

Amazon International Bestselling Author

# Morgan Kelley

Playboys gotta play...  
Unfortunately.

## Two for the Fun

FBI Series 43



# ***Two for the Fun***

*An FBI/Flashback Thriller*

*Book 43*

***By Morgan Kelley***



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**Content Advisory:** *This book is intended for mature audiences and contains, explicit sexual activity between various couples, including two men. This is a sex story anthology. If you are offended by gay sex between two men, you should stop reading now. If you have an open mind and believe that love is love, enjoy.*

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**Dear Reader,**

**Since my books crossover a great deal, I recommend reading them as they are written. I tend to mention characters in books they don't generally occur in, and later in the series, there are full crossovers.**

**Some readers have contacted me for this list, and I figured I'd pass it on to the rest of you.**

**While you can read the books by series only, it only enhances the reading experience if you go in order of how I wrote them. I tend to give away secrets...**

**I'm sneaky like that.**

**On the next page, I've given you the list.**

**MK**

**Here is the reading book order:**

The Killing Times (FBI)  
Sacred Burial Grounds (FBI)  
True Love Lost (FBI)  
Deep Dark Mire (FBI)  
Fire Burns Hot (FBI)  
Celestia is Falling (Croft & Croft)  
Darkness of Truth (FBI)  
Vegas is Dying (Croft)  
Devil hath Come (FBI)  
Christmas is Killing (Croft)  
Blood Red Rage (Littlemoon)  
Consumed by Wrath (FBI)  
Sinner Repent (Carter trilogy 1)  
Love is Bleeding (Croft)  
Lost & Broken (Littlemoon)  
Illegal Fantasies (Anthology 1)  
Redemption is Here (FBI)  
Sinner Realized (Carter trilogy 2)  
Romance Under Arrest (Anthology 2)  
Heaven is Weeping (Croft)  
Unthinkable Games (Littlemoon)  
Dead Shall Speak (FBI)  
Sinner Reborn (Carter trilogy 3)  
Pledging to Die (FBI)  
Hell is Burning (Croft)  
Truth is Found (Littlemoon)  
Slay Bells Ring (FBI)  
Holiday Reinforcements (Trilogy 3)  
Oracle Rising (Oracle)  
Past will Haunt (FBI Flashback 1)  
Choices will Destroy (FBI)  
Justice is Dead (Final Croft book)  
Haven of Nightmares (Littlemoon)  
Blood Shall Run (FBI)  
Oracle Seeing (Oracle)  
Dark Justice (New Croft Series)

Forbidden Secrets (Littlemoon)  
Act of Blood (FBI)  
Oracle Saving (Oracle)  
Stalked by the Past (FBI flashback 2 )  
Dying to Love (FBI)  
Lost Justice (Croft)  
Kiss of Souls ( Littlemoon) (FBI/Littlemoon crossover)  
Oracle Haunting (Oracle)  
Revenge has Come (FBI)  
Paid Justice (Croft)  
Wedding of our Dreams: Steele and Dante (Croft)  
Lost Souls (Littlemoon) Sept 2017  
Discarded by Fate (FBI)October 2017  
Atonement (Hunter Mercenary) November 2017  
It's Good to be the Boss (Romance Anthology 1) November 2017  
Dawn of Evil (FBI) Jan 2018  
Dead are Forgotten (FBI) Jan 2018  
Love Knows No Bounds (FBI) Valentine's Day 2018  
True Justice (Croft/FBI crossover) Feb 2018  
Mob Justice (Croft Mob) March 2018  
Found Curses (Littlemoon) April 2018  
Absolution (Hunter Mercenary) May 2018  
All the King's Henchmen (FBI) June 2018  
Honor Thy Anger (FBI flashback) July 2018  
No Justice (Croft Mob) August 2018  
Secret Shame (Littlemoon) Sept 2018  
All the Queen's Men (FBI) October 2018  
It's Good to be Loved (Romance Antho) Nov 2018  
Amends (Hunter Mercenary) Nov 2018  
Angel of Death (FBI Flashback/Christmas) 2018  
Taker of Life (FBI/ Christmas) 2018  
Cause of Death (FBI Flashback) 2019  
Time of Death (FBI) 2019  
L'Amour of Death (FBI Flashback) Valentine's Day 2019  
All Justice (Croft) March 2019  
Choice of Despair (Littlemoon) April 2019  
Apology (Hunter/FBI crossover) May 2019



Manner of Death (FBI) June 2019  
The Final Orpheum (FBI/Flashback) July 2019  
City Justice (Croft Mob) August 2019  
Threat of Exposure (Littlemoon) Sept 2019  
Blood of my Enemies (FBI) October 2019  
Oracle Hunting (Oracle/Phoenix Files) Nov 2019  
Rage of Heaven (FBI Flashback) Jan 2020  
Rage of Hell (FBI) Jan 2020  
Rage of Love (Littlemoon/FBI crossover) Feb 2020  
Bad Justice (Croft) March 2020  
Acrimony (Hunter) April 2020  
Sacred Truth (Littlemoon) May 2020  
Rage of Revenge (FBI) June 2020  
Enter the Truth (FBI Flashback) July 2020  
Advantage (Hunter) August 2020  
Blood Moon Rising (Littlemoon) Sept 2020  
Eye for an Eye (FBI) Nov 2020  
It's Good to be Bad (Romance Anthology) Dec 2020  
End is here (FBI) Jan 2021  
One for the Family (FBI Flashback Arc 1) Feb 2021  
Apparition (Hunter) March 2021  
Haunted Visions (Littlemoon) April 2021  
Savage Bayou (FBI) June 2021  
Two for the Fun (FBI flashback Arc 2) July 2021

Harcourte books do not cross over and can be read anytime.

### **The Harcourte Vampires**

Dangerous Revelations  
Dangerous Choices  
Dangerous Misery  
Dangerous Retaliation  
Dangerous Influence

Dangerous Sacrifice  
Dangerous *Destruction*

***A Paranormal Antiquities Series***

Wicked Hunt (Antiquities Novel) Dec 2019  
Darkest Angel (Antiquities Novel) Dec 2020  
Harshes Queen (Antiquities Novel) Dec 2021

~~~~~ About the Author ~~~~~

**Morgan Kelley lives in the beautiful Pocono Mountains with her husband and two children. After attending college at Penn State University and studying Criminal Justice, Morgan knew her only true passion in life would be murder and books. She put them both together and began her career as a writer. Other than books and writing, you can find Morgan hanging out in her garden and digging in the dirt.**

**Her other works include: The Junction, Serial Sins, The Blood Betrayal, The Killing Times (1), Sacred Burial Grounds (2), True Love Lost (3), Deep Dark Mire (4), Fire Burns Hot (5), Darkness of Truth (6), Devil Hath Come (7), Consumed by Wrath (8), Redemption is Here (9), Dead Shall Speak (10), Pledging to Die (11), Slay Bells Ring (12), Past will Haunt (13), Choices will Destroy (14), Blood shall Run (15), Act of Blood (16), Stalked by the Past (17), Dying to Love (18), Revenge has Come (19), Blood Red Rage (1) Lost & Broken (2), Unthinkable Games (3), Truth is Found (4), Haven of Nightmares (5), Forbidden Secrets (6), Kiss of Souls (7), Celestia is Falling (1), Vegas is Dying (2), Christmas is Killing (3), Love is Bleeding (4), Heaven is Weeping (5), Hell is Burning (6), Justice is Dead (7), Dark Justice (1), Lost Justice (2), Paid Justice (3), Dangerous Revelations (1), Dangerous Choices (2), Dangerous Misery (3), Dangerous Retaliation (4), Dangerous Influence (5), Dangerous Sacrifice (6), Sinner Repent (1), Sinner Realized (2), Sinner Reborn (3), Oracle Rising (1), Oracle Seeing (2), Oracle Saving (3), Oracle Haunting, (4), Illegal Fantasies (Anthology 1), Romance Under Arrest (Anthology 2), and Holiday Reinforcements (Anthology 3)**

**Please feel free to visit Morgan at her website:  
[www.morgankelley.com](http://www.morgankelley.com), email her [author.m.kelley@gmail.com](mailto:author.m.kelley@gmail.com), or visit her blog at [www.morgankelley.blogspot.com](http://www.morgankelley.blogspot.com) or her website [www.morgankelley.com](http://www.morgankelley.com).**



**It's all fun and games until you find yourself  
dating a serial killer...**

**—Elizabeth LaRue**

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## *Prologue*

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*Small Town*  
*West Virginia*  
*Sunday*  
*Late Night*

Growing up, Theodore Clarkson always coveted what he couldn't have. That was just how he was, and he wasn't going to pretend otherwise. What dirt poor person wasn't that exact way in life? That was the standard norm across the board.

It was pretty normal when you were three days past dirt poor into desolate and from a place that most of the world had seemed to forget about daily.

It was a place where trees abounded, jobs didn't, and men knocked women up running on that moonshine high.

Basically, his life.

To say that his childhood had made him would be an understatement of epic proportions. Theodore Clarkson was incredibly resentful of his past and a bitter, angry man when it came to it.

So angry, in fact, that it formed him into a raging, seething mass of hate. It oozed from his pores.

It vibrated with each spoken word.

There would be no poetry, no prettiness, or anything that came even close to a normal life.

He was darkness and hate rolled into one embodiment.

Because of that upbringing, it was safe to say that it made him who he was today.

It made his future.

It made him nothing more than a monster and the people around him his potential victims.

Well, not his sisters.

They were the only ones he loved, simply because they had both been beside him in that shitty existence. They had helped him survive the worst of times, and that gave them immunity to his rage.

They were the only women he could ever love.

That hate was not something made overnight. It had been festering over many, many years.

When their father left them, oh, his mother had tried to take care of them, but she was dumber than a turnip.

**Seriously.**

She had no reason to be raising kids. His mother didn't even know how to take care of herself, so it fell to Kitty to make sure they had scraps of food, stealing what she could.

Honestly, Teddy knew the truth.

*Their mother...*

Simply, she didn't care.

She didn't even bother to understand that kids needed certain things to grow up to be productive members of society. They needed shoes, books, and all the things afforded to others.

While Kitty was out stealing them food, Letty was stealing them books from the library.

After all, no one would give the filthy Clarksons a library card. Their momma was no good.

Again, the root of their problem stemmed from one person, and one person alone.

**Their.**

**Walking.**

**Uterus.**

So, when he and his sisters killed her, tired of her being dead weight in their lives, and then acted as each other's alibis, it was the best day in his life.

**They.**

**Were.**

**Free.**

There was no one to be tied to, there was no one to have to feed with the precious resources already allocated to the three of them, and there was no one to tell them their behaviors were inappropriate.

There was no one to sing to the police of their dirty deeds.

Yeah, snitches got more than stitches.

**They.**

**Got.**

**Dead.**

Their threesome went about their lives, making whatever they could out of it.

Out in the world they went, and they were more than capable of doing bad all on their own.

Mayhem followed.

Murder came along for the ride.

His sisters proved that women were deadlier than men.

They made their mark in life.

They owned it.

The three Clarksons, born of nothing, were no longer going to be laughed at, mocked, or put down because their sperm donor skedaddled, or their mother was murdered during a supposed B and E.

**No.**

They were their own people, and they were going to be the ones who ruled that world.

West Virginia was theirs.

*Country road...*

*Take them home...*

*To a place where they could kill...*

Yeah, that was them.

They were infamous.

Kitty had become the best thief the world had ever seen, and she was one of the two women he respected in life. Kitty worked her ass off to steal so they could have what the rich folk didn't even think twice about. She'd raised them the rest of the way, and she took care of them.

Then there was Letty Clarkson, his other sister.

She was the smart one, or so that was how he and Kitty saw her. She wasn't as hard working as Kitty, but she found ways to bring money to the family.

**Using.**

**Her.**

**Smarts.**

She found rich old sugar daddies and took them for everything they were worth by way of sex. Men would pay her to use and abuse them. It worked for her since she hated men to the core of her being.

Well, not him.



Letty loved her some Teddy.

Kitty too.

His sister Letty used the world's oldest profession to rock their world and get a pocket full of coin.

**Good.**

**For.**

**Her.**

That took skill, and he appreciated her gifts. To him, his sisters could do no wrong.

They were his.

**Forever.**

With Kitty's tutelage on manipulation, and his on not leaving evidence, she was able to excel.

*See?*

Kids just needed someone to teach them, and they could do anything.

Now, lives were being snuffed out, and they were making money left and right.

Letty was good at it too.

As was Kitty.

Those skills helped put pretty things in her closet, and Letty was always willing to share.

*Him now...*

He wasn't so much about the money, as he was about the pussy. He didn't need to work. His sisters kept him in cash, and he kept them happy with his own talents.

Yeah, the family that slept together, ruled the world together.

That should be their huge-ass motto.

Simply said, unless he was angry, and showing that deep hatred toward women, he found it hard to get it up.

Not with his sweet sisters.

They were peas in a pod.

They kept that part of their lives silent since people tended to frown on it.

Well, screw them.

As for the victims, they meant nothing to him.

**Nothing.**

**At.**

**All.**

Teddy couldn't even pretend that he liked them, so instead, he used them for what they were worth.

**Sex.**

He would pick them, follow them, and when they were within his reach, he'd creep in, rape them until he couldn't rape them anymore, and be done with them.

He left a trail of bodies across the state.

He'd go in, disguise himself, and find a way to get close to them.

*Once he did...*

It was over.

**Then.**

**And.**

**There.**

He found that he could off a couple a week, getting his rocks off, and still having time to lounge around as his sisters took care of him.

It was a career.

His sisters were the money makers, and they were the true killers. The female of the species always was.

The lioness killed for the lion.

The female elephant was far more dangerous than her mate.

So, that was how they rolled. They took cues from nature and it worked for him.

He was the man of pleasure.

Leisure, if you will.

Sometimes, he'd woo the women if he really liked them. Well, not like, simply because to him, women were nothing more than a way to an end goal but if he was amused by them.

That was true for most of them.

**Except his sisters.**

They were his.

When they came home from the hunt, they'd count their coins, squirrel some away, and then enjoy each other's company.

*The viler.*

*The sicker.*

*The better.*

That was how they rolled, and he wasn't going to complain about it.  
**Ever.**

As for his prey, sometimes, he'd treat the women like they wanted, simply because he liked to study them before he took what he craved before tossing them away.

It was fun.

Like the last woman.

He'd picked her up, and then took her back to her room. She was here visiting friends and looking for love in all the wrong places.

*Oh, was she ever...?*

Her mistake.

Nothing good came out of this Podunk town but heartbreak and poverty—and it reminded him of his own home.

**God.**

*West Virginia...*

**Do better.**

Oh, don't get him wrong, there were some 'good' people, but not many, and he was finding that more the norm each and every time he picked a place to have some fun.

*Now, here?*

He hated them too.

*Why?*

It was the same wherever he went.

Back home, they watched his mother scrimp and save, trying to make ends meet, and no one offered any help to those poor Clarkson kids.

**NO.**

**ONE.**

They fought tooth-and-nail to survive in that tiny cabin in the woods where they grew their own food, bought cheap secondhand clothing, and struggled to get out, but everyone judged them as garbage.

Well, the joke was on them.

They got out, and now they had settled among the better-off people.

*Oh, be careful what you ask for...*

It might be unleashed upon you.

Truthfully, they had a home base where they cuddled down at night when they were back together again. Going out only to move around, grifters on the grift.

No one knew where their home was.

**NO.**

**ONE.**

They bought it years ago after Kitty had hit the mother lode with a job, and Letty had scored big after dominating some silly old pervert.

For them, their days of working were almost over, and they would settle into a life of luxury, pleasure, and peace.

**As a family.**

The family that slays together, stays together.

Oh, that would be a perfect motto too.

He was just so smart and full of them today. Teddy couldn't wait to tell his sisters that one.

He wouldn't bother her for now. He knew that his sister had just scored that big-ass haul of ten million dollars, so she was up to her eyeballs with getting out.

As soon as she got home, in the next couple of weeks, after making sure she wasn't followed, they were going to live like a king and queens.

For him, it was about biding his time and enjoying the carnal pleasure in his life.

Life was good—unlike for that last woman who really believed he gave a shit.

*Hint?*

He didn't.

Anyway, to keep himself busy, he found a place where he could catch his new prey.

Then, he did.

Teddy wooed her and that led to him picking her up.

**Man.**

She was way too easy.

Someone had little self-confidence, and he liked them best. A few nice words and the woman was putty in his hands.

Then, she was dead.

It always ended the same.

He brought her back to her hotel room, and she'd ordered food. She paid, of course, but he was happy to get it for her.

He wasn't wasting his money on a woman.

**Screw that.**

That was money for the women he really loved. If their name wasn't Kitty or Letty, they could pound sand.

There was no invite into his wallet.

Women were gold diggers, and he wasn't giving them a single, solitary cent.

Teddy was either getting really good at the act of seduction, or that cow was a hot mess.

It was almost too easy.

The wooing progressed, and they danced on the balcony off of the hotel room that she paid for, and it was perfect.

The mood had been set, his dick was in the upright position, and she was a lamb to the slaughter.

**She.**

**Was.**

**Easy.**

When she tried to stop him from taking what he wanted, it got ugly.

**For her.**

First off, did she really believe she was inviting him back to her room for cards and boardgames?

**NO.**

So, why was she putting on the brakes at this part of the venture?

Clearly, she knew what inviting a man to her room meant.

*Right?*

So, he got mean.

**Very.**

**Very.**

**Mean.**

He slammed her around, dazing her, and then took what he wanted by way of rape.

She cried like a baby, and that irritated him.

It almost made it hard for him to get off, but he slapped her around a bit, asserting his dominance.

That helped.

He came, and he was finished with the cow.

She was nothing to him.

As soon as he was done, he made sure so was she—not by way of orgasm.

By way of her life.

She pissed him off, and he wanted to make this as terrifying for her as possible. The good ones let him rape and strangle them. The bad ones put up a fight, and they deserved to be terrorized.

Yes, normally he'd kill them in bed, but this one had irritated the fuck out of him for being a cock tease.

She'd planned on wasting his precious time.

Oh, and she'd actually bit him.

Biting was his job, not the prey's.

Thankfully, she had a room at the back of the hotel, so when he tossed her body over the railing, he could watch her fall in fear and terror.

Oh, and she did.

There was nothing like a naked piece of ass falling to her death onto the pavement below.

It sent chills across his body as he decided her fate, and took her life.

*When she hit the ground...*

The thud alone was so sick and twisted...

**God.**

That was gratifying.

Some might say he had anger issues, but...

**Ehhhh.**

*Didn't everyone?*

That useless piece of ass had been annoying, and no one said no to him.

**NO.**

**ONE.**

Theodore Clarkson got what he wanted, when he wanted, and how he wanted.

**PERIOD.**

Women were for fucking, and they had no other point in his world.

Yes, he loved reliving their deaths.

But, alas, it was time to catch him some more pussy. His dick was awake, and until he could get home to his sisters...

Until then, he needed to get off.

Now, like with the last one, he was about to score again. The news covered the woman's death, and he laid low a day or two—just to be sure

they had nothing on him.

*When they didn't...*

He picked someone on the opposite side of town.

*Just to be safe.*

Now, he was watching and waiting for that sweet, sweet piece of ass to be his.

Yes, he was stalking her.

Oh, and she was about to come home. He'd followed her a day or two, and he knew how she rolled.

He was expecting her to fight, and he was fine with that. It was easier in their own home when they lived alone. The hotel had been a risk—all those security cameras.

Now, a house away from people?

Yeah, Teddy liked it that way.

He honestly hoped she fought hard too.

Little did they know, that if they didn't put up a fight, he really didn't enjoy it. What was cumming without a little battle beforehand?

So, he waited.

As he saw the headlights coming into focus, pulling down the street, he tucked himself into the trees and waited for her.

He was giddy too.

*How could he not be?*

When she was out of her car, he knew what he needed to do.

*Catch him some prey.*

Pulling on his gloves, he lowered his ski mask to cover his identity just in case she saw his face and escaped.

Then, his game would be up.

No one wanted that.

It was still days until his sister was done sneaking home, and he had to have someone to bone.

Besides, if Kitty had taught him anything, it was that you had to protect your identity.

**First and foremost.**

So, he heeded her rules.

When the woman parked, she was just as lovely as when he first saw her, and that turned him right on.

He loved a redhead.

**Sue him.**

He couldn't help himself.

That was his preference for each and every rape, since he had two blondes at home.

It was something about that rich color as it was spread out on a white pillowcase after death. He liked to strangle them, and when they couldn't move anymore, because they were dead, to arrange them.

Then fuck them again.

Sue him.

He liked kink.

He liked to mix it up.

It wasn't like he could kill Letty and Kitty. They were his family, so he had to get that perverseness out somehow.

*Right?*

Now, as he checked out her legs, he saw that flash of skin and he was rock hard. It was the buildup that got him off, just as much as taking her. It was that rush when he pinned her to the floor and saw the fear in her eyes.

It was delicious.

Yeah, now, he couldn't wait.

The fun was about to begin.

**Here.**

**And.**

**Now.**

As she headed toward her door, keys in hand, he was ready to make his move. Creeping behind her, it was all about timing.

That was the bottom line.

You couldn't let them get into the house.

Too many people had security, nowadays, and that would send your ass right to jail.

That couldn't happen.

He had more work to do for his ever-growing appetite.

So, as she put the key in the lock, his heart began racing in his chest.

His dick began throbbing.

He watched, licking his lips in anticipation.

The buffet was about to open.



With a turn of her wrist, the door was unlocked, and he was going to move.

**NOW.**

He raced at her as she began opening the door, and he slammed into her.

She hadn't been expecting it.

They both fell into her home, and with his booted foot, he kicked the door closed as the fight began.

She did battle.

**HARD.**

This was one more reason why he loved a redhead.

They fought like wildcats.

Oh, he loved every second of it too.

She kicked, screamed, and tried to bite him. Her nails dug into his ski mask, but she didn't hurt him.

**Not.**

**One.**

**Bit.**

If anything, he only got harder, randier, and wilder. This woman was dead.

Her attempt to stop him failed.

**Miserably.**

When she was pinned down, he rubbed his erection against her, signaling what was to come.

"Please," she whispered, as his forearm pressed down on her throat. "Please don't," she begged again.

He didn't care.

At this point, he wanted one thing and one thing alone.

**HER.**

"If you're a good girl, I won't hurt you," he promised. "If you get nasty, you're dead."

She whimpered.

"Understand?"

She nodded.

Only, this wasn't his first time or his twentieth.

He knew damn well that the second he lifted his arm to drop his fly, she was going to get crazy.

*Or so he hoped...*

They were all nasty girls, dressing like sluts and spreading their legs all over the place.

That wouldn't change, and he knew it.

Once a whore, always a whore.

That was one of his constants in life and for that, he was damn grateful.

He loved fucking a whore.

So, like he suspected, the second he moved his arm, the battle raged on.

Well, he was bigger than her, and it didn't take much to smack her head off the floor a few times to daze her.

**She.**

**Went.**

**Out.**

When the fight was gone, he knew what he was going to do to celebrate.

Teddy was going to have some fun.

With her.

"Now, bitch, it's time for you pay," he said, grabbing her by the ankles and dragging her into her room.

It was time to get off, leave the trash for someone else to clean up, and move along.

He was going to have some fun and move this party along for the night.

There were other women to hunt down, and he knew this one wasn't going to get him off quite like he wanted.

It took a special girl.

They had to be perfect.

The hunt would continue.

He could bet on it.

*And...*

**So.  
Could.  
They.**

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

*Three Days Later  
Same Town  
Wednesday Night  
After Dark*

When he was bored, he did things that might be construed as being evil.

Like taking forbidden fruit from a tree just out of his reach.

Teddy couldn't help it.

A man wanted what a man wanted, and he was going to need to fill those urges, so he didn't hurt one of his sisters when they came back together again.

They were his family, and he didn't want to find himself abusing one of them, so he had to get it out of his system.

**QUICKLY.**

That morning, his sister had called him, telling him that she was about to go on the run, her loot bag filled with forbidden goodies and the money transferred.

It would only be a matter of time.

She simply had to go off the radar until the fuzz was confused.

He couldn't wait.

She'd be showing up before he knew it, and they would each get a cut of that massive score.

**And.**

**So.**

**Much.**

**More.**

In a few days, he'd have to leave town. Teddy would be heading to one of their homes to meet up and get his cut, but he wanted to finish his reign of terror here first.

He wanted to exhaust himself, again, so his precious sisters didn't get hurt.

Besides, he saw a few gems he'd like to add to his crown.

Starting with this one next.

He'd picked her, again, since she tickled his fancy, and nothing more. She would be his next score.

While Kitty scored money, he was making a path of destruction of his own.

This one would be fun.

He could tell.

She was in her bed, sleeping soundly, and he was watching her. One might call him a peeping Tom, but he was definitely more than that.

He was a monster.

**Plain.**

**And.**

**Simple.**

Once he got into the house, he'd really make the pretty little flower scream.

He was the stuff of nightmares, and her worst ones were about to come true.

The second he saw her, his dick had been hard, and he couldn't help but want to partake in that sweetness.

Again, his obsession with redheads continued.

**Dead.**

**Redheads.**

There was nothing better, and he couldn't wait to get his hands, mouth, and dick on her.

Oh, and he couldn't wait to terrorize this one to make her scream for him.

She definitely would.

**All.**

**Night.**

**Long.**

Creeping toward the back door, it took almost no time to pop the lock on the screen door, and then jimmy the other one that gave him access to that hen's house.

It took seconds.

Then, he was in.

Oh, his dick throbbed as he pictured her beneath him, dead eyes watching him, as she let him do anything he wanted. She would make him so happy and calm that darkness down.

He couldn't wait.

**God.**

He loved his life.

Thankfully, skills ran in their family, and his sister wasn't the only one who could do a little B and E.

He could too.

Teddy was also a thief who stole.

**INNOCENCE.**

Well, he was about to steal a whole bunch of something that woman valued as he was waiting for his sister to call again.

Inside, he crept toward her room, and as the moonlight shone in, bathing her in that glorious glow, he rubbed his hands together.

This was going to be fun.

She was about to feed that desire in him and that insatiable appetite.

In the back of his mind, he told himself that he was doing it to protect Letty and Kitty.

He was doing it to make sure they didn't get hurt.

**Later.**

As he moved closer, the floor creaked, and the woman in bed moved, lifting her head.

And just like that, the battle raged.

He was on her, and while the hellion redhead did fight tooth-and-nail, he was bigger, hornier, and stronger than her.

He was able to subdue her, and as she cried and begged, he lived his best moment yet.

"It's okay, pretty girl. It's going to be okay. Let Teddy show you how I can love you," he whispered.

Then, there was that horrible hiss of the zipper.

They both knew exactly what it meant.

And Teddy Clarkson added one more jewel to his crown.

A ruby.

A redhead.

Another dead victim.

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## *Chapter One*

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*Washington D.C.*  
*Thursday*  
*Day After Catching*  
*Kitty Clarkson*

**T**hey had run one hell of a marathon the last three days, chasing a killer. Truthfully, Jack was more than happy to be working the next case with Elizabeth LaRue and her merry band of helpers.

Normally, he liked running his own shit, but who the hell was he kidding?

Elizabeth got things done.

What they said about her being at the top of her game, and that one day, she was going to rule the FBI kingdom was no joke.

She solved cases like Sherlock freaking Holmes.

When you had it, you had it, and that was one of the reasons he wasn't worked up about having to be tied to the next two chases.

One Clarkson down.

Two to go.

Riding shotgun with Elizabeth LaRue, and Axelle George, was all kinds of fun.

Toss in Charlie, and there was never a dull moment when it came to some murder, mayhem, and mischief.

It was his new thing.

When Gabe Rothschild had tied the three of them together, forcing them to fix this mess, he'd created the perfect storm.

They were screwed.

Collectively, they'd 'lost' ten million dollars in the process of taking down Kitty Clarkson, so their joint ride was not even close to being over.

**Oh, boy.**

They all knew one thing to be certain.

The fun was about to begin.

Oh, and by fun, he was talking about the personal time he was about to spend getting up close and personal with Axelle George.

Sue him.

They went weeks between a hookup, and this guaranteed him a good two to three weeks of sex.

Was he an asshole for going there?

**Hell.**

**Yes.**

Was she going to be just as happy?

**Absolutely.**

While Elizabeth was running the show, he would be getting some sweet, sweet moments with his CIA spook.

**Yes, his.**

While they weren't a couple, Jack knew that they would have a good run together.

Call it a hunch.

When he'd turned in his paperwork, his asshole captain had to swallow his words and choke down that the commissioner wanted **JACK**, not his asshole captain, to continue on with his good work and stop the Clarksons.

Oh, it had been a thing of beauty.

Captain Paul Delgatto had one hell of a shocked look on his face when Jack had cleared the '*cold case*' that the asshole saddled him with days ago.

They also closed an almost two-decade-old murder of who had killed Kitty Clarkson's mother.

That was a fine, fine feather in his cap.

Touché, douchebag.

The win was in his column.

Oh, and they would keep on coming. Elizabeth was ferocious and with Axelle and him...

Teddy and Letty were on their way down.

**Bet.**

**On.**

**It.**

Jack was giddy that the commissioner had been contacted by the Director of the FBI, and he was being '*lent out*' to get this job done.

Call him crazy, but helping Elizabeth chase down Teddy Clarkson, and the other sister, Letty, was a vast improvement over being ridden hard



by Captain *'I fucked-up'* Delgatto.

He was no fool.

Jack had to take the fun when he could. His journey was filled with standing over bodies and missing humanity.

*As for their new 'team'...*

Well, he was likely the **ONLY** one amused by all of this. He knew that when Gabe had left them standing there on the scene, Elizabeth was anything but smiling over the fact that she was on a marathon chase where she had to babysit a cop, a sheriff, a CIA spook, and some killers.

Someone aged a good five years because of this one.

Call it a hunch.

Later, he expected her to lose her shit over all of this. After all, it was Jack's fault.

He'd called in a favor.

**Oops.**

**His bad.**

Nah, who was he kidding?

He didn't regret it.

**At.**

**All.**

This was going to be a fun, wild ride that culminated with all of them adding to their street cred.

As for Elizabeth, the captain of the S.S. Babysitter, she was likely pacing a freaking pathway through the doctor's fine carpeting as she tried to figure out how to do this.

She had, after all, claimed the last case as hers.

**No takebacks!**

That was his rule.

Once you claimed it as your own, you were responsible for the whole shitshow.

Yeah, she was going to be pissed.

He knew how she rolled.

As for his responsibilities, Jack did what he had to do. He'd left the scene, turned in his paperwork, and met up with a sexy redhead for some dinner.

Okay, it had been dessert.

Jack had dined on the woman in his kitchen, his shower, and again in bed. Their appetites had been insatiable, and while he didn't make it a point to bed a woman and not feed her, Axelle was a whole wild storm you didn't control.

**At.**

**All.**

She rode into town, tore the place down, and left wreckage in her path.

There had been panties hanging from his pot rack when he went down to get some water during their in-between-sex romp.

**Yep.**

That was Hurricane Axelle.

Oh, and he loved every freaking second of it too.

Axelle just got him hot and bothered, and he knew that once they found Teddy and Letty, he would likely not see Axelle for weeks. While she was a bureau director here, she still had to go out for cases that required her 'specialty'.

He wasn't asking what it was.

He did once, and she said she'd tell him but then have to kill him.

He didn't think she was kidding either.

So, they would have weeks between when he saw her again.

Yeah, that bummed him out.

It was also why he was banging her like a drum in a parade down *Main Street*.

You had to get off while you could.

That was both of their mottos.

Now, as the sun was up, and they were going to be meeting Elizabeth to talk about this next leg of the case, he wanted to wake up the right way.

**With sex.**

Yes, he was a greedy bastard with an incredibly high sex drive when she was around.

**SUE HIM.**

At his age, he wasn't turning down a sexy bedmate for anything—especially one he actually liked.

He was almost a decade older than LaRue and Axelle, and he knew that he was lucky to have a woman who tolerated his BS.

Sex was easy.

*Doing battle with Axelle...*

That was fun.

For now, he was going to wake her up the old-fashioned way, and how she liked it.

**With.**

**Dick.**

Rolling over, Axelle was asleep beside him, and he couldn't help but admire her. She was gorgeous, and he was absolutely crazy about her.

The only thing in the world he loved more?

**HIS.**

**JOB.**

That was why they were stuck in this kind of perpetual one-night stand. He was scared shitless as to what would happen if he let her in.

*Would he survive and climb the ladder?*

*Or would he settle?*

Jack knew that if it was the latter, he'd never forgive her or himself.

So, he took what he could, gave what he had, and prayed they survived as friends.

As he watched her lips, apart and softly breathing in and out, he was compelled to kiss them.

Yeah, it was time to wake up his partner in fornication crime.

**Here.**

**And.**

**Now.**

"Oh, Axelle," he said, rolling closer, and pressing her beneath his body in the soft comfort of his bed.

She moaned.

Axelle immediately woke and enjoyed the scent of his cologne in close proximity to her body.

She loved this man and feared him too.

Jack could destroy her heart—more than he already had.

She said nothing, knowing that if she did, she'd make a fool of herself. Axelle had nothing but a string of bad relationships, and she knew that if Jack loved her like she loved him, they could survive.

Only, he was hellbent on keeping it the way it was.

And it was killing her.

She went into action, knowing exactly what he wanted. Jack's body was pressed to her hip, and she could feel his morning wood.

Someone wanted sex.

She wanted love.

"Ax," he hissed as she kissed down his chest, her nails leaving a trail of fire to his dick.

She let that hurt out by way of sex. She let him see her soul, and he wanted nothing to do with it.

That sucked.

Instead of arguing, since she'd agreed to this arrangement in the first place, she took.

Axelle wanted to feel.

So, she did just that.

She rolled, getting him on his back.

Her hands were everywhere.

She was taking no prisoners, making sure that he understood.

Their time was limited, and she didn't mean because they had work.

She wanted more, or she was going to have to move on.

Oh, and that would suck.

**A.**

**Lot.**

Axelle tried to show him through her actions, and she hoped he'd understand.

Planning to enjoy his body, she took control to rock his world.

Someone was going to be begging.

**HIM.**

Call it a hunch.

Jack enjoyed her touch, and there was nothing that he wanted more than to watch Axelle use him.

He loved her hands on his body, and her mouth was wicked.

Jack couldn't wait.

He knew he likely didn't deserve this response from her, but here he was, getting that gift from his best friend.

That was what she was.

Axelle was his favorite person in the whole world—then in second was Elizabeth.

“What do you want, Jack?” she asked, moving down his body as she left a path of fire.

“Ax, please,” he begged as she worked her way to his now throbbing dick.

*How he could still want more sex...?*

It was beyond him.

Only, with her, it never ended.

That need only kept going.

“Well, if my cop wants sex, he’ll get it,” she whispered, blowing across his dick.

He twitched and reacted to her warm breath.

“Oh, God help me. The devil has me in her grasp.”

She actually laughed.

Ehhh, he wasn’t wrong.

Without saying anything more, she ran her hand against his erection, sending shockwaves through his body.

He moaned.

Oh, he knew the truth.

Axelle was in full control, and he didn’t want that to change. She could have anything.

And he meant that.

As she rubbed him, he shook.

“Yeah, Ax, come on. Put your mouth on me,” he hissed as she teased him. “I need you before we get to work.”

Oh, and despite that dread and darkness growing in her, she needed him too.

Jack was the first man in her life who didn’t treat her like she was disposable.

Well, not yet.

She’d slept with her partner when she’d been a Fed, and Gabe tossed her after one night of hot sex.

Then there was her co-worker, Daniel Combe, who ended up being a serial killer.

That went nowhere.

Add in all the men who tried to get into her pants but didn’t feel anything for her...

Jack was the only one who did.

“Baby,” he whispered, as she stroked him. “God, Ax, I love you.”

Her heart hitched.

Only, he didn’t love her enough to promise her forever.

He felt the change in her, and he knew what it meant. If he didn’t distract her, he would lose her.

Jack’s fears took over.

He gave her heat.

He gave her need.

**Damn it.**

If need be, he’d give her his heart for this not to end. Jack hadn’t felt this way in...ever.

“Tell me what you want,” he said, staring into her eyes and seeing that sorrow.

It was mirrored in his.

She wanted the impossible.

She wanted all.

Instead, she gave him what he wanted to hear, so that the moment wasn’t ruined.

“Jack,” she whispered. “Let’s fuck.”

Her words stole his fears, wrapped them in lust, and distracted him.

**For.**

**Now.**

Her words were a good place to start as he tried to figure out how to navigate this. His heart was hers, and that scared the shit out of him.

“Ax,” he whispered.

His voice said it all.

He was lost in what he needed from her.

That connection.

When she looked up his body, Jack was staring down at her, his body was wracked with pleasure.

She’d be lying if she said he didn’t steal her breath.

Jack was a sexy man.

He was heading toward forty, and he was hot.

**Period.**

He looked so sexy with that grin on his face.

It was his ‘*fuck me*’ grin, and she was about to do just that. He could bet on it.

She ran her fingers across his abs, sending shivers down his spine and heat to his dick.

He was worked up and there was no way to hide that.

Taking his dick in hand, she licked him, and then she tormented the tip of his erection with teeth and tongue. She loved to hear his gasp of pleasure, and the words right after.

Jack was getting overheated.

“Please,” he whispered. “Ax, we have to get to work. Put me out of my misery, again.”

Oh, she would.

There was no doubt about that.

Someone was cumming.

Then, they’d continue with the lies that they didn’t have a relationship. They did.

He just refused to see it.

“Someone is about to get lucky,” she said, as she smiled at him.

It didn’t reach her eyes.

That darkness blocked it.

“Please,” he begged just in time to see her head slide down his erection and take him down her throat.

**To.**

**The.**

**Base.**

“Oh, God,” he muttered, as she worked him in and out of her mouth as if there was a race to make him cum.

Yeah, and he was good with that.

Truthfully, he was lost in that moment.

He was lost in the visual happening before him. Her swollen lips from a night of fornication were offering him peace through pleasure.

Jack closed his eyes, let her blow him, and just held on for one hell of a ride.

This was a good day in his book.

There was no way he was going to stop Axelle. She could use him, abuse him, and rock his world.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Hers.**

How could he want to do anything more than just enjoy what she was offering? What he would do is let her have her wicked way with him.

*Why?*

He was easy.

That was the damn truth too.

Axelle continued to blow him, and the entire time, he was watching her rich red hair tickle his thighs.

That was heaven right there.

The Red Queen was aptly named.

That was for sure.

**He.**

**Loved.**

**Her.**

There was no way to deny it. Years from now, he would still love her.

*How could he not?*

His hand found the back of her hair, and he slowed her down to make it even more torturous.

The strokes up and down his erection were enough to make his eyes cross. Someone had quite the mouth on her.

**Yowza.**

His dick was happy.

His balls were too.

“Jesus, Ax, you’re making me crazy,” he muttered his whole body on the cusp of shattering apart.

Only, he knew that they had to hurry up. Work was calling, and Elizabeth would be soon.

He knew the woman.

They were going to have to take this from on their backs to on their feet.

He knew what he wanted.

**Shower sex.**

It was time.

Just as he was about to lose control, he pushed her off of his dick, regretfully.

“Get up,” he ordered. “We have to get off in the shower. Let’s kill two birds with one stone.”



That worked for her.

She held out her hand, and he took it. Then, he pulled her to her feet, tossed her over his shoulder, and carried her into his bathroom.

This wasn't the first time they did it in here.

He hoped it wouldn't be the last.

With his free hand, he turned on the water, waited until it was warm, and then placed her on her feet in the spray.

Axelle was hot all wet.

The walls would be the perfect place to pin her.

"Oh, I love it when you are wet and soapy. It makes me crazy," he muttered.

She watched the water bead and slip down his body, dropping from his dick.

She liked vertical sex too.

**With him.**

His truly energetic cock could pin her to the wall any day. That was for damn sure.

"Oh, do you?" she asked, smiling. "Then let's get clean and dirty at the same time. Show me what you've got, copper."

Her words made him crazy too, and she knew it.

He crowded her, his dick throbbing for more attention, and that wet warm place to call home.

**In.**

**Her.**

"Well, then let's get dirty," he said, grabbing Axelle and pulling her into his body. Jack wanted his mouth on her in the worst way. He boosted her up and used the wall to hold her up so he could have some fun.

Someone was going down.

**HIM.**

Jack loved dining on this woman. There was something so hot about feasting on Axelle.

Plus, honestly, Jack enjoyed staring up her body, flushed from sex.

*How could he not?*

"If you drop my ass...", she warned, pressed to the wall with her thighs being dropped over his shoulders.

He grinned.

“I won’t drop you, Axelle. I’ll never drop you,” he promised, as he prepared to make her scream his name.

Yeah, if the neighbors didn’t call the cops, you weren’t dining on your sex partner right.

That was his rule.

“I trust you,” she admitted, believing that no matter what, when he hurt her, and he would, it wouldn’t be intentional. She knew Jack loved her.

That wasn’t the problem.

At her words, he knew he needed to get this moving. Time was a-wasting, and he had a clit to torment.

And that heated his blood even more.

He pictured her screaming his name as he feasted on that sexy part of her body.

“My turn. Let me show you how to get a lady off,” he stated. “My lady likes it dirty.”

Oh, and she did.

Her heart skipped at being called ‘*his*’ lady.

**Damn him.**

Jack held her up, and his mouth found her sensitive clit with the tip of his tongue, teasing her. He rode her hard, driving her up that climb until he felt her thighs quiver against the sides of his head.

Oh, yeah, she was cumming.

**Soon.**

She moaned as he held her against that shower wall, his strong hands holding her up as he was pelted with water.

It was getting hot in there, and the water had **NOTHING** to do with it.

His heart raced.

As he supported her weight, Jack took his time, devouring her. He feasted on her clit, making Axelle beg and squirm. He loved everything about dining at her Y.

**EVERYTHING.**

It was one of his favorite things in the world.

He held nothing back as his sole intent was to make her cum. He wanted to feel her shatter apart as he forced her back up that climb.

Over and over.

It was hot.

For him, getting her off was the best thing in his small, sad world.

**She.**

**Was.**

**His.**

Now, with her focused on him, Jack would rock her world and bind them together even more. He didn't want to end this run with her. He wanted him and Axelle to have this for years to come.

**Selfishly.**

Jack kept working her clit.

**Brutally.**

He took what he wanted and the whole time Axelle held on and shouted his name.

*She fell once.*

*Twice.*

*Oh, and he was taking her back up again.*

If you didn't make your partner cum until she was sore, you were a failure in bed.

It was better to give **AND THEN** receive.

Axelle held on as he drove her insane with his wicked mouth. He tortured her, as he forced her to keep cumming for him.

Someone was going to be sore.

**YAY!**

"Jack, more!"

He gave her what she wanted, offering her that love and adoration in the act of mating.

It was all he could give her.

**For now.**

Jack took and pillaged as he shoved her off of the edge with one hell of an orgasm.

When she shouted his name, that was the one that would bring the cops to his house.

**That.**

**Right.**

**There.**

He kept going, making sure that Axelle knew that he wasn't even close to being done. Jack was insatiable, and he could eat his girl out all damn day.

As she shook, he kept going, shoving her back into that pleasure. Jack wanted her to see that this was how he loved her. This was how he shared what was deep within his soul.

He would worship her if he could.

Jack kept going, and when she was begging him to stop because she couldn't cum again, he bet she could.

Jack was a betting man.

He'd prove it.

Holding her up, he spread her thighs wider, trapping her between the tile and his mouth. Then, he did something wicked with his tongue that made her scream again.

"Jack!" she gasped, as he shoved her to the edge.

He didn't stop.

Her hands were in his hair, and she wasn't pushing him away. She was pulling him in. Well, in that case, one more, and he was going to have to stop.

Oh, not because he couldn't do this all day, but because time was not their friend. His dick was rock hard, and he wanted to fuck her in the worst way.

It took seconds for her to come again.

Well, that worked for him.

It was time.

Jack placed her on her feet, stood, and pulled her against him until they were both in the cascading water.

As his mouth moved over hers, claiming her, his hand slid down her body, gently touching her abused clit.

She whimpered, and it made him giddy.

"Please," she whispered, and he couldn't help but want more. With her, he always did.

Lower his fingers dipped, and she gasped as he stroked her now with his slippery wet fingers.

Oh, if she thought he was done...

He was running out of time, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted to watch her eyes go blind with that pleasure.

**Here.**

"Jack," she whimpered as he teased and tormented her. She knew he was being that wicked man she craved.

“Ax, one more,” he said, greedily.

“I can’t,” she admitted.

He called bullshit.

He’d bet she could.

Instead of speaking, he strummed her clit, and it didn’t take long for her whole body to react to his fingers teasing her clit.

Goosebumps crisscrossed her flesh, her nipples pebbled into berry-like buds, and her eyes glassed over.

He liked to do it right.

**Each.**

**Time.**

“Cum for me,” he whispered.

Well, how was she going to say no to that?

Axelle let him have control, and she did.

That orgasm exploded from her, and she came from his hand driving her wild. Her legs went weak, and he was there to hold her up.

“Oh, Jack,” she muttered.

“Jill, baby, it’s time to take a tumble. I need you,” he said with his dick so rock-hard that it hurt. His balls were ready, and he wanted to cum in her in the worst way.

He needed her.

**NOW.**

Jack knew he wanted her to take him over the edge.

There was nothing better than being at eye level with her tits. They were glorious.

“Ride me, Ax. I want to see you bounce for me. I love your body over mine.”

She didn’t argue.

Instead, she gave him what he wanted.

*Why?*

She’d cum about six times.

This was the least she could do.

As she straddled his body, getting onto her knees, she saw that heat there.

Someone was horny.

“My how big you are, Jack,” she teased, rubbing the head of his dick through that wetness he’d caused.

As the water pounded them, she tormented him.

“And this is why I torture you,” he said, moaning. “You’re evil.”

She smiled, but before she could say anything, he was done. Jack grabbed her hips and pulled her down with such force that he impaled her to his balls.

That roughness was so unexpected, and it was all it took.

She came.

**Again.**

Her body bowed, and he was in heaven.

As her body milked his, he held on.

“Ax,” he muttered. “I love when you’re so abused anything makes you cum.”

She knew the truth.

It wasn’t just anything.

**It was him.**

He had a magnificent dick, and it was ball’s deep in her.

“Ax, if I don’t cum, and soon, I’m going to be wild all day. Put me out of my misery,” he begged as she began moving. “I want to cum in you.”

That was all she had to hear.

It was so proprietary, and she’d be lying if she said she didn’t like it.

She began bouncing in his lap, her body giving him all she had as she ground down roughly on his erection.

Jack had asked for it.

Oh, and she was giving it to him.

His balls ached, and his dick was having a damn good time buried in her as she rode him. He was focused on her and only her. He knew he had one shot to time it perfectly.

Cumming as one was important.

**Damn.**

**Important.**

“Ride me harder,” he begged as he pulled her down with each glide up his erection.

Axelle shared her soul, giving him that glimpse into her world.

Only him.

Only Jack.

*She rode wildly.*

*She rode like she was being chased.*

Axelle made him pay and they both loved it. As the shower flowed around them, Jack begged for more and held on for all he was worth.

**“BABY!”** he shouted as she took him to the top of that climb and refused to let him fall.

She played with him.

Cat and mouse.

He was her prey.

**Oh, and he loved it.**

As she did her worst, he watched her eyes and saw that love there. No one had ever loved him but her, and he wished that it happened much later.

He had so much to do.

She touched his cheek as if knowing what he was thinking.

“Cum for me, Jack,” she whispered, giving him that love freely.

**For now.**

That was all he had to hear. That heat erupted from her, tearing his teetering body from the ledge.

**He.**

**Came.**

**Too.**

There was that hot freefall through the pleasure as they both dropped.

The colors swirled around them, and there was nothing but ecstasy.

The peace flooded them.

It took him a second, and when he opened his eyes, her forehead was pressed to his.

“I love you, Ax, baby,” he whispered. “I’ll always love you. Please don’t forget it.”

In that moment, Axelle’s heart broke even more.

With each time they came together, she became more and more attached, and one day, she was going to lose this.

She knew for a fact.

Her track record sucked.

As he helped her up and began soaping her up with tender, gentle hands, she had already made her mind up.

She had to let him go.

She had to set Jack free.

Jill needed more than he could give her, and she was doing them both a disservice. She loved him too much after just months of this.

What would it be like in years?

Axelle would ask for something he couldn't give her.

When they found Teddy and Letty, she was going to have to move on.

Without her Jack.

Jill would need a solo adventure.

She was going to have to find someone to make her own. Jack was never going to be willing to meet her halfway to relationship-ville—even though they were already there.

*There was love.*

*There was sex.*

*There was protectiveness.*

Wasn't that exactly what Elizabeth and Chris had that she craved?

She already knew they were in the middle of a relationship that Jack would deny.

For now, it was save her heart, or lose it forever to a man who wouldn't commit.

While the sex was hot, she wanted more.

**She.**

**Wanted.**

**All.**

Sue her.

Axelle wanted someone to love her for the rest of her life, and not a few nights a month in someone's arms—even if he was the most amazing man.

It was hard to come to grips that she was going to leave him behind.

"Well, shall we head to LaRue's?" Jack asked as they rinsed off and he handed her a fluffy towel. "I'm sure she's been up all night getting prepped for today," he stated, seeing that look on her face and hating it.

It said goodbye, and Jack didn't want to lose her.

"Oh, I'm sure," she said.

He was honest with her.

"I'm glad to be working this with you, Ax. It's fun having these times together. I will never forget them."

She couldn't say the same.



They were soul-crushing.

“Want to grab something to eat on the way?” he asked.

She smiled, despite wanting to weep.

“Sure, Jack. Jill will buy you breakfast since we all know cops get paid shit,” she teased.

He winked at her.

“Don’t you know it, my sexy spook? I’ll get your things. I think your bra is hanging by my pots,” he said, touching her cheek with love.

As he walked away, she watched him, and her whole world kept crumbling.

As soon as he closed the bathroom door, she closed her eyes.

It was scary to walk away from stability.

Only, Axelle George knew that she had no choice.

Love had to be out there waiting for her.

*Everyone was worthy of love...*

Right?

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## *Chapter Two*

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*Across D.C.*

*Leonard and LaRue Brownstone*

*Thursday*

*Morning*

When it came to having your back to the wall, she was there. This was the worst-case scenario, and Elizabeth LaRue knew that because of this *'favor'*, she'd put herself into a position that was going to be a bitch to get out of anytime soon.

*What position?*

The one where she had to catch three siblings, back-to-back, and without any of them finding out they were being hunted.

Catching Kitty Clarkson hadn't been that difficult, but it hadn't been easy either. The woman had **ALMOST** gotten away with her killing spree.

*What did she get away with?*

**TEN MILLION DOLLARS.**

She'd positioned herself in a bank, assuming another woman's identity, and then robbing the dead women blind. She'd played the ol' switcheroo, and nearly got out of *Dodge*—much, much wealthier.

By making the crime scenes look like they were all about the B and E, she'd distracted like a magician using sleight of hand.

The true crime was stealing that much loot via bank transfer.

Now, thanks to Kitty, her BS, and an ill-timed favor, Elizabeth was about to go after one more sibling, buying the CIA time to find the money.

What they did know was it was transferred somewhere outside the US.

Thus, why Axelle was stuck helping them on this never-ending case.

Axelle was going to be searching for the loot, as Elizabeth played babysitter and asshole-wrangler.

**Yay.**

*How could her day get much worse?*

Oh, she knew.

Her boss, and Gabe's boss, were sadistic assholes. Not only did she have days to find a rapist, ten million dollars, and a black widow, she had to do it without a net, babysitting a cop, a CIA spook, two MEs, and her father.

**Yep.**

Her hands were full.

Charlie *'I'm the luckiest man in the whole world because I find a way to interfere in my daughter's cases each and every time'* LaRue was in his freaking *'sheriff-of-a-small-town'* glory.

**Damn it.**

Truthfully, she was not amused.

**At.**

**All.**

This was a really shitty stunt and Gabe was going to get his ass kicked for dumping it on her.

**Mark.**

**Her.**

**Words.**

She hadn't been the one who started this nightmare of a case, but she was being held hostage as she finished it. Jack asked for a favor and here it was, biting her in the ass.

**NO.**

**MORE.**

**FAVORS.**

This was what happened when you let yourself ask for help, and you owed someone. You were pulled into the crazy, and that was never good.

For her, she'd done the job.

She'd closed the case and caught Kitty Clarkson when no one else could, and her reward?

**This clusterfuck.**

Elizabeth was seriously doubting her karma. While she didn't mind having to take another case—God knew she did it all the damn time—she didn't have to babysit a slew of chuckleheads in the process.

That was going to be the pain-in-the-ass part.

*What?*

*The?*

*Hell?*

It was crystal clear that she'd been really shitty in a past life for this to keep happening.

It was that or the universe was trying to steer this bus off of a cliff and onto the rocks below.

That had to be the reason.

*Why else would Gabe do this shit to her?*

Normally, he didn't want her hot-dogging it, as he called it, around DC, making a mess. Now, he was giving her a loaded gun, a twitchy finger, and the possibility of fucking what was left of her career up.

**WHAT?**

Was he forgetting what she was capable of alone?

Then, toss in Chris, Tony, some techs, her father, a CIA spook, and a cop?

Was he losing his damn mind?

**Apparently.**

It was clear he didn't recall the Carnival Killer case, the Tarot Card maniac, and the whole '*going to steal your organs in Paris*' debacle.

Giving her these people as her backup was questionable at best, and now he was setting them loose in West Virginia.

God bless that state.

May they forgive her for what was coming their way.

It was about to get full-on LaRue up in there.

Now, at her and Chris' brownstone, she was waiting for the courier to drop off the official file, so she could get her ass to a jet to play these games.

What she did know was this was one thing and one thing alone.

**BULL.**

**SHIT.**

That's exactly what this was.

This could take forever to solve, and she really wanted to get her ass on a cruise ship soon—since she'd already purchased the tickets.

Now, she was going to have to change the dates. There was no way she'd be able to get this done in time.

*Right?*

That timeline was also in her mind, making her a cranky, cranky investigator.

Apparently, she wasn't hiding it well.

“Irritated?” Chris asked as he made them some coffee before they headed out.

He could tell she was not happy.

The love of his life was sitting at the kitchen island and the look on her face...

**Yowza.**

It was a cross between sucking on a bag of lemons and fantasizing about killing her boss with that exact bag of lemons.

It took a lot to make her miserable, and it appeared this round was won by Gabe. Elizabeth was not amused, and it appeared they were all in for a long one.

She held a mean grudge, and at the top of her list was their boss and his shitty antics. Finally, it looked like he’d pushed her beyond her limits of interference in her life.

He’d cut off her path to the very expensive cruise, a buffet of fantastic foods, and hours of mind-blowing sex.

Yeah, he hated him too.

Chris knew his woman, and there was no doubt in his mind that she could catch all three and still make that cruise. If not, he would just call and push it back. He’d yet to buy Charlie’s and Sam’s tickets, so he had time.

*As for her...*

Oh, she was not amused by Gabe today.

**At.**

**All.**

In fact, she’d growled all night long in her sleep like she was a hungry wolf eating its prey. Someone was killed **MANY** times in her dreams, and he was betting it wasn’t him.

When she looked over at him, she growled.

It made him laugh.

*How could it not?*

She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, she had a heart of gold, and she loved him. This was just FBI crankiness at its finest.

He’d ply her with coffee, some fuel, and they’d get over it.

*What choice did they have?*

When they’d closed the case yesterday, and both of them did their paperwork, he knew today was going to be a bitch when it came to being

dropped into a town in the middle of a mess. There was no doubt in his mind that the FBI was more than happy to pass this buck.

It was clear they had been watching the killings that had been going on, and ever-so-happy to pass it off to someone to handle.

The FBI's new darling.

As for everyone else who was helping, or in her view, hindering...

Charlie was as happy as a plaid-wearing clam.

Sam was jolly like this was Christmas Eve.

Oh, and Jack had been in a good mood too because he was sleeping with Axelle non-freaking-stop.

Chris...well, he was just grateful that they had one down, and only two to go. Elizabeth would run hard, and he worried about her.

*That he would be by her side...*

He dared not smile.

Elizabeth would growl even more.

They were all up-to-bat once more as they continued this race against two more nuts, but Elizabeth was, clearly, not going to enjoy this.

So, Chris did what he did best.

Talk his woman down.

"Want to talk about it before everyone gets here and you grumble your way to the jet?" he asked, handing her a steaming mug of dark, rich coffee.

She took it and grumbled even more.

She knew it was stupid to be bitchy about this, but really...this was not her rodeo.

It was Jack's and she'd gotten pulled into it.

"I solved the case. I shouldn't have to play more reindeer games with these cuckoos. There is a whole FBI to share in all the fun," she offered. "I'm over it..." she began, only to have him shut that down by kissing her.

Chris knew how to calm the savage-woman beast.

As he sat beside her, his hand was in her hair at the back of her head, and his mouth moved silkily over hers in a reminder that at least they would be doing it together.

Slowly, he set her mouth free, and she blinked through that pleasure. Her heart was racing but now for a whole other kind of reason.

Chris knew that they couldn't go into this with a chip on the lead investigator's shoulder.

It was what it was.

So, he attempted to ground her temper as quickly as possible.

"Let me stop you there. Had your father, Sam, Jack, and Axelle not been involved, would you be fine with taking on this case?"

She put her cup down.

Oh, she loved a smart man, and she hated a smart man. Here came his gift of talking her down.

Chris continued.

"Because we all know that you are an adrenaline junkie, and that you love a chase—the wilder the better. A serial rapist killing people seems to be right up your alley, and we both know it. We've been to that rodeo before, cowgirl. What gives to make you this bitchy about it? Normally, you'd be over it in a couple of hours, but here we are, T-minus an hour, and you're still growling at people—me."

She knew she could be honest with him, and Elizabeth didn't want him to think she was upset with him.

She wasn't.

Chris was the **ONLY** person who she would never be worked up about working with on back-to-back cases. This was, after all, her job.

"I feel like I'm being punished, and my back is against the wall. I did what I was supposed to do, and instead of it being a *'good job, here are two days off'*, it's *'get your ass on a plane and give me more'*."

Chris knew Elizabeth was a complex creature with more nooks and crannies than any other person he knew. She wasn't an easy solve on a good day. It took time and strategy to get past that tough exterior.

There had to be more.

She was accustomed to being overlooked, underpaid, and run into the ground.

He kept digging.

"Is it the timeline for our vacation that has you worked up?" he asked.

She paused.

"You can tell me, Sweetness. Let me help you work through this."

She gave in.

It was stupid since she was a Fed early in her career, but she wanted that time away with him. She craved it. What made her feel like an idiot was that she wanted to be a girl.

*Was that so much to ask?*

She wanted to be alone with him on a boat with no cares in the world.

He kissed the ring on her finger and stared into her icy-blue eyes, waiting for her to share.

She knew he was waiting, and the man beside her knew her too well.

Finally, she caved.

“Yes, it is. I really wanted to have that cruise and to be alone with you, Christopher. I feel like every time I do a good job, Gabe wants to throw another tough one at me to stop me from enjoying my actual life. I mean, come on! An easy case would be nice.”

He knew she was worried more about wasting the money on a cruise they missed than anything else. Elizabeth had grown up in a single-parent-income family, and not wealthy. She was likely freaking out about the money that she’d spent.

Chris knew how much the tickets had cost since he’d invited Charlie and Sam without telling her. That price was nothing to him, but everything to her.

Only, he had to tread lightly.

If he made her suspicious, the jig would be up, and his girl would be angry.

Without saying a word, he poured cereal for both of them so they could get some calories in them before they hopped that jet.

He had bran.

She had something coated in sugar.

That was very much how they both rolled and to each their own.

Instead of arguing with his woman, he put fruit in both of their bowls, and then leaned over to give her a kiss.

“We won’t miss the cruise, and if we cut it close, I’ll call them and get our date pushed back, Elizabeth. We are going on the beach vacation that you planned one way or another.”

“I didn’t get insurance...”

He stopped her.



“Do you trust me?”

She nodded.

“Then let me handle the cruise and if we can’t make that one, I’ll call, be nice, and get our dates bumped.”

Or he’d just pay for new tickets, let her think that it was bumped, and call it a day. The last thing he wanted was her worked up.

“Now, as for an ‘*easy case*’, we’ve been to that rodeo, my love. Remember when Gabe was giving you the easy cases after ‘*The Butcher*’, and you nearly shit a town full of bricks all over his office?”

She chewed some pieces of dry cereal and said nothing.

*Why?*

He knew her too well.

Chris continued.

“You would hate an easy one.”

She sighed.

“Then, my father...”

It made him laugh.

Oh, Elizabeth Renee LaRue was a complex creature with so many twists and turns that a driving enthusiast would be giddy. She could make you work for it.

*And he loved every second of it.*

“Love of my life,” he said, pouring the milk into her bowl first, and then his, “when will you give up that ghost? You’re never shaking Charlie. I’m willing to bet he’s haunting our house long after his time here on Earth is over.”

She gasped and the sugar cereal fell off of her spoon as she stared at him in horror.

“Don’t jinx it! I don’t want our house haunted by anything—**ESPECIALLY** my father! Ghosts are not for me, Christopher!”

He laughed.

He wasn’t shocked.

If she couldn’t rationalize it, and it wasn’t tangible to her mind, it couldn’t exist. Chris got that as a scientist.

**Completely.**

“Come on. You know you’re more irritated that you are having fun with your father than you are that you’re stuck with him. This is another

kind of scowl. Let's go back to how you think you're in trouble for doing a good job."

He was right.

**Damn him.**

A smart man was sexy and annoying all at once.

"Is this punishment?" she asked. "Is Gabe really pissed at me for doing a good job? He has me conditioned to wait for the praise, and this time..."

And there it was.

While she didn't do it for the praise, she'd become accustomed to being told how great she did. This time, Gabe was withholding it because he was a dick.

Yeah, he really was.

The man loved a good mind-fuck, and he was finally figuring out how to mess with Elizabeth when she didn't *'obey'* him.

He shook his head.

"The big boss is messing with you, along with Gabe, Elizabeth. He's tried everything to keep us apart, stop you from having help, and from becoming a media darling. While he knows how good you are, now, he's worried that your ego will get too big."

She stared at him.

"Uh, ouch?"

He laughed.

"I'm not saying you have one. I'm saying he knows how good you are but this likely got his ass scorched by the director, and in his own sick way wants to keep you safe."

She listened.

If there was anyone who could talk her down, it was Chris.

He continued.

"Gabe's boss hates women, and you're knocking cases out of the park one after another. The director is likely putting a lot of pressure on Gabe, as he's setting you up to move up the ladder. You'll be in charge one day."

She dropped her spoon.

**IN.**

**HORROR.**

She couldn't believe he said it out loud. Now, he definitely jinxed the hell out of this.

**“CHRISTOPHER!”**

He laughed.

Oh, his woman was funny. That she didn't realize how big an asset she was to the FBI...

It was amusing.

“You're good at what you do, Bethe. You're smart, you're tough, and you aren't being punished. I wouldn't lie to you.”

She chilled out.

He squeezed her hand in reassurance.

“You are good because you work well with the people around you. In your case, Gabe is irritated that you come with backup. That's why the crankiness from him.”

Yeah, she supposed he was right.

Chris would see it from a different perspective. That big gray squishy matter between his ears was an asset to her when she went off on a tangent.

“As for getting rid of your father...give up. Charlie is going to keep popping in because he loves you, and you're lucky to have him around. I'd give anything for my father to try to butt in and help with an autopsy.”

She knew how much he wished his father had lived so he could have had that man in his life.

She felt like a bag of dicks for going on and on about her issues when she was lucky.

She had her daddy, and he was an amazing man who loved her so damn much.

“Charlie is harmless.”

She actually laughed.

*Why?*

Oh, she didn't learn to be like this because of a fluke. Her father... he was her mentor and had Catherine, her mother, not died, he would have been running DC.

**No.**

**Freaking.**

**Doubt.**

“Well, yeah, but that’s easy for you to say. You get Sam. Who doesn’t love Sam? He’s a mom. I get Charlie ‘*I’m taking over*’ LaRue.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Sam was so easy to get along with that it was a pleasure to have him at his side. It was proof that opposites attract. He and Elizabeth were opposites too.

Instead of arguing, he ate some bran.

And laughed.

“Care to refute that?” she asked.

So, he did.

“Yep. **BUT** you also get Charlie ‘*I have a different perspective*’ LaRue to keep you focused and seeing it another way. One day, you’ll miss it.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Uh-huh.”

Chris already saw that she was in a far better mood. It appeared that he’d pulled off layers of stress, and now she was less cranky.

Score one for her partner in life.

“I love you,” she stated, giving him a kiss on the cheek in gratitude.

She didn’t need to thank him.

This was what being a partner meant.

“I love you too, Bethe,” he admitted. “You’ve got this, and we’ll catch all the Clarksons. Then...we’ll go on our cruise.”

“I can’t wait to be alone with you.”

If the universe loved him, Charlie and Sam would **NOT** make their appearance known on that cruise, and instead, stayed shackled up in their room.

**PLEASE.**

If not, Elizabeth was going to kill him.

“Me either,” he admitted. “I’m tying you to that bed for days,” he said, knowing it would be to keep her away from the two men.

As they continued to eat their breakfast, someone knocked on the door.

“That’s going to be the courier. I know Gabe won’t show his ass up here. I’m supposed to have two days off and he’s a chicken shit. He’s hiding until that jet takes off.”

Chris laughed.

“Likely, and if he has any common sense, he’ll avoid you when we are finished too.”

**AMEN.**

Elizabeth hoped so.

She headed for the door of their brownstone, and when she opened it, Elizabeth was horrified.

Oh, it wasn’t the courier.

Not surprisingly, it was her father and Sam, and her dad had the file and was already reading it.

That was the horrifying part.

The man had **NO** boundaries.

“**DAD!**” she said pointing out the envelope he’d opened and perused without her.

Charlie couldn’t help himself.

He grinned at her.

“Now, don’t get your knickers bunched, Baby Girl. The guy was standing here wondering what he was doing in the rich part of town, so I helped him out. You know me. I love to be as helpful as possible.”

She opened her mouth, but her snarky comment was cut off by one thing, and one thing alone.

There was laughter from inside the brownstone.

It appeared her doctor was entertained.

*Oh...*

Chris was getting his giggle on.

Before she could stop the crazy, he opened his mouth and actually kept yapping at her.

“So, are we ready?” Charlie asked, pointing toward their bags on the steps. “You don’t look like you’re ready to roll, Baby Girl. Has that doctor of yours been keeping you busy?”

Jesus in a spaceship.

Elizabeth stared at him, and as she opened her mouth to take him down a notch, she noticed something.

*The smile on his face...*

It wasn’t faked.

The man was genuinely happy that he was going to be helping her with this.

That look had been missing for a while the last few times she'd seen him, and Charlie was back to being the man she knew.

There was that twinkle in his icy-blue eyes, and it wasn't always there—as of late.

That her daddy was hurting over Abigale and George...

Yeah, she'd swallow her irritation.

Chris was right.

She'd miss having this one day, and she knew that it would come sooner rather than later. Charlie was in his fifties, and time stopped for no one.

So, she threw him a bone.

Oh, it was a big one, but she loved the man so damn much.

Now, he had an excuse to be there, and she couldn't shit all over it.

She wouldn't.

Elizabeth knew how hard he'd worked to raise her, giving her what she needed. The man had worked extra shifts, and he'd taken on side gigs to put food on their table. He was paying for child support now, and that had to hurt.

It was the least she could do.

"Yeah, Dad, I'm getting there," she said, grabbing his suitcase and Sam's.

She put her mood away.

One day she'd miss having him knock on her door. Hopefully, it wouldn't be for a long-ass time, but this put everything into perspective.

She had him now.

Charlie followed his daughter into her home, and he toed off his boots in her foyer.

Sam did the same with his loafers.

They headed into the kitchen behind her and found Chris having something to eat.

"Hungry, Mom and Dad?" Chris asked.

Sam gave Chris a kiss on the cheek.

"Mind if we join you?" Sam asked.

Chris pointed.

"Bran is everyone's friend."

Charlie opened his mouth, but Sam was quicker. He pointed at the sheriff and gave him the look.

“Sammy! I like bacon.”

“Well, I don’t like your cholesterol, so bran it is. We discussed this, Charles.”

Elizabeth snickered as she picked up her bowl of soggy sugar cereal and continued eating. She knew Sam was **NOT** going to let her father get away with it.

Now that she knew they were a couple, that nagging made perfect sense. Chris nagged her all the damn time about her eating habits.

Love was love.

“Bran?” Charlie said as Sam poured milk over the man’s cereal.

“Come on! Who really eats this shit?” he asked, horrified.

Chris finished his and smiled.

“I do. I like it.”

Charlie shook his head.

“Son, how did you catch my baby girl? I know it wasn’t with bran.”

“It was his dick,” she said, not missing a beat. Since he violated that file, she was going to make him pay.

Fair was fair.

“It’s energetic.”

Charlie stared at her.

“You were once a sweet thing with pigtails and dresses. How did this go so wrong?”

She smiled sweetly.

“I discovered dick. Again, his.”

Sam laughed.

“Give up, Charles. She’s allowed to like ME dick. That’s her rodeo.”

He said nothing.

*Why?*

He liked it too.

She was his child.

Oh, Charlie never saw this one coming in all of his years, but he wasn’t exactly sad. His daughter was in a monogamous relationship with a stable man.

He technically won this round.

Chris pushed his bowl away.

“Do you know what a body looks like inside when all you eat is sugar and processed takeout? You grow tumors and polyps. Then, your

heart fills with cholesterol and before you know it, you're dead on your floor..."

Both LaRues were staring at him like he was nuts as one of them was eating sugar and processed food.

The other because that was his basic food group.

"Well, thanks for that jolly foray into food and my polyp-y colon," Charlie stated. "You're Mr. Cheery."

Chris laughed and shook his head.

When his daughter wasn't looking, Charlie swapped cereal bowls. He was **NOT** eating bran.

**Screw that.**

Sam wouldn't withhold sex, since he liked dick just as much.

"So, Baby Girl, this should be a fun one," he said, as she took the file from the counter and checked it out for herself.

She was focused on the information in it.

Oh, she saw the bowl switcheroo, but she would grab some snacks for the road. Her father could have her cereal.

"Right?" he added.

Truthfully, Charlie hoped she wasn't going to give him shit about helping. He liked to see things through, and he didn't want to have his daughter chase this family of crazies alone. This morning, as Sam was helping him soap up in the shower, he was worried she was going to send him home.

*To nothing.*

*Salem* was his least favorite place to be as of late. He wanted to be here with her and Chris. All it would take was his girl to tell him they were having a baby, and that house in *Salem* was going up for sale.

His biological Grandpa-clock was ticking, and his daughter was annoyingly ignoring it.

"Not so sure it's going to be fun," she said, as her phone began ringing on the kitchen island. "I'm sure it will be a clusterfuck, father. Call it a hunch."

When she focused on the phone, she saw Gabe's name and it had the reaction expected.

She growled again.

Chris pushed her cell closer to her and reassured his girl that it was okay.



They were all stuck in this, Gabe included. While he didn't often defend the man, he did this time.

"Be nice. He's fed up with you too."

She began laughing.

*How could she not?*

That was the god's honest truth. Gabe had to be over her bullshit by now.

*Yeah...*

She'd behave.

Gabe was proving to have the power to make her incredibly miserable, and she was over that shit.

This mess proved it.

Answering, she opted to screw with him.

"Morning, Boss. How are you today?" she asked cheerily, trying not to laugh the whole time. She sounded like she was possessed.

He actually paused at that greeting.

Truthfully, it wasn't what he was expecting.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

He'd dumped the next round of the case on her, and he was pretty damn sure she was going to bitch up a storm.

This was not that.

"Is this really Elizabeth?" he asked, recognizing her voice, but not the nicety in it.

That was new.

**And scary.**

"Yes, Gabriel, it's me. Who did you expect to answer my cell phone? The Blessed Virgin Mary?"

Yeah, that was a hard no.

Someone was as far from the BVM as humanly possible. Then again, they both likely said or had '*Jesus*' said a lot in their lives.

*Jesus, you're great at carpentry.*

*Jesus, Elizabeth, wear some panties.*

Gabe went with the obvious.

*How could he not?*

“Uh, did you somehow swap personalities with someone without anyone knowing?” he asked.

She wanted to growl, but Chris was giving her the look. So, she’d play nice.

**For now.**

“No, I was just having breakfast and talking this case over with my father. He’s excited to be joining me on the next leg of this adventure.”

“Elizabeth...”

She heard the tension.

**GOOD.**

If she was suffering, he was too.

“He’s ready to go. In fact, he intercepted the courier and is already caught up on the case. He can actually get me up to speed on it.”

Oh, she knew how to irritate Gabe.

This round was hers.

Despite what Chris had said earlier, this boned her but good, and she liked to share the fun.

As if on cue, her father chimed in.

“I can’t wait,” Charlie said. “I hope it’s in a state where I can open carry a gun...”

That was all it took.

Gabe gasped.

It was clear that the Director of the FBI hadn’t thought this one through all of the way. Their boss wanted to screw Elizabeth over, but this could go bad.

Charlie was a wild card.

Elizabeth sat there grinning.

Here came the first victory in this long war, and it was a tally on her side.

**NOT.**

**HIS.**

Oh, mess with her, would he?

This was going to bite him in the ass. She was pulling a three-sixty. She was going to use her father and keep using him to assist until she broke Gabe.

Two could play this game.

She actually liked Charlie—loved him.

*Gabe...*

Not so much.

“LaRue...,” he began, trying to warn her.

She cut him off.

“Is the jet ready?” she asked. “I’m going to be heading to the airport in ten. I’m waiting for Axelle and Jack. She had some things to tie up before being hijacked for this case. I sure hope she doesn’t get mean. You know how she is...,” she said, laying the framework for the man’s stroke.

Yeah, he never thought this one through.

*Two LaRues, and an Axelle...*

**Oh, boy.**

West Virginia was in for one hell of a show. Someone would be ceding from the union any day now.

There was an audible swallow.

“I mean, she’s only CIA. How bad could it possibly be to force her to work a case with me?”

It was clear he was having second thoughts—or hated his boss for pushing this on them.

One way or another, she’d find out who was behind this decision, and she would make them pay.

**Big-time.**

“LaRue, don’t go there.”

She smiled.

Yeah, this was so much better than being bitchy. She was being vindictive and messing with his mind.

Beside her, Chris just shook his head.

It was clear that he wasn’t shocked.

Well, if anything, she was consistent.

*Right?*

“I’m sure that she loved her boss being called by the FBI and getting her shoved into this when it’s really not a CIA matter.”

She clarified.

“She’s there to find the money—not solve this, Elizabeth. Her job is not to be hotdogging it around town. Her job is to sit her ass in a room and research,” Gabe clarified.

“Uh-huh. Well, we all love being tied to research for hours at a time.”

Gabe was worried.

Why?

Axelle was **NOT** his biggest fan and working with her was not his favorite thing. He'd made the mistake of a drive-by fucking after way too much booze, and it followed him to that day.

Plus, the woman was like a redheaded Elizabeth.

It freaked him out beyond belief.

He stayed calm.

"Well, her boss offered her up since she was helping the FBI. This is her punishment from him. I had **NOTHING** to do with that. Besides, we know that the money was shipped overseas and likely from an offshore account to an offshore account. That is totally a CIA gig."

She kept the torture going.

"Mmmhmmm," she said, eating some cereal—her father's bran—and the smile on her face was **HUGE**.

Oh, two could play these shitty games, now couldn't they?

"Anyway, I was just about to be read in on the case file. What's up?" she asked.

Gabe was sweating it, and she knew it.

The man was predictable if nothing.

"I just received a call. There was another victim last night. The sheriff in that town just called it in. They are holding the scene until you get there. We believe Teddy Clarkson is killing still," he said, trying to get Elizabeth to read between the lines. He wanted her to think about this.

There were layers he couldn't bring up, and she was smart enough to figure them out, **IF** she thought about it.

She kept eating.

Yeah, she knew that the FBI was likely watching this mess go down, but now that they had Kitty, and her DNA on file, they could pinpoint her family.

It sucked to be them.

The dogs were being called out on them.

**Woof.**

**Woof.**

"What do we have by way of his part in this, Gabe? Catch me up."

He did just that.

“Well, we have a crazy,” he stated. “Apparently, he’s three victims in so far, in this town, but we know from what you’ve dug up, and what we’ve found, that he moves from town-to-town, and he is a predator.”

She was curious.

“You ran her DNA?”

“Yes. We have fifteen bodies in West Virginia tied to him. Agents on the ground have gotten back to us. They likely have the same man doing the killing there. We don’t have the DNA on those victims, but word on the street is it’s Teddy.”

He waited for her to get it.

He hoped she would.

This was something that ran deep, and his fingers were crossed.

Elizabeth took it all in as she tried to sort through what Gabe was telling her.

She was trying to figure out how a sheriff had called it in, when he wouldn’t be privy to everything they knew.

Then, again, maybe he’d been leaked some intel.

In the FBI, there were agents like her, and there were agents like Axelle had once been. They blended in, and they extracted intel to help the local law in their neck of the woods.

Basically, they were spies out there protecting the interest of the United States on its own soil. It was how they watched for domestic terrorists, bombers, and assholes trying to betray the country.

It was clear they had their sights on Teddy’s victims and getting Kitty had given them an identity of the mysterious serial nutbag.

This file was something Axelle would have compiled. She had been an FBI agent at one time until Gabe stuck his dick in the wrong place during a post-case celebration.

She’d learned a lot of her spying domestically.

Without saying anything more, she flipped through the pages.

One important thing was missing.

“We don’t have a photo?” she asked.

“Here’s the thing,” he began. “The Clarksons are from a small town, and none of them got driver’s licenses there. They had aliases when they finally got them, and we don’t know the locations. We only had the hit on Kitty’s DNA to give us this asshole’s identity.”

She let him talk.

“The death of their mother was the catalyst that put them on the radar, and then when Kitty went nuts, spitting at agents, we collected that and ran it.”

She laughed.

“They always spit.”

He was aware.

At that moment, they had her under wraps. They weren’t exactly breaking the law and violating her rights.

She was taking a little trip to drug land where she stayed under. The last thing they needed was for her to lawyer up, and blow this.

“Now that we have the DNA link, we know that they killed their mother, disguised it as a B and E, and are up to no good. Right now, we’re running the DNA through all the databases to find Letty Clarkson. Once we do...”

She was aware.

She’d have one more to catch.

Yeah, this was one hell of a race to get all three before anyone’s arrest came out. It honestly would have been easier to shoot the woman.

Only, that wasn’t her choice to make.

“Is she talking?” Elizabeth asked.

“You didn’t hear this from me, but the CIA has let us have some drugs.”

Oh, she didn’t want to know.

The spooks used all kinds of not-so-legal techniques to get people to talk.

The less she knew, the better.

J. Edgar Hoover was a bag of dicks, but he wasn’t that far into the darkness.

**Thankfully.**

The CIA liked to break all the rules when it came to interrogation.

She’d seen Guantanamo Bay.

“When she talks, **IF** she talks, I’ll let you know. What I do know is that we won’t be able to keep her quiet for long. If you’re going to stop the other two siblings, you have to move fast,” he stated.

It was why he’d picked her.

Elizabeth was one of the few Feds who could pick up an almost invisible trail and chase it.

“Uh, well, that’s easier said than done,” she stated. “I don’t have pictures, I don’t have all the details yet, and I’m literally being dumped into a three-person deep death match.”

He was aware.

Only, he knew her skill.

She was beyond stellar, but if he said it, he worried her ego would take her down. He was dealing with a cowboy already with Blackhawk.

His ego would be his end.

Gabe knew it.

“If anyone can do this, it’s you.”

She hoped he was right.

“Oh, well, your faith in me is astounding.”

He cut to the chase.

“Elizabeth, he’s strangling women in bed, or tossing them off balconies. He’s sick, and you have to be the one who nails him. He’s off his rocker, and you already know what going up against them is going to be like.”

She did.

There was no point arguing.

This case was hers.

Besides, Charlie was grinning like a lunatic. If she took him off of it, he’d cry.

“I’ll handle it,” she stated. “When I do, I want a week off without you boning me over. I need a vacation, Gabe. I get it. I know you’re having fun messing with me, but I’m going to burn out.”

He sighed.

Oh, he knew it was coming.

“The director wants you on this. He thinks you’re going to drop the ball, and he’s handing you the hard ones to make it a reality. Again, you didn’t hear that from me.”

And there it was.

That man hated her guts.

*She wasn’t sure why...*

Oh, yeah, she actually was.

She humiliated his super soldiers in the FBI army with just her skills, some beat-up boots, and her brain.

“Is that so?” Charlie stated.

“LaRue number two, don’t.”

She laughed.

“Actually, he’s the chicken, and I’m the egg. He technically came first,” she said, trying to defuse it. Now that she knew that the director was the one with a stick up his ass, she didn’t want to poke Gabe’s eyes out.

She wasn’t shocked.

It was clear that Gabe was in the middle, trying to protect her.

“Again, that week off.”

He gave in.

“A little birdy has put in for vacation time for you when you are going away. I won’t interfere.”

Charlie played along.

“You’re going away? Where?”

She pointed at him.

**“NO. DAD. JUST. NO.”**

He laughed.

Gabe wasn’t getting on that train.

**Ever.**

“You can trust me this time. It’s a deal. I’ll not bother you for a full week, and I won’t hand you a case. You and your man can go do whatever it is you do when the doors are closed.”

She opened her mouth and Chris put his hand over it—just in case.

Oh, he knew her.

“Okay?” Gabe asked.

“Swear on your children’s lives,” she stated, not willing to play this game. She’d paid a shit ton of money for those tickets, and they were going on that all-inclusive cruise to sex land.

He gasped in mock horror.

Of course, she was going to make him do that. She knew Amy, Bea, and their new pregnancy were his life.

“LaRue!”

“I mean it. You have no honor. You’re a pain in my ass, but you love your kids. Do it.”

He mumbled.

“I swear on my children’s lives I won’t bone your vacation with work. Okay, LaRue?” he asked.

She took it.



It was the best chance she had, and she knew it.

“Okay, so I’m going to catch Teddy Clarkson next. We’ll fly out in an hour, and I’ll get this underway. You just make sure the cops keep Kitty under wraps. If word gets out to her siblings that she’s caught...”

He was well aware.

“We would use her phone to get details, but so far, theirs aren’t on. Plus, we need a warrant.”

Yeah, that wouldn’t happen.

Not in time.

It took days.

“Just get that money, LaRue. It’s got to be somewhere that the brother and sister can access. We know she likely shipped it through some accounts offshore and brought it back. If it’s not with Theodore Clarkson, it’s with Letty.”

She put it on her list of things to do.

“Okay, I’ll check-in as soon as I get this fun fest underway. Have Salem meet us...”

He slowed her roll.

**Immediately.**

Oh, and he dropped the news.

“You don’t have access to her on this case. You have your team, LaRue.”

She nearly shit herself.

Salem was her partner.

As of late, Elizabeth was taking the hard cases, and Salem was going the profile route. Normally, she wouldn’t care, but with just days to close and catch three people...

She needed her.

“Gabe!”

There was nothing he could do.

The director really didn’t like Elizabeth.

“She’s been assigned to another case by **MY BOSS**. He feels that we have other things going on,” he stated, clueing her in as to what was the issue.

**Not him.**

The angry head honcho.

“Are you shitting me?” she asked, as everyone stared at her. “He’s setting me up to fail.”

He was well aware.

**THUS**, why he gave her a CIA spook, a cop, and was ignoring that Charlie LaRue, the pain in his ass, was playing helper on this.

While the director made it harder, Gabe gave her accommodations that he wouldn’t give anyone else. He was leveling the playing field in his own way.

“Elizabeth, you pissed him off. You make him nervous because none of the ponies he’s bet on can hold a candle to you. He discounted you because you have tits. I can’t stop him. I can only help slow that shit-roll for you.”

**God.**

**Damn.**

**It.**

“If you need a profile, I have someone who can do it. He’s teamed up with Gene Cantrell. I’ll get you hooked up. Just say the word. Doctor Dane is on her way to Idaho and has been told **NOT** to take calls due to security issues. Sorry, LaRue. You have your team. Use them wisely.”

What?

She was being told not to contact her own partner? Was he really thinking she’d listen?

Yeah, well, no.

“Well, this blows.”

Oh, he was aware, and he knew she’d ignore him. That was what he was hoping would happen.

“Good luck, LaRue. I’m rooting for you. Keep your nose clean, make sure your father stays under the radar, and get me Teddy Clarkson. I want to rub it in the director’s face when you close this.”

She did too.

“On it, Gabe.”

He didn’t keep her on the phone.

He hung up.

Elizabeth knew what she had to do, and that there was a lot relying on her getting it done.

She wasn’t amused.

Neither was her father.

“Your boss’ boss is an asshole. He’s trying to sabotage my baby girl’s job,” Charlie stated, angrily.

Oh, she was aware.

“We can do this,” Chris said, taking her hand in his. “He can’t stop us.”

He was right.

She had her people and her skill.

She was going to show that over-bloated asshole what a woman, **THIS WOMAN**, could do.

“Well, you heard him,” Elizabeth stated, rubbing her temples. “We have three victims so far and have to meet with a sheriff. This should be so much fun,” she stated, as her father smiled like a loon beside her.

Yeah, she couldn’t wait.

Let the babysitting and ass-kicking begin.

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## *Chapter Three*

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*West Virginia*

*Small Town*

*Airstrip*

*Three Hours Later*

When her whole team touched down, people were waiting for them on the tarmac—one of them being the sheriff or who she assumed it would be. Elizabeth was calling this one before she spoke a word to him.

While she didn't like to stereotype anyone, since it was done often to her, she wasn't exactly shocked to have nailed this one.

She could see this one coming a mile away.

*He was young.*

*He was smiling.*

*He was about as green as green could be.*

The sheriff had that sheen to him—the kind that multiple deaths washed away.

**Terrific.**

Someone was grossly outplayed when it came to one of the killer Clarksons. This man was in over his head, whether he knew it or not. That he was still smiling as someone as vicious and dangerous as a Clarkson was hunting his citizens...

He had no clue.

The last thing she needed in this chase was someone who was going to hinder her operation even more than it already was. That meant one thing, and one thing only.

She was going to be doing this without the local law's assistance.

Call it a hunch.

He would be useless.

It wasn't like that was something that didn't happen more often than not. If she had a dollar for every local law officer who was in over his head...

She'd be 'Chris Leonard' rich.

So, in order to get her job done, she had to micromanage not one, but two MEs, a group of techs who were wild cards, A homicide cop, a CIA director, a town full of green cops, and her father. All of that while chasing a homicidal sibling in half the time she would normally be allotted.

**Great.**

As she gathered her gear, body armor in tow, they exited the jet onto the very simple airfield. When going to small towns, you had to work with what was given to you.

At least she didn't have to worry about her luggage being lost in a real airport.

There was that.

It was the small things.

"Here we go, team," she said, under her breath. She knew they heard her as they moved into a formation around her.

They'd protect her, and she'd return the favor.

As she headed toward the sheriff's cars parked not far from the FBI rentals, he began waving her down.

*Jesus help her from committing homicide on this case.*

*Amen.*

It was a simple prayer, but one she meant. Nothing was going her way on this one.

"Agent!" he called, waving her down.

She could feel her eye twitching at his enthusiasm, and Chris was full of giggles beside her. It was clear that her face was not as blank as she'd hoped it would be.

Sue her.

This was going to blow.

As for her man, oh, of course, he'd be amused by this. Well, until the dude hit on her.

Then, it would be his eye twitching.

Elizabeth focused on the man, still trying not to judge him beforehand, but with each step closer, it was getting harder and harder.

Yeah, it wasn't going to be easy for her.

Her gut was screaming, and she was already waiting for something else to bite her in the ass.

When she reached him, and his deputy, she dropped her bag and body armor with a thud at his feet.

“Yeah?” she asked, watching him from behind her mirrored shades. She could feel Charlie and Sam right behind her, and she wanted to see what was up with this display.

He was way too excited for a cop.

Cop plus FBI equaled clusterfuck more often than not in her world, and yet, he was happy.

From her peripheral, she could see that Axelle and Jack had headed toward their rides, and that was more proof they expected this to be ridiculous.

Lucky them.

“Honey, are you the agent in charge, or can you point me at the one running this?” he asked, glancing over at Chris, and then Charlie.

And here it went.

“Unfortunately, this is my circle jerk. What can I do you for?” she asked, letting the south out.

*Why not?*

It couldn’t get any worse.

*Right?*

The man called her honey, and now he was thinking one of the men was running this circus. Well, she had horrible news for him.

This was her show, and she was the ringmaster.

He blinked at her use of ‘*circle jerk*’.

Well, she had news.

It was about to get worse.

“I’m sorry...”

She clarified and cut him off.

“Yes, actually, I’m Special Agent Elizabeth LaRue, and this is now my rodeo, Sheriff...?”

She waited.

He held out his hand.

“I’m Remington Bowman. My friends call me Remmy.”

Good to know.

She wouldn’t be using that nickname simply because they weren’t friends, they weren’t going to be friends, and honestly, she could call him sheriff and be fine with it.

Yeah, she was in a mood.

**Clearly.**

This was what happened when you skipped morning wood for a chip on your shoulder.

**This.**

**Right.**

**Here.**

“I’ll just call you sheriff. It’s easier. I hate memorizing names when I don’t plan on using them.”

Chris tried not to laugh.

“Ehhhhh, she won’t,” he stated, knowing it was true. She’d call him sheriff, jackwagon, asshole, pain-in-her-ass, but never Remmy.

He would bet money on it.

Elizabeth continued.

“Anyway, we’ve made our introductions, so if you don’t mind...,” she began, jerking her head toward their blacked-out Denali and the perfect chance to escape.

**Until he kept talking.**

Sam gave her the look, and it screamed *‘mind your manners. I raised you better than this’*.

**Well, shit.**

“It’s a pleasure to be working with you on this, Agent LaRue. Your boss called and he told us that we would have the best agent he had, so the pleasure is all ours.”

Chris stared at the man.

*Wait?*

*What?*

Hadn’t Gabe told them the man called them? Suddenly, this felt off.

“Thank you for helping us out,” Remington offered.

Elizabeth shrugged.

Well, at least he rebounded from the gender faux pas.

Still, he was assuming, and that was a dangerous thing. Someone needed to hold his horses.

**Big-time.**

She pulled off her sunglasses and stared him in the eyes. It was clear he wasn’t ready for that punch of icy blue.

He actually took a step back.

“Uh, we’re not working *‘together’*. I don’t do the whole *‘play nice’* thing,” she warned. “Apparently, my boss neglected to share that tidbit with

you. I'm mean, I don't get along with people, and I don't like to share my cases. Basically, think of me like a plague. I come, I destroy, and then I sashay my ass out of here when I've done my damage."

Charlie laughed.

She wasn't wrong.

Only, the man didn't get irritated. It was clear that he was laid back, and a cop needed to be when dealing with Elizabeth. It would be for the best.

He might not have that stroke.

Remington shrugged.

"Yeah, well, he said the lead investigator was hell to work with, but damn good. He apologized in advance and said he was sending me some cigars. Apparently, you are notorious."

*She didn't blink.*

*She didn't bat an eye.*

*She didn't move.*

Remington went with it, trying to be nice.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have really pretty eyes?" he asked.

She sighed.

"Here we go," she stated, getting ready to deal with the pretty comments that always came after. Someone was laying it on thick.

Chris ran his hand up and down her back, his eyes narrowed as he checked the man out.

His gut was screaming.

Someone was hitting all of Elizabeth's trigger buttons as if he'd been clued in. The sheriff was zero for two so far. It was hard to be this blatantly idiotic.

"She is pretty too," the deputy beside him stated.

She growled, and the man jumped.

"You don't say?" she asked. "I'm pretty. I should be a model, and I have nice eyes. Let me give you a heads-up. If you plan on asking me out, I'd sooner cut out your spleens and make slippers for those chilly nights by the fire."

Charlie felt for her.

His daughter had to do this dance every single time. Still, he knew when she was not able to handle it.



She wasn't there yet.

"So, you don't like the obvious. Okay, but as a warning, I tend to point out the obvious," he offered. "That's just how I roll. Now, let's talk about this case, and how I can help out."

She wasn't sure if she'd been assholeish enough. Normally, a sheriff would lob her the case and run for the hills. What was going on with this one?

She was being a downright bitchy jerk.

Clearly, this one wasn't going to do it.

**Yet.**

"You aren't helping out. I run solo. I'm pretty sure I made that clear."

As if he had **NO** self-preservation for himself, he actually lifted a hand, and he counted, one-by-one, the three people behind her, and then started counting the techs, Jack, and the rest of her team.

"That's actually twenty. That's not solo. So, what's a couple more added to the fun?"

**FUN?**

She was wasting time and getting **B.I.T.C.H.Y**—with **ALL** capitals.

Elizabeth rubbed her eyes as she fought for some sort of control over this mess. She was already being bet against with the Director of the FBI. She didn't need the greenhorn playing cop on her watch. She was babysitting **PLENTY** of people.

Again, she could feel Chris' hand on her back, soothing her with his infinite well of calm. Bless her man for being able to soothe the savage bitch. If not, she'd be a raging sex-deprived nutbag.

She gave up.

If Deputy Do Right wanted to follow her around, so be it. She had a killer to catch, and she needed to move on it. They were burning daylight.

"Just tell me what you have," she stated. "I received the file from Deputy Director Rothschild. He mentioned you have a third victim."

The man nodded.

"We do. Imagine my shock when the FBI contacted us and tied all the cases to each other. We weren't expecting it."

Chris paused.

Uh, that wasn't right.

He was good at little details, and so was Elizabeth. She'd missed what he just said. Now, his alarm was rising.

He just told them the FBI contacted them. Again, Gabe said otherwise.

**Uh-oh.**

If anything, Chris had learned that if it felt off, it looked off, and your gut was screaming, listen to it.

Elizabeth had taught him that.

Now, she was being tied up in knots by the sheriff, trying to piss her off.

For now, he said nothing.

The sheriff did the opposite.

"Our first issue began over the weekend. A woman visiting our town took a header off of an upper balcony. She was staying at the one big hotel in town."

Chris heard the fake Southern tinge to his voice. He spent enough time around Elizabeth to hear it slip, and to know when she brought it out.

This guy was bringing it out.

*Why?*

Chris said nothing as he watched his woman navigate this. Something was up.

"It's the nicest place in town," Remington stated.

Elizabeth was aware.

She was staying there too, so later, if she ever got away from Podunk Willie, she'd be checking out what went down there.

**One day.**

**Maybe.**

"She met up with her friends in the bar, they had drinks, she left with them, and later returned to see if there were any '*hot men in town*'," he said, using air quotes. "Later, she dove off of the balcony into the back of the lot. No one found her until the sun was up. There are no lights back there."

She listened.

Oh, she read all of this, but she wanted to see what else the sheriff would be offering up.

"Next, we had a woman die in her own house. See how I didn't connect them? House and hotel."

She lifted a brow.

“Do you often have women turn up dead here?” she asked, setting his ass up.

“No.”

“Well, then call me shocked that two women within days were killed, and it’s connected.”

He smiled at her.

“I bet you’re a spicy one,” he said, laughing. “We call that a firecracker around here.”

Chris narrowed his eyes behind his shades.

He rolled one ‘R’ earlier, but not any in that sentence. It was definitely off. Elizabeth did the same thing when she was laying the hick voice on thick.

Yep.

Something was off.

She shrugged.

“Fireworks kill. Keep that in mind. One minute you’re dealing with one, and then the next minute it goes off and blows your hand, face, and dick to kingdom come.”

There was her warning.

The man stared at her.

“Spicy and having anger issues. Cool. This should be an interesting partnership.”

Jesus take the wheel of this John Deere.

This man had her irritated.

“Just finish, please. I have work to do.”

He shrugged and did just that, brushing his dark hair back from his eyes as he was still smiling.

Nothing made this man falter.

What was this?

“Anyhoo, she was coming home from a night out, and was attacked.”

Again, she was aware.

“And the last one?” she asked.

Elizabeth realized the less she said, the better.

“That was the one we found this morning and then the FBI called. That was astounding.”

Chris waited for her to get it.

“It’s not really,” she stated. “They have spies too. Where there are agency offices, there are lurking Feds, watching your every move—like when you jerk off.”

Chris lifted a brow.

Had she been so irritated with Gabe this morning that she didn’t realize that the man and their boss had their stories flipped?

From beside her, Charlie actually laughed when the sheriff’s face registered shock and then panic.

Yeah, his girl was funny.

The man wasn’t wearing a ring, and most men jerked off at some point. She’d out read him and called him on it.

This time he’d forgive her for talking about a man’s junk.

**This time.**

“How was she found?” she asked, pushing on.

“The girl’s mother came over to do some shopping with her daughter, and she found her dead in her bed. When that one happened, and we were alerted, the FBI called. He said he would send his best.”

Okay, Chris wasn’t imagining it.

Had Gabe made a mistake?

Yeah, Chris’ gut was screaming.

Elizabeth thought nothing of it, and she focused on the man.

“Well, I’m here.”

They were tracking unusual killings, and two would have had the local bureau’s attention, and the DNA from Kitty would have really been what sparked this fun fest.

The man beside the sheriff butted in.

**Again.**

“We’re holding the scene for you, Miss,” the deputy beside the sheriff stated. “The FBI boss said you liked to run it a certain way.”

Oh, Gabe could say that.

Only, the scene was Chris’.

She ran the investigation.

She focused on the deputy, and she was going to have to get some information.

“Great. How about a name, Deputy?” she asked. “Not a nickname, not what your momma calls you on Sundays after church, but your God-

given name.”

She shouldn't have to say that, but she was well aware of where she was.

He shared, and the whole time, the look on his face said one thing.

He was going to get to touch the pretty lady.

**Yeah.**

**No.**

“It's Xavier Price, Miss,” he said, shaking her hand enthusiastically.

Charlie laughed since he was well aware that men tended to stare at Elizabeth like she was a unicorn. All that bad attitude packed into the pretty package.

He was living his best moment.

She stared at him like he was slightly off his rocker, down the hill, and lost in the Sanity-ville woods.

“Uh, okay,” she said, extricating her hand and wiping the wetness from his clammy hands onto her jeans.

**Lordy.**

Someone was sweating up a storm, and it wasn't that warm out.

The sheriff smiled.

“We'll escort you to the scene, and we'll have our ME talk to you about the victims.”

And that wasn't happening.

Not on her watch.

She stopped that roll, then and there, because she didn't give two figs, a stick, and a handful of rocks about what their ME thought.

She came equipped with her own.

“I come with an ME, or two,” she added when Sam cleared his throat behind her. “I don't need yours or his findings. Mine will be redoing them anyway.”

The man looked surprised.

“Really?” Remington asked.

Well, it was time to do the rest of the introductions of her team.

“Yes, really. This is Doctor Christopher Leonard, and this is Doctor Samuel Trudeau. They are my doctors on this. I'm sure they'll appreciate the heads-up from yours but let me reassure you that they can handle it.”

The man laughed.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it. Doc Manchester is so old that he created the handbook on autopsies when the Egyptians were building the pyramids.”

That wasn’t what she expected.

She laughed despite herself.

**Chris.**

**Did.**

**Not.**

He wasn’t buying the charm Remington was handing out. He’d seen it before, when Elizabeth was playing a game against a suspect. She laid on the accent, smiled, and played nice.

This was off.

“I wish I was kidding,” Remington offered.

Honestly, Elizabeth didn’t want to like the guy, but honestly, he wasn’t busting her balls. Other than the shit everyone said to her, he really didn’t *‘insult’* her.

**Much.**

Let’s face it.

People breathing insulted her.

She threw him a bone.

“Okay, Sheriff, lead the way. I’ll follow you to the crime scene with my team,” she said.

He grabbed her gear.

Immediately, the sheriff was playing hero or trying to do it. When he took her things, it had the reaction that it always would.

For her.

Oh, and for Mr. Giggles, her sexy ME.

“Let me carry that for you. Ladies shouldn’t carry their own things,” he stated.

It wasn’t lost on her that Chris was staring at him—and not in a good way.

He spoke up.

“I could have gotten that for you, Elizabeth,” Chris said as he gave the man the foulest of looks.

He missed it.

**Luckily.**

It was all fun and games for her to be irritated. It appeared her ME was going to have his blood pressure going up too, even if he had nothing

to worry about with her.

Apparently, someone was jealous.

**Or something.**

Well, Chris had nothing to worry about.

She liked her bedmates a lot more ME and a little less sheriff-y.

That was just how she swung.

Heading toward their ride, one of the techs tossed her keys, and they unlocked it.

“You can put it in the back,” she stated, and the sheriff did just that. Then, he saluted her as the rest of her team began loading up their things.

“Follow us,” the sheriff stated, winking at her.

Chris was the one growling now.

Ahhhh, how the tides had changed.

She knew what he was thinking.

“I don’t like him,” he said, hopping into the passenger seat as his woman got behind the wheel.

“It’s all fun and games when I have to deal with the bullshit. Welcome to my shitshow, sexy ME. What happened to it’s all okay.”

He couldn’t shake that off feeling.

Sam chimed in.

“It was fine until he noticed that you had breasts.”

“In his defense,” she said, busting his ass, “they are spectacular.”

Charlie sighed.

“I hate men.”

She found that amusing as hell and for all kinds of reasons. Mostly, because Sam was staring at him, and she could see the look that passed between them in the mirror.

Okay, her life was amusing.

She’d give the universe that.

As they began pulling out, she rolled down the window and pointed at the other techs in their rides and the van.

“Follow me. Keep up! I’m not playing find the lab rats in the middle of these hills, hear me? Think Deliverance and boiling your bodies in giant pots to stoke the moonshine fires!”

Chris was holding her hand and knew at least they would be safe. No one would mess with her.

**NO.**

## ONE.

Before they could pull out, she pointed at the ride Axelle was driving, and she needed to know.

“Where you headed?” she asked her, knowing the woman had her own battle ahead playing *‘find the millions’*.

At least she didn’t have to deal with that. Thank God she could avoid that mess. It was likely going to be a free-for-all as the money was going to be a bitch to locate.

She shared.

“I’m going to check-in at the hotel. I want to start running the money. If we don’t find that ten million, we’re both dead. I’ll take Jack with me. You can get him later to be your research monkey.”

She wasn’t wrong, and that worked for her. It also meant one less person she needed to keep track of during this investigation. Where Axelle was, Jack would be close by.

It looked like she was down one in the babysitting category.

## Hallelujah.

“Okay, team, head out.”

With the official word, they got down to work and played follow the leader.

As she was driving, Chris opted to take that moment to drop the bomb.

“I don’t like him, and I don’t trust him,” Chris stated. “He’s the killer.”

She glanced over as she was driving.

*Was he being serious?*

“What?” she asked, caught off guard. “Where the hell did you get that from? I mean, he’s annoying in that *‘I’m so green you’d get sick if you ate me’* kind of way,” she stated. “But he didn’t have blood on him from the deaths.”

“I stand by my statement. He has shifty eyes,” he said, not sure why she didn’t see he was a lying sack of shit. Was Chris just overreacting?

Sam laughed and so did Charlie.

“Uh, Christopher,” she began.

It was clear the green-eyed monster was taking over the blue-eyed ME.



There was some competition on the horizon, and the ME was going to have to keep cool. While Gabe wasn't separating them, they had to still keep it on the DL.

Well, despite what the sheriff was thinking, Elizabeth didn't play games like that, so Chris had nothing to worry about.

**Really.**

"You shouldn't worry about that shit," she added.

He stopped her.

"He was ogling you as in he'd like to lock you in a room with him and do his....," he began, not having a word for what he was picturing.

The smartest one in the ride had lost his words.

That was how irritated he was, but it wasn't because he was coveting what was his.

**It.**

**Felt.**

**Off.**

"Dastardly dirty, deranged deeds?" Charlie offered, humor in his voice.

Chris nodded.

"Yes. That."

Elizabeth knew how hard it was for Chris. They couldn't tell anyone they were a couple, and most of the time, men hit on her at work.

*In front of him.*

She got the irritation, simply because she watched techs, other MEs, and women to do the same to him. It was annoying, but she trusted her partner.

**Totally.**

"Okay, first off, checking out a woman and carrying her bag does not a killer make. If it did, it would make my job a whole hell of a lot easier."

Chris sat there.

He tried to explain what he was sensing around the man.

"It gave me a weird feeling," he stated. "Not the punch someone in the face feeling, but an uneasy feeling. He's not nearly as green as he looks, Elizabeth. Watch your back. He's lying."

She lifted a brow.

What was this?

“Are you being legit?” she asked, glancing over as she drove. Chris’ face said it all.

He wasn’t playing.

Her man was seriously riled up.

He explained.

“Know how you play dumb to underestimate your opponent and other cops? You know how you throw out your accent to hide your intelligence and intent?”

She nodded as she drove.

“Yes.”

“He’s full of shit. He’s faking it. That’s a bogus accent. I’ve heard yours and Charlie’s enough to know when it’s forced. He can’t roll his Rs like you guys do. Sam has that Southern belle tone, you and Charlie speak southern lawman. He’s not a country hick.”

She wasn’t sure if this was jealousy or if he was right. She’d been so irritated that she wasn’t focused on that. She just gave Dudley Do-Right the pass over thanks to the dopey grin.

“Plus, Gabe told us that he called this case in. He just told us twice that the FBI contacted him. Something isn’t kosher. You were distracted and missed it. I wasn’t. I was watching him.”

*What?*

*The?*

*Hell?*

She had missed that, but now she realized that it had been said.

Charlie too.

“Holy shit! He’s right, Baby Girl.”

Yeah, he was.

It was clear that she was so distracted that she’d been focused on the man insulting her to get her off guard.

Damn.

“Please be careful,” her man stated. He picked up her fingers and squeezed them in his hand. “I don’t like this.”

That was all she had to hear.

She had one hundred percent faith in him.

“Okay, Christopher. I trust your assessment. I’ll get to the bottom of this.”

He was grateful.

Something didn't feel right, and he couldn't put his finger on it.

"I don't want you alone with him," he added since he was on a roll.

"I really feel like he's sketchy at best. Keep Charlie with you."

She lifted a brow.

"Uh, that's an issue. I'm working."

"When have I ever asked you not to be alone with a man?" he asked.

He had a point.

**Never.**

Something about Remington Bowman had him off his game, and she respected that. He was no longer a newbie, but a Fed with experience under his belt.

"Please."

"Christopher, do we really have to have this discussion in front of **T. H. E. M?**" she spelled.

When he looked back, Charlie was eating a granola bar, and they were leaning forward to take it all in like it was some telenovela on TV.

"See what I mean?"

He did.

"You tell me to go by my gut. I am. He's not playing this straight. I'd bet on it. He's trying to either pawn this off on you, or he's up to something."

She understood.

She was now seeing it too, and she would get to the bottom of this.

"Okay, handsome. I'll be careful."

"Thank you."

Deep down, he was grateful. Oh, he knew what it looked like, but honestly, he had a bad feeling about the man. It was the wolf in sheep's clothing thing.

*Maybe it was petty.*

*Maybe it was lame.*

His gut was his gut.

Every day, he did battle with himself over losing Elizabeth, proposing a legitimate on paper marriage to her, and being a nut. He couldn't help himself for the most part, but this was different.

The man was a lying sack of shit.

As she drove, Chris leaned over and left a kiss on her cheek. It would be the last one for the day. Once they arrived, he was back to just

being her ME.

“I love you,” he stated. “I just need you to be safe.”

She smiled at him, and he saw that adoration in her eyes. Yeah, he knew she’d be safe. His woman was tenacious, and she’d get to the bottom of this.

**Thank.**

**Freaking.**

**God.**

“I love you, too, Christopher. Forever.”

“Awwww, look at the lovebirds,” Charlie stated, making kissy sounds.

That was all it took.

“Who will shove your plaid-wearing ass out of this ride and leave you here, Father. Test me.”

“I’m astounded that she found someone who likes a woman this spicy,” he teased, winking at Chris to lighten the mood. If the man legit had a bad feeling, Charlie knew what he’d be doing.

Baby girl-sitting.

**Non.**

**Freaking.**

**Stop.**

Instead of going there, she chose to ignore him for her sanity’s sake.

This was an uphill battle with her father.

As the sheriff pulled off onto a dirt road, she made sure she had the three vehicles behind her—plus their van.

So far, so good.

It was always bad to lose techs on day one.

When the sheriff pulled his vehicle into the driveway, she could see the other cops there, and how they milled around.

They were touching everything.

**With.**

**No.**

**Gloves.**

“Well, this crime scene is going to be a mess,” Chris stated, as cops were leaning on the porch rails, deputies having coffee on the steps, and they were parked all over the yard.

One actually spit into the grass.

Grass that they were now going to have to swab to get DNA to exclude the dumbass deputy.

She nearly lost her nut.

“Jesus in an outdoor shower. What the bloody hell?” she asked, slamming the car into park. The whole vehicle shuddered to a stop on the gravel.

Then, she was out.

That’s when the FBI’s ambassador of fun went nuts on them for being idiots.

Well, not them.

**The.**

**Sheriff.**

“What the bloody hell is this madness?” she asked, as the sheriff knew exactly what she was talking about.

“Who brought donuts to the crime scene?” he asked, horrified.

“Your one deputy just spit. That’s spit we have to keep track of, and now he’s pouring out his cold coffee into the shrubs!” she barked.

He saw this going south.

Remington focused on the Fed.

“I’m sorry about this. I left them alone, and they made it a circus,” he stated. “They know better than to do shit like this,” he stated. “I trained most of them.”

That was saying a lot since they looked to be about eighteen, collectively—if that.

Chris was right.

This was off.

Now, the sheriff had her **FULL** attention.

“I’ve tried to teach them better than this,” he stated, the West Virginia accent slipping. “I told them to not touch anything since it’s not how it’s done.”

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

It was time.

“Can I speak to you a second?” she asked, pointing toward the gravel away from anyone else who might hear her.

“Sure thing.”

She walked away.

When they got far enough away, she leaned in and got serious fast.

“Are you CIA or FBI?” she asked, knowing that the man was damn good at manipulating. Had Chris not mentioned the ‘*FBI called*’ slipup, she wouldn’t have noticed.

He was a little too good at acting.

It reminded her of someone.

**Axelle.**

So, she was going out on a limb.

As she asked, he looked surprised.

Yep.

**CIA.**

“Before you lie, my ME figured it out, and now I know for a fact that you aren’t some hick from Podunk. You’ve had training. You’re either here because you’re a plant, or...”

The jig was up.

“I need you to keep that quiet,” stated Remington, hushing her.

Score some points for her ME.

“Why?” she asked.

“I’m not from West Virginia,” he stated, dropping the accent. “I’m not from this side of the country.”

Again, Chris nailed it.

She stared into his eyes.

Oh, there was worry there.

She could see it.

“Spill it.”

“I need your word.”

She crossed her arms over her chest.

“You’re playing games with me, and that’s not going to fly. I need to know what you’re up to, and I need to know now.”

He weighed his options.

“You’re right. I’m CIA. My boss put me here two years ago to begin an undercover operation. There’s more going on here than just a killer. My boss doesn’t want you digging here but he doesn’t want anyone digging here until we clear the CIA issue.”

She stared at him.

**Interesting.**

“Do you know Axelle George?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“I know of her. I’ve never met her,” he said, his voice incredibly low. “As far as everyone here knows, I’m just Remington Bowman. You can’t blow my cover. This has nothing to do with this case, Elizabeth Renee LaRue. Charlie LaRue is your father, Samuel Trudeaux is his lover, and...”

She stopped him.

Someone had their own intel.

To save her father, she’d deal with it. If someone outed Charlie, he’d be mortified. Christ! He couldn’t even say ‘gay’ to her.

“Okay, your point is made. We both now know more about each other than we’re letting on. I won’t blow your cover, but you had better up your game, Remington. My ME felt it was off.”

“He’s very smart. We’ve run him too.”

“Stop running my family, okay? You spooks are a mess. Just give it to me straight.”

“We have some domestic terrorist cells popping up in these hills. I was put here to watch and report back. Before you tell me that the CIA doesn’t work here, we do. We just do it undercover. I need you to not blow it.”

She saw Chris was staring at her, so she upped her act.

She pretended to ream him out.

“I won’t say shit as long as this isn’t about my case. You can carry on.”

He looked relieved.

“I appreciate it.”

“Swear on your spook heart that you guys aren’t playing games here with Teddy Clarkson.”

He did.

“Not my issue. I’m just playing backwoods cop and your killer picked this place to be a douchebag. **THUS**, how I alerted the FBI. I was the one who called it in to the CIA that we had a killer here, and the FBI ran with it. That was me.”

Okay, that cleared up that lie. The FBI didn’t contact him. Gabe had been honest.

**Damn.**

She hated playing these games.

“You’d better play dumb a little better. My team is the best, and if one noticed, and I noticed...”

He got it.

“I’m going to up my game. Just say nothing. Please. A lot is riding on this. Your boss told my boss you were tits with an attitude and you’d never figure this out.”

She laughed.

“Gabe or the director?”

“The big asshole in the big office.”

She figured as much.

Gabe had no clue, and he had tried to warn her in their phone call.

“Okay, pretend your ass is chewed, and let’s carry on. If you are the killer...”

He stared at her.

“Why would I kill women in the town I’m trying to blend into? I’m not an idiot.”

She laughed.

“What’s your real name?”

“Remington Bowman. I swear.”

“Your momma hated you, Remington. Welcome to the hell that is my case. Buckle up,” she stated and began walking away. Then, she added to it to make sure it sounded legit.

She had no choice.

“Jesus Christ! Your men are a mess, and I don’t want any of them on my damn crime scene,” she said, exploding.

The man followed her back to where they were.

“Do you know how much work this is now?” she asked, treating him how she’d treat any cop who jacked up their scene.

He kept apologizing.

“I mean, how hard can it be, Agent? It’s just some donut dust and coffee.”

That was all it took.

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

The techs got out and they began bitching, and it was distraction enough.



They now had to fingerprint and get swabs of DNA from every single cop on the scene.

**Every.**

**Single.**

**One.**

“Handle your mess!” she stated.

As soon as the sheriff barked at them, the people began moving like they were lit on fire.

“I am so sorry about that,” Remington stated, putting his faith in the Fed. “They know better. You leave them alone for one second, and they start acting like fools.”

Oh, she was aware.

She knew the feeling.

Okay, this changed everything. Now, she wasn’t feeling so overwhelmed by working with the sheriff. He wasn’t going to be as big a pain in the ass as she thought, and for that, she was grateful.

Now, she only needed to keep the rest of the team in the dark.

Oh, her to-do list was getting longer and longer. She knew who would be onto this farce, and Elizabeth would never discount her ME’s gut again.

“It’s going to be a long day, team. We can thank the sheriff and his men,” she stated, cutting him no slack.

She couldn’t.

Oh, and she was going to tell someone.

**Gabe.**

The last time the big boss played dirty games, Gabe and Chris had been abducted in Paris and nearly died.

**Not.**

**On.**

**Her.**

**Watch.**

She focused on Remington.

“Line your men up. They are going to have to get printed and donate their clothing. I hope they all wore clean britches like their mommas told them too. They leaned on a crime scene. We have to check it and pull trace.”

The deputy beside the sheriff volunteered.

“I’ll handle it, Remmy.”

“You’re a good deputy, Xavier. Have at it,” he said, not sure if his cover was blown or not. He kept the act up just in case. This was going to be an intel standoff.

They each had something on the other person.

“Show me,” she stated.

The *‘sheriff’* led Elizabeth and her team inside the house. In the back, there was a bedroom with some guy in it. She had to assume it was the coroner.

*Why?*

He was older than God himself.

Remington wasn’t kidding when he said the man had autopsies under his belt from Ancient Egypt.

“This way,” Remington stated.

When they got to the doorway, Elizabeth pulled on gloves, and she took a pair of booties from Chris. They got into protective gear.

Chris was staring at the man, and she knew what he was thinking.

Okay, there were going to be two people she reported this to—Gabe and her sexy ME. He was giving the CIA mole the eyes.

**Angry ones.**

The faux-sheriff stayed outside the door, leaving this to them.

“Doctor Manchester, these are the Feds,” he said, doing the introductions. “This is Special Agent LaRue, and these are her two MEs, Doctor Leonard, and Doctor Trudeauux.”

Charlie cleared his throat.

Oh, he’d missed the first round of intros, but he wasn’t missing this one.

“I’m her partner,” he said, pointing at his kid. “You can call me Charlie,” he said, thinking about what Chris had said. He was keeping an eye on his daughter.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

From the other side of the room, the town coroner shrugged.

“I’m to assume that the FBI wants to take over this one?” he asked, still not looking up.

Then again, his glasses were so thick, Elizabeth wasn't sure he'd see them anyway.

Instead of answering, she tagged in her partner on this. This was his bag of crazy. She had her own issues.

Her ME was polite. He held out his hand and waited. Finally, the ME noticed.

Chris shook his hand.

"Yes, Sir. I'm in charge," he stated. "We would like to thank you for the use of your facility."

The man laughed.

"If that's what you want to call that dungeon, okay. It's more of a big, refrigerated room that makes your nuts grow icicles, but sure. Facility it is."

"Kinky?" she asked, trying to picture it in her head. It was Chris' nuts, and even with icicles, she was still up for it.

Go figure.

Chris gave her the look, and he knew what his woman was thinking.

Sam went next. He shook the older ME's hand.

"I'm his assistant," he stated, offering up nothing more.

Yes, he had twice as much experience, but this was Chris' show, and unlike Charlie, he wasn't one to confiscate what wasn't his jurisdiction.

He could share.

*The LaRues...*

Not so much.

"It's a pleasure. Well, let me get you caught up. I have a woman at the morgue who hit the ground like a ton of bricks. Everything inside her is mush and broken. She's yours too."

Chris figured.

"We'll put her back together again," he stated. What he wanted was the update and then a look at the body.

"Whatever," he stated. "Then, we have two women raped and murdered in their homes."

Uh, he was aware.

Charlie was making notes as he stood not far from where the sheriff was in the door. Only, he was watching the man, not the town ME.

"Was there forced entry?" he asked, checking out the dude in charge of this mess.

His daughter gave him the look and it told him to back the hell off.  
It made him laugh.

Only, Charlie couldn't help himself.

"What? I'm your partner. I know how to do this. I want to ask some questions that have caught my interest."

She couldn't let him do that.

Instead, Elizabeth literally prayed out loud.

"Please, Jesus, keep me from killing him," she began, pointing at her badge to clue him in.

She outranked him.

Charlie winked and said nothing more.

He got it.

He'd just watch the sheriff.

"There was forced entry on this one," Remington stated, trying to get this moving. "Someone popped two locks to get in. He was good, too, because she likely never stirred. The house was pristine—until my deputies rolled on through."

Yeah, she could see that.

The town coroner was packing up his things.

"I have the details available at my morgue. There are not many murders here, so I detailed them more than I normally would. I plan on staying out of your way, Doctors."

Chris was glad.

He'd use whatever he could at this point.

"Thank you, Sir. We appreciate it."

The man pulled off his gloves and tucked them into a garbage bag. Then, he grabbed his things.

Out of respect, Chris gave him time, even though he really wanted to get to the body. As soon as the man was gone, it was time.

Chris moved toward the victim and checked it out. She was restrained in what he assumed was her bed. Her arms were tied above her head with some rope and the cord from the lamp. She was damaged from blows to her face, and there was blood dried just below her nose.

Chris got out his clipboard.

He began making notes.

"Who do we have?" Elizabeth asked the sheriff, knowing that he likely ran her. While he was playing dumb, he would still do the basic job to

keep his cover.

“Her name is Carolyn Williams. She’s a nurse at the local hospital.”

Charlie kept writing, and his daughter let him do his thing. It was the one thing he did on the scene that she didn’t have to worry about.

Her dad took good notes.

“What about the other victims?” she asked the sheriff, trying to get a feel for Teddy’s victims.

If she could, she might be able to figure out what had gone on.

“What can you tell us about their careers?” she added. “It might help.”

He pulled out a little notebook and read off what he knew about them.

Elizabeth listened.

Chris would have more details, but while he was getting situated, she wanted to talk to the girl’s mother and anyone outside who might have seen something.

“Victim one was a tourist, and her name was Gloria Beake. She came to town to visit some friends and it didn’t go well,” he said, just reiterating what he’d said earlier.

Only, now, he knew she wanted it on the record.

Charlie kept scribbling as Chris was getting pictures of the victim. He was instructing the techs what he wanted.

The sheriff kept talking.

“I don’t know much about her other than what her friends told me, and that she was looking for some love in, definitely, the wrong places.”

**Clearly.**

“You’re welcome to talk to all of them. I have all their information.”

**Great.**

Oh, and she would.

“Next is Jana Katz. It appeared that she was attacked as she was coming home. We found a high heel, her purse, and her garments in the living room. Her car keys were in the lock. It appears she was just entering her house.”

She had questions.

“Who found her?” she asked.

“One of her girlfriends did. She came to pick her up for work and found the door open, and Jana murdered.”

That had to be tough.

“Okay, and what did she do for a living?”

He shared what he’d discovered. What Remington wanted was the woman out of the town as quickly as possible so he could continue his assignment.

“She worked at the local hospital. She was a nurse.”

She stopped him.

“Wait, you had two nurses die back-to-back, and you didn’t think that’s weird?”

He knew she was laying it on so he could keep his cover.

So, Remington played dumb.

He tossed her his notebook.

When she read it, she saw he had actually written that in the margin.

“I actually thought it was weird.”

He lowered his voice.

“I’m from a hick town, Agent. I’m not an idiot. Don’t mistake pleasantness with dumbness,” he stated for everyone else’s benefit.

She let it go.

“Good point.”

When she didn’t lose it, Chris looked up at her.

*The sheriff sassed her, and she wasn’t getting bitchy?*

*What?*

“Anything, Christopher?” she asked, ignoring the look on his face.

He didn’t hold back.

Chris was down on his knees, checking out the bruising between her legs.

Oh, and there was plenty.

“He was angry,” Chris stated. “She’s beyond bruised. He was in a rage.”

She moved and checked it out. Chris moved the sheet that had been half on her body and half off.

“Yowza,” she stated.

She and Chris had hard, rough sex, and she **NEVER** had bruising. That was saying a lot about how hard Teddy was pounding into her body.

The sheriff shook his head.

“All three of them were raped by this animal. This is why I called the FBI. I can’t handle this on my own. We don’t have this kind of killer

here.”

Chris was pretty sure that wasn't what went down.

He really hoped Elizabeth didn't fall for this BS. Only, he let it go because something else caught his eye.

**Something bad.**

“Uh, Elizabeth,” he said, pointing to the tears to her body. “Look.”

She did.

That's when she saw it.

**Yep.**

This was going to be a fun one.

**She.**

**Could.**

**Tell.**

“Okay, Christopher. Bag and tag her and get her into the morgue. I'll be in after for an update.”

The sheriff was curious.

As was Charlie.

It was weird looking at a woman's girly parts, but he wanted to know what they were keeping to themselves.

When he looked at Sam, he said nothing.

“Can we take this outside?” Elizabeth asked as the deputies were peering into the room.

He nodded.

When they headed out, she moved off to the backyard where there was no one standing there.

“What?” he asked. “What did your ME see that mine didn't?” he asked.

Elizabeth explained.

This wasn't the first time she saw shit like this.

“She was dead when she was violated. She didn't put up a fight to the rape.”

He blinked.

Oh, that was some nasty, nasty shit, and as a Fed, he knew it too. That made this chase that much worse for the FBI agent in front of him.

“Oh, shit. Are you saying,” he said, lowering his voice, “that this animal likes having sex with dead women and he's running amuck here?”

“Yep. He had sex with that dead woman.”

Every time she said it, it was more and more horrifying.

She explained.

“There is blood around her wrists, and that means she was bound alive. When he raped her, she was dead. The tears show no blood flow. They aren’t pink. She was gone at that point, which is damn good. I can’t say as for the rest of the victims yet. Chris will let me know at some point.”

He wanted to puke.

“Jesus.”

Charlie shook his head.

“You get the worst ones, Baby Girl. I know I keep saying it, but you really do.”

That had the sheriff’s attention, but simply because he had to keep his act going. Oh, he knew who Charlie LaRue was. He did his research.

He knew everything about the woman standing before him, and he knew what he needed to do.

**Play.**

**Along.**

“Baby Girl?” he asked.

Elizabeth had to keep up the front. Well, at least this spook already knew, so the cat wasn’t really out of the bag.

“Dad!” she stated, chastising him because Charlie really liked to do this each case. “I swear to God. You gave me a name. How about when we’re working you use it? I know you can remember it because you’re not quite there to senility. **YET!**”

He laughed.

*How could he not?*

Remington covered the smile with his hand, as the antics exploded around him.

Charlie shrugged.

“Actually, your mother named you Elizabeth. I thought Pandora was a far better choice since you are a nosey one.”

She sighed.

Then, she kept up the farce.

It was ironic. This was the first ‘*sheriff*’ who already knew about Charlie, and she was still having to explain.

Only her life.



“He’s a sheriff, and he’s my father, but I’m sure you can tell by the resemblance,” she said, staring at the CIA plant.

“Nope. Can’t.”

She rolled her eyes.

He was enjoying this a little too much.

She continued, using the same excuse she used all the damn time.

“He helps me out on some cases when he’s in town to visit. He can’t keep his fingers out of my job. Yada-yada.”

The sheriff just looked back and forth between them, playing it up. Remington couldn’t help it. He’d heard a lot about Elizabeth LaRue. She was supposedly an up-and-coming agent who Gabe Rothschild was betting the whole kit and kaboodle on.

**Interesting.**

“You do have the same eyes. If you wore plaid...,” he teased.

She stopped that crazy train.

“Over my dead body.”

Remington knew they needed to get back on track. He had a farce to uphold, and now his job was harder. Normally, he could just wander around as he played sheriff.

Now, he was having to actually appear to help her as he kept an eye on things.

“We need to get back into the morgue and have your ME look at those other victims. Mine didn’t say anything about them being dead.”

She wasn’t shocked.

The man’s glasses were enough to beam lasers into space. That’s how thick they were. Someone needed some cataract or glaucoma surgery.

“Well, in your MEs defense,” she began. “Mine is spectacular. He doesn’t miss shit.”

He laughed.

Oh, he knew why she was defending the man. He had intel on her relationship too. That was something he was curious about. Elizabeth LaRue was stunning, even with the shit attitude.

The ME...he looked like the typical science guy you’d find in a lab. How that worked...?

Yeah, he’d poke that later and study it.

**Sue him.**

He was a curious creature—thus, the CIA job.

“Well, lucky you,” he stated.

Yes, she was aware.

“I’ll get us there so we can move this along,” he began, hoping she’d get it. He had his own mess.

Unfortunately, she shut him down immediately.

“I want to talk to her mother.”

He looked impatient.

“Agent...”

She didn’t care if he was busy. He had been put here, and he might have intel she could use. Someone was going to be stuck on her timeline.

**Not.**

**His.**

“She found her, and I need to talk to her. I know she’s likely in shock, and she’s likely sick over this, but I need to do this.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose—impatiently.

Then, he decided.

There was a way to make this work for him.

“Okay. I’ll get her to my office. You can do it there. Please don’t be hard on her,” he said, covering for himself. He played sympathetic cop.

“She found her child tied to a bed and raped. She’ll never be able to unsee that.”

She was aware.

So, she warned him.

“I don’t beat down victims’ families. Just assholes who stand in my way,” she stated, giving him the look.

Well, it looked like that was his warning.

It appeared what he’d heard about her was absolutely the god’s honest truth.

He caved, willing to bet that she’d out him.

“Well, then, Agent LaRue, I’ll have Xavier go pick her up. Follow me to my office.”

She stopped him.

“I have your address. I’ll meet you there. I want to wander around her house. You go do your thing, and I’ll do mine.”

He was grateful.

It had taken a while to build this cover, and he did have work to do. Oh, and he had to check-in. His boss was **NOT** going to like that their op

was in danger.

He nodded.

“I’ll see you there.”

When he walked away, Elizabeth held her breath, hoping that her father was none the wiser. He was damn good at reading people, and Chris had given him a heads-up.

Instead of talking about the man, her father whistled and was focused on the victim.

“You have a legit sicko,” he admitted. “Baby Girl, he’s raping dead women,” he said, shaking his head. “You do get the winners, and you called it. That sheriff is going to be useless.”

She would have laughed if it wouldn’t have alerted Charlie to what he’d missed.

This was why people were freaked-out about CIA spooks. They operated all around them even when they said they never stepped foot in the US.

*As for the dead body violation...*

She was aware.

“As I told the sheriff, I’m going to take a little stroll around the house to get acclimated with this killer,” she said. “As I do, I want you to do some research. See if you can find anything on the victims. We have their names now.”

Charlie didn’t want to look at the dead woman again. It was a little too close to home. In that moment, he was infinitely grateful that his daughter lived with someone, and not alone.

This was one of his fears.

Killers stalked single ladies.

“I’ll give the sheriff time to get the woman there. Then, after our interview, we’ll see what else Chris has found. He’ll have his hands in the victim by then.”

That worked for him.

Charlie knew her laptop was in her bag, so he headed toward the vehicle.

Elizabeth pulled out her phone as soon as she was sure the ‘*sheriff*’ was gone, and she had some privacy. Under a beautiful tree, she made the call.

When Gabe picked up, he sighed.

“What did you do already? You just landed,” he stated, having that report in front of him from the jet’s pilot.

“So, question...?”

He waited.

“Did you know that the sheriff of this town was actually a CIA plant, or were you played?”

The hitch in his breathing told her all she needed to know.

“**WHAT?**” he asked.

Oh, he knew that the director was out for blood with LaRue, but this was news to him.

Failure—yes.

Dirty games—no.

“Well, I called you on your private line for a reason, and that reason is Sheriff Remington Bowman is CIA. Chris noticed something was off, and when I pushed, he caved.”

“Holy fuck.”

“He’s running a domestic terrorist op here, and he’s stuck in the middle. Who called this one in?”

He was confused.

“The director told me that we had intel. I was told that we had FBI information related to the DNA.”

“He called us in, Gabe. You know that with the exception of Axelle, I don’t trust the CIA. Look at the dude she was sleeping with in Paris. He was playing both sides. CIA is notorious.”

He was aware.

“I can’t believe the director did it to me again.”

She laughed.

“Really? That’s so shocking?”

“You know telling me this puts you in a bad place,” he stated.

Oh, she was aware.

“You have my back, Gabe, and I have yours. You’re my friend, and now, we have a problem. I have to delicately work this case and not blow his cover.”

“You don’t do anything delicately.”

“You don’t say?”

“Elizabeth, watch your back, and you know the standard CIA protocol.”

“Don’t trust them?”

“Yep. I’ll see what I can find out. Don’t discount the sheriff. Treat him as if he’s a suspect. CIA operatives will create a mess to cover a whole other mess—case in point, Paris.”

She was aware.

“I don’t like this.”

He didn’t either.

“He knows everything about me, Gabe. **EVERYTHING.**”

Well, that explained why their boss wanted her running this.

“He’s giving you the rope, Elizabeth. Don’t hang yourself with it.”

Oh, she wouldn’t.

“I have to get back to work. I’ll check-in. Watch your ass, Gabe. Someone is playing some sick games, and it looks to be the head of the FBI.”

He was aware.

And he hated that.

“Be safe, LaRue. I have your back.”

Gabe was the **ONLY** one she trusted right now, other than her team. There was no way she was dropping the ball on this now that the CIA and her big boss were meddling.

Screw that.

“And don’t tell anyone. Keep this classified—not even Christopher!”

“Sure,” she said. “I have to go.”

When she hung up, not giving him time to say anything else, she now had a huge-ass conundrum.

*Lie to her man.*

*Be honest and risk it.*

*Or find a middle ground.*

**Jesus.**

Her life was tough—and she knew it was going to get her in some deep shit.

There was one other person she needed to give the heads-up, and that was her friend the spook.

She rattled off a text to Axelle.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

She wasn't sure how she felt about all of this, but it wasn't like she had time to complain.

She had work to do.

Tucking away her phone, she did her job. Elizabeth checked out the woman's house, hoping something might catch her attention.

Something did.

It was pristine.

It appeared that Teddy came in a back door, walked through, and likely touched nothing he didn't have to touch.

He was efficient as a killer.

That sucked.

Time was speeding by, and she knew there was only a matter of days before Teddy and Letty figured out Kitty was down.

**Shit.**

It appeared that she had a genuine sicko on her hands.

**And a CIA mess.**

Yeah, this was about right for her.

West Virginia was never going to be the same again.

Bet on it.

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## *Chapter Four*

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*Washington D.C.*  
*Blackhawk's Brownstone*  
*Same Time*

**I**t was just another day in Ethan's world, and it was looking to be just like the last one. While some would say it was better to have a slow day, he wasn't one of those people. When it was slow, he would think.

Thinking, for him, was a bad thing.

It made him spend time worrying about the people that he'd intentionally broken and left behind, and that forced him deeper into that mire.

He really wished he could be busy twenty-four-seven to stop the thinking, but clearly, that wasn't going to be his fate.

Blackhawk was stuck.

When he woke up, he worked out, hit the shower, and pulled on a pair of jeans along with his customary black polo shirt. It was his uniform on a day off.

*It was simple.*

*It was comfortable.*

It pissed off Melanie if she came around because his tattoos were showing.

Who was he kidding?

That was the sole reason he did it.

As of late, she wasn't calling, and he wasn't crying about it. He didn't have a need for her in his life, at this moment, and that meant a reprieve.

**Thank God.**

She was the most annoying, irritating, and bothersome person on the planet, and that was saying a lot since he chased serial killers.

Yes, he'd rather bed down with a spleen-eater than Melanie.

That said it all.

Now, Ethan could let his hair down, literally, and just be himself for a change.

While not the best thing, it was the easiest thing.

While he wasn't planning on doing anything today, he wanted to be comfortable as he wandered around his home, barefoot.

One day of silence wouldn't kill him.

*Right?*

To kick his day off, he made another pot of coffee and planned on caffeinating into the night.

Sue him.

It was his day off, and he was **NOT** answering his phone or opening the door to anyone.

**Period.**

The second he thought that, it happened.

Someone knocked on his door, and he was pretty sure he was going to be pissed off.

*Seriously?*

This was exactly what happened when you put shit out in the universe. So much for his day of not talking, watching a game, and being alone.

The banging continued, and it made his eye twitch.

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

**WHAT?**

It appeared that whoever it was had no intention of going away, so that meant one thing.

He had to open the door.

In his head, he kept saying the same thing over and over again.

*Please don't let it be Melanie.*

*Please don't let it be Melanie...*

As he headed there, when he opened his heavy wooden door, he was pleasantly surprised.

It wasn't her.

Thankfully.

It was his partner, and he was carrying a pizza and some files.

"Uh, what's this?" Blackhawk asked, pointing at the work and the pizza.

Gene laughed.



Oh, they had to spend time together, and Gene really wasn't that upset about it.

Ethan was damn nice to look at. Even now, he couldn't help but get that race to his pulse seeing him.

He had a crush on his partner.

**Sue him.**

The man was hot.

From the sleek body to the dark shiny hair, Gene couldn't help himself.

The man just made his dick twitch.

"Well, sunshine, Gabe is on the warpath with that case we didn't close, and he wants us to go back over our files, making sure that they are pristine. I think he's hoping you'll see something you didn't, and we'll close it all the way up here."

He lifted a brow.

*What was this bullshit?*

The Everglades killer had nearly killed them, and he went under. How were they supposed to catch him?

*By luck?*

*A séance?*

*What?*

"For the record, Gene, my reports are always pristine. The dude went under. I wasn't sitting in that backwoods town waiting for him to try to blow me to kingdom come, again."

Gene got it.

It wasn't like the man was lying.

Ethan was damn good at his job.

No one documented shit like Ethan Blackhawk. Gene never had to worry about that. As for the killer, he was gone, and there was no doubt that one day, he'd be back.

"Don't hate the messenger," Gene stated. "Apparently, he called, and you sent him to voicemail."

He laughed.

"Well, I did do that. I wanted to avoid him, and I wasn't going to even open my door. You got lucky."

Oh, Gene really wanted to get lucky with this man. Now, the twitch was a throb.

What wouldn't he give to bed down with his partner? Would it ruin what they had?

*Possibly, but his ass in jeans...*

**Jesus.**

He couldn't help himself.

There was no way Gene was giving up this opportunity to spend the whole day with the man **NOT** working. He wanted to ask him out, but he was seriously not sure which way Blackhawk swung.

One mistake, and he was screwed—and not in the way he wanted.

Only, he couldn't help but pick up the man-on-man vibes that his partner was giving off. He really thought he was gay—or at least liked men part of the time. Gene would take a little trip down Bisexual Lane with the man.

Oh, he could turn him full-time gay if given the chance.

Here went nothing.

“Well, it's supposed to be our first day off, and I'm not doing the paperwork alone. So, I brought lunch. Want to hang out and eat pizza with me?”

“Not sick of me yet?” Ethan asked, knowing that his partners tended to bail after a few weeks.

**Jay.**

**Lincoln.**

**Countless, nameless others.**

It was only a matter of time before Gene did too.

“Nah, you intrigue me, Blackhawk. I want to figure out the mysteries that are you,” he teased.

“Like?” Ethan asked.

“Like how you don't freaking sweat. We were in the Everglades, and you smelled pristine walking out of a swamp. What witchcraft is that?”

It made him laugh.

The reason Ethan liked this man was because he didn't butt into his personal life. That was off-limits for everyone, and with good reason.

Personal was personal.

Professional was professional.

When he became the boss, he didn't want anyone to know about his personal trip to the directorship.

“I have a really good deodorant, and I stay calm. You freak-out way too easily.”

“Yeah, well, backwoods deputies and gators make me twitchy. Anything that can eat part of you is worrisome in my world.”

Ethan snorted.

“Good point.”

“So, want to eat some pizza with your partner on our day off?” he asked, holding his breath.

Blackhawk liked pizza, Gene, and a day off, so it was fine by him.

He shrugged.

It wasn't like he was going to do anything that day anyway. Ethan planned on watching TV, working on some profiles, and calling it a day. He could reschedule some food with a friend, and some talking.

Besides, the only real goals for him were dodging a flight attendant and a few other people.

*Gabriel Rothschild.*

*His grandfather.*

*His brother...*

The list was getting longer and longer with each passing day.

“Come on in and make yourself comfortable,” he stated, heading back to the kitchen.

Gene checked him out as he walked away, and he would be lying if he said he didn't like watching his partner.

He was barefoot, in a nice pair of fitted jeans, and his shirt revealed a little more than he normally showed off.

Someone liked ink.

**A.**

**LOT.**

Yeah, happy day off to him.

It was eye candy day.

Gene followed him in, and he placed the pizza on his counter once they reached the man's pristine kitchen. It was all stainless steel, black tile, and very hyper-masculine.

**LIKE.**

**HIM.**

There was one thing out of place.

“Blackhawk, are those herbs on your windowsill?” he asked, pointing at the planter on his counter by the window. He hadn’t expected that.

He glanced over.

“Uh, yeah, basil. I make a mean marinara sauce. You have to have fresh basil for it.”

Oh, that intrigued him.

Gene could cook, minimally, and that his partner could do it...that was hot.

He covered.

“What the hell are you doing with plants? How do you keep them alive? We’re never around.”

Ethan was amused.

He laughed.

He lowered his voice and leaned in as if he was sharing one of J. Edgar Hoover’s secrets.

Gene got a whiff of cologne, and it turned his belly to mush. He’d love to sniff the man all day long.

It would be torture, but he smelled like Heaven—if that place actually existed.

“There’s a little old lady next door who takes care of me. I shovel her snow, and she brings me clippings from her garden. When I’m away she gets my mail and checks on the place. I have backup when I’m not home.”

He laughed.

“How sweet of you. You’re an enigma, Blackhawk. A damn puzzle.”

Oh, he was aware.

Reaching into his fridge, he grabbed two beers. Then, Ethan tossed his partner one.

It was early to be drinking. Blackhawk had planned on coffee, but if he was eating pizza—and he was eating it—that just seemed wrong.

Coffee was for breakfast or work.

Beer was meant to accompany pizza.

Gene caught the beer and handed him his own case files that he’d just sent to Gabe late last night when they left Florida.

“Gabe is a dick making agents work on their days off. He likes to push until he can’t push anymore.”

Gene was aware.

That's why it sucked being an agent. You weren't paid hourly. You didn't clock in. You were salaried and at the man's mercy.

The files had been a ploy to get into Blackhawk's home and spend time with him. You could learn a lot about a person by their house.

*Ethan's was tidy.*

*Masculine.*

*And there wasn't any sign of a woman's touch.*

That made Gene happy.

"You know that we don't really need to go over these," Ethan stated. "The killer, who was feeding women to the gators, is long gone, and I noted that," he said as if reading Gene's mind.

He was well aware.

Again, just a ploy.

He began thinking about sleeping with Ethan in his bed, hoping the man picked that up too.

Why not put it out there?

He'd take damn good care of all of his needs.

Gene would rock his world.

"I know, but if you quickly just flip through them, we can say we opened it."

Ethan did just that.

Gene grinned.

"Now, we can eat pizza and watch a game. Then, when Gabe asks me if we even bothered to open them, I can be honest. Yes, we looked **OVER** them as we stared at the TV."

Ethan laughed.

Yeah, he really liked his partner.

The man was amusing, and he wasn't up in his life. Oh, they'd begun hanging out more, but Ethan didn't really have friends. His one friend had been his brother, and that was over.

What would it hurt to have someone to be his ride-or-die bitch?

Jay bailed.

Lincoln lasted two weeks.

Gene was on a couple months already, and the only thing he asked of Ethan was to share pizza and watch a game.

That worked for him.

**SOLD.**

A day off together it was.

“Good one. Well, then let’s go eat pizza on the couch. I’m more than ready to do absolutely nothing now that we’re back here. After nearly being blown up...pass.”

He understood.

**Completely.**

A part of Gene was irritated that they didn’t catch the killer while they were there, but there was no way he was coming out after nearly killing two Feds and a bunch of deputies.

Someone was on the lam.

He’d keep his eye out to see if any more killings like this one popped up. If he didn’t see any, they’d have to move on.

*What choice did they have?*

Ethan dropped the pizza on the coffee table, and he pointed at the couch.

“Have a seat. If you get grease on the leather, you’re going home.”

He laughed.

*How could he not?*

Yeah, someone was a neat freak.

What Ethan didn’t know was that so was he. He liked when a man smelled good and was tidy. No one wanted smelly junk or a pigsty couch to fuck on.

“Okay, Mr. Clean. I think I can keep that in mind. Note to self, don’t get anything greasy. No one wants to slide.”

Oh, he did.

**Into the man.**

Ethan took a seat and turned the game on. As Gene opened the pizza, fragrant scents wafted up toward both of them, and he was damn giddy.

This was the best day off, and it had only just begun. He was going to make the most of it.

“Is that Fratellis?” Ethan asked, picking up the scent of the sauce. It was his favorite place to get a pie.

It was his go-to pizza joint.

Gene grinned.

That was **NOT** a coincidence. When wooing a sexy man, you got him his favorite food. The way to a guy's heart was through his stomach.

“Do I know my partner or what? You like their extra cheese, spicy peppers, and sausage.”

He grinned.

This was turning out to be a much better day. Spending it with his partner was not bad.

They might have to do more days off like this. Ethan liked having a buddy to hang with.

It made it better.

“Yes, yes, I do. How’s this game?” he asked, settling on basketball.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he said, pulling a slice from the box as Ethan handed him a napkin.

As they ate pizza, cheering when the team scored, and booing when they didn’t, Gene glanced over.

That’s when he saw something that was going to put his partner over the edge.

Mr. Clean was not so damn clean.

“Uh, don’t freak-out, Ethan, but you got sauce on your shirt,” he stated.

The man looked down.

Ethan actually cursed.

“Sauce is a bitch to get out,” he said, tossing his half-eaten slice back into the box.

Gene found that amusing.

“And look...I’m still clean. No grease here.”

Ethan snorted.

When he stood, he pulled off his shirt in front of Gene to go stain treat it.

Black, unfortunately, showed everything.

“I’ll be back. Save me some,” he said, facing his partner.

As soon as he was topless, Gene nearly choked on his pizza. It was hard to think past what he was seeing.

Now, his semi-erect dick was rock-hard.

*Why?*

His partner was more than someone who liked tattoos.

He was **COVERED** in them.

They were all over him.

*His chest.*

*His abs.*

*His arms.*

Oh, someone was all about sinning with this man on so many different levels.

If the six-pack wasn't enough, the treasure trail of ink was. The man should be topless all-day-long.

**Seriously.**

"Give me a minute," Ethan said, focused on the grease and nothing more.

"Uh, sure," he said, checking him out as he walked away, and his back was tatted up too.

**Jesus Christ.**

It got hot in there.

"Uh, do you need my help?" he called. "You know, to take off your jeans and fuck you," he said, a lot quieter and mostly to himself.

Today was the best day of his life.

**Hot.**

**Damn.**

"I'm good! Save me some pie!"

Gene would give him the rest of it if he just sat there topless so he could feast on something entirely different.

He hadn't been expecting to see the giant raven, a bunch of tribal tats, and all kinds of ink all over his partner.

He was pretty sure that was the hottest thing he'd seen all damn day.

Now, Ethan and his tattoos were running through his head.

**Naked.**



*Carolyn Williams’  
Home  
West Virginia*

It took her a whole five minutes to walk herself around the whole property.

There were lots of trees, flowers that had been meticulously planted, and a place of calm. The windchimes ringing non-stop were peaceful.

The whole place reminded her of her childhood home in *Salem*. It was clear that Carolyn loved her place, and it was a shame that someone ended her life so callously.

It pissed her off.

That was shit that she didn’t deserve.

With her walk around the yard, she stopped by the garage and found the woman’s car still there. It wasn’t locked, and she went in to check it out.

The vehicle was open too, and that said a lot about how the woman felt in her surroundings.

**SAFE.**

When you didn’t feel like you were protected and safe, you tended to lock shit down and didn’t leave anything open. That this woman’s garage and car were...

She had no clue she was being followed and chosen by Teddy Clarkson.

That the woman lived alone, and she still didn’t have security or bars on her windows...

There was that sense that this house was protected by the locks and that alone.

In actuality, that was far from the truth.

*For Elizabeth, if she lived alone...*

**Oh, hell, yeah.**

The place would be locked up like Fort freaking Knox.

**Period.**

The house was juxtapositioned far enough from the road to make it an ideal spot for a killer to stalk.

While trees and bushes were pretty, they made great places for assholes to lurk, and that appeared to be what had happened. The back door was across from the trees, as was the bedroom window.

**Damn.**

Teddy had picked an easy one.

Clearly, he had some other skills other than raping a corpse. It was likely that his sister had taught him some B and E tricks.

**Great.**

A rapist who couldn't be stopped by a lock.

This town was in some serious shit if they didn't get it under control.

**And.**

**Fast.**

Now, it was time to get to the problem at hand.

Her partner in all of this.

She'd be lying if she said she wasn't worried about keeping a secret from him.

When she went in to find Chris, he was pulling off his gloves and that signaled one thing.

It appeared that he was done with his initial check of the body, and the team was ready to move her so the techs could continue their jobs.

From how much bitching they were doing, it was going to be one hell of a trace hunt.

When the techs were bitchy, the day ran far less smooth. They really needed to get their acts together and hire a new head tech.

Well, not **THEIR** acts.

That was Chris' rodeo.

After Violet's murder, they were still trying out techs in the position, and true to form, it wasn't easy to find one.

As soon as he saw her, he pointed back toward the way she had just come in.

He looked relieved to see her.

That meant he wasn't angry about her disappearing with the 'sheriff'.

That worked.

“Can I see you outside?” he asked. Chris hated that she’d disappeared with the man running this case in the town, simply because he didn’t trust him.

It was more than significant other jealousy.

**Really.**

“Absolutely, Doctor.”

She didn’t mind.

This afforded her the opportunity to ask him all of the questions that he hated her asking before he even opened up the body.

Oh, and she would.

Elizabeth was a one-trick pony when it came to how she interrogated her ME on the job.

**Lucky him.**

Elizabeth followed him out.

“In our ride,” he stated, as she followed him toward the SUV where they could talk privately.

Clearly, something was up. She began wondering if he found something out of the ordinary that might help her with this case.

Fingers were crossed.

Before he could say anything, Elizabeth knew what needed to be handled.

Babysitting duty.

“Where is Charlie?” she asked, knowing that if he was roaming around, bad shit could happen.

She knew her father.

She didn’t get her skills magically. This apple dropped from that tree and learned all of his tricks.

Chris didn’t hesitate.

When she’d left with the sheriff, Chris had sent Tony to keep an eye on her.

Yes, he was stalking his woman.

**Sue him.**

His gut was off.

**WAY off.**

“He’s in the tech van. The team helped him log into your laptop, and he’s in the back researching using FBI toys. I know where you get your love

for tech. The man is in Heaven. Sam is there with him. He didn't like Charlie wandering. Apparently, and I quote, '*the man could find trouble in his own pockets*'."

She laughed.

Ehhhh, Sam had said that many times about her growing up, and he wasn't exactly wrong.

*Now was he?*

Yeah, she wasn't the only one aware that the plaid menace could make a shit ton of issues, and it helped to have someone else babysitting him too so she could focus.

"Well, what do you need to say to me?" she asked, preparing to pepper this conversation with all the things she wanted to know like COD, TOD, and anything else she could squeeze out of her ME.

Knowing that he was likely going to bug the hell out of her nagging about the sheriff, he opted to show her.

Not tell her.

Chris pulled her mouth to his, and he kissed her like he was going to be busy for the next six years apologizing for his jealousy and overprotective side.

She'd been in danger way too many times.

Elizabeth held on.

The heat in the ride went through the roof.

She was pretty sure they were sending up smoke signals to the outside world that screamed '*stay back*'.

That tangle of tongues made her forget, and so did his hand in the back of her hair. Chris could turn her brain to mush in seconds, and this was the proof.

She was no longer thinking about anything but him in his sexy aqua scrubs as he kissed her stupid.

Maybe that had been his plan.

*Oh, yeah...*

She was easy when it came to him.

When Chris slowly set her free, she was dazed, confused, and distracted.

**Big.**

**Time.**

What could she say to that sexy display of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?

*Oh, she knew...*

"Holy shit, Doctor."

He laughed because he was feeling it too. He'd kissed her like that because he felt like it, and he wanted her to know that he was going to miss her tonight.

Yeah, someone was pulling a long one, and while he trusted her, he didn't trust the sheriff. He was planning to ask Charlie to keep an eye on her and that man.

He didn't doubt that his gut was right. When it came to his woman, he was seldom wrong.

"I agree, with that assessment. Holy shit, Agent," he replied, loving that when he kissed her, it made his day.

With love, she ran her fingers down his cheek to share what she was feeling.

"I love you," she offered.

He didn't hold back.

"I feel the same, Bethe. You're mine," he offered. "Please be careful."

Yeah, she suspected that was what was going on in his head.

"My gut is going haywire," he admitted. "I hope he's just trying to poach my girl, but I feel like it's more. I'm scared," he said, staring into her eyes.

Well, she couldn't let him be afraid.

That made up her mind.

"You know I would never keep secrets from you, right?" she asked.

He lifted a brow.

"We agreed never to do that. It destroys a relationship," he admitted.

Granted, he had a big witchcraft secret of his own.

His mother.

She had to make a choice.

"You were right, but I need you to swear to me that not only will you not say anything, but you will not let on that I told you."

He stared at her.

"That you're asking me to promise to be loyal with silence scares the shit out of me. What happened, baby?" he asked, running his thumb

across her lower lip.

It made her want to be honest.

Chris always had her back.

“Swear to me.”

He saw she wasn’t kidding.

“Did he touch you? I’ll get my ass out of this car, get backup, meaning your father, and watch as the sheriff has a showdown for me.”

She would have laughed.

Maybe she should have.

“Swear to me.”

He held up his pinky and did the deed. When she wrapped hers around his, only then did she tell him.

“He’s not a sheriff.”

His eyes went huge.

“What is he?” Chris asked. “Is he the killer? For the record, I was only kidding about him being the killer.”

She laughed.

“He’s a CIA mole. He admitted it. He was planted here by the CIA, and he’s working an unrelated case, so we have to play dumb and ignore him.”

He blinked.

“Ignore? Well, he was checking out your breasts, so that makes it hard for me to play ignorant.”

She touched his cheek.

“He called this in. He called his bosses, who called the Director of the FBI, and leaked it to Gabe that Teddy was here. Gabe didn’t know. That’s why all of this feels off. We couldn’t put our finger on how the FBI knew it was Teddy in this big state...”

He got it.

“Bethe, I don’t like this.”

She didn’t either.

“He knows everything about me.”

**Well, shit.**

Now he really hated it.

“We have to play nice.”

Chris had to know.

“Does Gabe know?”

“I told Remington that I’d say nothing. Immediately, I called Gabe and gave him the heads-up. He told me not to trust him.”

Oh, well, now it was getting worse.

While Gabe was paranoid, this was bad.

**DAMN.**

**BAD.**

“I want you to go **NOWHERE** alone with him. The CIA is a bunch of sneaky, lying, organ selling...”

She kissed him.

Then, rested her forehead against his.

“I know. I want to leave a trail. That you figured it out...that was the only reason he told me. I need you to be safe, Christopher, and I need you to play dumb. So, if he’s staring at my tits...”

“Poke his eyes out with my scalpel?”

She laughed.

“Well, threaten to do it. Pretend he’s just another sheriff. Pretend he’s backwoods and dumb but know that he’s not. You and I are the only ones who know other than Gabe.”

“Axelle?”

“He said he has heard of her but doesn’t know her. I’ll see how this plays out and go from there. The bottom line is that we can’t let on. The big boss is trying to hang me out to dry, and I don’t doubt that he will screw this up to take me down. I need you to be **VERY** cautious about what you say and do around him.”

That was fine.

“I mean what I said. You go nowhere alone with him. I hate being an irate husband, but here we are.”

She loved him for it.

Chris trusted her but wanted to protect her.

It was nice.

He stared into her eyes and then began cursing up a storm. It caught her off guard.

Chris cursed on occasion, but a full-on tirade out of the blue?

**Not often.**

“Uh, what was that about?” she asked.

He broke the bad news.

“I might be busy all night. I’m up to my eyeballs in autopsies. I had planned on telling you to think about me all night long.”

Oh, she would be.

*In fact, that kiss...*

Her panties were wet.

“Only, now I’m freaked-out,” Chris admitted. “I don’t think you should be sleeping alone with a CIA mole and killer running around, and we both know Jack will be busy with Axelle.”

And Charlie with Sam.

Their family had paired off, and he wasn’t leaving his woman alone.

**Screw it.**

Truth be told, he’d been prepared to work all night, but her face showed that same worry, and his gut was going off again.

**Nope.**

He changed tracks.

**IMMEDIATELY.**

What it would come down to was that he’d work faster.

Chris would get it done in order to ensure that his woman wasn’t alone tonight in a strange town with CIA moles running amuck.

Axelle was a different case.

The sheriff wannabe?

**NOPE.**

“I’ll be okay,” she offered, seeing the look on his face.

Yeah, still a no for him.

The love of his life came first. The day she didn’t, he’d know they were in trouble.

“I tell you what,” he stated, leaving a few kisses across her freckled face. “I’ll meet you at the hotel in a few hours. I will want to dump my stuff off, and I’ll update you on the autopsies, that way, I’m clear and we’ve killed two birds with one stone. I know you like to harass me in the morgue, but...”

She laughed.

She knew what he was doing, and she appreciated it. Elizabeth would cut him a break.

“Oh, you’re not ditching me that easily, sexy ME.”

He ran his teeth over her ear as he tried to calm himself and distract her. His heart was racing, and it wasn’t all because they were this close



together.

He was worried.

“Who’s trying to ditch you?” he asked, giving her goosebumps. “I was thinking about a working lunch where I get to see my wife. Want to have a meal with me?” he asked, knowing she’d never say no.

It was his way of checking in on her.

Well, that was the best offer she’d had all day, so she wasn’t opposed to that.

“Sold.”

He felt a little better.

He’d keep an eye on her.

“Let me get this one autopsy done, and I’ll meet you back at the hotel. I can check over the other ones to see how well the town ME did, then, we’ll grab some lunch and talk. I hear there’s a bar in the hotel.”

That worked for her.

*Bars had burgers.*

*Burgers had bacon.*

*Bacon had grease.*

She was a sucker for that kind of shit, and him making time in his day to have a moment with her.

“And Sam and my father?” she asked, as the tenting in his scrubs were just distracting enough for her liking. She was getting wetter by the minute.

*Maybe they could...*

Chris stared into her eyes and opened his mouth, ready to suggest they ditch the ‘rents and maybe have sex. She brought it out in him at the oddest times.

Only, before he could say anything else, both back doors opened, and there they were.

Like magicians.

Or parents trying to kill an erection.

Chris laughed.

Well, so much for that.

“That’s the kind of power you have. You summoned them,” he teased. “Now summon me an island and particularly erotic white bikini for our cruise.”

She snorted.

“I have a new one that’s basically all bondage-y strings. I plan on debuting that one.”

He wouldn’t say no to that.

“Oh, Jesus, Sam. He’s thinking about her in a bikini again. Where’s that bucket of cold water to throw at him. Next, he’ll start humping.”

Sam laughed.

Elizabeth pointed at him.

“Don’t. I’m wearing his ring. We’re going to talk about anything we want.”

She knew that Chris was having to put off his sexual plans more often than not and the erection from kissing her was not going to be used to bust his ass. There was no doubt that they weren’t talking dead bodies.

The men in the back said nothing.

They both loved Chris.

“So, it’s a date?” he asked, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

That was all her father had to hear.

It started him back up again.

He couldn’t help himself.

Cockblocking for his daughter was something every father did out of habit.

Well, good fathers.

“What’s a date?” Charlie asked, leaning forward to make them nervous because that’s what he liked to do.

“Well, I guess we should tell you,” she said, looking back. “It’s something so huge, and we were going to surprise you, Dad.”

He got all smiley.

“What? You’re going to start having kids?” he asked, going there.

Immediately, she rolled her eyes.

If she had a dollar every time that he said that...

She’d be wealthy herself.

It was clear that her father was never going to stop asking about little Leonard and LaRues.

“No, we’re going to visit that nursing home that I picked for you. Congrats. I’m putting your old-ass away for being a nosey bitch.”

Sam laughed.

He couldn’t help himself.

A LaRue was a LaRue, no matter the gender or age. That was a constant.

“Har-har.”

Chris gave her a lingering kiss.

When he broke it, he winked at her.

“Don’t worry, Sweetness. We’ll find one with full-time security to keep the sheriff locked up.”

“You’re funny—a regular comedian. I hope you’re laughing when I kick open your bedroom door in my house and scare the shit out of you.”

They ignored him.

He’d never do that.

Then, he’d have to see a naked daughter being loved on by an equally naked man.

“I’ll meet you later, Sweetness. Think about me. I know I’ll think about you, my love,” he said, knowing she was safe. “Sam, whenever you’re ready.”

Then, he was gone.

As soon as he left the vehicle, Sam squeezed her arm lovingly.

“Be safe out there, Sweetheart. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom,” she said, watching him follow after Chris. They were both in aqua scrubs, and it was sweet. Chris was allowing Sam to fully immerse himself in their world.

She loved him for it.

When he was gone, Charlie literally climbed his big, lumberjack-ass through the opening and dropped into the front seat instead of going out the door.

“You can use those things with hinges, Dad. Boots on rental seats are bad.”

He busted her ass.

“What? And risk you gunning it and leaving me behind? Hell no. I know you. I can’t run long distances in these cowboy boots.”

She snorted.

*Why?*

The visual.

She would start to pull away just to make him give chase. Sometimes, she couldn’t contain herself.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road,” she stated.

Charlie couldn't hold back. He was a nosey bitch, like she said. In fact, she got that from him.

So, he went there.

"What are you two planning? Come on! You can tell your friend Charlie, and your partner."

Oh, so he didn't want to play Dad?

**Okay.**

She stared at him.

"Well, he's a guy, and I'm a girl, so we were going to have lunch naked. Guess what I'm having?"

He stared at her in horror.

Why wasn't he shocked?

His girl was a wildcard.

While she didn't go there with his love life anymore since finding out about Sam and him, she didn't hold back from horrifying her old man with her sex life.

**All.**

**The.**

**Time.**

She had to have some fun.

**Right?**

"In case you don't know the answer to that, Kreskin, it starts with **Di** and ends in **ck**, and I think about his all day long."

Charlie shook his head.

**Yep.**

Not shocked.

"I don't know how you went from good Catholic girl to this hellion. I told your mother not to let you hang out with the cool kids."

She laughed.

Elizabeth had hung out with Charlie and other deputies. If anything, she learned her ways by watching the man who had been her idol.

Deputies had foul-ass mouths on them.

Well, Charlie's did.

"I'm kidding about the sex," she stated, as they started driving. She had directions to the sheriff's station sitting between them on the console. She'd printed them out before the flight.

"Uh-huh."

She had to cover and telling him Chris was cutting out early would signal something going on. They had to keep this on the DL.

So, she handed out a semi-white fib.

Transparent, mostly.

“Chris might have to work late tonight, so he’s going to meet me for an update and lunch. We like to have a meal together. It keeps us grounded.”

He got that.

He and Sam had dinner together each and every night. They cooked, and they talked about their days. It was a beautiful part of their relationship, and vital. He was glad his daughter was doing it.

Charlie wanted her and Chris to be together forever. It was clear they loved deeply.

That was always a good thing.

“Well, I’ll keep busy. I won’t get in your way. I know how important your time with him is.”

Oh, she somehow doubted that he wasn’t going to nose his way into their break.

Call it a hunch.

She knew her old man, and she was more worried about what he’d do without her there to babysit.

*As for what she’d learned...*

“I didn’t find anything out of the ordinary while I searched her place. Let’s head in and meet with the dead girl’s mother. I want to see if we can find anything that might tell us why we have a tourist and a pair of dead nurses.”

He was good with that.

“Did you find anything?”

“Well, even using your fabulous tech, it was sketchy. I kept getting disconnected.”

Then Sam came and distracted him.

One kiss and Charlie had been focused on the man’s body in those scrubs.

He loved that color on him.

**Jesus.**

He was just as bad as his daughter.

“There will be time,” she stated, knowing reception would be better at the hotel. Glancing at her watch, she figured Remington would have plenty of time to get the people together for her interviews.

“Let’s go.”

Charlie was as excited as a pig in shit that his daughter was letting him help with catching the Clarksons.

This was the most fun he’d had since...

Well, since when he butted into her last case.

Sue him.

He couldn’t help himself.

As for a *‘business’* lunch, maybe he’d do the same.

He and Sam had separate rooms, but they really didn’t need them.

*Now did they?*

He could buy his ME some lunch and have a midday picnic with him.

Lovin’ included.

“I’ll work on searching for anything on the victims when you’re busy ogling your ME. I can be dignified.”

No, he could not.

And that was what made that even more amusing. He planned on ogling too.

She leaned over and gave her father a kiss, grateful that he was helping her.

This case was turning into a royal pain in her ass, and that didn’t include babysitting.

She’d give credit where credit was due.

“I love you, Dad, and I’m glad you’re here.”

He stared at her in shock. Where the hell was his daughter because this couldn’t be her, could it be?

She laughed.

Yeah, like father like daughter.

To the end.

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## *Chapter Five*

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*Sheriff's Office*  
*Thursday*  
*Late Morning*

**W**ell, shock of all shocks. It appeared that Charlie had found his missing child and her abrasive personality. They tended to go hand-in-hand, and her telling him earlier that he was helping...

It should have been the harbinger that she was going to be losing her shit on someone soon.

Yeah, the mystery was solved.

He almost felt bad for the men facing her down, and he would have if he didn't know how much shit was on her plate.

So, when they strolled into the sheriff's office, and immediately, she terrorized the staff, Charlie knew exactly where her sweetness had gone.

**Down.**

**The.**

**Drain.**

She could turn it on and off like a light switch.

It had been a fluke.

The ballbuster was back, and she was really laying it on thick for the sheriff and his men.

Case in point?

As she strolled in, him beside her, the deputies there were giving her the look.

Not the *'here comes the Fed'* look.

The *'who's the hot girl'* look?

That was all it took for the switch to be flipped, and his daughter to go from calm to irritated.

Now, he understood why she had such a chip on her shoulder.

The men around her tended to not notice how hard she worked, simply because she had tits.

That had to be a pain in the ass.



In fact, it made Charlie want to smash their heads together. His baby girl was doing good things, and there was no doubt that one day, she'd be running the FBI.

She had it in her.

"Can I talk to Sheriff Bowman? He should be here waiting for me."

The deputy behind the counter smiled at her.

"Well, aren't you just the prettiest thing I've seen today?" he asked.

She smiled.

"Aren't you an annoying pain in the ass who likely couldn't tie your shoes until you were twenty?" she inquired back without missing a beat.

Her father laughed.

It was all kinds of wrong, but he understood.

"Son, stop being nice. She's meaner than your momma on a Sunday after you skipped services. Back away and get the sheriff before she cuts out your liver."

She made slurping noises.

The deputy just stared at her wide-eyed and actually took a step back.

From not far away, there was laughter.

The sheriff must have heard the commotion.

"Agent LaRue, I was waiting," Remington said as he exited his office. He'd had to check back in with his bosses, alerting them that the CIA had an issue, and she was badass wearing cowboy boots.

They would get back to him with his new directive, now that it was clear that this woman wasn't going to drop the ball on this case.

It would also be about seeing if she kept his cover.

"Well, I'm here now, Remington."

He nodded.

"I have Carolyn Williams' mother in my office, and I have a surprise for you."

"Is it a machine gun with continuous bullets like an Everlasting Gobstopper? I've always wanted one of them to shoot up a town full of idiot deputies," she said, turning to catch a whole bunch of them checking out her ass. The second she caught them, she growled, and they jumped.

He laughed.

How could he not?

*The men in this town...*

They were ass backward. Most of them were out looking for a pretty thing to keep barefoot and pregnant in their homes. LaRue was the opposite of that.

From what he'd been told, she was hardcore, badass, and didn't pull punches.

None of them could handle her.

Plus, she was playing hide the ME's sausage. She was taken.

"Boys, go. She'll hand you your ass. Patrol time."

When they were gone, he apologized.

"I'm sorry about them. There are more men than women here, and they sometimes forget their manners. It's a full-time job to keep their dicks in their pants. Trust me."

She noticed.

"Well, what's my surprise?" she asked, not really expecting much. She wasn't impressed by this town, and she doubted the undercover agent was going to give her anything useful.

Call it a hunch.

"I had a deputy pick up the two friends of the first victim so you can talk to them, and the friend of the second victim. They're all here, willing to talk about what happened. I just want to make your job easier so you can solve this and head home."

Oh, she knew why.

So he could play CIA all over the lush green West Virginia city. Instead of busting his balls, she was pleasant.

"Well, that's a nice surprise. Thank you."

He smiled.

"I try to be helpful," he said.

Yeah, because it benefited the CIA.

Who was he kidding?

"Now, shall we?" he asked, pointing at his office. "Betty is in really bad shape, as you can imagine, so..."

She rolled her eyes.

Elizabeth was kind to the families of the victims.

**Always.**

"I'll be nice. Chill out."

And she would be.

Going in, a woman was sitting on the couch, her hands wrapped around a coffee. She was red-eyed, and she looked like shit.

That was expected.

This poor woman had found her daughter not that long ago, and her life had been turned upside down on her.

She approached, and there was nothing but sympathy for her.

Gently, Elizabeth sat beside her and made sure she did this right. By no fault of her own, her world had been destroyed.

That sucked.

“Ma’am, I’m Elizabeth. I work for the FBI. I’m going to be handling your daughter’s case, and I just want you to know that I am so sorry about Carolyn.”

The woman nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks.

She kept blowing her nose and blotting at her red eyes to slow the waterworks down.

Elizabeth patted her leg to offer that human touch that a grieving person needed. Touch really did heal.

“In order to help your daughter, I need you to tell me everything you can about what happened, and anything pertinent about your daughter’s life.”

She nodded again.

“She and I were going to go into Virginia to do some shopping at some outlets. We go once a month. Today was her day off from the hospital, and we were getting an early start. The outlet opens at eight, and we like to get breakfast beforehand.”

She listened, and Charlie stood back making notes for them.

“When I got there, the door was open. I thought that was weird, but maybe Carolyn had been running around, and just forgot.”

She was shaking.

Elizabeth put her hand on her arm, soothing her further.

“Go ahead, ma’am.”

She did.

“When I went in, I called to her, and she didn’t reply, so I figured she was in the bathroom. I headed back toward her bedroom, and I saw her foot on the bed. Just a peek of it until I rounded the corner.”

She stopped and wiped her eyes as she prepared for the next part of the conversation.

It would be hard.

**Damn hard.**

Only, Elizabeth needed her.

“Then, I saw my baby,” she whispered, the tears coming full force.

“She was dead.”

The sobbing began, and Elizabeth moved closer.

She knew what the woman needed.

“It’s okay, Betty. Cry. I’m here,” she said, as the woman went into her arms and Elizabeth just held her.

She clung to her, and she didn’t mind.

She wanted to cry after each victim too, so she absolutely got it.

What humans did to each other...

It was shitty.

No one should be privy to that.

What that mother had seen was horrific, and unfortunately, it would never go away.

“I’ll never unsee that. It’ll be burned into my mind forever,” she whispered, as she kept crying.

Yeah, it would.

And for that, Elizabeth was sorry.

As she sobbed, Betty bumped the table, and her coffee spilled on the floor.

Remington handled it, as his own eyes filled with emotion over all of this. It had sucked seeing the victims.

It was one reason why he wasn’t FBI. In the CIA, you didn’t chase the same people. He could decompartmentalize on his cases.

This was hard on anyone who had a soul.

**Even him.**

“I know, Betty. When I was a little girl, my mother died right in front of me. We were in an accident, and she was hit by a drunk driver. They slammed into our car so hard, half of her was destroyed. I still see it. It gets easier, but it never really leaves you,” she admitted.

That hurt someone else in the room.

**Her father.**

Charlie stood there, sick to his stomach that his daughter had to see Catherine’s death. He’d been ill seeing her in that car, but he hadn’t watched her die.

That she had...

His young child had seen too much too soon, and it went downhill from there. It had been one scar after another for Elizabeth, and he only wished, as a father, he could have protected her from it.

Then again, maybe it would have changed who she was today, and this person was important.

She chased death and killers.

"I can still see the part of her face that was damaged from the impact. I watched her eyes and saw the moment she left. You won't ever forget what you saw, Betty, but I talked to my ME. She didn't suffer despite what you saw."

The woman's sobbed hitched.

"He raped her," she whispered.

Elizabeth knew it was a tricky slope. Only, she knew what a victim's family needed.

"She was already gone," she promised.

That reassurance seemed to help.

To the two men standing there, they knew what it meant. Carolyn had been raped postmortem, but her mother hadn't picked up on that.

**Thank.**

**Freaking.**

**God.**

It was a fine line to walk, and so far, he was impressed with Elizabeth. What they said about her was true.

"There was no pain. There was no suffering. She had already left and was at peace. I swear to you."

That calmed her.

"Really?" Betty asked looking up into Elizabeth's face. "I need to know that she was okay."

She nodded.

"My ME is really good, and that's what he already told me. She suffered no pain at all. She died when he broke in. She fought and was killed long before."

This could make her investigation harder, and Remington knew that.

In that moment, he had massive respect for the agent. That kind of compassion was lost after years of seeing bad things. You became numb to it.

Clearly, she had a deep well of it.

Elizabeth grabbed some tissues from the box on the table beside them.

Then, she handed them to Betty.

“Help me catch him and bring Carolyn justice. I need to know if she was having any issues with anyone.”

It was time to push on.

The woman shook her head.

“No, she loved her job at the ER, and she was a good person who everyone loved. That’s what makes this all crazy. She didn’t hurt anyone. She helped people.”

She was curious.

So, she went there.

“Do you know if she knew a woman by the name of Jana Katz?” she asked.

Betty thought about it, and it was clear that she was trying to recall the name.

*To no avail.*

**Unfortunately.**

“It doesn’t sound familiar. Her friends at the hospital would know. You should talk to them.”

That was her plan if she had time. She really wished there were more of her at this point.

**Like five.**

Heaven help the world.

“And she said nothing about feeling like she was being followed?” Elizabeth asked.

She shook her head.

It was clear that Carolyn wasn’t worried, and the status of her home seemed to say just that.

The unlocked garage.

The no security on the house.

She wasn’t at all shocked.

Teddy was good at stalking.

“All I know was she liked to go out and have drinks with friends. She might have brought a guy home from that, and maybe he was the one who hurt her? I don’t know. I can’t believe any of this is happening.”

Yeah, well, it was, unfortunately, and now Elizabeth had to piece it together—somehow.

As for the picking up a man aspect, that was a good lead. It was really her only lead, other than the hospital connection.

“Did she have a place she liked to go to hang out or see if she could find a soul mate?” she asked, phrasing that so it didn’t sound cheap.

For Betty’s sake.

She shrugged.

“Honestly, I never asked. She and I didn’t talk about things like that. It made her uncomfortable to think of me in her personal relationships. Now, I wish I did.”

Charlie stared at his daughter.

This was exactly why he was up in her business. Daughters needed to be protected.

She appreciated the woman sharing what she could, but the crying had to be exhausting, and she didn’t want to make Betty suffer any more than she was.

“Well, thank you, Betty.”

The woman needed to know.

“When can I have her back?” she asked. “I want to put her beside my husband. He died two years ago from cancer. I know Carolyn would want that.”

**Jesus.**

This poor woman.

She squeezed her hands in reassurance.

That would depend on the investigation, and there was one thing that would be different.

They would take Carolyn to her bones.

“We will release her to you as soon as we can. I do have to warn you, ma’am, she’s not going to look like she did. We have to use her body to find the killer.”

It took a second.

Then, she considered it.

“I’m fine with that.”

Elizabeth relaxed.

There was no way Chris could release her until they plucked all the evidence from her, and they had a date with some beetles.

“It’s okay, Agent. I get it. Find who hurt her. Carolyn loved helping people. She’s not here anymore to do that, and I know that she’s with Jesus. You can use her body to find him and put his filthy ass in **HELL**.”

Here came the next phase of grief.

**ANGER.**

“We will, Ma’am. If you find or hear anything,” she said, pulling the card from the back of her badge to hand it to her, “call me. If you just need an update, call me. I’ll answer.”

She took the card.

“Your momma would be proud,” she said. “I hope you know that. You’re helping people too.”

She gave her a kiss on the cheek.

It was a very motherly thing to do.

Never let it be said that the people in West Virginia weren’t good people. Already, Carolyn’s mother was trying to mother her.

Elizabeth smiled.

“I know. I do it for her. I’ve always done it for her,” she said, patting her knee. “Now, let’s get a deputy to drive you home.”

“Thank you.”

Remington took that as his sign. He knew exactly what the agent was going to do next.

“Xavier,” he said, calling the deputy who was right outside his office at his desk. “Can you take Betty home?” he inquired.

The man saluted and offered up his arm to the grieving woman.

“It would be my pleasure,” he said, taking her out.

When she was gone, Remington was honest.

“What they say about you isn’t completely accurate,” he said, and then realized what he’d done.

Charlie missed it.

Well, most of it.

“Is someone talking shit about my baby girl?” he asked, looking around. “I’ll break their faces.”

She laughed.

“Ignore my very angry father. He tends to be a wild card on a good day.”

She wasn’t done.



“As for the rest, I’m a bitch, but I’m not a bitch to people who are having the worst day of their lives. I don’t roll that way. Ever.”

He was seeing that. Word on the street from the head of the CIA from the Director of the FBI was vastly different.

Now, was the dude lying, or was this an act?

He wasn’t sure yet.

“What do you think about what she said?” he asked, changing the focus.

“Well, I think that we have two nurses out of three, and those are unusual odds. I’m curious as to whether or not the hospital comes into play, or if she picked up an asshole who maybe made it look like a B and E to throw us off. I just wish I had more time in my day to find out.”

The man thought about it.

“I mean, that could be. I thought I’d seen everything in this town until this started popping up. People are assholes, clearly, and that’s why I’m doing this job.”

She knew he didn’t mean as a faux sheriff.

“Yeah, they are. Thus, my sunny disposition. I’ve only been a Fed a handful of years, so I get it. My boss is a douchebag with a God complex. He hates women, so he loves giving me these little fun cases. I’m sure it’s only going to make me a nicer person.”

Charlie laughed.

“Baby Girl, you’re a gem. The head of the FBI is afraid of how good you are. You make him look bad when he was an agent.”

She was aware.

Elizabeth didn’t play games.

She didn’t want to run the FBI. She wanted to chase killers. Let someone else play that game.

Now, it was time to do more interviews.

“Let me talk to the friend who found the second victim. I’ll work backward on this one,” she said, hoping that the friend knew something.

**Anything.**

Later, she’d get a timeline from Chris, since she really needed one.

She was going to grill him earlier, in their ride, but his kisses made her forget to ask.

**Damn him.**

Oh, someone was getting a surprise visit **BEFORE** lunch.

“That’s good with me,” Remington stated.

Elizabeth glanced over at her father.

“Keep taking notes for me, Dad,” she stated.

He winked.

Then, she was questioning the ‘*sheriff*’ again.

“Okay, and victim two was found, when?” she asked. “Refresh my memory until I can get a timeline from my ME.”

He did.

“We found her on Tuesday morning. She died Monday night according to our ME.”

Charlie scribbled that down.

*How she did this in her head...?*

**No clue.**

It was a lot to remember.

“And the woman who took a tumble from the hotel balcony?” she asked.

He gave her what he had.

“She was found early Saturday morning, and died the night before.”

So, the killing basically started on Friday. Something brought Teddy here to begin.

But what?

If she could figure that out, she might have a chance to catch him—fast.

“And before that?”

He shook his head.

“There was nothing before this. I would have seen it,” he admitted.

She knew what he meant.

The CIA had nothing on their radar in this town before that Friday.

Good to know.

She thought about it.

She knew how violent Teddy Clarkson was, and how sick the man’s sister was. She was willing to bet there were more around this area, or maybe no one noticed if he changed up his MO.

That meant one thing.

**Tag.**

He was it.

“I’m sure you want us out of here, right?”

He lifted a brow.

“Absolutely. What are you about to do?” he asked, holding his breath.

She went with his cover.

“Since you’re the local yokel, can you call around to any surrounding sheriff’s departments in the state and see what else pops up? They will deal with you before me, a Fed.”

He relaxed.

“Uh, how many killings have been happening?” he asked since he only had a snapshot of this town. Before being here, he was from out West.

It was time to tell him all she knew. If he was going to help, they needed to be honest.

“Let’s just say that **YOUR** killer isn’t new to the game,” she stated. “Do you know why I’m chasing him?”

He shook his head.

When he’d called the intel in, he was given the minimum. He’d really just called in a serial killer. He assumed that was bad enough.

Oh, and that his boss asked him to keep an eye on LaRue.

“He is part of a threesome of lunatics. I just bagged the one yesterday. I have very little time to grab the other two. This killer is one.”

His eyes went huge.

“I just caught his killer sister. Unfortunately, I have three siblings who are nutters. We’re one down, and now I’m looking for Teddy Clarkson. What I do know about him is that he’s a serial rapist who has been leaving women in his wake. Granted, they didn’t have this MO. This is an escalation.”

“Jesus.”

Yeah, she was aware.

“His sister killed older women and robbed them blind. I’m surprised you weren’t advised. This could be bad.”

She didn’t mean with his case.

If she dropped the ball, more Feds were coming here. The more Feds, the more chance he would blow his cover.

Remington knew what she meant.

“Are you kidding me?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“His sister transferred ten million dollars, and we have a CIA bureau director helping,” she said, knowing he knew who.

Again, Axelle.

“Ten million? Out of the country and back in?”

She nodded.

“Holy shit.”

“This family was raised to kill.”

This was her way of reading him in. She wasn’t sure what he did know, but from the look of it, he was now worried.

“It’s in my best interest to have your help, so we can get the hell onto the next sibling. This is what they did to their mother.”

She handed him her phone, and the man was able to read the case file on the dead woman.

It didn’t take him long to see what the siblings had done to their own flesh and blood. Elizabeth definitely chased some bad people.

“Holy shit,” he said again.

That’s what she thought over and over again too.

“Yeah, they bashed their own mother’s face in, so imagine the blatant disregard they have for everyone else. The three of them are psychopaths with a chip on their shoulder, and I know you’re busy, but I could use your help.”

He got it.

She was telling him he had to help or both of their cases, and his cover, were blown.

His boss never told him all of this.

“From what the FBI knows about Theodore Clarkson, and there isn’t much, he will watch and plan. He’s a stalker, and I need the best to catch him on this compressed timeline.”

“Do you have a photo?”

*She laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*And laughed.*

“What? And make it easy? The issue is they grew up in a poor town in this state. They were homeschooled, and we have zero pictures. When they got licenses, **IF** they got them, they lied about their names. They are all aliases or fake IDs.”

He understood why she needed help.

This seemed daunting, even to him, and as someone who saw some pretty bad situations come up while under, that said a lot.

“So, we’re chasing a psychopath killer who has no soul. Well, that sounds like fun.”

She laughed.

“Welcome to my world. There are days I wish I was Axelle George, and I didn’t have to play these games.”

He knew what she was saying.

The CIA didn’t really chase people.

They infiltrated, hid, and sent back intel.

It was like acting.

He was nothing more than an actor keeping Americans safe.

“As I said, I have two left to lock up, and after what I’ve found out today, my timeline is getting shorter. We have the cuckoo’s sister, killer number uno, drugged up with CIA fun meds.”

He laughed.

Yeah, he knew what she meant. They used those drugs in interrogations. They had a short timeline for working. At some point, you had to stop using them.

Or the person died.

“Now, I have maybe a week to catch the last two.”

The look on the man’s face said it all.

“It would have been nice to be told all of this when I called it in.”

Charlie didn’t catch that either.

**Fortunately.**

She laughed.

“Oh, well, it would have been nice if I didn’t just put the one crazy away **YESTERDAY** and have to deal with another today. Here’s a newsflash, Remington. The FBI is a big ol’ ball of confusion even for me, and add in the CIA, and we have one big circle jerk.”

He got it.

It looked like his op was on the back burner until he got the FBI out of his town.

**ASAP.**

“Okay, well, this is going to be a team effort, I think.”

She laughed.

“If you want us gone, it does. The most important part is that **NO ONE** knows about it. We can’t let the cat out of the bag that I took down Kitty Clarkson. If Teddy finds out, he’ll be in the wind, and he’ll warn Letty.”

“So, we need to work fast,” Charlie stated.

Remington had no choice.

The homegrown extremists trying to hire terrorists from outside the country were going to have to wait. He’d have to infiltrate later as a good ol’ boy. Now, helping was the only way to keep his cover.

“Okay, well, then we should be going. On to the next interview?” he asked.

She nodded.

He led them out, and in a conference room not far away, a deputy was sitting with the woman.

When she took a seat, the woman looked up at her.

It appeared that she’d been crying too, and she wasn’t shocked at that.

“Hey, I’m Agent Elizabeth LaRue, and I work with the FBI. I’m handling this case,” she stated.

The woman nodded.

“I’m Jetta Smith. I worked with Jana at the hospital. We carpooled since there were limited parking spots, and I’m the one who found her,” she whispered.

Elizabeth tried to be merciful.

Like with Carolyn’s mother, she felt sorry for Jetta. What she saw would never go away.

**Ever.**

“Walk me through it. Try and think about every detail, anything Jana might have said, or what you saw. The smallest thing could be huge, and that might help me catch her killer.”

She nodded.

Then, she broke it down.

“I was picking her up at six in the morning. Our shift starts at six-thirty, and it’s a short drive.”

Charlie made notes.

The woman kept going.

“When I got there, it was odd. Her car was parked where it normally is, but her keys were **IN** the door—as in, **IN** the lock. I saw them hanging there, and I thought...oh, Jana had a moment and forgot. We all do.”

She said nothing so as not to interrupt the woman’s telling of her side of this.

“I knocked, and no one answered, so I opened the door to find her so we wouldn’t be late. When I walked in, I found her on the couch. She was naked and her eyes were open. She was dead,” she said, tears filling her eyes as that visual came back to haunt her.

Elizabeth grabbed the tissues from the table and slid them to the woman. She took a bunch of them.

She was tough though.

Jetta kept talking.

There was no doubt this woman was a nurse. She was beyond badass.

“We’re nurses, so we’re accustomed to death, but that...it was hideous. It was so foul.”

The sheriff explained since Elizabeth didn’t have her update yet from her MEs.

“It was incredibly vile,” he stated. “She was bound, spread eagle, her wrists tied to the coffee tables, as if he was afraid that she was going to escape,” he said.

Well, since victim three was likely dead when she was raped, she was willing to bet that Teddy just liked the way it looked in his sick, sick world.

While his rampage had been escalation from the start, she was betting that the man was just disgusting and sick.

Call it a hunch.

“As soon as I saw that, I ran out and called the police to come.”

She asked her the same questions that she asked Betty to see if, once more, Teddy had stalked his prey. Her fingers were crossed that she’d get something to point her in a direction.

She had drinks and bringing a man home from Carolyn’s mother, and two nurses from the same hospital.

“Was anyone bothering her at work?” she asked, taking that route first.

Jetta shook her head.

“Not that I know of. We were pretty close, and Jana didn’t tell me anything was going on,” she said, rather quickly.

Then, she paused.

That had Elizabeth's attention.

“What?” she asked. “There is nothing too small that might help,” she reassured.

Jetta nodded and shared.

“She recently broke up with her long-time boyfriend, and she was pretty bummed-out about it too. They were together a while. As for her telling me if he was pissing her off, she never said anything about him harassing her.”

Yeah, only, many women didn’t tell people when someone in their life was being abusive or doing stupid shit. So, that didn’t mean anything.

On top of that, her ex might have known Carolyn Williams. He was dating a nurse.

**Interesting.**

She pushed on, hoping to find out more. This might be a viable lead that she could chase.

Her fingers were crossed.

The clock, unfortunately, was ticking.

“What is his name?” she asked, knowing her father would write it down.

“It’s Kenny Murdock.”

The sheriff clued her in since he’d dug around, planning on doing a notify. Jana didn’t have any family, and the ex’s name popped up.

“I had planned on notifying him, but I didn’t. He’s a long-distance truck driver, and when we went to talk to him yesterday, we found out that he’s out of town until tomorrow.”

Well, she knew who was on her list for tomorrow’s interviews.

Someone was getting a visit at some point. Already, the day was ticking away, and she’d yet to talk to Chris about TOD and COD. It was making her edgy.

Still, she pushed on, hoping to make up ground.

“Why did they break up?” she asked, covering all of her bases.

Jetta shrugged.

“I don’t know. She said they had issues, and I left it at that. I don’t think she wanted to talk about it. Jana was a private person, and I respected



that.”

“Do you by any chance know what she was doing the night before? Maybe she talked about it when you carpooled?”

She thought about it.

It didn’t take long.

“I think she was going to a late yoga class or getting a drink. She often did either of those things, depending on how rough a day she had. Then, she’d be in a better frame of mind before she settled in.”

It was clear that the women, while friends, didn’t really butt into each other’s lives.

She didn’t think there would be anything else that would help her out on this one.

What she needed was to hit the morgue and get information on the evidence the town’s coroner staff collected. She knew Chris wanted to meet for lunch, but these interviews were turning up very little to help her other than an ex and getting some drinks at a bar.

Damn.

Teddy was good at playing hide-and-seek.

“Thank you, Jetta. If we have any more questions, we’ll let you know,” she said, signaling that the interview was done.

They could move on.

The woman nodded.

“Sure. Promise me that you’ll find who did this to her,” she said.

Elizabeth patted her arm.

“Oh, I will. I’m hell on killers. I’ll find who hurt your friend,” she stated.

It was clear that the woman didn’t know that more than just Jana had died.

The media didn’t have this, yet.

Good.

“Be safe out there,” Elizabeth stated, and with that, she concluded that interview.

Heading out in the hall, she leaned against a wall to think it through. She waited until a deputy came and took Jetta to her car so she could go home.

When the coast was clear, she talked it out.

“What are you thinking?” Charlie asked as Remington leaned against the same wall.

“I’m profiling him and the most logical place that he’s hiding is in plain sight. He’s a watcher and stalker, so he’s going to want to be anonymous but still have a way to be near them. Normally, I’d get a profile, but I already know my killer, and my profiler won’t be able to give me much more.”

“So, we’re on our own?” Charlie asked.

She nodded.

“Yeah, Dad, we have to outthink him. He’s given us clues. We just have to pick them out of the nonsense and string them together.”

“I like my job better than yours,” Remington stated.

She laughed.

“Yeah, well, I don’t blame you on that one,” she stated, thinking more of his CIA persona than his sheriff cover.

“Let me think this through,” she stated.

They let her do just that.

Finally, she broke her silence.

“I’m going to say that he’s not going to be masquerading as a doctor or nurse,” she stated. “The Clarksons grew up dirt-ass poor, so education wasn’t a priority. While he can *‘fake it ‘til he makes it’*, he couldn’t do that as a professional.”

That made sense.

Well, as much sense as all of this mess made, to begin with.

She continued.

“He is going to hide in plain sight, and not be someone who sticks around for a long time, so we’re looking at a lower-level career that he could lie about and get hired to do.”

“Like a truck driver?” Charlie asked.

She nodded.

“We know that they faked their licenses, so he literally could have stolen one and is using it like that. Truck driver fits since the killings are around the state.”

*Speaking of killings...*

“When was the last batch of homicides?” the sheriff asked, trying to get caught up since he was being pulled into this.

She pulled out her phone and flipped through the information Gabe had given her after dropping this mess into her lap yesterday.

“Two months ago, on the opposite side of the state,” she added. “So, in the time between, he headed here, planted himself here in preparation, or just comes here to hunt. We don’t know which of those applies, yet.”

Remington hated her job.

This sucked.

“That makes this almost impossible. How the hell do you FBI agents do this?”

She laughed.

“We wing it.”

He could see that.

Elizabeth was already feeling the time crunch on this. It was ticking away in the back of her head, and she was getting edgy that she didn’t have an update yet.

It was hard to be calm when you knew that you only had so many days to do a case. It was a tough position to be in.

When she glanced at her watch, she felt like time was moving faster.

“At some point, I’ll head to the hospital.”

“About that,” Remington began.

He broke it to her.

“I already did. You know, since I’m the **SHERIFF**.”

She got it.

In order to keep up the charade he was playing, he had to make it look like he was investigating. Now, she’d see if he really was any good at being a ‘*sheriff*’.

She could do it with her eyes closed.

And without a net.

“And?” she asked.

He told her exactly what he found out, hoping it would help her in some way.

“When I asked about Jana, they said no one had any complaints from her that she was being harassed or was unhappy. They said it was easy sailing.”

She was curious.

“We have two nurses and what piques my interest is the chances that they are from the same hospital.”

He laughed.

This town was small, and that was why he'd been put here. Extremists were trying to find and indoctrinate Americans into doing dirty deeds against their country.

Most of the people here were poor, uneducated, and easily led astray. That was why he was posing as a dumbass sheriff. He wanted to be recruited so he could get intel.

"We only have one hospital, Agent LaRue. We are a town with a population of three thousand. One hospital, one vet, two grocery stores. The fanciest place we have is the hotel where the first victim was killed and the video rental place."

Yeah, small towns.

She grew up in one.

That was why she had assumed that the two nurses would be at the one location.

It made it easier and harder at the same time.

"Okay, well, I think we're staying in that same hotel," she stated.

"When we booked our rooms, there was the no-tell motel and this place."

He laughed again.

"Thank God you avoided the other place. It's a filthy hole where you have nightmares afterward. It's totally a roach coach."

She laughed.

Yeah, it was clear he was definitely a Fed whose boss had shoved his ass into horrible places too.

"Why are you amused?" Charlie asked.

That was easy.

"Most of my team is stuck there. We paid for our own rooms. I know how Gabriel Rothschild rolls. He's sadistic, so we upgraded."

Charlie got it.

Normally, he didn't like Chris spending money on him, but the simple luxury was wearing off on him. Maybe it shouldn't, but he didn't want bedbugs coming home with him.

He was crazy like that.

"You have one last interview. It's the women who were friends with Gloria Beake—the balcony victim."

Yeah, she needed to get this moving.

“Okay, point me at the friends. I’ll kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, when I head to the hotel to check-in. I’ll talk to the staff when I go there to drop my gear.”

“If you want to save time, I can have a deputy run your things over for you.”

While she appreciated it, she wanted to get a lay of the land. That was one job she couldn’t pass off. There was a victim killed there, and they were sleeping there. If it was dangerous, she would move them to the roach coach. While she didn’t like bugs, she liked breathing.

She stopped him.

Not only that, but she was meeting Chris for a late lunch, so that was an emphatic hell no.

“I have it. I like to keep my gear at arm’s length, and I want to see what the place is like.”

He understood.

He was the same way.

“Okay, well, then let’s talk to the two friends.”

That worked for her.

Heading into yet another conference room, they settled in at the table. The two women were quiet and watching Elizabeth as if she was going to bite.

Yeah, she wasn’t going to do that.

When the one opened her mouth, she already knew what she was going to say.

“It’s only pot.”

She lifted her brow.

Yeah, shock of all shocks. They thought she was going to question them about their friend and bust them for using marijuana.

She wasn’t.

There were days she wanted to smoke a whole bag to forget some of the atrocities she saw daily.

“You’re not in trouble,” she said, reassuring them. “I’m not going to bust you over pot. I’m more interested in your friend, and how she ended up dying.”

They were young.

If anything, just twenty-one.

“We are so upset over what happened to Gloria,” she stated. “Her falling to her death was horrible.”

And that explained it.

Elizabeth glanced over at Remington. It was clear that the word wasn't out yet, and that worked to her advantage.

“Yes, it's terrible how she fell,” he said, winking at Elizabeth.

Well, at least the media wouldn't be riding her ass the second she stepped outside the door.

Spooks could keep their yaps shut, thankfully.

She'd work with that.

“First, let's make some introductions,” Elizabeth offered, trying to calm them down.

She gave them her name and her father's and then wanted theirs.

“And you guys are?”

“I'm Reba Dorsey, and this is Randa Hollywell,” the one woman said.

Charlie made note of it.

Okay, well, now that the introductions were made, it was time to get down to it.

“What happened?” she asked, making sure she left that open-ended so that the women would just tell her everything. Since Gloria was the first victim, she wanted to get as much as she could without giving anything else up.

Soon enough, the media would have this in their sights, and she had to hope the lack of media would buy her more time.

She needed a clock reset.

“Well, Gloria came to visit us,” Reba stated.

She listened.

“We went shopping out of town, and when we came back, we stopped to get something to eat.”

She didn't say anything.

Randa continued for her friend, picking up where Reba left off.

“We went into the bar, and when we were there, there was some kind of speed dating thing going on.”

She lifted a brow.

*Pardon?*

*How did one 'speed date'?*

*Was this some new-fangled thing the kids today were getting into?*

**Oh, shit.**

She sounded old like her father.

Great.

That clock was really speeding up. Next, she'd need laxatives and regular checkups.

"What the hell is that?" she asked, almost afraid to know, but since it was her job...

Remington was well aware.

"Don't date, Agent?" he asked, winking at her.

Oh, he knew all about who she was cozied up to. The CIA had a dossier, and he knew that her ME and she were hot and heavy.

*But...*

He had to play along, and that meant flirting with her.

"No. I work."

"Want to?"

She pointed at him.

"Don't."

It made him laugh.

Honestly, for her, dating was for people with more time. She was all about jumping her ME as soon as they had a moment alone.

She was in a committed relationship, and that meant dating was done. Mating was up to bat.

She really hoped Remington left her personal life out of this, but she was suspecting that wasn't going to be the case. Chris was going to get riled up.

Again.

He held up his hands in surrender, amused.

Then, he explained.

"Well, it's where you sit down with a random stranger and you have two minutes to talk to them. If you connect, you then can meet up later. It's a new thing that all the kids are doing."

**Not her.**

You couldn't learn jack shit about someone in two minutes. That's how long it took to run a background check—which she'd be doing in a case like that.

And this was why people were victims of serial killers. They did shit that put them in danger.

Give her a gun, a security system, and paranoia any damn day of the week.

She glanced over at the women, not only curious about the dead woman, but wanting to see if they maybe could be a potential victim, or two.

“Did you guys participate?”

The two women shook their heads.

“No,” stated Randa. “I’m married, and that would definitely piss off my husband.”

As it should.

When Elizabeth focused on her friend, Reba also shook her head.

“I have a boyfriend, but we stayed while Gloria did it. She had fun, and when it was over, we headed out. She came back to my place, and we watched a movie.”

Charlie was making a timeline.

“Okay, and then what?”

“She drove back to the hotel, and in the morning when we showed up to pick her up to go to breakfast, the cops were there. She wasn’t answering her phone, and then...”

Remington explained for Reba.

“The phone in the woman’s room began ringing, and I answered it.”

Elizabeth had a timeline.

And some interesting information to follow-up on.

She had two nurses, a woman who either hit up yoga or got a drink, and now a *‘speed dater’*.

Now, she had another mystery.

What the hell happened between coming back from watching a movie and taking a header off the balcony onto the concrete pavement below?

Did someone she met during her dating fun wait for her and help her out? By someone, she meant Teddy.

**Interesting.**

It looked like that was what she needed to find out.

It was time to dig.



“And no one was bothering you at the speed dating thing?” she asked. “Other than the men participating, did anyone approach Gloria or you guys?”

They shook their heads.

“No, we had a couple drinks there, some burgers, and we left. Gloria told us she was going back to bed, and then...”

They were wiping their eyes.

Yeah, she could see why.

What had happened to Gloria was horrible.

“Did Gloria have a boyfriend back home?” she asked, going there. “Speaking of that, where was back home?” Elizabeth added.

Yeah, this was why she liked an update with her ME first. She was going into these interviews blind, and that was never good for her.

Or the victims.

The one friend answered.

“She lives in Pennsylvania,” Reba stated, not realizing she was still using the present and not the past. “And yes, she did,” she admitted.

Well, that was off.

“But she was participating in speed dating?” she asked. “So, she was cheating on her boyfriend?”

While that might have sounded like she was judging, she wasn’t. She was taking potential suspects and ramming them at the case in her head.

Boyfriends get angry when their girlfriends cheated.

It sent up red flags all over the place.

The other girl defended her.

“It wasn’t like that. Gloria wanted to move here, but her boyfriend doesn’t like West Virginia. So, she was seeing if there was anything here that she might like. She didn’t connect and she was over it.”

Yeah, but it was still all kinds of possible that it was going to be part of why she’d died. While they thought she took a fall, they knew it was Teddy.

Was her current boyfriend Teddy Clarkson?

They didn’t have intel that he had a life in Pennsylvania, but the two states were side-by-side.

She had to keep that in consideration.

Elizabeth reassured them.

“Okay, well, I’m not here to judge her. I have to ask the questions to find out what happened.”

The women looked confused.

“She fell. We were drinking, she had some pot, and shit happens,” Randa offered. “We shouldn’t have let her leave.”

Probably not, considering.

“Maybe,” she stated. “Only, we don’t know what happened, and that’s why I’m here,” she admitted. “Let me do my job.”

The girls seemed to be reassured by her words.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” Reba stated. “She was a good, kind teacher who loved everyone.”

“Me either. Gloria was a good person. I feel responsible because we were drinking,” Randa offered. “She only had two drinks hours before. She wasn’t that tipsy. I think the pot was a really bad idea.”

Well, yeah.

And illegal.

Yeah, well, if this was Teddy, tipsy wouldn’t matter. He was a violent asshole.

**Clearly.**

Elizabeth knew there was nothing more she could get from them. They didn’t know their friend was raped and dumped over the side of the balcony, so it was best to stop now.

She couldn’t have it leak.

“Okay, ladies, you’re free,” she said, letting them go before someone slipped.

The two women got up, and they headed out. When the door closed, she leaned back in the chair.

“Well, this is puzzling,” the sheriff stated.

“What do a teacher and two nurses have in common?” she asked.

“Not much,” he stated, “when one of them wasn’t even from this state.”

She was aware.

“What are you thinking, Baby Girl?” Charlie asked, knowing that this was going to be damn difficult.

She glanced over.

“That I need more information on the victims. That means I only have one place to go.”

“Christopher?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I want to talk to my ME,” she stated. “Then, I have a lunch date. I was planning on meeting someone for a burger in that bar, so that’s what I’ll do since I’m beyond curious about speed dating.”

Remington couldn’t help himself.

“Dating, huh?”

She laughed.

The only man she wanted to date was the man she was currently tied to for the rest of her life.

She was a lucky girl.

“Need help?” Remington asked.

Charlie glared at him.

Elizabeth wasn’t worried. The spook knew everything about her, but she’d cut Charlie off at the pass.

“I’m good on that front, but I could use some help.”

Remington had no choice.

He really needed to get the FBI out of the town. He wouldn’t be recruited unless the Feds were gone. No terrorist was going to risk it.

Her case was compromising his.

“Uh, okay, what would you like me to do?” he asked.

She knew she was out of time for much more legwork, so why not use the spook.

He was, technically, using her to clean up a mess.

“Well, since you’re the *‘sheriff’* in this town, why don’t you go do the initial interview at the hospital for the newest victim? You already talked to them about Jana.”

He was good with that.

It would keep his cover, and that was the bottom line.

“I have limited time, and I’m three victims in. If you can interview, and see what comes up, I can go there. If you find anything that connects the two women, let me know. I’ll free up my schedule to talk to them.”

He understood.

“Can I join you at the morgue for your update since I’m going to be helping out?” he asked. “Oh, and you’re welcome.”

Charlie stared at him.

“Do you realize she’s saving your bacon?” he asked.

The man laughed.

“Yeah, I do, but she’s also making it harder for me to do my job.”

He stared blankly at the man.

“What’s he talking about?” Charlie asked his daughter.

She made a circular sign by her temple, signaling the man was nuts.

Remington relaxed.

It was clear she didn’t tell her own father about his undercover status.

That meant he was in.

“I’m not crazy, LaRue.”

She snorted.

Oh, he was worse than crazy.

He was a spook.

“Anyway,” she began, “you can be there,” she offered, not bothered by that at all.

She knew they were all trapped in this circle jerk together. It couldn’t be any Fed for themselves.

Besides, Remington wasn’t as big an asshole as she’d assumed that he’d be. He appeared to be good at his job—as a spook—since no one was any the wiser.

That was always welcomed.

“I’m going to pop into the morgue and surprise a scrub-wearing ME. I need to harass him to get some details.”

Charlie laughed.

“That poor man. You just can’t leave him alone.”

She grinned.

Hell, no, she couldn’t.

He was as sexy as sin, and her partner in this crazy-ass journey.

They were stuck with each other.

Thankfully.

***Damascus  
Early Morning  
Shift***

Callen Whitefox was ready to start his day as a deputy for the reservation police.

The shit brown uniform, beatdown body armor, and annoyance of sitting in a parked car for twelve hours were affecting him.

He was bitchy.

He began each shift in the same, cranky mood, and it was proving to be one more day he needed to get through.

His ankle ached from his injury on the job, and he wouldn't even take a damn aspirin.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

There was no one to call if he found himself addicted to OTC meds.

So, it was suffer and be angry.

He was so freaking miserable on patrol, but what was he supposed to do?

He needed to eat.

He liked having electricity.

After his run-in with Kaya Cheek, his grandfather was hovering, not letting him stick his dick in **ANYONE**.

*Not Natives.*

*Not white women.*

*Oh, and barely his own palm.*

He lurked and jumped out at the oddest times, making sure he wasn't trying to get laid.

That wasn't helping his mood either.

Couldn't a man jerk off on his own couch, fantasizing about the sexy woman of his dreams?

Apparently, not.

*Why?*

**Hint.**

She wasn't Native.

Granted, the man had given him some hope that there would be a light at the end of the tunnel, but he was pretty sure it would be an oncoming Native mess.

Call it a fact of Callen's life.

Still, he was trying to be positive. All Callen needed was for life to start to go his way.

**Desperately.**

So, as he got into his beat-up truck and headed the five miles down the road to work, he tried to be happy.

**TRIED** being the operative word.

Once there, he greeted the nightshift deputy and was given some interesting news.

"Whitefox, the boss wants to see you," James Thunderstone said.

Uh-oh.

That couldn't be good.

"Why? What went wrong?" he asked, rethinking his last shift, and it had been pretty slow.

The man shrugged.

"No clue. He asked me to tell you to head into his office first thing before you headed out."

**Perfect.**

He was likely getting his ass shit-canned thanks to that asshole on the council. Yes, he was the reason his nephew took his life, but so was alcohol and a domestic.

It appeared his big fears were coming true.

Up to that point, the man had left him alone.

Well, it was a nice run.

Losing his only source of income would be the icing on this cupcake. It looked like it was time to be a starving writer and start doing his hobby full-time.

It was scary.

No money was a problem.

Yeah, Callen was fucked seven ways to Sunday if he was jobless. He'd have to go off reservation to find work or pray his writing was good enough to get him a little bit of money.

This place was an employment wasteland.

If he worked in a bar, he'd be faced with Kaya and booze all day long. Then, he'd slip down that slide right into more addiction and trouble.

He prayed to the Great Spirit.

**AGAIN.**

Maybe this time, he'd answer.

*Please don't let me lose my job. It's all I have left.*

Then, he headed into the office.

When he knocked on his boss's door, the man looked up at him. William Whitefeather was a good boss.

*He was patient.*

*He was calm.*

*He was also a friend of Timothy's.*

**Thank.**

**The.**

**Universe.**

It was likely the only reason he had gotten this job and was given a chance. Timothy had the most pull on the reservation, and no one disrespected the Shaman.

Or said no.

He was loved.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked his boss, nervously. It took him back to his childhood when he would be in the principal's office, and the man would ask about his home life.

Even then, people knew he was abused, starving, and in danger—but the white principal turned his head and let it slide.

His boss pointed at the chair.

"Have a seat, Son. I need to talk to you."

He did.

Then, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"I didn't do anything," Callen began. "Please don't fire me. I need my job. It's how I help Timothy!"

The man laughed.

Of course, he went there. It was rare for William Whitefeather to call anyone in.

He reassured him.

“Callen, I’m not firing you.”

“Then what did you need to see me about? Did someone complain?”

He shook his head.

“No, I’m retiring.”

Callen’s eyes went huge.

**WHHHAAATTTT?**

That was unexpected. William wasn’t that old. He was in his fifties. Apparently, he was over babysitting.

“You are?”

William nodded.

“I have to find my replacement in the next year, and I was hoping to talk to you. Callen, I see so much potential in you. You’re calm, you can talk people down, and you’re not afraid to do your job.”

Callen looked around.

**Again, WHHHAAATTTT?**

“Uh, and what does this have to do with me?” he asked, afraid to get his hopes up. He wanted to move up the ladder, but he didn’t believe it would happen this fast.

Every time he got his hopes up, he fell hard. Honestly, he wasn’t sure that he could take much more.

Callen was still hurt over the Ethan mess.

William Whitefeather explained.

“I want you to replace me. You’re my choice to be chief of reservation police. When I feel that you’re ready, in the next year or two, I’ll step down, and she’s yours to run.”

His eyes were huge.

**Holy.**

**SHIT.**

“What? Really?”

The man nodded.

“For the next months, I want you to work beside me, and I’m going to teach you everything I know. It’s going to be a lot, but I know you can do it. Then, when my retirement comes up, the job is yours.”

He couldn’t believe this.



“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll take it. There’s a raise involved that will help you out substantially.”

That was all he had to say.

It looked like writing was on the back burner.

**For now.**

One day he’d take it back up again to fulfill his dreams.

“I’ll take it.”

Fuck everything else.

Money was king on the rez. Even if it was ten cents more, that was four dollars more a week. That bought food and Callen liked to eat.

The man laughed.

“Good. You’re perfect for this job. It’ll take you a while to get accustomed to it, but you’re fair, honest, and you don’t let your father get away with anything.”

It took him a second.

“Oh, you mean Wyler. Well, no, he’s an asshole, so no, I don’t let him get away with shit. Timothy...I’d cover for him anytime.”

The man laughed.

“Son, you and everyone on this reservation. He’s a national treasure—or should be. The man can see everything in the smoke, and he’s a blessing to our tribe.”

He laughed.

Well, suddenly, there was no stress. Callen felt a million times better.

He’d wanted to apply for this job when William left, but he’d never expected it to go this well.

This was a freaking miracle.

Only, Callen wanted to know.

His father, Timothy, had told him that good things were coming. He’d seen it in the smoke, so this must have been it.

*Then again...*

Had granddad played around with this, helping him get this job?

“Is this the Shaman’s doing?” he asked. “Please be honest, William. I want to do things on my own. Everyone already thinks that he takes care of me. I’m a grown man.”

He reassured him.

“Son, Timothy is my friend, and I love him dearly. Only, he’s not my boss. I don’t answer to him. Had he come to me and told me to give you this position, I would have done the opposite. He has his thing, and I have mine. I’m the law here. I need an honest Native who won’t let this place to go hell.”

He felt even better.

“And I earned it?”

He nodded.

“You never call off. Other than after you were shot, you always show up for work, people respect you, and you do the job. That’s what I’m looking for. You can teach anyone to do my job, but you can’t teach someone respect and honesty. They either have it or they don’t.”

Callen smiled.

It was the first legit one in **WEEKS**.

“Like I said, I’ll take it,” he stated.

The man wrote the salary down, and he slid it toward him.

“It’s not hourly. It’s salary. Is this going to be acceptable?” he asked.

Callen stared at it.

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

It was double what he made. He could buy a new truck—afford the payments, and then give Timothy the rest.

Again, money was key.

Callen had been poor his whole life, and with that kind of money, he would have a cushion. He could buy name-brand food at the store, instead of generic.

No, it didn’t taste the same.

It would give him a better reputation—other than being the Blackhawk bastard.

Ethan’s backup Native.

Timothy’s shameful grandson.

He’d be the law, and he’d be respected—as much as he could be.

“As I’ve already said, you had me at raise. I’m in.”

The man smiled.

Yeah, he wasn’t shocked.

Also, William knew he was picking the right man.

“Then, let’s get you off of patrol, and get you started with learning my job. Most of it is paperwork. That’s going to take you a good year to get down. I’ll start by showing you, then we’ll move to you doing it under my tutelage, and then on your own.”

He could do that.

**Easily.**

Callen was smart, or Timothy had always said he was. Now, it was time to prove it.

He was moving on up.

**Finally.**

“Once I feel you’re ready, I can turn in my gun and be done.”

Callen couldn’t believe this.

His life had been shit for so long, and now, he saw the chance to get out from under the misery.

This could open so many doors.

This could take care of his grandfather.

In that moment, Callen Whitefox had hope.

And for him, it put him on an entirely different path, and that changed everything.

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## *Chapter Six*

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*Hotel  
Axelle George's  
Room  
Thursday  
Late Morning*

**A**s Axelle was working on two laptops, trying to find the money, Jack was watching her. As of late, she was pulling away. He could feel it whenever they were together. He honestly hoped they weren't heading for some battle.

Truthfully, he was waiting for her to demand a relationship with him.

The scary part was, he'd give it to her.

If she asked, he'd bend.

**In.**

**A.**

**Heartbeat.**

Jack knew what he wanted, but he also loved her. Axelle had gotten past his defenses, and she'd built a little nook in his heart, and that scared him.

**Deeply.**

For her, he'd do anything.

Basically, it meant that she had the potential to destroy his world and ruin his career aspirations.

With the last case, the commissioner knew his name, and Captain Delgatto was running scared.

Next stop, he was going to be captain.

He would bet on it.

Now, he was worried about Axelle and what she'd want from him. Would he grow to resent her?

That broke his heart.

How could it not?

“Hey,” he said, getting her attention as he sat on the bed, working on some things of his own.

He was trying to find Teddy Clarkson by some miracle as she chased ten million dollars.

She glanced up.

It was hard to work with him near, simply because she knew that the end was coming.

Her gut told her so.

Axelle wanted to love him, but she knew that she would never have his whole heart back.

Jack loved his job.

She was important to him, but she knew that if it came down to it, he’d choose his career over her.

She wanted a life.

**A family.**

While she didn’t want kids, she wanted a husband to come home to who loved her for all of her, and maybe a dog or cat.

**For.**

**Now.**

She wanted a good man like Jack, but one who could walk away from work. He took calls at all hours, like her, and she knew that when she could stop doing that, she’d found the one.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Are we okay?” he asked. “You feel off.”

She stared at him.

“I’m good,” she said, her heart breaking even as she said the words.

She was crazy about him and in love.

She would do anything for Jack, and because of that, she’d let him go.

She’d let him have his career because it was his first love.

*Maybe she fell too easily.*

*Maybe she was needy.*

All Axelle knew was she couldn’t force him to love her like she loved him.

“Why?” she asked.

“I just get this feeling like you want to say something to me,” he added.

Oh, she did.

“Like?”

“The relationship question,” he said, going there. It was a risk, but for her, he’d do it.

As soon as he said it, he regretted it.

It hung there.

Maybe, he was curious as to what she’d do.

Maybe, he wanted her to claim him as hers and give him the easy way out.

He wasn’t sure.

Finally, she broke her silence.

“I’m not going there,” she finally said.

He was curious as to why not.

Every other woman he’d slept with more than three times went there. They asked where their relationship was going, and when they were going to be serious.

*Then...*

He ran.

That was the mood killer for him. It literally killed erections and sexual appetite.

Just not with her, and he knew that fate was putting a split path in front of him. They had to decide. His gut was telling him this mattered.

*As for her...*

Axelle was different than the rest.

He’d thought about how he could fit her into his world, and honestly, she wouldn’t be a bad fit. They worked well together in and out of bed.

**Many.**

**Many.**

**Times.**

“Well, we both really love our jobs,” she said, knowing that was bullshit.

She’d give hers up for love.

He wouldn’t.

“While I love you, Jack, and I won’t pretend, I’m a realist. I know that you want to be commissioner, and I want to move up the ladder too.”

His heart raced.

“So, no relationship talk?”

She shook her head.

Then, she said the hardest thing she’d ever had to say in her whole life.

“You are free to move on if that’s what you’re thinking is best for you and your career plans. I won’t hold it against you, and I won’t hate you.”

He didn’t like that.

He didn’t want to move on, and that was the big issue. He liked having her, and he loved his career.

He was confused.

**Big-time.**

“Well, I’m happy as is. Are you?” he asked, holding his breath.

When she didn’t reply, he moved closer.

**Yep.**

She wasn’t.

This was why he was getting that gut feeling that it was about to go south.

“Ax, talk to me.”

She did.

“I’m happy for now, Jack, but at some point, I’m going to have to leave. I’m going to want all.”

He sat beside her on the bed.

Honestly, would it be that bad?

He wasn’t sure.

“When?” he asked.

She touched his face with absolute love and tenderness that he’d come to crave from her.

She was an amazing woman.

He loved her.

Axelle was honest.

“I love you so much,” she said, being open with him. “You’re an amazing man, and I could be happy in this forever if I knew that it was a relationship. I know that we can’t have that.”

He felt ill.

*Why?*

Because he was happy and sad. She was the first and only woman who ever gave him this without an ultimatum. She was different.

She understood.

Here was his Axelle.

And she'd always be that.

For her, he'd come running and do whatever it took to make her happy. She was special, and he was blessed to have met her.

"I love you too," he stated, touching her cheek with his much bigger hand. "I don't want you to think I don't, Ax. I really do. If you asked me for more, I'd give it to you."

She was aware.

Only, he wouldn't be happy.

If she took more, they would end at some point, and that would destroy what they had.

She knew it.

"That's why I won't ask," she stated. "And I hope when I come to you one day, and I tell you I'm moving on, you won't ask me to stay."

He leaned his forehead against hers.

**God.**

This was so damn hard.

That day would hurt so much. It would kill a piece of his heart, and he knew it.

Only, he did love her.

**So.**

**Damn.**

**Much.**

"Baby, I won't ask. I'll want to, but I'll give you that because you've always given me what I've wanted. I'll hurt that day. Please look past the smile and know that when I lose you to someone who deserves you more, I'll ache."

A tear slipped.

She might be the Red Queen and tough on the outside, but with Jack, she was always herself.

"I'll know. Please know that I had no choice but to move on so I can live."

He kissed her softly on the lips.

"You are my best friend, and I will give you whatever you need."



She believed him.

“Thank you, Jack.”

“Jill, if you ever need me when we aren’t together, you know you can call, right?”

She nodded as he wiped that tear.

“I’m sorry I’m broken inside,” Jack said. “I’m sorry that I can’t give you all of me and not have it be a mess. I would if I could, Ax. We’re at that crossroad, and I feel big things coming.”

She understood.

She gave him another soft kiss.

He was a damn good guy. If she could find one just like him, who loved her, respected her, and would give her his heart, she knew she’d be safe.

There had to be someone out there for her.

*Right?*

There had to be someone who would love her.

This couldn’t be all there was.

“I don’t hate you for that, Jack. Maybe there are people out there for us and we’ll find them.”

He gave her a promise.

“If we get into our forties and fifties, and there’s no one, want to find me again? I’ll marry you and get old with you, Axelle. I just need to get to the top, and I’ll be ready.”

**God.**

That sounded so sad.

Only, she knew he was a good man to grow old with, even if she saw that stranger in her dreams and was curious.

She could hold out.

Either way.

She stared into his eyes.

“Okay, Jack. If we get there, we’ll get old together.”

“I love you, Axelle. I’m sorry.”

Yeah, well, so was she.

*Being alone...*

It sucked.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

***Town Morgue  
Sheriff's Department  
Basement  
Noon***

When the love of his life strolled into the morgue with her beat-up boots, jeans, and blazer, his heart skipped in his chest. She was gorgeous when she worked, and Chris loved just staring at her.

How could he not?

She owned his heart.

Unfortunately for him, she wasn't there to just say '*hi*'.

It looked like she was going to bug him for information first, and then they'd get something to eat.

Honestly, Chris wasn't really shocked she'd shown up. There was no way that he was going to get his autopsy done before Elizabeth came to harass him.

**No.**

**Freaking.**

**Way.**

If anything, he knew his woman, and she had a pattern. Going out to do interviews without having her autopsy details...

Not her thing.

What rubbed him the wrong freaking way was that she was **NOT** alone. She had a tail, and he was inches from her. The '*sheriff*' was checking out her ass.

He could tell.

Chris was a man, and he could tell when another one was sniffing around what was his. What really made him cranky was that he knew he was CIA.

That made it worse.

The dude knew that she was taken—because the CIA knew everything—and still, here he was watching her ass in those jeans. Oh, well, not in his workspace.

**Screw that.**

Chris wasn't going to be disrespected by another Fed as he dug in a body.

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

*What did he have to do?*

Tattoo his name on her forehead?

Chris had put a ring on her finger, and it was still there, so this should be a no-brainer. While he got that men liked to admire women, this one was off the eligibility list.

He'd hung some baubles around her neck, and she wore them all of the time.

Honestly, now he understood why animals pissed on things to mark their territory.

Covering his irritation at the CIA spook, he smiled at his girl.

“Well, surprise. I guess it's update time, team. Be ready. Agent LaRue looks like she's about to be rough.”

She winked at him.

Oh, she liked it rough all right, but not when she was working. Later, she'd play those kinky games with this sexy man. Her heart skipped the second she heard his voice.

It was like they were made to be together.

“Oh, I just stopped in to see if you guys needed anything, but if you're up for it, how about COD?”

He laughed, and so did Sam.

There were a few consistent things in life.

*Taxes sucked.*

*Everyone died.*

*And Elizabeth was going to get COD no matter what.*

This was her normal thing, and this time, he didn't even fight it. He wanted a break after this autopsy so he could spend some time with his woman.

Especially now that the spook was up in her space.

Well, Chris' space.

The sexy FBI agent was all his.

Chris was three days past sexually frustrated.

*Why?*

It had been a long couple of weeks without just having her all to himself. While he didn't mind sharing with Charlie and Sam, he missed their alone time.

**God.**

What had he done inviting Charlie and Sam on that cruise? He could have had her all to himself.

**Yep.**

He was an idiot for being nice.

What wouldn't he do for his family?

**Clearly, a lot.**

Chris focused on her and not the spook behind her. The faux sheriff was making his blood pressure go up.

"Well, then buckle up, Agent. Let's see what I can give you," he said, pulling off his gloves and grabbing the files that the town coroner had left for him.

He needed to do his job so she could do hers. They were tied to each other.

She hopped onto a table, and the sheriff was practically on top of her. It appeared that the CIA agent was testing his boundaries.

She saw that look from Chris, and she knew how territorial he was. Someone was going to get hurt. Chris had scalpels not far away, and Remington was in for a shock. He'd fight dirty if need be.

Don't mess with an ME.

**Ever.**

"Hit me with it, Newton," she said, inflecting all that warmth into her voice. She wanted him to know how much she was looking forward to their *'date'*.

He focused on her and that delicious melody of her voice. That was their secret name when there was sex in the future.

She called him that when Elizabeth was thinking about him in a not-so-ME kind of a way.

That sent a cascade of warmth through his body.

He'd be her sexy scientist any damn day.

Chris updated her using what the town ME had, and what they'd had time to compile.

It was time to begin.

"Well, victim one, Gloria Beake, had been alive as she fell from that balcony. She was breathing at the time of impact."

She figured as much.

You didn't toss a body off a balcony unless it was to kill someone. It would have been easier to leave a dead body in the room. It would have bought Teddy time.

Someone had anger issues.

Good to know.

From beside her, Remington lifted a brow.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

Chris tried not to let it bother him.

**Really.**

Cops questioned him all of the time. That this cop was a CIA operative, and that he likely knew everything about him and Elizabeth...

It annoyed him.

Chris was blunt.

There was no love lost there.

"Because her COD is literally because of hitting the ground. She had massive organ failure and internal hemorrhaging. Unless she was hit by a bus in her room..."

The man laughed.

"Someone is feisty. Is he always like this?" Remington asked.

"Yes, he really is. Don't break him. I like him exactly this way. It's how we work so well together."

Chris was focused on her and ignoring the other man.

Charlie came to his rescue.

"Sheriff, how about you park your car further from my baby girl," he stated. "You're breathing on her. That makes me cranky."

The man raised his hands and slid three feet down the table.

"Better?"

“Yep.”

Charlie winked at his son-in-law, of sorts.

“Carry on, Christopher,” he stated.

The man did.

Later, he was going to kiss the man. Screw what he’d been thinking. Charlie deserved that cruise for what he’d just done to help him out.

It was obvious that he wasn’t the only one seeing the man getting a little too close.

She continued working.

“Okay, so we know he tossed her over the side, and I’m going to say it was due to rage.”

Remington was curious.

Since he was helping out, he wanted to understand how she was seeing it. He didn’t solve shit for a living.

He was a mole.

“How do you know that?”

She stared at him.

“You need to get out in the field more and detect,” she stated. “If he killed her in the room, he could have just left her there. It would have been easier for him. So, I’m postulating that in a rage, he tossed her.”

He winked at her.

“Thanks for clearing that up.”

Elizabeth focused on Chris.

“What else do we know?”

He shared.

“She was raped before she was tossed. I found semen and tears to her vaginal wall. He was rough, and he was vicious. That might be where the rage came in.”

She agreed there.

Charlie was focused on what he was hearing, and something stood out to him.

“Okay, we have semen, and we have DNA from Kitty. Have we compared it?” he asked. “You know, just to be sure?”

Chris nodded.

He pulled a paper from the one file.

“I made sure to have the samples checked against Kitty and the three victims.”

She was curious.

“And?”

“The FBI was right. It’s Teddy who is doing this. You don’t have to worry that it’s not. He’s here, he’s out of his nut, and he’s leaving bodies all over.”

She knew he’d check the system against unsolved cases.

“How many to his name?” she asked.

He pulled out a sheet.

“It seems that he’s prolific, and in this case, it’s not a good thing. We have fifteen other victims in this state. This is the first time he’s hit three in the same town. He moves around a lot.”

She wasn’t shocked.

“Timeline between them?”

He walked over to her and handed Elizabeth the paper.

She studied it.

“Days to weeks. He’s random.”

Chris nodded.

“Yes, he is. It appears he’s found a town he likes, and he’s having a field day here.”

**Great.**

Elizabeth still didn’t know how he was finding the women. There was the hospital, and there was Gloria possibly finding a man on her way back to the hotel.

She didn’t have anything on the speed dating thing, yet.

She handed the paper back to him.

“Okay, well, this makes it easier in a way. We know that we have Teddy, so nothing is going to jump up and bite me in the ass. No copycat here.”

Chris reassured her.

“No, Elizabeth, it’s correct. It’s him. You’re focused on the right guy, and now all you need is his face.”

She was aware.

Well, that made her life easier. Well, easier in a ‘*chasing someone who came from a family of nuts and not having their face*’ kind of easy.

It was just another day in her world.

“Well, so the hunt continues for Teddy Clarkson. What else can you tell me?” she asked.

Chris focused on the papers.

“Your first victim, Gloria, had some booze in her system, and she was also smoking marijuana at some point.”

She was aware.

Her friends Reba and Randa said as much.

She focused on Chris. Elizabeth wanted whatever else he could give her.

It was vital.

“And TOD according to the coroner?” she asked, hoping he didn’t put up a fight, so she added a little more to take the pressure off of him. “I know you’ll confirm, but for now, let’s go with what we have?”

He was fine with that.

At that very moment, Sam was working on just that.

Chris broke it down.

“The town ME puts her time of death at around one in the morning on Saturday. That’s when he’s calling it.”

Charlie knew the boy.

He’d seen him work a lot over the last year.

If he didn’t buy that, he wouldn’t have given it to Elizabeth, but he wanted to make sure.

“Do you concur with his findings, Christopher?” Charlie asked.

He didn’t hesitate.

“The math looks right, and Sam did tissue samples. You can ask him.”

She did.

“Mom, what’s the deal?”

“Christopher is absolutely correct, and so is the town ME. She took her last breath around one in the morning—give or take a few minutes. She was outside in the elements when she was found, so that alters it a bit.”

She took that into consideration.

“Yes, it was chilly out,” Remington said.

Okay, so she had a timeline and it actually matched up with the one in her head.

**Perfect.**

“How about victim number two, Newton?” she asked, trying to get this all done so she could head back out to the field. While she had a sexy date with her ME, she also wanted to talk to the hotel employees.



She could multitask.

Chris shuffled his files, getting them in order. When he opened the correct one, he began giving her what he could.

“You have a positive ID on both of the first two victims, according to the coroner,” he stated.

She hoped there was more.

When Tony rolled over on his stool, he stopped at her swinging feet.

“Before you say anything, Elizabeth, because we know you, I’m working on double-checking their IDs against dentals.”

She laughed.

Apparently, she had a pattern.

And they said you couldn’t train geniuses.

They were wrong.

“And?” she asked.

He continued.

“They match, so it does, indeed, seem that you have Gloria Beake and Jana Katz. I know it’s imperative that we move quickly.”

Oh, he was right there.

Never let it be said Tony missed the important things. So much rode on this.

*Lives.*

*Her career.*

There was no way she was letting the Director of the FBI take her down with a case.

She could do bad all by herself. Elizabeth didn’t need assistance with it.

Tony continued.

“We have dentals coming in for the final victim, even though her mother gave the ID on the scene. You know how Chris likes everything checked and double-checked so there are no shocks.”

Thank God for him and an efficient team.

“Thanks, Tony,” she stated.

She noticed that he was staring at the sheriff.

*What the hell?*

“Anthony, this is Remington, Remington, this is Anthony. Okay, now, next?” she asked, hurrying it along.

“Uh, tech?” Remington asked, playing along. He was in the role of bumbling sheriff, so why not have fun with it.

Tony sputtered.

“**WHAT?**” he asked.

It made her laugh.

How could it not?

She clarified before her bug man had a stroke.

“Actually, Remington,” she began, knowing he was messing with the man. Axelle did the same thing. It took a special kind of sadistic to be a spook.

Oh, and he was.

She could tell.

“This is Doctor Anthony Magnus, and he’s my forensic anthropologist.”

“Bug?” Tony asked the man as he juggled a bag of flavored beetles. He didn’t like the man.

They were very protective of Elizabeth since she was in love with his bestie. This guy rubbed him the wrong way.

“What kind now, Anthony?” she asked.

“Salt and vinegar.”

The sheriff looked appalled, and she didn’t believe he was faking that. Most people were grossed out by it.

“I am still working on the salt to vinegar ratio. It’s not like I can look it up in a cookbook—that I know.”

The look on Remington’s face...

It was priceless.

Don’t let it be said that the CIA knew everything.

**They.**

**Did.**

**Not.**

She knew what he was thinking.

“You get accustomed to it,” she stated. It had taken her a while too, but now, she was good. “Put the bugs away, Anthony. You’re freaking out the people in town.”

Listening to her, he did.

Oh, he was glad the man was creeped out. No one poached his best buddy’s girl.

She was theirs.

To keep this moving, she distracted him.

“Now, be a good bug man and go get the beetles ready for the bodies.”

That was all Tony had to hear.

He rolled away with a grin on his face as he happily munched some bugs. She didn't say a word because there was no point.

You couldn't corral the crazy. You just had to let it run wild when it needed to.

Remington shook his head.

“The FBI hires unusual people.”

“You think?” she asked.

Not far away, the love of her life stood, he was eyeing up the man with that look.

Chris was easy to read.

He wanted to do an autopsy on the man.

**While alive.**

Trouble was brewing.

“I love my team just the way they are,” she said, glad that Chris was managing to keep his mouth shut. They were going to have to revisit the ‘*you have nothing to worry about*’ conversation, again.

She'd bet on it.

Chris focused on the file.

“As I was saying, victim number two, Jana Katz, was found tied to her couch,” he said, showing Elizabeth the pictures that the coroner had put in the file.

*It was brutal.*

*It was sickening.*

*It was the perfect picture to describe Teddy Clarkson.*

“She, too, was raped postmortem.”

Charlie made gagging sounds.

“That's six days past sick,” he stated. “What the hell is wrong with that man?”

That was a no-brainer.

“Uh, he's a serial killer, Dad. That pretty much says it all. He and his sisters killed their own mother. This is the least shocking thing in this whole clusterfuck.”

Charlie agreed there.

“You get the winners, Baby Girl.”

Oh, she was aware.

When she gave him the nod, Chris continued.

“COD is strangulation. He choked her out,” he stated. “There were bruises on her neck, according to the pictures. Then, he positioned her on the couch, spread her like that, and raped her.”

**Yep.**

**Sick.**

“The other coroner documented the petechial hemorrhages in her eyes and inside in her lungs.”

She sighed.

They had to catch Teddy and fast.

*What wouldn't she give for a photo?*

Oh, and the US Marshals to help her chase him down?

Chris shook his head.

“He played with her, Elizabeth. With the vast number of broken capillaries in her lungs, he kept bringing her back, then choking her out, and bringing her back again.”

**Lordy.**

He was sick.

She rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“I hate the people who stuck me with this nightmare. I swear the FBI is a bunch of douchebags.”

Remington laughed.

“Comment, **SHERIFF?**”

He held his hands up in surrender. It wasn't his fault that the CIA and FBI went head-to-head and disliked each other.

He didn't start or propagate that battle.

Chris wasn't exactly fond of Teddy Clarkson. He was definitely a sicko, and, more often than not, they tended to fixate on Elizabeth.

**Unfortunately.**

“What is her TOD?” she asked.

“It's around eleven at night on Monday. The coroner is again, pretty close. I won't be re-autopsying the first victim. All the samples are already sent out, and Sam is doing a once-over. The town ME moved fast. As for this one, I will recheck Jana over.”

She understood.

That meant that by shuffling his work, Chris would be sleeping beside her tonight.

**Thank.**

**God.**

“Okay, and what about our final victim?” she asked, moving this along. The timeline was falling into place, and she had to hustle. “What do you have as COD?”

Chris put the folders down and pulled on gloves. Elizabeth followed him over to the body because it appeared that he was going to show her.

When the sheriff didn’t move from his spot, she glanced over. Oh, she knew why, but if Remington was going to poke the FBI team, she was going to reciprocate with doing the same to a spook.

Call it sharing.

And it was caring.

“Uh, don’t you want to see what he’s going to show us?” she asked, almost daring him. “What’s wrong, Remington? Don’t you like the inside of a dead body?”

The man shook his head.

“That you do is all kinds of weird, LaRue. That’s all I’m saying.”

She smiled.

That small victory was hers.

Instead of him, Charlie headed over. He didn’t hesitate to look into the dead woman as Chris showed them what he needed them to see.

“I’m in,” Charlie stated. “If you’ve seen one autopsy, you’d seen them all.”

Wasn’t that the truth?

From beside Chris, while no one could see her hands, she groped her sexy ME.

His breathing hitched as she groped his dick through his scrubs. Immediately, he got hard.

She was so close to him that he could smell her perfume—the one that he’d gotten her in Paris. It made his body react, and he couldn’t wait to have lunch with her.

Someone missed his girl.

“Go ahead, Christopher,” she said, softly, despite her father standing there. “Show me what you got.”

Oh, he'd love to, but since they had a room full of people, he'd just think about work.

**Or try.**

Chris moved back the flap of skin of the Y-incision to show her the woman's lungs.

"Again, look at the petechial hemorrhaging. He cut off her oxygen and played with her. That's incredibly sadistic. It's not fun to play with people."

Oh, she disagreed as she ran her hand across his ass as she leaned into the table to look.

He tensed as that pleasure washed over him.

**God.**

He loved his life.

Chris loved how no matter how stressful the situation, there was that constant need to touch each other.

It was amazing.

"And?" she asked as his arm brushed her body armor, and she didn't think it was accidental.

Oh, she wished she wasn't in her gear, and they were home. She was going to make this marathon up to him when they finally had time to be a couple and not Feds.

As if a picture was worth a thousand words, he opened her one eye, and it was blood red.

Yowza.

He wasn't kidding on the asphyxiation. It looked like her eyeballs had filled with blood.

"See?" he asked.

Yes, yes, she did.

There was nothing more to say about COD. It was time for her to move on.

"Okay, so TOD on this one is?" she asked.

"She died around the same time last night. It appears your killer is dropping a body every couple of days."

**Great.**

Well, if he kept that pattern, Teddy wouldn't likely kill anyone for another night. At least she'd have some time to catch up.

*Right?*

“How long until you’re done with this autopsy?” she asked, wanting to get to the hotel. She wanted to dump her gear, talk to a concierge, and get food in both of them.

Fueling up mattered.

Chris knew he needed to stitch her Y-incision up, get into street clothes, and he was good to go.

That he could do fast.

Faster if it meant lunch with his girl.

“All I need to do is sew her up, and she’s done. I’ll come back and work on the samples, that will need to be checked by the techs, after we check-in at the hotel.”

**Perfect.**

That meant lunch.

She was starving.

“Okay, well, I’ll wait for you.”

Remington liked busting ass, and he was pretty sure, after watching her, that he could do it with the Fed. They were stuck working together, so why not have some fun?

He played dumb.

Well, and to see if she’d invite him to lunch. The whole time here, the ME was shooting daggers at him. It appeared their intel was right.

Someone was hooking up with her ME.

**Interesting.**

“Oh, are you going somewhere?” he asked.

She stared at him.

Elizabeth was aware that they already had this conversation, and she suspected he was trying to rile her up.

Bad idea.

“Again, I want to drop my things at the hotel and grab something to eat. I work better when I’m fed, and I don’t tend to rip people’s faces off when I have food in me. **HINT. HINT.**”

On cue, the techs began snickering.

“**WHAT’S FUNNY?**” she asked, kicking the metal table and making them jump and scatter.

Chris laughed.

“Quick, someone throw a burger at her. She’s hangry,” he joked.

Oh, was he laughing?

She felt him up, and that filled her sweet tooth. There was nothing better than dessert first.

Chris fought that need to moan, as she cupped him through his scrubs. What wouldn't he give to be alone with her right now?

**God.**

He wanted her.

"I do like what I like," she said, and Elizabeth wasn't talking about food.

Oh, he did too.

Remington grinned.

"Want company?" he asked, and Chris nearly dropped the needle and length of nylon thread into the body.

"Uh, no," he said, answering for her.

Oh, well, Remington was pretty damn sure that he was right. Someone was banging Elizabeth. The man definitely was shooting dirty looks at him.

He backed off.

"Well, if you're going to head out and go to the hotel, I'm going to take a trip over to the hospital to see if I can connect the two women. Then, I'll call around to other sheriffs, like you asked, to see if they have any bodies that the FBI isn't aware of, piling up from these kinds of circumstances."

That worked for her.

"I'll find you and let you know," Remington stated.

Elizabeth appreciated that.

If she didn't delegate, they really had a conundrum. Kitty could be crying lawyer soon, and she'd get a phone call. There was no doubt who she'd be alerting.

Her siblings.

"Thanks," she stated.

Elizabeth knew that she also had to check-in with Axelle and Jack.

**AFTER** she took a break.

*A food break.*

*A man break.*

Elizabeth knew Chris needed some attention. As of late, Charlie and Sam had been all over their relationship. Later, if the sheriff found anything, she'd head to the hospital to dig more.



“Look for the chaos,” she stated. “That’s how you’ll find me,” she said, as the man saluted with his two fingers and walked out of the morgue.

That was one distraction down, and now it was time for the biggest one.

**Her man.**

Chris was stitching the woman up as quickly as he could. As she moved closer, now that the techs were distracted, she could smell his cologne.

The man always smelled delicious.

There was just something about how that scent called to her.

With eager fingers, she slipped her hand beneath his scrubs, and that kiss of chilly flesh to his body sent chills across his body.

“Bethe,” he muttered. “You’re very distracting.”

Oh, she knew.

There was something about him turned on and sporting an erection in his scrubs that made her crazy.

Sue her.

She couldn’t help it.

“Want me to stop sexually harassing you in the workplace?” she whispered.

**HELL.**

**NO.**

“Never stop,” he whispered. “Be bad. I love you that way,” he admitted.

Oh, and he really did.

He’d be lying if he said he didn’t like it.

**A.**

**Lot.**

When Charlie cleared his throat, she glanced up at him. Yeah, he’d caught her with her hand in the ME cookie jar.

**Again.**

“Okay, Baby Girl,” her father stated, admiring his own ME not far away. There was something sexy about Sam when he was holding a clipboard.

Okay, it was his ass.

Charlie was checking out his posterior. Who was he kidding?

“We’ll get a ride back with you so Sammy and I can check-in too. You know how he packs. We’ll be carrying luggage for hours.”

The man laughed.

It wasn’t a lie.

As for what her father was trying to sell, Elizabeth wasn’t buying it.

Her dad was giving his ME the eyes.

They were the same ones she gave Chris all of the time, and now that she was cognizant of their love affair, it was hard to miss it.

Yeah, it made her happy to know he was in love.

*Oh, and that she wasn’t getting a new mommy.*

No one really wanted that mess going down. Sam was perfect as the missing piece of her family.

As Chris put the last stitch in the woman, he called it an autopsy. There were things to do.

Mainly, flirt with Elizabeth.

He could survive without food, but if he didn’t put his mouth on Elizabeth, he was going to die.

As soon as Chris declared his completion, Tony rolled over, and he was ready.

“Can I put her in the beetles?” he asked. “I know you want to redo the middle autopsy.”

He nodded.

“Yeah, you can put Gloria and Carolyn in. Leave Jana out. As soon as I get back, I’ll recheck the coroner’s findings, and we can move that one along too. I have the samples for Jana and I’ll handle those too.”

Elizabeth was going to ruin some of her father’s fun.

“Want to join us for food, Dad?” she asked. When he didn’t reply, she said his name. “Charles, hello. Are you in there?” she asked.

He looked over, and it was clear that he was totally focused on Sam, and what would be going down at that hotel. Oh, thank you Jesus that she wasn’t a fly on that wall.

**Been there.**

**Done that.**

She was scarred after hearing her father use sexy talk. There was no way she was going to that rodeo again.

“Uh, no thank you, Elizabeth. I really want to help Sam unpack. It’s my duty to protect him from tumbling luggage. I’ll throw myself over him

to protect him.”

Oh, she bet.

Well, no ass busting here. Her old man would stroke out.

“Okay, Dad. Make sure you eat a salad,” she teased.

He blinked.

“Yeah, I will.”

And that was confirmation that the man had ME on the brain. She’d eat a salad too if it meant having hot sex with Chris.

**God.**

They were so much alike.

“I’ll meet you in Axelle’s room after you grab some sustenance, or whatever it is you plan on doing.”

Sam grinned, and she caught it.

**Yep.**

How the bloody hell had she missed all of this?

It was crystal clear now that not only were they a couple, but that they had a deep love.

**Lordy.**

LaRues really dug MEs.

**Clearly.**

“On second thought,” he said, wanting to get out of there immediately, “we’ll take a separate ride. There is a lot of unpacking to do,” Charlie said, winking at his ME.

Sam agreed.

“I do love unpacking.”

She managed to keep a straight face as her father was grabbing keys from the desk that the techs were using.

**Somehow.**

“We’ll get these back later when I drop Sammy off,” he told the tech.

Yeah, much later.

“Get comfortable,” she teased.

He flushed red.

“I personally hate hotel rooms. The beds are **NEVER** good enough. I like my own bed to cuddle down into.”

Oh, she was having way too much fun with this.

It would just be so much easier on Charlie if he just owned it. She wondered how long this was going to go on.

Elizabeth didn't understand why he was so worked up over being bisexual.

Really, she was fine with it.

He loved her mother, and he loved Sam. She'd erase Typhoid Scary from her memories—err...Abigale the purveyor of soul destruction.

Sam and Charlie headed out, and she waited for her ME.

"Check-in first or burgers?" Chris asked as he packed up his tools.

This was her conundrum.

Her first choice would be hot sex in the front of the Denali outside, then food, and finally work. Only, she had **DAYS** to get this case closed, and catch Letty. That meant she had to cross work off first.

**Damn responsibilities.**

"I would really like to have a talk with the concierge first," she stated.

Chris lifted a brow.

**WHAT?**

He had one hell of an erection, and she'd teased him into a frenzy. Now, she was going to work?

Did the universe hate him?

**Crap.**

"Uh, when I said working lunch, that was when there was COD, TOD, and anything else to discuss. Since we eliminated the work, I thought we'd fill it with more fun things..."

She snorted.

Oh, she knew what he was talking about.

That was on her mind. Only, she also had to keep this train on the tracks. It wasn't easy.

She was wet, and there was nothing she liked more than a sexy ME over her.

"Oh, I know. Trust me. I have to talk to the hotel staff, so I can knock it off my list."

"What has you pushing that above eating. I know I'm starving," he said, licking his lips.

**God.**

She could jump him right here.

Instead of doing that, she shared what she'd learned during her interviews.

"Here's the thing...the first woman, Gloria, did this thing at the hotel called speed dating, and she was headed back to the hotel when she picked Teddy up. I have to figure out if she met him during that speed dating or..."

He got it.

*Who else did?*

The second he picked up something that involved the opposite sex, Tony rolled over.

"Ohhhh, I've wanted to try that."

She stared at him.

"What?"

"Speed dating. You get to date like fifteen women in thirty minutes. Then, you can see if you connect. You know, first impressions and all."

*Why was she not surprised?*

They both stared at him.

"You realize that's a **HORRIBLE** idea," Elizabeth stated. "You have bad luck with random dating, Tony. Should you be trying out thirty women at once?"

He laughed.

Oh, he recalled.

Tony had taken a few months off from dating, and he'd come to one conclusion. While he sucked at picking a date, blue balls sucked worse. He was dominant in bed, and not having a woman on her knees...

It really wasn't fun.

He reassured them.

"I have a rule now. I don't sleep with anyone on the first date. The second..."

Chris stopped the crazy before it could somehow tie this to some anthropological lesson.

Tony was a disaster, and they were generally the ones who had to clean up after him.

"Is this speed dating a legit thing?" he asked.

They both nodded.

Elizabeth explained.

“Apparently, and that’s why I need to talk to the concierge. If she came back and Teddy was there...”

Chris understood.

What he didn’t like was where this was heading. He really hoped that she wouldn’t be thinking about acting as bait at any point in this.

He’d lose his mind.

Yeah, he really didn’t like this at all.

Already, he had that feeling.

“I have this all planned out. Concierge and then our lunch date. I want a burger.”

And him.

Only, she wasn’t saying that out loud. There were techs around, and they were gossipy. She didn’t want that going back to the Director of the FBI—especially since he’d boned them good by dumping this on her to fail.

“I like burgers,” Tony stated, smiling at them.

Oh, he knew there would be more than just that for lunch.

Chris shut that down.

“You have work to do,” Chris offered. “I’ll get you something to eat on my way back.”

He grinned and then rolled away.

Chris was thinking about the speed dating thing, but he knew that he had to be delicate with it. The last thing he needed was to put any ideas into motion.

“So, you think Teddy Clarkson was speed dating?”

She wasn’t sure.

“Not yet, but I do think that if Gloria left her friends inebriated that Teddy could have been scouting out someone at the hotel and picked her. We know he watches, so I have to find out if anyone saw anything. I’ll address the speed dating if it keeps coming up.”

**God.**

He hoped it didn’t.

He was already struggling with having to keep their relationship secret. Chris was tired of men hitting on her, and not being able to claim her as his own.

It was eroding his patience.

“All I really know is I have two nurses and a tourist that were killed in two different ways. Without DNA, I’d be boned. I have to chase every

lead. I hope you don't mind."

Yeah, he understood.

His work was pretty cut-and-dry. He found the evidence. She had to put it together and make something of it. That was far more difficult.

"I'm behind the eight ball here. I don't even know what the brother looks like," she said as Chris went off to get changed.

"Give me a minute," he said, stepping into the morgue office for less than that amount of time.

It was the fastest that he'd ever dressed.

When he was back in street clothing, they headed out.

"We have his DNA, and before long, you'll get a line on him. You always do. I have faith in you, Bethe."

She was grateful.

Honestly, she couldn't do it without his brain and his faith in her. Chris was her biggest cheerleader.

"I appreciate that, handsome."

Outside, they found their vehicle, and since this was a *'date'*, of sorts, Chris hopped inside behind the wheel. He was going to drive his girl to their lunch.

Elizabeth didn't question it.

Instead, she made sure their gear was in the back, and then joined him.

As they drove toward the hotel, she wanted to point something out to him that was non-work related—since they were finally alone and could discuss it.

"You're going to give yourself an ulcer."

He glanced over after pulling out of the parking lot.

"Over what exactly?" Chris asked.

She didn't pull any punches.

"Over being worried that I'm attracted to anyone but you," she said, taking his free hand in hers.

He said nothing.

That told her all she had to know.

"For the record, I don't find the sheriff—AKA the spook—attractive. He's not my type," she admitted. "You're my type," she added.

How she didn't find him attractive boggled his mind. The man was handsome. Every single man she seemed to come in contact with since they

became a couple was handsome. It was overwhelming.

Chris couldn't help but compare himself. He trained to be a doctor. On day one of medical school, they told the class to look around. Half would be gone, and there would only be one winner.

It was always competition driven.

It was bred into him.

Only, what was he to say?

"Sure," he stated.

Elizabeth loved his profile.

He was wearing glasses, his eyes still not healed perfectly from that disaster in Paris. She didn't mind, simply because he was sexy as sin in a pair of spectacles.

"I just want to put it out there that you have nothing to worry about. I know you struggle with it..."

He had news for her.

"And always will, Elizabeth. You don't get it," he borderline snapped.

Yeah, that proved her point.

He was a man on the edge, and she didn't know how to help him through it.

Instead, she closed her mouth and stared out the window to keep from stressing him out.

What really bothered her was that clearly, he didn't see that she did get it because she struggled too.

Only, she was tired of discussing it.

Chris realized how shitty that sounded. Elizabeth was just trying to help him through it.

He sighed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That came out way harsher than it should have."

She shrugged.

"Sure," she said, mimicking that answer he'd given her.

She wasn't going to talk about it.

If just discussing it made him this testy, she'd have to let him work through it on his own.

She'd tried.



Together they drove, and finally, he broke the silence. Chris knew his stupidity was damaging them, but he was desperate not to lose her.

“He’s provoking me. Ever since Tony Morell, it’s like I have a hair-trigger when poked. I know it’s lame to say this, but it sucks not to be able to claim you, Elizabeth. It’s hard on my ego, and I’m ashamed to say that. Only, your body is mine, and I hate that he’s checking out your ass and being an asshole when we both know the CIA likely has a whole file on us.”

She glanced over.

“I hadn’t noticed that he was focused on me.”

*How?*

It was so blatant.

“I don’t know how you didn’t.”

She was honest.

“Because I was checking out your ass. Christopher, this is killing us. It’s making me stress, and it’s making you stress.”

His heart began racing.

“I wish there was some way I could stop you from feeling this, but until you trust me, you’re going to be a mess.”

He was aware.

Only, how did that happen?

How did he shut it off?

She reached for his hand, again, and he was cold. His fingers felt icy to her touch, so she took them in hers and blew on the ones not steering the car.

“You have my heart,” she said. “I wish I knew how to show you more.”

He squeezed her fingers.

“Have patience with me, Elizabeth. I’m really trying. Everything has come easy when it came to being smart. It’s the social stuff I struggle with. It’s sharing you that’s hard. I finally have someone so amazing who loves all of me. I just wish I didn’t have to pretend every day that you weren’t mine.”

She leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

This was why she didn’t go back to Salem. Tony Morel had really fucked it up with him provoking Chris. Before that, it was just normal boyfriend issues. After tearing Chris’ ego apart, a couple of times, it made a mess.

She'd bitch slap him next time she saw Tony for doing that to her man.

"You're an amazing partner, handsome. I'm lucky."

Chris knew the truth.

He was the lucky one.

"I'll help you any way I can, Christopher. I'll figure it out, and we'll clear this up. I promise."

"I believe in you," he stated.

And he did.

"Have faith in me," she said.

He didn't have any choice.

**Really.**

As they pulled into the parking lot, Chris parked, and they got out. He grabbed his bag, and she grabbed hers. Then, she slipped her hand into his, holding it.

The techs were back in the morgue, so she could just be his woman for a little bit—even when she worked. It would be nice to be out of the closet.

**God.**

She was just like her father.

It hit her, and it hit her hard.

Charlie pretended, and she was too.

Yeah, Elizabeth didn't like that one freaking bit. She was going to have to do something.

**Soon.**

Inside the hotel, which was actually not that bad, considering how small the town was, they stood at the front desk. She could still smell her father's cologne, so she knew he'd been there.

Chris hit the little bell on the counter.

That told them all they needed to know about this place. It was likely the biggest building in town, with eight floors, but still not super busy.

When a man appeared, he was smiling.

"Welcome," he stated. "Can I help you?"

She took over even though Chris had booked their rooms so that they could avoid the Black Plague at the no-tell motel.

She didn't want anyone to know she was a Fed.

Him either.

“Yeah, my husband and I are checking in,” she stated. “You’ll find our reservation under Doctor and Mrs. Christopher Leonard.”

Chris stared at her.

Normally, when they checked-in, it was as Agent and ME. This was new.

She noticed him staring, and she smiled at him.

He didn’t want to hide?

Well, so be it.

She wouldn’t hide.

That worked for her now that she’d been judging her father for not being out when she was doing the exact same thing.

You loved who you loved, and she had a big ol’ soft spot for the man beside her.

Fuck their jobs.

If she lost him, she’d be heartbroken. If the team found out they were a couple, who cared?

Gabe wouldn’t fire her.

Call it a hunch.

On top of that, the Director of the FBI was already gunning for her, so it wasn’t like she wasn’t already a target. What was one more bull’s-eye on her back?

“Oh, well, welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Leonard. We are happy to have you here at our establishment. If you need anything, let me know. We have various events at night, like wine and cheese, and a meet and greet.”

Chris was still staring at her as she played arm candy and giggled.

“Oh, I love some whine with my cheese,” she joked, knowing he’d get it.

And he did.

“We like to make our guests comfortable.”

She read his name tag.

“Well, thank you, James,” she stated. “I hear there’s a speed dating thing. My sister is here already. She checked in earlier—red hair and with an annoying man with her?”

“Oh, Ms. George and Mr. Warner. Yes, they checked in a couple hours ago. I thought they were a couple.”

She grinned.

Time to bust Jack's ass.

"They kinda are. They're kissing cousins."

James Mallery paused, and Chris actually laughed. Yeah, Elizabeth was working.

"Uh, I see."

Elizabeth kept going.

"I want her to get out and see the world, and I keep telling her that it's totally wrong to be banging your cousin. I mean, he's handsome, but if you're not going to marry him..." she said, pointing at Chris.

He didn't get upset.

Instead, he played along, slapping her on the ass.

"I got the best relative of them all," he joked. "Our Daddy is so proud."

The concierge was so caught off guard that she knew she could get anything from him now.

"Anyway, speed dating sounds fun. Who organizes it?"

It took James Mallery a few seconds, but he recovered.

"Actually, I do. There are flyers outside the bar if you want more information for your sister or your cousin."

There were times having this much fun should be illegal. While the spooks got to act, sometimes, so did she.

"Really," he stated. "Help yourself," he said, giving her the room key as Chris handed over their credit card.

It was clear he wanted to get rid of them.

**ASAP.**

They were making him uncomfortable. Then again, that was the point.

"Thank you, we will. I do have another question. I heard there was a woman who fell from her balcony. It was on the news back in Georgetown. Is it safe on them? I love a balcony. I like to air dry after my shower."

He blinked.

"Pardon?" he asked.

"You know, air dry. Towels chafe."

Chris was so amused. She was interviewing him and by adding in ridiculousness, the man didn't even notice.

James' eyes went huge.

"Oh. I see."

“So, I want to make sure I’m not going to fall naked to my death. That has to suck. I mean, when you hit the ground it does. Then I’d be naked, and people would talk. We like to keep our little intricacies on the DL, right?” she asked Chris.

“Oh, well, absolutely.”

The concierge recovered.

“It is perfectly safe. It was a terrible accident. She was drinking. When she came back, she was tipsy. Our night concierge saw her.”

She wanted to ask more.

Only, past this point, it would make him suspicious.

“Oh, there’s two?” she asked, smiling.

He nodded.

“Yes, myself and Donny. We had three, but she quit a few months ago, and we never replaced her.”

Uh-huh.

Well, now she had another name, and one more person to talk to about what went down. Someone had to see Teddy, and she just needed a description.

“Okay, thanks, she said, as Chris signed his name on the slip and tucked his credit card away. “Oh, can we have our things brought up? I would love to get a burger. I’m starving.”

The man smiled.

“Absolutely. I can take them up for you and put them in your room. I’ll do it right now. We don’t have many more check-ins for today. It’s our offseason.”

Good to know.

The only reason she was trusting anyone with their things was because their gear was locked in the rental. If the man snooped, he’d find just clothes.

Oh, and sexy things she packed to make Chris lose his control.

She handed her bag over, and Chris too.

“Thank you, James,” she said. When the man took her things, she focused on Chris.

Then, she went into his body in front of the man and planted one on his mouth.

It was a deep one too.

She tickled his tonsils.

When he set her free, after that delicious mating of mouths, his whole body was on fire.

Chris was confused.

“Let’s go eat, my love,” she stated before he could say anything.

Chris was a captive audience.

Then again, he’d do anything to spend all day with her. The blood had drained South, and he wasn’t able to focus.

Heading toward the bar inside the lobby of the big hotel, he was wondering what she was up to.

“Uh, Sweetness, maybe I’m just distracted, but what are you doing? We didn’t check-in as FBI.”

She smiled.

She was aware.

“Oh, I know. I have to work, but I’m technically off duty. Now, I’m just here as Mrs. Leonard. I can be her and get information, as I proved.”

Chris felt bad that he was making her life harder.

He wanted to reassure her that he didn’t mind, but that would be a lie.

He did.

*That she was giving him this...*

It was the best gift. He hated having to introduce them as co-workers to **ANYONE**.

There was something so damn sexy about calling her Mrs. Leonard. It made him want to toss her over his shoulder and carry her to their room.

**AFTER** he fed her.

There was that need to take care of her too.

The bar was not far ahead, and it looked like a decent place. It was more a pub than a bar, dark inside, and with patrons already in it.

On the wall before walking in was a menu and the flyers.

She checked both out.

It took three seconds to find the burgers and to narrow that down. She was a simple person. Slap some bacon, cheese, and mayo on some dead cow, and she was good to go. There was a veggie burger for Chris, and that mattered.

Autopsies and lunch were sometimes a struggle.

Next, she was focused on speed dating. She grabbed a flyer for later. Now, she had a man to focus on, and he deserved some of her attention.

Thankfully, she could multitask.

“Let’s get some food, and take a break,” she stated, knowing she’d still work if she could.

Chris was down with that.

*If that was what she wanted...*

So be it.

Chris loved having a meal with his woman.

**Alone.**

**Finally.**

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\**

***Washington D.C.***

***Blackhawks’ Home***

***Early Afternoon***

They watched the game, kicked the pizza, and a whole six-pack. It was a good morning in Gene’s world, simply because he could just chill out and be himself.

That was the good thing about being around Ethan.

They didn’t talk personal shit.

**Ever.**

That meant he could be obtuse with what he was saying, and the man wouldn't try to dig deeper to figure out what he was saying.

As a closeted gay man, that worked for him.

As Ethan turned off the TV, he stretched.

"I think that's the most I've sat on my ass in the last month."

Gene laughed.

"I know. I'm usually running after you."

And checking out the ass in question.

It was fine.

**Damn fine.**

Ethan grinned.

"It's not my fault I have longer legs. Blame your parents for the extra steps."

Gene snorted.

"I will next time I see them."

He stood himself.

"I should probably be going," he stated. "We '*went over the file*' and now your day is yours."

Only, Ethan missed having company.

Those few days Callen was here, or the time he went back to be with him, it was nice. Now, it was cold in his world.

**Again.**

"Want to do something else?" Ethan asked, taking a chance.

Gene heard the words and wanted to do a little dance. He was pretty sure that the man was asking what he thought he was asking.

"Like?"

"Do you like billiards? We can go shoot some pool, or we can go catch a movie. I haven't been out of the house in ages other than to work."

This had to be a date—of sorts.

*Right?*

Gene's dick got hard.

In its defense, Ethan Blackhawk was a very sexy man.

"Uh, okay. We're going to have to get dinner too because unlike you, Ethan, I like food. Billiards means more beer, so I need food to soak that shit up."

He laughed and grabbed a notebook that was on the table.

"Well, I do like food. I just like work more."



He was well aware.

“Here is the bar. Meet me there in an hour. I want to jump in the shower. I worked out this morning, and now I smell like an old Italian grandmother.”

He found that outrageously funny.

This man didn’t look like any granny he knew.

He was ripped.

He was sexy.

Oh, and Gene had the hots for the man.

**BIG-TIME.**

“Want me to pick you up?” he asked. “Then, you can drink. You won’t have to drive home.”

Ethan considered it.

“Uh, well, only if next time you let me drive.”

**Oh, anytime.**

In his head, he pictured himself blowing the man in the front seat of his sleek Mustang.

Yeah, he needed a shower too.

**A cold one.**

“Deal,” Gene stated.

He was going home to do some major manscaping.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

“I’ll be back in an hour, Grandma.”

Ethan walked him and the empty pizza box to the door and let them out. One toward his car, and one to the trash.

“I’ll be ready. See you then, Gene,” he called, waving at him.

When Ethan closed the door, Gene Cantrell whistled his way to his ride.

He had a date.

He was sure of it.



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## *Chapter Seven*

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*Hotel Bar*  
*Thursday*  
*Early Afternoon*

**A**s they sat in the darkish pub, Elizabeth was free to be herself. It was a damn happy place to be as she was cuddled up against Chris. It was evidently clear that he was already feeling better.

Tucked away in street clothes, unknown to everyone around them, they could just take this lunch break and be a couple.

On the job, it was rare that they weren't eating out of a Styrofoam container while staring at pictures of the dead.

Now, they got to be Bethe and Chris.

It was refreshing too.

It was also entertaining.

*Why?*

When the waitress had come, and she'd taken their order, Elizabeth had said the word '**HUSBAND**' at least four times to drive the point home.

She was leaving **NOTHING** up for interpretation when it came to the man beside her. While he saw a geek, she saw the sexiest man alive.

*As for the waitress...*

The whole time it was amusing since the woman had to think she was batshit insane.

*As for Chris?*

He liked it.

He wasn't going to lie.

It gave him that warm fuzzy feeling in the pit of his belly each time she said that word.

*How could it not?*

It was clear that he was stressing nothing, and even if he told himself that a million times, he simply couldn't just shut it off. There was something in him driving it, and Chris didn't like it.

He was going to try to chill out.

**Big-time.**

**For her.**

Now, as they waited for their food to arrive, her hand was on his thigh, her hair was down, and they were silently enjoying the moment.

Maybe too quietly.

As they were sitting here, Elizabeth was curious what he was thinking about.

She pulled a quarter out of her pocket and slid it toward him.

Immediately, he knew why. He'd done something similar a year and a half ago.

Time flew.

He smiled and gave her his thoughts.

Of course, they were about her.

"I was thinking that not a moment goes by where I don't find myself helplessly in love with you."

It gave her butterflies.

*Why?*

She understood it. She loved him too.

**A lot.**

He slid another quarter back.

Little did she know he saved each one she gave him. Later, he'd put today's date and their location on it, and it would go into a jar for a memory.

They were more valuable than anything.

"Well, Christopher, I was thinking about our cruise," Elizabeth stated, "and how we will be on it. I don't care how long we chase these annoying Clarksons. My ass will be in that bikini on a lounge chair."

He gave her a kiss.

"I prefer you out of the bikini, but in our room—if the choice is mine."

She grinned.

"Deal."

As the woman came back, she slid two burgers onto their table. Chris was having the standard veggie burger since he'd been digging in a body already today, and she had a double with extra bacon and cheese—no lettuce or veggies other than pickles. Burgers weren't gardens.

You didn't put greenery on them.

She'd learned that from her dad.

Immediately, she checked out the food and was excited. She rubbed her hands together maniacally.

“Come to momma, you sexy piece of meat.”

He laughed.

How she ate that much, Chris didn’t know, but he craved nothing more than feeding her.

He’d keep her in bacon burgers until they were old if she’d let him.

As the waitress headed off, she stared down at her fries, realizing something was wrong.

“Well, shit.”

He glanced over.

“What?” he asked, as he was holding his veggie burger.

“I know I asked for mayo on the side. I can’t be having naked fries going into my piehole. Mayo makes them go down faster.”

He laughed.

Chris already knew half of his fries were hers anyway.

“Because that monstrosity doesn’t have enough cholesterol?” he joked.

She wiggled her eyebrows.

“I’m going to burn this cholesterol off later when I have my sexy man do dirty, dirty things to me. It’s fuel for the kink.”

That was all he had to hear.

He went to get up.

“I’ll get you mayo if I have to run to a store.”

She laughed and pulled him back down.

While she appreciated it, he’d been on his feet and would be all day. She sat on her ass. He was right. With all this cholesterol, she needed to move around.

“I’ll go to the bar and ask for some. Will you stay here and guard my masterpiece?” she asked.

He found her amusing.

The only people who would steal that was Charlie or a body builder after a three-hour workout.

“Yeah, Bethe, I will.”

With her food safe, she gave him a soft kiss, whispered dirty things related to the aforementioned kink, and headed off to find mayo.

Chris was thankful that he wasn't wearing scrubs because true to form, her sexy talk had his body rock-hard.

As she approached the bar, there was news on, and it was talking about the deaths that had gone down.

Well, the second two.

It was clear the media didn't know that the balcony dive was anything more than accidental.

This sucked.

The media was onto it.

There were shots of the women's homes after the police tape had been taken down. Now, she had to hope she didn't run into any of the media there when she walked them.

**Damn.**

**Damn.**

**Damn.**

When the bartender turned around, he shook his head.

"That's shitty," he stated. "Those ladies were nice. I hate that this happened to them. I just saw them a few days ago."

It was like the blessed Baby Jesus was delivering a miracle unto her. She was on the hunt for mayo, also from the heavens, and now, someone was giving her information on her case without her even asking.

Screw the mayo—for now.

Work, once again, had her full attention. The speed dating and pub were back up front and screaming for her attention. She hoped Chris forgave her.

It was time to play along.

"Oh, you knew them?" she asked, grateful her badge was tucked away with her gun at her back and beneath her blazer.

"Yeah, I did. That's three deaths in a couple of days. That's really a horrible thing," the man said, smiling at her.

He was checking her out, and she wanted to tell him that she didn't like big, strong macho men. She liked sleek, smart men with skills to get her wet.

He was wasting his time.

"Three?" she asked, playing dumb.

"Yeah, we had another one who committed suicide off of the hotel or it was an '*accident*'," he offered, making the air quotes around the word.

“They were all in here Friday getting drinks and the suicide one had joined in the speed dating. I’m not sure the others were though. Fridays are busy here.”

Elizabeth played concerned citizen.

“Oh, my! That’s horrible,” she said, as the man stared over her shoulder toward Chris. Immediately, she shifted, making sure to protect her partner.

*Why?*

She wasn’t sure.

It just overcame her.

He nodded.

“Yeah, Jana and Carolyn were just in here too. I just talked to them Friday as I made them drinks. One was a rum and Coke, and the other a Bare-Naked Lady. This is horrible.”

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

“Wow, and they were here Friday too?” she asked.

He stared at her.

“Uh, yeah, I just said that. They were regulars on the speed dating circuit. They came every Friday, even though it’s normally the same guys, you know? Again, I’m not sure if they participated, but I know they were here. I never forget a drink. What do you like?” he asked, grinning at her.

She stared at him.

“I don’t drink.”

“Bummer. Drinks make panties come off.”

Yeah, and that wasn’t happening. Good to see she pegged that one right off the bat. Thank God Chris was sitting at the table, and she was blocking any of this tomfoolery.

Now, that coincidence of one being here for speed dating had multiplied, and she had confirmation.

All three women were involved in speed dating?

*What?*

*The?*

*Hell?*

Could this be the epicenter?

Right here in the hotel?

“But enough about that. Can I help you with something, honey?” the guy asked. “I’m sure you’re not here for chitchat, but if you are...?” he asked, smiling.

Well, that window of opportunity had closed.

It looked like she would have to do some outside digging on this. It was time to be Elizabeth, not Agent LaRue.

**For Chris.**

“Well, Keller,” she said, reading his name badge. “I’m actually here because I asked for extra mayo and didn’t get any. Sorry,” she said, sheepishly. “As for talking, I’m with someone.”

Oh, he noticed the second she came in.

He laughed.

“Ahhh, I figured as much. My loss,” he teased. “Stay right here, and I’ll get you some mayo.”

“Make it a vat,” she stated.

He grinned and headed away. The second he was gone, she sensed someone coming up behind her, and she went on alert. Then, she smelled the cologne.

*Not Chris.*

*The CIA spook.*

“Well, go figure. I find you here.”

“In my defense, it’s a small town, and you knew I was staying in the same hotel as the first victim. That’s not really detecting, Remington. When I said do more of it, that wasn’t what I meant.”

He laughed.

Oh, she was spicy.

And sexy with her hair down.

Behind them, he could feel the ME’s eyes on him, and someone was shooting daggers his way.

“You are the investigator, and we both know I’m just an actor in the play of life.”

Yeah, well, she wasn’t getting attached. With the exception of Axelle, she didn’t like the CIA.

They had their own turfs, and technically, he was on hers. This was her domain inside the country. He should keep that in mind. Instead of going there, she changed the subject before Keller came back.

She kept her voice low.



“Dude, all three women were at the speed dating,” she stated, seeing Chris from the corner of her eye and he was watching them. “Not one, but three. They all came and tried to find love here.”

He genuinely looked surprised. Now, maybe he was faking it, but she didn’t believe that. She caught him off guard.

“Really?”

**Shit.**

The sheriff moved closer as she nodded.

“What?”

“Keller, the bartender, just told me that he’d seen all three here Friday night for a round of speed dating. Two of them were here **EVERY** Friday.”

His eyes were huge.

“Which makes sense,” Elizabeth stated since Carolyn’s mother said she was out, and they didn’t really discuss her dating habits. “She was here. It seems that Jana wasn’t out at yoga. She was out on Friday looking for love in all the pub-y places.”

“Oh, boy. You may have found the ‘*where*’.”

*She was aware.*

*She had the who.*

*She had the where.*

Now, she needed the why and the how.

Then, she’d have Teddy.

She’d bet on it.

As she saw the bartender coming back, she lowered her voice.

“Hit on me and keep my cover. He thinks I’m just here for lunch,” she warned. “Play it cool,” she warned.

Oh, well, he could do that.

Besides, he knew Keller Devoe was a big flirt himself. There was no doubt he was already scoping out the potential with this woman.

The ME was going to stroke out, but if she wanted him to, so be it.

She was in charge.

Plus, he liked stirring the pot.

All CIA operatives did.

“Here’s your mayo. Hey, Sheriff,” Keller stated, looking disappointed that the woman had company.

**Again.**

“Oh, hey! I just came in to put a takeout order in,” he stated. “Can I get my normal?” he asked, covering. “This nice woman was keeping me company until you got back.”

She smiled.

Keller...not so much.

“Sure can. I’ll have them get it started in the back,” he said, ringing it up.

Remington paid.

“Thanks. I see you’re watching the news,” Keller said, Elizabeth picked up the massive bowl of mayo.

Well, he nailed that.

“We were just talking about the dead women,” Elizabeth offered. “And speed dating.”

Keller joined the conversation.

“Yeah, they were here and having a good time. I’m sick over all of this.”

Oh, well, when Remington was here Saturday, the man hadn’t been around. This might have been nice to know then. He would have had more for Elizabeth, and she wouldn’t have wasted half a day.

His CIA intel told him that the extremists were going to be recruiting next week. He **REALLY** needed the FBI gone by...now.

Elizabeth tagged out of this one. If she lingered, it looked off, and she knew Chris.

He’d be showing up.

“Thanks for the mayo,” Elizabeth said, jerking her head toward where she and Chris were sitting so Remington would get the hint.

As soon as she was gone, the bartender checked her out.

“She’s hot. She’s with that nerd though. Maybe you can get her name and number.”

Remington shook his head.

“I don’t know. She looks pretty happy with him,” Remington stated.

“If you don’t, I am. I can steal her away without even trying. He’s a geek. That little lamb needs a shepherd.”

Oh, this dude was in for a rude awakening.

That lamb could kick the much bigger man’s ass.

**Easily.**

Keller might be strong and someone who worked out, but Remington's money was on Elizabeth.

He opted to save the FBI cover or his was blown too.

"I'm going to go introduce myself. I'll be back for my food," he said, following her over to her table. When she sat, he stood there.

Then, he tried to make it look like he was chatting up Elizabeth.

"Play along," he said. "If I don't flirt with you, he's coming over to play."

Chris' eyes narrowed.

"I should get some gloves. I'm doing an autopsy here on the table," he stated.

Elizabeth choked on a fry.

"Christopher."

Remington knew he had very little time.

"Holy shit! They were here," he stated.

"Yeah, that's going to change my focus. What did you find out at the hospital? Was it a dead end?"

He nodded.

"Yeah, the co-workers at the hospital didn't know how they'd know each other. The two women worked in two different departments."

Chris was saying nothing.

"Want to sit?" Elizabeth asked.

Oh, Chris didn't like this at all. His whole body tensed.

Remington saw it and smiled.

"Well, if you don't mind..."

Chris recalled the conversation in the ride over. He opted to calm the hell down and let Elizabeth do her thing.

He trusted her.

He really did.

Elizabeth slid closer to Chris, and immediately, he dropped an arm over Elizabeth's shoulder in the circular booth. The bartender was watching, and he was more than happy to shut that down.

No one was poaching her on his watch.

Remington laughed.

"Well, now the bartender is never going to believe I'm trying to get your number," Remington joked.

Elizabeth knew that despite Chris saying nothing, his body language told an entirely different tale.

She owned their relationship.

“Well, he made a wrong assumption. My husband gets bitchy when men hit on me, and I don’t blame him. I’m his wife.”

She dropped the bomb, also because she was curious how much the CIA knew. If they knew, then there was no point pretending. It was likely everyone above her knew too.

*The Director of the FBI.*

**Mainly.**

At the ‘H’ word, Remington was actually surprised.

“Pardon?”

She found his mouth with hers, and he tasted like salt and French fries. When she glanced back over, she didn’t pretend.

This was legit.

“He’s my husband, and we work together. I tell him everything, Remington. We’re a couple.”

Well, that meant the cat was out of the bag.

She was telling him that Chris knew he was CIA.

It was time to drop the act. He only hoped the man was not going to jack this up on him.

“I didn’t expect that part. I knew you were a couple, but not the big M.”

She shrugged as she rested against him.

Chris just watched, his eyes giving nothing away in that dark booth. He was waiting for the shitty comments to begin.

It always happened.

It had everything to do with her hotness and his not-ness. There was no doubt it was coming.

“Well, someone’s intel is off. I just assumed...”

She dunked a fry in mayo and popped it into her mouth. Then, she offered one to Chris.

“You know what they say when you assume,” she stated. “He’s my husband, we’re a team, I work with my father, on occasion, and his backup ME is my Mom. Well, stepmom to the second power. Sam raised me after mine died.”

He laughed.

“Holy hell’s bells but your life is dramatic.”

Chris relaxed marginally when the man didn’t make a shitty comment about her being hot, and him being...rich.

“You managed to evade the CIA. Good job,” he said, stealing one of her fries. It wasn’t lost on him that with the missing one, the ME replaced it.

**Yep.**

They were legit.

The man was cuddling her, feeding her, and looked like he wanted to grab Remington’s intestines and use them to choke him to death.

“As you know, our boss, the director, is gunning for me. I’m giving you some big-time trust. I don’t have faith in anyone outside of my team. Can you keep this under wraps?”

He smiled.

“LaRue, we’re stuck on this together. I won’t say shit—especially if you get the hell out of here before next week.”

“What’s next week?” Chris asked.

It was clear she only vetted him in on so much.

“We have international terrorists looking to get some not-so-smart homegrown terrorists onboard for some mayhem. I’m trying to get recruited. It took me two years to set this cover. If they get spooked...”

Chris got it.

Elizabeth too.

“Well, I want to get this done ASAP. I have to find Teddy and Letty. I’m only one-third of the way there.”

“What do you want me to do, Agent LaRue?” he asked.

“Elizabeth,” she stated, “and Christopher. We’re all in this together.”

That they were.

Remington knew the ice was broken. It looked like he wasn’t public enemy number one. The ME was eating his food, and not shooting daggers at him.

It could have something to do with Elizabeth’s hand on his thigh. Remington was sure that helped.

“Well, we’re going to eat incredibly fast, and then meet you back at your office. I want to take this route to see what else we can find out about the women on Friday. If this speed dating is ground zero for Teddy, we have to move fast.”

He was good with that.

The faster, the better.

"I called around to some sheriffs in the neighboring areas. They are researching any missing women, but no one turned up bound, raped, and left to be found."

"He's escalating," she stated. "He's fixated on this hunting ground, and it's likely because he found a way to pick the women."

Yeah, by speed dating them.

**Great.**

"I can shakedown the staff here since I did my two tasks."

She stopped him.

"No. I have a different idea. Meet me at your office, and we'll discuss it then. I need to meet up with my other two team members and clue them in. Then, I need to work this out in my head."

He got it.

"For the record, and I know I'm not an investigator, but when I was here Saturday for Gloria, I talked to people in the hotel. No one mentioned this. Keller wasn't here."

Chris watched the man.

He was flirting with a redhead.

Someone wanted to get laid.

"He's something," Chris stated.

The man agreed.

"What do you know about him?" Elizabeth asked.

He honestly didn't have anything.

"He was here before me, and he's a hound dog. He thinks he can score any woman because he has big muscles."

She laughed.

"Not the muscle I like," she stated.

He opened his mouth, and she shut that down.

"Please don't bring up my husband's dick. I will warn you, right now, I'll go on and on about it, and how hot our sex is. I've found that makes people uncomfortable. I meant brains. That's the muscle I admire."

Remington leaned forward.

"Get it out of the gutter, LaRue. I was thinking his brain," he stated. "I know everything about Orion Christopher Leonard. The CIA has a file."

Chris choked on his fry.

Elizabeth handed him her soda so he could get some liquid to wash it down.

“I see.”

He winked at her.

“Don’t worry. It’s normal. He graduated at the top of his class, and he was recruited by the FBI. His mother...”

“Stop,” Chris said, that panic coming. “We get it. You know everything about me.”

The man smiled.

“Her too. She was a cheerleader, trouble in high school, excelled in languages, and was top of her FBI class. The CIA wanted her, but the FBI stole her away.”

She shrugged.

“I don’t like to play games. I’m too blunt. I’d be a horrible spook. I don’t lie. Oh, your shirt is hideous.”

He laughed.

Despite them being from different agencies, he liked her. She was obviously good at what she did.

“Well, LaRue, use his big brain, and yours, nerd girl, and find that killer. There has to be something that connects them, right?” Remington asked.

Chris took a bite of a fry she fed him.

Then, he just went for it.

“Would this be a good time to mention that all three victims were redheads? Maybe you guys didn’t notice, but as someone who sees the bodies naked, they were.”

So, the carpet matched the drapes.

Good to know.

They both stared at him.

“Pardon?”

“Well, what you couldn’t tell from the last victim because she’d been wet down after trace was pulled, and had wet hair, and the first **LANDED** on her head, but they were all redheads. Your killer might have a type.”

That helped her out.

**BIG-TIME.**

*Oh, if he only knew how much...*

She grabbed his face, and she kissed him long and deep. Then, she pulled away.

The whole time, he grinned like a fool because he was—for her.

“And that is why I’m married to you,” she stated. “Your brain gets me all hot and bothered. I didn’t even notice.”

Oh, he loved helping her out.

Remington laughed.

“Way to play tonsil hockey. That had to be fun,” he said, teasing them.

Chris pointed at the table.

“Autopsy. Here.”

Remington laughed.

“I get it. No flirting with your wife. What if she told me to do it...?”

She gave him the side-eye.

“Uh, okay, then.”

Remington laughed even more.

Elizabeth knew what she needed now, and it wasn’t this spook bugging her.

“Head to your office. You’re blowing my cover. I’ll catch up later.”

“Okay, do you want me to go back to the hospital again and see if they knew anything about the two nurses who were speed dating? I didn’t ask that.”

“Sure,” she said, her hand inching closer to Chris’ dick. She couldn’t help herself. She was crazy about this man.

“And on that note, I’ll make myself scarce.”

That worked for her.

She could feel this case coming together. Now, she just needed to figure out who was there, and who the women had contact with. One of the men might be Teddy in disguise.

Elizabeth couldn’t help but believe that this was their best chance of finding Teddy.

“Thank you, Christopher,” she said, touching his cheek. “You really are my better half. Thank you for being focused when I’m inundated.”

He tenderly kissed her on the lips.

“What wouldn’t I do for the love of my life?” he asked, pushing her plate closer to her.

Chris knew what was coming.



**Food.**

**Work.**

Well, he'd have to spend some private time with her later. It looked like the S.S. Nooner had sailed. When Elizabeth was focused on work...

**Yep.**

It was all work and no play for him and his erection.

When she focused on her plate, Elizabeth started inhaling her food as quickly as she could. She knew they had a lot of work to do.

"Don't choke on me," he warned.

She went there.

"We need to get upstairs. I'm going to see if I can talk Axelle into playing speed dater tomorrow."

This was exactly where he expected this to go. Only, he was damn grateful she wasn't a redhead.

**She.**

**Was.**

**Safe.**

Chris took a bite of his food.

"I figured that's where this was going to go," he stated. Oh, he'd seen her work plenty of times, and he knew his girl. She was going to be running an undercover operation of her own.

Immediately, she reassured him.

"I'll have Tony here, and shove a few techs into the mix. We can fill the place up with Feds. Then, we can watch who **ISN'T** one."

It wasn't a bad idea.

Really.

**ESPECIALLY** since she wasn't the bait.

"I also want to go visit the women's homes and that hotel room. I want to see what else I can find beforehand."

"Check their phones," he stated, chewing. "We have them in evidence and they aren't locked."

She pulled no punches.

"I would ride you right here with the burger in one hand and a vat of mayo in the other."

He stared at her.

"Oddly, I'd be okay with that. It goes to show how much I love you. I'd ignore the mayo or use it as lubricant. Slippery is better."

She laughed.

Oh, this man of hers.

“We have to move fast on this. Tomorrow night is another speed dating,” she said, sliding the flyer toward him that she’d taken from outside in the hotel lobby.

“Well, I’m sure we can keep Axelle safe,” Chris stated. “Jack can do the dating too. No one has seen him yet.”

That was perfect.

She would pack this place full of Feds and ensure everyone went home.

“Christopher, we might actually get this handled.”

He was just grateful, again, that she wasn’t putting herself into that mess.

“Good. I’d like to get through these three chases and onto our cruise.”

Then, she dropped the bomb.

“Well, we’ll move fast. I’ll be helping Axelle. I’m going to be doing the speed dating also,” she said.

That was all he had to hear.

Chris began choking on his veggie burger. Now, he knew how he was going to die.

The COD would be asphyxiation on a vegetable as his **WIFE** told him she was going to try to pick up a man.

**Oh, holy shit!**

Chris couldn’t believe this. This was exactly what he didn’t want happening, and here he was.

Living his worst nightmare.

As he tried not to die, Elizabeth patted him on the back.

“Are you okay?”

He stared at her, eyes watering.

**NO.**

He was not okay.

And it was likely only going to get worse.

Somehow, he figured that he could count on it.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

*Axelle's Room*  
*Thirty Minutes Later*

When there was knocking on her door, Axelle got up to see who it was. She was promptly handed a takeout bag with two cartons in it.

“Oh, look. FBI is delivering food now. I was just going to order from the pub downstairs.”

She liked to feed her people, and until this was over, the spook and cop were hers.

“I brought you and Jack lunch, Red.”

She wasn't turning down food. Coffee and a few candy bars were **NOT** going to tide her over long.

“Oh, thanks,” Axelle stated, heading into her room with Elizabeth and Chris right behind her.

Jack was parked on the bed, reading through some papers.

“How's it going?” she asked.

Axelle shrugged.

“Well, let's just say that Kitty Clarkson did a damn good job at sending the money the hell out of there. I have people looking at the routing numbers and trying to find the account. If we can do that, we're clear. We'll get it back.”

Jack shook the papers and explained his part in this, so she didn't think he was just staring at the pretty CIA director.

“I’m cross-checking the account numbers against the ones here in the town. Axelle got them, and don’t ask how, because she said she’d cut a bitch.”

She laughed.

“He’s not lying,” she admitted, handing him some food.

When Elizabeth didn’t comment, Axelle was curious. She dropped onto the bed and popped her takeout container open.

“LaRue, what are you thinking?” she asked.

“I think I stumbled onto how he’s picking his victims. It makes perfect sense now, and I’m just working out how to trap him in my head.”

Chris said nothing.

If he did, he was stroking out.

He was sure of it. After he snapped at her earlier, he had **NO** room to screw that up again. It was taking all he had not to say anything, but he was sure his eye was twitching.

Axelle was intrigued.

She lifted a brow.

“Care to share with the class, LaRue?”

She broke it down.

“Victim one, Gloria Beake came here to visit friends. She goes out, gets some drinks, participates in a thing called speed dating.”

That had Jack’s attention.

“What is that?” Jack asked, taking a bite out of his burger.

She explained.

“That’s where you meet as many men as possible, or women, in two-minute intervals.”

Axelle laughed.

“Uh, that sounds lame,” Axelle stated. “You can’t get to know someone in that time. That’s how you end up sleeping with a serial killer...” she said and then got it. “Ohhhhhhh.”

Elizabeth knew she’d pick up what she was laying down.

It was clear that Jack still wasn’t sure where this was going. He was still calm.

Like Chris, she expected a freak-out.

“Well, she was there, and the bartender told us so were Jana Katz and Carolyn Williams. The killer likely picked a redhead from there. They were there Friday, and then every two to three days one of them died.”

Axelle lifted a brow.

“Okay, so you potentially found out where he’s hunting. What are we going to do? Stake it out?”

She smiled.

This was the hard sell.

“Well, it seems that all three victims have something in common.”

Jack was curious.

“What?” he asked, as he took a bite of the burger.

“They were redheads. Red Queen, congrats! You’re going to go speed dating to find yourself a man!”

Jack began choking on his food the second it was out of her mouth. Axelle began pounding him on the back.

The second he recovered, with tears in his eyes from choking, he stared at Elizabeth with the *‘what the fuck’* face.

“Are you shitting me?” he asked as Axelle kept hitting him on the back.

She was very serious.

Elizabeth broke it down.

This should be a no-brainer for Axelle. She worked undercover ops for years. This was **LITERALLY** her thing. Chasing money outside of the country, and this, was her bread and butter as a CIA operative.

If she could stick Remington in, she would, but he wouldn’t look as good in a dress and red wig.

“She’s a redhead. She’s not been seen by anyone but the concierge. She’s going dating. It’s as simple as that. That will give us one person in on the speed dating.”

Jack protested.

*How could he not?*

“He’s killing women.”

Then, as if she didn’t realize Axelle was female, he pointed at her breasts.

Breasts he was **VERY** fond of.

“Yeah, redheads. Catch up, Jack. We’ve been there already.”

His eyes were huge.

Then, he lost his mind.

Chris didn’t say shit because someone had to do it. Now, they both had women they loved in the game. While Jack was not committed, there

was no doubt that Axelle was his.

“Hell to the emphatic no,” he stated.

Chris stood there, still recovering from this. He shook his head.

“Oh, it gets worse,” he stated. “Wait for it.”

Elizabeth pointed at Jack.

“You’re dating too, sunshine. So, get ready to play eligible bachelor looking for love.”

He laughed.

“LaRue, I don’t date.”

Axelle said nothing, but it hurt a bit.

She wouldn’t lie.

“Yeah, well, no kidding, Detective Jack ‘*now working for me in this FBI op that you so nicely dropped in my lap to save your bacon*’ Warner.”

He closed his eyes.

**Damn it.**

Elizabeth had him there.

She continued.

“You’re actually there to watch the bait. Axelle is going in, and so am I. We have male techs, Chris, you, and Tony. We can flood the speed dating, and then be able to watch some of the others who aren’t FBI.”

He was appalled.

As was Chris, who didn’t like hearing it the first time, and certainly not this time.

“Why is he so calm?” Jack asked, pointing at Chris.

He fielded that one.

“Because I was pissy about Remington Bowman flirting with her, and I already screwed myself and got the ‘*one more time and you’re sleeping in a separate bed*’ look.”

Jack hated this.

Why did both women not see that this could be very bad for either of them—especially the redhead in the group?

“LaRue, that’s dangerous, again, for her.”

Axelle laughed.

“Uh, Jack, I’ve actually infiltrated spy rings and shot my way out of a prison camp. Speed dating is easy.”

He didn’t like this at all.

**Not.**

**One.**

**Bit.**

Elizabeth reassured him.

“She’ll be safe. We have to be ready for tomorrow, so I need all-hands-on-deck to start working on the other things. We’re going dating.”

Jack stared at Chris.

“Uh, talk some sense into your woman.”

He laughed sardonically.

“You think I didn’t try? You tell her no and then tell me how that works out when she and Axelle kick your ass. I’ll do your autopsy though, so I got your back.”

Jack sighed.

“This is a horrible idea.”

She pointed out the obvious.

“I know, **BUT** we have **VERY** little time before Teddy and Letty realize Kitty is behind bars. Once they do, and they disappear with ten million, who do you think is getting their asses read the riot act as they take the heat on this?”

She raised her hand.

Axelle raised hers.

Then, she elbowed him.

Jack was well aware that this was a big mess, and it was all because of him. He’d begged Elizabeth to help him with this to keep from dinging up his career.

“Damn it. I hate that you’re right about this,” he stated. “This is all kinds of dangerous for her.”

She understood, but they had no other choice.

**Really.**

“Jack, we don’t know what he looks like. For all I know, he was sitting his ass in the bar while we were grabbing food. I have to make myself look less like myself, and I have to do it quickly. My gut is screaming that this is how we find him.”

He hoped she was right.

Then, she shared what she knew.

“On top of that, and I’m only telling you because she’s a CIA spook herself, but Remington Bowman isn’t a sheriff. He’s CIA, and they are

running a counterintelligence op here. We're literally jacking up their two-year plan."

Axelle lifted a brow.

The man didn't look familiar, but there were many, many spooks in the world.

"Oh, that's bad. He's had to be here for a while and there's likely a ton riding on it."

It was funny how she wasn't even shocked.

Apparently, the CIA was always on the ground.

She shared it all.

"He saw the killings and alerted the FBI by way of your boss," she told Axelle. "My boss is trying to bury me. I can't drop this ball. If I go down, anyone want to guess who also goes down?" she asked.

They knew.

The least of their issues was blowing their cover and forcing Teddy to run. The CIA would make their lives hell, starting with her and Axelle.

"We have no choice," Axelle admitted. "I'm in," she stated. "I'll let men ogle me."

Jack sputtered.

She added the last part.

"Since I'm not in a relationship."

It shut him up.

**FAST.**

How this had come back to bite him more than once, he wasn't quite sure. Only, what was he supposed to add to that?

"I'm going to be there with you," Elizabeth stated. "We'll be fine."

Chris wanted to lose his shit.

He was barely hanging on.

"Your husband is not liking this, Elizabeth," he stated, wanting her to know where he stood.

**Still.**

She was well aware.

Her father was going to like it even less, but he wasn't a Fed on the brink of having her job destroyed. He'd have to suck it up.

She pulled out her phone and dialed someone else who might have issues with an undercover op like this. So, she decided to get approval first.

**Just.**



**In.**

**Case.**

When Gabe answered his private number, she didn't give him time to say anything.

"Hey, question."

"Yes?" he asked. "Please tell me you didn't get in trouble. We're both in a bad place with the Director of the FBI and the CIA."

Yeah, well, she wasn't sure how he was going to feel about this.

"Can you ship me some super stealthy surveillance shit that the FBI uses but pretends they don't have? You know, the stuff they stole from the CIA."

Axelle laughed.

Gabe was confused.

"Uh, why do you need surveillance equipment that we all know is not valid in court since we don't have a warrant to listen in on someone?" he asked, almost afraid to go there.

She broke it down and told him everything. It didn't take long, and she really hoped she'd sold it to him.

When she was done, he was silent.

Then, he spoke.

"LaRue, this is exactly why you are my best agent. You found a good angle and you're willing to risk it to handle it. I am going to send you what I can. You're my favorite person right now, and if you catch this dude, you'll really be my favorite person. When I become the head honcho, I'll make sure I take care of you."

She snorted.

"You take care of me now by boning my vacations and jacking with my life every chance you get. I'll risk you just hating me," she joked.

He laughed.

"Har-har, chuckles."

Since he still liked her, she wanted to make sure they were on the same page.

"Remember your promise. I get that week and so does Chris so we can go on our cruise."

"Deal. I'll have the equipment shipped to your hotel."

She stopped him.

“No. That’s where speed dating happens. Send it to the sheriff’s office, care of Remington Bowman—you know, the CIA operative. In fact, make it sound like the CIA wants it. Then, they’ll send the good shit.”

Axelle laughed.

“Way to play the game, LaRue. I trained you well.”

Gabe shut that down.

“I trained her.”

“You two can piss on me later to see who owns me. Now, get me that shit.”

Chris shook his head.

**God.**

He wished they were normal people in normal careers. This was stressing him out.

Gabe acquiesced.

“Got it. It’ll be there in the morning. Email me whatever else you want me to get to you, and I’ll handle it.”

Oh, she would.

She was going to need help. They couldn’t go shopping, and they needed clothing.

“Tell Livy I need her help and to check her email. She’s going to have to help me. If I go shopping, someone might see me,” she stated. “I need slutty attire. She knows where to shop.”

Chris nearly had a stroke.

Then, and there.

Somehow, this kept getting worse.

Gabe tended to agree.

“You want me to send my pregnant woman into a shop that sells hooker panties? Really?”

She said one thing.

“Do you want Teddy Clarkson caught?” she asked. “Right now, he might be waiting on tomorrow’s speed dating to find a woman. We have to move fast or we’re both unemployed. The director isn’t fond of either of us.”

She had a point.

He gave in.

“It’ll be there. Send the email. Oh, and LaRue, be safe. Have backup.”

She explained.

“Jack, Tony, and Chris will be doing the dating too, and I’ll put some of the techs in the bar.”

That worked for him.

He trusted her.

“Be safe, LaRue. Good luck,” he said, and then hung up to go get her things ready.

“This is going to blow up,” Jack stated. “I can feel it. Whenever you go off the grid and into the crazy, something bad happens.”

She pointed at him.

“You got me pulled into this clusterfuck. This was your case with Kitty Clarkson. I was happily chasing cannibals who liked eating their victims. You had to need help with the troublesome trio.”

He stared at her.

“Do you hear yourself?” he asked. “Cannibals?”

Ehhhh, the monsters you knew.

She was about to say more when there was a knock on their hotel room door.

“Can you get that so I can eat?” Axelle stated. “If I put this container down, Jack will inhale it as he stress eats over all of this.”

She laughed.

“Sure can.”

She jogged over and opened the door. Her father and Sam were standing there.

“Hey, what did we miss?” he asked, coming in and taking a seat on the one couch there.

Well, where to begin?

Oh, Jack knew.

“Your daughter is about to use herself and Axelle as bait to catch a rapist,” Jack stated.

That was all it took.

**“WHAT?”** Charlie asked, horrified.

You take one sexy break to get your ME on, and the shit hits the fan with his daughter.

He pointed at Chris.

“You were supposed to watch her.”

He raised his hands in surrender.

“You created this ballsy, fearless woman. I’m just here for the ride. She’s not listening to me.”

What the men didn’t realize was she could handle herself just fine without testosterone getting in her way.

“Oh, Jesus, here we go,” Elizabeth stated. “Dad.”

He cut her off.

“Don’t dad me, Baby Girl. You’re going to be bait? What are you thinking?”

“That Jack, Chris, Tony, and a room full of techs who will be undercover will keep me safe as my father has surveillance in a sexy van with high tech shit to watch me.”

Chris sighed.

Well, she’d neutralized that.

Charlie loved tech.

He closed his mouth.

“Like wires and cameras?” he asked. “You mean that sexy spy shit?”

Chris knew they were screwed.

With one sentence, she managed to take her own father to the dark side. At the mention of spy shit, he was sold. So much for the voice of fatherly reason.

**Yep.**

He was having a stroke today.

Chris was sure of it.

Well, now he’d really have to make sure he was all over his woman during that speed dating.

“Yeah, and it’s perfect for you because you’re easy to spot and hard to blend in, Dad, you and Sam will be monitoring from a van outside the hotel.”

“I’m in. This spy shit gets me giddy like a schoolgirl.”

She laughed.

Oh, she was aware.

“Charlie,” Chris stated. “Maybe think about your baby girl being dangled in front of a killer?”

Sam raised his hand.

“Do I get any say in this?” he asked.

Elizabeth kissed him.

“No. Zip it. Why do you smell like my father’s cologne?” she asked, knowing the effect that would have.

Both Sam and Charlie looked horrified.

Well, she’d use what she could.

Charlie changed the subject.

“Walk me through your plans for the speed dating thing,” Charlie stated. “I still want to make sure you’re safe.”

It was the least she could do, so she tried to make them all feel safer.

“We’ll go in, and we’ll participate in the speed dating. While we’re in there, we’ll be wearing some cameras, I hope.”

Axelle got it.

“You want everyone’s face.”

She smiled.

“Yes, because I’m betting that he’s going to be there looking for his next victim. We know a few things about him already,” she stated.

They listened.

“Again, he likes redheads.”

Jack groaned.

Axelle raised her hand.

“We do have more fun.”

Jack was horrified.

“That he’s killing them and **THEN** raping them, right, Christopher? Are we forgetting that?”

Chris really needed a drink.

**NOW.**

He had all kinds of pictures in his head, and none of them were good.

Chris nodded.

“Yep. They were dead.”

Jack looked even more horrified—if that was possible.

“Oh, Jesus! He’s raping corpses. He’s nuts!” he stated, and then stared at Axelle as if he was picturing it.

Chris nodded.

“Fun times tomorrow,” he stated, aging quicker by the minute.

Oh, loving a strong woman was tough.

**Like.**

**Right.**

**Now.**

“Okay, there has to be a better way.”

She stopped him.

“Listen, I still have an ex-boyfriend on the list to interview tomorrow, and I want to walk the other two scenes, but we don’t have time to do that first and then plan this. We have to be proactive.”

Yeah, well, hopefully, the ex would be the killer, and they could avoid this mess. She wouldn’t have a gun, and neither would Axelle.

Elizabeth pushed on.

If it was anyone else questioning her, she’d be pissed, but she understood why Chris was worried.

His protectiveness was sweet, and it gave her comfort.

“I don’t think I can make this clear enough. Gabe can’t keep Kitty under wraps for much longer. We have two more siblings. We have a week at the most before they will be suspicious that Kitty is MIA.”

Axelle had her back.

“We’ll be good. I know the tech Gabe is ‘*borrowing*’. I’ve used it before. I can get us hooked up, and we’ll be monitored. If LaRue changes this homeless look up a bit, no one will see it’s her.”

She stared at her.

“Really? Homeless?”

“Well, those boots have seen better days, and jeans...would it kill you to wear dress pants like every other Fed?”

She nodded.

“Actually, yes.”

“Girls,” Charlie said. “Details.”

She went back to focusing on that.

“We’ll do the rounds of dating, we’ll get everyone’s face, and in the meantime, Dad, you also have another important part of this. You need to find a way to get me a list of speed dating names from the last round a week ago.”

“Uh...”

She stopped him.

“Welcome to my job. You wanted in, so you’re in. I don’t care how you do it.”

He lifted a brow.

“You’re giving me carte blanche on how I work our case?”

She threw him a bone, but only because they were running against the clock.

“Yep.”

He grinned.

“Baby Girl, I have never loved you more. Do you need me to help you pick out something less homeless chic?”

She pointed at him.

“You raised me. This mess is your fault,” she stated. “Just keep that in mind. I dress like you. I’d wear flannel but then my gun would get caught on the material!”

Oh, he was proud of her no matter how she dressed. He was even prouder that she was letting him help. It wasn’t like her man cared if she was in jeans or a dress. He was smitten either way, and his baby girl caught herself a dedicated doctor.

That was any parent’s dream.

“I can show you how to romance a man and what to wear,” he teased.

Sam said nothing, but Charlie had just romanced the hell out of him. He wasn’t lying about that particular skill.

She passed on that.

“I’ll get the slutty gear on my own, thank you. Livy will have our backs.”

Chris was saying nothing.

He was flushed red and about ready to have the big one. This was going to test his patience on all kinds of levels. Not when she was coming across him, Tony, or Jack. It was the strangers that made him want to have that stroke.

“Once we get the faces, we’ll run them and use that list you procure to cross everyone off the list.”

That worked for him.

“I love helping,” he stated.

Sam got up and headed toward his child. He took her face in his hands.

“You will be safe, right?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I will, Mom.”

He kissed her and then focused on Axelle.

“Sweetheart, you’ll be safe too, right?”

She smiled at the man.

“You know it, Sam. I’ll keep LaRue from fucking this up and blowing it. This is **LITERALLY** my jam. Here, I thought I was stuck chasing money, but playing hide-and-seek with someone is what I do.”

He gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Okay, well, it’s settled. Axelle, you and Jack stay inside. I need to keep your faces clear of this. Hang out and track the money. Give me a list of what you need so I can get it to Gabe.”

“Gotcha.”

“Sam, you and Chris will go back to the morgue, and Christopher, stay out of public places.”

He stopped her.

“Actually, Elizabeth, I would like to speak to you privately.”

She blinked.

“About?”

“Again, privately.”

Oh, she knew there was about to be a battle.

Call it a hunch.

“We’ll head back and meet the sheriff at his office, Dad. Can you give Sam a ride there? I’ll catch up after I talk to Chris.”

“Can do, Baby Girl.”

Before she could say anything, Chris had her by the arm, and he was leading her out of that room, down the hall, and toward theirs.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Pissed.**

The staccato of his feet on the floor, combined with the death grip on her arm told her all she needed to know.

He was going to blow.

“Uh, Christopher.”

He said nothing.

**At.**

**All.**

In fact, from the color of skin by the collar of his shirt, she was pretty sure he was going to argue with her.

**Damn it.**



She didn't have time for this.

This was the last thing she needed.

As he shoved the key into their door, and then pushed it open, he practically dragged her into the room.

As she opened her mouth to try to soothe the savage beast, it was too late.

Chris lost his mind.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

*Somewhere  
West Virginia  
That Same Time*

Oh, he was looking forward to tomorrow night. This was so easy, it was like shooting fish in a barrel.

All he had to do was pick the pretty ones, and then take them one-by-one.

That was his plan, and while he was waiting for his sister, he was going to have some fun.

He liked to get his anger out, so when he got to be with them, he would be gentle.

*Kind.*

*Romantic.*

You treated your sisters one way, and the whores in the world another.

Speaking of sister...

He was missing Kitty. She hadn't checked in, and he was hoping everything was okay.

As he called, the message went to voicemail, and he immediately turned off the phone.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

His sister had taught him well.

With some worry, he called Letty from the other phone he used. When she answered, he could hear a man screaming in the background.

"Yes, love?"

"Are you busy, Letty?" he asked, as he heard a crack of a whip.

"I'm just working," she stated. "Looking for Mr. Right," she stated.

"I won't keep you long."

There were more screams.

**Man.**

He couldn't wait to find another woman. He wanted her to scream for him like that.

"I always have time for you, my love," she stated. "What's up?"

"I can't reach Kitty."

She wasn't shocked.

"She told me the heat was on. She's likely keeping her phone off so she can evade those fucker cops. Give her time. You know she gave us a meet-up date. We still have a week. She'll be there."

He calmed down.

"Want me to make you feel better when we get home?" she asked, purring into the phone.

"Oh, Letty, you know I do. Only you know what I like."

She did.

"Well, let me get back to this old man, and making him lick my boots, and I'll get ready for you."

"Yes, please," he said.

"I love you, Teddy. See you in a week."

He would be there.

**With.**

**Bells.**

**On.**

No one made a man hurt so good like Letty. She was a black widow who could make you do anything.

As he hung up his phone and turned it off, he thought about tomorrow's pick.

He needed a distraction, now that he was thinking about the sexy times with his sister.

It was time to make a plan.

And have some fun.

Someone was going to die.

Again.

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## *Chapter Eight*

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*Hotel Room*  
*Thursday*  
*Early Afternoon*

**T**o say that Elizabeth was caught completely off guard would be an understatement. Where she expected a knockdown-dragout fight, that wasn't the case. It appeared that the man she loved had something else on his mind.

In fact, Chris moved so fast that she found herself pressed against the hotel room door, trapped against him. The whole time, it was crystal clear how angry, riled up, and tormented he was.

His whole being vibrated with that rage, and she understood why.

This entire situation was a big pill for him to swallow. Chris felt helpless to protect her, and that was making him insane. It was whittling away at his control.

**Inch.**

**By.**

**Inch.**

Elizabeth knew that he was doing battle with something scarier than her walking away from him by choice. He was afraid she'd be hurt.

And he couldn't keep her safe.

In that moment, she knew that he needed this. Chris needed to have some control, or it would fester and damage him. While he was not in control of their work relationship, he had been given a taste of what being dominant was.

Now, they were bleeding into each other, and he was barely able to hang on.

Oh, she understood.

For her, when the world became too hard, too vile, and out of control, she let that control go. She put herself in his hands, knowing he'd protect her.

Now, he was trying to find a way to reassure himself that he could keep her safe.

In that moment, she offered up what she could, trying to heal him.

“I can’t,” he said, his mouth so damn close to hers that their lips almost touch. “I can’t lose you.”

Her hands went into his hair, and she stared into his eyes. The icy blue met that boy-next-door baby blue, and she held fast.

“I’m yours,” she whispered back. “I’m always going to be yours no matter what.”

His heart thumped.

She felt it in her palm as it was against his carotid artery on his neck.

“Elizabeth,” he said, barely hanging on.

“Take what you need.”

He blinked and made up his mind.

In that moment, Chris was being asked to go against his nature of being dominant behind their closed doors. He was being asked to let her risk herself, and as if that wasn’t bad enough, to swallow watching her *‘dating’*.

It was too much.

Sealing his mouth to hers, his knee went between her legs, pinning her to that door, as his mouth destroyed her control now too.

In his head, he knew that this was her job.

Only, in his heart, he couldn’t rationalize letting her be hurt.

It would kill him.

While losing her to another man would shatter his world, and break him, losing her to death...

He’d have to follow.

Chris knew he couldn’t wake up every day and know that the woman he loved so damn much was never going to be by his side again.

It would destroy him.

The kiss was so heated, that warmth radiated out from their bodies, making him want more, and sending goosebumps across her body.

She couldn’t think.

She could only feel.

“Christopher,” she whispered into the kiss as he feasted from her mouth like a starving man on a mission to take what was rightfully his.

His hands found hers, and he pinned them above her head, their fingers twining together.

He pushed more and more into that kiss, seeking out something to make him find comfort in what she was going to do.

He found none.

When he set her mouth free, his lips were beside her ear.

“If anything happens to you, it will end me.”

That was all he had to say.

She understood.

“Nothing will happen. I promise.”

He stared into her eyes, and he knew if Elizabeth made a promise, she’d keep it. The whole thing was just hard because what he kept thinking about was the time that he’d been forced to kill a man who had been trying to drown her on that carnival case.

He had to breathe life back into her.

Then, there was when she was abducted in New Orleans, and he’d come in to see her bound and fighting for her life.

Chris wasn’t sure how much more of that he could handle. Each one made him more and more irrational.

He said nothing, simply because he needed her. That would speak louder than any words he could say.

In that moment, he set her free.

Chris released her and took a full step back.

He was giving her the choice.

It had to be hers.

**God.**

It was so damn hard to do.

“Okay, Elizabeth,” he said, swallowing that fear for her and only her.

She watched him, and his body was so wracked with tension. That kiss had stirred them both up, and she was no longer thinking work.

Chris was giving her the opportunity to run.

**To leave.**

Only, that was anything but what she wanted. Truthfully, she wanted him.

**ONLY** him.

Moving closer, she watched his eyes dilate, proof that he was lost in that need.

“Elizabeth,” he muttered, his dick throbbing.

Chris wanted to grab her, toss her over his shoulder, and take her to bed.

**Desperately.**

It took everything he had not to jump her.

**God.**

He wanted her.

“You have work to do,” he said, barely able to get the words out.

Oh, she was well aware, but that wasn’t the most important thing going on in her world at that moment. While her brain was still thinking case, her body was a whole other story.

*She was wet.*

*She was wild.*

He made her into this.

Chris’ touch could turn her whole world upside down and make her out of control.

“Let me show you,” she said, moving closer. Going into his body, Chris was tense. He expected her to leave, and that was not what was going to happen.

He moaned at her touch when her lips touched that artery in his neck, and she left kisses there.

He was very distracting as that scent of his cologne overtook her, and the feel of his body against hers was that familiar comfort.

Here was home.

*In his arms.*

Someone needed to give him some control back.

Elizabeth offered up what she could to a man who was her whole world.

She stuck her hands into the shirt that he was wearing and pulled roughly. The buttons on the shirt flew off, sailing all over that hotel room.

He gasped in surprise.

“I owe you a shirt,” she stated, as she bit him on the neck.

**HARD.**

Chris’ knees almost buckled from that flash of heat.

**God.**

She knew how to make him crazy.

“Be careful,” he warned. “If you let him out, then you get the consequences.”

Oh, she was aware.

With love and greed, she began leaving kisses across his flesh. She followed that light spattering of hair lower.

Chris watched, his hand in the back of her hair, focused on Elizabeth and the trail of open-mouthed kisses that she was leaving on his body.

He moaned but didn't move.

When she went lower, he enjoyed seeing her go to her knees.

"Sir, may I blow you?" she asked, staring up at him.

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

His dick throbbed at that one sentence.

*How could it not?*

He stared into her eyes.

"If you don't make me cum, Elizabeth, it will be bad," he warned.

"I'm out of control, and now isn't the time to tease me."

She could tell.

"Is that a yes?" she asked.

He didn't hesitate.

"Yes."

Her fingers worked on the buckle of his belt, his zipper, and then the button of his khaki pants, it didn't take long before she had him bared to her.

He was rock-hard, throbbing, and right there. It was time to help him through this by way of sex.

It worked for them.

In that passion, they found the path back to control.

It was simply their thing.

When Chris' pants dropped, he was focused on her, and only her.

"Now, Elizabeth," he said, knowing she was giving him some control back, so he survived this.

She licked him.

When she reached the tip of his erection, she swirled her mouth around the head of his dick, and he moaned in pleasure.

Oh, she was definitely going to be the death of him.

Here was the proof.

When she took him in her mouth, his body shook from the pleasure that ripped through him.



Elizabeth was good as an agent, but as his sexy submissive, she was outstanding.

She knew her way around his body.

“Teasing,” he said, shoving her mouth down his erection and burying himself down her throat.

Tears filled her eyes.

He stared at her.

“I told you this would happen. Remember that.”

She tried to nod, unable to speak since her mouth was full.

**Very.**

**Full.**

“Now, blow me, Elizabeth.”

He set her free, and she did just that.

Her head bobbed, and her hand stroked as she worked him into that heated frenzy. She teased him, despite that warning because she could.

She loved when Chris lost control—in bed.

It would steal his focus, and he would be less worried about her outside their bedroom.

She hoped.

Elizabeth sent goosebumps across his body as she dragged her teeth up his dick. The whole time, Chris was focused on that feeling.

As he moaned, he knew this wasn’t going to work for him. Despite his warning, she was teasing him to get him riled up.

**Pass.**

Chris pulled her up, and she gasped.

Reaching for her gun, he tore it from her lower back, her badge next. He dropped them onto the table in the room and took control.

“Don’t be surprised.”

With that, he bent over, tossed her over his shoulder, and carried her to their hotel bed.

“Christopher!”

His hand landed hard on her ass, and she was lucky she was wearing jeans. Well, she wouldn’t be in a few minutes.

When he tossed her onto the bed, he was on top of her, trapping her. His mouth found hers, and he kissed her, controlling that too.

Elizabeth couldn’t move, and she didn’t want to.

His body had caged her, and she was loving it.

This was her happy place, beneath him.

When he broke the kiss, he bit her ear.

“I warned you. You had to push me, didn’t you?” he asked, leaving one hell of a bite on her neck.

Yes, he marked her.

“Christopher!” she said, knowing that was going to leave one hell of a hickey.

“Looks like you’ll have to cover that up. My bad,” he said, as he grabbed her wrists and held them above her head on the bed with his one hand as his other hand dropped to the belt at her waist. He undid it and pulled it out.

When his mouth found hers again, she was lost in that kiss, until she felt her handcuffs clicking into place.

**Jesus.**

Someone was fast.

When he broke the kiss, she was locked to the bed. Most hotels didn’t have slotted headboards, but this one did, and it was clear that he was using it.

She tugged at them.

Chris pushed off of her body and yanked her pants from her body with a rough pull.

Then, he tore her panties off.

She gasped.

“It’s like you thought I was kidding,” he stated, staring down at his bottomless woman. “I wasn’t.”

She opened her mouth, and he shoved her panties into it before she could talk.

Her eyes went huge.

Chris straddled her body and undid the buttons on her shirt.

“You’re lucky that everyone saw you in this shirt. If you had another like it, I’d be destroying this one.

She tugged at her wrists.

But wisely, said nothing.

Good for her.

Chris was in no mood.

His control was shot to shit, he was sick of thinking of her hurt, and if he could keep her handcuffed to that bed for a month, he’d be happy.

**Hell.**

**A YEAR.**

Chris finally got her shirt open, and he decided to pull her bra down, so he could see her breasts. When she spilled out, he began there.

*Why not?*

He wanted nothing more than to forget.

So, he would.

He caged her one nipple between his teeth and tortured her.

Immediately, Elizabeth's body bowed, as the pleasure overtook her.

She shook.

"Oh, we're just beginning," he said, moving to the other one and doing the same thing.

She whimpered through the panties in her mouth.

When her body shook, and her nipples were tight pebbles, he went lower. At her navel, he teased her, like she'd teased him.

Just the tip of his tongue.

When Elizabeth whimpered, she was more than happy to hand over control. Chris was in charge, and she was happily his submissive.

It gave her calm.

When he began going lower, she watched, and it was when he slipped his fingers across her wet clit, that she knew he was going to be very bad.

"Oh, look. Someone is wet. I think I should have some fun," he said, tormenting her.

Honestly, she looked beyond gorgeous.

Her tits were out, he had her legs spread, and she was locked to that headboard.

*If he could keep her like this forever...*

*He would.*

With just the lightest of touches, he rubbed her clit, making her body ache for more.

"We're going to do this my way until you beg me to fuck you. Then, and only then, will I."

She blinked.

He ground his fingers against her clit, and her body bowed. She knew that he planned on making her scream his name and beg for more.

She was fine with that.

It was how she liked to roll.

What woman was going to turn down multiple orgasms as she was handcuffed to a bed?

*The answer?*

**NO.**

**ONE.**

As he punished her clit, Elizabeth shook.

“More,” he demanded, as he drove her up, took her to the edge, and shoved her over.

She came.

**Hard.**

Only, he wasn’t done.

Chris wanted her to remember this tomorrow when she was sitting with other men, flirting and pretending to pick them up. He wanted this moment to be what she was thinking about.

When her eyes opened, he didn’t hold back.

“Tomorrow, when you’re staring at some stranger, remember this is what you get each and every night,” he said, diving in.

She gasped as his mouth took her clit, and Chris destroyed her control.

He worked her up, devouring, taking, and plundering.

Goosebumps crisscrossed her body as he feasted between her legs.

Chris took no prisoners, as he destroyed her control.

She was forced back up that climb, and over the edge.

**Again.**

“Two,” he said, watching her fall.

Immediately, he started all over again. Someone’s clit was about to be punished. He was driven to this madness.

“It’s all your fault,” he said, only breaking contact for one moment. “You make me crazy,” he said, going back to work.

She shook, and Elizabeth had no control. While his mouth moved effortlessly against that sensitive part of her body, his hand found her breasts, and he was pulling and torturing her nipples.

It took very little time to shove her off again.

She whimpered as she fell, her body awash in that pleasure.

“Three,” he stated, needing even more. “I could do this all day,” he said. “Someone’s going to be sore,” he promised. “Maybe don’t tease me

when I'm already on the edge."

The second her eyes opened, he yanked her ruined panties out of her mouth.

"I want to hear you scream," he said, taking her mouth in one hell of a searing kiss.

As his dick rubbed against her wetness, she tried to lure him in by shifting.

Only, it wasn't happening.

"Not yet," he said, breaking the kiss and moving back between her legs. He pulled her tight, so the cuffs strained, and she was stretched out before him.

"God. The things I'd love to do to you, Elizabeth. I don't think you know how far I want to take things."

She stared up at him.

"Christopher."

He stared down at her.

"I own you. Don't forget it."

Instead of scaring her, that sent a delicious heat through her body. She wanted to be his and only his.

"Say it. Tell me what I want to hear."

"You own me, Sir."

His dick throbbed.

Oh, his sexy submissive wasn't getting him to fuck her quite yet.

Chris went low again, and he left bites along her inner thighs, marking her up.

It was all kinds of wrong, but he was staking his claim.

**She.**

**Was.**

**His.**

Again, he ran his fingers across the delicate bud as he tormented her. She was trying to grind against his hand, and he wanted her so wild that when he entered her, they didn't make love.

They fucked.

"Cum for me again, Elizabeth," he said and then spread her legs further apart to show who owned her.

**HIM.**

She gasped when he lowered himself, nestling in between her thighs to enjoy what was his.

“Please,” she begged.

“Please what?” he asked, his hand crashing down on her inner thigh, scaring her.

Then making her moan.

That delicious slap of heat made her wetter—if that was even possible.

“You are mine, Elizabeth, and I’ve decided that I want to pursue more of what we’ve started. I’ve decided that I don’t give a shit if your father is around. I’m fucking you when I want, how I want, and where I want.”

She swallowed.

“Give me permission,” he said, rubbing his finger over her clit to torment her.

She whimpered.

“Tell me I can take you wherever. The last few weeks, I’ve been holding back out of respect for your father, but you’re mine, Elizabeth. You’re my property.”

She gasped when he slid his fingers into her, and her body bowed in that pleasure.

“Say it.”

“Christopher.”

He used his thumb to wildly stroke her clit, taking her back up that climb until she was on the edge.

“Tell me,” he said, changing up the rhythm so she struggled to get off.

“God! Yes!” she said, handing everything over to him. “I’m yours. I’m your property.”

His dick went painfully hard.

“Then, we begin.”

His mouth found her clit, and he feasted roughly on her. She was already so wet and ready to fall.

She took that tumble, and he offered no mercy.

That was four, and there was so much more to come. He wanted to do truly dirty things, crossing lines, and breaking rules. When he nipped her, **HARD**, she screamed and came again.

He was up, moving up her body, and taking off his destroyed shirt. He waited, staring down into her face.

*The pleasure there...*

It was visible.

Why this kind of relationship worked for them, he didn't know, but he craved control, and she needed to be dominated.

When her eyes flickered open, she could feel his erection throbbing against her.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" he stated, not done quite yet.

She nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"We were exploring our sexual desires and put them on hold. You're asking me to watch my woman, my wife, my world flirt and go speed dating to catch a rapist, but there will be a price."

She swallowed.

"I will need to be given something I want. Remember that night when you couldn't say no? Remember how Tony was there, and you had to let me dominate you?"

She nodded.

"I want that back. That was when I felt secure. When you handed everything over to me, I felt safe."

She stared up into his eyes.

"How did you feel?" he asked.

Oh, she recalled it well.

That had been the hottest, wildest sex they'd ever had. She'd been so out of control with lust when he made her feel like she was safe.

"It made me happy."

His hand crashed down on her thigh, and she moaned.

"Address me how you need to, Elizabeth. At work, we are equals, but in here, you are mine. Remember it. I'm done pretending."

She got wet.

**Again.**

This man could make her crazy, and she was helpless to stop it.

"I felt safe and happy, Sir."

He tormented one of her nipples.

When it popped out of his mouth, she moaned. He was rubbing his erection through the wetness between her legs, and all she wanted was for

him to bury himself in her.

That was all.

“I need to go back there, Elizabeth. Had life and family not interfered, I feel like we would have had an amazing adventure. I want to see what else is out there, and I want to experience it with you.”

She wanted that too.

“Yes, Sir. Please.”

Oh, well, then it was decided.

Chris moved lower. He dove in, finding her clit and sharing what he felt for her.

**Heat.**

**Pleasure.**

**Wildness.**

Chris feasted.

He drove her wild, devouring, and taking whatever it was that he wanted. She was his, and he could make her beg and scream. What he wanted was to explore the plethora of sex that was available to them.

While he had to be strait-laced at work, he could be wild and unpredictable at home.

It was done.

When she was on the cusp of cumming, for the fifth time, he knew what he wanted.

Her ass.

When she was about to tumble, he stopped, getting her to whimper in frustration.

Chris grabbed the cuff key that was on the bed beside her and unlocked her.

“Someone was bad. She’s going to be spanked. Get over my lap, Elizabeth.”

She didn’t hesitate.

Chris sat on the edge of the bed, and she crawled over his lap, resting in place. When his hand came down over her derriere, she gasped.

“Count for me.”

She did what he wanted not so he wouldn’t keep going, but because she wanted him to never stop.

“One.”

His hand landed again.



“Two.”

The third one was even harder, and she moaned in pleasure as she rubbed against his ridiculously hard dick. She couldn't wait until it was between her legs.

This man made her out of control.

“Three,” she said, after catching her breath.

He moved to the other cheek and repeated the swats.

“Four.”

He hit her harder, loving how his handprint was on her pale cheek. His dick throbbed, and he was aware that he should have cum before.

She wasn't the only one who liked to be tortured a little.

**He.**

**Did.**

**Too.**

When he finally came, all that stress and worry would be gone.

“Five.”

When his hand came down again, the crack was so loud he moaned with her.

**God.**

He loved exploring their sexuality.

“Six,” she said, wiggling in his lap. She was horny before, but now, she wanted even more.

Chris was ready.

“Get on your knees, Elizabeth, and blow me. This time, don't tease me, or I'll stop right now, jerk off, and we'll send you back to work horny and unsatisfied. We both know you want me to cum in you.”

Yes, yes, she did.

Climbing off his lap, she knelt between his knees and waited for him to be ready.

Chris gave her permission.

“Now.”

She didn't hesitate.

“Make me cum, Elizabeth, or when I fuck you, I will not have mercy.”

She was torn.

She loved when he was out of control, and she kind of wanted him that wild. So, she blew him.

**Badly.**

Well, not bad, but she kept switching up the rhythm, making him work for it.

Chris leaned back on his elbows, and the pleasure was undeniable.

As his woman's head bounced in his lap, he was out of control. He pictured all the sexy fun they were going to have, and how he wanted to up their sex game.

He was a sucker for a bound Elizabeth.

As he felt the heat rising in his balls, he knew she was tormenting him. Well, someone's mouth was going to be sore. He would let her play her game, and then he'd play his.

As she blew him, he reached into her hair and shoved her mouth down his dick, roughly.

It choked her, and he refused to let her up.

"We discussed this, Elizabeth. I don't play these kinds of games. You are mine, and I gave you an order."

She was running out of air.

Only, she loved the fact that he was in control. Had it been anyone else, she'd fight.

With Chris, she trusted him.

Slowly, he let her up his dick, and the saliva went from her chin to his dick.

That was all he had to see.

Yeah, he should have cum. Now, he was about to suffer.

Pulling her up, she was in his lap, and he pulled her down, burying his cock in her.

She screamed in pleasure and came.

He didn't move, enjoying how her body tried to milk him to the edge and over.

**Not happening.**

He was going to get what he wanted.

**A.**

**Rough.**

**Fuck.**

As she rode that orgasm, he waited. When Elizabeth's eyes opened, he took her mouth in a hot kiss. The tangle of tongues was out of control.

As he broke the kiss, he enjoyed her swollen lips, how warm her ass felt under his hands, and how she was in his lap.

“Now, this is how I like you, Elizabeth.”

She loved how his dick was throbbing in her. Elizabeth had forgotten everything but him, and that was exactly what she wanted.

“How many times have you cum?” he asked, playing with her pebbled nipples. They were tight little buds, and he knew she was loving every second of it.

From the goosebumps to her nipples...Elizabeth was easy to read.

“Six, I think, Sir.”

He smiled.

“Are you sore?”

She nodded.

That made him happy. She'd be thinking about him and how he'd pillaged even when they were apart.

“You're about to be even sorer. Ride me,” he said, as she did just that. She began moving, his rock-hard dick sliding in and out of her.

Chris was in hell.

He wanted to cum so badly, but he managed to hold on. Her body was awash in goosebumps, and she was beyond aroused. With Elizabeth, he'd learned the dirtier, the rougher, and the further down the kinky trail, the more she wanted it.

He was giving them the gift that kept on giving.

Their sex lives were about to go back to insane.

As she bounced, he slapped her on the ass again, hard, and it was all it took.

She came.

“Oh, God!” she shouted, as that pleasure took over, and sent her careening off the edge.

Chris wanted her, and he couldn't wait any longer.

He wanted his dick taking her in some wild, wanton romp in a hotel room on a case.

**God.**

He wished they were home. He had some sexy tricks in their walk-in closet.

Moving, Chris needed more, and he knew what he wanted. Normally, he'd ask, but he was just taking. Picking her up, he flipped her

over and put her on her knees on that bed.

Then, he moved in behind her.

“Teases get their asses taken,” he warned. Then, he nudged her with his dick.

Chris knew that if he didn’t take her, and hard, he was going to die.

So, he took the plunge, deep within her ass.

She screamed, and his hand was over her mouth, muffling the sound.

**Jesus.**

She was tight.

He could barely move, and he loved how she had his handprints on her ass cheeks.

That was so damn hot.

He wanted to dirty this up even more.

Sue him.

He was balls deep in her red ass, and he was finally feeling calm again. He was finally feeling like he could face what was coming.

“Tell me to fuck you, Elizabeth. Use my title and tell me to take what I want.”

He didn’t move.

As she caught her breath, he waited.

When his hand was removed, she didn’t hesitate.

“Please, Sir. Fuck me. I need you.”

Oh, he needed her too.

Chris began moving. He slid out and forced himself back into her, reviling in her gasp of pleasure and pain as he continued to take her.

He knew he wasn’t lasting long.

If he’d cum once, he’d have control. All he had now was his sexy woman on her knees, his dick in her ass, and the need to empty his balls in his sexy submissive.

He fucked her hard.

Chris held nothing back as he watched his rock-hard dick slide into her ass and then out again.

She was whimpering in pleasure as he took her, and he was damn happy. He was in his happy place, in control.

He rode her hard.

Chris was coming close to the end as his balls screamed for release. If he didn't cum, and soon, he really believed he'd die.

When his hand came around, and he stroked her wet clit, he knew they were taking this tumble together.

"I'm almost there," he said, driving his body into that heat as he focused on her red ass.

**God.**

He needed her.

"Come on, my sexy submissive," he said, pinching her clit hard enough to shoot that lick of pain through her body. It did what he wanted.

She fell.

Elizabeth exploded, and her body tore him from the edge as it squeezed down on his dick.

**Jesus.**

He was done.

That heat exploded from her, filling her ass as the pleasure washed over them both.

They fell to the bed, her in front of him, his dick still buried in her ass.

They drifted.

As he lay there, their bodies cooling from the heated sex, he ran his hand over her petal-soft skin.

"I'm in love with a pervert," she said. "Where do I get more?" she asked, breaking the silence.

He moved closer, pulling her into his body.

He nuzzled the back of her neck.

"Oh, I have all you need," he said, leaving kisses there. "I'm going to apologize for being rough, but I need you to know that's a lie. I loved every second of it."

So did she.

She was curious.

"Are you still worried?"

He thought about it.

"Honestly, a little, but I feel like I'm back in control. I know I'm going to be there, and I can keep an eye on my wife," he said.

"I have faith in you, Tony, Jack, and anyone else we put there. Plus, I'm going to have a gun. I swear to you, my love, I'll be okay."

He knew she was right.

Now, he was calmer, and he was going there.

“Are you really okay with returning to our previous scheduled sexual bucket list?” he asked.

She shifted so she was face-to-face with him. His dick was no longer in her body, and she could touch his cheek.

“Yes. I missed it. I liked exploring and finding us. Is it wrong I like the kink, the role-playing, and when you tie me up?” she asked.

Chris would be honest with her.

He’d never lie.

“Had you asked me that before I met you, I’d likely be horrified, but I’ve found we are defining us. I need to have some control, Bethe. Our lives are chaos, and there’s something comforting about having control of this part of our life.”

She understood.

“Is it because I’m the boss at work?”

He nodded.

“Yeah. A strong woman can be hard on your ego. Before you, I wasn’t this man. I was more willing to just hide in the shadows and exist. Now, I’ve found I want more from life than settling. I want the prize. That’s you.”

She was honest.

“My life is exhausting,” she admitted. “Not you, because you’re the only break I get. When I’m with you, Christopher, I don’t want to be badass. I want to hand it over and just feel. I need this,” she said, pointing between them. “I need a man who will let me be Elizabeth LaRue during the day, but when we are in bed, he’ll take care of me.”

Tears filled her eyes.

“It gets heavy, huh?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I’m scared shitless I’m going to screw this case up and lose Teddy. If I do, the Director of the FBI will destroy my career. See why I have to take the risks to get it done?”

He did.

Chris pulled her into his body.

“I understand, and I know you need to do this. I support you. I’m better now. As long as I can be in charge of this, you can be in charge of

that. A relationship is meeting halfway.”

She held onto him.

“We will be fine. You be badass at work, and I’ll be what we both need at home.”

That worked for her.

“I love you, Christopher, but...”

He hated buts.

Chris waited.

“I think I love your dick more.”

He snorted.

Chris didn’t believe that at all.

“I will take care of you, Elizabeth. I’ll make sure that we solve this, and we find him. We’ve got this, Bethe. You can lean on me, and when you need me to be the strong one, I’ll hold you up.”

She gave him a soft kiss.

“You’re my whole world,” she said. “Never leave me, Orion.”

He saw the diamonds hanging against her flesh that she never took off. One was a constellation, and one was a single hanging diamond.

“My sweet Bethe, I’m never leaving you. Let’s go back to work and solve some shit.”

She smiled.

Yeah, she loved this man.

More than life itself.

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

***Down The Hall  
Axelle’s Room***

He was watching her now that everyone else had left, and he wanted to say something.

She could tell.

When she sighed and looked up, their eyes met.

“Jack, please don’t make this personal and something harder than it is. This is what I do daily. I get into bad situations and I get out of them. I’m damn good at my job.”

He didn’t speak.

“I’ve been in far worse places, dealing with far more dangerous men.”

He got up and moved closer to her. When he sat beside her, she focused on him, waiting for him to tell her not to do this.

When he took her hand in his, he stared into her eyes and finally broke his silence.

When you loved a strong woman, you couldn’t shield her. Most of the time, she’d be doing the protecting. With Axelle, he knew he had to accept her for her.

And he was good with that.

“I won’t let him hurt you. I will have your back, Axelle. I know you can do this. I’m astounded at how good you are at your job. I was worried at first, but I know how smart you are.”

It caught her off guard.

That was not what she was expecting.

**Jesus.**

Why couldn’t he be available for more than just some sex and lack of commitment? He’d be the perfect man—she knew it.

“Jack.”

He gave her a soft kiss.

“You’ll be safe. You’re my best friend in the whole world, and I won’t let you get hurt. You can trust in me. I promise.”

**Damn it.**

That was exactly the right thing to say to her.



And it made her fall even more for him.

**The jackass.**

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## *Chapter Nine*

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*Sheriff's Office*  
*Thursday*  
*Afternoon*

With her and Chris back on common ground, a new angle to this killer's potential hunting ground, and all of it found out within hours of landing here, Elizabeth was feeling like she was on top of the world.

Oh, and she was going to run with it.

Now that she was back to work, her personal issues aside, she had faith in her team, and more importantly, her skill.

This gave her hope that she'd be able to stay one step ahead of Theodore Clarkson until she was right on his ass and putting him in handcuffs.

Thinking about handcuffs made her focus on her red ass, the lack of panties, and the man beside her. After cuddling, Chris wanted her to think of him, and he bossed her around.

She'd be lying if she said it wasn't hot.

So wet and pantiless was about ready to get back to work.

Beside her, as she drove, Chris was far calmer, and for that, she was damn grateful.

A stressed man was a stressed woman.

She'd learned that.

One of the good things about Chris was that he was so much stronger than he gave himself credit. He might not see it, but he was the reason she was as strong as she was.

Many times, she leaned on him.

The man was tough, and she loved that about him.

They would be fine as they navigated this case.

*And life.*

As she drove, he placed his hand on her thigh, and that warmth gave her goosebumps.

She smelled like him.

Elizabeth loved that best.

“Thank you for being mine,” he said, out of the blue. “I want to do something special on our cruise. Since you got me that amazing gift, can I arrange for something special?” he asked.

She smiled.

“Absolutely,” she said.

Chris smiled.

He loved that she’d come full circle and would let him buy her something or give her a gift. That had been a long battle.

“Okay, Bethe. I’m going to start working on it.”

She parked and turned his face to hers.

“No more jewelry.”

He laughed.

“Of course, you’d ruin it.”

She laughed.

Then, she gave him a soft kiss.

“We need to get in there.”

He was aware. Elizabeth was ready to get everyone on the same page, and she wasn’t going to back down.

Teddy was in her sights, and Chris just had to hold on and back her up.

“I see the spook is here.”

The sheriff’s car wasn’t far away, and that meant that he was back from talking to the hospital staff about whether or not either of the women had mentioned going speed dating. If they didn’t know each other, like he found out, that meant this was a good possibility.

“I hope he has something,” she said, slipping her gun onto her hip, and wiggling her badge next to it.

“I’m sure he does,” he said, leaning over. “One kiss, and I’ll let you do your thing.”

She let him lead, and when his hand slipped to her crotch, and he rubbed her through her jeans, she moaned.

“Remember who owns you, Elizabeth. Later, I’ll show you again.”

She swallowed and nodded, accepting his kiss.

Damn but the man could make her wet all over again, and there was no doubt that was the plan. She’d never be able to not think about him if her jeans were damp.

“You have my permission to be the boss,” he stated, handing her back that control.

Like a switch being flipped, she blinked and did just that.

“Okay, sexy, ME. Go check Jana and I’ll pop in later to check on you.”

“Deal, beautiful agent.”

And just like that, they did their thing.

She hopped out and pulled on her sunglasses, as she tried not to draw too much attention to herself. Tomorrow, she’d be doing just that, so she needed to stay under the radar.

Elizabeth had emailed Livy and gave her the detailed list of what she wanted. Her friend was already shopping, and the goods would be here by morning.

Thank God.

*Who had time to shop?*

Certainly, not her.

As they both entered the sheriff’s station, Sam was waiting for Chris, and Charlie was waiting for her.

“About time,” Charlie stated. “Someone took a long lunch.”

She smiled at her father.

“Well, it took me a while to get out of my handcuffs and find my panties.”

Charlie stared at her.

“I asked for that. I know better.”

Chris laughed.

What made it funnier was that he knew Charlie wasn’t sure if she was kidding or being legit.

That might keep him from stroking out.

“Hey, Mom,” Chris said, giving Sam a kiss on the cheek.

Sam saw that the boy looked so much better.

“Ready to work?” he asked.

Chris was.

“Bethe, I’ll see you later. I love you,” he said, keeping his voice low since techs were wandering now. They were likely heading out to get some food.

She winked at him.

“Later, ME. Be ready for me.”

That was all she had to say, and he knew that it was all business until they were alone.

They split off, and they headed in their directions. As they were walking away, her father was curious.

“Is he okay?” Charlie asked, knowing that the boy had been inches from a stroke.

“He’s better. He was worried about me. Chris struggles with some things.”

“Like?” he asked.

She glanced over at him.

“Do you really want to know, Dad? You’re the one who gets squeamish with information.”

He dropped his arm over her shoulder.

“He’s my un-son-in-law. Of course, I want to know,” he stated.

“You know that bugs him, right?”

He didn’t.

“Really?”

“Dad, can you just drop the un part? Then, maybe he wouldn’t feel like what we have is temporary.”

Charlie didn’t realize it bothered him.

“Tony Morel did a number on him last time. I want him to be happy, and if I could marry him tomorrow, I would. While the upper management might look the other way at us being a couple, if they found definitive proof on paper, we’d be done. They can only say rumors, not evidence.”

Charlie got it.

“I won’t use the **UN** anymore.”

She patted him on the back.

“Thanks, Dad.”

He continued.

“I worry about him. I love the boy. He’s a part of my baby girl, and I can’t help but be happy when I see him. He watches you like it’s a non-stop honeymoon. You can share what’s happening if you feel like you need help. I’m here for both of you.”

She was aware.

So, she shared.

“He sometimes thinks someone will steal me away.”

He lifted a brow.

“Is he calling my baby girl a cheater?” he asked, hoping that wasn’t the case.

“No, he just doesn’t think he’s a catch. I don’t know how the hell he doesn’t, since he’s amazing, but I don’t know how to tell him that he is more than that.”

“His mother did a number on him,” he stated, saying nothing more about her.

Well, almost nothing more.

“What a witch.”

Charlie tried to clue her in, but that she didn’t have any idea that he was sleeping with Sam, he really didn’t have much hope that she’d figure this out either.

*His girl...*

So smart but clearly oblivious.

Maybe that was for the best.

“Dad, no name-calling,” she stated. “If I can’t call the witch you married one, you can’t call his mother one.”

**Yep.**

That was his point.

“I won’t bust his ass anymore. He’s my son-in-law plain and simple.”

She knew she could count on her father.

Inside the sheriff’s station, they found the man they were looking for. Remington was waiting for them, leaning on the counter. The whole place was pretty deserted. The deputies must have been out on calls.

“I was about to come looking for you,” he said, looking at his watch.

She laughed.

“Yeah, well, you can’t rush some things.”

Oh, he was pretty sure he knew what she was talking about. She had a hickey on her neck, and her lips were swollen.

“I see you had lunch,” he joked, touching his own neck.

She snorted.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m a hussy. Sue me. You do your lunch your way, and I’ll do it mine.”

Charlie said nothing since he’d had some sexy fun himself. He knew where his daughter got it.

“Anyway,” Remington said, “let’s go into my office. I just made coffee.”

She looked uneasy about that.

Coffee, to her now, should not burn a hole in your gut. She was getting an ulcer already and didn’t need to help it along.

He saw the look.

Remington explained.

“I made the good kind. When the deputies leave, I make a pot of stuff that won’t kill your stomach lining.”

She laughed.

“Sold.”

They headed in, and he closed the door.

After pouring them some coffee, he let them add their own powdered creamer. Then, he sat down.

“I bet you want to know about what I found out,” he stated.

She did.

“Well, I went back to the hospital, and I talked to the staff. It seems that both Jana and Carolyn loved speed dating. You were right and the information from Keller was accurate. They never missed a week.”

**BINGO.**

She was betting it was going to be how Teddy found his women, and now, if she could sneak up on him, she might be able to nail his ass down.

Then, bring in sibling number two.

She was curious.

“How long has it been going on?” she asked.

He’d called the hotel and asked on the DL because he suspected the Fed would be asking just that.

“This is like month two. So, this is the eighth one tomorrow.”

Charlie was curious.

His baby girl needed that list of names, and she told him to get them. Now, he had to figure out how.

“If I wanted to find out who attends, how would I go about that?”

“Well, it’s held by the hotel in the bar. The concierge usually handles it, or that’s what he said.”

Elizabeth was curious.

“You didn’t out us there, did you?”

He knew what she was saying.

“No, I just called to get some information and asked about the first victim. I told James Mallery that I had questions for the official report on the woman who fell—nothing more.”

That worked for her.

“He told me he had to look at the sign-up list in his office, so that’s where you’ll find it,” he offered.

“Excellent. We’ll be needing that,” she stated.

Charlie looked at his daughter, and they shared a thought. Like father like daughter. He was going to have to figure out how to get it.

Oh, and he would.

“What do you know about the hotel? When is shift change?” he asked.

Remington only knew because he had calls there about drunken patrons making the place a mess.

“The night concierge is there before seven. I’ve dealt with him a lot when there’s a drunken brawl in the bar. He’s a good guy. He’ll help you out.”

“What’s his name?” Charlie asked, pulling out his little notebook that he used to write shit down for his daughter.

“Donny Shepherd. He was the guy on duty when Gloria was tossed.”

“Okay, Dad. You have this, right?” she asked.

“Axelle?” he asked.

She nodded.

“That seems right up her alley.”

Then that was exactly what he’d do. She was good at a little B and E, so why not use what they had? Gabe had told them to get it done, and Charlie liked his daughter’s world more than his own.

**His.**

**Was.**

**Boring.**

Now, this was the shit.

Elizabeth put that on the back burner, and she focused on the spook.

“Since you went back to the hospital, did either of the women’s coworkers mention anyone bothering or harassing them?” she asked.



She could go there, but that would take precious time—time they didn't really have.

He shook his head.

"No. The opposite was true. They said they had a good time. There's music, a DJ, drinks, and the people are nice. The two women were trying to get the rest of their single coworkers to go."

This was really frustrating since no one was feeling like they were in danger. That was just proof that Teddy was damn good at hide-and-seek.

Like his sister.

"What's our plan for the rest of today. I have to admit that I'm having a good time, despite what's going on. Being a sheriff is boring," he stated, keeping his cover intact.

Charlie laughed.

"I was thinking the same thing. I'm a sheriff in a small town like this. It sucks."

She laughed.

Why?

Oh, she was betting that Remington's job was so much more exciting than either of theirs—but her father didn't realize that.

Charlie was being serious.

He shrugged.

"It's true. You have a cool job," he said to his daughter.

"Uh, I chase people who are nuts," she began. "Never mind. Tony Morel works for you. He's as crazy as they come. I take it back."

He winked at her.

She wasn't wrong there.

To answer Remington's question, she broke down what she wanted to do.

"I want to see the crime scenes, but I need you to get me onto them without being seen."

He lifted a brow.

"Uh, you do?" he asked.

She explained.

"We have three dead redheads, and I'm going undercover tomorrow night at the next speed dating thing."

He stared at her with his mouth open.

Oh, boy.

That was going to stir up some shit. He was beginning to question why the CIA and FBI had sent this woman in. His life was about to get much, much more difficult.

“What?” she asked, seeing the look.

He covered.

“Your ME is going to lose it.”

She laughed.

“He already lost it. We’re good now. Chris knows that this is our job.”

Remington needed them to wrap this up. When he’d come back, his boss had called, and apparently, their timeline was moved up. There was chatter that on Sunday, the terrorists were making their move. He had to be there. Now, he was going to have to call his boss back and update him as to what the FBI was planning.

“What can I do to help? I’m fully vested in this.”

She told Remington her main plan, and caught her father up in case she’d left anything out earlier.

“Because I’m going undercover, I don’t want anyone to see me. That’s why I need you to sneak me to the scenes, minus the hotel. I’m incognito there already.”

He listened.

“I can’t let anyone realize that the cops are onto the speed dating angle. If Teddy finds out, he’ll bolt, and we don’t have his home location or the money yet.”

“I can do that,” he stated.

**Perfect.**

“For the record, you’re going to stand out. You’re pretty obvious.”

She was aware.

Only, she had a plan for that too.

“I can only do what I can do right now,” she stated. “For now, I can wear sunglasses, but I need something to hide my hair. Can I borrow a baseball cap?” she asked, pointing to his coat rack.

He wasn’t sure that was going to work.

“Uh, sure.”

Then again, this wasn’t his rodeo. If the Fed thought she could pull this off, he was good until it risked his operation.

“What do you want to do first? The hotel? Jana’s? Or Carolyn’s again?”

“I think I want to do the order of their deaths.”

He got it.

“The hotel it is.”

He tossed her his baseball cap.

“That should be the easy one since we’re staying there. I can just walk right in. We have to avoid the media, and I saw that it was on the news.”

He was aware.

The last two victims were stirring up the public, and that was also why he needed this handled.

The heat was on.

The last thing he wanted was to be seen on the news. He’d run operations and could be picked out of the media coverage by the **WRONG** people.

He hoped this woman realized that his operation came first, and he’d make sure his stayed intact. It had been two years of undercover work, living as a sheriff to pull this off.

He wasn’t playing.

“I don’t want Teddy to know the FBI is on the ground more than he already does. If he ties this to his sister...”

He got it.

The killer could be spooked, and this town would be a full-on media frenzy.

That would be really bad if he ran.

“Okay, Elizabeth.”

“Then, after we visit the crime scenes, I need to get back here to see if the techs found anything. I want a peek into their phones—not the techs’ phones, the dead women’s.”

He understood.

“Well, then let’s go.”

She pulled his borrowed cap onto her head. She pulled her ponytail out the back loop and put on her shades.

It wasn’t perfect, but it would have to do.

“Okay, let’s head out. I’ll drive,” she stated. “The last thing we need is a sheriff’s vehicle parked out in the open, or if I have to outrun the media.

Our windows are tinted.”

Charlie giggled.

“Again, your job is awesome.”

She snorted.

“You picked Salem, Father, not I.”

She had a point.

As they headed out, Deputy Price was standing there, watching them leave.

“Xavier, I have to run out for a little bit. Hold down the fort,” he stated.

The man saluted.

“Sure thing, Boss! Rex and I can handle it,” he stated, as they walked past. “Can’t we, Rex?” he asked the other deputy.

The man nodded.

Elizabeth shook her head.

They were her age, but they were greener than green. She was shocked that they’d managed to become deputies. They were more like a pack of Pollyannas out spreading sunshine.

**Lordy.**

Her job ruined that.

As they walked, she was hoping to find something helpful at the scene.

Anything at this point would be nice.

“Everything is still intact at the hotel, right?” she asked.

He nodded.

“We turned over jurisdiction to the FBI the second you hit town this morning. It’s your scene.”

Well, at least something was going her way.

“Did you have the town ME’s people swab and do the normal stuff?”

He hesitated.

“What?” she asked.

“I left it up to him.”

Elizabeth stared at him.

“Call him and ask.”

Remington pulled out his phone and called the ME on his home line. When he answered, he asked.

“Doc, I have a question about Gloria Beake’s death. Did your people check the room? I know I had the hotel seal it up.”

He listened.

As they were getting into Elizabeth’s ride, he said very little, and she didn’t like that.

**At.**

**All.**

“Okay, Doc. Thanks. I’ll talk to you soon,” he stated.

“Well, do you want the good news or the bad news?” Remington asked.

“Oh, shit,” Charlie stated. “She’s going to punch you, Son, so bob and weave.”

She stared at him.

“Just give me the bad news.”

“Doc said that because she died on the ground, they didn’t really do an in-depth crime scene search. They did some fingerprints and took pictures, but it’s a hotel room. They are dirty places.”

She stared at him.

“And the good news?”

He smiled.

“Again, I had the hotel seal it up the second the next victim popped up, and you were called. It’s yours to do whatever you want.”

Well, her techs were getting extra work, but that was nothing shocking or new.

“You saved yourself with that one,” she stated, starting up the FBI rental.

He laughed.

“What would you have done?” he asked.

She pulled out of the sheriff’s station.

“I would have lost my shit.”

Charlie knew she wasn’t kidding.

**At.**

**All.**

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\**

***Washington D.C.  
Billiard Room***

They were having a good time.

It was crystal clear that Ethan came here more often than not with his other friends. The guy slinging drinks behind the bar asked about a dude name Jay, and then Lincoln.

Oh, and why he'd not been around as of late.

Was this a gay-friendly place?

Gene couldn't help but wonder at the interaction and that his partner preferred to hang with the guys.

**Holy shit.**

That made him happy.

And horny.

When they got there, they got a pitcher of beer, which was always dangerous when it came to shooting pool and drinking, but apparently, this was how Blackhawk rolled.

Gene liked beer, but the issue was that you didn't realize how much you were consuming.

"So, is this your honey hole?" Gene asked. "They seem to know you," he stated.

Ethan laughed.

"I take so little time off, but I do hide here. Leroy behind the counter is awesome. He's funny as hell, and he can mix a drink."

Gene was curious.

“Who are you hiding from?” he asked. “Gabe?”

Ethan laughed.

“A woman.”

*What the fuck?*

His hopes sank.

**Fast.**

“As in an ex?”

Ethan took his shot and then lit up a cigarette.

There was clearly a lot that Gene didn’t know about the man. He never had a clue he smoked.

He never did it on the job.

Apparently, off duty Ethan and on duty Ethan were two different creatures.

Ethan exhaled the gray smoke, and he sipped his beer. The whole time, he was considering what to share.

He liked to play it close to the vest.

While he’d never talk about his personal life, he liked Gene. The guy was decent, and he wanted to keep him as a partner.

So, he went there.

“I started this disastrous clusterfuck with her because, in order to move up in the FBI, Gabe expects his chosen few to have normal lives. I don’t. She repulses me, and I still fuck her just to keep up the charade. It is like selling my soul to the devil and takes a bunch of booze to pull it off.”

And hope came back.

He pretended to date for the same reason. Oh, he dated, but not women. He lied all the time and said he was in a relationship for the exact same reasons.

This was more hope that Ethan was gay.

*Could Gene bone a woman?*

He wasn’t sure.

*Would he do it for his career?*

No, but Ethan was a whole different creature when it came to loving his job.

Gene was betting he was gay—like him—or at least bi.

Well, hello, Native man.

“She knows where I live, and she shows up. I can’t stand her fucking guts. That’s harsh, but she’s annoying. She wears so much makeup

that you can't see her face. She took it off once, and I didn't know it was her."

He laughed.

Since Ethan was sharing, he did too.

"I brought a woman to the Christmas party I met doing my laundry. She cost me one hundred bucks, but she leaves me alone. Pay for your date next time. Then, they don't stalk you."

Ethan laughed and held out his cigarette.

Oh, Gene took it, simply because Ethan's mouth had been on it. He took a drag and let it out.

"Work smarter, not harder, Ethan."

Oh, he was aware.

Melanie was a big job.

"Yeah, now you tell me. So, to answer your question, I come here to escape her. She parades me around in front of her friends like I'm a trophy. It makes me feel all kinds of dirty. She and her girlfriends are the opposite of what I find sexy."

He got it.

**Men.**

He had to mean men.

"I just want to enjoy my life as I choose it. Now, I have her dogging me like there's a snowball's chance in Hell she has anything I want."

Yeah, he didn't check out women.

**Ever.**

Gene was feeling damn happy.

"Well, I like it here," Gene said, taking a shot. He knocked the ball into the pocket and took his next shot.

Ethan felt like he shared, so it was his partner's turn. As he poured them big frosty glasses of beer, he went there.

"I don't usually do personal, but now I'm going to ask. Are you dating someone?"

He shook his head.

"I mostly do one-night bullshit just to get off. I don't like the complication of someone who doesn't understand how long and shitty my days are. This is our first day off in a while."

It was.

They worked twenty-one straight.



“I am with you on that.”

It was Ethan’s turn, and he squeezed by his partner to take another shot. His sleeves were rolled up, and Ethan was himself. Well, his hair was still pulled back, but there was no tension in his face.

Gene couldn’t help but watch him.

He was hot.

There was something about that mix of being white and Native that gave him this exotic look. He was tan and his eyes had more of an angle to them, but his other features, minus his cheek bones, were definitely Caucasian.

Lordy, but his cheekbones...

They were sharp and gave Gene an erection.

As his partner bent over in front of him, Gene checked out his ass.

**Holy shit.**

He was one foot from him, and he knew what he wanted to do—**EVERYTHING** that he had fantasized about.

Ethan made his shot, they clinked glasses off of each other, and kicked back the beers.

Then, he poured them more beer.

That pitcher was kicked.

When he was going to go get another one, Gene stopped him.

“I have to drive.”

Ethan was genuinely having a good time.

“My place is three blocks away. Worse come to worse, we crawl back, puke, and sleep it off.”

“At your place?” he asked.

He laughed.

“No, the bushes, partner. Of course, at my place,” he said, laughing as he went to get them more.

Well, if he was offering.

Gene kicked back his beer and grinned.

“Keep them coming, Blackhawk,” he said, even when the man was out of earshot. “I like beer, and I’m down for some hot drunken Native sex.”

Gene was a giddy, giddy boy.

Someone was sleeping with his partner.

**TONIGHT.**

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

*Hotel  
Fifth Floor  
Crime Scene One*

When they got there, she already knew there was going to be a huge-ass problem.

The tape was gone.

Not only was the tape gone, but the door was open, and someone was inside cleaning the room.

*What?*

*The?*

*Hell?*

She stared at Remington, and he had the same look on his face.

Pulling their guns, she toed open the door, and she moved into the room damn fast.

As she did, the cleaning lady screamed and threw a roll of toilet paper at Remington.

It clocked him in the head.

“I told you to bob and weave,” Charlie stated, holstering his gun.

His daughter was going to lose it. This woman had just destroyed a crime scene. A crime scene that they didn’t get to strip of all trace due to an ass-backward town ME.

“What are you doing in here?” she asked, horrified by this. She’d planned on having her people come here and tear the place apart.

Now, there was really no point.

**Damn it.**

“I’m cleaning the room!” the woman stated.

**Well, clearly.**

“Who told you to do that?” Elizabeth asked. “This is an ongoing investigation. This is a crime scene. There was tape,” she stated.

Remington agreed.

“It’s in her garbage,” he said, looking in the can attached to her cleaning cart.”

She looked scared.

“I was told to do it,” she stated. “I didn’t mean to make anyone upset,” she said, tears filling her eyes.

She put her gun away.

Jesus in a crashing hot air balloon.

This was a mess.

“It’s okay,” she said, reading her nametag, “Heather, you’re not in trouble. Whoever sent you up here is in trouble,” she stated.

The woman sang like a cage full of canaries.

“It was Mr. Mallery,” she stated. “He put the room on my cleaning schedule,” she said, showing him the clipboard. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

She looked at Remington.

“Well, so much for the daytime concierge. He just threw this investigation in the garbage,” she stated.

**Damn.**

This was a mess.

She had to do her job, and this made it harder.

If there was a receipt, or car keys, or...

She was making herself insane thinking about it.

“Heather, go get him. Tell him the FBI is in the room, and we want to know what the fuck happened. Use that word. It has impact,” she stated.

The woman ran out.

“This blows,” she stated, the second the woman was gone.

As she looked around, it was clear that it was too late. Heather had cleaned it up, there was new furniture, and this was over.

The place was immaculate.

She’d seen the crime scene pictures in the files the coroner had left Chris. The tables were overturned, the chairs messed up, and broken glasses on the floor.

There had been a fight—and this was the opposite.

“I’m sorry,” Remington stated. “I told them this was not to be opened up. I told them this morning that the FBI was taking over.”

She pulled her badge and tossed it to her father.

“Well, Charlie, you get your wish. Play FBI. I can’t blow my cover. Don’t be ridiculous!” she stated, as he smiled like the cat who swallowed the canary. “Ask good questions.”

She headed into the other room as soon as they heard running coming down the hall, she listened from inside the small bathroom.

Charlie was ready, flipping his daughter’s badge open to the shiny metal emblem, and hiding his own sheriff’s star.

When the concierge came in and looked around, he was confused.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I could ask y’all the same,” he stated, crossing his arms over his chest so his shirt pulled up revealing the FBI lettering on Elizabeth’s badge.

The man was staring right at it.

Then him.

“Aren’t you staying here?” he asked the man.

“Oh, I’ll ask the questions,” Charlie stated. Then, he did just that. “We came on in here, and we found that the dang room was cleaned up. What are y’all thinking?” he asked, pointing at the concierge.

“Are you the FBI?”

“Naw, I’m masquerading as a Fed for shits and giggles. Son, do you think I have time to be playing these kinds of games?” he asked.

Elizabeth laughed to herself.

Her father was pretty damn smart. He evaded and literally said he wasn’t FBI, so this wouldn’t bite her in the ass.

Charlie kept pushing.

“Who cleared this room to be cleaned?”

The concierge took a minute, but he owned it.

“When the FBI didn’t stop by this morning, I assumed it was good to go. I have to keep this place running smoothly.”

Charlie stared him down.

“You realize that evidence is now lost?”

The man hemmed and hawed.

“She fell! Why is this a crime scene?” he asked.

Elizabeth prayed her father kept his mouth closed. She didn’t want it getting out that the first victim was part of this.

She began praying.

“Son, the federal government has lots of paperwork. You do you realize by code E one-twenty-seven J when someone commits suicide, I have to fill out the ten-ninety-three B subpage twenty-four?”

Remington was staring at him.

He almost laughed.

The concierge said nothing.

“**NOW!** I have to do five more forms. Holy hell’s bells, man, you made this harder. You had better hope I don’t lock your ass up for interfering with an investigation.”

The man gasped.

“I’m so pissed. Just get the hell out of here! When the FBI says something is off-limits, it’s off-limits!” he stated.

Charlie pointed.

The man took off, the door slamming behind him.

When his daughter came around the corner, she was laughing.

“Dad, you’re too much.”

He smiled.

“Did I do good?” he asked.

“Dad, you really did. I’m proud of you. Now, give me back my badge.”

He smiled.

“I should keep it...”

She pointed.

“I swear to God, Father...”

He took it off.

“Did you like my southern accent?” he asked, winking at her.

“Dad, you have one to begin with,” she stated, shaking her head as she took her badge back.

“I know I keep saying this, Elizabeth, but I love your job.”

She rolled her eyes.

She did too, and she’d like to keep it.

Remington was amused.

“You guys turn on your accents like light switches. You could be CIA.”

Oh, hers came out when she was irritated—like now.

“Let’s look around.”

Charlie knew she was stressed, so he busted her ass like any good father or partner would.

“You do that a little too well,” Charlie teased, knowing damn well she could bite when this cranky.

She didn’t bat an eye.

“Well, when Chris and I play Union soldier and Southern belle, we like it authentic.”

Remington stared at her as if he wasn’t sure if she was kidding or not.

Charlie just laughed.

“She’s busting balls, Son. She’s no belle, and she knows it.”

He wasn’t wrong.

**At.**

**All.**

Elizabeth ignored him and headed toward the balcony. She pulled out gloves and slid the door open, even though the place was wrecked as a crime scene.

Still, it was out of habit.

Looking over the edge, she saw the parking lot, and that was still roped off by tape, ironically.

**Lordy.**

Small towns.

“What are you thinking, Baby Girl?” Charlie asked.

She looked around, and when she saw a chaise lounge there with a big-ass cushion on it, she was curious. She picked it up like it was a body.

“Uh, what are you doing?” Remington asked.

“Well, it’s this cushion or someone picks me up and tosses me,” she stated, sarcastically.

Charlie shook his head.

“One day, Baby Girl, someone is going to take you up on that offer. Trust me.”

She rolled her eyes and lifted the cushion above her head. Then, she hefted it as far as she could. It was maybe fifty pounds, still wet from some rain a few days ago.

They all glanced over.

It fell and landed beyond the area where the woman had landed.

“Okay, what was that supposed to prove?” Charlie asked. “Feeling like wrecking a hotel room?”

She pulled out her phone and didn’t answer.

When she rattled off a text, she had an important question for her ME.

*‘Christopher, how much did the first victim weigh when she was chucked off the balcony. Oh, and I have bad news. The hotel cleaned the first crime scene, and the original ME didn’t have the trace pulled here the right way.’*

She hit send.

Oh, she knew he was going to be pissed.

It didn’t take long to get a reply.

*‘I know that you’re kidding, right? What do you mean? Elizabeth, what the hell? She was one hundred and thirteen pounds.’*

Well, she wasn’t going to that rodeo.

Her ME hated when someone jacked up a body or crime scene.

She put her phone away.

“Okay, Father, now I explain. That cushion is heavy. It’s soaked, and it has to be about forty to fifty pounds dripping wet. I was able to throw it further away from the building than the body fell.”

He stared at her.

“Whoever tossed Gloria had to be pretty strong. She was a hundred and thirteen pounds, and she didn’t land that far away from the cushion—plus, this railing is up pretty high.”

He got it now.

“So, look at my height, and how far I got it,” she stated.

They were staring at her.

In this case, it was best for a scientist to confirm what she was thinking, and she knew he’d be waiting for her to call.

She pulled out her phone and dialed her man. Someone could math better than the three of them.

**Clearly.**

He answered on the second ring.

“What do you mean the crime scene is wrecked?” he asked before anything else.

“The concierge had it cleaned. The crypt keeper ME didn’t have the room swept. The trace you have is minimal. Now, focus for me.”

He suspected he knew where this was going.

“On what, Bethe? I’m not done, so stop now before asking for an update.”

She laughed.

“I’m really not calling to talk autopsy.”

He didn’t believe her.

“Uh-huh. I’ve been burned by that cowgirl before,” he said, knowing the woman he loved.

She was sneaky to get information.

“No, really. I need help with a math problem. I swear to God. That’s why I needed to know how much she weighed.”

Oh, well, that he could do.

“What are you trying to do as the computation?” he asked, pulling out some paper and a calculator on his clipboard.

“When you use big words, you get me all giddy,” she teased.

He laughed.

“Be serious. If you want me to sleep with you tonight, I have to get my work done. My boss is mean.”

She definitely wanted him in bed tonight.

And every night.

“Okay, so how tall would a man have to be to throw a woman the size of the first victim over the railing and have her land where she did?”

He paused.

“How tall is the railing?”

She stood beside it. It came to her breasts.

“Uh, titter high?” she asked, clueing him in.

He laughed, but she could hear the keys of a calculator going.

Charlie just shook his head. He knew better than to go there. His daughter set him up to walk into them all the damn time.



“Gloria was about fifty-one point two kilograms, and the distance she fell was approximately point zero two one kilometers...”

She stopped him.

“Why are you using the metric system?” she asked, busting his ass because her scientist was sexy.

He laughed.

“Because everything I calculate is done in the metric system, Elizabeth, and I convert it for you. We’re the only people who use it in the whole bloody world.”

**Jesus.**

“That’s even sexier.”

“Elizabeth,” her father said.

“Well, it is. What is four feet in kilometers?” she asked her father.

He didn’t miss a beat.

“Something I don’t need to know as an American redneck whose tape measure is in feet.”

Chris laughed.

As did Remington.

“Bethe, the killer would have to be at least five foot nine and weigh more than you do by twenty pounds to make up for the shorter height.”

Charlie stared at her phone.

“Is that legit?” he asked. “Did he just figure out the height of a suspect by how far a body was tossed?”

“Yes. It’s math. You take the...”

She cut him off.

Like with Tony, he’d go off on a science tangent, and she wasn’t math-ing with the clock ticking.

“I love you, Newton. See you when I get done at the scenes. You have the best thing between your ears,” she said, just as her father was going to protest.

He laughed as she hung up.

“Nice save.”

She thought so.

“Okay, so we know for our killer to heft Gloria over the side, he couldn’t be too short, or it would have left her body closer to the building.”

“So, five-nine?” Remington asked. “You’re how tall, Elizabeth?”

“I’m six feet in these boots. They have a good heel. That’s just a hair under my height. I’d say around yours.”

That made it clearer.

“So, someone our height. Okay, well, that narrows it down once we see who was there last week.”

It would.

If Charlie could get that list.

*Speaking of which...*

“I could confiscate that list,” Remington said. “Then we could look up everyone on it.”

She stopped him for two reasons.

“First, the Clarkson’s used fake IDs. They could be wrong and lead us off a trail we don’t need to be on. We have to go with the speed dating angle.”

Well, he’d tried.

“And secondly, we don’t want anyone to realize we are thinking this is ground zero. The media is saying it’s a focus point, but we have to keep our hand close to the vest. If Teddy makes a break for it, I have to chase. I’ll never get a day off.”

He supposed.

She stared down at the cushion.

“Okay, we’ve figured out all we can here. Shall we hit up Jana’s house?” she asked.

Before they could say anything else, the sheriff’s phone rang. He pulled it out and answered it.

“Yes, Xavier,” he stated, recognizing the number. He put it on speakerphone.

All he could hope was there wasn’t another body. With each one, his operation risked being compromised.

“Sheriff, the media is at Carolyn’s house. Her mother is there doing an interview. She’s talking about someone killing people.”

He stared at Elizabeth.

**Well, shit.**

She sighed and didn’t look happy.

Again, that was very inconvenient. The only reason she wasn’t losing it was because she already walked that scene.

Remington wanted an update.

Xavier was new and green, but he was super good at keeping track of people.

“Can you keep an eye on them and let me know when they leave?” he asked.

“Sure thing, Boss. Rex and I are on the scene.”

“Thanks, Xavier.”

He hung up.

“We had better move quick.”

She was aware.

“We also will have to skip that house. There’s no way I can risk it. Let’s do a drive-by of Jana’s house. Once Mrs. Williams is done giving her interview, the media will start to put two and two together. They will be all over the other house. We don’t have a lot of time.”

He knew she was right.

Time was ticking.

This just kicked the game up a notch.

**Big-time.**

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## *Chapter Ten*

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*Jana Katz's  
Home  
Thursday Afternoon*

**T**he coast was clear at the deceased woman's home, according to Charles Riley LaRue. He said so from his spot in the back seat as he continued to play Fed. It was funny to see him get so animated, so she let him have this one.

It was only fair since he'd done a damn good job at the hotel of not blowing anyone's cover.

There was no point trying to stop him. If she stressed it, she'd have an ulcer.

Charlie was living his best life, and she knew that he was sacrificing a great deal by being there. He had a life and career of his own and was putting her first to save her ass.

She appreciated that.

When they pulled down the woman's driveway, this house, much like Carolyn's, was back from the road, and it had a plentitude of trees.

Then again, this was West Virginia, and there were more trees here than people.

She was sure of it.

As they headed toward Jana's house, the police tape was still intact, and that made her feel a whole lot better about this walkthrough.

Knowing they had to hurry so they didn't get caught here, Remington cut through the security tape, and they entered to check it out.

Inside, the place was wrecked—much like the photos from the hotel.

With Carolyn's home, the killer had ambushed her in her bed, but here, it was crystal clear that what her friend had told her was right.

Jana had been grabbed right inside the door.

There was blood everywhere, and the couch was just as bad. While the restraints he'd used were gone, along with the body, the mess was still there.

"Well, he's an animal," Charlie stated.

The one thing he feared most about having a daughter was that this would be her fate. Men were assholes, and he should know. He shared that DNA.

Too many didn't understand the word '*no*', and for that, he feared for his daughter's wellbeing. Add to it that she was beautiful, and it upped his anxiety level.

**Big-time.**

It was one more reason he wanted to be around her as much as possible.

**To.**

**Protect.**

**Her.**

Yes, he knew she could take care of herself, but if he ever came into a room and saw his sweet baby girl hurt, he'd lose his damn mind.

*If she died...*

He'd be gone too.

Beside Sam, she was the only reason he kept going. He was tired, and he relied on her keeping him afloat—whether she knew it or not.

"Yeah, he certainly is," she stated, walking the scene. It was pretty straightforward.

Teddy was a sick, sick bastard.

Then, she thought about it.

"Remington, what was Carolyn tied to the bed with?" she asked.

"Rope."

"And was rope used again here?" she asked the man who had seen the actual carnage.

"Again, yes."

"Dad, do you have rope in your house?" she asked, thinking about it.

"Yeah, I do."

"I don't," she stated. "I mean, I live with Chris, but we don't have rope."

He knew what she was thinking.

"He brought supplies to the last two women's homes."

She nodded.

"I'm going to bet that the first kill didn't get him off like he wanted. He wants them to fight, but not too much. His pleasure and her terror are his

big thing.”

She pulled out her phone and made a call.

Salem, her wayward partner, answered on the fifth ring. She was the only one who escaped the director’s wrath and didn’t have to play this game.

**Lucky.**

**Her.**

Too bad Elizabeth didn’t know how to play the game of ‘*climb the ladder*’. She didn’t want to be at the top—unless it was the list of people who closed their cases.

“Yo. Partner,” Salem stated.

It was good to hear her voice.

“Hey, miss me?” Elizabeth asked. “I hate when Gabe won’t let us play together.”

She laughed.

“He knows you have Charlie. I’ll just ogle the big lumberjack. Where is Mr. Sexy.”

He actually smiled.

“Jesus, Dad. Stop,” she said, shaking her head. The last thing she needed was to see his ego expand.

Salem laughed.

“Hey, Charlie. Miss me?”

When he opened his mouth, she pointed at her father.

“Test me. Go ahead. I have a rich husband. I can pay for a nursing home now.”

It made him laugh.

He winked at his daughter.

Charlie was going to live with her when he and Sam got too old.

Oh, he couldn’t wait.

That would be fun.

“LaRue, you’re no fun,” Salem stated.

“Yeah, if I had a dollar for every time someone told me that, Salem, I’d be rich. Now, riddle me this, Profiler. You know about this case since you showed the last part of the last one. What do I have on my hands?”

She did know the case.

Gabe had given her the profile and told her if Elizabeth called to run with it, even when the head honcho had given her the opposite directives.

“Well, it just so happens I have the file here. He’s loco, sister. Watch your back. He has **ZERO** regard for women. I’m going to say the only women he cares about are his sisters.”

She was aware.

“Well, he tossed one off a balcony and she fell seventy feet alive to the pavement.”

“Ouch. That had to suck.”

That was an understatement.

“How attached is he to them?”

“I’m going to say very attached. He’s protective of them. I went over his family history, and after his sperm donor ran, he was likely the man of the house. They are going to be equally protective of him.”

**Great.**

“So, if he finds out we’ve taken Kitty down?”

“He’ll Mc-lose-it.”

Yeah, she figured as much.

“Here’s something I kinda am leaning toward,” Salem stated. “He hates all women but his sisters, so when he’s with them, I’m going to say he can’t differentiate between a relationship and familial unit.”

“Uh, in English?” Charlie asked.

Elizabeth knew.

“Dad, he’s sticking his dick in his sisters because they are the ones he **LOVES**,” she translated from Salem-ese.

Charlie looked horrified.

“Jesus. That’s all kinds of wrong.”

“The family that slays together, knocks boots together, and stays together,” she stated.

Salem snorted.

**God.**

She missed working with her partner.

“Elizabeth is right. He’s going to have a deep personal relationship with them. They are the only women he trusts and can find value in. He’s likely been having sex with them for a while, and thus why he’s out killing everyone else. Every other woman doesn’t matter. He has what he wants. Them.”

Jesus in a leaky sauna.

This changed the game for Elizabeth. It had been about keeping Kitty hush-hush, but now she really had to do it.

“Well, we need to move fast then.”

Salem agreed.

“He’ll be gunning for you if he finds out. If he gets you, he’ll torture you.”

She figured as much.

“If that happens, I’ll eat my gun, put a bullet in the melon, and put myself down like a rabid squirrel before I let that happen,” she stated.

Her father began sweating since she planned on using herself as bait.

“**ELIZABETH!**” her father said. “I spent all those years trying to keep you alive. Can you try harder?”

She laughed.

“Ignore him. He’s cranky. I made him sit in the back seat again, and it squished up those miles of legs.”

Salem laughed.

“I wish I could play too.”

Her, too, simply because more eyes and one more redhead would be helpful.

“Give me what you have,” she stated.

“He can’t exist without them. They’ve been a unit for so long that if you mess with it, and remove the women, he’ll lose control. His sisters take care of him.”

“Where would he hide jobwise?” Elizabeth asked as Charlie and Remington just listened.

“In plain sight. He’d take a job he could get easily and without much of a background check. That being said, they’ve been on the grift for years, so they likely have **MANY** backup IDs. They will look legit on paper and be a full story. Remember, Kitty was a con woman. She was able to become a whole different person, get hired by a **BANK** in a powerful position. She would have hooked her siblings up.”

**Great.**

So, he could be anywhere.

“For all you know, he could be the sheriff,” Salem stated out of the blue.

They both looked at Remington.



“I’m gonna say not likely,” she stated.

Remington waited for her to blow his cover.

“He’s been thoroughly checked out,” she admitted. “I think we’re good.”

Salem hoped so.

“Well, that’s good,” Salem stated. “As for Teddy, he’s bound to escalate sooner rather than later.

Elizabeth gave her the rest.

“Uh, well, speaking of uncomfortable topics and escalation,” she began, “he’s raping them **AFTER** they die.”

Salem didn’t flinch.

“Oh, some necrophilia and a side of incest. What a life you lead,” she teased. “I’m jealous.”

She knew that wasn’t the least bit true. Salem liked playing profiler and had aspirations of climbing the ladder.

“So, what happens when we take out him, and his last sister finds out?”

She laughed.

“Oh, well, she’s going to lose it too. If you touch any of the siblings, the remaining ones will escalate beyond what you see now.”

**Great.**

Well, then they had to keep Kitty’s lockdown silent until they caught cuckoo number two in this sick game, and then keep his quiet too.

Salem wished she could be there to help, but she knew the director wanted Elizabeth to handle this alone.

Why?

**No clue.**

Gabe had just told her to help on the DL and to ignore the director. Bad things were coming to a head. She could feel it.

“Hang in there, LaRue.”

“I’m trying. Too bad you’re not here. We have a little party planned for tomorrow.”

She told her about the speed dating.

Then, Salem dropped the bomb.

“I’ve done it,” she stated. “It’s fun. You get to meet all kinds of people in thirty minutes.”

Why was Elizabeth not surprised?

**At.**

**All.**

“Girl, slow down.”

“I can’t help myself. I’m looking for Mr. Right. I have this overwhelming need to pack as much fun into my life as possible. You know our expiry date, Lyzee. We will be lucky to get old.”

She was well aware, but since her father looked freaked-out, she closed that topic out.

There was no point in giving him a stroke.

“Okay, well, wish us luck. If I need more, I’ll call you, Salem. Stay out of trouble.”

She laughed.

“The director has me doing shit work. He really wanted you to handle this without a net,” she warned. Salem heard through the grapevine, and she wanted her partner to have a heads-up on this one.

Elizabeth wasn’t shocked.

Gabe had warned her already.

“No surprise there. I hope he’s ready when I boot his ass off a bridge. It’s coming.”

She laughed.

She could see it happening.

“See you, partner. Call me if you need me. I’ll be available all week. Tip your servers.”

She laughed.

Her partner was nuts, but she genuinely liked her. They were opposites, but they attracted.

With that, Elizabeth hung up.

“Well, that was **NOT** encouraging,” Elizabeth stated. “We have to keep him from escalating and finding out about his sister. Then, we have to keep Letty from finding out about the other two. This is one hell of a balancing act.”

Charlie wished he could help even more, but this was on his baby girl.

As she walked around the room, she was staring out at the trees.

“He stalked them,” she stated. “He’s working his way through the women, and I’m betting he’s watching on his down days. The two women

he killed lastly, were both around the same time. The other one was later. Why?"

Charlie tried to help her out.

"Maybe he spent more time with the first one. He did get into her room, and she came back later. He was moving on the fly if he met her at the speed dating thing."

**Good point.**

So, he was waiting there watching? Or was he leaving the bar and saw her?

Those were things they couldn't answer.

**Yet.**

In time, she might be able to, if she got lucky.

As she walked around the woman's home, nothing was out of place except for where the crime went down.

It proved to her that the killer was all about that one act.

**Control.**

He wanted to break her.

"Yeah, he really hates women," she stated. "He didn't trash the place or dig for loot. The damage will all be from the attack. He wanted her to fight. He got off on it. I'll bet on it."

He was definitely sick.

"We know Kitty told her brother about the money," Charlie stated. "The call and the window," he reminded her.

She recalled.

Kitty had given them the heads-up, so she really hoped Axelle found that money. They needed to locate Letty to get the last sibling.

"Why no stealing?" Remington asked.

She knew.

"He's not worried about survival. He's got his sisters to take care of him. He's the weak link. If we can get him in, we can likely get the black widow."

Charlie hoped so.

When she was done, she stared at them.

"Let's get back to the morgue. I want to see what was on their phones. I'm curious to see if the killer wooed the women, or if he changed up his game after having to toss one off a balcony."

That worked for Remington.

*And Charlie.*

He wasn't thrilled with his daughter out and about, especially if she was playing dater tomorrow.

"I have a feeling that once I get a line on him, we're going to close this fast. He's going to move quickly, and I'm going to cut him off at the pass. Then, I'm going to neuter Teddy."

"How your mind works is very interesting," Remington stated.

He was shocked the CIA didn't fight harder to win her away from the FBI. She was incredibly driven and motivated.

She laughed.

"It's a mire of crazy with a floating life raft that's sinking fast," she stated. "Luckily for me, I adapt quickly."

He hoped so.

Because tomorrow night was coming fast.

And so was the operation he couldn't blow.

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

***Morgue***

***Thursday***

***Late Afternoon***

When they pulled up, she got out and the two deputies were all over the sheriff. It was clear they needed positive affirmation basically every damn day.

They were **UP HIS ASS.**

Then again, that was nothing surprising.

Her father's deputies, well, Tony Morel, were exactly the same. He had to get a gold star to feel like he did his job that day. That had to be exhausting for Charlie.

To signal they were going in, she pointed toward the morgue, and he nodded, gesturing that he had other issues to handle.

This was where they parted ways.

**For now.**

It was coming up on five, and they were likely switching shifts here, and at the hotel.

She knew her father was going to be busy tonight with Axelle, and she needed to cross the preliminary shit off of her list. Today was a long day, and she couldn't slow down.

**Not.**

**Yet.**

She needed that speed dating list to get a jump on what was coming.

Later, she'd be on her computer eliminating anyone she could, and as quickly as she could.

The whole team would.

It wasn't going to be a fun night. Normally, she'd get some sleep, since the chase was on, but with these cases, they had three people and very little time.

When she headed into the morgue, she saw her man standing there, and she had an inspiration.

He was working so hard, and she knew that with their earlier conversation, he needed to feel like he was validated in her world.

It took a second, but she opted to prove it.

Fuck the rules.

The director of the FBI was gunning for her, the CIA was up in her cases, and she was going to play the odds.

She knew the FBI needed her, so it was time.

Besides, she was no fool.

When you hired smart people, they caught on to the subtle hints around them.

"Hey, team," she stated, walking across the morgue, right to Chris, and into his body. Then, she took control, catching him off guard.

When she jumped up, wrapping her legs around his hips, he had just enough time to drop his clipboard and brace himself.

**For.**

**The.**

**Kiss.**

It said it all, and she held on as she showed him exactly how much she missed the man.

**In front of everyone.**

Chris held on, and thankfully, she was blocking his erection in his scrubs because he was a man and helplessly in lust with this woman.

*Still...*

*What?*

*Was?*

*This?*

When she broke the kiss, the entire room broke into applause for them and stood.

Immediately, Chris broke into a sweat—not because she was kissing him, but due to the terror of what would likely be happening.

They were now outed.

“What are you doing?” he hissed, his eyes wide in fear.

She played it cool.

“I’m saying hello.”

“Elizabeth! Did you hit your head?” he asked as the entire room giggled.

**Oh, Jesus.**

This was bad.

Chris was trying to figure out how to downplay this to save both of their jobs working together.

He got her off of his body and pulled her by the arm into the little office, ignoring the techs finding their impromptu kiss entertaining.

Once inside, he stared at her.

“Elizabeth! We can lose our jobs! Have you lost your mind? They’ll separate us!”

She stared at him.

Well, this wasn’t exactly the response she was expecting, and she’d be lying if she said it didn’t sting a bit.

Chris needed to make up his mind and get off this rollercoaster.

“Let me get this straight, Christopher. You want the world to know I’m yours, but you don’t want the world to know I’m yours? How am I supposed to navigate that? You tell me how irritated you are when someone hits on me, techs included, and when I definitively put a stop to it, you’re appalled. Do I embarrass you?”

He stopped her.

It wasn’t that.

“Bethe, Sweetness, I love you, but our jobs...”

She shrugged.

“I’d lose mine for you,” she said. “In a heartbeat, I’d turn in my badge to protect your heart. It hurts you pretending, and I can’t swallow that. What wouldn’t I do for the man I love?”

His heart skipped.

“Sweetness,” he said moving closer to her. “I can’t ask that of you,” he stated.

“If our jobs weren’t on the line, would you care?”

He didn’t hesitate.

“No.”

“Here’s something you may or may not have thought about, Christopher. The FBI hires really smart people. I’m willing to bet most of the techs out there suspected or already knew. You stare at me all of the time, and I’ve copped a feel a few times, not thinking about it.”

His heart was slowing down.

She was right.

“If they haven’t gossiped or made comments, maybe it’s safe to say they love us as much as we love them. I’d protect them to the death, and they respect us. I am willing to put my trust in them and give you some peace.”

**God.**

He’d love to have some peace.

They’d made a few mistakes along the way. He’d called her ‘sweetness’, and she’d said, ‘*I love you*’ in parting. They were horrible at keeping up the ruse.

**Clearly.**

Elizabeth reassured him.

“Gabe won’t fire us. I’m willing to bet that he won’t separate us either. We work too well together, and we’ve closed every single case that

he has thrown at us, and there have been damn hard ones. He wanted to, but after you saved me from the Carnival killer, he saw you could have my back when I'm working alone."

She had a very valid point.

Since that case, Gabe kept his comments to himself, especially after their case in Paris when he wouldn't leave Gabe behind.

"So, my love, let them talk. I'll call his bluff. If it means keeping your heart intact, fuck it. Let him try. The director has been up to some shady shit, like that operation in Paris with the CIA. We have shit on him that is far worse, and I'll leak it to the media. As for Gabe, I'll hit him where it hurts—his wife."

Chris felt better.

A tiny weight lifted, and he wouldn't have to hear the techs talk about her like she was some eligible bachelorette. He could enjoy their relationship out of the closet.

**She.**

**Was.**

**His.**

Chris wanted the world to know it too.

With relief, he rested his forehead against hers.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

"Doctor, you're the best thing in my life. I'm beyond sure. If it takes the pressure off of your heart, calming you, let them talk. I'm getting a better deal. You have an amazing heart and a fantastic dick. I will tell them that if need be. I have pictures."

He laughed.

"I love you, Elizabeth. I love every single thing about you. Don't forget it."

She wouldn't.

"Back at you, Newton. Now, if we don't go out there, they're going to think you're having sex with me on this really awkwardly small desk."

His eyes went huge.

"Will Charlie run in because I can be fast so we don't have to lie?" he asked, teasing her.

She laughed.

Oh, had they not just had wild, hot sex in the hotel, she might be more than willing to do just that.



Only, it was work time.

*Plus...*

**She.**

**Was.**

**Buried.**

“I will have to take a sexy raincheck on that offer, since my daddy will kick that door in,” she stated.

Well, that was an erection killer right there.

“Damn,” he joked.

“Come on.”

Heading out, she had Chris’ hand in hers. Then, she whistled, getting everyone’s attention.

It was time to reinforce her bond with the people around her. When they settled down, she was honest.

“We are a family. I would die for every one of you if someone was pointing a gun at you. I would save you, and so would Chris. We are a team, and you deserve to know that we are a couple. The FBI doesn’t want us working together, but I trust all of you. If you blab, we could lose our partnership.”

No one said a word.

From the serious looks on their faces, it was clear that they didn’t want that.

The odds were in their favor.

Chris was a good boss, and the techs liked him.

He wasn’t a dick, and he didn’t talk down to them like some of the other MEs.

That went far in their world.

Too many people overlooked the techs.

They didn’t.

“I believe that you guys already suspected that we were in the middle of a relationship. In fact, raise your hand if you think the sexy ME was hot for the investigator.”

Everyone raised their hands.

**EVERY.**

**SINGLE.**

**PERSON.**

Tony raised two.

Then, as if to prove a point, money began exchanging hands. Clearly, they had a betting pool going on them.

Tony was thrilled.

“I won big on this one. I had Elizabeth getting sick of pretending and outing you both!” he said, spinning on his chair like a nut.

It made her laugh.

*These crazies...*

She loved and respected all of them. They were their people, and that made her good at her job. She was only as strong an investigator because the scientists behind her were damn good.

She looked over at Chris and touched his cheek. It was chilly from being in the morgue.

She loved him enough to risk it.

He was hers and always would be.

“See? We go from here. We keep it professional, and we keep it honest. I’m in love with you, and I don’t care what Gabe does to me.”

Charlie was grinning from his seat on the metal table, and Sam was too.

It appeared that their baby girl was making a stand, and he was proud of her. She got that moxie from her momma—not him.

Chris simply stared at her.

**Holy shit.**

Chris didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

The pressure was off in one aspect, but now ten times as much in another.

He had to put his faith in Elizabeth.

And hope for the best.

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## *Chapter Eleven*

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*Damascus*

*Thursday*

*Late Afternoon*

*Same Time*

**H**e couldn't get home quick enough. Well, not to his home, but to his grandfather's home. Callen had the best day of his life, as of late, and there were only a couple of people he wanted to tell.

First would be his father, Timothy.

Then, his brother, had they been talking.

Callen wasn't even bothered that he could only tell one person. He was the most important person in his world, and the only person to always be there for him—no matter what.

As his truck slid to a stop in the old man's driveway, he hopped out and began calling to him.

He knew that at this time of the day, his grandfather was likely making something to eat or in the tipi with the peyote and spirits.

When his front door opened, Timothy came out drying his hands.

"Son, what's wrong?" he asked.

Callen said nothing, but instead, he ran at the man and hugged him.

Timothy held him as he vibrated with excitement.

Yeah, this was new.

Callen blurted out the words.

"Dad! I got a promotion. I'm going to be the chief of police!

William is retiring, and **HE. PICKED. ME!**"

Timothy laughed and patted his boy on the back in happiness for him.

This was a blessing, and he knew it.

Timothy had been in his cabin, praying to the Great Spirit that something would keep Callen going.

He'd been worried about him.

Plus, keeping that whore, Kaya Cheek, away was a pain in his Native ass.

“Son, that is wonderful! I knew you would do great things,” he stated.

“Dad! There’s a raise. I’m going to have more money. We can fix your home, and I can get a better vehicle!”

He touched his sweet boy’s face.

He was a good man.

Callen had a sweet and tender heart.

He was gentle and kind. His grandson didn’t think about himself but always thought about his family. There was no one with a bigger soul and sense of compassion than this man.

It was why he loved him so much.

It was why he had fought so hard to save him.

Callen would grow to help even more people in his life—whether he knew it or not.

This was only the beginning.

“My boy, that is absolutely fantastic. You deserve it. No one works harder than you, Callen.”

He was beaming.

“Today is the first day in a very long time where I don’t feel like it’s coming apart. I’m going to be the chief of police, Dad. I actually made something of myself.”

Timothy wasn’t shocked.

“I knew you would.”

“It might take a year or two to learn it all, but I can do it,” he stated. “William believes I can do it. Today was the best day at work, and I had to tell you!”

Callen was so happy.

Timothy could count on one hand the times he’d seen him feel like this. They were far and few between, and that hurt him as a father and grandfather.

“We should celebrate,” Timothy offered. “Come in and I’ll make you something to eat. We’ll have dinner together. Every promotion deserves a celebratory dinner.”

Callen accepted.

Inside, he toed off his boots and followed the man into his kitchen. He already had food prepared and two plates.

“Uh, you knew I was coming?” he asked.

“The smoke,” Timothy stated. “I knew you’d have good news, but I wasn’t sure what.”

He laughed.

Of course, he would know.

This man was, and always would be, the all-seeing Shaman.

Sitting, Timothy sliced off pieces of roast, and placed it on each plate, and then served him up some vegetables.

“There is dessert too,” he stated.

Callen lifted a brow.

“Please say cookies,” he stated.

Timothy laughed.

Here was the happy boy he once saw thriving before his brother and he had that falling out years ago.

“You know I made you cookies. Chocolate chip.”

Callen grinned.

“Today is a good day. I just wish I could tell Ethan. That’s my last thing to make it better. We used to always share when something good happened.”

Callen’s smile faltered.

Timothy stepped in before it was ruined.

“Son, he will come around. I told you good things were coming. Have faith in this old man.”

Callen shrugged.

“The sad part is, Dad, even after he bailed on me, and dumped me in *New Orleans*, I’d forgive him in a heartbeat. I’d take him back because I love and miss him.”

He reached over the island and touched his son’s cheek.

“That’s because you, my boy, are the healer and protector. Your heart is pure, and you are the one who mediates and solves. Your brother loves you. He misses you too.”

Callen shrugged.

“He does, CJ. I know my boys. I know everything about them. They are my children. I raised you. I know that Ethan would rather be with you than not. He just hates the world right now.”

“I wish I could help him.”

And there was the boy he loved.

**Back.**

**From.  
The.  
Brink.**

“Callen James, one day, there will come a time when you will have to forgive him, and you will. There will come a time when he comes to you asking for forgiveness, and you will give it because you are a good man.”

He didn’t doubt that.

His whole soul felt fractured when he lost Ethan. He couldn’t explain it. It was more like losing a partner and his other half than just a blowout with his brother.

“Should I find him and talk to him, Dad?” Callen asked as they carried their food to the table.

Timothy sat and stared into his son’s eyes.

“No, my boy. You’ve done all you can. It’s time for your brother to face his demons, make his choices, and figure out what he needs to do. You can’t be your brother’s keeper. I will step in to keep him on the path if need be.”

“Someone has to save him, Dad. Someone has to keep him from losing himself.”

Timothy picked up his water glass and toasted his son.

“She will, Callen James. She will. Trust me. The raven will return, and when she finally does, it will begin a new era for our family. The Blackhawks are destined for great things. Believe, Callen James. Everything will change.”

Callen clinked his glass off of Timothy’s and believed the man.

He was, after all, the Shaman.

And in these woods, his word was gold.

*West Virginia*  
*Morgue*  
*Late Afternoon*

Elizabeth knew that they were working against a strict timeline when it came to catching Teddy Clarkson. If they wanted to bag him before he found out about his sister being caught, they had to move fast.

It would take a village on this one.

While sometimes, it was her solving a case, and sometimes, it was the forensics team, this time, they all had to be on the same page.

It was that damn vital.

One mistake, and Teddy would be in the wind. That was something that they couldn't let happen.

Not on her watch.

If he ran, he'd alert Letty, and she'd never be caught. The money had to be somewhere, and one of the last two siblings had to know where it was.

She'd bet on it.

Their jobs hinged on finding it.

Gabe would be big-time pissed if they dropped the ball, and she had to make sure that didn't happen either. After just coming out as a couple, they needed to close every case, every time.

Or they were done as a team.

So, it began.

"Techs, I know this is out of your scope of responsibility, but who here wants to take a little field trip to a bar?"

They looked at her.

They looked at each other.

Then, they stared like deer in headlights.

It was amusing if nothing.

"I'm being serious. I know you think I've completely lost my nut, but I haven't."

A few techs raised their hands, and it was clear they thought this was some kind of trap. They were not supposed to leave the lab.

*Or morgue.*

*Or crime scene.*

Elizabeth was pretty strict about it, especially after Violet's death in *New Orleans*.

Well, she'd take what she could.

"Perfect. Here's why I need a few of you," she said. "Once upon a time, a killer was targeting redheads. He was killing them and raping them. So, the lead investigator found out that he's using a bar and speed dating as a way to pick them—or so she believes."

They were listening.

**God.**

*This group...*

She loved her job.

Never let that not be said.

"So, she and her CIA friend had to go undercover to catch the killer, but she needed backup."

Again, they began looking at each other.

"Yes, you guys. I need to fill that bar with people we know aren't homicidal lunatics. I need to make sure the people there can watch mine and Axelle George's backs."

They began smiling.

It was clear she wasn't teasing them. There was going to be a field trip, and no one liked them more than smart scientists.

She'd learned that from Chris and Tony.

One raised his hand.

She pointed.

"Yes?"

"So, we get to go to a bar, drink, and just watch you in action?" he asked. "Outside the lair?"

She laughed.

"Yes, outside the lair," she said, waving her arm to encompass the room.

All of them began grinning at the prospects of being let out of the morgue to have some fun.



“Here’s the thing,” she said, pointing out the female techs who were redheads. There weren’t many, and while she was willing to dance with this devil, she wasn’t risking them.

“The females have to stay in. I know it’s sexist, and some of you could kick a man’s ass, but I can’t have him being distracted from the bait and taking one of you guys. Gabe would skin me alive.”

They booed.

Yeah, she booed Gabe a lot too.

She sweetened the pot.

“I’ll buy the ones stuck inside some dinner and even dessert. Who wants baked goods?”

The smiles were back.

“I know you aren’t accustomed to being in the field, so here are the rules. **DO NOT** engage a crazy. He may look normal on the outside, but he isn’t. He’s a psychopathic nutbag. **DO NOT** blow our cover,” she added. “You don’t know me, you don’t recognize me, and you don’t know my name.”

They were making notes.

**Holy shit.**

The nerds would inherit the world.

*Just not her world.*

Tony slid over.

“What about me?” he asked. “Need a date?” he asked, grinning now that he could bust Chris’ ass even more.

Chris shoved him back to his corner with his foot. Tony slid into a table on his rolling chair.

He laughed.

“Someone is testy.”

“She’s being serious,” Chris stated. “Hers and Axelle’s lives are in serious jeopardy. This killer is murdering women and then raping them. He’s sick, as you’ve seen. As her team, it’s our job to be serious and keep her alive like she does for us every time we are on a case.”

Tony rolled back over.

“I wouldn’t let anything happen to Elizabeth. When that drug dealer tried to kill us all on that one case, she protected us. He was going to kill us,” he admitted. “She kicked his ass and saved our lives. We owe her,” Tony said, collectively.

The team agreed.

The techs moved closer to show her their support.

Elizabeth had no doubt they'd keep an eye on her, but could they not blow the operation?

That was the question.

"We will help," the one male tech stated. "I'm observant, and I have a photographic memory."

Another spoke up.

"I may be a nerd, but I'm really good with spotting things out of place."

Another chimed in.

"We all have guns..."

She stopped that right there.

Oh, Lordy, that was the **LAST** thing she needed. A room full of armed techs drinking?

**Hell.**

**No.**

"No guns," she stated. "If our killer, who is a watcher is there, he'll be looking for cops. The second two killings were on the news. You go in with **NO** badges and **NO** guns."

They shrugged.

"No chemicals to make bombs, no bugs, and no sharp pointy implements. Got it?"

They booed again.

*This group...*

She had to cover her bases, just in case.

"Okay, so tomorrow night, we will keep working here, but we'll make sure the female techs have protection. Then, the men will head to the bar. You are allowed one drink. **ONE** alcoholic beverage, so get ready to switch to water or soda. I can't be worried you're going to get shitfaced drunk and blow my cover."

They all agreed.

She focused on Tony.

"As for you, and I can't believe I'm saying this, Anthony, but you get to be a speed dater. You and Chris will be joining Jack. You are to talk to each of the women and get to know them. If you think they are a viable victim, we'll all be mic'd. You'll report it to the van that will be outside."

He grinned.

“**TALK**, Anthony, not jump, not date, and not get numbers to make this a mess. You are **NOT** allowed to sleep with any one of them.”

He pouted.

And crossed his fingers behind his back.

“Fine, but that’s not fair, **MOM**.”

She shook her head.

“Want to stay here? I can ground you, Anthony, solely based on the fact you are the one who tends to pick up murder victims more often than anyone else here.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Apparently, his radar was whack. If only he could use that for good. Then, it might not be so damn annoying.

“I’m in,” Tony stated. “I won’t make a mess of it,” he added. “I promise.”

That worked for her.

“Okay, now that we’ve discussed that, we need to move on. A little birdy told me there are phones from the dead women’s homes and hotel room. I need them.”

One of the techs went to the evidence box and unlocked it. Pulling them out, he passed them off to her.

Pulling out gloves, she put them on and placed the phones on the table. Charlie moved closer, and they began checking out the phones.

She opened the one and began scrolling through the messages sent to Gloria Beake from her friends.

They were the normal ones.

There were messages about her boyfriend, them meeting up for a girl’s weekend, and then the texts from Reba and Randa asking where Gloria was that morning.

Yeah, there were no odd numbers, calls from a stranger, or anything that led her to believe someone was picking her up for some *‘fun’*.

Charlie shook his head.

“Nada.”

Yeah, unfortunately.

“Well, he didn’t contact her to hook up—unless he had the wherewithal to delete them after killing her. Since we know she went over the railing alive, I doubt he hung out.”

He agreed.

“The adrenaline rush alone...”

She was aware.

Then, something occurred to her.

“Did the police pull any security footage?” she asked the techs who were nearby processing trace.

The head tech came over.

“Yes, the town ME had his techs get it. We have it if you’re interested. I will say we scanned it, and you’re not going to like it.”

Oh, she didn’t like that.

**AT.**

**ALL.**

“Why?” she asked.

He went to a computer and began typing in a password. When it went to one of their laptop screens, she watched.

And then realized why he said what he said.

There were **NO** facial shots.

“Damn it. He’s managed to avoid the cameras. He knew right where to stand.”

He fast-forwarded it.

She noticed the time was one minute to one. The man came out of the woman’s room, baseball cap pulled down, jacket on, and he headed down the hallway in the opposite direction to the stairwell where there were no cameras.

**DAMN.**

“He hauled ass since her TOD was around one,” she stated. “Yeah, he studied this place. I need video from days before, so I can see if we caught him.”

As the words were just out of her mouth, the morgue door opened, and in came Remington.

He looked annoyed.

Well, join the club.

“I’m sorry about that. I had to get the night shift set up. They tend to think guarding donuts is a priority.”

He stopped.

“What?” he asked when she was staring at him.

Then, he saw the video.

“Hotel?” he asked, recognizing the footage.

She nodded.

Elizabeth wanted his opinion, since he was a CIA spook, and was likely good at evading cameras.

“Replay it.”

The tech did.

Remington watched and knew what he was going to see.

“So that was useless.”

She nodded.

“He definitely knew where the cameras were. I was just saying how I wanted footage from days ago. He scoped out the area. He knew where the danger was, and he avoided it.”

“Well, I have bad news. Again.”

“What?” she asked, hating this.

The ME had told him this after the death. He’d been working at the back of the building, and the ME had wanted the same thing for his report. He’d wanted to see if there was video at the back of the building.

“The hotel has footage, but it is only for twenty-four hours. It records over itself. The only reason I was able to get my hands on that was I got it from the night concierge. You have everything they have.”

**DAMN** again.

“Sorry,” he offered.

Well, that was just how shit happened sometimes, and she had to keep going.

Teddy was smart, but she and her team were smarter.

She’d bet on it.

“Well, then back to what I was doing,” she stated, as the tech shut down the video.

“I’m going through phones to see if he contacted her.”

Remington moved closer.

“I was thinking about it. If he’s contacting his sisters, why don’t you just trace his phone?” he asked. “We have the technology.”

She was aware.

“When someone took down Kitty,” she said, looking at her father, “she went down on her phone in her pocket, and broke it. The FBI pulled numbers, but we can’t use it to track her. As for anything incoming, he’s shutting off his phone before they can trace it.”

He got it now.

They had to get him to keep his phone on long enough for a trace.

“Well, it was a thought.”

It certainly was.

Grabbing Carolyn’s phone, she went through the messages, and there was nothing in them from a stranger.

Elizabeth was beginning to believe that was **NOT** how he found them.

She was leaning toward good old-fashioned stalking.

She had texts from friends, she had texts from her family, but nothing when it came to a message asking for a meetup with a potential speed dating buddy.

“Maybe you’re off,” Remington said. “Could the speed dating be a coincidence?” he asked.

She hoped not, and she didn’t think so.

If it looked off, and it felt off, it was off. That was one of the investigator’s cardinal rules. Her gut was saying that little fun fest was somehow involved.

With the time constraint, she was rolling the dice.

Until they had something that said otherwise, she had to keep pushing.

“I doubt it,” she stated. “There are no coincidences,” she added. “All three of the women were in that bar, and all three of them were there speed dating. That’s our only constant so far. The hospital was a dead end. I’ll get the information, and I’ll run with it.”

He said nothing else.

This was her case, and he was just grateful that she was trying to move it along for him. He didn’t want a serial killer running around in his town while he was trying to run a CIA op. The pressure was on from his bosses.

She put that phone away, and Charlie was already going through the last phone belonging to Jana.

When he grinned, she paused.

“What?” she asked.

He showed her the phone. There was a text from someone who appeared to be her ex.

**The truck driver.**

Oh, and it was telling. It was from weeks before, likely when the speed dating began.

***‘Answer your phone, Jana. I know you’re out fucking around at that dating thing. Don’t make me drive there. We’re going to settle this now!’***

She read it out loud for the rest of her team.

All of their eyes went huge.

Again, one more reference to speed dating.

Coincidence her ass.

“Where did you find that?” Remington asked, reading over Charlie’s shoulder.

“Well, I went into blocked numbers, and I unblocked it. That was the last message he sent over a month ago.”

“When the speed dating began?” Remington asked.

They both nodded.

It looked like the ex, Kenny Murdock, was moving his way up the list of suspects. Being a truck driver would be the ideal job for Teddy. He could move around the state, much like the body counts seemed to show, and he could pose as a boyfriend for cover.

**Interesting.**

Someone was getting a visit as soon as he was back or out of hiding. If this was Teddy, she was willing to bet he wasn’t really driving, but using that as an excuse to create mayhem across West Virginia.

Yeah, tomorrow, she’d be waiting for him.

Now, more than ever, Elizabeth had to believe that the dating funfest was her ground zero for Teddy. If Kenny was really Teddy, this showed he knew about the location.

Elizabeth took a picture of the message so when she talked to the ex tomorrow, she’d have ammunition against him. She was going to go in hard, and if this was Teddy, she should be able to read him.

*Right?*

As she handed the evidence back to the tech so it could be put away, she focused on Chris.

“You rechecked the autopsy on Jana. Did you find anything new that might help me out?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“The town coroner was spot on. He nailed it, and I don’t often get to say that. TOD is what he said, COD is what he said, and I’m sorry, but there’s nothing new to add.”

**Great.**

Well, at least she’d get to sleep beside him tonight.

“Techs, how’s it going with trace?” she asked.

The one tech headed back over.

“We found semen and we’re cross-matching it as we speak. It’s likely going to match the semen found already on your first victim.”

She wouldn’t doubt it.

“And we are running it against Kitty, right?”

He nodded.

“Doctor Leonard wants everything run against her sample—just to be sure.”

Yeah, because she didn’t want any surprises where it turned out this wasn’t Teddy—or he had a helper. That was the last thing she needed.

Her job was on the line, as were Jack and Axelle’s. They had to find that ten million, or they would swing.

“Okay, thanks. So, I’m going to go on record and say this,” she stated. “I hate when we know the killer upfront. It makes it harder.”

Chris laughed.

“Someone write that down. I clearly recall Elizabeth asking the crime-solving Gods to give her a case where she knew the killer upfront.”

She snorted.

He wasn’t lying.

She’d asked, and she’d received.

Oh, and it sucked.

“I will never do that again,” she stated. “Clearly, I have no damn sense. What higher power is going to listen to me?”

He was amused.

Elizabeth continued.

“Okay, techs, the good news is we likely won’t have a body until after tomorrow’s speed dating. The bad news is that we likely won’t have a



body until after tomorrow's speed dating, so who the hell knows what's going to happen."

She needed more evidence and hoping for a body was a shitty thing to do, so they'd have to be patient.

"We can go a night or ten without a victim," Chris admitted.

Sam agreed.

"No death is a good death," he admitted.

Wasn't that the truth?

Chris also hoped that when they did get a body, it didn't belong to her or Axelle. He wasn't really thrilled about the prospects of more death.

Oh, tomorrow, he was going to be watching her like a hawk. His only solace?

She wasn't a redhead.

**Thank.**

**Freaking.**

**God.**

Elizabeth gave them their marching orders.

"Okay, techs, work a couple more hours, and then get back to the hotel. I want you paired up in the buddy system with the females. I don't trust small towns, and I don't like the idea that anyone could be the mark for Teddy," she said, pointing at the redheads.

When her phone rang, she pulled it from her pocket. It was Salem, and she was shocked the woman was calling her. She hoped she was okay.

Next to Tony, Salem had horrible taste in men, and she really hoped nothing happened.

"Yo. Partner. What's up? Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm good."

Salem sounded like she was in a car.

"I was going over the files, and something hit me, and I wanted to give you a heads-up on it regarding your killer."

She put it on speaker.

"Go for it, and you're on speaker so behave."

She laughed.

"Gotcha. Thanks for the warning. I don't need HR calling," she teased. "Again."

"Truth."

Salem shared what she had figured out.

“He’s accustomed to strong women,” she stated. “His sisters are vital to his life.”

She waited.

“If he finds out you are onto him, he’s going to enjoy the challenge. He really believes he’s the golden child. He won’t run. He’s going to stay and play the game. You’ll be an insult to him until he can get his revenge.”

“If he figures out a woman is chasing him, he’ll be amused by that. He thinks women are beneath him. His only Achilles heel in all of this is his sisters. I mean, he killed his mother and hated her. He’ll play the game and try to beat you. Keep Kitty’s capture your ace in the hole.”

She could do that.

“He’s narcissistic. He’ll be bitchy that you’re trying to take away his victims. He’ll turn on you fast.”

Chris did **NOT** like that.

His face showed it too.

With Elizabeth, she liked a challenge, and if he was focused on her, that made her job easier. She’d rather risk her than anyone else.

He didn’t doubt she’d try that craziness out too. She’d done it many times before.

His example?

The Carnival Killer case and how Detective Cameron Cooper fucked it up and she’d nearly died.

“You don’t say?” she asked.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Salem stated. “I mean it. He will really be an asshole toward a cop.”

Chris sighed.

“She’s about to do something stupid,” he stated. “I can already feel it.”

Charlie was not amused.

He’d be sticking like glue then. He trusted her skill, but she was his child.

He was not finding his daughter dead and raped.

**NOT.**

**HAPPENING.**

“Just as long as the cat stays in the bag about Kitty, you’ll have time. He views himself as unstoppable. His sisters would save his ass. He’ll

call them and tell them about you.”

Again, not what she wanted, but at some point, she knew they might be outed. The media was on the trail, and she was about to make an appearance at the speed dating.

She had to hope that if he was in the dating pool of men, he didn’t suspect anything by two strangers showing up. They didn’t know how long he’d been here.

So, she asked.

“How much studying has he done?” she asked. “I’m concerned that he’s been here weeks and watched the women, and now two strangers show up.”

Salem thought about it.

“If you put in too many, it’s going to stand out. My suggestion would be to go bare minimum.”

“I was going to put in Axelle, Jack, Chris, and Tony. Oh, and me.”

“How many people are there normally?” she asked.

The sheriff was right there.

“I don’t know for sure, since I don’t do it myself. I like to find my women the old-fashioned way.”

“Oh, do tell,” Salem stated, practically purring.

“Down, Doctor Dane. He’s out of your league,” she said. “You’ll eat him alive and ruin him.”

Remington didn’t believe that was a possibility, but he was curious.

Salem laughed.

“Just tread lightly, Elizabeth.”

“I was going to plant the techs in the bar.”

She hesitated.

“I wouldn’t. That’s too big of a crowd. You will likely get away with a couple people. I wouldn’t put Chris in because he’s awkward.”

“And I’m right here,” he stated. “Only, you knew that since she told you that you were on speakerphone!”

She laughed.

“Sorry, but someone in a speed dating has to be focused, able to schmooze, and flirt with lots of women. That is more Tony.”

The man laughed.

“She’s not wrong. I can flirt,” he said, rolling over to Elizabeth and winking at her. “Come here often, you tall drink of Southern water?”

She snorted.

She couldn't help herself.

It was Tony at his finest, and absurd.

She shook her head and pushed on.

"What about Jack?"

"He's a walking hormone. Put him in. Pull Chris. He's the weakest link in the dating pool. How he caught you..."

Then, she realized what she did.

"Oops. I mean..."

Elizabeth stopped her.

"We came out," she stated. "It was too exhausting."

Salem cheered.

"Please tell me it was Elizabeth who finally owned it. I had fifty on her being the reason it came out."

She laughed.

"We have your money," Tony stated.

*Why wasn't she shocked?*

As for Chris, his face said it all. The man being discussed was not amused by being pulled.

"I managed to catch a very attractive woman. I think I can do this."

She stared at him.

The look said, *'remember how you wanted to be friends with benefits and nothing more'*?

"I take that back. She caught me. Who am I kidding?"

Salem broke it to him.

"Teddy has a head start here. He has anonymity. We don't have his face. He could be anyone and he could have built a life here that we don't know about. We know the three siblings move around and stole identities. For all we know, again, he's playing sheriff."

She laughed as Remington sputtered.

"I've run him, he's clear," she stated, not wanting any of the techs digging in that hornet's nest.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

They all focused on him, and the man was staring at them like they were crazy.

"Uh, not the killer," he said, again.

Elizabeth busted the CIA spook's ass.

Why not?

“Know how many times it’s been a cop behind it?” she asked.

Chris answered for her, joining in.

“Basically, about one out of eight cases,” he stated. “We come across it a lot. Where better to hide?”

He wasn’t amused.

When she winked at him, he shook his head.

“Bust the small-town sheriff’s balls. How could that come back to bite you in the ass?” he asked.

She laughed.

“Don’t take it personally. It’s what we do.”

He shook his head.

“So, what are you going to do about tonight,” he asked since her partner had thrown the wrench in the works.

“Techs, you’re staying in.”

They began booing.

Again.

“I’ll get you food,” she stated, “and you can watch porn in the hotel. Charge it to the FBI.”

“Elizabeth!” her father stated.

She laughed.

“They know I was kidding,” she said, staring at them. “Right?”

They all looked chagrined.

She was willing to bet this had already happened before.

Call it a hunch.

“And me?” Chris said.

She stared at him.

“I’m sorry, Christopher. You’re not participating in the dating part. Hide in the shadows of the bar.”

He still wasn’t amused.

She continued.

“It’s pretty dark in there. Jack and Tony will do the schmoozing, and you can watch me to have my back.”

He was staring at her.

“Please?” she asked.

When she moved closer, she lowered her voice.

“I need someone I trust to watch my back. If you’re dating, you’re not going to be focused on me. This could go bad.”

He relaxed.

She had a point.

It wasn’t like she was telling him to stay in the room, which he wouldn’t. It was very much like when she replaced him with Tony in Paris.

He’d blown that by showing up against her wishes. It nearly got them hurt.

For now, he’d listen.

He could sit at the bar, pretend to watch sports, and watch her.

“Okay, Elizabeth, but this had better not go south.”

Charlie reassured him.

“I’ll be in the van with Sam. We’ll have eyes and ears on her.”

That was the **ONLY** reason he was backing down. Well, that and because everyone was watching him.

“Then you should be good,” Salem stated. “I’m sorry to throw this off, but if you lose him...”

She was well aware.

“The shit will hit the fan. At least now I know he might figure out I’m FBI and want to play the game. We have to keep this on track.”

Tony patted his friend on the back.

“She’ll be okay,” he reassured.

Oh, Chris hoped so, or he was going to lose his mind over this one.

“I have to go,” Salem stated. “I’m about at our crime scene. I’ll text you tomorrow. Or call me if you need me,” she stated.

“Thanks, Salem. I appreciate you helping on this.”

“What are friends for?” she asked.

Then, she was gone.

“What is next?” Remington asked.

She knew exactly what needed to be done. She needed a copy of all the names so she could start getting suspects. She had the killer, but she had to play find the fake identity and hope that Teddy had screwed it up.

**Somehow.**

That was proving to be hard.

“My father and Axelle have a job to do.”

The techs began laughing.

“Chuckle patch, mind your manners and don’t be bold,” she stated.  
“I know that you want pizza and ice cream.”

Charlie laughed.

“Don’t let her scare you. She’s going to feed you,” he said, usurping her control.

**Yet.**

**Again.**

“Dad!”

He winked at her.

“Okay, team, I’ll order you food, and then we’re heading back to the hotel. I want to meet the night concierge, and I want to ask some questions. Then, Dad, you know what you need to do.”

He grinned.

“What is he about to do?” the sheriff asked. His curiosity was piqued.

“A little felonious breaking and entering,” Charlie stated, not the least bit ashamed.

“**DAD!**” she stated. “You do not have to answer every single question!”

Sam shook his head.

He knew what had gone down.

“You’ve created a monster,” he stated. “I do believe I warned you.”

Oh, she was aware.

Only, it was too late to worry about that.  
She had a killer to catch.

*Or their heads....*

Were going to roll.

***Washington D.C.***  
***Billiard Room***

Oh, they had way too much to drink.

Gene was shitfaced, and his partner was actually worse. It was early evening, and they were so bad that they were stumbling back to his place.

Gene was acutely aware of Ethan leaning on him, as they tried to not get arrested for drunk and disorderly behavior.

Thank freaking God they had badges.

That might save their ass.

*If Gabe got wind of this...*

**They.**

**Were.**

**Fucked.**

“Have you ever done something stupid?” Gene asked, the sidewalk fuzzy as he helped walk-drag Ethan back to his place. “I think we just did.”

Ethan snorted.

His words were slurred.

“I’ve done worsssee...,” he muttered. “I brokeeeeeeee Callen’s heartttt.”

Gene was drunk, but he wasn’t so drunk he missed that. His drunken investigative skills were focused, and he was curious.

“I still llovee himms.”

The second he said that, Gene tripped, and they almost fell. Somehow, he managed to keep them upright.

**Holy shit.**

His partner was definitely gay.

Callen had to be a past lover.

Well, if he needed his heart healed, Gene would take one for the team, and give too.

He was easy like that.

As he thought about sex with his partner, his dick got hard, despite the drinking.



Four pitchers of beer between them was a freaking bad idea. He was going to puke.

Well, Ethan was definitely getting a bed buddy, and if he initiated sex, he was going for it.

**Screw it.**

He hoped his partner had rubbers. They were going to need a box. The pent-up sexual frustration and tension was going to be a marathon sex fest—even this toasted.

He could tell.

“You love him?” Gene asked, trying to figure out if he had a chance.

*Who was the mystery man?*

That intrigued him.

Ethan didn’t answer the question, instead, he was blatantly honest.

“I’m gonna puke,” he stated.

Oh, and he did just that.

Outside his brownstone, feet from his steps, Ethan Blackhawk lost his breakfast, lunch, and beer.

Vomit splashed everywhere.

No one was safe.

**Shit.**

“I wannnnnna die,” he muttered when he was done puking. “I deserve itttt.”

As people walked by, Gene waved them on.

“Nothing to see, peoples, nothing to see. We’re just two drunk men celebrating. We are good.”

He knew that they had to get inside before the cops came.

“You’re not dying,” he said, hefting his partner back onto his feet. “We just drank too much.”

“I need to sleep it offffffff,” Ethan muttered. “Don’t drive,” he stated. “Sttttayyy.”

Oh, he could barely walk.

Driving was a hell no.

Since he was asking for a sleepover, Gene wasn’t saying no. Now, if he asked for sex, they were getting naked the second they were in the door.

Together, they stumbled up the brownstone steps.

“Keys,” he muttered.

Ethan couldn’t make his hands work. His fingers were dead.

“Pocket.”

Gene propped his partner up, swore he’d never drink again, and went fishing for the man’s keys.

When he patted down his pockets, he found keys and he also found something so much better.

A dick.

**Damn.**

He was an asshole for enjoying this. They were in no condition to be doing anything but sleeping this off.

“Not my keys,” Ethan muttered when Gene hit his dick instead of keys.

Oh, Gene was well aware.

As someone who liked dick, he could tell the difference—even this drunk.

*Why?*

He also had one, and he liked using it.

Gene knew what he’d like to do with it right at that moment.

He shoved his hand in the man’s pocket and found them. As Ethan leaned against him, he got vomit all over him.

**Fuck.**

They were going to have to get out of these things.

“We’re dirty,” Ethan said, giggling. “I think you just groped me,” he added.

He absolutely did, and someone was packing some big dick too. That gave him chills. He’d take some of that—rubbers or not.

Just thinking that, Gene’s dick got harder.

**Jesus.**

He was an asshole for enjoying this.

When Ethan leaned on him, they were groin-to-groin. It was the puke breath that ruined it.

“Dude, puke is gross,” he said, realizing he was about puke himself.

The bile rose up, and he had to put his partner down.

“Wait here,” he said, as he let Ethan slide down the wall, and he leaned over the stone railing.

*And puked.*

**Jesus.**

It was never-ending.

There was a lesson in this. Don't drink two pitchers of beer in a mere two hours with nothing substantial in your gut.

**It sucked.**

When he was done tossing his guts, he found Ethan sleeping on the ground. His hair was mussed up, and he'd be lying if he said he wasn't hot.

"Dude, we gotta get in," he muttered.

Gene fumbled with the key in the lock. As he did, Ethan leaned forward, and his head rested against Gene's groin.

**Holy fuck.**

He was a saint.

**Truly.**

All he could think of was dirty sexy, a few blowjobs, and fucking some ass.

He needed to get them in before they passed out on the stoop.

With a few tries, he finally got the door open.

Now, he needed the alarm code.

"Ethan," he said, touching his face.

When the man looked up at him, his face by his dick, housed in his pants, he really wanted to get off. Only, Ethan was in no position.

He wouldn't cross that line.

Oh, he'd think about it, but he wasn't crossing a line without permission.

Rape was rape, and he was a Fed.

"Yesss?" he slurred.

"Alarm code. What is it?"

He began laughing.

"Callen's birthdayyyy," he slurred again. Then, thankfully, he rattled it off.

Well, this Callen was special if his partner was using his birthday as his alarm code.

When he pushed the door open and pulled Ethan in, he punched in the code, and thankfully, it worked.

When he turned, someone was out cold.

Gene tried to focus and knew he had very limited time to get them in bed. He dragged the man inside, kicking the door closed.

He tripped and knocked over the console table by the door. The painting shifted, and he couldn't get his hands to work to fix it. Somehow,

he managed to lock the door.

Then, he dragged Ethan by the arms into the man's space, and into his bedroom. Thank God it wasn't a long distance. Gene was done.

He wasn't even thinking about sex at this point. The room was spinning, and he was thinking about passing out.

Only, they had vomit all over them.

If God was merciful, he wouldn't die in his sleep, and he'd remember stripping Ethan out of his things.

He pulled off his shirt, and the man laughed.

"Dude, we gotta sleep this shit off."

Ethan's fingers barely got his jeans open. Gene had to help him. He first pulled off his shoes and then tugged his jeans down. Someone was wearing boxer briefs, and they showed **EVERYTHING**.

Yep, he'd been right.

Someone was packing some dick.

Okay, he was thinking about sex again.

Gene's dick twitched. Had he not had way too much to drink, he'd be enjoying this.

Now, he just wanted to die.

Once he got Ethan out of his clothes, but not his undies, he hefted him onto his bed and covered him up. Then, he began pulling off his own things.

Gene knew he wasn't going to hold on much more.

He was about ready to drop.

As he fell into Ethan's bed, he pulled the blankets over him too. He could feel his partner nearby, and when he rolled into him, Gene really prayed that he'd remember this.

Ethan was against him, his face on his shoulder, his arm over his abs, and his leg on his.

**Jesus.**

This was hot.

Only, as the room spun, he closed his eyes, and thankfully, the darkness came.

And two drunken men did what two drunken men tended to do.

**They.  
Passed.  
Out.**

**Together.**

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## *Chapter Twelve*

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*Hotel*  
*Thursday*  
*Early Evening*

**W**hen they arrived back at the hotel, Elizabeth had Sam and Charlie head in first. Elizabeth wanted to meet the concierge like she had with the daytime one to see if she could get anything out of him.

Remington had said he was around when the cops had been called thanks to the bar, and he had been on duty for the first killing, so she had some questions.

It was going to be tricky, not outing herself, but she could pull it off.

**She.**

**Hoped.**

She wasn't going to her room without some kind of information, and to run some recognizance.

**God.**

She sounded like a spook.

This was what happened when you played with them while you worked.

Elizabeth was working out a plan in her head. Questioning him was going to prove difficult due to having to keep a cover.

Only, she had to do it, simply because the daytime concierge, James Mallery, had said that the hotel was in charge of the speed dating.

*Who ran a front desk?*

**The concierge.**

What was coming was not likely going to go over well with the man beside her. He was watching her, and she knew what he was thinking.

Well, it was time to just own it.

"Chris, head on in. I have to go this alone," she stated.

*The look he gave her...*

"I know," she stated.

Yeah, she seemed to be telling him that a lot as of late, and it was on his nerves.

This was her job.

**NOT.**

**HIS.**

When he opened his mouth, she shut that down.

“If we screw this up, I’m outed. I have to get my name on that list and have Axelle do the same thing. If you and I walk in together, then how am I supposed to be up for speed dating?”

He understood.

He didn’t like it, but Chris got it.

“Just be careful. I’ll be in the elevator waiting for you. If you need me, scream.”

She laughed.

“Or I can use my gun,” she stated. “You know since I’m armed and dangerous and you’re just ridiculously handsome.”

Oh, well, what she wasn’t taking into account was how hard he’d fight for his woman.

It would be to the death.

**No.**

**Doubt.**

Instead of arguing, he kissed her on the mouth.

“Or to make me feel all manly and useful, my wife, my love, and my woman could scream.”

She nuzzled him.

Okay, she could give him this.

She would be fine, and there was not going to be screaming, so there was no point putting up a fight.

“Okay, handsome, I can call for my sexy doctor. Got it,” she said, as he left his scent all over her.

Chris took that moment to stare into her eyes.

“I love you, Bethe. See you in the elevator,” he said, placing his lips against hers in a sweet kiss.

It gave her butterflies.

When he set her mouth free, she turned her mouth into his palm and left a kiss there.

“Miss me,” he said.

She would, and she warned him.

“There’s security in the hallways, so pretend you don’t know me. Go peruse the vending machines and have a hard time making up your mind.”

Oh, he would.

“I’ll get something sweet for my sweet,” he said, winking at her.

Then, he hopped out of their vehicle and headed away.

The whole trek into the building, she was checking out his ass.

**Sue her.**

She loved her some sexy jean-clad doctor.

It didn’t take long and as Elizabeth watched him go in, he waved at the man behind the desk and then headed around the corner to the elevator.

There was no doubt in his mind that she was going to have someone listening in on their conversation as he played *‘pick out the candy’*.

It was nice to have someone worry about her—even though it was unfounded.

Well, here went nothing.

Heading into the building, she began patting her pockets as if she’d lost something.

The man behind the counter glanced up at her when she made a sighing sound.

“Are you okay, Miss?” he asked.

She walked over.

“I am having a bad day,” she stated, putting a pout on her face. Her gun and badge were tucked away, and it was time to get her name on that speed dating list.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. What can I do to help you?” he asked, smiling at her.

“Unless you’ve found my phone...”

He grinned.

“Sorry, no one has turned one in. Let me look in the office,” Donny Shephard said.

She watched which room he went into and checked it out. There were no cameras over it. Her father should be okay.

**SHOULD.**

That was the operative word.

When he came out, he shook his head.

“Sorry, no phone.”



“Darn.”

She tried to look lost and innocent.

“Awww, it’s okay, honey. Maybe someone will turn it in. I’ll keep an eye open.”

She did that flirty pout that she’d learned playing Miss Kitty.

“I was supposed to meet friends here. They bailed. Now, my one girlfriend and I are new here, and we have nothing to do. What can a single pair of girls do in West Virginia?”

She prayed he didn’t look up her room.

It had Chris’ name attached to it.

Her fingers were crossed.

“Well, we have speed dating tomorrow night, that is if you’re interested.”

She smiled.

**BINGO.**

*Men...*

They were easy.

“Really?”

He went into the room and grabbed a clipboard. She could see that it was in a file folder holder right by the door.

**Perfect.**

Charlie wouldn’t have to go crazy-looking.

“Yes,” he said, coming back. “I have a couple of spots left. Would you like to get your girlfriend and yourself on the list?” he asked.

She batted her eyes at him as he leaned on the counter.

She pretended to think about it.

So far, so good.

“If I sign her up, and she doesn’t want to do it, can I still?” she asked, twirling her hair around her finger.

He grinned.

“You sure can. I’m Donny Shephard, by the way, and I’m the concierge. I don’t think we’ve met. When did you check-in?” he asked.

**Shit.**

This was what she didn’t want him to ask. Well, she had to play with it the best she could.

She smiled.

Inside, she was freaking out.

She had to come up with a lie, and fast. This is why Axelle was good at her job. She could lie her way into the White House. Elizabeth could punch her way in.

“My name is Bethe,” she stated. “I could lie, but I guess I should be honest.”

He leaned forward.

“Yes?”

“My girlfriend snuck me in. She checked in, I didn’t. Don’t kick me out.”

He laughed.

Then, he leaned in and whispered.

“I thought you were going to say something worse. That happens all of the time. While working here, I’ve seen it all. That’s nothing.”

“So, my secret is safe, Donny?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Yep. Sign up, Bethe. It’s hosted by us but plays out in the pub, so if you get tipsy, you don’t have to drive. Drunk driving is dumb.”

She took the pen.

“If you don’t find anyone you like there, maybe stop back in here and we can talk.”

Yeah, no.

She knew Chris was listening, and he was either amused that this guy was flirting or pissed off.

It was anyone’s guess.

She took the pen and signed Bethe LaRue and Axelle George.

Then, she handed it back.

“Do lots of people sign up?” she asked, noticing that it was only one paper, and there were ten women.

“Well, we don’t get as many men, so we let them just sign up the day of when they show.”

**Shit.**

The paper had only women on it. She really needed the previous weeks’ papers.

When he walked back and tucked the clipboard beside a file folder, she knew Charlie had better not blow this mission, or she was going to be pissed.

Then again, she’d come down and flirt it out of him—somehow.

“We’ll see you later,” he said. “If you need anything, Bethe, just call the desk. I’ll run it right up to your room,” he said, winking at her.

Oh, she’d be keeping his name in mind.

**When she ran him.**

Waving to the man, she heard the elevator door opening and saw Chris step inside. She really hoped that he’d stayed off the camera as he lurked.

She stepped in, and they rode up, side-by-side. His ears were red, so she knew he’d heard all the flirting and innuendos.

Still, he kept it calm.

The door to their floor opened, and when he got off, he gave her a nod.

She went up to Axelle’s room and sent him a text.

***‘I’ll meet you in our room shortly. I need to get some information to Ax before she and my father head out.’***

It didn’t take him long to reply.

Clearly, he expected the text and was waiting on her to contact him.

***‘Just be safe, BETHE. I wouldn’t want DONNY to have to rescue you.’***

She laughed as she read it.

**Yep.**

Lurker Mc Lurkerson had been right there, listening in while he was supposed to get her some candy. Well, she had news for him.

She’d rather eat nails before allowing Donny to rescue her. In that sexy fantasy, there was a scrub-wearing man.

As the elevator stopped, she headed out toward Axelle’s room, and when she knocked, Jack opened the door.

“We were waiting for you,” he stated. “I’m dying to do some work. While I love watching Ax work, I’m scared by CIA tactics.”

She laughed and headed in.

That she understood.

**Completely.**

“Well, here’s the thing. You can’t. I need you, her, and Tony to stay incognito.”

He sighed.

It was time to break down her plan, reiterating what she had already told them with a little bit of new information.

Now, she needed them on board with all of it.

“Tomorrow night is the big show, Jack, and we have to have undercover there. As for the rest, I just dealt with the night concierge.”

“And?” Axelle asked.

She told them what had happened at the desk with Donny, and how he’d been a flirt.

“Oh, wow,” Axelle stated. “You got us on that list, right?” she asked.

She nodded, grateful that Axelle was up for this little mission. She could say no, but true to form, the CIA spook was curious as all hell.

“We are set, but here is where the new information comes in. I scoped out the front desk, and you and my dad have to get last week’s list. It’s priority one right now. I watched him go into the office. There’s no security above the door. It’s more a closet. Then, there’s a folder by the clipboard. I’m going to bet it has the names of the men.”

“We can do it,” Axelle stated. “I’ll distract him, and Charlie can LaRue him good.”

“You know that my last name is **ALSO** LaRue, and that doesn’t exactly come across flattering.”

She laughed.

“I know but it’s hard to control myself.”

Jack was thinking case as the ladies joked around.

“If you signed you both up, why didn’t you get a look at this week’s list?”

That had been her plan.

“Well, only because the men don’t show up until the day of, since there aren’t as many of them. They cap the women. There are more women

than men. Both you and Tony will be able to sashay on in and get a spot. We got the last two spots for the ladies.”

She focused on her friend.

“To make sure you and I are safe, and because Salem said fewer people than we planned, I really don’t want to overlook that list. It will make it easier if he takes another woman.”

Axelle was thinking about it.

In her head, she was working up a plan.

“How sticky are Charlie’s fingers?” she asked.

She laughed.

“Oh, well, I learned some things from him. Let’s just say that he’s not as good as you, but I think he can pull it off. I talked us up, so the night concierge knows about you and me. Maybe you can ask more questions and be hesitant. Oh, and FYI, he also thinks you snuck me in. I couldn’t go in as Chris’ wife. That is a big ol’ red flag.”

Axelle could work with any lie, especially if it had a good foundation, and this was decent.

She’d worked with less.

They could do it.

“Okay, get Charlie to meet me down there. I’ll get to work.”

“What can I do?” Jack asked.

She had an idea.

“Come on down to my room. Chris and I were going to start researching. Sam will be there too. While they are doing their dirty deeds, we’re going to have to figure out where Teddy is hiding.”

“And tomorrow?”

She knew the clock was racing ahead, but she had to be prepped for the speed dating, on top of some interviews.

“I have to get ready for tomorrow night, and I really hope the shit I asked for is shipped. Livy was going to handle it. Tomorrow, you are still benched until after the dating. My guess is that the killer is looking for love again. He already killed three women, and tomorrow is the fun, so I don’t think he’ll kill anyone tonight.”

Jack was thinking that too.

Before he could say anything, she was curious.

“How’s the money hunt going?”

They both laughed, and it wasn’t a good one.

“I have half my office helping,” Axelle stated. “All I know at this point is it went out of the US to the Cayman Islands, and now I’m tracking it back in. I found the first stop in California. I’ll have to follow it location by location. I need about a month.”

She stared at her.

“We have days. Like less than a week.”

She was aware.

“See my conundrum?” Axelle asked.

Yes, yes, she did.

“I’ll take a break and get you that list, and then we are back at it again.”

Bless her friend.

She owed her one—only, she wasn’t saying that. That was exactly how they got into this mess in the first place.

### **JACK’S FAVOR.**

It was time to move.

“Okay, head down. I’ll come to your room after I talk to Mr. Sticky Fingers,” Axelle stated.

Elizabeth hoped they had this, if not, they had a huge problem. There were too many potential suspects for her to interview all of them, and deep down, she was betting Teddy wasn’t going to be easy to spot.

He liked hide-and-seek, and she was going with her gut on this one. That’s how she caught Kitty. Her gut had been screaming.

“Be cool, Ax. **EVERYTHING** is riding on this,” she reminded her and then clued her into what Salem had offered up.

She listened.

Ax was good with the odds being against them.

That’s normally how her world worked.

Her back was generally against the wall.

“Okay, so if he figures out that we’re after him, he’s going to still play but not if he figures out his sister is caught. That works for me. I like a chase,” she stated.

Normally, Elizabeth did too, but typically it wasn’t escalating this quickly.

At some point, she’d get tired.

You didn’t chase two killers, back-to-back, using your brain nonstop, and not get exhausted.

By the time they went after Letty, she'd be worn down.

"Yeah, so again, no comment on Kitty. We have to hope that she stays silent from wherever my boss has her tucked away."

Ax filled her in.

"She'd be in a hospital, so likely one of the military bases. You have to be monitored when that medicine is administered, or you can get..."

She noticed they were staring at her.

"Classified," she stated.

Elizabeth shook her head.

She didn't want to know.

"Just be careful, Ax," Elizabeth stated.

Oh, she would be.

She pulled on her shoes.

Jack was curious.

"Do you want me to order dinner from downstairs?" he asked.

"Yes, please, for when I get back. I like my food hot. I'm not a fan of cold Styrofoam meals. Give me some time. I'm always hungry after running a con," she stated, winking at her friend. "I love that I get to play with the sexy sheriff. He's fun."

She laughed.

"Well, good luck there," she stated, knowing that Axelle was not going to get a rise out of him.

**Literally.**

She didn't have the right working parts for that party.

**Thank.**

**Freaking.**

**God.**

Elizabeth preferred her friend not to become her new Mommy.

**Ever.**

As she headed out, she texted her father. Elizabeth used the stairwell to the floor and then peeked out to make sure the coast was clear.

Thank God West Virginia was normally a quiet, laid-back place, that didn't really have a lot of tech.

She'd be screwed.

As she scanned the hall, there were no cameras and that gave her an easy walk to her door.

It looked like the game was about to begin.

Now, hopefully, no one fucked it up.

*Oh, Charlie....*

He had better be on his best damn behavior.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

***Charlie's Room  
That Same Moment***

His sheriff was pulling on a fresh shirt, and Sam was lying on the bed watching him. There was nothing better than staring at this sexy man as he dressed.

Sue him.

Sam was easy when it came to big, sheriff-y, and lumberjack. That was a sexy man he liked climbing.

It wasn't lost on him that Charlie was living his best life, and that was saying a lot considering the love of his life had been bummed when they arrived in Washington DC this last visit.

His heart had been broken, and that killed Sam.

He wished he could make him forget that his ex-wife had destroyed the relationship he had with his son.

Damn all of these kid issues.

Sam only had Elizabeth, and she was an angel. He wished, deep down, that Charlie never had another child. While it was selfish, it would



have saved him so much pain.

*Suffering.*

*Misery.*

Now, at least, the man was living his best life, and that was all because of his daughter. Bless Elizabeth for seeing that he needed this. Sam couldn't love her more.

*As for this man...*

"You're smiling a little too big," Sam stated. "That looks suspicious."

He laughed that whiskey warm chuckle that sent shivers across Sam's body.

The man just got him all hot and bothered. He was his soul mate, and he couldn't imagine life without him. That was why he made sure he ate better, took his meds, and was not dining out of vending machines like the LaRues tended to do. If anything happened to Charlie, Sam would want to die too.

He couldn't imagine going back to his house, living on, and not having his lumberjack. It would be better to stop existing if Charlie was not in his life.

Charlie focused on him and smiled at his partner.

"I love helping my baby out."

Oh, he could see that.

This was the happiest that he'd ever seen Charlie in a very long time.

"She's not fighting you on this one, so you have to be in your control freak glory."

He grinned.

"I am. It makes me think," Charlie said, knowing what he was going to tell Sam could change everything. Only, he had to get it off his chest.

Charlie didn't believe in lying to the man he loved, so he went there, holding his breath.

Charlie dropped the bomb.

"I think I want to move back to Washington DC," he stated, catching the man off guard.

Sam stared at him.

He said nothing, at first, because he was so damn surprised to hear that. So many things went through his brain. It was so hard to process.

“Sam?” Charlie asked, watching him.

Finally, the man found his voice.

“I see,” he stated. “And us, Charles?” he asked, his heart racing in his chest. He always dreaded this day. There was always a part of him that knew Charlie could decide to sell his house and leave. He could pack it all up and move to be closer to Elizabeth.

*And leave him.*

**Again.**

Charlie saw the fear in Sam’s eyes, and he moved closer.

“Come with me, Sammy. We can keep our house down in *Salem*, and we can be here more often. *Salem* is boring, and she needs us. I can skip a run for sheriff this round and let someone else take the job a bit. It’s hard to come and go. I watch her, and I see that she’s struggling when we leave.”

“Charlie, I don’t know if I can,” he admitted. “You could probably pull it off. They’d let you do anything simply because you’re the best sheriff and everyone loves you. Right now, you have people working under you. I might not be able to miss long periods of work.”

Charlie stared into his eyes.

He really needed this.

Deep down, Charlie had that sick feeling that he wasn’t going to have forty more years with his daughter. He really believed that he wasn’t going to live to an old age.

That scared him.

Sam sat up and was honest.

“I wish I could, Charlie. You can come back. I’ll see you when I can,” Sam said, his heart breaking.

It put Charlie in a horrible position, and in that moment, Charlie knew he had to decide.

It was the hardest decision of his life.

His daughter, the only child in his life, or the man he’d betrayed more than once and left behind.

“Okay, Sammy,” he said, that sadness overtaking him.

Charlie said nothing else. Instead, he stood up, and he finished getting dressed. He didn’t look at Sam because he wanted to weep. He was between a rock and a hard place when it came to the two people he loved.

He had to let one go.

The mood in the room tanked, and Sam could feel it. His heart was hurting, and he wanted to cry.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” Sam asked softly from the bed.

Charlie turned.

He did the right thing even though it was the hardest thing in the world.

“No, Sammy. After we help her with this case, we’ll go home. I made a commitment to you, and you’re my partner. Elizabeth will be fine without me. You won’t. I have to protect my husband. That’s what you are, Sammy. I made a vow, and I know that people will be vicious to you if I’m not there.”

That shocked him.

He couldn’t believe it.

“Really, Charles?” he asked.

He nodded.

“Abigale will open Hell on you if I’m not there to keep you safe. She will start her shit, and I can’t risk some gay hater will hurt you while I’m away. Elizabeth has a life. She carries a gun and is smart. She can handle herself. She has her life now with Chris, and I’m her past. I’m staying with you because I have to protect my soulmate.”

Sam got up.

“Charlie,” he said, hugging him. He really believed he would choose Elizabeth. Sam knew that his daughter was his whole world. Now, it appeared Sam was.

That was all he ever wanted.

Charlie patted him on the back.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It was fun while it lasted. It was a good run,” he stated. “All good things must come to an end. Now, she can stop thinking about me butting into her life. When this case is closed, we head home.”

Sam heard it in his voice.

He didn’t want to head home. He wanted to be where he could feel alive.

“Charlie...”

He stopped him.

“It’s okay,” he said again. “Really.”

There was no way that was the truth. Sam knew this would break the man's heart.

When Charlie's phone chimed, he set Sam free and pulled it out of his pocket.

"It's my girl," he said, showing Sam.

*'Dad, meet Axelle downstairs and get shit done. We need that list, and you cannot get caught. The camera points at the concierge desk—not the room behind it. Be careful. I love you and thank you for always having my back. Spending this time with you has been the best few weeks of my life.'*

Sam saw the message as Charlie read it and then tucked it into his pocket. Apparently, Elizabeth did need her father still.

Saying that Sam felt like shit was an understatement.

While Charlie was his soulmate, Elizabeth had a deep connection with the man who gave her life, taught her to be a cop, and to be smart. She was her father's child, and they were two peas in that plaid-wearing pod.

"Charlie," he began.

The big man stopped him.

"I have to go. I'll meet you in Elizabeth's room," he stated. "Then, we'll tell her that we have to be heading back. We can't join her for the next one. This is as long as we can be away from *Salem*."

That melancholy was back in his voice.

It was the same as when George had told him that he wasn't his father, and to never speak to him again.

Charlie loved two things.

His kids, and his **KIDS**.

"Charles..."

He stopped him.

"It's okay, Sammy. This is her life, not mine. I made my choices, and it's time for me to bow out. She'll figure it out on her own. Elizabeth is smart. One day, she'd have to figure out how to do this without me anyway. I'm a phone call away. This is our life, and we should be living it in *Salem*."

He touched his cheek with his big lumberjack hand.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” he said, giving him a soft kiss on the lips.  
“Wish me luck.”

**Oh, Jesus.**

This was bad.

“Good luck, Charles,” he said, watching the love of his life leave the room.

And he no longer felt like shit.

**He.**

**Felt.**

**Worse.**

### ***Downstairs...***

When Axelle saw him, Charlie was coming out of the elevator. For this little mission, they needed to get a plan ready. She’d worked with him breaking into a security company not long ago, but this was going to be harder.

She didn’t have the tech to block cameras.

Her boss wouldn’t let her bring it, and that was suspicious.

Oh, well, she’d stress that later.

It was time to get this done.

She met the big man by the vending machines and pretended she didn’t know him. She instead kept her back to the camera and talked quietly.

The last few times that she’d come downstairs to get coffee and some snacks from here, and the pub, she’d checked out the camera situation.

This was going to have to be done perfectly.

She clued him in.

“I’m going to get the concierge’s attention. You need to get the file folder just inside the office door. Don’t take the folder. Take the contents. We can buy ourselves some time.”

He perused his soda choices, loving every damn second of this. How was he going to go home and go back to sitting behind a desk counting ceiling tiles?

**God.**

That sounded horrible.

Then, he pulled change from his pocket, to pretend to be counting it. He’d be lying if he said this wasn’t the shit. He was having so much fun.

Yeah, he was going to miss it along with his daughter.

“I hear you. Go. I’ll get it and meet you in the elevator to get to Elizabeth’s room. Just be careful. You fit the killer’s preference list.”

She was aware.

Only, she was way too smart to fall for shit like this. Again, this was her everyday job.

She put money in and pulled out a candy bar. Then, she headed around the corner to talk to the man behind the desk. When she appeared, he came out of the office, and thankfully, he left the door open behind him.

Now, Axelle had to position herself just right...

If not, Charlie was going to be seen.

When the man came over, he was grinning.

“Well, two pretty ladies in one night. What can I help you with?” he asked.

She flirted.

**HARD.**

“Well, my friend, the one you talked to, just told me she signed me up for speed dating, but that’s not really my thing,” she stated. “Can you tell me more about it?”

He smiled like a lunatic.

“Oh, well, I’m the person to see. I run it. The hotel sponsors it every week on Friday night. We have music, free drinks for the ladies, and it’s a fun time. Mostly, we laugh and enjoy it. The DJ hosts it, and the bartender makes sure the ladies are safe.”

She saw Charlie heading their way.

He was reading some notices regarding emergency exits not far from the office door. She couldn't look over at him or she might give him away.

Axelle had to hope he kept his fingers light.

When he reached for the folder, his eyes on them, she placed her candy bar down hard in the opposite direction, redirecting the man's gaze.

"Well, that sounds like a good time. Will you be doing the speed dating?" she asked, as Charlie grabbed the papers and slowly moved away, shoving them inside his flannel.

Hot damn.

The man did it.

Donny grinned.

"Oh, I wish. Unfortunately, I have to work until ten. The speed dating is over then."

She batted her eyes.

"Well, if we come back to town again, maybe I'll look you up," she said, opening her candy bar.

She had his full attention.

When she took a bite, the caramel stuck to her lip and she licked it off. Then, handed him her candy bar.

"I like to share," she said, putting all the heat and seduction she could into it.

His eyes went huge.

Oh, he took that sexually.

**She.**

**Could.**

**Tell.**

Well, LaRue wanted a distraction.

She got it.

"Thanks for your help," she purred and then walked away. When she gave him a little finger wave, he returned it.

Then, she got into the elevator.

As the doors closed, she laughed, staring straight ahead so if Donny watched the cameras, it appeared they were just riding up together.

"Charlie, you have some slick moves," she stated. "For a big man, you move quietly. I know where LaRue gets it," she stated.

He ate his candy bar and knew he'd done damn good.

“I don’t know why you all were surprised. I was a cop. Had my wife not died, I would have likely moved up the ranks.”

Axelle genuinely liked the man.

He was kind, protective, and the father everyone wanted. He loved Elizabeth so much that he’d break the law for her. That was dedication.

She wanted him to know she was aware of his secret, but that she wouldn’t out him.

“And how does Sam like your slick moves?” she asked, clueing him in.

He said nothing.

There was tension in the air.

She looked over at him.

“Your secret is safe with me,” she stated, giving the man a kiss on the cheek. “My Dad died young. Elizabeth is damn lucky to have you as a role model,” she stated.

**Christ.**

He really believed they were doing a good job of keeping it on the DL.

Apparently, not.

“Axelle, I don’t want to have to explain to her about Sam, her mother, and...”

She patted his hand, knowing she broke the act, but everyone loved Charlie and Sam. They were good people.

“I meant what I said. Spooks keep secrets. It’s part of the job. If she doesn’t know, that’s not my place to tell her. For the record, I’m happy for you.”

“God. I hope she never finds out. I don’t want her to think less of me.”

Why he was opening up, he didn’t know.

That was a lie.

He wanted to tell his daughter.

From beside him, Axelle was honest.

“Charles LaRue, she couldn’t think less of you even if you were killing people. You’re the love of her life.”

“Well, Christopher...”

She stopped him.



“No, Charlie, trust me. She loves you the most. She’d kill for you. Chris owns a good part of her heart, but you own twice as much. One day, when she loses you, she’s going to lose most of her heart.”

He didn’t want that to happen.

“I got your back, Charlie. We all do,” she stated, staring straight ahead.

When the elevator opened, and Axelle headed out, Charlie followed.

His heart hurt so bad that he really wanted to cry. Only, he had to fake it until he could make it.

But deep down, he knew that leaving her was going to be so damn hard.

As they moved down the hall, Axelle avoided the cameras, showing Charlie where to walk.

At Elizabeth’s door, she went in first, and then Charlie wasn’t far behind them.

Once inside, Elizabeth was pacing back and forth. Chris was ordering food from the bar downstairs to be delivered, and it was clear that Elizabeth was stressed.

“We’re back,” Axelle stated. “That was fun. You should have seen Charlie in action. Dude has some skills,” she stated. “I’d work with him any day.”

Elizabeth stopped pacing.

“It went well?” she asked, hopefully.

Axelle grinned.

“Yep.”

Sam was sitting there, and he could see that while Charlie had fun, that happiness was gone from his eyes, and he was the reason for that.

While he owned his heart, he knew who the real love of his life was.

**His daughter.**

“Thank God,” Elizabeth said, walking toward her father. She hugged him, and he picked her up and squeezed her tight.

Charlie buried his face in her neck, and he fought those tears. He wanted to go back in time and have another eighteen years with her.

He didn’t want to let her go, and so much had happened where he could see the space between them growing. She was all grown up and living her life.

He missed her so much.

Every day without her was hard.

“It’s all good, Baby Girl. I told you not to stress it. The day I can’t sneak papers out of a folder...come on. I’m accustomed to sneaking up on my daughter’s men.”

Chris laughed.

“**MAN**. It’s singular. I don’t want to know about her youth. It would kill me,” he said, hanging up his phone.

Jack grinned.

“I want to know.”

Elizabeth didn’t even look at him. She just gave him a push, and he fell off of the bed.

He laughed as he hit the floor.

“Someone is mean.”

Charlie kissed her on the forehead.

“That’s how I raised her,” he said, knowing he was going to miss this. “Well, here are your papers,” he stated. “What’s the plan?” he asked.

“We’re going to get some food, and then start comparing the names on all of the sheets. We’ll see who is showing up as a constant, and then run them. I know whatever we find will not really help us, **UNLESS** Teddy made a mistake. We’re going to look for what stands out as odd.”

That worked for him.

Jack was starving.

“I could totally eat. Axelle lives on vending machine crap and coffee. She ordered from the bar a couple of times, and I was hoping it would be booze, but the poor waiter had to run up coffee. Who does that?”

She laughed.

“Me. It’s my room. You can order what you want from yours,” she stated.

Yeah, no. He was staying with her for as long as he could. When they caught Teddy and Letty, he knew he’d not see her as much—or again.

For now, he had to keep her with him so they’d both be okay, emotionally.

They needed each other.

“Okay, so let’s start going through names,” Elizabeth stated, “and when the food comes, we’ll take a dinner break. Tomorrow, I have interviews, and I need to get this done.”

That worked for everyone.

Well, almost everyone.

Axelle was the first to complain.

“Uh, we have to move this to my room,” she stated. “I have the laptops running the money trail, and I have to be on it. Can we get the food dropped off there?”

That was an easy one.

“Sure. Let’s grab our gear and head there. Chris, can you change the room number?” she asked.

He nodded.

“I can.”

“Okay, well, then let’s get moving.”

When her father rolled his neck, she caught it from the corner of her eye, and she glanced over. Normally, he’d be all excited about this.

He was saying nothing.

That wasn’t Charlie.

“Are you okay, Dad?” she asked, holding a page for him to look through.

He didn’t take it.

“I’m good, Baby Girl. I’m just not feeling like eating, and it’s been a long day. You can handle this without me,” he said, already pulling away.

“You’ve got this, Elizabeth. I think I’ll go back to my room.”

**Wait.**

*What?*

*Was?*

*This?*

Her father didn’t want pub grub?

The man who couldn’t keep his mitts off a pig because of his love affair with bacon wanted to skip dinner?

He didn’t want to work and be up in this case until he made her batshit insane?

She stared at him.

“Do you feel okay?”

He figured it was better to do this in a room of people. He didn’t want to have to tell his daughter he was going to be leaving after this case alone.

He’d break.

He felt like he was abandoning her.

“Well, about that. I need to tell you something,” he stated. “I know this is a bad time, but I want to just say it and get it over with,” he began.

She looked worried.

Sam watched her face, and she looked scared. It was clear that she wasn’t ready to be without him. It was clear that she still had Charlie as her safety net, and this would break her.

Then, with the big man, he wasn’t ready to be without her either. Sometimes, you had to make a sacrifice and figure out how to make it work.

Sam couldn’t do this to either of them.

He loved his career, but he was willing to find a way around it. If he could figure out how to pay off their homes, they could pull this off.

What wouldn’t he do for Elizabeth and Charlie?

He stopped his man by interrupting.

“I get to tell her, Charles,” Sam stated, catching the man off guard.

Elizabeth focused on Sam.

“He’s not sick, is he?” she asked, tears filling her eyes. “What’s wrong with my dad?” she inquired, going there.

She was about to have a meltdown.

She already lost her mother, and she couldn’t do it again. It would kill her. Elizabeth’s heart was racing, and she wanted to freak-out.

Chris actually moved to take her hand in case something bad was about to be said.

He knew his woman.

There was one way to really destroy her.

**Charlie.**

If anything ever happened to him, she would never be the same again. Chris knew how much she loved him, but she loved her father more than anything.

In pain, they’d bonded.

They were one.

Sam reassured her.

“Oh, he’s crazy, but he’s not sick, sweetheart,” Sam stated. “We’ve decided that we’re going to move back to DC. Charlie wants to be here, and I can fly back to Salem if they need me. We’re going to try and be here even more. YAY! Surprise!”

She blinked.

Chris knew she was going to lose her shit. Only, he wasn't sure whether it was because she would be happy or annoyed. One never knew with Elizabeth.

She stared at her father.

"Are you serious?" she asked.

Apparently, they were.

He nodded.

Oh, Sam was going to get one hell of a kiss later. He knew what the man was sacrificing, but this felt right. It wouldn't be forever. It would only be until he was sure she was ready, and so was he.

Before he could answer, she focused on Sam.

"Sam?"

He smiled.

"If you'd like us to be here, then, yes," Sam stated. "We'd love to come and be here. Winters suck, but summers are nice."

That was all she had to hear.

She ran at her dad and jumped at him. Charlie caught her, and she wrapped herself around him.

"Daddy," she said, holding on.

Charlie held his daughter and glanced over at Sam.

*Thank you*, he mouthed.

Sam just smiled.

He could live without his job. He could sell his house if need be. Besides, who was going to move to Salem to dig in bodies? The town would have one hell of a time trying to find a replacement.

Sam would take his chances.

It had taken them six years to get him to take the job. The place hadn't had a coroner until he took the position.

Charlie held his daughter.

"I might have to leave to go back now and again, but if you want me here, Elizabeth, I'm here for as long as I can."

She left a warm kiss on his neck.

"I want you here," she said. "I always want you here, Daddy."

His heart skipped.

He couldn't get those first eighteen years back, but maybe he could have some good ones going forward.

On top of that, he knew that him and Sam leaving would put Abigale in a tizzy. She couldn't make their lives hell since she was terrified of Elizabeth.

Oh, he definitely wanted to be here too.

Because he didn't want her to be embarrassed or lost in that emotion, he put her down.

"I can't wait to work on all of the cases," he said, grinning like a fool. "Christopher, we're moving in."

He laughed.

"Oh, well, I guess there goes the kink fest," he teased, not even caring. Oh, it was annoying to have to tone it back, but when he saw the absolute happiness on Elizabeth's face...

It was worth it.

They'd just have to kink it up at night in the privacy of their own brownstone.

"Kink fest?" Charlie asked, horrified. Then, he glanced over at Sam, who was right beside Chris.

"Sammy?" Charlie asked, and the man knocked Chris onto the bed.

"Behave, young man."

Elizabeth grinned.

"I don't even mind," she stated. "You can butt in all you want," she stated.

Again, Charlie warned her.

"Only as long as I can pull it off. If the mayor bitches, or the townsfolk get testy about Sam not being there, we have to go back. I have to be able to check-in."

Chris wanted to help.

From the bed, he clued them in.

"If only you had a son-in-law who owned a tech company," he teased. "You know and could get you software and hardware where you can check-in daily and be there on a screen," he stated. "Oh, and a fancy phone like your daughters."

Charlie loved tech.

It was fun.

He stared at him.

"Is that legit a thing, Son?" he asked. "You wouldn't tease an old man, now would you?"

Chris laughed.

“Well, I hope it will be. My company is pushing it, and the high-tech phones to the government. It’s the wave of the future, or so we hope.”

The big man grinned.

“Well, then hook me up. Can I get one of those newfangled things for the mayor’s office so he will be all about being the only person in the whole state to have it? He likes to feel like he’s on the cutting edge.”

She laughed.

“In *Salem*, Dad?”

He laughed.

“I know, but don’t tell him. This might be the way to handle all of this.”

Chris laughed.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Elizabeth pulled him up from the bed and planted one hell of a kiss on his mouth. She knew the sacrifice he was making, and the one Sam was too.

She appreciated it.

“Today is turning out to be a damn good day,” she stated, despite the rush to the finish line.

Charlie agreed.

“Well, then let’s start going through the names,” Charlie said, dropping his arm over Sam’s shoulder.

He’d never forget what the love of his life sacrificed for him.

**Ever.**

Charlie would have time with his daughter.

For as long as he had left.

*One Hour Later*  
*Research*  
*Dinner Time*  
*Axelle's Room*

They were comparing names, and they were coming up with some men who had shown up at quite a few of the speed dating events.

So far, five individuals seemed to regularly hang out on a Friday night, trying to pick up the ladies.

Well, that was definitely something good in her book. Teddy might be hiding in plain sight as one of them.

"This might help," she said, writing the five names down on a sheet of paper for them.

While she would love a whiteboard, it was already after dark, and she wasn't sending anyone out for one, or asking downstairs.

*How would she explain that?*

It appeared that Teddy wasn't the only one hiding in plain sight—so were they.

"It's a start," Charlie admitted. "I'm not sure how you're going to determine he's one of those people," he added.

She explained.

"We know that Kitty was a master at faking an identity. I'm betting she taught her siblings all they knew. We won't be able to tell by looking at the information. What we can do is see what is out of place."

Axelle explained.

"LaRue is reversing it. Say we find a name that the person died fifty years ago. That's a red flag."

He got it.

"You're looking for what's odd."

She nodded.



“Then, if we have any, I can dedicate my time to them. If nothing comes up, that means I have to interview all of the people and hope Teddy isn’t one. If he is...”

Charlie got it.

“He’ll run.”

She nodded.

“Exactly, so we have to work fast. We should start breaking these names down to dig into their identities,” she stated, pointing at the paper, “and go from there.”

“It seems harder when you know the person who is doing it,” Sam stated.

*Was?*

*It?*

*Ever?*

“It really is.”

When there was a knock to her door, Axelle was the closest, and it was her room.

“Get out of sight,” she stated, as Elizabeth stayed, hiding the papers.

They did. It was a tight squeeze into the one bathroom, but all the men managed to squeeze in.

“We’re good,” Chris whispered.

Elizabeth pointed.

When she opened the door, there was a man holding food.

“You ordered a bunch of food, miss?” the pub employee asked.

She laughed when he looked at the four takeout bags and the two of them.

“We did, Vale,” she said, reading his name tag. “We’re really hungry,” she stated, taking the bags.

Axelle signed the paper, adding a good-sized tip as Chris had instructed.

“Thanks,” she stated.

His eyes got huge with the tip.

“All this for walking it up?” he asked. “Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“We like to stay in our room,” she offered, winking at him. “You know, to cozy up.”

Elizabeth almost laughed.

Axelle made it sound like they were having a sex fest. Well, whatever. She was hungry and as long as they ate and worked, he could think she was being boned by circus employees.

She waved and closed the door.

“You’re a piece of work,” Elizabeth said, taking half of the bags, as she shook her head.

“Hey, if he wants to think I’m petting the kitty, that’s on him.”

She wasn’t going there. When it came to that, she preferred her ME to do the petting.

**“FOOD!”** Elizabeth said, starving.

When Chris came out, he was shaking his head.

“Now the ladies are flirting too,” he said, laughing. “My life is a challenge.”

She gave him a kiss and squeezed his ass when no one was looking.

Yeah, he loved a challenge.

“Let’s get some food and keep working,” Elizabeth stated.

As Chris handed out the takeout containers, she sat on the floor with Axelle, and they had laptops ready to go. Everyone was going to have to help out on this compressed timeline.

As Axelle monitored her money trail, Jack was manning the list they’d made.

“Give me one,” Jack stated.

She did just that.

“First up, Jack, you have Simian Welch. He was at three of the seven speed datings,” she offered.

“I’ll take one,” Charlie said, sitting at the little table not far away with Sam.

She gave Charlie one too.

“Try Peter Newbert. He was at four of the seven,” she offered.

She took the next one.

“I’ve got Marcus Lewis,” she said, running him. Immediately, she knew it wasn’t him. The second she put in his name, his face popped up onto the screen.

**Damn.**

One down.

“Okay, mine is already a bust,” she stated, turning her laptop around so they could see him. “He’s African American. I’m going to say that the

Clarkson kids were all Caucasian.”

Axelle and Jack agreed.

“Likely,” she stated.

Jack’s laptop beeped.

“I have Simian. He popped up. He’s not from here. It shows he’s the oldest of four, and he has a life.”

She knew they couldn’t discount anything, since Kitty was damn good at faking IDs.

“What does he look like?” she asked.

He began searching for anything that might have his picture.

Elizabeth reminded them that while hard, facial recognition would be key.

“Remember the poor woman Kitty killed to assume her identity. She might have taught her siblings that trick. Keep digging. Find me a picture.”

He was trying.

Jack shared.

“He does have social media, but nothing really that gives us baby pictures or family photos. It looks like he mostly posts things about video games and girls.”

“Age?” she asked.

He pulled up a picture in the driver’s license database and then compared it to what was on social media, just to cover their bases.

He showed them.

“His license says the late twenties.”

It fit.

“Tag him. Axelle, see what else you can find on Simian. Dig as much as you can to help Jack out.”

She did what Elizabeth asked and got to work.

At that same moment, Charlie’s laptop pinged, and they all looked over.

“Uh-oh,” he stated.

“What?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, you’re not going to like this one as the killer,” he stated.

“Why?” she asked as Chris finished handing out food to everyone in the room.

Charlie explained.

“He’s fifty on the driver’s license, and I have social media pictures of him with his grandbabies. He’s not going to fit.”

**Damn.**

Yeah, that wasn’t going to be him.

When Charlie showed her the picture, she shook her head.

“Teddy would be younger.”

Charlie stared at him.

“He’s lucky,” he said, out of the blue.

Elizabeth wasn’t sure where he was going with that, but with her father, one never really knew.

“And that means?”

**“HE HAS GRANDBABIES.”**

Chris actually took his Styrofoam container away, and it made Charlie laugh.

“Son, don’t come between me and a burger,” he stated. “Sam already does that shit.”

Sam laughed as Chris handed it back.

As for his daughter, she pointed at him.

“How about you slow your grandpa roll, and just try the next name, Dad?”

He snorted.

“Hit me with it, Baby Girl.”

She did.

“You have Vick Lane.”

Her father began eating his burger and worked on his search for anything on the man.

As they all ate in silence, Elizabeth continued her search of Joseph Peterman, and when it chimed, she saw the face of a young man staring back at her.

He, too, was in his late twenties.

**Hot damn.**

They had two ‘*suspects*’ to work with, and she hoped they showed tomorrow night for the speed dating. She wanted to talk to each one of them.

Before she could say anything, her father’s laptop chimed too.

Charlie shook his head.

“My next one is a no,” he stated. Then, he explained. “Vick Lane is a mixed-race male again over forty. Apparently, he’s looking for young love.”

“Aren’t they all?” she asked, pointing at Chris. “Some men like them younger.”

He laughed.

“Uh, Sweetness, you’re not ten years younger than me. When I was starting kindergarten, you were toddling around. I didn’t rob the cradle.”

She winked at him.

Elizabeth liked to believe that they would have found each other, no matter the age. When it was meant to be, it was meant to be.

As for her other tag-team partner in this, Axelle wasn’t having any luck finding anything off about the man. Jack wasn’t kidding when he said there wasn’t much on social media.

“Ax?”

She shook her head.

“Jack found just about everything. He owns a business in town, and like Jack said, he’s around the right age. He cleans carpets,” she stated, showing them what else she found on Simian.

Some older pictures.

He had blonde hair and blue eyes.

It fit.

“We’ll pay him a visit tomorrow,” she stated. “Meanwhile, send me that picture. I’m going to get it over to Tony. Maybe he can tell us if this man and Kitty are related.”

That worked for her.

Axelle sent it right to her phone.

Elizabeth shared what she had on her hit. The man looking back at her from her computer was also a potential.

Joseph Peterman had a local address. Other than that, she couldn’t really find anything on him.

Maybe because he was Teddy.

He lived not far from the hotel.

“Uh, I have a hit that doesn’t have a history online, and isn’t pulling up in the databases,” she stated.

“Who?” Axelle asked, willing to help her search now that she’d helped Jack.

She gave Axelle the name.

“Peterman, Joseph. It’s giving me an older man, but he’s coming up dead. Can you run him too? Maybe I’m on the wrong trail?”

She searched too.

Axelle ran him through the IRS and her own work database, just in case.

Her laptop pinged.

“I also found a Joseph Peterman who is listed as dead in the searches.”

Her heart began racing.

“That’s what you wanted, right?” Charlie stated, wiping his mouth.

It was.

That meant one thing.

“Well, I think tomorrow, we need to swing by Mr. Peterman’s home and ask him why he doesn’t seem to exist.”

That worked for Charlie.

“The sheriff is going to be sorry he missed out on all of this,” he admitted.

Oh, she was pretty sure Remington would be just fine. He was, after all, running his own operation there.

“Good work, team. Now, let’s get our reports filed to our bosses, updating them, and I’ll call Tony to make sure the techs are behaving.”

“I can’t believe you left him in charge,” Chris stated, laughing. “Right now, he’s having beetle races across the floor, and they are having a party.”

They had better not be doing anything like that.

She’d kick their asses.

“If I have to go over there instead of getting solid sleep, I’m going to kick bug man’s ass,” she promised.

Chris just laughed.

There was no doubt in his mind that now, they were both going back there to check up on the team.

If this cut into him having a rousing game of feeling up the lead investigator...

The women weren't going to be the only dead people in town.

Tony would be joining them.

He could bet on it.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

*Two Hours Later*

*The Lobby*

*Thursday Night*

Sam had snuck out to get something from the vending machine and left Charlie showering.

He'd sent a text, knowing that if he was caught, Charlie would kick his ass.

It would destroy his relationship, but it was something he felt compelled to do.

He was meeting another man.

*One he loved very much.*

When he sent the text, it was only a few minutes when the elevator opened, and out came Chris.

On his face, there was worry.

Oh, he knew why.

He'd texted him and said this meeting had to be kept absolutely quiet.

"Mom, are you okay?" Chris asked, his hair sticking up and a hickey on his neck.

It was clear what he had been doing.

**Elizabeth.**

“I’m okay, but I need help with something, and I can’t do it alone. Only, you can’t say anything.”

He was worried still.

Sam bought a candy bar for each of them, and then took a seat on the bench.

He hoped that if Elizabeth or Charlie got suspicious, they’d believe they both happened upon each other there.

“I won’t,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know how to ask this. I’ve never asked for help in my whole life, and neither has Charlie.”

He took Sam’s hand in his and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“If I can help, Mom, I will. Just tell me.”

He did.

He did something Charlie would kill him for if he were to ever find out.

“There is no way we can financially afford to come back to DC and lose our jobs. Charlie had to refinance the house to pay off Abigale for alimony and child support.”

Chris got it.

“And you’re afraid he’s going to lose their house if he comes back?”

He nodded.

“I told him I’d help him, since our finances are separate, and he was okay with that, but Christopher, then I have to work. I can’t come back. If I don’t, Charlie won’t. See the conundrum?”

Chris listened.

He saw the worry.

“I would never ask for help.”

Chris stopped him.

“Mom, it’s okay.”

“I want him to be near his daughter, but if I don’t come back, I worry that I’m going to be hurt. Abigale hates me. She spreads homophobic things all over, and it’s just a matter of time before some nut is convinced to hurt me. That will kill Charlie. I just don’t know how to do this.”

Chris did.

“Let me pay off his home and yours. Let me help you out.”

“I feel horrible for asking,” Sam said, as he started to cry. “I’m just not sure how to make it work. We can go part-time, or Charlie can not run



for sheriff, but then how will he pay his bills? He is so miserable there without Elizabeth, that he'd do anything to escape that misery—and that includes not thinking this through.”

Chris knew Charlie was doing it so Elizabeth could have him in her life even more. There was no way he could let him lose her childhood home.

Chris knew how Charlie had been run through the wringer with alimony and child support for George, simply because Abigale was a vicious bitch.

“Am I family?” Chris asked, hugging the man.

“You are my son,” Sam stated. “I never thought I'd be blessed with more than Elizabeth. I'll find a way to pay you back.”

He stopped him.

“Let me make this easy for you. I want to give Elizabeth a gift. She works damn hard, and she deserves to have her father in her life. I will give you the money to help, and I'm going to give you a portion of my paycheck since you help with autopsies.”

“I don't...”

He stopped him again.

“Sam, you have been doing autopsies, paperwork, and helping out. I'll make sure you get some income out of this even if I have to go talk to Gabe. You're a contractor. I'll work it out. As for the debt, give me your account information, and I'll have the money put in. Then, pay off Charlie's home. How much does he and you owe?”

He told him.

“Sam, that's less than what I make in a year as an ME for the FBI.”

Sam stared at him.

“I am in the wrong job.”

He laughed.

“I'll get you paid and submit the paperwork for Charlie and yourself to Gabe. I'll make sure Elizabeth leans on Gabe. Then, you'll have money from that. If you need more,” he began.

“I don't want you to be my ATM.”

He kissed him on the cheek.

“You're my family,” he said, wiping a tear on his cheek. “What wouldn't I do for you and Charlie?” he asked.

“Thank you, Christopher. Our girl is blessed to have you. I know that you’ll take good care of her.”

He smiled.

“I plan on it.”

When the elevator opened, Elizabeth came out. As soon as she saw Sam’s face, she panicked.

“Are you okay?”

Chris reassured her.

“He’s fine.”

Sam laughed.

“I was just worried about you, and Chris was calming me down. We ran into each other here.”

She relaxed.

“Oh, okay, Mom.”

She gave him a kiss.

“I’m going to be fine tomorrow. Don’t let this upset you, and don’t stir up my father. God. He’ll try to get one of those baby things that attach to your chest and carry me in it.”

Sam laughed.

“I won’t.”

Chris gave Sam a kiss and held his girl’s hand.

“If you need me, Sam, I’ll talk you out of the crazy. I’m accustomed to it.”

She pinched him on the side.

He yelped.

“Or if I need you to save me,” he teased.

“I’m good. I just needed a moment. Thank you, Christopher. You really helped me out.”

“Anytime, Mom. Anytime.”

Elizabeth and Chris got into the elevator, and it began the climb.

“When will you be telling me the truth?” she asked, knowing Sam had lied to her. She’d done wild shit her whole life, and he didn’t cry over her.

Sam only cried over one person.

Charles Riley LaRue.

“Did my daddy hurt his heart? I’ll kick his ass.”

He wasn’t shocked.

“If I tell you, it has to never be said out loud or mentioned again.”

She was worried.

“I swear.”

“Swear on our relationship that it goes to your grave,” he added.

**Jesus.**

*What was this?*

“Okay, I swear on our relationship even though this makes me scared shitless.”

He told her.

**EVERYTHING.**

The whole time, she said nothing.

When the elevator opened, and they walked back to the room, he explained, and she was silent.

Inside, he toed off his shoes, and she did the same.

“Before you get all crazy,” he said, knowing how she hated when he spent money on her, “I want to give this gift to Sam and Charlie, along with you. That’s one year’s salary, Elizabeth, and it would mean you could see your father, and he wouldn’t lose his home. Sam would refinance his home, making the hole bigger.”

She didn’t say a word.

There were tears in her eyes.

“Please just let me do this for you and them.”

“Oh, Christopher,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I have never loved you more than I do right now.”

He touched her cheek.

“That’s a drop in the bucket in money. We literally have more than that in our joint account. Abigale buried him. Let me help dig him out.”

She went into his body, and he waited.

She took his face in her hands and kissed him. It was gentle, sweet, filled with all the things she felt for him. He was her hero.

Chris would be that role until the day she died. There was no way she could pay him back, but she would always fight for him and protect him.

When she broke the kiss, he was confused.

“No fight?” he asked. “You’re not going to go crazy?”

She stared into his eyes.

“Oh, I’m about to go crazy,” she said, grabbing him through the front of his pants. “Want to go have sex again? It seems that my sexy man did something so unselfish, kind, caring, and sweet, that I feel like jumping him again.”

He grinned.

“Well, if you want to molest your ME...”

She pulled him toward the bed.

And the whole time, she was grateful.

She loved her man.

**A.**

**Lot.**

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

***Somewhere In Town***

***Her Home***

***Eleven P.M.***

Oh, he was on the prowl.

There was something about her that he simply couldn’t put out of his head.

He hadn’t been planning on grabbing this one for some fun, but he was getting worried.

Teddy had tried calling Kitty, and she wasn’t picking up. Once more, he’d needed his other sister to talk him down.

She'd suggested that he find something to occupy himself.

Well, if she insisted.

He thought back to that speed dating, and he recalled one prettier girl who caught his attention.

He knew where she lived, and he was more than fine with an impromptu date.

As he watched through the back door, he saw her dancing around her kitchen with a glass of wine.

Well, it was showtime.

When it was all done, he was impressed. It took less than two minutes to get to her.

"Well, gorgeous. Let's have some fun. You look like someone who likes a good time."

And then **HE** had one.

Sadly, she **DID NOT**.

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## Chapter Thirteen

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*Washington D.C.*

*Early*

*Friday Morning*

**T**he whole night was a blur, and Ethan Blackhawk had the weirdest-ass dream all night long. He dreamed that he was in bed with a man and cuddled up to his partner. There was no freaking way that could have gone down.

*Right?*

The last thing that he remembered was drinking way too much beer, a few shots of hard booze, and shooting pool.

Okay, it was a lot of booze.

Only, he'd been having a rare night off with someone he liked spending time with, and that was important to him.

On top of the binge drinking, Blackhawk vaguely recalled someone helping him home.

**Oh, shit.**

Booze was not his friend, and it was probably a bad idea to have a few shots when he was getting the pitchers refilled.

**Shit.**

**Shit.**

**Shit.**

Now, he was forced to play *'put the puzzle pieces of his night back in order'*, with someone in his home.

This was bad.

**REAL.**

**BAD.**

*Who was in the other room?*

There was no way his dream was legit, and he'd slept with his partner. They were men, and men didn't do shit like that.

The only problem with that was that he could hear his washing machine in the hall going, and he was in his undies.

This was a damn bad time to have morning wood.

There were times when he wished he didn't have the Blackhawk DNA, and this was **DEFINITELY** one of those times.

Oh, yeah, there was that awkward feeling settling into his gut. Someone was going to be in the kitchen and was roaming his home.

**Alone.**

This was how people got killed.

Now, he was stuck hoping it wasn't some serial killer mystery woman who was going to shoot him. His gun was in his safe, but it wasn't locked.

Oh, he was screwed.

On top of dying, he didn't have condoms here. He hadn't been boning anyone for a few weeks. He just really hoped that this dick hadn't been utilized the night before.

Ethan didn't want to be like Wyler, leaving kids all over the place.

He prayed to every god that he could think of that his partner was going to be in the kitchen and not a woman.

**Not Melanie.**

If he ever **REALLY** wanted to sleep with a man and not a woman, this was that time.

**FUCK.**

Getting out of bed, his phone wasn't anywhere to be seen, and all he could find were his shoes.

Ethan had one hell of a hangover, and his mouth tasted like the inside of a dumpster. Someone had been puking.

He could tell.

On top of that, his head was pounding, and dehydration was there. It felt like he was mummified.

He needed to stay away from hard alcohol. It made him want to fuck anything with a vagina, party way too hard, and do stupid shit.

Again, he really hoped it wasn't Melanie in that kitchen. His luck he got home, she came to the door, and he ended up marrying her.

He stared at his hands, and there was no ring.

Oh, thank you, God.

What he could tell from the smells and sounds was that there was food.

Despite that sick feeling in his gut, he knew that the only way past a hangover was more booze...

**NO.**

*Or food to soak up that stomach nastiness.*

Stumbling out, he smelled bacon.

**God.**

He loved bacon.

When he walked around the kitchen wall, low and behold, his partner was standing there and making something to eat.

“Thank freaking God you’re here,” he muttered, that relief flooding him.

Gene turned, and he was in boxers.

When his phone had gone off earlier, alerting him that they were flying out later for a case, he had to get out of bed.

Oh, it wasn’t easy.

It sucked.

Gene wanted to stay right where he was. Waking up with Ethan on top of him was a damn nice thing, but he wasn’t a douche.

His partner had been talking in his sleep, and twice, he’d said ‘*Callen*’. Apparently, he was still in love with whoever that was.

That meant his gun was staying in the holster until he could make sure his partner was over the man.

*Whoever he was...*

How did he walk away from Ethan Blackhawk? His dick alone made him one hell of a catch.

He knew because someone had morning wood. This was why Gene liked baggy boxers.

“Coffee?” Gene asked, pouring him some.

Ethan took it.

“I am so glad to see you. What the fuck happened?” Ethan asked, his hair down, his head hurting, and his gut on fire.

Gene checked him out.

God, this man was hot.

Gene wanted to run his mouth over those carved-out muscles at his hips or hold onto them from behind. He’d top or bottom for the man any day.

He refocused.

“Well, Blackhawk, we got drunk,” he stated. “I feel like shit, and you drank more, so I can only imagine how you feel.”



Oh, Ethan was not in a good place.

That was for damn sure.

Only, he was glad Gene hadn't left his ass there or driven home. If the worst thing he did was sleep beside his partner, that was nothing.

They had stakeouts where they slept in the same room. As long as he didn't do stupid shit like bone Melanie and get married to that harpy...

**Hell.**

If Gene told him they had sex, he would have been less freaked-out than being inebriated with the flight attendant. That was how much he hated her.

Gene cooked and kept talking.

"After testing our livers' limits, we stumbled back, we both puked, you **ON** us, and me in your shrubs. I am washing our shit. I hope you don't mind."

Ethan didn't.

He walked over to his partner and kissed him in the middle of the forehead.

"Bless you for staying and taking care of me. Oh, and not letting that woman I am using to move up the ladder into my house. She'd try to get me to marry her or knock her up. I owe you on that one."

He shuddered.

Gene laughed.

Oh, well, if Ethan wanted to kiss him, sleep on him, or touch his dick, like he had a few times in the night as he shifted his body against his...

*Who was he to complain?*

Had Gene not respected him and believed in consent, no matter the gender, he would have been far less horny this morning.

"I also grabbed a shower. I hope you're okay with that."

Ethan sipped his coffee.

"I'm good. Feel free."

Oh, Gene had to because someone had to jerk off or do something stupid.

Only, it wasn't all good news. Again, they were going out, and Ethan was going to be pissed.

"Well, don't be so damn happy yet."

Ethan didn't give a shit.

As long as he didn't end up buck-ass naked in bed with Melanie, who wanted his sperm in the worst way, he was good. There could be no bad news after that was eliminated.

Hell.

Maybe if he told Melanie he was dating a man, he could get rid of her. He'd play bi-sexual to lose her. It wasn't like waking up with a man freaked him out.

He'd slept with his brother for years in Timothy's tiny two-bedroom cabin. He wasn't afraid of that.

*Knocking up the she-devil and ruining his career...*

That freaked him out.

"What?" he asked.

"As I was saying, Gabe called. We're heading out," he stated.

Ethan rested his head on the table.

Okay, he was wrong.

That was almost as bad. If he had to get on a plane hungover...he was going to puke.

**MANY.**

**TIMES.**

"Oh, fuck me," he said, resting his head on the table.

Gene laughed.

He wished that was an invitation he could take. Up to when their phones started going off, he'd planned on taking that leap this morning.

This was one sleepover Gene was not going to forget.

Now that Gene was pretty sure that his partner was gay, he was going to see if the man was over his last partner, Callen, and go from there.

"Where are we heading out to?" Ethan asked, "and do I have to bring my brain? It hurts," he stated.

Gene laughed and then his head hurt too from his hangover.

"Oh, Jesus. My brain is pickled," he muttered. "We're going to Arizona. Bodies in a desert. So, we'll be dehydrated and in the ungodly hot sun as punishment."

Oh, that was going to be horrible.

Ethan sat up and did the only thing he could.

He chugged the coffee like it was his lifeline. Then, he wandered to a cabinet and pulled down aspirin. He downed three and took more out of the bottle to give to Gene.

He accepted them.

“We’re idiots,” Gene stated.

Ethan laughed.

“Yeah, we are,” he admitted. “Want to do it again?” he asked.

Honestly, he had the best time until he went beyond his beer limit.

Gene was a cool guy, and they worked well together. He didn’t even mind the man was in his house in his boxers.

Or he was in his briefs.

Guys saw junk in the gym all the time, and he was secure in his masculinity.

Plus, he’d rather wake up with a man than Melanie the succubus flight attendant. She’d duct tape popsicle sticks to his dick to ride him while he was out.

**No.**

**Doubt.**

Gene found that funny.

“Absolutely. I’m a glutton for punishment. Next day off, it’s a date.”

Ethan snorted.

Yeah, they were idiots.

Gene put eggs and toast on a plate, then placed the bacon on top. He placed the dishes on the table and grabbed the ketchup and hot sauce on the counter.

“We have to eat, and I have to go get my car.”

“Thank you, Honey. I love a houseguest who makes me food,” he joked.

Oh, he could call him honey any damn day. He’d be his permanent houseguest.

“You have a nicer place. Don’t think I won’t move in,” he said, not really joking. “I still have to get my car. Luckily, I still have my keys.”

Ethan was feeling magnanimous toward the man. The only person he’d ever trusted when that drunk was his brother.

**Man.**

He missed him.

Ethan had to push that out of his mind. When he was blackout drunk, it was best not to be near anyone. His sperm donor got that drunk, and he woke up all over the rez.

“I’ll drive us to your car, and then head to your place. I’ll take us to the airport. It’s the least I can do since you got us back here last night.”

Gene began eating, hoping to soak up the bile in his gut.

“Are you okay that we both passed out in your bed? I couldn’t make it to the couch, and your bathroom was closer.”

He ate his toast, hoping he could keep the food down. Today was going to blow. He was totally having a bloody Mary on the plane.

**Screw it.**

He couldn’t profile with his brain this foggy.

“Nah, I’m good,” he stated. “Thanks for taking care of me. I don’t get that drunk that often because my family has a history of blacking out with booze.”

Gene relaxed.

He also noticed Ethan was far more relaxed around him. He usually had up a wall, but he was chill. It was as if he got past the barrier and was seeing the real man. He wasn’t freaked-out that he was shirtless, or that his hair was down.

“Okay, good. I didn’t want it to be weird.”

Ethan laughed, and it hurt.

“Dude, you’re my partner. It’s not weird. That you cooked and did my laundry is the highlight of my day. Again, move in,” he teased.

Gene had that warm fuzzy feeling that went right to his dick.

When their phones chimed again, Ethan whimpered.

“Make it stop.”

Gene pulled open the drawer and dropped their phones in until the aspirin kicked in. Then, he grabbed them both some water.

“Chug,” he stated. “Like you did last night.”

Ethan did.

Why?

Because duty called, and clearly, his sense of self-preservation sucked.

He, too, was his father's child.

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

*West Virginia  
Six A.M.*

She could feel the bed shifting, and she already knew who it would be.

Christopher.

The love of her life.

The night before had been about making sure they had everything lined up and checked out. With tonight's operation, they couldn't miss anything.

So, they ate, she dealt with Tony and the techs, thankfully on the phone, and then everyone went to their room to get some sleep. This was the second case in five days, and they needed to be rested.

When she'd jumped her man, then showered, and found him MIA, she'd gotten freaked-out. Finding him and Sam talking, and then hearing what he was going to do had made her love him even more.

It was hard to believe that it was possible, but she did.

After jumping Chris again, in their hotel room to wear herself out, so they could get some sleep, she'd dropped off and slept like a rock.

Now, her internal clock was going off, and she'd had six good hours of sleep.

Today was going to be hard.

She had to pack so much into twelve hours, and that included the hours needed to get herself prepped for tonight.

Before she even opened her eyes, she knew that he was wide-awake and focused on her. She could feel him blowing warm breath across her bared breasts.

Her nipples pebbled.

Apparently, her man needed her, and she wasn't going to complain. After what he'd offered, she'd let him jump her on the concierge's counter downstairs.

"Elizabeth," he said, as his lips were moving across her arm, and toward her neck, "I seem to have morning wood, and I need my girl."

Mostly, he was stirred up because he was worried, and he needed a distraction. They both did that for the other person. Chris needed her or he was going to have a bad day.

He could tell.

When his warm palm cupped one of her full breasts, and his thumb stroked that nipple, her body shook.

Oh, well, he wasn't the only one who needed it. Apparently, his girl was down for it too.

"Christopher," she muttered.

"It seems, Sweetness, I can't seem to get enough of you," he admitted.

Oh, and it was true.

He wanted all that she had to offer and so much more.

As his fingers traced across her ribs, goosebumps crisscrossed her body.

"I feel like waking up the right way."

Yeah, she did too.

When she stared into his eyes, there was that need and heat there. She also saw adoration.

"Let me love you," she whispered.

The artery in his neck, and dick, jumped.

"Yes, please," he whispered, his whole being tingling as he pictured what would be happening.

Chris never wanted this to end.

**Ever.**

Elizabeth found his mouth with hers. When she kissed him, all of the worries of the upcoming night vanished. In that minute, he was at peace.

She could do that to him.

When she broke the kiss, he stared into her icy-blue eyes.

“You have to be safe tonight,” he said.

She knew he was stressing it.

This man would forever worry about her. She knew that to be a fact.

She reassured him the best she could.

“I will be okay,” she whispered with her lips against his. “I’m good at my job, and I know I’ll have backup. You guys will have my back, and there is nothing for me to worry about, Christopher. I need you to believe that.”

Oh, he did.

Chris would die for her. He’d do anything in his power to keep her alive, safe, and in his life.

Still, he was worried and needed reassurance.

This woman scared the hell out of him. She put herself in harm’s way countless times to help the people she’d sworn to protect.

It was terrifying.

“Make me forget,” he said, as she ran her fingers across his morning stubble.

Well, that she could do.

Her mouth found his, again, and the kiss exploded around them. She held nothing back, plumbing the depths of his mouth like only a lover could do. The whole time, Elizabeth was letting the love and need in her, ebb into him.

There was no holding back.

**NONE.**

As they made love to each other’s mouths, hands wandered, and there was that growing heat surrounding them. Chris’ body reacted to her being against him as he let go of the fear to focus on just her.

She would be fine.

He had to believe it.

There could be no Christopher without his sweetness. She was his core.

When they both moaned in such pleasure, Chris knew he needed to come up to breathe.

He broke the kiss.

“I never want to let you out of my sight,” he admitted, staring into her beautiful eyes.

Her heart skipped.

"Then don't," she said, simply. "Be with me until we get old."

Oh, he planned on it.

Chris' body ached to have more of her. She filled him with such peace, that he'd never be okay if he had to give her up. He'd be a shell of a human being.

He'd never love again if he lost her.

That would be a fact.

"My sweet doctor," she said, leaving kisses on his face.

Chris' hands moved over her body. He loved her soft, petal-like skin. It gave him hours of pleasure just running his fingers over what was his.

**HER.**

"Make love to me," she stated, "and let me do the same for you."

Oh, he was down with that.

"Yes, please," he said as he could feel her hands moving down his torso, leaving a trail of fire as she touched him.

His heart raced.

His body ached.

Chris knew absolute love because he'd found it with her.

When she stared into his eyes, he knew that what he was feeling was something she felt too.

"I love you," she said, giving him a gift. Every time she said it, he felt blessed.

Thankfully, she said it to him all the time, and each time it was like a sucker punch to his soul.

**God.**

He was lucky.

Chris couldn't believe the universe had given him something so perfect.

She was his.

"I love you too," he vowed. "I will always love you, Bethe. I'll love you until we're old. You're meant to be mine."

**Damn.**

When her hand found its target, there was that quick whip of pleasure racing through him. Her warm fingers were wrapped around his



erection, and he wanted nothing more but for her to show him how much she wanted him.

Chris loved how she took care of him in bed.

As her fingers moved across the head of his dick, that wetness told the tale.

Chris moaned.

**God.**

He loved his life.

There was no other woman who could make him feel this way. Chris wanted to celebrate what he'd found the second he met her.

"Someone is thinking about me," she said, as his dick jumped against her hand.

There was nothing hotter than a horny man with morning wood. She loved this time of the day.

**Hell.**

Anytime they were having sex was a good time.

*Who was she kidding?*

"Yes, I am," he muttered, as he could feel his body reacting to just that gentle touch.

He craved more.

When her foot caressed his leg, his body shook. Then, there was that kiss of flesh touching flesh, and he began picturing her above him, below him, and himself buried in her.

**Hot.**

**Damn.**

He couldn't wait.

As Elizabeth began to stroke his erection, Chris was lost in that sensation. All of the worries slipped away, and his lower brain turned on.

She was his only focus.

She was that peace.

As he throbbed in her hand, Elizabeth knew what the man she loved needed more than anything.

That promise that it would all be okay.

The universe didn't put them together to tear them apart, right? There had to be a purpose for this journey.

"I will love you forever. I'll be yours until the end of our lives," she vowed.

His heart hitched.

Those were the sweetest words from the sweetest woman. There were times he wanted to take, and there were times he simply wanted her to enjoy all he had to offer.

**His.**

**Whole.**

**Being.**

“Take what you need from me,” she offered.

Or that.

How could he pass that offer up?

Chris’ heart thumped in his chest, and he licked his lips because they had gone bone dry.

This woman was a precious gift.

While he loved her touching him, Chris knew that he wanted to change it up. Last night, they’d been wicked and wild.

Now, he wanted to be gentle and sweet.

**For her.**

She was going to have a long day where she pushed herself to the limits, and he wanted to comfort her—in advance.

It was time to rock her world.

It was time to take care of his woman.

He was going to enjoy her body just as much as she enjoyed his.

Chris took that offer and ran with it.

He rolled.

Trapping her beneath him, Chris enjoyed the feel of her body against his.

That need called to him.

It rose up and it took control.

He was hungry, and his woman was on the menu this morning.

His mouth moved all over her body, and he did his best to lavish her with the love that she deserved.

He didn’t want to worry about his needs.

She came first.

**Always.**

She was his heart.

As he began worshiping her, Elizabeth reacted to his touch exactly how he knew she would.

She moaned in pleasure as his mouth left a trail of fire across her flesh, teasing her, and driving her wild.

*Gone was the worry about tonight.*

*Gone was the stress that something might happen.*

He lived in that moment.

**With.**

**Her.**

As his mouth moved down her body, it didn't take long for Elizabeth to forget everything. She was myopically focused on her sexy ME, and what happiness they had.

It was almost hard to believe that they had this kind of joy.

A part of her didn't believe she deserved it, but for whatever reason, the universe gave her a gift.

She was running with that.

Love was here.

She could feel it.

As she reacted to the way he touched her, the temperature in the room went up.

When he lifted his head, their eyes met. Chris couldn't get enough, and he wanted to taste her. He started with his favorite part of her.

Her breasts.

The second his mouth came in contact with her pebbled nipple, Elizabeth moaned.

**God.**

He loved the sound of that.

It drove him wild.

"More," she begged, as he made her want him as if he was some drug.

Chris pressed her into the mattress, his body pinning her beneath him.

Here was a sexy buffet of woman, and he couldn't get enough.

She felt the same.

Elizabeth loved being trapped beneath him.

"I am on sexy overload," he muttered. "I don't know what to taste first," he admitted.

"Well, I was thinking," she began, and before she finished, she took control.

Elizabeth rolled, getting to the top.

“Oh, look, there’s a hot ME in my bed.”

He grinned up at her.

“Whatcha going to do about that?” he asked.

She snorted.

“I think I’m going to have some fun. You’re going to be my hapless victim,” she teased, adding an evil chuckle.

It made him smile.

“Oh, help! Someone! I’m being held hostage by a gorgeous woman with really amazing tits. Whatever will I do?” he asked. “Should I escape or let her put my dick between them?”

She laughed.

“Oh, well, I do have my plans,” she admitted.

He winked at her.

“Do your worst, Agent. I’m yours.”

She accepted his offer and attacked.

As she took everything that she wanted, Chris was one happy man.

“I love my life,” he muttered, as Elizabeth left bites and nips across his heated flesh. When she drove the mating, he didn’t want to do anything but let her have her wicked way with him.

It was amazing to be him.

**Every.**

**Single.**

**Day.**

When she ground her body against his erection, he gasped in pleasure.

“Oh, yeah, Bethe. More.”

He never wanted this feeling to end.

**Hell!**

He wished they could both retire, stay in bed on some deserted island, and make love like wild people.

That was a good day in his book.

Chris was madly in love with this woman.

“Buckle up, buttercup. I’m about to give you some head.”

Oh, he was ready.

She slid down his body, and her hand found his rock-hard erection. When she stroked him, goosebumps appeared across his flesh.

“Like this, sexy ME?” she asked, being wicked and a little rough. When his balls reacted, she already had her answer.

“God! Yes!”

She grinned.

“Please put your mouth on my dick,” he muttered. Her hand was amazing, but he wanted more.

**So.**

**Much.**

**More.**

“Oh, it will be my pleasure,” she admitted.

She did what he asked, and that warm guttural moan was enough to really make her wet.

Elizabeth was focused on his erection.

He was thick, long, and throbbing just for her. Now, this was the breakfast of champions.

She said nothing more, but instead, let her mouth show him what she was thinking.

She slid him in her mouth and then worked him hard.

“God! Elizabeth!” he hissed as she took him so deep, he could feel her throat tightening down on him.

*The visual...*

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

Chris watched her pump his dick with her hand and use her mouth to blow his mind.

**Jesus.**

She continued to stroke him with her bare hand while tormenting the tip of his dick with her mouth.

She held nothing back as she made him beg and whimper for relief.

“Please let me cum,” he whispered. He wanted to pour down her throat in a hot wave.

She was making his legs shake, and his balls revolt.

Elizabeth said nothing.

Instead, she kept working him hard. She knew what he liked, and she was going to make this morning memorable.

Chris held on.

“**GOD!**” he muttered. “Please don’t stop. I need to cum in the worst way.”

Oh, she had news for him.

He wasn’t cumming quite yet.

It looked like it was time to really make him wild.

Chris knew he was going to suffer, and honestly, he didn’t mind.

Finding her hair, he used his hands to slow her down, so it was really torture. He couldn’t look at her or he was losing it.

When he shoved her head all the way down, gagging her on his dick, he nearly came.

“Jesus. I don’t know what I did to deserve a woman like you, but I’m so glad I earned this.”

She stared up at him, her mouth full.

Chris released her hair, thinking she’d set him free. The opposite was true.

Elizabeth wasn’t close to done.

She blew him.

She pulled out her best hooker technique and made him beg for more.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Easy.**

She worked Chris in and out of her mouth, changing up the speed, and making him shake in need.

She didn’t stop.

She couldn’t.

He wasn’t the only one feeling that pleasure.

She was too.

“Bethe,” Chris whispered, his body bowed in pleasure as she destroyed every single, solitary shred of control. “You’re killing me.”

That was the point. She wanted him to think about her all day long, and what they had.

Thankfully, Chris could do more than one round, and she was going to make him cum, and then enjoy what happened when he was all twitterpated.

That was how she liked to start her morning.

“Elizabeth!” he hissed while his body was pushed beyond his limits. He was teetering on the edge, and he knew what was coming.

It was going to be a two-cum morning.

Chris was not able to think about anything but the pleasure. He was only human, and his sexy woman was hard to resist.

Elizabeth ignored his pleas for mercy.

She didn’t slow down.

Instead, she worked him harder, pushing his body into that heat and punishment.

**Jesus.**

Chris was at his wit’s end.

“Bethe,” he whispered, barely able to get the word out as she grabbed him by the balls.

He knew what was coming.

**HIM.**

“If you do it, I’m pouring down your throat,” he warned. “I can’t hold on much more,” he hissed.

That was the point.

She wanted him wild and crazy, so she simply turned up the heat.

Elizabeth worked him hard, and by the time he was teetering, she knew he was going to fall.

The throbbing told the tale.

It was time.

As she drove him down her throat with one heated slide, Elizabeth squeezed his balls enough to shove her man off the edge. Chris liked a little pain with his sexy fun, and she was down with that.

**Pain.**

**Was.**

**Pleasure.**

Chris couldn’t think. That lust overtook him as he stared up at the ceiling.

**Holy shit!**

He was exploding.

“**GOD!** I’m cumming, Bethe! Shit!” Chris hissed as his whole body bowed in that pleasure.

She held on as that heat exploded from him, pouring down her throat. As his dick throbbed, she got even wetter.

There was that gasp of pleasure and that sigh of release. Someone had the edge taken off.

“Wicked,” he muttered.

Yes, yes, she was.

As he regained control, Chris opened his eyes and watched her set his dick free.

He was still hard, and he knew that it wouldn’t be long before he was likely begging again.

Elizabeth was insatiable.

He was never happier that he could cum multiple times in one mating.

When he stared down his body, she was rubbing against him, and she stopped at his dick.

“What was that about your dick between my tits?” she asked.

When she did just that, he forgot that he just came, and got horny all over again.

“Christ. You’re going to kill me one day.”

She let him slide his dick between her gorgeous tits, and it felt like he still hadn’t cum.

He wanted her that much.

“Bethe,” he warned as she titty fucked him, and then licked the tip of his dick.

Oh, hell.

She was making him crazy. This woman was so damn sexy and had very few limits.

**Thank.**

**Freaking.**

**God.**

He whimpered as he watched his once more rock-hard dick sliding between her breasts.

**Yep.**

He loved his life.

“Maybe my sexy man can show me who’s boss,” she said, making him moan at that breathy whisper of words.

He needed more.

It was his turn.

*Someone was cumming.*



**Her.**

Chris took control, flipping their positions. He put his woman beneath him and didn't hesitate.

He headed toward her clit.

It was time to make her scream. What had started as soft, gentle sex had escalated.

Like it always did.

He spread her thighs and took no prisoners. He wanted to hear her cum over and over again.

She gasped as he began taking what he wanted most. Chris held nothing back, feasting on his girl.

Elizabeth's body bowed.

The gentle was gone.

Chris was hungry, and there was no doubt that he wanted her to pay for the torment she'd inflicted on him.

**Hallelujah.**

She wanted all he could offer.

It was crystal clear that she only stirred him up with the blowjob.

Good.

She liked a wild ride.

As she buried her hands in his hair, she greedily took in all of the offered pleasure.

The goosebumps crisscrossed her flesh as Chris didn't hold back.

**He.**

**Went.**

**Wild.**

When people scoffed at her being with an ME, she wished they could see this. The man knew his way around a woman's body, and that was beautiful.

Chris flicked his tongue over her clit, getting her to moan in pleasure.

He didn't let up.

**Not.**

**One.**

**Bit.**

"Christopher!" she shouted, as he drove her up and to the crest of that orgasm. She could feel herself slipping from the edge. Oh, there was no

way she could hold on.

It was coming.

When Chris bit her clit, Elizabeth was done. She took that tumble into the pleasure.

It was amazing.

She fell.

**Hard.**

Elizabeth floated in that orgasm as warmth and pleasure wrapped around her.

This was her heaven.

This was the best way to wake up.

Chris loved watching that pleasure on her face, and he knew that she had a busy day. While he wanted to make her cum again and again, he knew they were racing the clock.

**It was time.**

Besides, he really wanted to be buried in her body as they raced to the finish line as one.

Slowly, Chris moved up her body, leaving kisses along that path.

When she opened her eyes, he told her that he needed her.

“I’m going to take you, Bethe. I can’t help but want to cum in you. You’re mine,” he vowed.

Her heart raced.

“Yes, please,” she whispered, running her fingers across his morning scruff.

This was a good day in her world.

Chris was between her legs, and he was rock-hard all over again.

She couldn’t wait until he filled her.

Her ME was beyond sexy.

“Hurry,” she whispered, as he left kisses on her neck and collarbones.

“Someone is needy,” he teased, as he nudged her with his erection.

She moaned, opening for him.

With need and gentleness, he slid into her body, enjoying the wet heat that waited for him. There was nothing better in the world, and he was convinced of that.

She was his.

This always undid the knots in him.

As he buried himself in her, Chris found himself moaning in pleasure.

“Oh, Bethe, that never gets old,” he admitted as his body reacted to being home. “It’s perfection,” he added, as he was struggling not to cum.

Yeah, he was weak.

He came once, but it was never enough. Around her, he was perpetually horny.

**Sue him.**

Chris began moving, taking them both on one hell of a climb and ride.

Elizabeth held on, her legs around his hips, and her eyes locked onto his.

This was their morning mating ritual.

**This.**

**Right.**

**Here.**

She explored his chest, her nails scraping seductively across his flesh.

**God.**

She loved this.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he muttered as she drove him wild with that teasing touch.

She agreed.

“I can’t either,” she admitted.

“So good, Bethe. This feels perfect in every way,” he said, lost in her gorgeous eyes.

“Hurry,” she whispered. “I need more.”

That was all he had to hear.

He picked up the pace, giving the lady what she wanted. What wouldn’t he give her?

**Anything.**

Elizabeth could have his heart from his chest if that was what she wanted. He would give up anything to have this forever with her.

Chris stared down into her eyes, and together, they both held on for the ride.

*He couldn’t wait.*

*She begged for more.*

The entire time, Chris' eyes showed her the truth. She was loved more than life.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Home.**

There would never be a him without her, and because of that, he was lost to her.

As her body began losing the battle, her nails went into his shoulders, warning him that she was there.

**On.**

**The.**

**Edge.**

"Bethe!" he moaned as his whole being was awash in that pre-cumming pleasure. It was overwhelming and threatening to take him over.

"So close," she admitted. "Wait for me. We fall as one," she whispered.

Her words drove him wild.

They would forever be that team.

To push her over, he drove into her body in desperate thrusts meant to take her over the edge.

She gasped and moaned in pleasure.

**"NOW!"** she said, and it set him off.

Chris let go.

"Bethe!" he shouted, as his whole world erupted around him.

The heat exploded from him, pouring into the woman he loved.

It carried them both over the edge as they fell through that burst of colors.

Then came the peace.

It was the best part as they felt warm, safe, and protected—connected as one.

Chris stayed buried in her, as he let time pass. He wanted to steal a few more seconds with her.

He wanted to take all he could.

Later, he'd have to pretend he didn't know her, as he watched her risk her life to catch a killer.

It made him ill.

It made him hurt.

Still, instead of ruining it, he said nothing. Loving Elizabeth wasn't easy, but it was the best thing he ever did, and here was the proof.

He could feel the love as if it was tangible.

She sighed in pleasure, and it had his attention.

When the haze cleared, Chris rolled off her body and nuzzled her.

The scent of her skin making him calm.

While he was worried about tonight, he just kept promising himself he'd watch over her.

**Like.**

**A.**

**Hawk.**

"Mmmmmmm," she whispered.

"I love you, Bethe," he said, leaving kisses on her throat. "I swear we are staying in bed that whole cruise," he said, hoping Sam and Charlie could entertain themselves.

Chris knew what he was going to be doing.

**HER.**

*Then...*

Re-hydrating himself.

"We have to get up," he stated. "I need to get to the morgue, and you have an ex to harass."

She was aware.

It was fun while it lasted.

It was time to get this done, so they could move on and celebrate their vacation.

"Well, then we should get going. Today is going to be one hell of a day."

Chris agreed.

He dreaded this with every fiber in his being.

"I've got this. You don't have to be afraid," she reassured.

It was too late.

He was already there.

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## *Chapter Fourteen*

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*Sheriff's Station*  
*Friday Eight A.M.*  
*Meet-up*

**W**hen Elizabeth arrived at the man's office, she was again going 'incognito'. Well, as much as she could. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, she was sporting Remington's borrowed cap, and her sunglasses were on.

Later, she knew that she had some big plans to disguise herself that included some tricks that Livy had sent her.

She was going to shock them all.

After her old partner sent her a list of what she'd packed up for her, she knew it was going to be easy to hide in plain sight.

Teddy wasn't the only one who could play these kinds of games.

**Bring it on.**

Beside her, Charlie was in all of his glory that morning, and she was glad.

The man was so damn happy that he was radiating.

What she wanted to ask was if he got lucky, because Chris, from the back seat, was sporting the same exact smile, but she knew better.

What she was going to do was **NOT** bust his balls, and instead kiss her man goodbye.

As they got out, it was time to go their separate ways. Chris would babysit the techs, keeping everything going smoothly, and she would start her marathon of work.

She had to check out in the early afternoon to get ready for the undercover operation. It wasn't something she could rush. The slightest mistake could risk her, and Axelle.

As he moved into her body, happy that he didn't have to pretend, he hogged up all of her personal space.

**YAY!**

She loved that.

He smelled so damn good with his cologne, and smooth-shaven face. There was something hot about a well-groomed man.

She preferred him this way.

She couldn't help herself.

"I love you, stay safe, and I'll check-in later," Elizabeth said, as she gave him a kiss.

Chris slid his hands around her back and grabbed handfuls of ass.

Immediately, Charlie threw one of his handkerchiefs at the man.

"That is a flag on the play, Son."

It made them laugh and broke up the kiss.

"Dad, must you?" she asked as Sam handed Charlie his *'flag'* back.

"It's nothing personal," he said. "That's my baby girl's ass. It makes me twitchy to see anyone pawing at it."

Chris didn't get offended.

He understood Charlie.

He knew that in the back of the man's head, they weren't really married. A father was a father.

He set her free and ran his fingers over her cheek.

"If you need me, call me. I'll find you."

Her heart fluttered.

While she knew she could handle anything on her own, it still made her feel all kinds of mushy that he'd race to her rescue.

Once out of his arms, she gave Sam a kiss too.

"I love you, Mom."

He hugged her.

"Be safe, my girl. You keep your father out of trouble," he stated. "You know how he gets."

**"SAMMY!"**

She laughed.

"Yeah, I know," she said, winking at Sam. "He's so much trouble."

Chris found that amusing.

The apple didn't fall far from the lumberjack on this one.

"Both of you be good," Elizabeth stated. "Call if for some reason the techs get some forensics. I know they won't, but my fingers are crossed."

"We'll be fine. Focus on yourselves," Chris stated. "Two of us have questionable behavior."

They pointed at her and Charlie.

Her father giggled.

“I know. I love my life. I can’t wait to interrogate some suspects.”

She laughed.

“Not happening, Father, and mostly because we have

**INTERVIEWS.** No one is getting flogged with a wet hose in a locked-down room.”

“Bummer,” he stated.

It made her happy to see him genuinely this excited. The last time she’d seen him this jolly, he’d signed divorce papers. That joy had been temporary since no one dropped a house on Abigale...yet.

So, she celebrated with him.

“We’ll come in at lunchtime. We have to talk to an ex, and I want to shake down the two men who were on our list.”

That worked for Chris.

He was fine with her being out there, as long as she had backup. The CIA spook playing sheriff still rubbed him the wrong way, but Charlie would never let anything happen to her.

“See you later, Sweetness,” he said, heading toward the morgue. The techs were milling around, and he wasn’t worried about terms of endearment any longer.

**Thankfully.**

When she was sure that they were inside, she focused on her father.

A part of her felt like his and Sam’s declaration of moving home were part of a dream yesterday. She really hoped it hadn’t been. She missed her father so damn much.

“Are you really going to be around more?” she asked, hoping and praying that the man never found out what Sam had asked of Chris.

Charlie would lose his shit.

*He would be so angry...*

He would take it as an act of betrayal.

**Definitely.**

There was one thing in life that Charlie couldn’t stand. It was charity from anyone. He’d rather suffer than let anyone help him.

In a lot of ways, she was like that too.

Only, Chris taught her it wasn’t charity. It was someone you loved helping you, and she returned that favor at every opportunity.



**Out.**

**Of.**

**Love.**

At her question, he grinned.

“Yep. I’m really contemplating not running for sheriff for a term. I just have to work out some financial things on my end,” he stated, “and if my spiffy son-in-law can hook me up with some tech, I might be able to telecommute.”

She stared at him.

“That’s a new word.”

He grinned.

“I saw it online. I was researching last night, and apparently, in a few years, there’s going to be people doing that. Can you imagine? Working from home?”

She laughed.

“No, because then that means serial killers are in my home. That’s not exactly a relaxing idea.”

He snorted.

“Anyway, I think I can pull it off.”

He was going to do anything he could to make that happen.

Still, a man had bills to pay. Once he figured out how to do this, he would be in a better position.

How much he worked was dependent on his and Sam’s financial situation.

If one of them sold their home, it was feasible. Then, they could see how much they had in retirement savings. It just might work out.

He hoped.

Charlie really wanted to be near his daughter.

Elizabeth knew what he was saying.

“Well, if you need help...”

He stared at her.

“What?” she asked.

“I am **NOT** taking charity from my daughter. I have some things lined up,” he said, adamantly.

He and Sam would work it out.

While he would let Sam help him, he wouldn’t let his daughter or Chris do that.

Parents took care of their kids, not vice versa.

**Period.**

Since he really considered Sam his spouse, just not on paper, it was okay for them to help each other. Elizabeth was not helping him.

**Ever.**

She'd bought him a truck and he'd nearly had a stroke. Letting him live in her brownstone was already enough to make him twitchy.

Elizabeth heard the tension.

She changed direction, and fast.

"And you coming here to 'live' is really okay with Sam? I don't want to start shit," she stated and then realized how that sounded. She wasn't supposed to know, so she covered. "I know how he loves his job, and you two are best friends."

He had spoken to Sam last night after they'd made love. He couldn't help himself. This was a huge gift, and that Sam loved him enough to make a sacrifice...

He would do anything for the man.

"Sam can go part-time, while I take some time off. I just don't want him there alone," he stated. "You know how Salem is."

Oh, she did.

It was homophobic to the max.

That Sam's house wasn't firebombed...the only reason was that her father wouldn't tolerate bullshit like that, and the assholes in town knew it.

She was grateful Chris was helping them out.

She would take that secret to her grave so Sam wouldn't get hurt in all of this. Loving a LaRue was not easy. They made you work for it.

"Yeah, don't let him get hurt. I love mom. He's the best thing that has ever happened to us," she said, trying to clue him in that she was okay with it.

"Yeah, we were lucky to have Sam save us both," he stated, leaning over to give her a kiss.

That was an understatement.

"If me being around becomes annoying..."

She stopped him.

"Nope. It won't. As for income for you and Sam, Chris and I will talk to Gabe. If you subcontract, which the FBI sometimes does, you will

get paid. I may have to give you the money in cash. You know how the FBI hates a paper trail for the taxpayers.”

He lifted his brow.

“Really? A paycheck too? Is that really a thing?”

He giggled even more.

“Yeah, I don’t know how Gabe will handle this, but if he does cash, say nothing, admit nothing, and play dumb. That is the FBI motto. You will be off the record.”

“What money?” he asked.

She laughed.

“Perfect.”

What her father didn’t know was after she found out about what Chris and Sam talked about, they concocted a whole scheme where she was going to make sure they were given cash from them.

Charlie could have her whole salary. Chris took care of her, and normally, that would bother her, but not now. Her man was doing something amazing.

She’d talk to Gabe and make sure he was in on it but said nothing.

She pointed.

“Here comes the sheriff,” she stated, but the look on his face was off.

He was tense.

“Uh-oh,” she stated.

Something had stirred up the spook, and she was willing to bet it wasn’t his domestic terrorists.

This was going to be bad. When a spook had that particular look on their face, it usually meant one or two things.

The jig was up.

Or there was trouble.

When he stopped in front of them, Charlie, too, knew it was bad.

“What now?” she asked Remington.

“You have another victim.”

**Holy shit.**

“Oh, come on!” she stated.

This sucked.

She had planned to get some shit done for tonight. Now, she was going to be cutting it close.

“Yeah, I’m sorry to tell you this. It just got messier,” Remington admitted.

Charlie stared at him.

“Why is it **HER** victim and not **YOURS**?”

**Shit.**

That had been an inadvertent slip.

He tried to cover.

“Well, Mr. LaRue, that’s exactly what I meant,” Remington stated.

Elizabeth patted her father on the arm.

“It’s okay, Dad. What do we have?” she asked, hoping they could keep this handled. She really didn’t think there would be a killing this close to the next speed dating.

**Damn.**

Teddy was really trying to go for the homicide land speed record.

Remington explained.

“I don’t know too much, since it was just called in. What I do know is that the victim’s mother works third shift at the local diner, and when she got home, she found her daughter dead.”

This sucked.

For the poor woman, and for her timeline.

Teddy was definitely out of his damn mind that he’d killed four women in one week. Someone had a few screws loose.

“Same MO?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Yeah, it is. One of my deputies, Xavier headed out, and he reported back in. It seems that she was raped too. So much for him waiting for tonight,” he stated. “It appears he’s got a voracious appetite when it comes to being an animal.”

**Apparently.**

She hated that he took another woman.

“We’ll follow you to the woman’s home. Let me text my team to mobilize them.”

He nodded.

“We need to stop this guy. The mayor is going to have a press conference today unless we get this under control,” Remington warned.

“He’s riding my ass and is in the mood to take away my job. Can I say how bad that would be at this time?”

It got worse and worse.

**Fuck.**

Yeah, that would suck since he was working a CIA case. Elizabeth also had to avoid the media until after the speed dating. She still believed that was going to be ground zero.

“You have to stop him from having any media update until I do my job tonight. If he announces that the FBI is here, I’m done. The killer could bolt. It will blow tonight’s plans.”

He was aware.

“I’ll try. I have a meeting with him later. I’ll see what I can do.”

Well, that was all she could ask. Now, she needed to cover her bases. That meant checking to see if the speed dating was still the hunting ground.

She went there.

“What’s his newest victim’s name?” she asked.

He didn’t hesitate.

“Diane Elder.”

Charlie looked over.

“She’s on the list, isn’t she? I swear that name sounds familiar.”

She nodded.

“She was on the list.”

**Thank God.**

While Elizabeth wasn’t happy anyone died, at least Teddy wasn’t deviating. She still had a chance of ending this tonight with speed dating. If not, she was screwed.

The media would have a hold of this shortly.

Now, she had even less time.

**DAMN.**

**DAMN.**

**DAMN.**

“Okay, well, let’s get going,” Remington stated. “I have Xavier holding the scene for me. More deputies are there, and I told them to keep it on the DL.”

She needed it to stay that way.

It was only hours to speed dating, and she had to make sure she was there.

“On it,” she stated.

Elizabeth texted Chris.

***‘We have another body. I need the techs to keep this low-key. We don’t need the media all over me right now. She’s on the speed dating list. Get ready to roll.’***

She rubbed her temples.

Elizabeth had a serial killer headache, and the source was an idiot Clarkson.

**Part two.**

***‘We’ll be right out. Don’t worry, Sweetness. You’ll catch him.’***

It was as if he could see the stress on her face. It was clear Chris knew what she was thinking.

**EVERYTHING** was on the line.

It didn’t take long before the techs began exiting the building, Chris and Sam right behind them. They didn’t make a peep, and it just looked like people getting off shift.

Her fingers were crossed.

“Let’s go,” she said to Remington.

That was all it took.

By the time the sheriff was pulling out, Chris’ whole team was ready to go. While this was an emergency, Remington kept the lights and sirens off, in an attempt to buy her some time.

The whole time driving, Elizabeth said nothing.

Charlie was worried about her.

“Don’t blame yourself,” he stated. “You couldn’t have saved her. We came to this party late.”

Honestly, she wasn’t.

In the few years that she’d been doing this, Elizabeth realized that she couldn’t take on the weight of a killer’s choices.

She’d be burned out in five years.

She reassured him.

“There’s no way to predict it. I had hoped, but in the back of my mind, I knew that this was a possibility. I really wanted him to wait until tonight, but Teddy is nuts, and when you’re dealing with a crazy person, you can’t predict the outcome.”

He’d seen that himself.

Charlie was glad that she wasn’t carrying this guilt.

As they drove the rest of the way in silence, she checked out the street signs leading to the house.

This was familiar.

It shouldn’t be.

“Why does this street sound like we have heard it before?” she asked her father.

He looked up at the sign and then flipped through his notebook.

It didn’t take him long to figure out why.

“Well, here’s a fun coinkydink for you, Baby Girl. Joseph Peterman lives on this street.”

When they pulled into a driveway, she saw the house numbers.

**Holy shit.**

It was three houses down from the man on the list from the speed dating. That’s why it looked familiar. Elizabeth stared down the block.

“Really? Holy shit! That’s where Joseph Peterman lives,” she said, pointing down the street toward the house.

Charlie shook his head.

“Uh, that’s an odd one.”

Oh, she was aware.

If your name came up once in an investigation, that was suspicious, and you warranted an interview.

*If it came up twice...*

You went to her suspect list.

“We have a guy who has no past, and we have him three doors down from a victim? Oh, well, you are going to get your interrogation, Dad. He’d better be able to answer all of my questions.”

Charlie was living for it.

Not the dead body part, simply because each one made him terrified for his daughter, but the interrogation part was fun. He loved staring at a person and making them crack.

It was a gift.

“I guess we’re going there before we visit the ex.”

She nodded.

“Yeah, we are.”

When they got out, there was media already there, and it was clear that where there was smoke, there was fire. Granted, they weren’t asking too many questions, but someone had leaked it.

**Shit.**

That was bad.

Loose lips sank ships, and it was also the only way they could beat the investigator to the scene.

She was kicking someone’s ass at some point.

“Dad, block me, and don’t let them see me,” she stated. “If they do, I can’t participate tonight. I’ll be all over the news. You’ll be in the van, so you have some leeway.”

He did what she asked, making sure he acted as a wall for his daughter past the media, and toward the tape. Once under it, she was good, but still...

This was shitty timing.

Someone was working against her on this.

She could feel it.

Inside, she could hear a woman wailing from what had to be the kitchen. There was no doubt who it would be.

**Diane’s mother.**

Immediately, her heart broke for the woman. She knew what damage seeing your dead family member did to a person. She was living it.

As she moved through the house, that’s where she found the mess Teddy had made of a once, living, breathing human being.

On the dining room floor, a woman was sprawled out, and she was destroyed.

Yeah, he was escalating.

**For.**

**Sure.**

While the others had been knocked around, Diane Elder had suffered more than the others. Teddy had been in a rage, and he’d beaten the hell out of her. She was bloodied, battered, and bruised.

**Jesus.**



The killer was losing it.

Teddy Clarkson was going over the edge.

All she could think was '*God help whoever he took next*'. They were going to suffer.

Chris was right behind her, and he put his medical kit down. He already had on gloves and was ready to go.

"Give me a few," he stated, knowing that Elizabeth had very little time, and he wasn't going to play their normal games. "I'll have TOD as soon as I probe her."

That worked for her.

"Thank you, Christopher. I can't jack around—not today."

He was aware.

"I'll give you all I can, Elizabeth."

She was grateful.

Then, he got the attention of his tech team. He laid down his directives.

"I want us on and off this scene as fast as possible. Trace will be easy since we know who did it. Just tag and bag as much as you can as quickly as you can. Keep your badges covered, and don't give the media anything. We don't want '*FBI*' getting out. Got it?"

They did.

They followed his instructions, and the techs hauled ass.

Elizabeth knew what she had to do next.

"Is that the mother?" she asked, and Deputy Xavier Price, who was at his boss' side, nodded.

"Yes, she called us screaming. We got here as fast as we could," he stated. "We didn't touch anything, Agent."

Well, that was good.

"I'll help," Remington said, knowing what was next. Someone had to talk to Diane's mom.

"Everyone stays inside," Elizabeth added. "We don't need anything leaking to the media, again."

They got it.

She was not amused.

Heading toward the sobbing sounds, they found the woman sitting in a chair, and she looked like hell. No one could blame her. If she came home and found a loved one destroyed like that, she'd be a mess too.

“Mrs. Elder?” Elizabeth asked, crouching before the sobbing woman. “I’m Elizabeth, and I’m here to help Diane,” she said.

The woman stared at her.

“Who hurt my daughter?” she asked, between gasps.

Oh, she couldn’t tell her that. Elizabeth couldn’t risk it getting out.

“I don’t know, ma’am, but I’ll find out.”

The woman focused on her.

“Are you a cop?” she asked.

Elizabeth nodded, again, not giving her too much. She didn’t want word spreading like wildfire.

“I am, and I’m going to help your daughter now, but I have to ask you some questions first. What happened?” Elizabeth asked, hoping she could give her something.

The woman began explaining between the sobs.

Elizabeth grabbed some tissues from the table and put them into her hands.

The victim’s mother began mopping her face.

“Diane wasn’t answering her phone,” she stated. “I work at night, and I swung by before going home to get some sleep, and I found her. Someone hurt my baby.”

Yeah, he really did.

“I’m sorry,” she stated.

Diane’s mother was beyond distraught.

“Who would do this? Who would do that to a human being?” she asked.

The answer was ‘*an animal*’, but she kept it to herself.

Elizabeth had to ask questions, and hope that the woman held on through them. She couldn’t push it off.

“Was anyone bothering Diane?” she asked.

She shook her head.

“No! Diane told me everything. She would have told me if someone was harassing her. Did someone break in and do this?”

Oh, well, that was a definite, but she was playing this hand close to the vest.

Elizabeth went with her standby.

“I’m not sure, ma’am, but we’ll find out,” she stated.

That’s when Diane’s mother lost it.

**“WELL, HURRY UP!”** Mary Elder shouted, catching her off guard. “Do your job!”

Elizabeth wasn't shocked, and she certainly didn't take it personally. She couldn't.

After grief came rage.

“I will, Ma'am.”

The sheriff tried to help.

“Mary,” Remington stated, “she just got here. Give us some time,” he offered.

The woman sobbed.

“It's okay,” she stated, patting her on the shoulder. “I know you're angry. I'll work on this and find who hurt your daughter,” Elizabeth offered.

She nodded.

Remington comforted the woman.

“I'll swing over and talk to your boss, Mary,” Remington offered.

“I'll tell him you'll need some time off. He'll understand.”

She wiped her eyes.

“Thank you, Remmy.”

He didn't mind.

“Hey, you always make sure my guys are fed, so it's the least I can do. I'm sorry about Diane. I really am. She was a sweetheart.”

It was clear the man was familiar with them both.

This might help.

Elizabeth let him soothe the woman.

“Can my friend here ask more questions?” Remington asked.

Mary nodded.

Okay, having someone who knew the people in town was definitely helpful.

Elizabeth began digging into this mess.

“What is a normal Thursday for your daughter?” she asked, trying to pinpoint where Teddy had seen her to follow her home.

She noticed that Diane was **NOT** a redhead, and that was concerning. They might not have been on track with that little tidbit. There might be something else that attracted Teddy.

If there was, she had to find it ASAP.

“She worked at the local grocery store,” she stated. “She's a cashier so she would have been at work all day, and then she likely ran some

errands.”

She pushed on.

“What would she do today?” she asked, thinking about the Friday night speed dating.

“She was off today and tomorrow. She’d likely sleep in, do her laundry, and then go out tonight with friends.”

“Do you know where she would go?” she asked.

Mary shrugged.

“I don’t know. I didn’t grill her. She was a grown adult, and she had her own life.”

The tone was getting testy, and Elizabeth knew she had very little latitude at this point.

If she pushed...

The victim’s mother would be agitated.

Pissed off people bitched to the media, and that was the last thing she needed.

So, she didn’t ask more.

Instead, she just went with the facts of the case.

Elizabeth knew where she’d been. She had the signup lists to prove it.

Glancing up, she gave Remington a look. She had to tag him in since Mary was much calmer with him.

*The devil you knew...*

“Can I get a list of those friends?” Remington asked, helping out. He already knew that Elizabeth had a long task list for today, and he’d have to pitch in and talk to some people—like he had with the hospital staff.

“Sure,” Mary stated.

She rattled them off.

They were all women.

Charlie was making notes, listening from not far away. His daughter was good at her job. She’d gotten information out of the woman and didn’t have to give up anything that she was holding close to the vest.

“Mrs. Elder, I am very sorry for your loss,” she said after Remington had the names, and Charlie too. “I will do all I can.”

She nodded.

“Can someone take me home?” Mary asked. “I just want to go home. I feel sick.”

Xavier raised his hand.

“I’ll take her, Sheriff.”

Elizabeth moved out of her way as the deputy helped her up and escorted her out.

When they were gone, Remington knew what she was going to ask.

“Let me guess...you want me to drive out and talk to her friends.”

She nodded.

“Yeah, can you find out if any of the men tickled her fancy at the speed dating? You have to do it on the DL,” she said, warning him again.

“If anyone talks to the media...”

Remington was well aware.

She didn’t have to ask.

Later, he’d have to check-in with his boss, and they would want to know what was going on.

He’d stay in the loop.

“I’ll go handle that as soon as I get you off the scene. I know you have a day full of interviews.”

She did.

Oh, and speaking of interviews, she told him what she and Charlie had figured out as they pulled up.

“As a side note, three doors down, there lives one of my suspects. Interesting, right?” she asked.

His eyes got big.

“Are you shitting me? Three doors down?”

She smiled.

“Nope. That’s legit. Crazy, huh?”

Yeah, it was.

“Who?” he asked, curiosity getting to him. Elizabeth hadn’t shared who she suspected, and he wanted to know what was coming.

She explained.

“We found a gentleman by the name of Joseph Peterman. He isn’t who he says he is. It seems he comes up dead in the databases.”

His eyes went huge.

“And he lives this close to a victim? Well, color me suspicious,” Remington stated. “That’s a big red flag.”

Oh, she was aware.

Elizabeth actually laughed.

Not because any of this was funny, but because the ‘*sheriff*’ was damn good at being undercover. If she didn’t know that he was a spook, she’d really believe he was a small-town sheriff.

He’d fooled Charlie, who **WAS** a small-town sheriff.

“Uh, what’s so funny?”

She covered.

“It’s stress from chasing this family of lunatics,” she admitted, and then changed the subject. “I’m going to get an update from my ME, and then I’m heading there. I’m going to walk my ass through the backyards and go that route. I don’t want the media catching me.”

He glanced at his watch.

“Okay, give me some time. I’ll either text you or call. I’m going to be up to my eyeballs in my own stuff.”

Charlie was confused.

“You have a serial killer. You’d think that would be your primary focus.”

Elizabeth slowed his roll.

“Yeah, Dad, let’s stick me with another annoying small-town sheriff to really slow me down,” she stated. “I don’t need more help!”

It seemed to work.

“Oh, someone is sassy today, Daughter.”

Well, it wasn’t like he was wrong.

She was sassy every day.

Remington winked at her, grateful his cover was still intact—for the most part.

“Be safe out there. I’ll get back to you.”

With that, he headed out.

Well, that was one thing off her list. Having help from a spook was better than trying to do it all by herself.

Elizabeth had to talk to Chris, and then they could head out the back door and sashay their asses over to Joseph Peterman’s house to get some answers.

Elizabeth headed back to the living room and found her sexy ME getting the woman into a body bag. It was clear he was hauling ass.

She knew why.

If he was stuck working late, he wouldn’t be able to watch her at the speed dating.

Someone was going to have Diane's body processed and put in the beetles before lunch.

She'd bet on it.

"Someone is speedy."

He stared at her.

"So, let me get this straight, Elizabeth. I go too slow, and you get irritated, and now I'm going fast, and you're questioning it?" he asked, busting her ass to lighten the mood. The lines of stress on her face were concerning.

She grinned at his sass.

Little did he know, she loved it.

**Sue her.**

That was just how she rolled.

Yeah, this was their little dance, and she liked it.

"I'm fickle. I can't help myself," she teased.

He laughed.

"Well, Ms. Fickle," he stated, pulling off his gloves so that he could give her what he had.

Chris was getting Diane back to the morgue to autopsy her ASAP. There was no freaking way he was missing out on tonight. Someone needed backup.

Plus, he knew the cold hard facts.

Saturday, they would likely have another body. If the pattern held true, Teddy was going to take someone like he had last weekend.

It wasn't going to be Elizabeth or Axelle.

He'd make sure his woman was safe, as he knew Jack would be all over Axelle.

"I can give you a little. COD appears, and I say that because anything can change, but appears to be asphyxiation. She has petechial hemorrhaging in her eyes. It fits with the other victims."

She listened as Charlie made notes for her.

**Man.**

He was spoiling her. Salem didn't make notes for her like her father did. She was living her best life—well, as much as that was possible when you chased serial killers.

Elizabeth would take what she could get.

“I took note of her nails. She fought like hell. We have DNA, but that really won’t matter. It does tell me that he likely beat the hell out of her in a fight to contain her.”

She was glad.

Good for Diane.

She let Chris talk.

“Diane was raped postmortem. The tears that I can see show there was no blood flow to the wounds, so like the other women, he got off after killing her.”

Well, at least he was consistently an asshole.

**No.**

**Shock.**

**There.**

“She wasn’t restrained since there are no ligature marks on her arms and legs, so he likely did battle, killed her, and then raped her.”

That was unlike the middle two women. They’d been restrained in bed, and on the couch.

He was getting meaner by the day.

She had to catch him.

“TOD was around midnight last night—give or take a few minutes. If I were to guess, and don’t get accustomed, I’d say closer to eleven-thirty.”

She smiled.

“Don’t,” he said, already knowing where she was going with this one.

She did anyway.

“So, in the time it took me to talk to the dead woman’s mother, you’ve given me COD and TOD without me having to pull it painfully from you.”

He stared at her.

Chris moved closer and lowered his voice.

“If it weren’t for the laws of the land, Elizabeth, I’d put you over my knee again.”

She laughed.

Charlie did not.

“Jesus doing the Tango with a camel. What the hell is it with you two?” he asked.



Chris shrugged.

“Blame the wicked woman who likes it. I’m just a hapless victim.”

She laughed.

Charlie shook his head.

“Okay, well, get her in, and if you find anything else, let me know, but we both know you won’t. Teddy is staying on track, and he’s mowing through women left and right.”

Chris hoped she wasn’t going to be one of them.

“I’ll have this wrapped fast. I’ll be ready for tonight,” he stated, in no uncertain terms.

She wasn’t shocked.

In fact, she’d called that one.

“Okay, Christopher. Be safe transporting, and remember, mum’s the word on the FBI,” she said, pointing outside.

He got it.

“They won’t suspect anything. We are going to the town morgue. We’ll be safe.”

She gave his hand a squeeze.

“Thank you for rushing this for me.”

He would do anything for her.

“Make sure you’re safe, talking to your suspects. This makes me incredibly nervous. I’m trusting your life to Charlie.”

“**HEY!**” the man said.

“You realize I got her to this age without losing her, right? Let me reassure you that was no easy task. She was wily!”

She stared at him.

“Well, you did misplace me for a few hours the summer I was sixteen.”

He stared at her as if she was out of her mind.

“You snuck out of the damn house, Elizabeth. You tied bedsheets together and rappelled down the side of the house. That was a breakout, not me losing you.”

“My libido...”

He stopped her.

“Please don’t. I can’t.”

Chris laughed.

He loved when they interacted. It was always a good time. She was just like her father—a ball buster.

When a tech came over, Chris knew it was time.

“Check-in, so I know that you’re okay,” he stated.

She winked.

“I will.”

Elizabeth watched as the team zipped Diane up, and knew it was time to mosey out the back door and get some interviews done. She knew Diane was in good hands.

As soon as Chris went out the front, distracting the media, she went out the back. Hopefully, by the time she came out of her first interview, the media would be gone.

They watched until the coast was clear, and they made a break for it.

In the back, there was a dog in a fenced-in yard.

He was growling and barking.

Before she could approach, a man came out the back and stood on his porch.

“He bites.”

Elizabeth was focused on the dog as her father was focused on the man watching them.

She knew in order to tame a dog, you had to show no fear, and if anything, she felt bad for the creature. He was matted, looked neglected, and scared.

Screw the guy for not taking better care of the dog.

They were part of the family.

You didn’t chain them to a tree.

**EVER.**

“Yeah, well, so do we,” she stated, as they both pulled out their badges.

The man’s eyes went huge.

“What is the problem, officer?”

She let that go so that word of the FBI didn’t spill out in the neighborhood.

“Uh, are you Joseph Peterman?” she asked, as they tucked the badges away. She was focused on the man, but she could see the barking dog from her peripheral.

Someone had made him mean—or tried to.

“Yeah, why?” he asked.

She stared at him.

“You didn’t notice the bruhaha going on three doors down?” she asked.

He looked confused.

“Uh, no, why?” he asked. “What happened?”

She pointed toward Diane Elder’s home and explained to him.

“Your neighbor, Diane, was killed last night.”

His eyes went huge.

“What?” he blurted out. “Are you kidding?” he asked. “I just saw her.”

She wanted to get closer.

“Can we enter your yard?” she asked, as she saw from her peripheral that the man’s neighbor was peeking out the door. She needed to calm the dog down, so it didn’t draw the media’s attention in that direction.

Before he could answer, the little old lady next door stuck her head out.

“Are you okay, Joey?” she called.

“Yeah, Mrs. Lenin. I’m good,” he stated and then focused on Elizabeth. “I wouldn’t enter the yard. Like I said, my dog bites.”

She wasn’t afraid of the dog, and neither was Charlie. She had a way with animals.

They liked her whereas people didn’t.

**Go figure.**

She only snarled a little.

“How about you let me worry about that?” she asked, going into the yard where a big floofy German Shepherd was watching her. “What’s his name?”

Charlie knew how good his daughter was with dogs, so he wasn’t too worried. Animals loved the LaRues.

It was their gift.

The man on the porch looked vastly uncomfortable, and that told her everything she needed to know.

He couldn’t deal with the dog, so he shoved him outside to rot.

“His name is Babylon. I named him that because he’s mostly gold-colored.”

She got it.

“The city of gold. I know my history,” she stated, unlatching the gate. When Babylon lunged, straining his chain leash, she pointed and sternly said ‘**NO**’.

The dog stopped.

“You sit.”

He did.

The man stared.

“Uh, he hates people.”

She shrugged.

“I do too. I get it. He’s not happy out here. He should be inside sleeping on a bed. Why are you chaining him to a tree in your back yard with no shade, no length to run, and no clean water?” she asked.

The man stared.

“He sheds and is destructive.”

She stopped him.

“We shed forty thousand skin cells a day,” she stated. “We are far worse. Then, the mites like to eat the skin cells, and they are thousands upon thousands in our beds. Should we be chained to a tree?”

Charlie laughed.

He couldn’t help it.

It was clear that she spent a lot of time with Chris and Tony. That little fun fact proved it.

When Elizabeth focused on the dog and had his attention, she pointed. He came over and sat close to her. She moved even closer, so he could be by her feet.

The man stared.

Then, she did the unthinkable.

She pet him.

Joseph Peterman stared at her.

“You are good at that.”

No, she was just able to see that he was miserable, and that was why he was barking. It wasn’t hot out, but the dog was wearing a double coat, and a matted mess. He likely was itchy and uncomfortable.

She’d bitch too.

Babylon licked her hand, and whimpered.

“Well, I understand him. You, I’m afraid, are another story. You have him outside and he’s angry. On top of that, when I ran Diane Elder’s

neighbors,” she said, exaggerating, “you came back a mystery. Joseph Peterman died. So, who the hell are you?” she asked. “So, I can report you for animal neglect.”

His eyes went huge.

Then, wisely, he explained.

“That’s my dad. I’m Christian Joseph Peterman. Everyone calls me Joey.”

Well, that explained that.

**Damn.**

She’d been hoping.

She stroked the dog, and he licked her hand. When she got down lower, he gave her kisses on her cheek.

“You are a good Baby,” she said.

Elizabeth switched tactics, keeping him off guard—the man, not the dog.

“How old is he?”

She wanted to keep the guy off balance, and this was a good way to do it.

Plus, she really loved dogs.

“Six,” he stated.

Jesus.

That was half his life, and he was chained to a tree? What the bloody, stupid hell was this man thinking?

“How long have you had him?” she asked.

Charlie watched his daughter work. They had a dog once, and Abigale had made him get rid of it. She had hated anything that made Elizabeth happy.

That broke his heart.

She’d loved her dog. She’d taught him tricks, trained him, and fell in love with him. It had killed Charlie to give the dog away, but he’d been in a shitty position.

Abigale was vicious, and he didn’t doubt that she’d ‘*accidentally*’ poison Elizabeth’s dog.

“I’ve had him since he was a little puppy. He doesn’t listen, chews up my furniture, and is a pain in the ass.”

Elizabeth stared at the dog.

**THIS DOG?**

He was being so good. He sat and still didn't move.

She didn't like this guy, based on the fact that he was making his dog stay outside in a muddy yard with no decent home. The doghouse was ineptly made, and this poor baby needed a better life.

She switched questioning, again.

"You said you just saw Diane, where?" she asked, keeping him guessing.

As she was talking, she unhooked the chain from around his neck, and immediately, the dog wandered over to Charlie, and he scratched him behind his ears.

Yeah, this was not a bad dog.

This was a bad owner.

"Last night, I was at the pub, and she was there with her friends. I said hey, since I recognized her as my neighbor, and I headed out."

She stared at him.

A bar where the speed dating happened.

Well, that was interesting.

They would have to talk to the people at the bar at some point.

Well, not her.

She had to be there tonight and didn't want to be seen. She was already risking it since she'd eaten there once.

Only, she would definitely be incognito.

"She was with her girlfriends, and we didn't really say much. I can't believe she showed up dead."

"Oh, believe it."

She didn't give much away.

"So, I have a question," she stated. "You like speed dating?" she asked.

He laughed.

"It's fun, and it helps me meet women. That's another reason I leave him outside. It's hard to date when he's an asshole."

She snapped and the dog came back to her, parking himself on her feet. He was trainable. The problem was the man didn't bother doing his job as an owner.

"He's not an asshole."

He laughed.

“You’d have a different tone if he lived in your house and shit on your floor. If you think you can do better with this asshole dog, take him.”

*Well, if he was offering...*

“Okay,” she stated.

The man blinked.

It was clear he wasn’t expecting that, but there was no way she was leaving this sweet dog to live his last half of his life chained to a tree and not being cared for in life.

**Fuck.**

**That.**

“Really?” he asked.

She didn’t back down.

“Yes, I’ll take him. I’ll make sure he’s taken care of, and all he needs is training and someone who isn’t a douchebag who treats him like he doesn’t matter.”

The man blinked.

“Hey now,” he said coming down off the stairs toward her.

Charlie’s body language changed, and the dog picked up on it. He began growling at Joseph Peterman.

Immediately, he backed up.

She pointed at the dog.

“Yeah, he’s not the problem,” she said. “His nails are long, he looks like he hasn’t been brushed in ages, and he isn’t your biggest fan. I’m going out on a limb here, and I’m going to say you’re a neglectful asshole.”

The man bristled.

Only, she didn’t care.

She was learning about him by poking him with her verbal stick. Someone had a temper.

She could see it.

She also could tell that he’d hit Babylon, because dogs didn’t turn on their owners unless they had some serious dislike for them.

That usually meant abuse.

“Now, onto my next question,” she stated. “Did you talk with a woman by the name of Gloria Beake at the speed dating?”

She showed him a picture on her phone of the woman’s driver’s license.

“Yes.”

“How’d that go?”

He looked confused.

“It was fine. She told me she had a boyfriend, and she was just doing it to have fun.”

That added up.

She was pretty sure this guy wasn’t Teddy. He had different facial structures than Kitty, and she imagined that they’d look similar.

**God.**

She hoped she wasn’t wrong.

“How about a woman by the name of Jana Katz?” she asked, flipping through her phone as the dog leaned against her legs. It was as if he was just begging to be saved.

She scratched him behind his ears.

Chris was going to kill her.

Only, what was she supposed to do?

“Yeah, I talked with her for a few minutes. We didn’t hit it off. I like my women a little less...bulky.”

She stared at him.

“Did he just fat shame a woman?” she asked her father. “I know Mr. Perfect here isn’t judging a woman by her looks.

Charlie didn’t like this dude.

He growled and pointed.

“You’re an asshole.”

Yes, yes, he was.

That was enough to make Joey Peterman shut his piehole. Well, that and his dog was staring at him like he was going to have a snack.

Elizabeth pushed on.

“Okay, and what about a woman by the name of Carolyn Williams?”

She showed him a picture on her phone.

“Yeah, she was nice. A nurse, I believe. She said she wasn’t looking for a serious thing, so I moved on. We didn’t really click.”

Well, that gave him contact with all of the women, but that also gave a list full of men the same access.

“Well, that concludes our fun little talk,” she stated, staring him down.

The man moved closer, and the dog growled.



Oh, someone was not a fan of this man. It was three against one on this one.

He pointed.

“Are you really taking my dog?” he asked.

“Are you really sick of him and not going to treat him better? I mean, call him back to you. If he comes to you, then he’s fine here. If he doesn’t, he is miserable, and would rather be with strangers than his person.”

Joseph Peterman whistled.

Babylon’s ears went up, but he didn’t move.

**Not.**

**One.**

**Inch.**

“Come on, buddy,” he said, patting his leg. “Come to Daddy.”

Again, nothing.

The man got angry.

When he moved toward the dog, Babylon flinched.

**Yep.**

She’d been right.

“I know you haven’t hit this sweet baby before,” she stated, pulling back her blazer to reveal her shiny badge and gun.

That stopped him in his tracks.

“Keep him. Stupid piece of shit,” the man stated. “Now I can have a normal life and save money from feeding you!”

She was the one who growled.

He backed up.

“Oh, there’s a lot of shit in this backyard,” she stated. “None of it him.”

She was done.

“Thanks for the talk. Get me his leash.”

The man did just that.

He stomped his way back into the house, grabbed his leash, and tossed it to her. The second it was in her hand, Babylon’s floofy tail began wagging.

Well, this was good for the dog, and troublesome for her. Chris was really going to lose it.

Only, what was she supposed to do. She could feel ribs beneath his coat, and she knew Joseph Peterman was not feeding this dog, or loving it.

That pissed her off.

“Want to go for a walk?” she asked, and the dog looked happy. She was betting the guy never took the poor dog for a walk—thus the state of his nails.

The poor baby.

Already, she was in love with him.

**Yep.**

Chris was going to kill her.

**IMMEDIATELY.**

She put the leash around his neck, making a makeshift collar, and then, she headed for the front. Once between the houses, she glanced over at her father.

“Hold my hand,” she said to her father, “and make sure your gun and badge are out of sight.”

He stared at her.

“What are we doing?”

“We’re walking back to the car,” she stated, pulling off her cap. She hoped the media was gone, but if not, they might not pay any attention to her. She was, after all, walking a dog.

“Why do I have to hold your hand?” he asked.

“You’re my **MUCH OLDER** sugar daddy.”

He stared at her.

“You are so wrong it’s insane.”

She laughed.

“Thanks for the newsflash, Charlie. I wasn’t aware. Come on. He’s a bust. I don’t get the crazy vibe from the asshole. He’s a dick, but I don’t think he’s a killer.”

He did what she wanted, and it wasn’t horrible. Charlie remembered holding her hand as a young kid, and he missed it. Her hand fit into his big one, and as they walked, Babylon was living his best life between them.

He hoped his daughter didn’t get attached.

Chris didn’t seem like a *‘fur everywhere’* kind of person. Call it a hunch.

German Shepherds shed.

**A.**

**LOT.**

“What the hell are you going to do with a dog?” Charlie asked as they approached the car, and the media didn’t even notice them.

Yeah, the dog and handholding worked.

“I don’t know. Normally, I save them and give them away, but he reminds me of Bubba.”

She opened the back door to their rental, and the dog jumped inside. She tossed her father the keys. She could see the sheriff, Remington, not far away talking to women. She suspected he didn’t leave the scene yet.

She wanted to wait.

“I’m driving?”

She pointed.

“We’re waiting. I have a brush in my purse. I want to brush Babylon out.”

He shook his head.

“Chris is going to kill you if you get attached to that dog. There is no way he’s going to approve of your rescuing this handsome beast.”

She couldn’t help it.

When she got into the back, she began brushing the dog, and he didn’t mind.

In fact, he was happy.

“I couldn’t leave him there. I know Chris is not going to be happy, but this dog needs someone to love him.”

She said the same thing when she was a little girl, and they found that stray.

Elizabeth had cried for two weeks when she came home from school and the woman had forced Charlie to give the dog away.

Now, Charlie saw that it was to break her. Then, he just thought Abigale had been afraid of the dog.

“Keep him,” he stated. “When Sam and I have to go home, he’ll come with me if you have to travel, or I can just bring him along. He’s a gorgeous dog,” he stated.

She wasn’t sure he’d be happy with that.

“You won’t give him away, will you?” she asked.

Oh, he heard the tone, and he knew.

He turned.

“I’m sorry about that. I see now how that has hurt you. I was trying to make Abigale happy, and she was worried about the baby, and threatened to ‘handle’ him. I didn’t want you finding your dog poisoned.”

Oh, Elizabeth knew.

“She just wanted to hurt me,” she stated, finding cookies in her purse and giving the dog one. “She hated me.”

He saw that now.

“If Chris won’t let you keep him, I’ll do it. I like him. He’s a good dog, and Sam will be safe if there’s a dog around.”

“Really?” she asked, afraid to get excited.

“Call Chris and warn him. We’ll go from there. He’s not a young dog, so he will be easy.”

Charlie always had dogs growing up, and he knew how kids should have them. They taught them responsibility. He wished he could go back and give Elizabeth that over again.

She pulled out her phone and dialed. Using FBI software, she made a video call to her man.

When his face came online, he was still in the van, and Tony was driving.

“I’m just getting back now,” he stated. “We lost the media. Tony is a menace behind the wheel.”

She didn’t laugh.

“Uh-oh. What happened?” he asked.

She was honest.

She turned the phone and showed him.

“Oh, Christ. Where did you find the dog? Why is this habitual with you? This is the third one!” he stated.

Yeah, this was going to be a hard sell.

“The guy wasn’t treating him well. He was outside, and he was being used to guard and nothing else. His nails are too long, he’s knappy, and I had to save him.”

She could hear Tony’s voice.

“She’s going to keep it. She likes mangy things. Look at you,” he joked.

Chris wasn’t having it.

“She’s not keeping it,” he said, then focused on her. “We can’t keep it, Elizabeth. You know that.”

She got quiet.

She did know it, but still, she'd had hope. Her life was hard, and she just wanted some normalcy. She didn't think that was too much to ask.

"Okay."

He saw the emotion.

"Elizabeth, we travel, we're not around..."

She shrugged.

Even as Charlie watched her, she didn't fight for it. She backed down, and that was a testament to how much she loved Chris, and how much he'd broken his child in her youth.

Tears filled her eyes.

Chris hated that he was hurting her.

"Bethe, we aren't around."

She sucked it up.

He was right. They didn't have conventional lives, so why did she think that she might actually get a taste of normalcy with a pet?

She reassured him.

"It's okay, Christopher. I get it. Charlie said he'd take him. I just wanted to keep him. I love dogs. I know you don't."

His heart skipped.

The tears told him how serious she had been about keeping the dog.

Elizabeth **NEVER** asked for anything.

This was the third time that she'd been happy with a dog and had to give it up. It was like the universe was throwing dogs at them until one stuck.

"Sweetness."

She stopped him.

"You're right. He'll be good with my dad. I'll still get to see him."

Charlie opened his mouth to try and help, but she shook her head, signaling that the conversation was over. He didn't say a word, respecting her decision.

Chris heard the sadness.

In that moment, he went with his gut.

Happy couples had pets, and he wanted to give the woman he loved all that he could—even this.

So, he went for it.

Chris threw logic out the window, and instead of using his head, he used his heart.

“You know what? Let’s keep him. If we all have to go out of town, we can find someone to watch him. They have kennels, and when we are home, we can have a dog walker come to take him out.”

She had a glimmer of hope.

“Really?” she asked.

He smiled.

“Sure. Now, Charlie will get off my ass about grandkids. He’s getting a grand-German Shepherd.”

She laughed.

“Do you mean it?” she asked. “You won’t take him away later, will you?” she asked.

Chris shook his head.

“I’m very serious, and no, once you take on a pet, it’s yours for life. Like I’ve said before, I had a spider.”

She looked relieved.

Why did he cave?

Because Chris knew that their home would be safer. People saw this breed and thought it was vicious. If he had to work out of town, the dog would keep Elizabeth safe.

That was his bottom line.

They had top-of-the-line security, but a dog was the best defense against an intruder and keeping her safe was his number one priority.

Plus, with Charlie and Sam, they could share custody.

He really wanted to make his woman happy, and clearly, a dog was the way to her heart.

“Yep. Keep him. I don’t know what we’ll do until we get home, but...”

“I can sneak him into the hotel, and we can figure it out,” she stated, grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

Yeah, this was the right thing to do.

**He.**

**Could.**

**Tell.**

“Deal,” he stated. “Oh, he’s not going to eat me, right?” he asked, not as adept with dogs as Elizabeth was. She recalled Beauregard and

Killer.

She shook her head.

“He’s a good boy,” she stated, as he gave her kisses.

To Chris, it looked like he was tasting her, but if she said so...

“Pussy,” Tony said from beside him.

She wasn’t letting anyone bust Chris.

**Ever.**

“He will eat the bug man. He likes ranch-flavored beetles. The kind Tony makes. We call that seasoning...”

The man shut up.

**FAST.**

“I love him already,” Chris stated. “What’s his name?”

“Babylon, but I’m calling him Baby. He’s a good boy,” she said, beaming.

Chris’ heart thumped.

He loved that he’d been able to give her this. Plus, his mother didn’t like dogs. That might keep her far, far away.

**BONUS** for him.

“Okay, Sweetness. I’ll see you later. Be safe, and kiss our dog-child for me,” he said, thinking about how this would be a test run for being parents. When he first met Elizabeth, he didn’t ever plan on marrying or procreating.

She’d changed that.

He was more curious, than not, what it would be like with her, and he was willing to do an experiment.

She laughed.

“Christopher, I love you. I really do.”

He smiled.

“Bethe, I **REALLY** love you,” he said, pointing at the dog. “Don’t forget it.”

She laughed.

Oh, she couldn’t.

When Elizabeth hung up, Charlie was smiling.

“He is crazy about you. He’s going to be picking dog hair off his designer furniture for years.”

She was aware.

“Chris never had a dog as a kid. He had a spider.”

Charlie looked horrified.

“That explains it all. He works in a morgue, he’s all about dead bodies, and now this information. Okay, Morticia.”

She snorted.

“This is going to be chaos,” Charlie added. “I can’t wait. Then again, normal is an illusion. What is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly.”

*Wasn’t that the truth?*

Still, she was willing to risk it.

“I’m going to use that one day. Mark my words,” she stated. “It’ll be in homage to the king of chaos who taught me everything I know.”

He laughed.

“Damn right, Baby Girl.”

As she stared out the windshield, from the backseat, she noticed that the CIA sheriff-spook was heading their way.

When he jerked open the door, the dog went shit nuts, barking like a manic.

The man went for his gun.

“What the fuck? Why is there a rabid dog in your vehicle?” he asked, as Elizabeth calmed the dog down by telling him to hush as she gave him a cookie.

The man looked inside.

“We rescued a dog,” Charlie said like it was completely normal.

Remington stared at her.

“I hate dogs.”

Elizabeth gasped.

“Who in their right mind hates dogs? They are the best thing in the whole world, next to dick.”

Charlie stared at her.

“Chaos.”

She snorted.

It wasn’t like she didn’t warn him. She thrived in the chaos, and she was absolutely the spider.

Remington got in, but he was wary.

“They know when you’re afraid. Just tell him hello and pet him. It’ll be all good.”

He went to pet the dog, and he growled.



“See? Dogs hate me.”

Well, that was a problem.

For him — not her.

“What was that all about?” she asked, pointing toward where he’d been standing.

He kept an eye on the dog and explained.

“I was coming out to take a little trip to talk to Diane Elder’s friends, and they showed up. They heard something was going on, and they were concerned.”

Well, that worked out well.

She needed someone to go to the bar and talk to people regarding Joseph being there and seeing Diane last night. It looked more and more like that was becoming ground zero when it came to where Teddy was likely playing.

Only, that left her two concierges, a bartender, all the men who could be speed dating, and anyone else who worked there.

**Damn.**

Day two, and she was no further along.

Yeah, she preferred not knowing who the killer was in advance. This was a bitch.

“Anyway,” he said, as she brushed the dog, and he was laying in her lap.

Well, across her body.

“They said they were at the bar, checking to make sure they were signed up for tonight. They had a few drinks, and then they went home. They each drove, and went their separate ways,” he stated.

“Was anyone aware that they were followed, specifically their friend?”

Remington shook his head.

“No. They said her neighbor was there, said hello, and they left right after. I asked if he was still there, and they said they didn’t notice.”

She thought about it.

“My gut says it’s not him. The reason we couldn’t find anything is he was going by his middle name. I’m sure if we run Christian Joseph Peterman, he’s legit.”

Charlie took her phone and did just that.

It didn’t take long.

He nodded.

“He’s got social media, he’s lived here forever, and he’s legit.”

She had been right. While the guy was an asshole when it came to owning the dog, he wasn’t going to be Teddy.

“Well, this sucks. We still don’t know who this killer is,” Remington stated. “I’m due to update the mayor this afternoon.”

She knew they didn’t have time to waste, and she had more things on her list.

“Dad, before you lose it, hear me out.”

His eyes went huge.

“What are you about to do?” he asked. “Isn’t it enough that you’re planning on using yourself as bait?” he asked.

“Speaking of bait,” Remington stated, hating to interrupt, “a shit ton of boxes arrived at my office.”

“Yeah, I have to pick them up. That’s our tech, our gear, and everything for tonight. That is why I’m going to suggest sending you and my father off to help me out.”

Charlie did not like this.

“You want me to let you wander around alone in a town where a nut is killing and raping women?”

She stared at him.

“Let me? Wait, but let me revisit a conversation we had when I was seventeen. You told me that if a man ever said I had to have his permission, to punch him in the balls, break his nose, and then kick his ass. Get out, Dad. It’s time.”

He pointed.

“You know what I meant.”

She reassured him.

“I’m the Fed, and I need to interview two more people on my list, and also hit up the bar. I need to corroborate what the sheriff found out, and what Joseph Peterman told us. I’m running out of time. I also have to pick up our gear and get ready for tonight. That’s going to take time.”

Charlie got it.

“I’ll have Babylon with me. I’m fine.”

Charlie sighed.

Remington was willing to dance naked in the street to keep his operation from going south. He’d do anything at this point for it not to be

blown.

Hell!

He'd babysit the damn dog.

"I'm in," he offered.

Charlie gave up.

He'd taught her well, and she did have a big dog with her. She wasn't a newbie. Plus, she wasn't a redhead.

Then again, neither was Diane.

Charlie wanted to help her out, and that meant doing what she asked so she'd talk to Gabe and let him contract out to make money.

"Okay, Elizabeth, I'm in."

**Finally.**

She gave them their marching orders, so she could talk to one more name on the list and the truck driver ex.

"Dad, I want you and the sheriff to go hang at the bar, ask questions, do some interviews, and find shit out. We'll have the tech set up for you and get you up to speed, but I want you to talk to **ANYONE** who might have an idea of who is behind this. Get me a list of names, and while I'm speed dating, you're going to be researching them and monitoring."

"I'm going to be helping out," Remington stated. "I'll help him research."

"You think you can handle the tech?" Charlie asked.

He laughed.

So did Elizabeth.

"What is so damn funny?"

She let the man handle it. This wasn't the first time the man inadvertently slipped.

"He's not an idiot," Elizabeth stated. "He'll figure it out."

The man sighed.

As Charlie stared at him, he owned it.

"I'm not a sheriff," he stated, figuring that he might as well. It wasn't like he was telling a newspaper. Elizabeth seemed to be damn good at her job, and she doubted her father was a hack. Besides, he researched him.

"What does that mean?" Charlie asked.

"Remember when Chris said he felt off?" she asked, clueing her father in.

“Yes.”

“I’m CIA,” Remington said. “I’m working here to take down a terrorist cell that’s from outside the country. They are recruiting Americans to blow shit up.”

His eyes went huge.

“Oh.”

“So, he can use the tech because he’s familiar with all kinds of CIA stuff. Don’t say anything!”

He shook his head.

“I won’t. I promise.”

Well, that was settled.

“Dad, you and Jack go do your thing, and I’ll do mine,” she stated. “Is there a place I can get Babylon some food?” she asked. “He’s hungry.”

Remington didn’t want to be his dinner.

“There’s a place not far from my office.”

**Perfect.**

She had the other guy’s address, and it was all in the general location. She could kill three birds with one stone.

“Be safe,” her father said, checking out his watch. “Don’t get abducted! It happens with you.”

She snorted.

“Yes, Dad,” she stated.

The men got out, and when she tried, Babylon whimpered.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she stated, hopping out and getting behind the driver’s seat. The dog climbed over the console and parked its furry butt in the passenger seat.

She was fine with that.

He was the perfect partner. He could hear better than a human, he watched everything, and he came equipped with sharp teeth.

She’d be safe.

Elizabeth rolled down the window so he could stick his head out, but she wrapped his leash around the gear shift, so that he didn’t take a flying leap.

“Okay, Babylon. Let’s go work,” she stated, and he barked.

Oh, Gabe was going to kill her if he found out about this.

There was no freaking doubt.

**And like always, she didn't give a shit.**

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\**

***Somewhere In Town***  
***Ten A.M.***

As tonight came closer, he was excited about the buffet of women which was about to be laid out before him.

*Tall ones.*

*Short ones.*

*Funny ones.*

*Bitches.*

He liked to pick the ones who reminded him of his mother, and how they were dumber than boxes of rocks. She had been a complete waste of time, and that was why he'd picked Gloria, Jana, Carolyn, and Diane.

They each had a characteristic that he hated in his mother.

Gloria had a man and was slumming for one who could give her even more.

Jana was vain and talked about herself and nothing more.

Carolyn was a nurse, but no common sense whatsoever.

And last was Diane, getting way too drunk, babbling like a dumb bitch, and irritating him.

Oh, he may have looked uninterested, but he heard each and every word from their lips.

Tonight, there would be more, and he would be more than happy to pick again.

He'd seen the news, and he knew that the police were investigating, but he wouldn't be caught.

*Why?*

They were clueless.

No one would even see him.

When you hid as well as he did...

You could have anything you wanted.

***And he wanted to spill blood.***

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## *Chapter Fifteen*

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### *Next Interview*

### *Simian Welch's Business*

### *Carpet Cleaning*

**W**ell, this was another fine mess that she had gotten herself into. She was in front of the business and in her rented vehicle with a dog. She definitely hadn't thought about how she was going to do her interviews with Baby on board.

**Clearly.**

Now that she was thinking straight, she had to make this work. If she didn't, she was pretty sure she was going to have to give the big guy away.

She didn't want that.

*Why couldn't her life be easy?*

Like the universe hadn't screwed with her enough by making her a big-breasted woman who had to deal with men on a regular basis.

**Men.**

**Who.**

**Killed.**

She focused on the dog and tried to figure it out.

"I have to go inside that business, and I need you to stay right here. I'm going to leave the vehicle running with the air conditioning on. I'll also leave the sunroof open. **PLEASE** do not eat this vehicle."

He licked her face.

It melted her heart.

Darn this damn good-looking floofer.

She was a sucker for MEs, sheriffs in plaid, and apparently, fluffy dogs. The universe had really had fun with this one.

As she got out, she pointed at Babylon.

"Stay."

He stared at her through the now-closed door and barked.

Elizabeth prayed for a miracle.

Oh, Chris was going to shit himself when she shoved this big dog into the back of her Mercedes. There was no way he was going to find this as amusing as she did.

She made a mental note to solve the '*dog nails on leather seats*' dilemma later.

For now, she had work to do.

Going into the business, she saw a man heading her way. He was in his mid-twenties to late twenties, and he was smiling up a storm.

His eyes were **NOT** on her face.

They were plastered to the front of her chest.

**Shocking.**

"What can I do for you today? Can I clean your carpet? Your drapes? Both?" he asked, lecherously.

**Ewww.**

**Gross.**

Why did men think a pickup line out the gate was the best idea in life?

It wasn't, as he was about to find out.

She stared at him.

Then, she pulled out her badge.

In the span of two seconds, once recognition dawned, his eyes went huge.

"I'm going to clean your clock. How's that sound?" she asked, staring at him with the '*I'm going to eat your liver if you don't shut up*' look on her face.

It worked.

He did just that.

"Now, I'm not sure if you've heard, but some women are dying in town. I need you to tell me what you know about speed dating."

He didn't hesitate.

"It's where you go from person to person..."

She stopped him.

"No, you and speed dating. I know how it works. You've been a participant?"

He nodded.

His gaze was fixed beyond her, and that had her attention. From the look on his face, it appeared that someone was coming at him with a



machete.

Yeah, that scared.

She turned and saw that her dog was up and half sticking out of the vehicle through the sunroof. He was watching them as he paused there.

Oh, boy.

Someone needed to learn ‘*stay*’ a little better.

Charlie and the dog had a lot in common—clearly.

“Ignore Killer. He’s just my partner,” she said, knowing there wasn’t much more she could say about it. Babylon would have to wait until she finished this interview.

He nodded, nervously.

“Where were we? Oh, yeah,” she stated. “You went to speed dating, right?” she asked, letting him hang himself. She hoped he’d lie, so she could really make him suffer.

“I go all the time. It’s fun. I’m single, and I like to mingle.”

She stared at him.

“Well, tell me about your interaction with Gloria Beake,” she said, showing him a picture.

The man’s eyes were big.

She looked behind her, through the glass windows, and Babylon was on the ground, sitting by the car door.

*Please don’t run away.*

*Please don’t run away...*

She had to keep her fingers crossed.

“Uh, yeah, I talked to her. She was nice. She wasn’t really interested in finding love. She was just looking to make friends. She was sweet.”

And she was dead.

Only, he didn’t lie.

“And how about Jana Katz?” she asked as the man stepped back.

She looked over her shoulder, again, expecting to find a murderer, but instead saw that Babylon had moved closer through the parking area.

He was sitting there watching.

She found it amusing.

The man?

**Not.**

**So.**

**Much.**

“Simian?” she asked, getting his attention.

The man looked at the picture and, wisely, answered her questions.

“She was a nurse, I think. We hit it off. She said she was going to keep doing the circuit, and then call me. I gave her my digits.”

This guy was afraid of a dog, and she wasn’t buying he had the balls enough to be a killer. He felt off.

She pulled up another picture.

“And her?” she asked, showing him Carolyn’s picture.

He stared at her.

Then the picture, then over her shoulder.

Elizabeth heard the growling and knew Babylon was right outside the door.

“Ignore him. He doesn’t like liars. I think he saw you staring at my tits. That always pisses him off.”

He spilled his guts.

**FAST.**

“She was flirting with the DJ more than the men in the speed dating,” he said, his eyes never leaving the dog. “She was focused on him.”

Well, this was interesting.

“The DJ, huh? Since you live here, and I do not, care to tell me his name?”

The guy struggled with it.

It was clear he was trying to recall it, but the big wolf-dog behind her was scaring him.

**God.**

She loved German Shepherds. When she retired one day, she was going to have twenty of them.

**Poor Chris.**

“Uh, there was a sign on the DJ table. I think it said *Harry Holston DJ’ing*.”

She made note in her phone.

She missed her father being there. He was her note-taking buddy.

When Simian wiped his forehead, she watched him. He was sweating a lot.

Time to make him sweat even more.

“So, you went to three speed datings, and aren’t from around here. Where are you originally from?”

Babylon barked, and he jumped.

“Ignore him. You’re behind glass,” she stated, putting her hand on the door as if she was going to open it. “To him, you look like one of those fancy pastries behind a display case.”

He looked like he was going to cry.

Yeah, not a killer.

**Damn.**

“I’m from West Virginia! I came here to open my business. I don’t have family here,” he said, beginning to regurgitate any and everything in his head. “I like pie. Dance music. The color red.”

She stared at him.

Lordy, he was pale.

“I’m sorry I stared at your breasts, officer!”

**Yep.**

Every woman needed a furry BFF. The tides had changed on this one. She didn’t even have to try to intimidate him.

“Did you see anyone bothering the women?” she asked, pretty sure this this wasn’t going to be Teddy.

Kitty was balls to the wall tough. She was fearless, and this dude was shaking over a dog. He was too skittish.

Then again, maybe that was why the sisters had to babysit his ass.

When Babylon barked, the man took another step back.

“Let me just say that if you try to run, you’re going to get caught,” she stated.

Oh, not by the dog.

**BY HER.**

“No, I didn’t. Really. The DJ was flirting up a storm. Talk to him. He was creepy. You know the type.”

She did.

“You mean the kind who stares at a woman’s tits instead of looking her in the eyes?”

He swallowed.

She went back to the pictures.

When she got out to her ride, she was going to text her father the information. Then, he and Remington could ask the people who worked at the bar about the DJ.

“What about this woman, Diane Elder?” she asked, again, showing him the picture.

“Uh, yeah, I remember her. She didn’t do a full circuit. She was talking to someone. I don’t know who it was.”

**Great.**

That wouldn’t help her.

Charlie was going to have to ask that question too.

“Ca-ca-can I go back to work?” he asked. “I have carpets to clean.”

She stared at him.

“If I find out you lied, I’m coming back with my partner,” she stated.

He nodded.

“Go.”

He ran for his back room and slammed the door. Immediately, she shook her head. This one was definitely a strike. She pulled up her pictures and sent this man’s face, and Kitty Clarkson’s, to Tony for comparison.

She needed his help.

***‘Anthony, can you look at these two faces. Are they related? I can’t tell if he’s just a pussy or if he’s one of the killer Clarksons.’***

She hit send.

Going outside, she was greeted with Babylon, who excitedly licked her hand. She picked up his leash and cuddled him.

“Who’s a good boy? You’re a good boy,” she stated. “You scared the man stupid, and he talked. You get a present,” she stated.

Babylon barked.

When her phone chimed, she pulled up Tony’s text and read it over.

***‘He’s not going to be the one. His brow is different, and his nose has a different shape. I am going to say he’s not related—unless Kitty, Teddy, and Letty all had different fathers or facial surgery to hide their identities. Then, I can’t tell unless I take their faces off.’***

Well, she didn't want him doing that. The courts weren't fans of letting beetles eat their suspects in order to see their bones.

It was well worth the shot.

***'Thanks, Anthony. I'm heading that way to get the pickup from Gabe. Tell Chris I'll be heading in and expect an update if there is anything. See you soon.'***

That was the only warning they'd get.

When Elizabeth looked at her watch, it was still relatively early in the day, so she had time to swing by the sheriff's station to pick up the boxes that arrived and get some supplies from the pet store.

She had one interview left, and she really hoped that she could avoid the media, not lose her dog, and get ready for tonight.

Truth be told, Elizabeth didn't have a good feeling about any of this. She knew when she was close to breaking a case.

And she definitely wasn't feeling it.

***\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\****

***Axelle's Room  
Friday Mid-Morning***

Jack had gone back to his room to take a shower, and that allowed Axelle to get some more work done.

He was hovering, and while she didn't mind, she didn't need a babysitter.

Out of curiosity, she was thinking about the other CIA operative there in that town.

Pulling out her phone, she made a call.

She had friends who had friends who had friends all over their organization.

"Jade," she said when the woman answered.

"Hey, Ax. What's up?"

"I'm stuck chasing money because our boss is sadistic," she stated.

The woman laughed.

"You just figured out this now? Really?"

She snorted.

"I know. I have a situation," she stated, not sure why she was being bugged by the whole thing, but something felt off to her. When two CIA spooks were in the same town, they generally knew it.

Her boss had sent her here, and they had another operative on the ground. That was like LaRue being sent in to find someone else in the FBI already here.

"What's going on?"

She told her about the other agent.

"Can you do some research on a Remington Bowman?" she asked.

"Apparently, he's working a terrorism cell."

Her friend got it.

"Absolutely. It'll take some time. I'll text you."

"Thanks. After the Daniel mess in Paris, I just like to keep my ducks in a row before I do anything."

"Gotcha, Ax. Just be safe."

She laughed.

"I'm literally on lockdown in a hotel room. I'm only in danger if the place blows up."

She snorted.

"With your luck..."

Axelle was aware.

"Thanks, Jade. I appreciate your help. Let me know," she stated.

“Will do.”

When she hung up, she heard a key in the door. Jack strolled in, his hair wet, and with two cups of coffee in his hands.

“Does someone want some caffeine?” he asked.

She laughed.

“You know it, coffee boy.”

He handed her a cup.

“Who were you talking to?” he asked. “I heard you as I was at the door.”

She told him.

“You think he’s hiding something?”

She wasn’t sure.

“I just have this feeling in my gut,” she stated. “You know how that goes.”

He did.

Jack planned on sticking close.

**DAMN.**

**CLOSE.**

“What can I help you with?” he asked.

She gave him more bank information and pointed at the laptop.

“We have to find this money.”

He was aware.

Only, now he was stressed about something entirely different. When a cop, Fed, or spook had a bad feeling...

It generally meant the shit was coming.

**Lucky them.**

*Morgue/Sheriff's Office*  
*Friday*  
*Late Morning*

Elizabeth hit up the pet store first, getting some provisions for Babylon. She got him a new collar, a shiny tag with his name on it, and everything else she needed for a new dog.

Yes, she was crazy.

A part of her knew she didn't have time for a dog, but she was curious.

She didn't have a mom for long, and she wondered if she had any of that maternal instinct.

While Chris didn't want kids, she wondered what it would be like to be a mother one day.

*Could she do it?*

*Was she just not made for that kind of life?*

With a dog, she would have a weird-ass trial run—just in case. Deep down, she knew she'd cave in a heartbeat if Chris asked her to marry him, legally, and start a family.

He'd make cute kids.

She could see in her mind's eye how they'd be smart, sweet, and good little people.

**Jesus.**

*What was wrong with her?*

She knew she needed to focus on the reality of it all. She had to babysit a plaid-wearing sheriff and her team. There was no time for a child.

Walking into the sheriff's office, Babylon was on a leash beside her.

"There are no dogs allowed in here," Xavier said, as Babylon growled at him.

She laid down the law.

"It's getting warm out. I'm not leaving him in the vehicle. That's dangerous. If you'd like to keep discussing this, come on over here,



Deputy.”

The man said nothing.

He also didn’t want to go over there.

That was clear.

She finished what she’d come in there to do, and it wasn’t deal with a newbie deputy.

“I was told by the sheriff there was a delivery here from the FBI,” she stated.

The man stayed behind the counter, clearly afraid.

“There is.”

He pointed to a bunch of boxes not far away.

“Can I get some help?” she asked.

Two of the other deputies headed her way. Xavier, not so much.

“They can help. I don’t like dogs,” he stated.

That, again, astounded her.

“They are man’s best friend. How do you not like them?” she asked, as one of the deputies was getting kisses from Babylon. It was obvious that the dog wasn’t a killer.

“I got bit as a kid.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Fine,” she stated, looping the dog’s leash through her belt and grabbing a box along with the deputies. They carried the things out and placed them in the back of her ride.

“Thanks,” she stated, as they headed off.

When they were gone, she pulled out her phone and called her boss on his private line.

It didn’t take him long to answer.

“LaRue, who did you shoot now?” he asked.

She laughed.

Why not have some fun?

“Well, I’m sure that the courts will agree that they had it coming.”

It caught him off guard.

“That’s not funny.”

She laughed, yeah, it actually was.

Then, she let him off the hook.

“I’m just checking in. I interviewed two suspects, and I have one more.”

“How’s it going?” Gabe asked, hopefully.

“Ehhhhh,” she stated.

“Elizabeth, I cannot tell you how important it is that you find the brother.”

“Oh, and here I was playing around. I love running back-to-back cases where I don’t get to sleep, I look like shit, and I’m basically incoherent from running my brain into the ground.”

He chilled out.

“I know, honey. I’m sorry. What can I do to help?” he asked.

“Nothing. I know this is going to come down to catching this asshole in the act. I can’t find him, Gabe. He’s hiding under another identity, and I’m employing everything I have.”

He believed her.

Gabe knew Elizabeth went hard.

“I can send in help,” he stated, “but you know who will hear about it.”

She was aware.

That was the last thing she needed.

“I’ve only been here a day. Give me one more, and then if I don’t have anyone by Saturday night, I’ll take a partner.”

And that told him all he needed to know.

She was really struggling.

“I’ll see what I can find out about the Clarksons,” he stated. “I’m sure there has to be more. I’ll put my best people on it—well, other than you. Dumping research on you now would be mean.”

She laughed.

“You don’t say?” she stated.

“Other than that, everyone’s safe, you included, right?” he asked.

She stared at the dog.

“Oh, I’m well-guarded.”

“Good. I want you to know that I believe in you. I know you have this.”

She was aware of who was in her corner. Gabe protected her, and she appreciated that.

“I need an opinion.”

“Sure,” he said, knowing he didn’t have much time. He had budget meetings in five, but he was trying to be a better friend. Elizabeth had

always had his back, so he was doing the same.

“Do you think I’d be a good mother?”

He gasped.

“Oh, please say you’re not pregnant,” he stated in terror. He knew what Livy was like with child, and he could only picture Elizabeth LaRue running around knocked up and armed.

**Jesus.**

It could be the end of civilization as they knew it.

She laughed.

“No, I’m not pregnant. I got a dog.”

He paused.

“A dog?” he asked, and then it hit him. “You are **NOT** passing another dog off on me. Beauregard is a menace. He destroys my shoes! I have a mop with an attitude!”

Elizabeth knew he was full of shit. Beauregard also killed a snake that had been moving toward Amy, and Gabe fed him steak for a week and started taking pictures of him.

She told him about Babylon.

He sighed.

“I’m going to say this, and I know at some point, I’ll regret it. It’s good for you to have a dog. Normal people have dogs. Happy people have dogs. You are all work, and the only play you get is with your ME.”

Gabe knew that in order to move up in the FBI, you had to have balance.

He’d tried to help Blackhawk, but he was so damn stubborn.

Now, he was putting his money on Elizabeth.

While he really wasn’t a fan of Christopher Leonard, he knew that she was finding balance, and if she didn’t bitch about not having time off, he’d question her ability to lead.

Oh, he wasn’t going to give her time, but that she wanted it...it was a good thing.

“That means a lot to me, Gabe. Thank you for that. I want balance.”

**Good.**

“I’m also going to say this. If you need a place to leave your dog when you’re out of town, and it’s good with kids, I’ll dog-sit.”

She smiled.

“Gabriel, you’re a good man,” she stated. “Babylon is very sweet. He only bit three people...”

Oh, hell.

What gave it away was when she began laughing.

“Not funny, LaRue. Not funny at all.”

She snorted.

“Oh, hey, before I let you go,” she stated. “I did something.”

He sighed.

“What?”

She told him about Charlie, Sam, and them moving there for as much of the year as possible.

“I can’t pay him, LaRue. If I was the boss, I could do it. I’m not.”

She was aware.

Instead, she shared her plan.

“I’m going to give him money, and so is Chris. I just need you to cover for me. If you run into him, and he says something, just play like you’re in on it, and that it has to be hush-hush.”

Gabe sighed.

Charlie was a menace.

Only, again, having family around her would give her balance. She was trying to find a level ground between work and family life. He wanted that for her.

“I’ll cover, but you tell the plaid menace to stay under the radar. Again, you know who has a big ol’ hard on over you being better than all the other agents.”

She was aware.

“Thank you, Gabe. I love you.”

He softened.

“I love you, too, Elizabeth. You’re my family, and my sister from a much crazier, reckless, wild, out of control, and insane mister.”

She snorted.

“Tell me something I don’t know. I have to get an ME update. Thanks for your time, Gabe. I know you’re busy and all.”

“And I have time for you. I always will. I promise.”

She was grateful.

“Thanks, Gabriel. I’ll check-in later.”

With that, she hung up.

“Okay, Babylon, let’s go meet daddy,” she stated, meaning Chris. “You be on your best behavior, and we’ll be okay. He’s a good man, and he’ll love you.”

She hoped.

Heading in, she ignored the looks from the deputies and some of her techs.

“What? You think cops are the only ones with a K-nine?” she asked. “I have one too. So what?”

No one said shit.

**Thankfully.**

Once into the morgue, she found her man elbow-deep in a body. As the door behind them closed, a bunch of techs headed her way the second they saw Babylon.

*See?*

People liked dogs.

Chris stopped working as he silently observed the techs petting the dog, and as his girl watched him. She looked like she was waiting for him to tell her the dog was a beast, and he’d changed his mind.

**Not.**

**Happening.**

Instead, he wiped his hands and headed her way.

“So, is this the new addition to our family?” he asked, trying to stay calm.

She was wary.

“If you don’t like him,” she began.

He stopped her.

“Sweetness, breathe. I’m not going to hate the dog,” he said, reading her like a book. “I’m wary around them, that’s all. Can I pet him?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Babylon, go meet daddy.”

Chris would be lying if he denied his heart skipped, and his body reacted to her calling him that. He wondered if one day they would really be parents.

If this was their training kid, he was good with that.

Chris got down, and the dog came toward him. He held his hand out, and Babylon licked him. Then, his tail began wagging and he gave him

doggy kisses.

Babylon knocked him onto his ass and sat on his lap.

Well, that was an easy sell.

Clearly, the dog loved him.

She laughed, and Chris heard the pure happiness in her voice. Yeah, he'd suck up dog fur for this.

"He's so soft," Chris said, running his hands through his fur.

"I brushed him. Gabe said if we have to go out of town, we can bring him over to his place to hang with Beauregard."

That worked for him.

"I did some research," he said, standing up. "There's a doggy daycare not far from our place. We can drop him off during the day for childcare, and then pick him up when we come home if we work cases in DC."

That he'd taken the time to do that said so much about the character of his heart and soul.

Here was a damn good man.

She went into his body and hugged him.

"Thank you, Christopher. Thank you so much for this," she said, knowing it was a huge inconvenience.

"Bethe, what wouldn't I do for you?" he asked. "Besides, I really do like him. He's kinda sweet with all those big teeth."

She waved her hand, and he sat.

**The dog.**

**Not Chris.**

"He's very smart."

He could see that.

When Tony rolled toward them, startling the dog, Babylon immediately put himself in front of Chris and Elizabeth.

The man nearly shit himself.

"Oh, Jesus. Don't let him kill me."

Elizabeth warned him.

"Anthony, you don't rush at a dog like that. You'll get eaten," she stated, teasing him to take the tension down.

He simply nodded.

"Babylon, go meet Tony," she stated, dropping the leash.

Tony whimpered.

“Oh, I’m dead,” he muttered. “This is why I like bugs. They can’t bite you. Well, they can bite you, and some can be toxic...”

She rolled her eyes.

“Tony, just pet the dog. You’ll be seeing him a lot at our place,” she stated.

He hesitantly touched him.

“Oh, he is soft.”

She laughed.

“Keep saying it, because I’m going to try to get Chris to let him sleep with us.”

He stared at her.

“In our room, yes. On our bed, no,” he stated. When Babylon stared at him with those big brown eyes, Chris sighed. “Damn it. At the foot of the bigger bed that we now have to get.”

She kissed his cheek.

Yeah, she loved this man.

While this was fun, she still had a deadline, and it was fast approaching.

“How about an update?” she asked. “Did you find anything new?” she asked, not really expecting much.

Chris knew she was going to work.

As Babylon made his rounds, he was over by Sam, giving him doggy kisses on the face.

Yeah, this could work.

Babylon was meeting the people in her life, and they all seemed to get along.

“There’s nothing new,” Sam stated. “You browbeat it all out of Christopher before.”

Well, no news was good news.

That was her motto.

It wasn’t like she was surprised.

“Okay, well, then I need to head back out. Hey, dog daddy, can I leave our fur baby with you?” she asked. “I have to interview Kenny Murdock, Jana Katz’s ex, and you should have seen the spectacle at the carpet place.”

He lifted a brow.

“You want me to keep a dog in here with plexiglass coffins of bones?” he asked. “Are you testing Babylon’s resolve? Or Tony’s patience?”

Tony gasped.

“Not my bones!”

She laughed.

“I had to deal with Simian Welch nearly getting eaten. Apparently, Babylon doesn’t like men who make passes at Feds who are badasses.”

That had Chris’ attention.

“Pardon?” he asked, as he was gloving up.

“The dude was talking carpets and drapes as he stared at my breasts. Babylon was watching him and scared him. My bad.”

Chris went to the dog, pet him, and gave him a big kiss on the head.

“You are the best boy,” he said, scratching him behind the ears.

“You can have any bone you want,” he said, joking.

“Chris!” Tony stated, putting himself in front of the beetle-filled boxes. “Not funny. Dogs like raw bones, and the people are raw!”

He laughed.

“I’ll buy him one later. I’d rather have him with you, but I get it. He can hang with us,” he said, as the dog wandered over to a tech who had jerky. It was clear he was food motivated.

**Like Elizabeth.**

Well, that was manageable.

“Thanks, handsome. Okay, see you tonight.”

He stopped her.

“First, where will you be going after the ex-boyfriend?” he asked, not thrilled she was going alone.

Clearly, that was the plan.

Yes, he knew her well.

Since Charlie wasn’t all over his *‘baby girl’*, that meant she was riding solo.

That could be problematic.

Especially here.

“The hotel. I want to write down some names. I wish I had a whiteboard.”

He went back to his autopsy.

“You do. I had one brought to the room.”



She stared at him.

“You are the perfect man. Don’t ever doubt it,” she stated. Then, she pointed at the techs. “Don’t feed him too much! I have to clean up after him! The dog, not the ME!”

Chris laughed.

How could he not?

She was amusing.

*Oh, his woman...*

She was something.

As she headed out, the dog tried to follow her, clearly smitten. Chris whistled, and Babylon whined but came over, sitting by his feet.

“Don’t eat anything that falls off of the table,” he warned. “I’m not explaining to your mother why you puked up a spleen.”

Sam laughed.

“Oh, you guys are so much fun.”

Chris laughed.

Oh, they were something alright.

Fun wasn’t the word he was thinking of either.

**Crazy.**

**They.**

**Were.**

**Crazy.**

**And he loved it.**

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## *Chapter Sixteen*

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### *Pub In The Hotel*

#### *Noon*

**T**o him, this was the coolest thing ever. Charlie had been a beat cop and was a sheriff, but he'd never had the opportunity to work like this. The whole fact that he could do good, and help his daughter... This was perfection.

No matter what, he would forever remember these moments. The only thing stressing him out was if they could actually afford to not work.

Charlie knew Sam had a savings account, but he had drained his paying child support and alimony. Now that George was coming close to being an adult in a few years, he had less debt. He'd refinanced his home to have some money, and he hoped they could pay that off.

Charlie would sell his home if need be.

He just felt as if he needed to be closer to Elizabeth.

Selling the house would kill him to do that to Elizabeth, but he'd wait and see what needed to be done.

Beside him, in the sheriff's car, the man was on his phone checking in with his deputies, and Charlie listened in.

He knew exactly what the man was dealing with when it came to men who needed babysitters.

The one deputy, Xavier Price, reminded him of Tony Morel.

*Ass-kissing.*

*Annoying.*

*But harmless.*

When the man hung up, he sighed.

"I'm desperately trying to play sheriff while stopping terrorists from radicalizing men. This is a hard balancing act. Oh, and did I mention it wasn't fun?"

Oh, he bet.

"Well, I can run this," he said, pointing at the building. "I've watched my baby girl do it."

He laughed.

It was hard to believe that Elizabeth was anyone's 'baby girl' since he knew what the files said about her. She was tough, unrelenting, and a stone-cold killer herself.

Yes, the CIA knew everything, and it was clear from the way his boss had talked about her that the CIA was jealous she wasn't theirs.

His boss wanted him to talk her into jumping ship, but he knew that wouldn't happen. She loved her job way too much. Only, when the CIA wanted something, they'd do anything to get it.

He'd bet on it.

As for running it, Remington had way too much on his plate. Charlie could do it.

He passed it off.

"Well, then have at it."

Just as they were about to get out of their vehicle, Charlie's phone chimed. He pulled it out of his back pocket and read it.

"It's from Elizabeth."

He read it to the man.

***'I talked to my interviews, and Simian Welch pointed us at the DJ. He said that the latest victim was talking to him. Ask around that pub. His name is Harry Holston. Also, someone was talking to Diane, but he didn't see who. I'm heading to my last interview, and then I'll be getting ready for tonight. See you at the hotel. Be safe, Sheriffs.'***

He put his phone away.

"Well, that might be helpful," Charlie stated. Then, he looked at his watch. "They should be open for the public now. I know they only do coffee and breakfast things for the hotel in the morning."

Remington was aware.

He'd grabbed coffee there when he was called to the building by a concierge when there was an issue.

"Let's get this done."

They headed in, and inside, they were greeted by a waitress. Charlie figured it was best to talk to the ladies there since he knew who wasn't killing and raping women.

Besides, he couldn't see anyone at the bar, and it was only early in the day. If the staff was working tonight, they likely weren't on shift yet.

"Welcome. Two?" she asked, grabbing menus.

This could work.

"Yes, sugar, two," he stated.

She smiled at the sheriff—the town one.

"Hey, Remmy. Want your regular order?" she asked, as she led them to a table.

"Yeah, Candy, but we're here to sit a spell. I'll have a soda, and Charlie?" he asked, as they slid into their booth.

"Make it two."

She placed the menus down and headed away.

Remington clued him in.

"That's Candy Carr. She's the day shift waitress. She is a good person to talk to," Remington suggested.

That worked for Charlie.

"You come here a lot, huh?"

He nodded.

"You'd be surprised how many times I get called to this place for nonsense."

He laughed.

Really, he wouldn't. They had a seedy motel in town—nothing like this—but he was called to it all the damn time.

"What's the bartender's name?" he asked. "I want to kill two birds with one stone."

"Keller Devoe. From what I know of him, he's a decent guy."

Well, since he had knowledge of the man, it was a good place to start.

"What do you know about him?"

"Well, I know that he's been here a good year. He's not from here."

Charlie made notes.

"And Harry Holston?"

"Never met him. I don't come here that time of night. It would be one of the deputies who would be called out when a DJ is here. I'm generally off duty by then."

He made notes about that too.

"Why does it feel like you're questioning me?" Remington asked.

Charlie smiled.

“Paranoid?”

“Uh, yes. That’s my literal job. I’m supposed to be suspicious and paranoid. It’s how I stay alive when I’m under,” he said, softly.

He closed his mouth as Candy came back.

“Here you go,” she said, putting the drinks down. “Are you ready to order?”

Charlie knew it was the perfect time.

The place was empty, and most of the people working were women.

He saw one busboy setting up a station not far away, but he was wearing earbuds and in his own world. In his book, that was someone who likely saw nothing going on around him.

Kids today...

“Actually, Candy, can you have a seat?” Charlie asked. “It’s official business.”

The woman looked confused.

“Uh...”

Charlie explained.

“I’m here helping the FBI, and I need to talk to you about the women who died in town. I also need you not to go gossiping about this when we’re done.”

Her eyes were huge.

“Uh, sure,” she said, slipping into the booth with the two men. “I didn’t do anything...”

He reassured her.

“We know,” Charlie offered. “This is more just to see if you saw anything. You could be a witness.”

That seemed to help her relax.

“Oh, okay.”

He pulled up a few photos Elizabeth had sent him, and he showed her. They were of Gloria, Jana, Carolyn, and Diane.

“Do you remember seeing anyone in here talking to these ladies?” he asked, recalling the text his daughter had just sent. Someone had been chatting it up with Diane.

She stared at them.

It appeared she was scrutinizing them.

“Well, normally, I work the day shift,” she stated, “but last week, I did a double, covering on Friday.”

Okay, she was here.

That was good.

Charlie pushed on.

“Did you see them with anyone who was staff?” he asked, hoping she would have.

She thought about it.

“Well, I saw this one,” she said, pointing toward Carolyn, “talking to Keller. Then again, he serves the drinks, so he talks to everyone.”

He let her keep talking.

“Then I saw this one,” she said, pointing at Diane. “She was here with friends, and she was talking to Harry. I think they were asking for songs right before the speed dating.”

Hot damn.

That answered Elizabeth’s question.

She thought harder.

“I mean, they had a table not far from where Harry sets up. There were four of them. I didn’t wait on them, so I can’t give you much more.”

He appreciated it.

“What time did y’all get off work?” he asked, trying to figure out a timeline.

“Keller works until we close on speed dating night. Harry was done right after speed dating. The hotel doesn’t let him play later, or they complain. They’ve called the cops a few times.”

Remington agreed.

“Xavier has taken a call or five. He’ll come back on shift so I can have a night off.”

Charlie made notes.

“I saw the news about those women. That’s scary,” she stated. “I know Keller walks us out if we are here late,” she admitted. “Or one of the men. People are sickos.”

Oh, they were aware.

“Did you notice anyone harassing the women before, during, or after speed dating?”

She shook her head.

“Nah, there was a lot of laughing and joking around. It’s fun to watch,” she stated. “We all stand there and gawk. It’s just crazy.”

“And no one was bothering them?” he asked. “It’s very important you think that one through for me.”

She shook her head.

“Keller doesn’t tolerate it. If someone bothers anyone, he boots them. He doesn’t take BS when it comes to the speed dating. That keeps our sales up, and we stay employed.”

Yeah, well, that didn’t help.

Honestly, Charlie didn’t think he was getting much more.

“Thank you for your help, Candy. I appreciate it. As a side note, was anyone else here also here last Friday night?” he asked.

She looked around at the servers.

“No, this is the day shift staff,” she stated. “I worked that double because someone called off, and I needed the cash. Everyone here is off by six when the next group comes in unless we have a call-off.”

He made note of that.

“Thanks, Candy.”

She got up.

“Do you want something to eat?” she asked. “Or was this just to talk?”

Charlie was definitely eating.

Sam wasn’t around, and later, he knew he’d be stuck eating an apple and calling it a meal.

Sam was up in his face about the food that Charlie consumed.

**Nag.**

**Nag.**

**Nag.**

He was sick of salads.

“I’m hungry,” he stated. “I’ll have the biggest, meanest, cheesiest burger you have. Make it a double, put some mayo on the side so I can dip my fries, and add some cholesterol.”

Remington laughed.

“Make it two,” he said, figuring he should get his food in now. He was going to be working on his real case later tonight. He had a meetup that he couldn’t miss, and he had to check in with his boss.

When she walked away, Remington lowered his voice.

“I don’t think that helped us much. Keller was here later, but then again, the first victim, Gloria, left and came back.”

“Is there any way you can get a list of his work schedule if we need it?” he asked.

Remington could.

“Yeah, I’ve flirted with some of these ladies before. Give me a few minutes and I’ll have it.”

He wasn’t sure if that was a good idea, since this was ground zero.

That might blow their cover.

He knew what to do.

Charlie pulled out his phone, and he called his daughter.

She answered on the first ring.

“Yo, Father.”

“Yo, Daughter, I’ve just interviewed a server here. Harry was near the last victim and her friends—that’s who your interview saw, and he gets off from work right after speed dating.”

She processed that.

“Interesting. Can you run him?” she asked. “Right now, I’m on my way to Jana Katz’s ex’s house. I’m driving and don’t have a free hand.”

That worked for him.

“I can. I also found out that the bartender, Keller, works later. I have Remington finding out his work schedule. Gloria came back, and it was much later. The other women were dead by eleven ish.”

She was proud of her old man.

“Remington offered to get their work schedule, but I probably should have asked if that’s what you wanted. This is your case. Do you want him to do it?”

She pondered it.

“Yeah, have at it.”

He nodded at Remington, and off he went to corner Candy, who was refilling sodas.

“I hope that helps you, Baby Girl.”

Oh, anything helped.

“It does, Dad. Taking that interview cuts me a break. I have a busy schedule.”

He was glad to be of assistance.



“Did you eat that double burger with mayo on the side yet, Charles?” she asked, trying not to laugh.

“I don’t have one in front of me, bossy pants. Who are you now? Sam?”

She laughed.

“I know you. You can smell a burger a mile away. You ordered it, didn’t you?” she asked, waiting for the information from Remington.

“Har-har. You’re funny.”

Of course, he ordered it.

He wasn’t a fool.

Before he could say anything else, Remington slid back into the seat.

It looked like he had a little larceny in him too. He had last week’s work schedule, and it appeared to be ripped out of a book.

Charlie wasn’t questioning it.

Period.

“He’s got it,” Charlie stated.

“What’s it say?” she asked.

He scanned the paper.

“Keller was at work for Gloria and Jana. He was off for Carolyn and Diane.”

**Damn.**

That didn’t help her. It gave him an alibi.

“I appreciate you and Remington doing the legwork for me. Like I said, I’m buried for this afternoon.”

He bet.

“How’s the dog?” he asked.

She laughed.

“He’s being dog sat by his new doggy daddy. I’m doing this interview solo.”

That was all she had to say.

Charlie sputtered.

“You’re going after a potential killer alone? Are you out of your mind, Elizabeth?”

She shook her head.

“Father, this is what I do. I have a gun and I’m good. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

She knew he was overprotective, but she could handle herself.

“I’ll be good. When you’re done eating that big-ass burger that I know you’re going to try and sneak past Sam’s nose, research Keller and Harry. I’ll check-in.”

He was going to re-spritz some cologne and be just fine. He did this all the time.

“Elizabeth, you had better be careful.”

She laughed.

“Careful is my middle name.”

“Oh, Jesus. It’s Renee. Your middle name is absolutely not ‘*careful*’,” he stated.

She laughed and hung up.

Charlie sighed.

“She’s a damn handful,” he muttered.

Remington reassured him.

“I’m sure she’ll be perfectly fine. This is a calm, normal town.”

He stared at him.

“With a serial killer in it. My baby girl attracts killers like moths to a back porch lightbulb!”

“You don’t say?” he said, joking.

“Oh, Jesus, I need a vacation from my vacation of butting into my daughter’s cases.”

Who was he kidding?

That was never going to happen.

He loved it too much.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

*Washington D.C.*  
*Airport*  
*Friday*  
*One P.M.*

They carried their bags toward the terminal, and both Ethan Blackhawk and Gene Cantrell had one hell of a hangover. Their heads were pounding, and they were both miserable as sin.

Check-in was easy.

All they had to do was flash their badges, have the attendants check the log for the FBI agents who were flying out that day, and they were clear to go.

Gene had pounded aspirin, hoping to be better by the time they landed.

Ethan was already looking better, but his mood...it was shit.

It was like the switch was flipped, and he was back to FBI mode.

As they got on the plane, Ethan's day got worse.

"Oh, fuck," he muttered.

Gene went on alert.

"What?" he asked, as they were heading down the aisle with other flyers.

Ethan couldn't believe his shitty luck.

"That's the woman I'm dodging," he muttered, getting Gene's attention.

Of course, he checked her out.

She was tall, so thin that if she turned sideways, she'd disappear, and painted up like a lady of the night.

Gene began laughing.

He couldn't help it.

"Well, she is definitely not your type," he said between giggles.

Ethan was a sexy man, and even if he was just fucking a woman to play straight, he could do **MUCH** better.

"Dude, not funny," Ethan stated. "She's going to bother the shit out of me."

The woman looked about as much fun as a case of shingles.

*What the hell was his partner thinking?*

Oh, yeah, ambition.

It got you every time.

If Ethan could bang her, he was pretty sure the man was bisexual. Because he'd have to like tits to even go there. Gene would rather give up sex forever.

"If you like me at all, you'll let me sit by the window," Ethan muttered. "You'll put your bigger body between her and me."

He snorted.

"What's it worth to you, Blackhawk?"

Ethan sighed.

"I let you sleep in my bed and puke in my bushes."

Ehhh, he had a point.

He'd seen him in his boxer briefs, and that was a sexy sight. He could play this for him.

"I can do that," he stated, knowing that he'd give anything to do that again. "Toss in that fishing trip, and you've got a deal."

Ethan would have tossed in his kidneys at this point.

**"DONE,"** he muttered.

When they approached, it took Melanie seconds to recognize him. She actually squealed.

It nearly shattered glass.

"Oh, Jesus," Ethan muttered from behind Gene. "Someone shoot me now."

"I got this, Blackhawk," he stated.

As they approached, the woman opened her mouth. Gene shut her down.

**"DON'T,"** he stated, catching her off guard. "If you blow our cover, I'll make sure you lose your fucking job! Don't talk to us, don't look at us, and pretend we aren't here," he hissed menacingly, his voice low.

She looked so surprised that she stepped back and fell into the lap of one of the other passengers. As she landed, her eyes were huge, and she just nodded.

**IN.**

**SHOCK.**

Gene waited for Ethan to get into the window seat, before he blocked the man in with his bulkier body. Then, he gave Melanie the look.

When she scurried away, Ethan laughed in relief. Already, his hangover felt better now that she was **NOT** going to be anywhere near him.

“How the hell did you do that?” he asked, grateful to his partner. “She’s so damn annoying.”

“I have a way with scaring women,” he stated, laughing. The serious look was gone, and Gene was well aware that the woman wouldn’t come near them.

Ethan handed Gene his carry-on, and the man stuffed it into the overhead compartment.

When he sat, they buckled in.

Ethan was grateful his partner had scared the woman away. Now, he could have a Bloody Mary, close his eyes, and pray to the hangover Gods to spare him from all of this.

Only, he had one thing to do first.

“So, when do you want to go fishing?” Ethan asked.

“Surprise me. I do like a good surprise.”

Ethan could do that.

“Hey, Gene, thanks for everything you’ve done. I appreciate it.”

He held out his fist.

“What are partners for, Ethan?”

The man grinned.

Ethan knew one thing.

This was going to be the start of a beautiful friendship, and he needed it. Maybe he could find a surrogate brother.

To help him survive the oncoming storm.

*West Virginia*  
*Same Time*  
*Kenny Murdock's Home*

When she arrived, the house didn't look like there was a whole lot of action going on in it. The lights were out, curtains were closed, and there wasn't a vehicle in the driveway.

It looked barely used, but then again, a truck driver might not spend time at home.

God knew her place didn't look lived in for the same reason, but now, their shared space did. Maybe Jana Katz had her boyfriend at her place more than coming here.

There was one thing that did make her suspicious.

There was no big truck.

Didn't most truck drivers bring their vehicles home with them? She had run across a few cross-country truck drivers in cases, and all of them kept their vehicles in their driveway. Kenny's was big enough, and there seemed to be truck tire tracks...

That he didn't have one here, gave her that sinking feeling that he wasn't going to be around.

**Damn it.**

Was he trying to avoid her, or was he just working?

It looked like she wasn't going to find out.

Still, she'd knock and see if maybe someone was home.

As she was preparing to head onto his porch, she heard a man whistle at her.

*What?*

*Did someone want to die?*

When she turned, a good ol' boy was sitting on the neighboring porch beside Kenny's home.

"Are you whistling at me?" she asked, not even taking off her shades. She didn't like the vibe she was getting, and that told her a lot.

“Yeah, baby, I am,” he said.

Then, he grinned.

Oh, and he had summer teeth.

Some were here and some were there. They were all just not hanging out together.

Well, someone had balls.

She moved a little closer.

“If you’re looking for Kenny, he ain’t home.”

Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. She could see that all on her own. She didn’t need his help deciphering that mystery.

She figured she could get some information out of the man, if she stayed at a safe distance. If she shot someone, Gabe would kick her ass.

“Do you know where he is?” she asked, making sure she kept her distance. The hair on the back of her neck was standing up, and she had that feeling.

All women had that gift of self-preservation.

It was their survival instinct in a world full of men who couldn’t take no for an answer.

While she was armed, she didn’t want to risk getting into a situation she couldn’t get herself out of. All of the sudden, she really wished she had brought Babylon.

“He went back out on the road to do some more deliveries. I’m getting his mail for him,” he stated, licking his lips. “What’s your name, pretty thing?” he asked.

She didn’t give him that.

“First, you tell me yours.”

“I’m Nathen,” he stated. “Wanna come in for some chitchat?” he asked, making a blowjob motion with his hand. “I’ll talk, and you can do the work.”

Yeah, never.

Her face must have said it all.

“Me and my brother could give you a good time.”

Immediately, she knew that this had gone from bad to worse. She didn’t see his brother, but she had a sneaking suspicion that he was around.

Well, this was bad.

There were two of them.

Just as she was about to ask him where he was so that she could be prepared, Elizabeth felt it.

The hair on the back of her neck went up, and her senses were extra alert.

The whisper came from behind her.

**Unfortunately.**

“Hey, pretty thing. Let’s party.”

When she saw the big man from her peripheral, she knew the shit was about to hit the fan.

**Big-time.**

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\**

***The Pub***

***Finishing Lunch***

***Same Time***

When Remington’s phone went off, he pulled it out. It was his deputy, and he was alerting him to a situation that was going down.

“Sir, one of the Koren brother’s neighbors called in a fight at their house. They said it’s bloody, and you need to get there.

He sighed.

“Well, my lunch is over. I’ll head there.”

“Sir, the pretty Fed is there. They said...”

He stopped Xavier.

“Wait, what?”

“She stumbled upon David and Nathen. You’d better get there fast. There was screaming. You’re the only one who can talk them down. If we show up...”

He knew what would happen.



Remington knew the sheriff beside him was going to lose his damn mind. They had constant problems with the Koren brothers. They were a little off, and they liked harassing women. If Elizabeth had shown up there...

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

"I'm going," he said, pulling out money and tossing it down. He hung up.

Charlie was staring at him.

"Uh, in a hurry?"

"Where was Elizabeth going?" he asked. "Do you have the address?" he asked.

Charlie pulled out his phone as they began walking out of the pub. He showed him.

**Yep.**

This was bad. He broke the bad news, hoping for the best, but expecting this to be a dirty mess.

"We have a pair of brothers in town who have **NO** impulse control. They like to take what isn't theirs."

Charlie didn't like this.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Elizabeth just showed up next door, and my deputy said a neighbor called in screaming."

**Oh.**

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

That was all he had to hear.

Charlie began running toward the sheriff's vehicle. He jumped in, and the man started it up.

"Hurry!" he stated, his heart racing in his chest. Elizabeth could be hurt. He knew he shouldn't have let her go there alone.

**Jesus.**

If they hurt his baby, there would be another killer in town causing issues.

**HIM.**

They didn't speak the entire way there, and the tension was palpable. Charlie's fists were clenched, and he was ready to destroy a town

to get to his child.

This feeling happened way too much in his world, and this was why he wanted to live near her.

She needed him.

Like now.

Not speaking, they hauled ass, Remington's lights and sirens on as they tore through the sleepy town, down a dirt road, and toward the house that Remington had been called to too **MANY** times.

When they pulled up, Charlie was out of his side of the vehicle and running with his gun out.

As they both got to the Koren brother's porch, Elizabeth was there, leaning against the rail.

**She.**

**Looked.**

**Fine.**

"Are you okay?" Charlie asked, seeing one man cuffed to the railing and crying, and one out cold on the porch floor, face down.

"Oh, I'm good. David grabbed me, and I kicked his ass. When his brother came to help him, he realized it was a big mistake, right, Nathen?"

The man was sobbing.

He was also bleeding from the face.

Someone had a broken nose, his eye was swelling closed, and he had no teeth.

**NONE.**

Charlie relaxed, as that adrenaline dropped. Elizabeth didn't have a scratch on her.

"And you're not hurt?" Remington asked.

"Dude, look at them. They couldn't put a plan together if I gave them the P, L, A, and N. You think I can't kick their asses?" she asked. "I did break a nail, and it hurt like a bitch," she said. "You know, when they are below the nail line..."

The men were staring at her.

"You will be the death of me yet," Charlie stated. "One of these days..."

She didn't call them, so she suspected a neighbor did.

Elizabeth explained.

“I came here to talk to the neighbor, and Nathen and David wanted the kind of party that is off-limits to anyone but my husband. I said no, they insisted. It got them hurt.”

Remington laughed.

Yeah, the CIA file was right. He wasn't tangling with this one. She took down five hundred pounds of stupid.

**Alone.**

His deputies were afraid of these two.

Apparently, she wasn't.

He was impressed.

“Who screamed?” Charlie asked. “The deputies said the neighbors heard screaming.”

She pointed at the man face down.

“He took a few shots to his balls. Then, I elbowed him in the face, and I broke out his last tooth.”

*Remington laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*And laughed.*

“He called that tooth Betsy. It was his favorite one of them all.”

She laughed.

“It was his only tooth. Or as he called it ‘*toof*’. Dad, you weren't worried, were you?”

He laughed.

“Yeah, but I see I raised a maniac, but I'm still telling your man for scaring me.”

She shook her head.

The day she couldn't handle two assholes like this was the day she turned in her badge. They weren't the sharpest tools in the shed.

**Hell.**

They didn't even have a shed.

“Anyway, Kenny wasn't home. He went back out on the road this morning, and that pisses me off because that doesn't help me with the whole ‘*is he really Teddy and did he kill his ex since he threatened her via text*’,” she stated.

The man on the ground began stirring.

“Okay, David, sit up,” Remington said, rolling the man over. “What the hell were you thinking?” he asked.

The man moaned.

“Well, I know what he was thinking with,” Elizabeth said, still leaning against the railing. “I think I popped a ball or too. Cowboy boots and testicles don’t really have a fair matchup.”

Charlie was grateful for all the times he taught her to fight mean and dirty.

**SO.**

**DAMN.**

**GRATEFUL.**

The man sat up.

“That bitch hurt me!” David said, pointing at her.

Remington had to hold Charlie back.

“Uh, no! One ass-kicking per day per person,” he stated, knowing these two wouldn’t be any match for an angry father.

Elizabeth knew that since they were brothers, they weren’t going to be Teddy in disguise. They’d just made a horrible mistake coming at her.

“Do you want them locked up?” Remington asked Elizabeth.

“Yes, because if they tried this with me, they’d try it with some woman who couldn’t fight them off. I want them booked on attempted sexual assault.”

Nathen was crying.

“She was just pretty.”

Remington had been dealing with these two for years, and everyone just let them off because they were afraid of them. Well, they’d messed with the wrong woman.

“I’ll come back and testify. Oh, and toss in that they assaulted a Fed. They won’t be let off by a judge from this Podunk town again.”

That was exactly what happened.

“I’ll make sure of it.”

Remington handcuffed David. He was holding his balls, and he was willing to bet that the man wouldn’t be getting off for a long time.

“I want to talk to that one,” she said, pointing at Nathen.

He was fine with that.

He led David away.

“Now, you little asshole,” she said, crouching down as her father was **RIGHT** there. “Tell me about your neighbor. Was he around Monday?”

He nodded.

“Okay, and when did he leave?” she asked.

“This morning,” he said whimpering.

“How long has he lived around here?”

The man shrugged.

“He moved in a while ago. I don’t know nothing more,” he said.

The problem was she ran Kenny Murdock, and she’d found his driver’s license, but that, again, meant nothing. She wasn’t able to find much of anything else.

“Dad, I want to take a walk around the man’s home,” she stated.

“Before you say anything, yes, I’m aware I don’t have a warrant.”

He didn’t care.

He was just glad his daughter could handle and defend herself.

“I’m with you,” he said, as the sheriff, Remington, came back for Nathen.

“We have some things to do,” she said. “Can you take them in?” Elizabeth asked.

He nodded.

“I know I offered to help with the operation, but it looks as if I’m tied up tonight, working my own case,” he said. “Can you handle this without me? I’ll try to get free at some point.”

Charlie shook his hand.

“You can join us in the van doing surveillance,” he offered.

The man would if he could wrap up his own issues first. Right now, he had to deal with the mayor, and call his boss to see what the man wanted him to do.

“Thanks, I’m sure I’ll be able to find you,” he said, joking around. “I’ll follow the trail of bloody men.”

Elizabeth appreciated him taking away the two idiots.

“Thanks, Remington. We’ll see you later,” she said, walking back to her rental, her father following.

“I thought you wanted to...”

She stopped him.

“If I’m breaking and entering, I want someone I trust to be with me. This is illegal. I need you to keep an eye out. I didn’t find much about this guy, and I’m curious.”

That worked for him.

When the sheriff pulled away, she got out, and so did Charlie. He stood watch as she walked around the back.

No one was messing with his baby girl.

**No one.**

At the back door, she found it an easy lock to pick. Once inside, she pulled her gun and walked through the house.

It was pretty sparse.

There was a coffee pot, and she touched it.

It was ice-cold.

So, the man had likely been gone a little while. That was good to know.

She moved through the house, and in the living room, she found a wall of Jana.

It was like someone was a tad bit obsessed.

There were pictures of them smiling.

Pictures of her sleeping.

Pictures of them together.

Yeah, this wasn't going to be her killer. Teddy was not the type to play relationship.

He'd kill and move on.

Salem had profiled him, and she believed what she said when it came to this. Teddy's sisters were the loves of his life. While sick, it gave her some perspective to keep this case from going off the rails.

Heading out the way she came in, she locked the door and jogged back around the front.

"Well?"

She shook her head.

"He was obsessed with his ex, but he can't be Teddy. He wouldn't be obsessed with one woman. He'd just want to kill them all. It's a miss."

He knew how disappointed she had to be.

"I know you're frustrated."

She leaned against the front of her ride.

“I’m frustrated because knowing who it is switches everything up. I can’t see something and go with it. I have to keep comparing it to Teddy. It’s making it harder.”

He patted her on the back.

“What do you want to do?” Charlie asked.

“I’m going back to the hotel. Chris got me a whiteboard, and I have to get ready.”

“Alone?” he asked.

She laughed.

*Was he serious?*

*Really?*

“Dad, did you see what I did to the brothers?” she asked. “I booted their asses around the yard and made them cry. I think I can get ready alone in a locked room.”

He looked at his watch. He could get to his room, shower, and run the DJ and bartender for tonight.

“This early?”

She knew it would take time.

Plus, she would have Axelle with her. They were getting ready together, and she told him as much.

“You know how we women are,” she admitted.

He laughed.

Charlie was pretty sure his daughter was up to no good.  
How did he know?

Call it a hunch.

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## *Chapter Seventeen*

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*Damascus*

*Early*

*Friday*

*Morning*

**T**he dream was a nice one. Callen was in his happy place, cuddled up in his bed, dreaming about the kind of life he was going to finally have with his new job. He was thinking about the improvements to his world.

Oh, and some sexy woman who would make his nest the best. He couldn't see her face in the dream, but he could hear windchimes, her laughter, and Timothy approving of his choice.

Yeah, it was definitely a dream.

There was no way he'd ever let Callen shack up with a white woman.

Hell would have to freeze over first.

As he was courting that beautiful woman in his dreams, he could hear banging on his door.

It stole that dream away, waking him up.

**Jesus.**

Whoever was at his door was dead.

He was having a good moment, and today was his day off. He planned on sleeping in, going over some manuals that William had given him, and learning about his new job.

"Coming," he muttered, climbing out of bed.

He had morning wood, and he would rather be dreaming about the dark-haired woman.

As he reached the door, he pulled it open, the sun blinding him.

"What?" he asked.

"Hey, sunshine," Kaya said, smiling at him. "I'm getting off work, and I was wondering if you wanted to get off too."

Her voice irritated him.

"You woke me up."



She pointed at his erection in his boxers.

“You don’t say? Is that for me?”

He finally figured out what she was talking about, and it pissed him off. He was not fucking up his life again with this train wreck. He’d jerk off into a sock before he got back on that train.

Timothy had been explicit with his warning.

“Pass.”

He went to close the door, and she put her boot in the way to stop it.

“Come on, Callen. When are you going to just admit we’re meant to be together? We can have some fun.”

He sighed.

“Well, we’re not going to have fun. You’ve ruined my existence and relationship with my brother, and I don’t feel like a trip to the free clinic for an STD.”

She glared at him.

“Oh, you’re too good for me?” she asked.

He pointed.

“A little birdy told me you were getting money for sex, Kaya. Is that true?”

She laughed.

“And if it is?”

He wiped the smile off of her face.

“Guess who is becoming the new chief of police?” he stated, pointing at himself. “William, who put up with your nonsense is retiring. I’m replacing him. Guess what my first duty will be?”

She gasped.

“Oh, yeah, Kaya. I’m going to make sure you’re out of the prostitution business.”

“I’ll tell everyone you slept with me.”

He laughed.

“Girl, really? You think there is a single man on this reservation who **HASN’T** slept with you? I mean, maybe Timothy and William. I’m not afraid of your rumors. In fact, I can start some of my own. Looks like your father was reported for some drugs.”

She backed up.

“Now, how about you stay away from me, Timothy, and even my deadbeat father? Because I’m going to be gunning for you. Let’s call it

justice, for that little incident with my brother.”

She looked afraid.

“I’ll get even, Callen,” she stated. “One day, you’ll be knocked down a peg.”

He was already at the bottom of that ladder, so who the hell was she kidding?

He couldn’t get knocked down much more. With this new job, he was going to start climbing, and he’d be damned if Kaya was going to stand in his way of making something of his life.

**BULLSHIT.**

That wasn’t happening.

As he slammed the door, Callen felt empowered. He was going to start to make a change today.

Timothy said the woman who would love him was out there. He’d focus on her and his job.

He was going to start working out and getting back in shape. He couldn’t run because of his ankle, but he could take a hike in the woods.

Why did he suddenly feel like he wanted a dog?

Well, he wasn’t sure where that one came from, but why the hell not?

This was a new day, and Callen wanted to live.

He finally had hope, and it wasn’t tied to his brother.

Callen James Whitefox was going to pull himself out of this deep dark mire and find his way into the light.

One way or another.

***Hotel***  
***Elizabeth and Chris' Room***  
***Friday***  
***Afternoon***

Axelle was working on her hair, helping her pull off one *Hail Mary* of a play. She didn't want to use Axelle as the only bait, knowing that up to that moment, she wasn't sure if she'd even talked to the killer.

This was hard.

She wished she could get something that might give her a lead on this.

On the board, she'd written her suspects, and there weren't many of them.

It was sad, and she knew it.

She even included the people they'd talked to and found nothing to tie them to the case. While her gut eliminated some of them, she wasn't so damn sure.

All she could keep thinking about was how Kitty hid in plain sight, and was damn good at creating a new identity for herself.

One mistake, and Teddy was in the wind.

She was hoping that tonight, Teddy would show up and play, but she couldn't be positive. They were going to have to keep their eyes open, and hope for that miracle.

She stared at the names on her board.

***Simian Welch—carpet guy***  
***Joseph Peterman—suspicious neighbor***  
***Kenny Murdock—missing ex-boyfriend***  
***Keller Devoe—bartender***  
***Harry Holston—friendly DJ***  
***Donny Shephard—night concierge***

*James Mallery—day concierge*

Just staring at them, she suspected that Teddy was even better at playing hide and seek than Kitty. He was hiding in a sea of potential rapists.

Oh, this round went to Kitty.

She'd taught her brother well.

That was for damn sure.

"Do you need to talk it out?" Axelle said, applying color to her hair. They'd bleached her out, and now she was becoming a redhead.

Her ME was either going to love it or fall over when he saw her.

Axelle had appreciated that she wanted to change it up a bit, and add more bait to the pond, but she was actually okay with it. She didn't mind being the killer's focus.

She wasn't easily snuck up on, and Jack had been hovering non freaking stop. He wasn't planning on leaving her side.

So, she was safe.

"I feel like I'm missing some suspects. I'm hoping that I didn't jack this up by letting Remington handle the hospital interviews. I know only two of the victims were nurses, but I just feel like I should have done **ALL** of the interviews. Maybe I'm being a control freak."

She'd let her father and Remington handle the pub ones today too, and she wasn't accustomed to sharing.

It tended to bite her in the ass.

Axelle understood her concern.

As her laptop not far away was working, she had to be honest with her friend.

"Put Remington Bowman on that list."

That pulled Elizabeth from her thoughts. She hadn't been expecting that.

**At.**

**All.**

"Pardon? Why?" she asked.

Was Axelle serious?

"Well, something about him feels off, and I made a call," she stated. "One of my *'friends'* in the bureau called me back. He doesn't exist."

She stared up at Axelle.

**“WHAT?”** she asked.

Oh, that couldn't be good.

“As in he could be Teddy?” she asked.

**Sweet baby Jesus!**

That was bad.

Had Chris been right yesterday when he called him a killer? Was she losing her edge?

Axelle calmed her down.

“Well, hold on, LaRue. He's either so deep and always plays that game, or he's possibly involved in this. Think about it. He made up this story about being undercover when all we know is what he tells us.”

“And what Gabe told us,” she stated.

“What did he say, exactly?” Axelle asked.

Elizabeth's heart was pounding in her chest. She believed Gabe, and knew that he'd not set her up for failure.

He wouldn't, right?

She shared what she knew.

“He said that Remington called the office, gave them a heads-up, and Gabe called the CIA. It's running an operation.”

Elizabeth didn't like this.

“And Gabe isn't playing you?” she asked.

God.

She hoped not.

In that moment, she had to put her faith in someone, and her only lifeline in this mess was Gabriel Rothschild. He hated being fucked with as much as she did, and their boss was always doing just that.

The director had almost got Gabe and Chris killed by lying his way around the rules.

No.

She trusted Gabe.

He wouldn't let her swing. She made him look good, and that was Gabe's bottom line.

“Ax, you might just be paranoid. Gabe is all about climbing the ladder, but he needs me to keep closing those cases. As for Remington, I ran him. He has a life,” she stated.

The woman said nothing.

Elizabeth had a suspicion as to why Axelle was so worried about this. She'd been burned too.

"The Daniel thing really fucked with you," Elizabeth stated.

Axelle sighed, and then she nodded.

"I really believed he was one of the good guys. That makes me question my gut."

She understood.

"I know you're worried, but I'm going to say he's safe," she stated.

"He knows too much that no one else knows, and he was the one who called it in. He confirms that, and so does Gabe. If he was Teddy, he wouldn't be reacting this way. He'd be losing his shit that we have his sister. I trust Salem's profile. She's good at what she does."

Axelle had to believe Elizabeth.

She tried to relax.

"Tell me what is bothering you," Elizabeth said as Axelle continued to dye her hair. "Normally, you're calm, but you feel like you're discombobulated by something. Talk it out."

She dropped the bomb, or what she thought was the bomb.

"I'm going to stop seeing Jack."

Elizabeth didn't even flinch.

"He won't commit, huh?" she asked.

It was so much more complex than that, and Axelle wanted off the rollercoaster. Oh, she loved the ride, but when it came to an end, it was a downer.

"I want a life, LaRue. I'm sick of coming home to an empty house, and just occasional intimacy. Jack loves his job, and he's not going to change."

"He'd change for you," she stated.

And that was the problem.

"For how long, LaRue? Would you want Chris to change for you?"

She shook her head.

"No, I love him how he is, and he feels the same."

And that was what she wanted.

"He'd have to sacrifice too much to be with me, and in the end, he'd hate me. He offered up a commitment—when we're old. He's betting no one will want me either."

That was shitty.

“Want me to kick his ass for you?”

She sighed.

“No. I’m good.”

“Are you sure? Because I’ve already booted two dudes in the balls today. One more is nothing. He should know better to do the ‘*if no one else takes us, we can settle*’ bullshit.”

She laughed.

You’d think he’d know, but, clearly, that wasn’t the case.

Axelle covered her pain with humor—like always.

“Is that some sick best friend code?” Axelle asked.

“Yep. It’s where I have your back. Livy and I made it up when we became friends. I’ll be there for you. Hoes before bros,” she said, laughing. “That sounds horrible, but you know what I mean.”

She did.

Axelle was grateful that she met Elizabeth, and that they had become close. She didn’t have any friends. Axelle was a spook. It took a special kind of crazy to like her.

Elizabeth crazy.

“Do you think he’ll ever settle down?” she asked. “I mean, when we get old...”

“Nope. Don’t hitch your giddy-up to that wagon and wait your whole life for it to get to town, as my dear, sainted father would say.”

She laughed.

“He’s not sainted, not dead, and crazy like you.”

She was aware.

“He’s also pretty astute, as am I. While Jack is a great guy, Ax, he’s not the guy for you. I can tell. You love each other, but you’re like taking two pieces of the puzzle not meant to fit and shoving them into each other until they do fit. It just breaks them for whatever piece they were meant for later in life.”

She listened.

“One day, you’ll wake up and hate yourself for doing that to him, and you. I know you well. I’m good at this.”

“Like Cupid?” she joked.

“Hey, if the wings and arrows fit, wave that freak flag with pride. Someone get me a diaper.”

She laughed at the visual.

“Keep your kink to yourself,” she joked, but then got serious. “I think you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.”

“I want what you and Chris have.”

It was her turn to laugh.

“What he sees in me...? No clue, Axelle. I have no freaking idea, so I can’t tell you how to get that. All I know is he likes me as I am. Aim for that.”

She knew what the man saw. It was what Elizabeth didn’t see. Elizabeth was a good person, and she was beautiful inside and out—once you got past the biting sarcasm, dirty looks, and bad attitude in beat-up cowboy boots.

“He likes your tits.”

She snorted.

“Preach, sister. Preach. In my defense, they are **AMAZING**.”

As her phone began ringing, she saw Chris’ face on the screen.

There was no way she’d let him see her right now. She was going to surprise them all. Elizabeth had never dyed her hair before.

**Ever.**

She’d always had her mother’s hair, and she kept it long and curly because of her. It was in homage to her.

A way to remember.

Elizabeth liked to touch her hair, playing with the curls when she was little. They had been comforting.

“Uh, he cannot see me.”

“Send it to voicemail.”

She did, and she knew that he was going to panic if she didn’t call him back, so she did just that—minus the video call.

When he answered, on the first ring, his voice said it all.

He was worried.

Yeah, she’d called that one.

Elizabeth put it on speaker.

“Sorry, my sexy ME. I’m doing my hair, and I don’t have a way to hold the phone.”

The tension drained away.

“I’m just glad you’re okay.”

She laughed.



“I’m here getting ready and using my whiteboard. I’m perfectly fine.”

“Well, I was taking our dog out to use the grassy facilities, and I saw the sheriff coming in with two suspects. They were a bloody mess. What did you do?”

She laughed.

*How could she not?*

“Well, in my defense, they thought raping a woman was a good Friday plan. I said otherwise.”

Chris could feel his blood pressure go up.

“Raping a woman? As in raping my particular woman, the one I love, and the one I’m scared shitless will get hurt when I’m not around?”

It was clear Chris didn’t realize Axelle was there.

“Well, you saw the outcome. I won that round. I’m mean like that. One of these days, these men will not look at me and see a debutant. That’s the day I lose my edge,” she teased.

He sighed.

“I can’t go there today,” he stated. “I’ll have a stroke. I’ll just pretend you were out with your father and safe.”

She laughed.

Whatever worked for him.

“What do you have for me?” she asked. “I’m sure while you’re on the phone stressing, you can give me some information on any trace that we may have found.”

He would do that to get his mind off of what she’d just told him. Tonight, he was going to be all over her like a crazy person himself.

“We don’t really have much. Okay, that’s a lie. We have nothing. We have trace, and it appears he doesn’t give a shit where he leaves it. From the amount of semen, he didn’t go one round or two.”

She scrunched up her nose.

“A repeat offender, huh?” she asked, trying to calm the man down.

Axelle set the timer on her phone for when she had to rinse out.

“Oh, yes, and he repeated the offense repeatedly. I’m going to say someone has a very high sex drive and libido.”

She was curious if there was some mathematical formula or something. He seemed so sure of himself.

“How do you know that?” she asked.

He laughed.

“Sweetness, I’m a guy. I know how much semen is normal, and how much is just overkill. We have a serial fornicator.”

“Well, that explains why Salem thinks he’s sexing up the two women in his life—Kitty and Letty.”

Chris didn’t understand that.

It was just gross to him.

“I have nothing but uncomplimentary words for that, so let’s just let your imagination think how that really makes me feel.”

She snorted.

“How diplomatic of you, Christopher.”

“Saying ‘icky’ makes me feel like my IQ dropped,” he admitted.

That was amusing as all hell. She couldn’t help but laugh at his comment.

“I miss you, Elizabeth. I just wanted to tell you that. I also love you more than anything in the world.”

Her heart skipped.

“I love you, too, Newton.”

Axelle was watching her friend, and at the man’s words, her face softened, and she went to mush. That was exactly what she wanted and didn’t have. The two of them were crazy about each other.

No one had to pretend or try.

This was what she was talking about.

**This adoration.**

“I can’t wait to go away with you,” Chris said. “I’m going to enjoy locking ourselves in the cabin. I called about our cruise, and I handled everything.”

He didn’t push it back, but he spoke to them about doing it if need be. They weren’t happy, but in the end, money talked.

She relaxed.

“Yeah, I’d rather go later than not at all. Thank you for handling that. You are always taking care of me.”

She could feel the love.

It oozed through the phone, reminding her that she was one lucky woman.

“I love taking care of you. I’ve also handled the Sam and Charlie thing,” he stated. “It’s all squared up, and your father and Mom are ready to

go.”

Yeah, she loved him so damn much.

“Thank you, Christopher. Later, I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“Oh, Bethe, you absolutely will. You, me, and some outrageous kink. I can’t wait to have my wicked way with you,” he admitted. “You bring the handcuffs. I’ll use them on you.”

Axelle’s eyes went huge, and her friend pointed at her. It was clear there was a lot about the ME that Axelle did not know. Someone was bossy.

*Snitches get stitches!* she mouthed.

Axelle raised her hands in surrender. She wasn’t going there — despite wanting to do just that.

“Yes, please,” she said, knowing Chris would be mortified over the whole thing. “You can tie me up any day.”

Oh, Axelle wasn’t letting that go. They were going to have a talk.

**For.**

**Sure.**

Chris knew it was time.

She was working, and he wanted to make sure he was ready for tonight. If he didn’t get out of there soon, he knew something would happen. Chris couldn’t miss her plan this evening.

**Not.**

**Happening.**

“Do you need anything?” he asked.

“Nope. I’m good. Livy hooked me up. Head to Charlie’s room until later. He took your suit and dress shoes with him. I’m still getting ready, and I like to surprise you.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will. You know me. I’m easy. I have to be. Look at my wife.”

Her heart raced.

“You betcha, Newton. You betcha.”

Chris was getting overheated, and it wasn’t that warm out. He needed to get back inside, so he could pack up and make it back to the hotel room.

**SOON.**

“I’m going to be heading back in a few minutes. I’ll make sure the techs are fed, and Babylon is too.”

She found that funny for one reason.

They were like pets and she told him as much. They had a dog and a tech team.

They were already parents. Keeping techs safe and happy was like parenting a bunch of overly smart toddlers.

He found that amusing.

“I’ll have Tony with me. I’ll have him get ready in Charlie’s room too. If you talk to Livy, tell her thank you for getting my things for me,” he stated.

“Oh, I will.”

“See you at our room in a bit.”

She knew he was going to fall over when he saw her. Oh, not the sexy clothing but the hair.

She hoped he liked redheads.

If not, well, they had a problem until she could dye it back in a few weeks.

“I’ll be there, my sweet Bethe. Think about me.”

Oh, she would.

**Absolutely.**

“We have to go down to the bar separately. As far as the world is concerned, we don’t know each other. Avoid the concierges,” she stated.

Oh, he would.

It wasn’t the only thing he’d be thinking about.

Chris had an erection—because his woman was all he wanted in the world. Later, he’d show her as much.

There was no doubt in his mind that she would pull something scandalous out of her bag of tricks.

*How did he know?*

That was how Elizabeth rolled. She was sadistic like that, and she enjoyed shocking him. He expected an outfit that would make his blood boil, and his balls ache.

“I love you, Sweetness. See you later.”

“Bye, Christopher. I love you too.”

When he hung up, Axelle had so many questions, and she knew what she was going with first.

“Define kink.”

She laughed.

“Not happening,” she stated.

Axelle took a shot. After all, she'd told her friend about her problems. It sounded like Elizabeth had a problem of her own.

**Horny ME syndrome.**

"Girlfriend Code."

Elizabeth stared at her in horror, and not believing she'd actually try to use that to her advantage.

**Never mind.**

She was a spook.

Of course, she was going to use that to her advantage.

"Axelle!"

She smiled.

"Share, my new bestie. You know you want to. What kind of kink lives in the man's head?"

She shook her head.

"Nope."

"How about if I give you some information I've acquired as of late. It's about your father."

She stared at her.

"You're building a file on my father?" she asked. "I don't like that at all."

She shook her head.

"No, just something I figured out."

Oh, she knew what it was.

"If you're going to tell me that my father is having sex with his ME, you're a little late on that one. I found out when I stumbled into my house and heard them. Luckily, I'm a hot mess, and I can compartmentalize shit like that."

That wasn't what she was expecting.

"Damn it!" Axelle stated. "I really want to know how kinky that strait-laced ME is."

Elizabeth thought about it.

"If I tell you, can you keep what you know about Charlie on the DL? I'm taking it to my grave, and I play oblivious because it will literally stop his heart if he thinks I know what he's doing in his bedroom. I once caught him and my momma when I was like nine, and he couldn't look at me for a week."

She laughed.

“I won’t say shit. You know me, LaRue. I’ll carry your secrets since you carry mine.”

Well, that solved that.

“We’re on a sexual scavenger hunt trying out all kinds of things. I like to hand over control during sex, and he likes to be bossy. It’s hot.”

“And the kink?”

“You name it, and we’ll try it. He’s a scientist. He likes to explore a hypothesis. I like being his test subject. It works for us in all kinds of ways.”

She wasn’t shocked.

It was clear that Elizabeth and Chris had a strong relationship.

“Well, you’re lucky. I wouldn’t dare go there with Jack. I like some kink too, but he’s so vanilla it’s scary.”

“And that’s why you’re not meant to be with him,” Elizabeth stated. “If you can’t say *‘tie me up, choke me with your dick, and fuck me’* to your man, you’re with the wrong one.”

Axelle laughed.

“I have never wanted to be a fly on your bedroom wall more than I do tonight.”

She winked at her friend.

“You and everyone else. I like to see how far I can take it, and with him...I take it far.”

Lucky, lucky girl.

“Okay, your secret is safe with me,” Axelle stated, as her timer began going off. “It’s time to rinse. You’re going to blow his scientific mind,” she stated.

Elizabeth grinned.

“Well, you got half of that right. I planned on blowing something tonight.”

Axelle snorted.

As Elizabeth went to rinse her hair out, she got ready to help her blow dry it for tonight.

At the knock on the door, Elizabeth peeked her head out.

“That’s our coffee. Can you grab it, Ax?” she asked. “Just sign it to our room.”

“You had better have gotten us some food,” she stated. “I’m starving.”

Elizabeth was already back in the bathroom.

When she opened the door, the same waiter from the pub was there.

He stared at her as she took the two bags of food.

“Uh, you really like to eat.”

She laughed.

“Yeah, well, my girlfriend has a tapeworm,” she stated. “Thanks, Vale,” she said, reading his name tag. “Don’t tell anyone. We skinny bitches can eat.”

He laughed, took the tip, and walked away.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

As soon as she locked the door, she pulled open the bags of food, and there were fries, onion rings, and some cheesy dip thing along with some coffees and bottles of water.

“Bless you, LaRue,” she said out loud and popped an onion ring into her mouth.

**“YOU HAD BETTER SAVE ME SOME OR I’M GOING TO HURT YOU!”** Elizabeth shouted from the bathroom. **“I’LL LOSE MY MIND!”**

When her friend came out five minutes later, red wet hair down, and her body wrapped in a towel, Axelle laughed.

The color change made her freckles and eyes stand out.

Oh, Chris was going to be the one who lost his mind.

She’d bet on it.

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

*Somewhere Nearby  
Three In The Afternoon*

Teddy had seen the news, and he knew that the heat was going to be on.

Only, he couldn't quit now.

He would be bored at home waiting for his sisters to arrive. So, instead, he was going to take his chances.

Since they didn't have his face, he was fine with it. There was no doubt that the cops would be lurking tonight, but he wasn't going to run.

**NO.**

He'd already seen the woman he wanted, and he was going to take her too.

He was going to enjoy her body as he did horrible, horrible things to her. His sexual desires would be running rampant tonight, and no one could stop him.

Oh, they could try.

Only, he was hidden so well that they'd never be able to catch him.

He trusted his sister's skills.

And she'd taught him to be invisible.

Oh, and deadly.



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## *Chapter Eighteen*

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*Five P.M.*

*Almost Operation Time*

*Elizabeth's Room*

**A**s she stared at herself in the mirror, Elizabeth knew that she was going to be unrecognizable. Why? Well, because she didn't even recognize herself. The missing dark black hair had changed her face—in a way.

She looked like a different person.

Her freckles were standing out more, her icy-blue eyes had been piercing before, but now were so icy blue that you couldn't miss them.

*Oh, and her pale skin...*

She looked Irish.

In fact, Elizabeth looked like someone plucked this Irish rose from the hillside of Ireland and dropped her into the woods of West Virginia.

Elizabeth was sure of one thing.

She didn't hate it.

**Not.**

**One.**

**Bit.**

She knew what she looked like sporting red hair, simply because she'd done undercover work before. Look at Miss Kitty. She was all flame-red hair, bad attitude, and freckles.

Staring at the colored contacts on the counter, she was curious to see what would happen. They were just cosmetic ones, and their agents used them all the time to change their appearance.

Well, here went nothing.

She was betting they made her look even more Irish.

Popping them in, Elizabeth stared at herself, and it stole a little gasp from her. She looked beyond different.

*She looked...*

**Beautiful.**

Gone was her momma, and in its place was someone new, and she wasn't hating it.

**Not.**

**At.**

**All.**

"How's it going, LaRue?" Axelle asked from the other side of the door.

"Come in and see."

Axelle opened the door and whistled.

"You don't look like you. You look like...me. It's like I found my long lost sister."

She laughed.

"This is going to confuse the shit out of Jack," she joked, "and Chris."

Oh, she bet.

Axelle stood beside her in the mirror, and they checked each other out.

**Yep.**

**Sisters.**

"I don't hate it," Elizabeth admitted. "I kinda like it. Now, I know why the Red Queen digs it."

Axelle snorted.

"Well, this Red Queen has news for you. While you were becoming someone else, my laptop beeped."

She lifted a brow.

"And?"

"I've isolated the last stretch of the money. By tomorrow, I should know where Kitty girl put her rainy-day fund."

She turned and kissed her on the mouth.

"Hey now. I like dick. Lots and lots of dick. You don't have one of those, do you?"

It made her laugh.

"I do but it's attached to my ME."

"Damn."

Elizabeth heard a knock on their door.

"That's going to be Charlie, Sam, and Jack. They were coming here before heading down to the van and bar. My father needs the keys to your

CIA kingdom. God help us all.”

Axelle headed that way.

Elizabeth waited in the bathroom. She wanted to catch her father off guard.

Sue her.

She liked it.

When Axelle opened the door, the men headed in—dog in tow—and Jack was the one in dress pants and a dress shirt. He looked like every other boy next door looking for love in all the wrong places.

**Mostly murderous ones.**

“Hey, where is my baby girl?” Charlie asked. “I want to give her the standard lecture about not getting hurt.”

Axelle laughed.

“Oh, well, she’s getting ready. Yo! LaRue. Your old man wants to lecture you on not letting men put their hands on your girly goods.”

Charlie snorted.

“You’re just like h...”

He stopped dead when someone walked around the corner. In that moment, Charlie lost his words.

Babylon barked, and ran at her, sniffing her. Then, his tail was going, and he rolled onto his back on the floor for her to rub his belly.

That told them all they needed to know. Elizabeth was under that hair.

“I don’t have words,” Charlie stated.

Jack did.

“I love twins. Come to my lair, ladies.”

Sam slapped him hard.

“That’s my baby,” he admitted. “Don’t be a pervert,” he added. “She’s already caught a doctor.”

Jack laughed.

“Someone’s baby has grown up and decided that boots and jeans are not the only way to make men cry.”

“Holy shit,” Charlie stated.

“Bad?” Elizabeth asked, turning.

“Elizabeth, you look like someone else. Had I not known this was your room...”

Then it hit him.

“You made yourself bait. Oh, Jesus. Go back into that room and take that wig off, young lady.”

His heart was racing.

He didn’t want his daughter getting hurt, and while Axelle was gorgeous, Elizabeth looked...

Jesus in a manger during a hurricane.

“Well, bad news, Dad. It’s not a wig. I bleached it out and dyed it red. That’s why I needed time.”

He closed his eyes.

“Your sainted mother is rolling in her grave,” he said with an Irish accent.

She laughed and hugged him.

“Aye, she be doing just that, and that means I accomplished what I was aiming for,” she said in a thick Irish accent.

She’d nailed that brogue.

“The killer is going to be fixated on you.”

She shrugged.

“When aren’t they?” she asked.

She had a point.

“Maybe you should take the dog. He’ll keep you safe,” he stated, trying to find any way to get his daughter protected.

“He’s gotta go to the van with you,” she stated, taking doggie kisses.

Her father shook his head.

“Christopher is going to lose his damn mind,” Charlie added. “That poor boy is going to lose a gasket, three sprockets, and all his....”

“Fluid?” she asked.

He pointed at her.

“I forbid him from mauling another woman,” he stated, making her laugh.

Charlie gave her a kiss in the middle of her forehead, and then Sam did the same. He cuddled her.

“You are gorgeous, my girl,” he stated.

“I’d bang you,” Jack said, winking at her.

She stepped on his foot with her heel.

He yelped.

Then, Axelle gave him the look, and the man began sweating up a storm.

“I’ll deal with you later,” Axelle stated, pulling a box out with earbuds. “We should get our gear on.”

It was more proof she had to end their sleep fest. Christopher Leonard would never make a comment like that about another woman. He only had eyes for Elizabeth.

She handed Elizabeth a pair of glasses for Chris, a pin for herself, and three pairs of earbuds. They were ready to roll. Charlie was going to be running the tech from the van.

“You go give these to your man, and Tony. I’ll take Charlie down the back way, and then meet you in the lobby to head in as besties.”

That worked for her.

She dropped them into a little handbag and fluffed her hair. She was going to see how Chris was doing.

She knew he’d smell like sin, and she was in the mood to commit some.

**Sue her.**

She loved her man.

“Oh, Elizabeth,” Charlie said, pulling some papers from his pocket. “You distracted me. I did some research, as you asked. I couldn’t find anything odd on the bartender. He has a life outside of this town, but nothing that stands out. His social media is a little blah, but the DJ…”

“Yes?”

She waited.

“He’s got nothing on him. So, unless he changed his name, or is using an alias, he’s suspicious as all hell.”

She thought about it.

“I can’t imagine him changing his name to Harry Holston. That’s not exactly a fun one.”

He understood what she was saying.

“Well, guess where he lives? I found his web page and checked out the address while I ran his cell.”

“Where?” she asked.

“Across the street from Carolyn Williams. Maybe he was tempted by seeing the nurse every day.”

That could be it.

Teddy would have zero impulse control.

“Good work, Dad. I’m going to get his face on this camera,” she said, touching the pin she’d stuck to her dress. “We’ll run all the faces, his included through the CIA database. They are always watching people.”

Axelle snorted.

“And you’re lucky we are.”

“Remington has some things to do,” Charlie added, “but he’ll be showing up later to sit in the van with us.”

“Well, as long as he doesn’t come into the speed dating, I’m good with that. If the police show up, Teddy won’t take the bait.”

She gave her friend a look, and Axelle had that suspicious stare on her face. She still didn’t trust him. The CIA messed with everyone, including their own people.

They had their hands into everything.

For now, it was time to get this operation moving. Elizabeth still had to close this case and find Letty.

The clock was ticking.

“Okay, Dad. You just keep an eye and ear on us. I want to make sure no one gets near Axelle or myself unless it’s someone we’re safe with.”

He got it.

“Sammy and I will play spies. Babylon will come running, and I will sic him on anyone pawing at my baby girl. We got you.”

She didn’t doubt it.

The van was going to be parked in the lot of the hotel, and they were LoJacked with the cameras. If someone tried to get away with them, Teddy had a problem.

**A.**

**BIG.**

**ONE.**

“I’m going to go get Chris and Tony ready,” she stated. “We all have to go in separately, minus Axelle and myself. So, Jack, head on down, get a drink, **OF SODA**, and get ready to speed date in the next hour.”

He smiled.

“I think it would be more authentic if I had a beer and sat at the bar. Cops don’t drink on duty.”

She sighed.

**“ONE DRINK.”**

He winked at her.

“Okay, Mom,” he said, as he headed out, Axelle, Charlie, and Sam right behind him.

The dog too.

She took a deep breath.

Well, it was time to see if her sexy ME liked a redhead as much as he liked his raven-haired hellion.

It was time to stir him up.

**Big-time.**

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

***Charlie and Sam's Room  
Heading Toward Six P.M.***

Christopher was trying not to get himself tied up in a nervous ball of mess.

Only, it wasn't easy.

He was worried about the woman he loved, and he was worried that she'd get hurt.

Tonight, he wasn't speed dating, and Salem had been right. He wouldn't be able to think. Already, he was fixated on the woman in his life.

He'd be lying if he said that he wasn't wildly turned on at the prospect of dragging her back to their room later when she was safe and burning off all of the adrenaline that was pumping through his body.

It was going to be a free-for-all.

His woman could bet on it.

Tony was in the shower, getting back late, and Chris was pacing the room.

At the knock on his door, he knew who it would be.

Heading toward it, he pulled open the door and opened his mouth to say something.

Only, words didn't come out.

Standing there was someone who was shaped like his woman, tall like his woman, but did **NOT** look like her.

**Holy.**

**Fuck.**

If he didn't see the constellation hanging around her neck, he wouldn't have been positive it was her.

She looked...**HOT.**

He never believed he'd ever get turned on by anyone else but Elizabeth, but he'd be lying if this didn't fuel a whole bunch of sexy fantasies.

"Hello there, sexy," she purred, the Irish accent out, and aimed right at him.

It hit him hard.

In the libido.

"Jesus Christ."

Chris couldn't think. Her dress was short, her heels were high, and her hair...

"Can I come in?" she asked.

He simply nodded.

When she was close enough to him, her heart pounded in her chest. Elizabeth could smell him, and it made her belly go liquid with that heat.

When he reached out and touched her hair, gently tugging at it, he moaned.

"It's real," he whispered.

He had an instant rock-hard erection.

Tonight was going to be the longest night of his life, and he wasn't shocked. He was going to watch the woman he loved, looking like this, flirt her way through a bunch of men.

Oh, he was going to suffer.

**From blue balls.**



She closed the door behind her. Then, she gave him her best Irish purr.

“Where’s Anthony?” she asked.

His dick throbbed.

“He’s in the bathroom, showering...”

That was all he got out.

She moved so fast, crashing into his body and finding his mouth with her own.

It set off an explosion in him. That need rocketed through his body, as her oral assault was just too much for him to handle.

Her mouth destroyed his control.

On top of that, she practically crawled into his body by way of his mouth.

**Double fuck.**

His body went on autopilot, and all he could think of was burying his dick between her legs over and over again until they both came.

She’d caught him off guard. He’d assumed he could stay in control until after.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Wrong.**

If he didn’t have her and have her now, he was going to suffer the entire night. He was going to be rough, brutal, and unforgiving later.

That meant one thing.

Chris backed her up, and he mauled her good. Her body reacted to him, and she went fluid in his arms. As that kiss destroyed them both, he pinned her to the wall, and drove his knee between her thighs, pinning her there. He could feel the heat radiating from her body.

**And his.**

He was pretty sure he was going to spontaneously combust, then and there.

She tore her mouth away, and Elizabeth needed him. She was wild, out of control, and wanted to cum in the worst way. His cologne was like pheromones.

It called to her.

“Bethe,” he whispered, his fingers wandering. He rubbed her through her panties, dying to rip them off, slide home, and fuck like some

lunatic.

She needed it.

She needed him.

“Christopher, do it fast. Please fuck me!” she hissed, that desperation and lust overwhelming her.

That was the best thing that he’d heard all day.

As his fingers went to the fly of his dress pants, to set his raging erection free, they both heard the worst thing in their lives.

The bathroom door opened.

**Jesus.**

It was so hard to back up, but somehow, Chris managed to do that. The last thing he wanted was for Tony to be privy to what happened between them.

He’d bust his ass for years to come.

When he took that step back, she whimpered in loss.

Oh, he was aware.

He was dying.

As Tony walked around the corner, he stopped. They were both staring at each other.

“Wow. Nice hair,” he said, then noticed that they weren’t moving.

He was a smart man.

He knew why.

“Uh, am I interrupting?” he asked, looking back and forth between the two of them. “I can go back into the other room.”

“Yes,” Chris said, his voice deep, filled with lust, and telling his friend that he needed more time.

Elizabeth had no choice.

They needed to get this done. Tony walking in was the universe throwing water onto that moment.

**For now.**

“No, we have to work.”

Chris struggled not to weep. He wanted her in the worst way, and now, he was going to have a perpetual hard-on the whole night.

*Later, I’m going to fuck you,* he mouthed, knowing she caught it. *My rules.*

She got wetter.

Then, she nodded.

Tony moved closer.

“Nice wig, Lyzee.”

Chris shared what he’d learned. His hands had been in her hair, and it was the same feel, scent, and curls.

“It’s not a wig,” Chris stated. “She dyed her hair. She likes torturing me in the worst possible ways.”

Miss Kitty wore a red wig, and that was a memory he’d never forget.

It took him back to a time when she was going to blow him on an operation before they were a couple. There was no doubt this wasn’t only about the case.

She wanted to up the heat.

She wanted to make him lose it, pushing them past their limits. This was about her being the bottom to his top, and he knew it.

Well, they were going to have an interesting night.

At his words, Tony moved closer to give her hair a yank.

**HARD.**

It didn’t come off.

“**OUCH!** That hurts, Anthony! It’s my damn hair,” she stated, coming out of that trance.

“My bad,” he said. “Is that your ass too...”

She punched him.

Chris just stood there, watching her move in that simple dress. She could have put on a potato sack, and still would have looked gorgeous.

*How did he get this lucky?*

*Oh, and tortured?*

**Jesus.**

This was going to be a long night.

“Okay, Anthony, answer me this,” she said, dropping the Irish accent. “Do I look different?”

He laughed.

“Oh, hell, yeah,” he admitted, checking out the look on his best buddy’s face. “Chris wants to have a spontaneous orgasm right now.”

He didn’t disagree.

Chris really wanted to take her in some sweaty romp.

He knew it was going to be like fucking his woman but a different woman at the same time.

She smiled.

“Perfect. I have our gear,” she said, pulling out a pair of glasses, and handing them to him. “There’s a camera in these,” she said, giving them to Chris.

He had put his contacts in, expecting them.

She checked him out.

He looked so handsome.

Then, she handed each man a pair of earbuds.

“These will be linked to **EVERYONE**, so mind what you say,” she warned the man she loved. She really didn’t want her father in on their sexy talk.

It was pornographic at best.

Chris and Tony popped them into their ears, and Tony pulled on his shirt and got dressed as she explained everything to them.

“My father is in the van with Sam and the dog. Chris’ job is to scan as many faces as possible. I’m going to be focused on the men in this little fun fest. Teddy is a watcher and stalker. He’s going to want to pick out his prize, and study her.”

They didn’t argue.

“Tomorrow, first thing, we’ll download the pictures and start going through them. Then, we’ll upload to the CIA database to see if we have anyone who has been caught on cameras before. That should help us eliminate who isn’t Teddy. We know he sticks to this state, and maybe the surrounding ones to hunt.”

That worked for them.

Elizabeth clicked on the camera and got ready to do her job.

Tony stood and listened to the talking on his earbud.

“Holy shit,” he muttered. “Your father is going nuts,” he stated. “Something about Chris staring at your ass.”

She laughed.

Chris had been doing just that. Somehow, he managed to look up, but still grab a handful of ass just by memory alone.

**Sue him.**

He was going to suffer, and he wanted a little appetizer to his main meal later.

As soon as her earbuds were in, she realized Tony was not joking. Her father was being himself.

“Christopher! I can see what you see! Stop staring at what the good lord gave my baby girl! I don’t want to look at my daughter’s ass all night long!”

She laughed.

*How could she not?*

Tonight was going to be interesting.

Call it a hunch.

Heading toward the door, she turned to focus on both men.

“Let’s go find a killer.”

Teddy was going to be there.

Her gut said it.

Now, all they had to do is find a lunatic without knowing what he looked like.

How hard could that be?

Yeah, she was aware.

It was going to be like finding a murderous pervert in a bar full of horny men—one hell of a challenge, at best.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

***Van***

***Hotel Parking Lot***

***Six P.M.***

## ***SHARP***

When he giggled for the fifth time, Sam had to acknowledge that one of them was having the time of his life. They had their microphone muted like Axelle had shown them, so they could listen but not be heard.

The man beside him was living his best life, and Sam was glad. He deserved it.

As Sam pet the dog, Babylon was calmly keeping them company. Sam could get used to this.

Well, not sitting in a surveillance truck, but hanging with Charlie like this.

When the man he loved looked over, Sam's heart skipped in his chest.

*Those blue LaRue eyes...*

*They caught you every time.*

*Charlie broke the silence.*

"You know we're going to keep the dog later. The boy is going to be all over my baby girl."

Sam laughed.

"That he isn't already all over her is a testament to his control and love for Elizabeth," Sam stated.

Charlie knew he was right.

It helped him relax.

"He really does love her, doesn't he?" he asked, seeing what they were seeing. Chris was against a wall in the pub, Tony was already in his position, Jack too.

When a bunch of women came in, Chris looked, but his gaze didn't stay there.

When Elizabeth came in, he was locked on her.

Sam pointed.

"He's myopically focused on her. He's madly in love. When they were apart today, he talked about her all day, and then talked about her some more. He's in love, Charles. You can bet on that. He's a good man for our daughter."

He was glad.

Charlie liked Chris, and he loved that the boy treated her like she mattered.

When he watched her walk across the bar, he wasn't looking at her face.

He was checking out her ass.

**Again.**

It wasn't like he could blame him.

"She looks like her momma," Charlie said. "I can't say I'm shocked she can get his attention like that. I did the same thing."

Sam didn't mind him talking about Catherine.

**At.**

**All.**

She opened the door for all of this by bringing Elizabeth into the world. If anything, he was grateful.

When Babylon whimpered, Sam gave him some kisses. Someone was a baby. He liked being scratched and given attention. It was probably due to being locked outside his whole life.

"I'm not shocked she took this dog," Sam stated. "You know how soft-hearted our Elizabeth is. She hates to see anyone, or anything broken."

He was aware.

"Do you mind that he's staying with us tonight? I don't want the boy bit because he's mauling my daughter. Oh, I'd love to see him climb onto a table and call nine-one-one, but I'm sadistic."

Sam laughed.

"Not one bit. I feel safer with Babylon around. I dare that cuntasaurus to come near me with this doggo here. I'll even take Baby with me back to Salem if he needs a babysitter. He's my grand doggy."

Charlie laughed.

Deep down, he was glad they had the dog too. Charlie wanted Sam to be safe. This would keep anyone away who might try to hurt him.

He worried about his partner.

"About us moving up here..."

Sam had talked to Chris again, and everything was handled. Sam was far from good at lying, so Chris helped him set up a plan to keep Charlie off the trail.

"I think we should keep your home, Charles, pay it off, and sell mine or maybe rent it out. Then, we have income coming in."

Charlie really wanted to have some income.

“Do we have the financial capacity to do this?” he asked Sam as he watched the monitors in the van. “Just tell it to me straight, Sammy. You know I suck at this financial shit.”

He nodded.

He was well aware. As for being able to do it?

Oh, they did now.

Chris had deposited the money into his account, and next week, he’d pay off Charlie’s bills, and put his home up for rent.

“Chris told me that I’d be getting paid to help in the morgue. I have zero overhead, and a good savings account. With rent coming in, that covers your salary.”

Charlie relaxed.

If Gabe came through and paid him in cash, they would have even more leeway. He could take some time off from being sheriff if the mayor didn’t want him to telecommute.

“Thank you for being good with math,” he stated, giving him a kiss.

“Well, you’re my husband,” he stated, touching the ring on his finger that Charlie had given him. “What is mine is yours, and I only want you to be happy, Charles.”

He loved him so much.

Charlie couldn’t imagine his life without Sam. He made his world brighter and kept him focused.

This new chapter would be amazing.

**He.**

**Couldn’t.**

**Wait.**

“Let’s keep our eyes on them,” Charlie stated, holding Sam’s hand as they helped their baby out.

Life was finally good.

When you followed your heart, it seldom let you down.

This was his proof.





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## *Chapter Nineteen*

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*Hotel Pub*  
*Six P.M.*

Elizabeth had just enough time to get the men into position and meet Axelle in the lobby of the hotel. She knew this was going to be about being aware of her surroundings and keeping an eye out for anyone who might look like they were on the hunt.

She wished this was a regular case, where she was using science and facts to find the killer, but that didn't appear to be the case.

She was going to have to use everything else in her arsenal to get the job done.

The longer this took, the more dangerous it was for the women in this town.

Oh, and her career.

As she approached Axelle in the lobby, the woman was talking to Donny and James. It appeared to be the changing of the guard.

As soon as her friend saw her, she headed her way, waving goodbye to the men.

She hugged Elizabeth, and they headed toward the pub.

"Did you get anything new out of them?" she asked, hopefully.

Axelle shook her head.

"No, they were both flirting, and telling me how pretty I am. Why the hell does that annoy me so much?"

Elizabeth laughed.

"Gee. I don't know what that's like. Please explain it to me," she stated.

Axelle snorted.

Ah, the sarcasm was out.

As they headed into the bar, it was brighter in there than normal, and she immediately scoped out the location to find the people who would keep her safe.

Chris was against a wall, watching her.

Tony was already seated at a small table in the middle of the room with only two chairs. On it, there was a number. It appeared that he was ready to go.

Not far away at a differently numbered table, Jack was grinning and flirting with all the women around him.

Axelle sighed and they both muted their coms when she signaled she wanted to talk privately.

“That’s why I can’t be with him anymore,” she said, seeing the distinct difference. Chris was myopically focused on one woman, and Jack was all over the place.

She reassured her.

“Well, Chris isn’t speed dating. It would look weird if Jack wasn’t focused. Don’t get upset. Jack is Jack,” she stated.

She tried not to, but it sucked.

She wanted that one man to want her like Chris wanted Elizabeth, and she was desperate to find it.

As they approached the bar, and a handmade sign that said, ‘*Ladies Check-In Here*’, they saw Keller Devoe, the bartender, and Harry Holston, or who they assumed was him, chatting it up with a bunch of ladies.

There were some pretty girls there.

It looked like a mixing pot of ladies. There were tall ones, short ones, all with different skin tones, and personalities.

Well, this should be interesting.

“Twenty says Tony picks the blonde and has some tawdry one-night stand,” she stated, motioning with a jerk of her head toward the only blonde in the group.

Axelle laughed.

“Well, then she’s your next victim,” Axelle joked back. “We should have everyone watch her.”

“I can hear you both,” Tony said. “Your sarcasm is duly noted and ignored. One might think you didn’t love me by the way you bust my ass.”

Charlie and Sam laughed.

“I’d pick the feisty redhead in the red heels,” Jack said, describing what Axelle was wearing.

She looked happy that he’d noticed.

“She’s got a point,” Chris said, softly. “Watch the blonde. If Tony goes missing, we know where he’ll be.”

Elizabeth ignored them.

She was just happy they were all live on the earbuds. When one of their lives was on the line, she had to focus on work.

Keller called them all closer and explained the rules.

“You each have two minutes with every man. When you hear the bell ring, you need to move to the next table. Here are some cards, so you can write your name on them if you want to talk to them after. If not, keep your private info to yourself. Only the hotel staff and I have your details. We want this to be safe.”

Yeah, well, in the light of what had happened to four women, that anyone here was willing to put themselves in this position...

**CRAZY.**

With a capital C.

That she was doing this was insane, but she got paid to do the absurd.

**Case in point.**

**THIS.**

“Now, ladies, grab a free drink and have some fun. If anyone bothers you or is inappropriate, let me know, and I’ll handle it,” Keller offered.

He began slinging drinks to the ladies.

As Elizabeth approached the bar, she saw the sign-up sheet on the top and moved her body to get a shot of it.

“Dad, make note,” she whispered.

“Got it, Baby Girl. I’m killing him later for him enjoying that tit shot you just gave him leaning over.”

Chris chimed in.

“Not if I get him first.”

She giggled and winked at the bartender as he handed her a drink. It was crystal clear he didn’t recognize her.

When he handed one to Axelle, he smiled.

“It’s the coffee hound in room four-twenty.”

She smiled.

“You found me out,” she said. “Thanks for sending up all those amazing coffees,” she purred.

He grinned.

Luckily, the bell rang, and it was time to begin.

“Chris, Jack, and Tony focus on everything around the women, not just the women,” she said, heading for the first table. “When we sit, Dad and Sam, run the names we get. We need to do this on the fly.”

She took a seat, and Axelle too. She was with some stranger, but Axelle got Tony.

She got down to work.

Holding out her hand, she shook the man’s and started to get to know him.

“Hey, I’m Bethe LaRue.”

He winked at her.

“Well, it’s a pleasure, Bethe. I’m Alex Frable.”

They heard Charlie.

“Got it. I’m running him, and we now have his face in a perfect shot.”

She focused on the man, and not her surroundings. She was trying to see Kitty in him, and they were the same blonde, so...

“Tell me about you,” she asked.

“I’m a real estate agent, and love women with long legs and a pretty smile.”

“I love killing hornballs and faking their COD in an autopsy,” Chris muttered, his eyes never leaving the man. “Won’t that be fun?”

She smiled.

Oh, not at Alex.

Over what Chris had said.

“Don’t implicate yourself, Son,” Charlie admitted. “There are witnesses. We’ll get them all later.”

Chris actually laughed.

“What do you do for a living, Bethe?” Alex asked, trying to get to know her.

Well, it was time to make some shit up.

“I’m a hand model.”

Tony was right behind her, and he started laughing. She heard it, and she opted to have fun with it.

“You know the kind in those ads in magazines where they are holding something and the picture is of the forearm down?” she asked, moving her arm. “That’s me.”

He stared at her.

“Really?”

Charlie’s voice came over the earbud.

“He is **NOT** a real estate agent. We found him, and he is gainfully unemployed, and lying his ass off,” he stated.

She wasn't shocked.

Men lied.

Men trying to get laid lied even more. It appeared that someone was into a hookup and didn’t plan on anything long term. That seemed to fit Teddy’s plans.

Since killing women was pretty much a one-night stand.

“Yes,” she stated, continuing the ruse. “Have you lived in this town for long?” she asked.

He nodded.

“A couple of years.”

“I can’t confirm,” Sam said over the earbuds. “Get more from him.”

So, she did.

“Maybe we can get together for a drink.”

Oh, well, that worked for her.

“Sure. Give me your number,” she stated.

He scribbled it down on a card and looked a little too happy that she was showing any interest in him.

Someone was in for a shock...

“I’m going to poke his eyeballs out with a swizzle stick, and then stir my specialty drink, ‘*Never Going to Happen Asshole*’ with it,” Chris stated.

There was laughter.

Charlie was having a damn good time.

Elizabeth tucked the card into her dress, ignoring the commentary.

“Thanks,” she stated, just as the bell rang.

She got up, and moved to the table behind her, sitting with Tony.

He was hamming it up.

“Come home and have babies with me,” he joked. “We can make little anthropologists. I will treat you right and make you my stay-at-home sex kitten. You know the ladies love a doctor.”

“Anthony, I know where you live,” Charlie stated. “I will let Christopher tie your dick in a knot and hang you with it.”

She laughed.

How could she not?

Chris said nothing, clearly not worried. Then again, her father was reminding him again to scan the room, not just her legs.

“Shhhh, let’s see who Axelle got,” she stated, so everyone could work.

They watched as her friend schmoozed the man across from her. When the waiter headed over, he brought them both drinks. It appeared her suspect was suave.

“Did he just look down her dress?” Jack muttered, not really paying attention to the brunette across from him. He lost complete interest in his ‘date’.

*Why?*

Her first question was about his job.

That screamed gold digger.

“Yep,” they all said.

“I don’t like this game,” he whispered from behind his drink.

Yeah, Chris understood that.

He was okay now that Elizabeth was with Tony, even if he was trying to provoke him. The devil you knew...

“Well, Adam James, it’s nice to meet you,” Axelle said, clueing them in to his name.

They could hear Charlie typing.

“He was born and raised here. He’s a dentist. Oh, Axelle, grab him up. Doctors are a good choice. My baby girl got herself one and look how happy she is.”

Jack cleared his throat, letting his ‘date’ go on and on. She talked a mile a minute.

“Later,” Jack muttered toward Charlie.

“He’s got two ex-wives,” Sam stated. **“RUN.”**

Elizabeth focused on Tony as their time was about up. Behind him, the blonde was sitting with Alex Frable, and she knew Tony.

He couldn’t help himself.

“Don’t pick anyone up!” she warned.

He laughed.

“I do have some control of my dick,” he admitted. “Beetle?” he asked. “These taste like that mix on a bar. It’s a little Cajun, a little...”

She didn’t have to worry.

He was going home alone if he kept that up.

“Pass.”

As the bell rang, they moved on. Elizabeth saw that Chris was ignoring the world but her.

It gave her a warm feeling in the pit of her belly.

As she walked past the DJ, he winked at her and kept playing the softer music.

Axelle was up and sitting with Jack.

This night was going to be annoyingly long.

“Hey, Red. Wanna hang in my room tonight?” he teased.

She snorted.

When she glanced over, she saw Chris, and he was hyper-focused on Elizabeth. He’d moved closer, making sure she was safe. He’d said nothing, but his face said it all.

Someone was getting laid later.

Yeah, she wanted that adoration.

“Uh, someone’s man is going to be taking his woman tonight,” Axelle stated.

“Count on it,” Chris stated, not even bothered by their comments. He was planning it all out in his head, and later, their bed.

Charlie began sputtering.

“Jesus. I’m listening. I don’t want to know,” he stated.

“Sorry, father of the woman,” Axelle offered, laughing at the tone in Charlie’s voice.

Fathers were like that.

“Keep it up, chuckleheads,” Charlie stated, doing his research on the fly. “Just keep your eyes on Axelle and Elizabeth. If we lose them...I’m killing some of you.”

They laughed.

*Then again, with Charlie...*

He likely wasn’t kidding.

No one better lay a hand on his baby girl.



Or else.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\**

***In That Bar  
At The Same Moment***

Oh, he was glad to be there.

He was watching all of this, and he was enjoying the whole thing.

*These women on parade...*

It was like dangling a lure that he simply couldn't resist in front of him. When would they learn?

He was invisible, and he could take whoever he wanted, and he would.

**Bet.**

**On.**

**It.**

It wasn't like he didn't have time.

His choice for the next evening of fun reminded him of someone, and that made it even dirtier.

She reminded him of his other sister, Letty. From the curves, the laugh, and the rest of her, it called to him. Since he couldn't be an animal with them, he'd take it out on her.

*Why?*

*The?*

*Hell?*

*Not?*

He liked it dirty.

He liked the kink.

Letty was the same way too.

*Why hide it?*

It wasn't like anyone was going to be able to catch him. He was out of their league.

If he wanted, he could take this town apart, pussy by pussy.  
They were at his mercy.

And they would never stop him.

Until he became bored and left.

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

***Bar***

***Same Time***

Chris was watching, and the whole time, he was saying nothing.  
After another bunch of men, he was only focused on one thing.

**Elizabeth.**

He had to make sure he didn't take his eyes off of her, and that wasn't exactly difficult. She stood out in the crowd of all the others.

He was thinking about later, and how he was going to enjoy getting his hands all over her.

*And mouth.*

*And dick.*

When someone stopped in front of him, he glanced over. It was the waiter.

"Sir, can I get you something to drink?" he asked.

Chris looked away for only a second.

"Yeah, thanks. I'll have a whiskey on the rocks. Make it a double, and I want top shelf," he said, handing him a fifty. "Keep the change."

The waiter headed away.

He was surprised no one busted his ass that he was getting a drink. Only, he didn't care. Chris really needed one.

**He.**

**Was.**

**Parched.**

His mouth was dry, and his throat was dusty like a desert. He wasn't sure why he was shocked.

His woman did this to him.

**Perpetually.**

As he watched the love of his life move from man-to-man, his control was gone. Chris knew that he was going to struggle with tonight, but he was really out of control.

He deserved a medal.

**FOR.**

**SAINTHOOD.**

There was nothing worse than testing a man's patience by flirting with his woman.

When the waiter returned, Chris took the drink and kicked it back. He didn't even sip it.

It was full on whiskey rush.

"Thank you," he said, handing him the glass back. His eyes never left Elizabeth, to make sure he didn't miss anything.

Later, he was going to be out of control.

**He.**

**Could.**

**Tell.**

When Elizabeth glanced over at him, she licked her lips, and he really wished he'd ordered two drinks.

If this didn't kill him...

It would be one hell of a miracle.

*Toward The End  
The Last Few Men  
Bar  
Nine Forty-Five P.M.*

Good Lord.

This was exactly why she was so damn glad to be out of the dating scene. It was a meat market out there, and Elizabeth realized that being taken was a good thing.

Screw dating.

It was a sewer.

If she had a dollar for each man who tried to stare down her dress at her breasts, check out her ass, or make her wish she'd picked a different profession, she'd be rich.

**FILTHY.**

**RICH.**

The men in this town were definitely testing her patience. How did any of them get laid?

She felt sorry for them and their pathetic pick-up lines. They were really horrible.

When one guy asked her if she was a parking ticket, because she had **FINE** written all over her, she actually laughed in his face.

How could she not?

Or the asshole who asked her if she believed in love at first sight—and if he should walk past her again.

**Lordy.**

There was some cheesy going on in there. At least she wasn't the only one. Axelle got the same lines from the same men.

Players, they weren't.

They were all busts up to this point, and she was on her last man, next.

She had to hope something popped.

Elizabeth was about ready to freak-out. Teddy was damn good at playing hide-and-seek.

As she sat at the next table, her last for the night, thankfully, the man began grinning, and she already knew what was coming.

**Lechery.**

“Hey, I’m Kevin Martin,” he said. “It would be a pleasure to let you sit on my face.”

That was all he said.

Why wasn’t she shocked.

“He’s dead,” Charlie stated over the com. “I’m not letting some asshole talk like that to my girl,” he added.

“Just run him,” Axelle stated. “I have him next.”

Elizabeth didn’t even flinch.

Instead, she stared into his eyes, trying to read him. He sounded a little drunk.

“Yeah, no, Kevin. I’ll pass on that. We don’t know each other,” she stated when she really wanted to punch him in the face to watch his teeth scatter like *Chiclets* on the floor.

“Come on, honey, lighten up. We can have some fun. Let’s go back to your room.”

This was why women had to look in the back seat of their rides before getting in.

**Assholes.**

**Like.**

**This.**

He gave off the rapist vibe.

“I have nothing on him,” Charlie stated. “I don’t think that’s his real name.”

Well, it wasn’t like she could ask him, now could she? He was her number one suspect for Teddy—if he was faking drunk. Teddy would be sober.

He would be on his game.

This could be a ploy to throw her off.

**Maybe.**

“Picture of his face is done,” Sam stated. “Leave that table, Elizabeth. He’s disgusting. His mother should be slapped for raising a boy

like that.”

Oh, well, Chris would be more than happy to slap that leer off of his face.

He moved closer.

**Just.**

**In.**

**Case.**

Just when she was trying to de-escalate it, there was more bad news.

“Sheriff is here,” Jack said, seeing the man head in across the room. He was done with his rounds of women and was watching Axelle not far away.

“He was supposed to stop by the van,” Charlie said. “Not enter the building.”

Elizabeth wanted to have a stroke.

The killer wasn’t going to make a move with the law there. As if to prove her point, when he came in, **EVERYONE** looked his way.

**Jesus.**

It was done.

Her operation was officially blown. Teddy wouldn’t pick a woman tonight. The local law just ensured that.

“So, what’s your name?” the asshole in front of her asked, leaning closer.

Yep.

She was sure he was drunk.

She could smell it on his breath.

“Bethe,” she stated, not even worthy of a last name. She had worked plenty of undercover operations to know this one was over.

He put his hand on her leg under the small café table.

“The op is over,” Axelle stated, since she was alone. “Remington just blew it,” she stated. “What the fuck?” she asked.

Yeah, Elizabeth was thinking the same thing.

“Uh, can you remove your hand from my person?” she asked.

“Awww, sugar, you like it. They always say no, and they don’t mean it.”

Oh, she meant it.

“Again, that’s rude,” she said, not wanting to make a scene, but he was slipping his hand up her leg.

“I bet I make you wet.”

Well, she was about to show him what happened when you put your hands on a lady. Since it was over, she was going to show him what his comments could get.

Only, she didn't get her chance.

She saw the shadow fall on the table, and when she looked up, it was Chris. He reached for the man's neck and placed his finger on a nerve there. The man's body went prone.

“The lady asked that you take your hands off of her body,” he stated.

A hush fell.

“Stop touching me, asshole,” Kevin Martin said.

“Well, she asked you to do the same, and you didn't give her that courtesy. Now, get your ass up, and get out of here,” he stated.

Elizabeth wanted to cry.

Not because Chris jumped in, since it was already fucked seven ways to Sunday with the local law entered the building.

“What's going on?” Remington asked. He'd been heading toward the bar, and he saw Chris standing over the table and the look on his face was that of rage.

“This gentleman, and I use the term loosely,” Chris said, “was putting his hands on this lady under the table. She asked him to stop, and he denied her request.”

“Kevin,” Remington said. “Drunk again?” he asked.

Oh, he'd seen this man many times. It wasn't usually at this bar, but it was apparent word had spread about speed dating, and someone wanted to give it a shot.

**Unfortunately.**

Chris released him, and when the man got up, he went to sucker punch Chris, but he wasn't having it. He ducked under the swing, and let the man fall onto the table nearby, knocking a drink onto Tony and his *'date'*.

And that was a wrap for that.

Keller headed over, and he stopped everything.

“Okay, folks, nothing to see,” he said, staring at the man on the floor. “That concludes this evening's festivities. Everyone gets a drink on me,” he said, trying to calm it down.

“Are you okay, Baby Girl?” Charlie asked over her earbud.

“No,” she said.

She was shocked that Chris had handled that situation. That wasn’t normally like him, and she was so damn pissed that Remington came into the pub.

What the hell?

Was he out of his mind?

“He was harassing this woman, Sheriff,” Chris stated. “Maybe lock him up overnight until he sobers up.”

That was the plan.

Remington was glad he showed up when he did, or the Feds would have made this a mess. He could spot them in the room since they stood out.

**Like.**

**Sore.**

**Thumbs.**

He was doing them, and himself, a favor.

“I’m sorry he bothered you,” Remington said, finally recognizing Elizabeth with her hair and eyes a different color.

That explained the ME getting involved.

As she moved away, she was fighting the anger.

“Wrap it all up,” she stated. “He’s not going to make a move now that this went down, and the law showed up. What the fuck was Remington thinking?”

She heard Axelle.

“Still standing by your initial belief?” she asked, knowing she’d know what she meant. “Or you ready to believe that we were just sacrificed for this asshole?”

She wasn’t so sure.

Why would a CIA spook who knew about not blowing covers do just that?

Now, she had more questions than she originally had.

Maybe she was wrong.



*If she was...*

That sucked.

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## *Chapter Twenty*

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*Hotel*

*Ten O'clock*

*Friday Night*

**W**hile the sheriff, the undercover spook, took the drunken leech to his office to lock him up, Elizabeth rendezvoused with her team — well, her father and Sam. She and Axelle had walked out the front doors, past the night concierge, and toward the van parked at the back of the lot.

They had to keep up what was left of their undercover operation.

The walk there, they weren't speaking, and that was because Axelle was aware that she was ready to lose it.

Her CIA buddy had been right.

She'd put her faith in another spook, and it burned them good. She was struggling with the why, though.

As she tapped on the back doors of the van, Charlie opened them.

"Are you going to hurt us?" Charlie asked, trying to break the tension.

It was so absurd it made her laugh.

"No, Dad. I'm coming to tell you that you're free for the night. That was a bust, and if Teddy is going to do something, I doubt it will be aimed at me. Remington blew my op. He literally put focus on me."

She wanted to strangle him.

**Big-time.**

When Charlie opened the door the rest of the way, he was sitting there with Babylon asleep on the floor. He lifted his head and scooted closer to her.

"Hey, Baby," she said, scratching him behind the ears as she tried to calm down. Elizabeth was not in a good place.

**At.**

**All.**

So, instead of taking it out on anyone who was innocent, she breathed through it.

Then, she focused on her father.

“Really. Call it a night.”

Charlie saw the irritation, and he wanted nothing more than to make it all work out for his daughter, but he couldn’t pull off a miracle.

She couldn’t either.

“If he gets away...,” he began.

She couldn’t.

Elizabeth held up her hand.

Truthfully, she felt like she was going to begin weeping, and if she did, she’d lose all street cred.

There was no crying on an op.

Gabe told her that once.

“Dad, I need to go decompress,” she stated. “Do you want me to take the dog?” she asked.

Charlie loved Chris way too much. He knew the man was riled up, and he also knew there was a storm coming. His son-in-law was going to have a big enough issue on his hand.

Someone was about to cry.

He knew his daughter.

“We’ll take custody of our furry grand-doggo,” he stated.

She simply nodded.

“Where are Chris and the men?” Sam asked, seeing just her and Axelle.

“Tony went missing as soon as the melee was over, Jack headed upstairs to wait for Axelle, and Chris is in our room. I don’t know why we bothered, since this was a hot mess.”

Charlie leaned down and gave her a kiss.

“You can’t win them all, Baby Girl. Sometimes, you have to deal with a loss now and again.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Tell that to the Director of the FBI. My loss is his gain, and his gain, is my unemployment.”

He opened his mouth, and she stopped him.

“I’ll be okay,” she stated. “Just lock the van up, and sneak Babylon in the back way. I’ll see you bright and early,” she stated. “I need to think.”

He held out his hand, and she took it.

When he squeezed her fingers, she had to put it away. If she let it eat away at her, knowing that Teddy Clarkson might just pull one over on her, she was going to lose it.

The weight on her shoulders was so fucking heavy at that point. Maybe she'd overestimated her skills.

"I love you both," she stated, releasing her father's hand. She wanted to be alone.

As she and Axelle walked away, the woman linked her arm through hers.

"It's not over yet," she stated. "You have to have faith."

She laughed.

"Ax, this is a hot mess. I was picked to fail. I'm doing just that, and this time, the director might get his wish. Catching three killers in a little over a week? In three different locations? That's a long shot for a long shot."

She knew how she felt.

Only, Elizabeth had gone to bat for her in Paris, making Gabe save her ass. She'd do what she could.

"If we find the money, maybe we'll both keep our jobs."

She hoped because finding Teddy was getting less and less likely—especially since Remington sashayed his ass into that speed dating.

He knew it all hinged on that.

Why?

As they walked in, they wandered past the empty concierge desk and headed toward the elevators. She knew Chris was upstairs, expecting her to be in the mood.

She wasn't.

The pressure of work was just too much, and there was no way she was going to be able to fake her way through sex. She'd never had to before, and right now...

She wanted to cry.

"Go take a hot shower, have a beer, and bounce on your man," Axelle stated.

She didn't say anything.

Instead, she waited for the door to open, and for Axelle to head down the hall to her room. When she cleared it, Elizabeth got back into the elevator and headed up.

She didn't care about the cameras.  
She didn't care about the front desk.  
*She was just...*

**Ready to break.**

After putting the key in the lock, she headed in. The second she turned around, she saw him waiting, and she broke.

For the first time in a long time, she felt hopeless, and she couldn't keep her head above water.

Here, with him, she could let it all out. Chris would understand, and he would be her strength.

She needed him.

"Oh, Bethe," he said, going from lusting after her to wanting to take care of his wife.

She didn't hold back.

"I'm going to lose my job," she said, walking toward him with the weight of the world on her shoulders. "I can't..."

He pulled her into his arms.

"I've got you, Bethe. I've got you."

He held her, and she cried into his shirt. He knew she was about at her max. Elizabeth was like a wild storm. She'd sweep you off your feet, but she was hard to bounce back from defeat—especially when it came to feeling like she failed.

"It's going to be okay."

She held onto him.

Elizabeth didn't believe him.

She felt betrayed.

Gently, he scooped her up and carried her to their shared bedroom. When he placed her on the bed, he took her ankle in his hands and slipped the shoe from her foot.

Then, the other one.

Then, he stayed between her knees. Reaching up, he stared into her eyes.

"I will help you fix this, and we'll be okay," he promised. "I need you to trust me."

She wanted to.

She just wanted to stop thinking.

Getting up, he pulled her to her feet and turned her around.

“Let me take care of you, Sweetness,” he said, as he slipped the zipper down her back and helped her out of the dress.

God.

She hoped he wouldn’t hate her if she said no to sex. She couldn’t do it—not feeling like this.

When it fell to her feet, he helped her step out of it, and then scooped her back up as he carried her into the bathroom.

“I’m sorry,” she began.

He stopped her.

“Don’t be. Let me give you some peace,” he said, no longer thinking about jumping her. He was thinking about taking care of his other half. There were countless times he’d come home exhausted, beat down, and sore, and she’d catered to him.

He wanted to return that favor.

Placing her on the countertop, he turned on the water in the bathtub and dumped some of her bath stuff she used. It made the room smell like her.

When he turned, he touched her cheek with his palm.

“I’ve got your back. I promise. If you lose your job, we pack up, and we will find new jobs. I’ll go anywhere to be with you. I’ll buy us an island, and we can sell coconuts to the monkeys.”

She laughed.

“I pictured it,” she said.

He kissed her softly on the lips.

“Good. I’m glad.”

When the tub was filled, he helped her off the counter, undid the clasp of her bra, and slipped her panties down her legs. Gently, he pulled her hair up, using one of her million hair ties that were always everywhere.

He’d miss them if they weren’t.

It gave him joy to find them in their bed, on the floor, and in his car.

Then, he held her hand as she stepped into the water.

In his ridiculously pricey suit, he sat on the floor of that hotel room and just held her hand.

As they sat there, he grabbed a washcloth and ran it over her legs.

“Why did he blow my op?” she asked him, out of the blue. “Why did the spook walk into that place knowing that we were trying to draw him out. What is Remington up to?”

He wasn't sure.

"Close your eyes and stop thinking. You know that you tend to figure things out when you're not thinking about them."

He was right.

She closed her eyes, and he let her just float in that warm water. Before he knew it, she was out cold.

She'd burned herself out.

Chris drained the water and pulled off his suit jacket so he wouldn't get it wet. Then, he headed out, pulled down the bedding, and stripped as quickly as he could.

When he went back into the bathroom, he ran a towel over her body, drying her off as much as he could, and then, he scooped her up again.

He wanted to feed her, and thankfully, he'd thought about that before she arrived.

Only, he wanted her to sleep more.

Tucking her into the bed, he turned off the light and climbed in with her. Then, he pulled her into his body and let her sleep.

Because he knew what was coming.

It appeared Teddy Clarkson had won this round.

And it meant one thing.

Their day of reckoning.

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

***Three A.M.***  
***Hotel Room***

He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep since he'd watched Elizabeth for a little while before dozing off, but he could tell that she was no longer asleep.

She was wide awake and watching him.

"What time is it?" he asked, his watch on the nightstand.

"Late."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"No."

He sat up, and she crawled into his body to be against him. Immediately, he wrapped his arms around her, and Elizabeth's mouth found his.

He wasn't shocked.

Chris knew that with her, she'd mourn, then she'd think, and finally, she'd need him. Once she had that trifecta, she'd regroup and be okay.

He held on for the storm.

She poured into him, liquid heat and need, and took what she needed from that kiss.

It woke him right up, and he wasn't talking about his brain. His dick was now awake, too, as a naked woman was against him. The scent of her bodywash filled his senses and gave him butterflies.

"Bethe," he whispered, as her mouth moved over his, teasing and offering pleasure.

"Make me feel better," she said, softly.

Oh, he could do that.

"What do you need from me, Bethe?" he asked. "Who do you want?"

She knew what he was asking.

Chris was willing to be who she needed.

"I need the man who loves me. Please make me forget."

Well, it was on.

Chris rolled, placing her beneath him on the bed. He pulled the hair tie free from her riotous curls, so he could feel that silkiness in the dark.

While he'd wanted to have fun with the updated Elizabeth, he wanted to heal her more.

His needs could wait.



Moving down her body, he left warm open-mouthed kisses across her flesh.

She moaned in pleasure.

The feel of him over her was helping her forget about the mess that was on her hands.

Chris traversed lower, and when he was between her legs, he left kisses on the inside of her knee and then to her thigh.

There was nothing he liked more than feeling her body against his. She was amazing.

Chris didn't even mind being tired the next day as long as he could be with her.

She made him forget everything.

Now, he would do the same.

"Christopher," she whispered.

He ran his finger through the wetness between her legs, and she was definitely in the mood.

Well, now, so was he.

"Oh, Bethe," he said, his voice low, "I love you."

She understood that feeling.

"I feel the same, Christopher. You're my world."

He believed her.

With feather-light kisses, he ran his mouth up and down her thigh, sending little shockwaves through her body.

He said nothing more.

It was the middle of the night, and he wanted to lull her back to sleep.

When her hand slid into his hair, Chris let her guide him. She took him right to her clit, and he knew she wasn't messing around.

He slowly teased her, using the tip of his tongue to make her crazy.

She gasped in pleasure.

It made him moan in need.

"Christopher!" she said, as he toyed with her, and then finally dove in, feasting on her.

His body was rock-hard with need.

Chris wasn't going to be able to prolong this for long. He was edgy, riled up, and thinking about how she'd heated him up earlier.

His dick was already hard from thinking about it.

*How could it not be?*

As she moaned from the wickedness of his mouth, Chris sent her over the edge without teasing her.

When she came, that stress, aggravation, and confusion were gone. His love and adoration washed it away.

He slid up her body, leaving kisses across her goosebump-covered flesh. When he was right above her, he waited for her to open her eyes.

“Better?” he asked when she did.

Elizabeth nodded.

“Thank you for putting your needs aside for mine,” she stated.

He gave her a kiss.

“Bethe, your needs are my needs,” he admitted. “When you hurt, I hurt. There is no yours and mine when it comes to this. There is only us now. We came together and created a world. We have parents...okay, those are yours, but thank you for sharing.”

She laughed.

He wasn’t done.

“We have friends we’ve added to our unit, and we even have a dog. We are one. With each day, it gets harder to divide us apart.”

She was glad.

When she pulled his mouth down and kissed him, he fell into that mating of mouths. Chris would sacrifice sex tonight if it meant healing her.

When she rolled, he wasn’t expecting it.

He found himself on the bottom, and he wasn’t exactly disappointed.

As she broke the kiss, she stared into his eyes.

“I did all this work, so you should have fun with it.”

Before he could say anything, she hopped off of him and headed toward the window to throw back the blinds. As soon as they were open, Chris could see her in the moonlight and light from the parking lots.

Her hair was wild, she was completely naked from her bath, and she was his.

**All.**

**HIS.**

“Bethe,” he said, his body reacting to seeing her. She was stunning like some warrior back from battle. The scars were internal, and they made her the tough woman she was inside and out.

Elizabeth wasn't done.

She crossed the room and climbed onto the bed. Chris was sitting up and had moved to lean on the headboard.

"Mr. Leonard," she said, straddling his lap. "It was very hot when you saved me from that asshole during the speed dating. Don't think I didn't notice."

Oh, he knew she could have kicked his ass easily, but he had been trying to save her cover.

"You don't say?" he asked, watching her.

When she leaned over and turned on the bedside lamp, he saw a different woman in bed with him.

His heart began pounding in his chest.

"Bethe," he whispered.

She'd slept in her contacts, and her hair was the same riotous mess, but a rich, deep red.

"Want to do it with a redhead?" she asked.

*He laughed.*

*And laughed.*

*And laughed.*

"If you're that redhead, then, yes," he said in no uncertain terms.

"Yes, yes, yes, and yes," he said, running his fingers over her cheek.

She put her worries aside to focus on a good man who genuinely loved her. She took his mouth in that fiery kiss, and his body went hard beneath her.

Not his dick.

**No.**

That was already erect and throbbing. The rest of him was rock-hard with that need and lust.

Pulling away, she moved down his body, leaving a trail of kisses in her wake. Her mouth teased, tormented, and drove him wild.

He begged for more and begged her to stop at the same time.

She kept going.

*Lower.*

*Lower.*

*And, finally, to her prize.*

Elizabeth stroked him, and his whole being shook with the pleasure she was sharing.

“I’m not going to last long,” he muttered through clenched teeth. “I’ve been pushed past my limits today. Seeing that man touch what is mine...he’s lucky I didn’t shank a bitch with my scalpel.”

She laughed.

*Why?*

She pictured it.

“He put his hand on my woman’s leg. All of those men flirted with the woman I love. I had to listen, so don’t tease, Elizabeth. I’ve already been pushed to my limit.”

His warning said it all.

Chris liked to be teased when they were in bed. They both did. It dragged out the deliciousness of them coming together, but he was already stirred up.

Now, he was a man on the edge, and she wasn’t going to torture him like that.

She had other plans.

He moaned as she kept stroking him, and as her mouth took him deep, Chris watched. It was like having sex with a different woman.

He couldn’t imagine ever doing that, but it gave him some sexy fantasies that they could role play.

All of them had Elizabeth’s sweet face.

She worked him hard, not even pulling any punches. She didn’t play around, and instead, she got down to work.

**Blowing.**

**Him.**

Chris held on, his woman’s head in his lap, his legs spread, and her silky hair touching his flesh.

It was almost too much to bear.

**ALMOST.**

His hand found her hair, and he slid it into the glorious silkiness of it. Then, he controlled her mouth.

Chris slowed it down, making it torture. He wanted to feel that heat and lust overtake him. This was his happy place, and he was there.

His legs shook, and his balls screamed in torment.

He still kept her going, fighting that need to cum down her throat. Chris wanted that release more than anything, but instead, he held on.

He wanted to cum in his woman.

When he set her head free, he was breathing heavily.

She stared up at him, and she looked wild, feral, and out of control. She looked like some wild, pagan queen here to pillage his village.

Uh, okay.

He'd let her.

She moved up his body, trapping his erection between her and him.

He moaned.

In the silence of the room, his voice sounded unfamiliar, distant, and full of lust.

*How he was holding on...?*

He wasn't sure.

With the last case, and this one, Chris was finding it difficult to not just take what he wanted.

**HER.**

His control was thinning, and he prayed when they went after Letty, it would be a simple one.

Yeah, what were the chances?

**Slim.**

**To.**

**None.**

"Christopher," she said, teasing him with bites and nibbles on his body.

"Yes?" he asked, his dick throbbing out of control.

She reached off of the bed, and he was busy checking out her ass the whole time.

**God.**

He wanted to put his dick there. When she came back, she had his handcuffs and belt in her hands.

He grinned.

He could use them on her.

**Easily.**

When she kissed him, he fell into that mating of mouths, and before he knew it, he heard the click of her handcuffs, and his hands being restrained above him. Well, to the headboard. It locked his arms above his head, elbows bent.

He opened his eyes in surprise. She'd double restrained him to it.

“Now, don’t cum,” she said, sliding back down his body to make him beg.

Oh, and he did.

Chris didn’t often get tied up.

He liked seeing her bound far more, but here he was, locked to the headboard.

He wasn’t hating it.

She blew him, and her mouth was so hard to resist. The whole time, Chris wanted to touch her, and he couldn’t. He couldn’t move his arms. His hips had a mind of their own, and they tried to get her to take him deeper, but she was playing with him.

“Elizabeth, I believe I said...”

She grabbed a pair of her panties from under the hotel bed, where she’d stashed them earlier, and shoved them into his mouth.

His eyes went huge.

Then, she shook out her hair.

“Let’s fuck.”

He moaned, more than willing to be her sexy playground. She needed to vent, and he’d let her do whatever she wanted. There was nothing but trust.

Elizabeth left bites up his body, marking him up. The whole time, his dick jumped in pleasure.

He wanted more.

He wanted all.

When she got to his neck, she left one hell of a hickey there to show the world who owned him.

This prize was all hers.

His body vibrated with need, and when her nails scraped down his body, leaving red lines, he whimpered in lust.

His dick was so hard, it had to be painful.

**Good.**

They’d have one hell of a ride together.

Straddling him, she used his body. Elizabeth slid down his dick, and Chris’ eyes nearly crossed.

“**MFUK,**” he muttered through the panties.

This was hot.

A redheaded hellion was rocking his world.

He could get used to this. Normally, he was on the other side of this ride, and he was the one tormenting her.

Now, she was in charge.

He liked it.

*Would he crawl like he sometimes made her?*

Probably not, but she could use him as a fuck-ride any day of the week. No sane man was saying no.

She bounced, her breasts right there, and he was helpless to do anything but hold on and not cum.

It wasn't easy.

He dared any man to survive long in this position. He relaxed into it, and just enjoyed her doing her worst.

As she rode him, he felt her body tightening down on his, and he knew she was going to cum.

He wanted to cum too.

She stared into his eyes and shook her head.

"Not you."

**Jesus.**

His balls were not happy, and he was struggling to hold on. Chris watched her breasts bounce, and her nipples pebble. He knew it was nothing he didn't make her do, so he fought.

**HARD.**

When she came, Elizabeth leaned on him, and Chris wanted to roll, bury himself in her, and fuck his woman.

The handcuffs and a belt holding his wrists to the headboard said that wasn't happening.

As soon as she was ready again, she rode him more, and she was brutal too. Chris had to think about work, bills, dead bodies, and his mother to keep from blowing.

**It.**

**Wasn't.**

**Easy.**

When you had a lush woman bouncing in your lap, your instinct was to cum.

As she rode him hard, switching up the rhythm to keep him off balance, it wasn't long before she came again.

She shouted his name and exploded apart.

**Jesus.**

He was going to die if he didn't cum and soon.

When she pulled the panties from his mouth, he was wild with need.

"I need you," he said. "You have to get me off."

She smiled.

"Nope."

His heart was racing.

"I don't like this game," he said as she got off his lap. "Where are you going?" he asked.

She leaned against the headboard wiggling her ass.

"I saved your favorite part for last."

Then he got it.

There was his girl.

He grinned like a lunatic. She was right. That was his absolutely favorite part.

He loved nothing more than being behind her, controlling when they both came.

He twisted and moved his hands—still locked to the headboard.

When she ducked under his arms, he was behind her and facing her ass.

**Holy shit.**

"You have to help me. I don't have my hands," he said watching as she reached behind her, stroked his wet dick, and guided him into her ass.

**FUCK.**

She knew how to make him absolutely insane.

"I can't get you off. You'll have to..."

She licked her finger, and he nearly came from that, and that alone. He was in her, but not deep, and she was going to masturbate.

Chris had been a good boy in his last life.

He was sure of it.

"Take me," she said, leaning back into him to slide him further into her body.

Chris had no choice.

His body demanded that they mate.

Today had been a long day and he wanted what he wanted.

That was her.

He began moving, as she rested the back of her head on his shoulder. He took her in abandon, enjoying how she milked his body.



“Bethe, not lasting long,” he said. “Get those fingers working,” he muttered, as he thought about all the men who flirted with his prize.

**His woman.**

**HIS WIFE.**

Chris’ body was on the edge, and when he heard her breathy gasp, he whispered into her ear.

“Cum for me, baby. Cum for me now,” he said, his body breaking apart as soon as he felt her do just that.

He fell into the pleasure, her going with him. As he felt the unlocking of the cuffs, Chris fell to the bed with her in his arms. He stayed buried in her ass.

Their breathing slowed as they cuddled.

“I love you,” she stated.

He nuzzled her hair.

“I love you too, Bethe,” he admitted. “How could I not?” he asked.

She was comfortable in his arms.

When she said nothing, he lifted his head.

“What are you thinking?”

She shared.

“About how much candy is in your medical bag, and will I have to wrestle it away from you. I’m hungry.”

He laughed.

“Well, my sexy wife, let me show you something even better,” he said, slipping from her body and going out to their sitting room.

When he returned, he had two containers of Chinese and chopsticks.

“Don’t mess with me, Christopher. You know how I am when I’m hangry.”

He laughed.

Oh, he did.

She’d eat someone’s hand off if it got into her way.

“When you were out checking with your father in the van, right before, I ordered Chinese. I picked it up at the concierge desk for an after-sex snack.”

She grinned.

“Well, it’s after sex...”

He headed her way.

She looked better. A little distraction went a long way.

“Maybe we can eat, and then we can work,” he stated, knowing she wasn’t going to sleep. She’d had a four-hour nap, and sex charged her.

It didn’t drain her.

She sat cross-legged on the bed, and he joined her. Before him, she never thought she’d be comfortable enough to be naked and eating food with a man.

That wasn’t a thing that good girls did.

*Or so she thought.*

Now, she knew differently.

Bad girls who let their sexy MEs maul them were perfectly fine eating cold Chinese nekid.

He handed her some peanut shrimp and opened up his lo mein. There was no doubt she’d be eating half of it, and he didn’t mind.

Together, they began eating, and she shared her shrimp, and he did the same with his noodles.

“He was there,” she stated out of the blue. “I know he was. I’m beginning to focus in on him.”

“And Remington?”

She told him what Axelle had felt.

“Maybe she’s not wrong. Maybe she’s onto something. If a spook says it’s off...”

She would have to listen.

Or watch.

“I’d wake my father up and start running the faces we found in the crowd, but...”

He stopped her.

“Your laptop has the files. I asked Charlie to email them. We can start there. Tomorrow, we can also ask Tony to swing by. He might see something.”

She was aware.

“Okay, Christopher. Let’s eat. When the sun comes up, we’re going to use technology to catch this guy.”

She gave him a peanutty kiss.

“You’re the best partner a woman could have.”

He winked.

Oh, it wasn't about being the best.  
He just knew his woman.

**Damn well.**

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\**

*Somewhere Nearby  
Same Time*

Teddy had raped her multiple times, but this time, she was alive. Normally, it was fun to watch them die and just use them. There was no judging, no condemnation, and he could take his time.

Well, with this one, he wanted to savor it.

He'd watched her a while, and she was a bitch. He'd hit on her a few times, and she always just laughed.

Well, he'd had the last laugh.

He'd taken what he wanted and then left her tied to the bed as he napped. Then, he took her again, just because it was good to be young, virile, and horny as fuck.

Now, she was staring up at him, her tear-stained face proof of who was in charge.

"Did you like it?" he asked, crawling against her.

She whimpered in pain.

She looked like a broken doll.

Her wrists were bloody as she struggled to escape, her thighs were a mess, and she was done.

Well, he was done with her.

"It wasn't as good as I hoped," he said,

“Maybe you should have been nicer. You reminded me of my sister, and I love fucking her.”

He punched her in the face, damaging her.

“Oh, sweet thing, thanks for letting me cum in, on, and all over you. Now, I have to get cleaned up and get to work. You know how I love my job.”

Then, he grabbed her neck and tightened his fingers until she started struggling.

Yeah, that’s what he liked.

Finally.

She got him hard.

As she fought, he raped her again, and this time, it was the best sex he’d ever had.

**So far.**

He saw another piece of ass he’d like to get his hands on tonight, and he would.

And they’d never find him.

Teddy had been trained by the best, and the cops...

They could kiss his ass.

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## *Chapter Twenty-One*

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### *Almost Dawn Hotel*

When Remington called, she wasn't shocked. She knew that the killer was going to make this a chase. While she was pissed that he didn't come for her, she knew that whoever he took was in for some misery.

While she wanted to rage, be angry, and kick someone's ass, she couldn't blame anyone but herself.

This was her case, and she was running it.

Now, she was taking control back. She'd pussy-footed around the spook to keep his operation secure, but he hadn't given a shit about hers.

That meant one thing.

Elizabeth was done.

Now, it was balls to the wall.

While she and Chris ate Chinese, she was watching the footage they had. There were lots of faces in a sea of women, and all of them were suspects.

"I'm going to go wake the team up so we can get to the scene," she stated.

He figured as much.

"Send Sam to the morgue with Babylon. I'll meet him there with the body," he said, pulling on his extra scrubs.

She focused on him.

"Thanks, Christopher, for giving me what I needed when it was harder for you."

He smiled.

"No, Bethe. Thank you for giving me this life. For that, and your heart, I'll do anything."

There was no doubt in her mind.

Elizabeth got lucky.

She gave him a kiss and headed toward the door, gun, badge, and gear on.

The FBI was going to work this, and if Remington Bowman's shit got caught in the crossfire...

That was his issue.

**NOT.**

**HERS.**

This was why the FBI hated the CIA, and vice versa. They couldn't work in the same location, and they weren't supposed to for a reason.

This was it.

Someone had to prove whose dick was bigger.

**HERS.**

She jogged down the hall to her father's room. When she knocked, it was Sam who answered.

He looked surprised.

"Tell my father we have a body. We're rolling out in five. I'll meet him at the car. Chris wants you and Babylon to head to the morgue. I'll have a tech take you."

He nodded.

"Okay, honey. Are you okay?" he asked.

She gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"I got a nap and climbed all over my sexy ME. That always makes me focus."

And it did.

"See you later, Mom," she said, walking away. Her father and Sam were making it damn difficult to pretend she wasn't aware of the relationship. She could see her father's big feet in the bed, and Sam smelled like him.

On top of that, there was **ONLY** one bed in the room.

Still, she kept going.

Running down the flight of stairs, she found Axelle's room and knocked.

When the woman opened, it was clear she was wide awake. Axelle was not a morning person. That meant she was up all night.

"You're going to be tired today," she stated.

She laughed.

"I had to input all the faces. I just got done. What's up?" Axelle asked, seeing her in her gear. It was early for the woman.

Hell.

It was early for birds.

"I have a body. Surprise."

"Oh, Christ," Axelle stated.

Elizabeth pointed.

"Is Jack here?"

She nodded.

"He's in bed."

Elizabeth headed in and moved closer to the man. When she touched his chest, he rolled over.

"Ax, baby, my dick hurts. Take a break," he muttered.

She laughed.

*As did Axelle.*

"Oh, shit. That's not you. It's Elizabeth, and she's going to bust my ass."

It was clear that the woman was doing more than inputting faces the whole night. Someone was worn down.

Ehhh, who was she to torment them?

"Right-o, Smiley. Now get your ass out of bed. You're going out with me on this case. You've been seen, and since Remington took to blowing my operation last night, I need backup. Charlie has a hair-trigger."

Axelle laughed from where she stood.

"That sounds familiar."

*Didn't it?*

"As far as I'm concerned," she stated, "Remington is playing against me."

Axelle nodded.

"Don't trust a spook, Elizabeth. They will sell your soul. One of the major character traits is the ability to lie to your friends and family."

She looked at her.

"Would you lie?"

She didn't hesitate.

"Yes."

Well, that was interesting.

"Are you lying about anything?" Elizabeth asked.

She didn't flinch.

"I swear I'm not lying on Jack's very energetic cock. How's that?" she asked, raising her right hand.

That worked for her.

Him, not so much.

“I’ll be at the car in five,” he said. “I’m naked, and I’d like for you **NOT** to see my dick today.”

She shrugged.

“I’ve seen it. Axelle has pictures. We call it Sir Willy-ton,” she joked.

He covered his head with a pillow.

He was too tired for two of them today. What the hell had he been thinking that this case was going to be fun. He had twice the ball busting, and only one set of balls.

Elizabeth focused on her friend.

“Ax, be careful today. He’s going to be out on the prowl. I’ll be back in-house later. I’m going to tear this hotel apart and figure out what the fuck is going on.”

She simply nodded.

“I’ll keep the faces running, and I’ll work on the money. I’m almost there.”

“Text me when you find it.”

She would do that.

Elizabeth headed out, and when she got downstairs, Chris, Tony, who was sporting a hickey, and her father were there.

“Uh, why are you at this hotel?” she asked. “You’re at the roach coach.”

He smiled.

“Don’t,” she stated. “Today is not the day to jack with the investigator.”

Tony shrugged.

He did anyway.

He handed her twenty.

“You were right. I jumped the blonde. I couldn’t help myself. If it’s any consolation, I kept her safe. We know who isn’t dead.”

She closed her eyes.

“Anthony...”

*On second thought...*

She didn’t have time.

It was best to let it go.



Jack came running out, barefoot, his shoes in his hands, as he was ready.

“Let’s go,” he stated. “Sir Willy-ton wants to get this rollercoaster ride of a long-ass case over with,” he stated.

Chris got into their ride and was confused.

“Who is Sir Willy-ton?” he asked.

“My dick,” Jack said. “Your woman has seen my dick,” he added.

Chris’ eyebrows went up.

“Anyone care to explain that?” he asked, opening his medical kit. From it, he pulled his pouch with sharp tools. “Quickly?”

“**JACK!** I did not!” Elizabeth said from behind the wheel. “He will kill you and hide you in a morgue.”

Jack didn’t believe that.

**At.**

**All.**

Instead, he smiled.

“Sucks to have your ass busted, huh?”

Well, he definitely got her there.

*Now didn’t he?*

***Five Minutes Later...***

When she rolled onto the crime scene, Xavier Price, the deputy, was bright-eyed and bushytailed.

It was annoying.

He was smiling like he’d won the freaking lottery or a man who had gotten laid all night long.

She wasn’t sure which, but she didn’t care.

He was in her way.

“**MOVE,**” she growled, as he held the tape for her, and she and her team went under it. He actually took a step back, clotheslining Tony with it. She was in no mood to play.

Elizabeth wasn’t sure who owned this house, but she was sure it was going to be bad.

Outside of it, some of the deputies looked sick, and one was puking in the grass.

That told her all she needed to know. She was willing to bet Teddy had a field day with this victim.

Going inside, she found Remington standing there.

“Thanks for coming,” he said, looking refreshed.

Well, someone got some sleep.

“Yeah, well, since it’s my job, and not the CIA’s, I’ve got to be here.”

His eyes went huge.

He wasn’t expecting that.

“Uh...”

She stared at him.

“Chris, go. Jack, Charlie, stay,” she said, moving closer to the man.

“We need to have a little talk,” she said, standing toe-to-toe with him.

Remington had a bad feeling about this.

“About?” he asked.

“Why you showed up at the speed dating last night?” she asked.

“You know, my operation to draw out the killer. You fucked it up on purpose, and I’m going with one of two reasons. You’re the killer, or you are working to take my case apart for the director of the FBI. You had orders to watch and slow me down, didn’t you?”

He made no motion.

Here was the thing about spooks. They were masters at a blank face. Axelle was the Red Queen for a reason. She could lie to your face and you’d never know, but when she was conflicted, or needed time to think her way out of a box, she went blank.

Like he did.

“The latter, huh?”

“I didn’t...”

“You said plenty by not saying anything. I’m going to bet my next paycheck that you were told to interfere, to tell me you’re CIA, so I’d use

kid gloves not to blow your operation—and in the process, risk mine.”

He crossed his arms.

“You’re an asshole. So, I want you to run back to your boss and tell him that Hurricane LaRue is about to fuck you up. Your two years of undercover are done since you opted to bend over and take it from the head of the FBI. Then, tell him that I plan on outing the CIA to the media. I don’t like the vultures, but I **REALLY** don’t like the CIA weasels who play games.”

He lowered his voice.

“Elizabeth, I had no choice. You know how it is.”

She stared at him.

“You had plenty of choices. You could have come to me and told me the truth. I would have kept it between us. One of us has more honor, and one of us is a coward. Pray, Remington, that our paths **NEVER EVER, EVER** cross again. My job is hard enough without going head-to-head with men who want to cut me down. I’m solving this, and I’m blowing your cover.”

He looked worried.

“Please, don’t.”

She smiled.

“Too little, too late. Get the fuck off my scene, and don’t you dare even look at me. Now, I’m angry, and that makes me vicious. I’ll not only blow the CIA’s cover, but I’ll also make sure you look like you were involved in this.”

He tried again.

“I had no choice. You don’t understand.”

“I do. We value our jobs, but mine is a whole different beast than yours. I will risk mine to save a life,” she said, pointing toward the room where the dead woman was. “You will risk lives to get the gold star. Now, since we are done, go make that phone call and check in with the director of the FBI. I have a killer to catch. You go play sheriff of Newberry.”

With that, she walked away.

“You’re lucky she was nice,” Jack said. “You fucked my friend over. That’s low as a cop. There are honorable Feds. You aren’t one.”

He followed Elizabeth.

“You, me, later,” Charlie stated. “If my baby girl gets her ass reamed for this case, you won’t see me coming, Remington, but I’ll be there. She

gets her mean from me.”

He walked away too.

As they reached the woman’s bedroom, Elizabeth was already standing there.

Chris gave her what he could.

“She was alive when he raped her. He wanted her alive to suffer,” he stated. “Then, he beat her, tortured, and abused her body.”

“TOD?” she asked, as the probe was already in her liver.

“She’s still warm. I’m going to say about the time you and I were getting up.”

She knew the timeline.

Chris was keeping it on the DL since he knew Elizabeth wouldn’t want Remington to know anything.

“COD?”

“I’m going to say by the petechial hemorrhaging in her eyes, and the bruises already forming on her neck, hours of strangulation. I’ll update you.”

When Charlie stared down at her, he gasped.

“We know her.”

She lifted a brow.

“What? How?”

“That’s a waitress from the bar. She works the dayshift. She works at the pub. I interviewed her yesterday morning. She’s who Remington the rat and I interviewed.”

She stared at her.

“Take her in,” she said. “Don’t do anything else here. Let’s move her.”

Chris knew that wasn’t procedure.

“Why?” he asked, his voice lower.

“It’s going to be someone who works in the location. We’ve been chasing daters. It’s an employee and someone who is at the hotel/pub during the day. He knew her. She wasn’t there last night. I’d remember her. I don’t want Remington to get her ID. Let’s keep this one quiet.”

Charlie whispered.

“She told me the previous Friday she worked a double. She is strictly day shift.”

Okay, well, the killer made a huge-ass mistake.

He'd narrowed it down.

She doubted he saw her that one night. He'd been playing in this town for weeks, and she was willing to bet he'd watched her during her shift.

That narrowed it considerably in her head.

"Move her in-house, Christopher. I want us where no one can hear or see what we're doing. I'm also going to go over the faces. Someone who works dayshift was there for the night shift or someone who goes to the pub during the day did this. He knew her—as in personally."

She couldn't ask the pub for help.

The bartender was there both shifts.

Keller Devoe worked during the day during the week, and on Fridays, he stayed late.

"Get her in."

She pointed at Jack and her father.

"Make sure no one is near this room. I need to call Salem," she stated.

She pulled out her phone as Tony and Chris did pictures as quickly as possible. They'd pull trace in the morgue.

On the fifth ring, she answered.

"LaRue, I literally just went to bed."

"I need help."

That changed the tone.

"What?"

She explained what she knew, and how the killer picked not a woman who was speed dating, but a woman who worked there.

She profiled it on the fly.

"He abused the others, but she has bites, she was kept alive, and she was tortured."

"He knew her," she stated. "In acts of violence against women, when an unsub, or unknown subject, tortures his victim like that, he is angry with them—not just bitter at the world. Like Teddy's mother. They beat her face in."

He was melting down.

She knew it.

"And as for his killing?" she asked.

“He’s escalating. He either knows you’re there, or he’s just plain lost his nut. If he’s marking her up, it’s personal. You don’t have much time. I’m going to say he’s getting off on killing, and he’s decided that he’s taking as many women as he can. His appetite is voracious.”

“She’s a waitress that only works the day shift and might cover a night shift. She’s never speed dated.”

“He works there,” Salem stated. “Focus on the employees or someone who has seen her there during the day. He likely flirted openly, and she turned down his advances—that’s why he switched it up. With the other ladies, they likely flirted, and he was merciful by killing them first.”

Yeah, that’s what she thought.

“Thanks. I’m sorry I woke you up,” she stated.

“It’s okay, partner. Nail this fucker. I want you to rub it in the director’s face when you bring in the second sibling.”

She wanted that too.

She lowered her voice and told Salem what else went down with the spook.

She wasn’t shocked.

“Partner, don’t trust anyone but the people in your circle. You know how vindictive and dickish the director is. He’d do anything to see women at home popping out babies and not solving cases. You’re making a name for yourself. It is eating him alive—but you didn’t hear that from me.”

“I know nothing,” she stated. “Salem, see you after I catch Teddy and Letty. I owe you a drink.”

“Done. Let’s double with Tony and Chris. I like looking at the bug man.”

She laughed.

Elizabeth wasn’t going there. What they did in their down time was their own business.

When she hung up, she pointed.

“There’s a whiteboard in the morgue, right?” she asked.

Chris was pulling off his gloves to transport.

“Yes.”

“I’m working there.”

He was relieved.

Chris didn’t want Elizabeth alone anywhere. He certainly didn’t want her wandering around a hotel with a killer working there.

“Let’s head in. I have a killer to catch.”

They walked off the scene, Remington leaning against his ride, and Elizabeth walked right by him, escorting Chris and the body to the van.

“Techs, strip this place and make sure we cover our bases. The CIA is sticking their noses into FBI territory. Now, we show them how it’s done.”

Then, she got into her ride, flipped Remington off, and pulled out of there.

She had a case to solve.

Screw the CIA and director for playing with her.

She was taking the Clarkson’s down.

**IMMEDIATELY.**

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\*\**

***Borrowed Morgue***

***Seven A.M.***

***Hustle Time***

Chris was in the other room, working on an autopsy with Sam, and at her feet, Babylon was sleeping on the floor. She was staring at a whiteboard.

Charlie had written down the potential suspects.

It was time for her to do what she did best.

**Solve it.**

On the board they had five suspects, and while not many, she felt like it had to be one of them.

That's what made sense. It had to be someone who spent time with Candy Carr, in order to learn all about her.

So, who could it be?

That was her big question.

***Remington Bowman***

***James Mallery***

***Donny Shephard***

***Harry Holston***

***Keller Devoe***

It wasn't a long list, but she was pretty sure it was going to have someone doing dirty deeds to single women. She was focused on them, knowing that one of them was likely Teddy in disguise.

Only, how to do it not using IDs, or past history? That was what made it harder.

All of that could be faked.

"Talk it out, Baby Girl," Charlie stated.

Jack agreed.

"Bounce it off of us," he added. "We'll help you work through it," he stated, knowing her mind was a minefield unless you knew how to navigate it.

Elizabeth had pulled more out of the shitter with fewer details. She could do this.

He'd bet on it.

"Salem said it was someone who likely hit on her and spent time near her. She likely turned him down. If we isolate by day shift only, that takes it down to James Mallery, Keller Devoe, and Remington Bowman."

Charlie sat.

"Do you really think that the CIA spook is behind this?" he asked. She laughed.

"No, but it gives me great satisfaction to put his name on a suspect list. It's petty, but that's basically me. No one ever called me sweet."



Well, they knew that wasn't true.

Chris called her that all the damn time.

She began talking it out.

"We know that the concierges were in charge of the lists, and they saw the women coming and going. Jack, pull up the IRS site. How long were James Mallery and Donny Shephard employed for the hotel?"

He did as she asked.

It took five minutes to find their tax records. He loved how completely illegal it was, and an invasion of privacy. If he could use information like this, he'd be having a free-for-all.

"Donny has been there six years."

That killed that option.

"It won't be him," she stated. "That's way too long in one place. He'd be a jump in and do the job so he could hunt."

"James has been here a year. Before that, he worked at other hotels in the state."

Charlie spoke.

"He could be transferring from location to location."

"Cross off Donny. Put a check by James. He's moved up the suspect list."

She moved down the list.

"Keller is the obvious choice, and I'm going to say that while Teddy is uneducated and a lunatic, he wouldn't do obvious. Kitty taught him better than that."

They agreed.

"Plus, he worked late and walked the women to their rides," Charlie added. "Some of the girls were dead in their beds by eleven. He'd never pull that off."

He was right.

"Dad, while I'm mulling this over, pull up the files. I'm going to call Axelle to send me over the faces that she's ID'd. By now, she should have some."

He agreed and did just that.

"Jack, see what you can find in the IRS site regarding the bartender and DJ. I want more on both of them."

When the door opened, in came Tony.

“Can I just nap here?” he asked. “I was up all night, and Chris doesn’t need me yet.”

“Whose fault is that, sunshine?” she asked, pointing at his crotch. He laughed.

“You can bust my balls all you want, but I need a nap or I’m sleeping in a plexiglass coffin. Don’t make me prove how ballsy I am.”

She gave up.

Elizabeth pointed at the couch.

“Thank you. I did my best work...”

She stopped him.

“Tony, I don’t want details.” She had too much on her plate to listen to him tell her about his conquest. “Save it for when we catch all the Clarksons and we are having a beer at happy hour.”

He would.

“I won’t bug you,” he stated. I just want some sleep, some raw toast to suck up some booze...”

She stared at him.

They all did.

“Did you say raw toast?” she asked.

Charlie started laughing at the look on his daughter’s face. It was priceless. It was between confusion and *‘what the fuck’*?

“Yeah, I can’t think. Bones I can do on autopilot, wording—not so much. What is toast that is raw?” he asked again.

“Uh, bread?” Jack asked.

She couldn’t.

She’d piss herself.

This was what happened when you dealt with very smart people on a daily basis. Sometimes, their brains melted down, like now.

“Just sit there,” she stated, and he did. “Please.”

When her phone rang, it was Axelle.

She answered.

“Please, please, please tell me you found the money, Ax. We need something good in case Teddy goes AWOL.”

“I found the money, baby! It’s in a bank in Kentucky. I’m putting security on it. They will freeze the account so it will be visible, but not removable. It’s ours. There’s our bait.”

“I could kiss you,” she stated.

“Oh, well, if Sir Willy-ton doesn’t mind.”

She snorted.

Jack rolled his eyes.

“You are funny, funny women. Whose balls would you break if I wasn’t here?” he asked.

She pointed at Tony.

Jack shook his head.

“Ax, thank you,” she stated. “You are the one spook I respect.”

She felt the same.

“I’m going to get some coffee, take a shower, and then nap. I’ll be here when you need me. Have Jack call if he’s coming back. I’ll security lock the door.”

That worked for her.

“Red Queen, good work. You’re the best. Can you send me the faces you ID’d? I want to see them and work on my whiteboard.”

“Sir Willy-ton said that I was the best too. Consider them sent.”

She laughed and hung up.

Tony was right there.

“Who is Sir Willy-ton?” he asked.

She snorted.

“Shut it, raw toast man.”

He gave up.

When her laptop and phone chimed, she opened it. It looked like she had her pictures and the address of the bank in Kentucky. Later, she’d call Gabe.

She had to work.

Pushing a button, the photos downloaded to her desktop via a CIA program. She wasn’t asking how because frankly, it was best she didn’t know how they got access to her FBI software. She’d let tech deal with that mess.

She began going over them.

Tony was sitting beside her on the couch, and his head was on her shoulder. It was something he did when he crashed at hers and Chris’ place.

When the door to the morgue office opened, Babylon lifted his head. When he saw it was Chris, he lowered it again.

“How’s it going?” he asked, coming in to check on them. It was too quiet in here, and Tony had come in. He wanted to ensure his woman

wasn't being pestered.

"Well, we are trying to pin this to an employee who works there during the day shift. I've narrowed it to possibly the bartender, or the day shift concierge, and I'm not decided on the DJ. If that fails, we're hoping for a face in the crowd. Like I said, he's a watcher. He was there."

He stared over her shoulder at the pictures. Elizabeth was flipping through them. There were names on them. Axelle had done a thorough job.

Well, CIA facial recognition did.

Elizabeth was passing them off to her father as she wrote their names down. Jack too.

"We're researching them all," she stated.

It was a long shot, but it was worth it.

"Well, I can tell you everything I said on the scene was accurate. Candy Carr, ID'd by fingerprints, was tortured and raped while alive. He switched it up."

"I can call the bar for you, and ask when she left," Jack offered.

She might have to do that. Right now, she didn't want to give anyone a heads-up. She was about to tell him to be tricky when the man leaning on her sat up.

"Stop," Tony said, out of the blue.

She had been flipping through pictures.

"Yes?"

He was sitting up and focused on her laptop.

"Go back one."

She did.

It was a picture of Chris. It had been taken by her pin camera. She pointed at a patron beside Chris.

"It says that's Peter Pillman..."

He shook his head.

"Not him. The waiter. That's Teddy Clarkson. He has the same face and cheekbones that Kitty does. I'd bet my next paycheck on it," he said, yawning.

She trusted Tony a great deal, but she needed a little more. Yes, the man saw things that they didn't in a person's face. It was his years of training, but still...

"He's working at night, and not in the dayshift," she stated, thinking about Candy Carr.

Charlie shared what he knew.

“He was working yesterday during the day. He must have worked a double. When I talked to Candy with Remington, he was bussing tables. He had earbuds in and was ignoring everyone.”

**HOLY.**

**SHIT.**

Recognition dawned.

She saw him before, bringing food up to their room. That was the guy who brought them their order yesterday afternoon.

“Tony...”

He knew what she was going to say.

“Again, my next paycheck. Trust me.”

Well, what could it hurt?

“Dad, call the pub. It’s early, but they do a breakfast setup. See if he is there, and why he was scheduled to work.”

He did just that.

She flipped.

“He’s the employee who brought us our dinner,” she stated. “He worked more than one night shift.”

Axelle had his name too.

“Jack, run Vale Jefferson. I think we have our hiding Clarkson. Finally.”

She gave Tony a huge kiss.

“Hey, baby, say it with a hickey,” he joked.

Chris slapped him in the back of the head.

It made him laugh.

Elizabeth was focused.

It looked like she was about to catch one more sibling.

**And soon.**

***Hotel***  
***Ten Minutes Later***

Axelle ran down and grabbed her coffee from the pub and was texting her boss on her phone as she headed back to her room.

She was so damn glad they found the money.

There was nothing like families of the filthy rich who would put on the political pressure if they didn't recover family money.

Now, that was off of their asses.

**Finally.**

Maybe, if she was lucky, her boss would let her come back in. It was hell running her bureau out of the office.

The children needed babysitting, and she was scheduled for an undercover operation in the next two months.

A girl had to work.

As Axelle sent her last text, she pulled her keycard from her pocket. Balancing her coffee and phone, she slipped it into the lock.

In that exact moment, the hair on her back stood up. When she went to turn to look over her shoulder, everything in her went into fight or flight.

Only, it was too late.

He struck her hard in the head, knocking her backward into the open door of her room.

“Since you're a cop, we're going to have to play this one a little differently, Red. Oh, and I do love a feisty woman. I hope you fight.”

Only, Axelle heard nothing.

**She.**  
**Was.**  
**Out.**

For the count.

*\*\* Leonard & LaRue \*\*\**

*Morgue*  
*That Exact Moment*  
*Not Far Away*

They couldn't find a Vale Jefferson, and Elizabeth was beginning to believe that Axelle had just tagged him in the photo by memory.

She had to have seen his name tag and didn't bother running him.

This could be an issue. Had they not searched him, they would have assumed he existed.

When Charlie hung up with the pub staff downstairs, Elizabeth was all ears. She wanted to know if he was there.

A part of her was screaming about the urgency and what Salem had said about Teddy being off his nut.

"Well?"

"He works doubles on Thursday, Friday, and is off the rest of the week. He's only part time."

That explained why he was there yesterday, and last Friday.

"He's worked there a few weeks, and he keeps to himself," Charlie offered. "He runs the food up for them, and really doesn't say much."

He wouldn't.

He'd want to hide.

"Well, it's Friday, so is he down there?" she asked. If he was, this might be incredibly easy to grab him. They could block the back door, and go in through the front...

"He was," he began.

"**WAS?**" she asked.

Charlie shared what he knew.

“The manager said he went up to deliver a meal to another room on four, and then was taking a break. He would be back in about thirty.”

**Holy.**

**Shit.**

“Uh, Axelle is on that floor, and she just said she was going down for coffee,” Jack began, and then was up. “He’ll jump her in the hall!”

Oh, no.

It looked like Teddy had taken the bait.

*Just not Elizabeth.*

He had to have recognized her and was going to ambush her and then get out of dodge.

**FUCK.**

She was going to kill Remington if anything happened to Axelle.

**Mark.**

**Her.**

**Words.**

Jack began calling Axelle’s phone, and no one was answering. There was no way she’d sleep through a ringer. There was no reason she’d be asleep now.

Jack began stroking out.

“We have to go!” he shouted, as he ran out of the room, causing Babylon to go nuts.

“Chris, stay here with the dog,” she said, following, Charlie right behind her.

He didn’t like this.

If Teddy got to Axelle already, he knew it was going to be bad.

Chris and Tony watched as they raced out, and both of them were scared for the CIA bureau director.

This was bad.

**It could mean death.**



*Hotel*  
*Five Minutes*  
*Later*

He subdued her.

Axelle felt like an idiot.

She knew better than to be unaware of her surroundings, especially since she'd been bait for the speed dating.

The minute she opened her eyes, she knew she was fucked. The only chance was that Elizabeth went through the pictures, saw this waiter's face, and put two and two together.

**Yep.**

She was dead.

She couldn't move, as he had her cuffed to the bed and something covering her mouth so she couldn't scream. His big mistake was that her wrists had been at an angle, and they were a little loose.

Oh, she'd bleed getting out of them, but it was better than being raped or dead.

Not far away, watching her, there stood the weasel-y asshole.

Teddy Clarkson had made his appearance, coming out of his hole.

Okay, she had to get out of this, and that meant using all she had to stop him.

**HOW?**

As he began stripping out of his clothing, he looked at his watch.

"Luckily for you, Red, I don't have all day. I normally like to take my new fuck-toys at night, so I can have time, but you were just so luscious. I think you'll be the last one, that way I can just walk out the back door, again, and be gone."

Axelle was thinking.

She could escape.

She just had to play this right. He didn't know how good she was at fighting.

If there was a God, LaRue would be figuring this out. She needed to stall.

**Somehow.**

"I really wanted your friend, but funny...she was checking in with a man. Something screamed wrong, and then, all I had to do is watch and listen to figure it out. The cops were onto me, and you'll be my last before I ditch this identity and move on."

He folded his work shirt.

"My sweet Kitty always says to listen, be ready, and don't be afraid to toss an identity and bail. I'm taking her advice. No one's caught her yet, so she has to be smart."

Oh, he was in for a surprise.

She couldn't wait to tell him—after she kicked his ass.

"I'm going to enjoy this. No one ever sees me, and that's why I take jobs where no one notices me watching," he said, dropping his fly. "I can hide in plain sight. I love a pretty girl. I have two sisters, and they are gorgeous. I can't hurt them when I fuck them, but I can hurt you."

Axelle just watched him.

She needed him to move closer. She was going to rip her hands from the cuffs and kick his ass.

First, she needed to stun him.

She needed to be able to reach him with her unrestrained legs. She would fight until her death.

This isn't over yet.

He dropped his pants.

"My mother was a cunt, and I really hate women. Only, I like touching them. They are soft, and they are pretty to look at. When I would touch my sisters, my mother would get so mad, but we did it anyway. The pussy you know."

**Ewww.**

She wanted to vomit.

This animal needed to be put down like the rabid animal he was. He was a predator and sick.

She wished she had her gun.

“We had to kill her. She was a bitch. I know that I can always count on my sisters. When Kitty is done, we’re living high on the hog. I’ll never work a day in my life, and I’ll travel all over the country to kill pretty things like you. I can’t wait for the cops to try to stop me.”

Oh, he wasn’t going to get that lucky.

Before he dropped his boxers, she heard the click of a knife. She knew he was going to take her clothes before he killed her.

She knew the COD.

It would be strangulation or a fall off of the balcony. There was no way she’d let her friends see her like that.

**No.**

**Freaking.**

**Way.**

Besides, she’d prefer not to take that kind of drop.

As he moved closer, the bed shifted. As he removed the tape over her mouth, she focused on him.

“I want you to scream for me, Red. I want you to scream the entire time I rape you. Then, I’ll walk out the back door and go home.”

She smiled at him.

“You think so?” she asked.

He moved closer to kiss her.

When he did, she headbutted him across the face, and then kicked him in the balls.

As he flew back, she fought to get out of the cuffs.

“Fuck you, you monster,” she said, letting her wrists bleed to get them out of the restraints.

Only, she must have missed his balls with that kick. It didn’t stop him.

It pissed him off.

How did she know?

Because it went to hell.

**Fast.**

*\*\*Leonard & LaRue\*\**

***That Exact Time  
Downstairs***

They flew into the parking lot, parked in front of the doors with the engine still running.

Together, Jack, Charlie, and Elizabeth raced past the concierge, guns out.

“Jack, take the elevator,” she said. “We block his escape,” she shouted, as she and her father hit the stairwell. He took the back way, and she went up the front.

Yeah, they split up.

There was no way Teddy, AKA Vale Jefferson, was leaving this building.

She was so close, and if he hurt Axelle, he was definitely not leaving alive.

Screw it.

Elizabeth and Charlie got to the door on the fourth floor around the same time, and they could hear a fight going on inside.

**SHIT.**

They couldn’t wait for Jack.

Her father was going to have to have her back.

She gave him the order.

“Take it down,” she stated, as her father hit the door, shaking it on the frame. She joined him, and they slammed into it, sending it off the hinges.

They could hear Jack racing down the hall behind them, and they knew Teddy’s only way out was off the balcony.

They couldn’t let that happen.

Once inside, they found a bloodied Axelle was on the balcony with the killer. He was trying to shove her over, and she was fighting like hell not to fall.

“Freeze!” Elizabeth shouted as Jack slid to a stop behind her. They couldn’t move further, since he had a hostage.

“**SHOOT HIM,**” Axelle stated. “Fucking shoot me if you have to. He’s getting ready to run. Don’t let him go,” she stated, as there was a knife under her chin as he was trying to shove her off the balcony.

Her one hand was wrapped around his wrist, trying to keep him from slicing her neck, and the other was holding onto the railing, as he tried to kill her.

Yeah, she was in danger of flipping backward over it.

**This sucked.**

It appeared that Teddy was deceptively strong.

He also knew how to fight.

As they moved closer, Teddy wasn’t having it.

“You are **NOTHING!**” he screamed. “Stupid cunts! My sisters will come for you! They will protect me!”

Oh, well, that wasn’t happening.

Elizabeth was watching Teddy, as Axelle was holding on. She was half in front of the man, and half over the railing with that knife in a really dangerous place.

One slice, and her jugular was gushing.

They moved closer.

“Go ahead. She dies,” he said, using his foot to slide the glass door further closed in a way to protect himself.

Axelle was staring into Elizabeth’s eyes.

“Make the shot, LaRue! Fucking make his brains blow out the back of his head,” she screamed.

Her faith was in her partner.

That’s what they were.

In this game of cat and mouse, she, Jack, and Axelle had formed a bond that nothing would break. They had to stick together. What started as saving Jack, was now saving Axelle.

“Let her go,” Elizabeth stated, moving closer.

Jack was panicked.

He knew the cold hard reality of it all. What Axelle wanted Elizabeth to do was a hard shot—into the wind, through glass, and with inches to spare.

**“SHOOT HIM!”**

“My sisters are coming,” he said, again, as the redhead he’d wanted moved closer.

Elizabeth needed him to shift slightly so she could take that shot. The door was only open a little, and she couldn’t take it through the glass. It could kill Axelle.

“Dad, the door,” she whispered, as her father heard her and he moved hard left. Teddy was focused on her, and she hoped he stayed that way.

She opted to distract him.

“Kitty isn’t coming, Teddy. I caught her back in DC. She’s in custody, that’s why you can’t call her. Now, I’m taking you in.”

He stared at her.

“The ten million is going back. Kiss it goodbye. That bank in Kentucky, where you sick bitches live is about to get a withdrawal by me.”

He moved his arm, and she knew that was the time.

**“NOW,”** she said, as her father was down on the floor, shoving the door as hard as he could to make it slide. “Catch her,” she said to Jack as he ran toward the door, and she pulled the trigger.

It was a damn hard shot, and she prayed.

Racing toward Axelle, Jack felt the drag of bullet whiz past his ear and make its target. He grabbed Axelle just as Teddy’s head exploded and the force of Jack hitting him knocked him backward over the railing.

As the woman he loved and cared about began falling, he grabbed her by the wrist and prayed.

Her weight caused Jack to slide forward, and Charlie grabbed the back of his jeans.

Hanging, Jack had her.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he said, refusing to let go even if his arm sang in pain. Her wrists were bloody, but he was holding on.

Elizabeth raced out, sliding her legs between the rails, and using her booted feet to hook around Axelle’s body for support until they could pull her over.

Then, they did just that.

Adrenaline crashed as they pulled a sobbing Axelle over the rails. When she was safely on the balcony, held by Jack, Elizabeth and Charlie stared over the edge.

Yeah, someone hit the ground.

**Headfirst.**

Well, what was left of his head when it was met with a nine-millimeter bullet.

Charlie whistled.

“Jesus Christ, but a swan dive onto the pavement is ugly,” he admitted.

She sat and laughed.

That had been way to freaking close.

“It couldn’t happen to a nicer asshole,” she stated through the tears.

Then, Charlie joined her in the laughing.

And Axelle.

“You guys are sickos,” Jack said, the giggles getting him too.

He was just grateful Axelle was alive.

The CIA director couldn’t stop. The adrenaline crash was wicked.

“I almost had him,” she offered, trying to get the words out. “Two more minutes...”

That made Elizabeth laugh even more. If she didn’t, she would have cried.

In the distance, they could hear sirens, and they knew someone in the building, likely the concierge, had called the cops.

Oh, and she was going to make this shitmess all Remington’s to clean up. She wasn’t going to even do the fucking paperwork.

He wanted to derail her?

Well, he could send a message back to his bosses at the CIA, who could call the Director of the FBI and tell him.

*She’d caught two of the three.*

Letty was next.

Elizabeth was betting the FBI was clearing her for shooting someone so she could continue.

Well, Gabe.

He’d have to do the paperwork too.

“Holy shit. That was...something, Elizabeth,” Jack finally got out, as he held Axelle against his body.

She wasn't shaking anymore.

Beside his daughter, Charlie was proud. She had lightning-fast reflexes and could think in a tough situation.

Even more importantly, his daughter was an excellent shot.

"I taught her that," he said, proudly. "Go for the head. It stops the crazy."

Elizabeth laughed even more.

Axelle too.

"That was way too close," Jack stated. "I think I have bullet drag burn on my ear."

Oh, it had been close. She wasn't the only nut. He ran a second faster than she'd anticipated.

They heard footfalls in the hallway, and eventually through the room. When Remington appeared, gun out, his eyes were huge.

"What the...?" he asked, looking around.

"You had another swan dive," she stated, getting up. "Name unknown," she stated, smiling at him.

Oh, two could play this game. She knew his fake identity, but since he was in boxers, missing his head and face...

Let them try.

Well, it was time.

She passed it off to the '*sheriff*'.

"Well, Tag," she stated. "You're up, Remington Bowman. You get to clean this up—in your spare time."

She offered her father a hand.

"How did he...?"

She stared at him, and he shut his mouth.

"Since this is **YOUR TOWN**, why don't you pass the paperwork onto my bosses? You know, since they tagged you into this," she stated.

"You want me to..."

Axelle punched him in the gut as she walked past him, hard enough to make him double over in pain.

"Douchebag," she muttered.

As he was bent over, Charlie laughed.

"Son, that's what happens when you bet against the womenfolk. Learn that lesson."

Xavier, his deputy just stared.



“Oh, and Remington...if you do figure out his identity, and leak his name to the media, someone’s going to be on the front page of a paper in this town, DC, and on the AP wire. I think you know what for too.”

He got it.

He said nothing else as they walked away.

“What would you like me to do?” Xavier asked his boss.

“Call in doc and have him get ready to do an autopsy. I have no clue who he is.”

The man hustled away.

As Remington stared down at the body, the Fed walked out the back door and stared up at him.

She flipped him off.

Not once.

**TWICE.**

Okay, well, she was not his biggest fan.

Only, he had news for her.

Somehow, he didn’t think this was going to be the last time he tangled with Elizabeth LaRue.

**Call it a hunch.**

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## *Epilogue*

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*West Virginia*  
*Thirty Minutes*  
*Later*

**W**hen Elizabeth's phone rang, she already knew who it was going to be. She'd given Remington Bowman enough time to filter back to his boss what she'd said, and what she'd done. Shit rolled downhill, and this was going to be her boss.

She'd bet on it.

Only, she really hoped that he was going to take her side in this, giving her some cover. She'd closed two serial killer cases in a matter of six days.

Now, she was getting ready for the last one.

Not far from her, the ambulance sat, and Axelle was getting cleaned up. Babylon was sitting with her, and she was petting him.

Dogs helped you calm down.

Here was the proof.

As for her, it was nice not to have any kind of paperwork to do on a case.

Yes, she was a bit bitchy dumping it, but that was life.

Answering, she knew it was time to do the dance if Gabe was pissy. She knew it well, it was the one where she kept all of their asses out of the sling.

"Hey, Gabe. I miss you. How's tricks?" she asked, trying not to laugh.

"What did you do, LaRue?" he asked, his voice serious.

**Oh, boy.**

"Well, I closed the case," she stated. "Isn't that what the director wanted?" she asked.

She heard whispering.

Gabe wasn't alone.

Oh, she'd bet the douchebag du jour was right there, listening to her conversation.

Well, she had news for him.

He could stick it up his ass. He wanted her gone, he wanted her isolated, and he wanted her to hang herself with some rope he gave her.

**PASS.**

“Well, you want the good news?” she asked.

He stopped her since he wasn’t alone. He didn’t want Elizabeth saying anything that got them both shitcanned. He was the only protection she had.

The big boss was not a fan.

“**NOPE.** I’m going first. A little birdy tells me that Axelle nearly took a fall, you shot someone, and the local sheriff is up to his eyeballs in cleaning up some cowboying around.”

“Yeehaw,” she stated.

Gabe was watching their boss, and he was **PISSED**. The old man was betting Elizabeth was going to fail. He wanted her gone, and as long as she kept doing an exemplary job, he was shit out of luck.

“I don’t know what the problem is, Gabe. You sent me here to catch Teddy, right? Or was this some circle jerk by the men in the FBI to stop me from showing them how to do their jobs?”

That was for the director.

Gabe didn’t say anything.

He was proud of her.

Elizabeth wasn’t done.

“Well, let me just say, I closed two out of three, and I’m getting on a flight to Kentucky. Does someone have a problem? I mean, I can do some interviews to make the FBI look good when they are playing dirty deeds. Oh, did you know the CIA is working inside the country? Man, the taxpayers will be pissed if they find out we knew about that.”

**Oh, Jesus.**

Their boss’ face was bright red.

Only, she had him over a barrel. Congress would shit its collective pants if it found out the director of the FBI knew about recognizance in the US.

That was FBI territory.

Gabe redirected.

“No, you are still on the hunt, Elizabeth. I did some research, and we have Feds on their home in West Virginia. It’s abandoned, but we’ll

keep an eye on it. Head to Kentucky. You'll get your last one."

She was aware.

"Gotcha," she stated.

Gabe gave her what he could, for now. He'd call her later and clue her in when they were alone. Now, this was for show, and for him to gloat.

His girl was going to be the best Fed.

He had been right.

*His boss...*

**WRONG.**

"It seems that the town where that money is sitting has a wealthy demographic. Rich men are going missing and turning up dead. Some black widow is playing all kinds of kinky torture games. Look for *Permission*."

She had no idea what that was, or what he meant, but she knew he'd call her later when he was home and out of the earshot of the asshole in charge.

"Gee. What a coinkydink. That's where I was heading anyway. I'll check-in. Maybe help the sheriff keep the lid on Teddy's ID. I have one sibling left before I take my victory lap for all women everywhere who have had men try to stop her."

She hung up.

**IMMEDIATELY.**

Chris was beside her, and he was laughing.

"I know I keep saying this, but one day, you're going to piss him off by hanging up on him."

"The director was in there. They deserved it."

Oh, he didn't disagree there.

"He won't fire me. I'm going to guess I'm too valuable, and like J. Edgar Hoover, I know too much."

That was very true.

"Who else is crazy enough to catch two killers in six and a half days. Anyone want to take a trip to Kentucky?" she asked as Axelle and Jack hopped out of the back of the ambulance.

Babylon pulled away and sat at her feet.

Axelle gave her the news.

"In light of me almost taking a header, my boss said I can head back in," Axelle stated.

And because the director of the FBI didn't want Elizabeth to have any more help. Well, screw that.

Elizabeth would miss her help.

"You found the money, I get it."

She stopped her.

"Fuck no, LaRue. You saved my bacon, and I don't care what my boss wants, or what your boss wants. I'm in. Let's find us a black widow and take her in too. When we catch her, I want to tell her we've offed her asshole brother."

She laughed.

Her too.

"Everyone else?" she asked.

Charlie raised his hand.

Chris too.

Sam was right behind, and Jack really had no choice. He wasn't leaving these women alone to destroy the place.

Then, they heard a voice.

"I seem to be free," Tony stated. He'd taped a Superman symbol to his chest.

Oh, no, he wasn't.

She pointed at him.

"You're lucky that you have a damn good eye for faces," she said, knowing why he did it. Someone was thinking he was getting the credit for this.

**Nope.**

He shrugged.

"Why are you pissed at me? I saved the day. I am super bug man."

Oh, she'd tell him why.

She pointed at the tape not far away. A woman was waving her arms and shouting his name.

**A blonde, scantily-dressed woman who he picked up speed dating.**

When he looked, his eyes went huge.

"Oh, no."

Yeah, he could say that again.

"Tony! Tony! You left without giving me your number! Let me have it, stud! We can make babies together!"

**Jesus.**

They were all horrified by that idea.

No one needed little bug men running around. Tony was a hot mess.

Here was the proof.

Imploringly, he stared at Elizabeth.

“If you love me, you’ll hide me from last night’s mistake. The beer made me do it.”

She smiled.

Oh, she loved him, and she loved busting his ass.

She focused on the scantily-clad hussy with the big knockers and likely no panties.

“His number is...”

Chris covered her mouth to shut her up and then tossed her over his shoulder, making her laugh her ass off.

Babylon barked like crazy, until Chris pointed at him.

“No.”

He stopped.

Chris was getting this show on the road.

“Let’s get to the airport,” he said, knowing anything his woman said would just be painful for their anthropologist. She’d totally give her his number for shits and giggles.

The team followed behind.

“Techs,” he whistled, as his woman slapped him on the ass. “Let’s go,” he said, enjoying being able to say it for once.

“That’s my line.”

He laughed.

Oh, he was aware.

“Kentucky, here we come,” Charlie stated. “I have a hankering to get my hands on a banjo and some bourbon. I feel like pickin’ and a grinnin’. You know that plaid is their state color,” he said, Sam and Babylon at his side.

Oh, Jesus.

His daughter stared at him from her precarious hanging position.

It looked like it was time to get the last sibling so they could all go the hell home.

It had been *One for the Family* and *Two for the Fun*.

Now, it was all about the glory.

*Three for the Glory* to be exact.

Then, Elizabeth LaRue would take her victory lap.

***To be continued...***

***Coming in January 2022:***



# *Three for the Glory*

***Coming Next:***

# **Avenge**

The next book in the Hunter Mercenary Series

August 2021



## ***Other books by Morgan Kelley:***

### **Standalone books**

The Junction (Out of Print)  
Serial Sins (Out of Print)  
The Blood Betrayal (Out of Print)

### **Romance/FBI Thriller Series**

Elizabeth, Ethan, Chris, and Callen

The Killing Times (book 1)  
Sacred Burial Grounds (book 2)  
True Love Lost (book 3)  
Deep Dark Mire (book 4)  
Fire Burns Hot (book 5)  
Darkness of Truth (book 6)  
Devil Hath Come (book 7)  
Consumed by Wrath (book 8)  
Redemption is Here (book 9)  
Dead Shall Speak (book 10)  
Pledging to Die (book 11)  
Slay Bells Ring (book 12)  
Past will Haunt (13) Flashback Book #1  
Choices will Destroy (14)  
Blood shall Run (15)  
Act of Blood (16)  
Stalked by the Past (17) Flashback book #2  
Dying to Love (18)  
Kiss of Souls (18.5) a Littlemoon/FBI crossover.  
Revenge has Come (19) June 2017  
Discarded by Fate (20) Oct 2017  
Dawn of Evil (21) Flashback book #3  
Dead are Forgotten (22)  
Love Knows No Bounds (23)  
All the King's Henchmen (24)  
Honor Thy Anger (25) Flashback book #4

All the Queen's Men (26)  
Angel of Death (27) Flashback book #5  
Taker of Life (28)  
Cause of Death (29) Flashback book #6  
Time of Death (30)  
L'amour of Death (31) Flashback book #7  
Manner of Death (32)  
The Final Orpheum (33) Flashback book #8  
Blood of my Enemies (34) October 2019  
Rage of Heaven (35) January 2020 Flashback book #9  
Rage of Hell (36) January 2020  
Rage of Revenge (37) June 2020  
Enter the Truth (38) July 2020 Flashback book #10  
Eye for an Eye (39) November 2020  
End is Here (40) January 2021  
One for the Family (41) Feb 2021  
Savage Bayou (42) June 2021  
Two for the Fun (43) July 2021  
Sinner & Saint (44) October 2021  
Three for the Glory (45) January 2022  
Of Flesh and Blood (46) January 2022

**Croft & Croft Romance Adventure Series**

Greyson and Emma Croft

Celestia is Falling (book 1)  
Vegas is Dying (book 2)  
Christmas is Killing (book 3)  
Love is Bleeding (book 4)  
Heaven is Weeping (book 5)  
Hell is Burning (book 6)  
Justice is Dying (book 7)

**The Croft Mob Series**

Greyson and Emma Croft spinoff series

Dark Justice (1)  
Lost Justice (2)  
Paid Justice (3)  
Wedding of our Dreams Novella (3.5) Steele and Dante  
True Justice (4) FBI crossover  
Mob Justice (5)  
No Justice (6)  
All Justice (7)  
City Justice (8)  
Bad Justice (9)  
Blind Justice (10) November 2021

***The Littlemoon Investigations Series***

Julian and Tori Littlemoon

Blood Red Rage (book 1)  
Lost & Broken (book 2)  
Unthinkable Games (book 3)  
Truth is Found (book 4)  
Haven of Nightmares (book 5)  
Forbidden Secrets (book 6)  
Kiss of Souls (book 7)/FBI crossover  
Lost Souls (book 8)  
Found Curses (book 9)  
Secret Shame (book 10)  
Choice of Despair (book 11)  
Threat of Exposure (book 12)  
Rage of Love (book 13) FBI/Littlemoon crossover  
Sacred Truth (book 14)  
Blood Moon Rising (book 15)  
Haunted Visions (book 16)  
Maze of Damnation (book 17) Sept 2021

### **The Hunter Series**

Dakota Rakin, Rogue Ravenscroft, Zayn Thundercloud, Jagger Armstrong

Atonement (1)  
Absolution (2)  
Amends (3) Croft Crossover  
Apology (4) FBI Crossover  
Acrimony (5) 2020  
Advantage (6) 2020  
Apparition (7) 2021  
Avenge (8) August 2021

### **The Romance Anthology.**

Blackhawks, Crofts, and Littlemoons etc.

It's Good to be the Boss (Antho 1)  
It's Good to be Loved (Antho 2)  
It's Good to be Bad (Antho 3)

### **The Carter Chronicles Trilogy.**

Callista, Nathaniel, and Lucas

Sinner Repent (book 1)  
Sinner Realized (book 2)  
Sinner Reborn (book 3)

### **The Oracle Phoenix Files**

Nathaniel Carter and Avalon Miller

Oracle Rising (book 1)  
Oracle Seeing (book 2)  
Oracle Saving (book 3)  
Oracle Haunting (book 4)  
Oracle Hunting (book 5)

**Harcourte Vampyre Society.**

Jolie, Jacques, and Flynn

Dangerous Revelations (book 1)  
Dangerous Choices (book 2)  
Dangerous Misery (book 3)  
Dangerous Retaliation (book 4)  
Dangerous Influence (book 5)  
Dangerous Sacrifice (book 6)  
Dangerous Destruction (Final Book)

**Paranormal Antiquities Hunter Mystery.**

Flynn, Jolie, Jacques, and Rinnon

Wicked Hunt (1)  
Darkest Angel (2)  
Harshest Queen (3) Dec 2021

**Anthologies**

All of the couples in one book

Illegal Fantasies-  
Behind Closed Doors (1)

Romance Under Arrest-  
Behind Closed Doors (2)

Holiday Reinforcements-  
Behind Closed Doors (3)-



