

Legacy

A Novel in Progress

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Chapter 12

Lacey Heightman

“That’s why they call me Mr. Fahrenheit,” I half-sang, half-hummed to myself. Queen’s “Don’t Stop Me Now” was playing through an earbud while I finished typing up a report of the previous mission. I tapped my feet to the music as I worked.

I heard someone step through the office doorway with my other ear and turned to see Hailey and Jake sit down at a pair of computers on the other side of the room. Hailey smiled at me when she saw me look, while Jake stared at the blank screen and didn’t seem to register my presence. I pulled out my phone to pause the song, took out my other earbud, and pushed away from my desk, sending my chair swiveling towards them.

“How did it go today?” I asked.

Jake turned at the sound of my voice and looked at me with hollow, reddish eyes. His mouth twisted into a weak smile.

“We were successful,” Hailey said apprehensively.

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Just one of the enemies.” At this, Jake’s smile vanished as he turned back to the blank computer screen and closed his eyes. “He’s okay now,” Hailey continued.

“What about him,” I mouthed, nodding to Jake.

Hailey responded only by biting her lip nervously.

This is ridiculous, I thought. I told him to talk to Gabriel about not being ready for this kind of action just yet. What happened to that? I guess I'll need to do something myself. As Jake and Hailey booted up their respective computers, I rolled my chair back over to my desk and quickly typed the last couple of sentences of my report. When I was done, I said my goodbyes and left the room. I walked directly across the building and up the stairs to Gabriel's office. I knocked on the door and waited; after a couple of seconds passed, the door swung open and Adrien walked out. "Evening," he said, nodding, and walked down the hall.

Gabriel was sitting behind his mahogany desk, looking at me with anticipation.

"Heightman," he greeted me, "what brings you here?"

I walked into the room and pulled out the seat opposite him.

"May I?" I nodded towards the chair.

"Of course."

I sat, taking a deep breath in as I did.

"We both know Jake shouldn't be here," I started.

Gabriel removed his elbows from his desk and leaned deep into the leather of his chair.

"Sure, he perhaps isn't the most suited to this line of work, but he's all we have. And I would say he's showing remarkable improvement, wouldn't you?"

"He didn't look very 'improved' when I saw him, just now."

I barely noticed Gabriel's eyebrows as they rose for a brief moment.

"He didn't get blown up again, did he?"

“What? No, he’s not hurt, he just-”

“Well, that sounds like improvement to me, wouldn’t you say?”

I took a moment to process Gabriel’s words. *How can he say all of this so casually?*

“You know what I mean, Gabriel. He’s suffering.”

“And what do you suggest I do about it?”

“What do you mean?” I blurted out. “Let him go. He’s not even American, let him go back to Canada.”

Gabriel leaned forward again, staring at me intensely.

“You realize that would put you and every other member of the team in more danger, right?”

“Yes, I realize that.” I barely held myself from telling him I wasn’t stupid.

Gabriel threw his hands up to feign defeat.

“I just can’t risk all of you for the sake of one person.”

“Well, if he breaks, what will you do then?”

“I’d certainly prefer that he overcomes his difficulties and continues to improve himself, but if the worst were to happen... Well, I’d cross that bridge when it comes, I suppose.”

“Well, the bridge is coming up.”

Gabriel released a drawn-out sigh and said nothing for a moment. Then, he said, “I’ll give him one week. We’ll see where we’re at then.”

A half win, but I'll take it.

“Thank you. I’m sure Jake will appreciate it, and he’ll come back to perform better than ever.”

I grabbed the arms of the chair and pushed myself to my feet. I turned to walk away, but hesitated for a moment, then turned back to face Gabriel.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Go right ahead,” he replied, combing his fingers through his jet-black hair.

“What’s your endgame, here?”

His forehead scrunched up into layers of wrinkles. “My endgame? This is my job. It’s what I was assigned to do.”

“Well, yeah,” I pushed the chair into the desk and leaned against it. “But there must be something you want to accomplish with your position. Why are you doing this? What drives you? What’s the point of any of this?”

Gabriel stared at me, meticulously scrutinizing my face. Suddenly uncomfortable, I averted my gaze and looked at a bookshelf against the wall to my left. I read a few of the titles: *The Art of War*, *The Selfish Gene*, and *Operation Paperclip*.

Finally, he answered. “My goal is to prevent death. As much death as possible. Do you know how many normal officers it would have taken to accomplish what Adrien, Jake, and Hailey accomplished today? And how many would have lost their lives? Even the most experienced, well-trained officers with the best protective equipment that money can buy stand a

higher risk of dying than the lot of you. I want to support all of you and minimize the risks for all of you, but at the same time, the more you risk yourselves, the less others have to.”

“How noble,” I pushed off the chair and stood straight, trying to mask my sarcasm.

“Well, thanks for your honesty.”

One side of Gabriel’s mouth twisted into a grin. “I always try to be as forthcoming as possible.”

Right.

I waved goodbye to Gabriel and made my way back down to the communal office space, humming to myself along the way. Upon my return, I noticed that Hailey was alone, typing up her report.

“Where’s Jake?” I asked.

Hailey’s blond ponytail swung through the air as she turned to the sound of my voice.

“He said he was gonna go train.” She leaned in and lowered her voice slightly. “I don’t think he wants to write the report because of what happened.”

I took the seat next to her, the one Jake had been sitting in. “What *did* happen?”

“I think he stabbed someone.” She looked down at her lap and shook her head. “That’s what the wound looked like. I don’t know. I wasn’t in the room.”

“And I don’t imagine he said anything about it. Did Adrien?”

She looked back up at me and shook her head. The motion was slow, and I thought her eyes held a faint mix of fear and sorrow.

This poor girl, I thought. She's not even old enough to drink and Gabriel has her doing this shit. Jake isn't the only one I need to look out for. I reached out and put a hand on her knee, rubbing it through the polyester of her pants.

“How are you doing? Are you adjusting to all of this?”

“It's hard,” she admitted, although not with the level of emotion I had expected. “I really don't like seeing all of these injuries, but it makes me happy that I can do something about it. I guess I'm adapting okay.”

“Wow, you're a lot tougher than you look,” I thought aloud. Hailey smiled at this.

“My mom always says I had to grow up faster than the other kids.”

Had to? I wondered what she meant by that. I knew her family weren't well-off and I didn't think her father had been in the picture, but to what extent did she have to grow up so fast?

“I guess there is one thing about all of this that bothers me,” Hailey said before I could think of a follow-up question.

“What's that?”

“I just...” She paused to find the words. “I guess I don't understand why we aren't using our powers to help more people, you know? Like, we haven't saved anyone's lives or anything, we've just been going to hunt down drug-dealers and petty thieves.”

“You know,” I took my hand from Hailey's knee and brought the tip of my index finger to rest against my chin. “I never thought about it that way. That's incredibly interesting, because guess what Gabriel just told me?”

“What?”

I gave my best Gabriel impression. “My number-one top priority, the reason I do all of this, is saving lives. I want to save as many lives as possible.”

Hailey looked at the screen of her computer, where the cursor of her text document was blinking impatiently, waiting for her next keystroke. Her eyebrows were lowered as she processed my words.

“Maybe there’s nothing that dangerous happening right now? No hostage situations or active shooters, or anything like that going on?”

I let a puff of air pass through my nose at that.

“In the whole country? Unlikely. If Gabriel really wanted to, he could have us shipped to any disaster zone in America in a matter of hours. I know we’ve only been at this officially for not even two weeks, but we haven’t even ‘saved’ a single life, yet. All we’ve done is put our own at risk.”

“Maybe he’s testing us?” Hailey suggested. “Y’know, to see if we could handle that kind of thing.”

“Maybe.” *But if that’s the case, it seems like he could’ve chosen some easier tests.* “Well, anyways, I shouldn’t bother you any longer.”

“You’re not a bother,” Hailey exclaimed as I pushed myself from my chair. As I looked at the genuine concern in the girl’s face, concern that I would consider myself a bother, a warm feeling enveloped my chest and I couldn’t have held back my smile if I’d tried.

“Say, if I can convince Jake to do something fun tonight, do you wanna come with?”

At my offer, the worried expression was swept away by excitement. “Of course! You know I’m always down for some fun!”

“For sure,” I said, starting to leave. “I’ll be back soon.”

I wandered through the halls to the training hall. On the far side of the large, empty room, in a section where they built the ceiling lower, a trio of punching bags hung from a series of chains. Jake was standing across from them, holding the tip of a blue dagger between his fingers. After a moment, he flung the blade towards the hanging sacks. By the time his arm finished its arc, another knife had appeared in his hand, and in the same motion, he launched it in the same direction as the first. Again, the moment the dagger left his hand, another materialized in his hand, which soon followed the same path as its predecessors. Finally, he put his surprisingly fluid motions to an end and examined the results of his efforts: the first dagger plunged into the middle of the leftmost punching bag, the second dug itself into the middle bag towards the bottom, but the third hit its target with the handle instead of the blade, bouncing against the rightmost punching bag and into the cement floor underneath, shattering into grains of light upon impact.

“Impressive,” I said. He jumped at my voice. “What are you doing?”

Jake looked towards the hanging bags, then back to me. “Training.”

“Since when have you trained in knife-throwing?”

“Since I realized that no matter what weapon I use, axe, spear, sword, or whatever, I need to get up close to people to be able to do anything, unless I want to use my gun.”

“Which you don’t.”

Jake nodded.

“Fair enough,” I cocked my head to the side. “But throwing knives still seems pretty lethal, not to mention difficult. You can’t summon, like, a bow and arrow, or a slingshot, or something?”

He shook his head. “I can make a bow, and I can make an arrow, but it doesn’t seem like I can create anything elastic, like a bow string. I can control how sharp or dull the knives are, though, so they shouldn’t kill anyone.”

“I see... it must be because of that glassy stuff that everything you make is made of.”

He nodded. After a moment, he asked, “so, what’s up?”

“Well, that’s what I’m wondering. Are you okay?”

“Sure,” he nodded again, but wouldn’t make eye contact. “I’m fine.”

Is this pride? Or is he trying to protect me, somehow, from the bleakness of his situation? Yeah, cause I’m the one who needs protecting.

“Right, well, I’ll be honest. You didn’t look too fine when you got back from that job. What happened?”

“I... I don’t think I want to talk about it,” he told me, casting his gaze downwards.

I reached out and touched his upper arm, lightly.

“That’s fine, but you’ll have to talk about it sometime. You can’t bottle that up.”

He clenched his mouth. “I know.”

“Well, good. You have the next week off, so you should try to... steady yourself for whatever happens next.”

Finally, he looked me in the face, his eyes quickly darting between mine, trying to decide if he can believe me. “What?”

“I talked to Gabriel. You’ve got a week to yourself.”

“But,” he stuttered. Suddenly, his lips were trembling. “But...”

I cleared my throat. “I think the word you’re looking for is ‘thanks.’”

Jake took a breath and smiled weakly. “Thank you.”

I tightened my grip on his arm. “C’mon, let’s go do something to take your mind off of all of this.”

His smile grew a little more genuine.

“Thank you,” he repeated.

Hailey, Jake and I climbed into my SUV, a boring black, like all the others, and started south on US Highway 1 towards Fredericksburg.

“I’m learning how to drive,” Hailey said.

“That’s exciting,” I mimicked her enthusiasm.

“I know. I’ll be the first one in my family to learn.”

“Really?”

“We’re really not too well off. None of the family can afford to own a car.”

Not too well off is an understatement, then.

“Did you want to switch seats, get some practice in?” I offered.

“I’m all right,” she giggled. “Maybe on the drive home?”

“That gives me an idea...” I looked over my shoulder before switching lanes. “We could go to a bar, and you can be our sober driver.”

I heard her sigh and chuckled.

“We went to a bar last time, and I can’t even get anything,” she argued. “Can we do anything else?”

“I’m just kidding. Do you have any ideas for what to do?”

“I’m hungry. Is that a pizza place up ahead?”

I squinted as we rounded a slight bend. A quarter mile away, one of the signs on the side of the road in front of a long row of brick department stores depicted a brightly coloured, ovular pepperoni pizza.

“Looks like it. All in favour?”

“Aye,” Jake and Hailey said at once.

I signalled and got ready to turn as Hailey called out, “jinx.”

“Really?” Jake sounded exasperated, but I could see his smile in the rear-view mirror.

“Ha, now you owe a pop.” Hailey beamed.

Jake rolled his eyes but didn’t stop smiling.

I pulled into the parking lot and we walked up to a set of glass doors adorned with a yellow triangle of neon lights encompassing three small red neon circles. The restaurant was empty apart from a waitress leaning against the front desk who, even as we walked up, was too intently focused on the dirt under her fingernails to notice us. When we eventually managed to get her attention, she led a to a booth with green, beat-up leather seats and handed us menus.

“Drinks?” She asked curtly.

“Just water for me,” I said.

Jake ordered a coke for himself and for Hailey, despite her protests that she hadn’t *really* meant that he *actually* owed her a pop.

“I’ll be back,” the waitress called over her shoulder as she turned away.

“I hope the chefs are more passionate about their work than the waitstaff,” I whispered. Jake smirked, while Hailey stuck her nose into her menu.

The apathetic server soon returned with our beverages.

“What’ll it be?” She asked.

Jake ordered a twelve-inch pepperoni pizza for himself, while Hailey and I opted to split a meat lover’s pizza. After a short while spent chatting and basking in the comforting presence of the hyperrealist paintings of bell peppers that adorned the wall of the booth, our pizzas arrived.

“Are you sure you’re gonna be able to eat all that?” I asked Jake, who had already shoved half a slice into his mouth.

He nodded, took a minute to chew, then said, “oh yeah, I haven’t eaten all day. And if I can’t finish, then I’ve got another meal for later. Win-win.”

“Smart,” Hailey commented, before taking her first bite. I couldn’t help but giggle at the seriousness of her voice. *Ah, yes, we have a real Albert Einstein over here.*

As the three of us ate away at our cheesy, doughy goodness, I started to feel a hint of homesickness. There was a pizzeria just like this one, down at the boardwalk in San Diego, that my parents used to take me to all the time. We would have family nights every Friday; we’d go to the cinema, see the early showing of whichever new movie looked best, and then we’d stop for dinner on the way home. The boardwalk pizzeria was where we stopped most often.

My favourite movie nights, though, were when we would rent a movie from Blockbuster, order pizza for delivery, and spend the night in the comfort of our home. Home was where the pets were: Discord, our happy-go-lucky golden retriever, Harmony, an older tabby cat, and Melody, a young Russian blue. It wasn’t a *real* family night without the whole family, pets included.

“Lacey, you okay?” Hailey asked. She was almost done with her half of the pie, while I was still picking away at my second slice.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just thinking of home.”

I pulled out my phone and found the one picture I have of Harmony, Melody, and Discord all together at once, then showed it to Hailey, then to Jake. An odd sense of pride passed over me at the delight in their faces.

“Cute, aren’t they? I miss them so much.” I took another bite of pizza, chewed, then: “Y’know... maybe I should adopt a kitten.”

"I've always wanted a pet..." Hailey looked wistfully at the chandelier dangling above the table. "But you shouldn't get a kitten if you're gonna be working all the time. You should adopt a mature cat, one that can relax when you're not there and appreciates the attention they get when you are. That way, you're giving them some comfort in their last years."

I considered her idea carefully, then began to regret that I hadn't come up with it, myself.

"That's a great idea," I told her, while Jake nodded his agreement. "That settles it. Tomorrow, I've got the day off, so I'm adopting a cat. Jake, since you're not doing anything, did you want to come with? Take your mind away from work?"

"Hell yeah," he said with a smile. "I love cats."

"And you, Hailey?"

"I would, but Adrien wants me to help him with an experiment, tomorrow. You'll have to let me come see the cat after, though."

"Of course."

I finished the final slice of my pizza as the waitress arrived to give Jake a takeaway box for his last two slices. We paid for our respective meals and Hailey left a couple of dollars on the table as a tip.

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Later that night, after I dropped Hailey and Jake off at their apartments, and as I was walking into my own, I thought back on my day, and, more specifically, my offer to meet with Jake tomorrow.

He doesn't think it's a date, does he?

Click. I turned my key and the lock unlatched as the thought popped into my mind.

No, Jake wouldn't take it that way... I pushed open the door and set my keys on the nearby coffee table. *Would he?*

The last time I had asked to go somewhere with a guy, I had meant it completely platonically, but he developed a pretty severe crush on me. That was during my time at the University of San Diego, and his name was Greg. I don't remember his last name. He had sat next to me in one of my math classes and, although he didn't talk much, he was nice when he did. Once, when we were studying derivatives, I just couldn't seem to wrap my head around the subject, and I knew that Greg had a good grasp of the topic so I asked him if he could help me study. He happily agreed.

I invited him into my dorm. Looking back, it was naïve of me to meet him at my place instead of somewhere public, but before then, I'd never had any bad experiences with a guy, before. Maybe I trusted him too much, or maybe I put too much faith in my own judge of character.

Greg tutored me for an hour or two, then he started making advances on me. A hand on the leg here, brushing up against me there... I tried to turn him down subtly, but when he put his hand on my thigh, I told him that this was not what I was looking for and asked him to leave.

He refused to leave me alone after that incident. Even after the semester ended, I would see him everywhere, including around my dorm, and I knew for a fact that he didn't live in that building. Honestly, for a while, I was getting kind of scared, and I didn't know what to do.

When I was in my third year, he took his own life. The school announced to everyone that they were holding a memorial. When I heard, the first thing I felt was a sense of relief, and I hated myself for it.

I found myself in my kitchen, pouring a beer glass about two thirds full with rum. I opened my fridge and grabbed a litre bottle of coke to top it off. Taking my drink to the couch, I pulled my iPod from my pocket and put on some music.

I took a deep drink as by Linkin Park's *Breaking the Habit* began to play.

Jake isn't the same as Greg, I told myself, and drank until I stopped thinking about it.

Chapter 13

Cordelia Livingston

My morning started out like any other day: I woke up, showered, chose a cute pink dress to wear, had breakfast (usually eggs and toast), brushed my teeth, did my makeup (primer, foundation, concealer, contour, highlighter, blush, eyeshadow and eyeliner, and lip gloss, at a minimum), brushed and styled my hair (today, I chose pigtails), put in my contact lens, and looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror one last time before I left the apartment. I noticed a hint of darkness at the roots of my carnation-pink hair and checked my schedule to make sure I had an upcoming hair appointment. Finally, I adjusted my choker so that the rose garnet gemstone rested in the centre of my neck and, satisfied, I gathered my belongings before walking out of the apartment.

I climbed the stairs of the building until I arrived at the roof access and pushed through the door into the outside world.

There was a breeze in the February air; it was cold, but not bitterly so. There had been a light layer of snow on the ground, but it seemed to have rained throughout the night, as most of the snow had melted into a slushy, muddy mess. The dark clouds that blanketed the sky threatened to resume the rainfall at any moment. It was as if I had never left London.

I looked at the horizon to the north. Dark trees overran the landscape in every direction, with the occasional brick building to break the mold. Far off in the distance to the northeast lied the Potomac River, serving as the Virginia/Maryland border. To the northwest, the meager skyline of the main Stafford community struggled to rise above the treeline.

Hopping up on the ledge of the apartment complex, I selected one of the taller buildings in the distance and focused on it, visualizing myself standing on top of it. Then, as a burst of light emanated from my choker, I stepped off the roof and onto the building in my mind's eye, two kilometres away.

I glanced over my shoulder at my now-distant apartment before strolling across this roof to teleport to the next. Leaping from building to building, I was on the roof of the agency within a minute of my departure. I transferred myself down to the parking lot and headed inside.

My corner office was how I always left it. I sat in my leather chair and looked at my bonsai tree, which sat in the window behind my desk. I liked to imagine that, if the plant could talk, it would complain about the weather. *How am I supposed to photosynthesize without any sunshine*, it would ask, and I chuckled at the absurdity before I remembered how I got to work. Absurdity didn't seem to have the same meaning, anymore.

With a smile on my face, I turned to the files arranged on my desk. The majority of the documents related to the opening of my new American pub: tax forms, permits, registries and whatnot. I've recently decided to name the establishment The American Queen, as a play on both the American dream and my own regal self.

I worked on finalizing a few loose ends for the better part of an hour. The grand opening is two Mondays out, and, although I can hardly contain my excitement, the piles of paperwork were weighing heavily on me. I was thankful for my arrangement with Gabriel, which allowed me the time to work on my personal affairs so long as I'm available when necessary.

As if my thoughts were a jinx of some kind, I heard a knock on the door and could tell it was Gabriel through the tiny, fogged window.

“Come in,” I called, then, as the door swung open, “good morning, Gabriel.”

“Good morning, Livingston. Awful day out there, isn’t it?”

I glanced at the window. My prediction had been correct; raindrops were flicking arrhythmically against the glass panes.

“Is it ever.” I turned back to the bespectacled man. “So, what can I do for you?”

“Glad you asked.” Gabriel gave a brief smirk before his expression grew more serious. “We got a sudden call from D.C. There’s been a bank robbery, and the suspect is on Highway 1 headed towards us.”

“Wow, that is sudden.”

“Yes, right. So, could you make it down to my office right away? It’s appreciated.”

Without giving me a chance to respond, he tapped the doorframe and left.

I dotted my i's and crossed my t's on the form I was working on, said a farewell to my bonsai tree, then made my way to Gabriel's office. I stopped just short of his door as I heard a raised voice coming from within.

“-anyone else?” It was Todd's voice, which had a distinctly gruff yet smooth quality.

I leaned against the wall, out of sight, listening in.

“Everyone else is occupied,” Gabriel replied. “Virnova and Heightman are off, Kinder and Barrett are doing some experiment, and sending your brother with you would be useless, as you well know. Is there an issue?”

“No, I’m sure I could handle this no matter who I’m with, but...” Todd lowered his voice so I had to strain to hear. “She doesn’t take any of this seriously.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I understand your concerns,” Gabriel said sternly. “But please assure your personal opinions don’t interfere with your work performance.”

“I won’t. You should trust me more than that.”

“You should go find Livingston. This is somewhat of a time-sensitive matter, after all.”

“Right.”

Todd’s footsteps started towards the door. I made no effort to pretend I wasn’t eavesdropping.

“Cordelia?” Todd stumbled back in surprise as he rounded the corner. “Have you been listening for long?”

I felt the smile creep up both sides of my face.

“Not long at all, dear.” I reached out and gently patted his bicep. “You needn’t concern yourself with that.”

The tall man looked down at me suspiciously, then squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head in quick, spastic motions.

“Let’s go,” he said, starting down the hallway.

As I followed, I told him, “Just so you know, I’m here because I signed a contract. The contract didn’t say I had to take this seriously.”

Todd said nothing as we walked to a black SUV. I climbed into the passenger seat as Todd jumped in, pushed his key into the ignition and twisted. The engine revved to life and the brooding man steered the vehicle out of the parking lot, heading north. He pushed a button on the dashboard to enable the sirens and lights, and another to turn on the police radio above the centre console. Civilian cars starting pulling over to let us speed past.

“Suspect is in a golden 1997 Honda civic, southbound on Highway 1,” dispatch relayed through the radio after a minute of rushing up the highway.

Todd grabbed the microphone and brought it close to his mouth. “Ten-four. What is the suspect’s current location?”

Another voice from the radio answered. “Passing through Southbridge now. Three officers in pursuit.”

“Copy.”

Todd put down the microphone, still saying nothing to me.

“So,” I yawned, pulling back my seat to stretch my legs. “What’s the plan?”

“I can handle this on my own,” he responded. “If I need something from you, I’ll ask.”

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms and legs, then looked out the window at the red and blue lights that shimmered in the reflections of the falling rain.

After several minutes of driving with constant chatter from the radio, Todd turned off the sirens and pulled into the near-empty lot of a used car dealership, using it to turn around. There were only a handful of cars with prices in their windows, each more rusted with age than the last.

We pulled back onto the shoulder of the highway and waited. I glared at Todd's long face, which brought to mind imagery of a workhorse, as he made considerable efforts to ignore my existence. As we sat there, the rain slowly ramped up in intensity until it became a torrential downpour, pounding against the roof and windshield.

Eventually, we heard sirens approaching in the distance and, soon enough, saw the flashing police lights cutting through the rain. Todd re-enabled our own lights and sirens before pressing his foot on the gas, pushing us back onto the highway. As we picked up speed, a gold civic with a broken taillight and two police cars roared past, splashing our windows with water. "Pull over, pull over," one of the police were repeating over a loudspeaker. The third cop car took up a position behind us.

I grabbed at the safety handle above the door and glanced over at the speedometer, which said we were approaching 70 mph. My grip tightened as I looked at the road, covered in a thin layer of rainwater as more poured down.

"Careful," I gasped, involuntarily.

Todd gave no indication of having heard me. I inhaled deeply through my nose and started to calm down. *That's right, I thought. If anything happens, I can just teleport away in an instant and leave this buffoon to face the consequences.*

We gained more speed and passed the other police vehicles. Little by little, we closed the gap between us and the single functioning taillight, which was the only part of the civic we could make out definitively through the downpour. Todd flicked the automatic window control, sending a continuous stream of rain droplets throughout the SUV.

Once the glass pane had receded entirely, Todd pushed his arm out the window and aimed his open hand at the car ahead of us. A green light emanated simultaneously from the necklace hidden behind his white button-up and the palm of his hand. Glassy vines sprouted from his hand and extended towards the civic, struggling against the force of the winds.

This is your big plan? You're gonna grab the car to stop it? I let go of the safety hand and readjusted my seating. *My plan is so much simpler.*

I squinted at the golden car, straining until I could barely make out the headrests within. I took a sharp breath and blinked; when I opened my eyes, I was in the backseat of the golden civic. The man driving, a red-faced musclehead with a buzzcut, did not notice right away.

From my purse, I unsheathed a combat knife, which I held to the man's throat as I leaned forwards against the driver's seat. The man gasped and flinched, cutting himself superficially on the blade as he struggled to maintain control of the vehicle.

"What are- Who..." he managed.

"I'd really recommend pulling over, darling," I said with a calm firmness. I craned my head to see the glow of Todd's vine as it slowly approached. "Things will only get rougher from here."

The man, sweating profusely and trembling, continued to drive without a word. I looked around the vehicle. In the backseat beside me was a briefcase. A handgun was on the passenger seat and another briefcase was on the floor in front of it, this one opened so that I could see the contents: hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of neatly bound bills, all stained with bright red ink. *He must not have known about the temper-proof dye packs that some banks use to mark their bills as stolen.*

“Pull over,” I ordered, “before I cut your throat out.”

“You don’t understand,” the driver's voice cracked. “They’ll put me away forever, this time. I messed up. Messed up real bad.”

“Like I said, things will only be worse if we drag this out.”

“You really don’t understand, lady.” He locked eyes with me in the rear-view mirror. “Kill me, then. Put the knife through my neck, ‘cause the State’s gonna do it anyway. I shot an officer back there. I think I killed him.”

“Surely, this isn’t how you want to go out?”

“Of course I don’t want to die! I didn’t want any of this to happen. Oh God, I didn’t...”

I glanced back again to see Todd’s vine about to latch onto the civic’s spoiler.

“Then why did-”

Before I could finish my sentence, the car lunged violently as its wheels burst through the deep puddles in the grooves in the road and we began to hydroplane. In a knee-jerk reaction, the driver slammed his foot against the brake pedal and, as a result, lost control of the car completely. A blizzard of stained bills flooded the air as the civic lurched to one side and began to spin out of control.

I clutched the man’s neck with my free hand I looked around frantically, my vision obscured by the storm of bills. Miraculously, through the money and the rain, I saw a clearing of grass on the shoulder of the road.

The knife was flung from my hand as we hit the ground, bouncing and skidding, a pile of flailing limbs, into the muddy ditch where we finally came to a rough stop. I groaned as I pulled

myself out of the mud, then I looked down the road to where the gold civic soared across the ditch and into a tree with an ear-shattering collision. Red flakes of paper exploded from the twisted mess of jagged metal through the broken windows, getting swept away immediately by the wind.

A police car, presumably the one that had been driving behind the SUV initially, pulled over on the shoulder nearby. Two strapping young officers exited the vehicle, one headed for me and one headed down into the ditch to pull the bank robber out of the mud.

“Are you okay?” The officer asked, staring at me with awe.

“Yes, I’m all right,” I said, wiping some of the muck off my face with my hands. “It’ll wash out.”

“No, I mean,” he eyed me up and down. “You’re bleeding.”

I looked down at my filthy body as the rain continued to fall, washing the enough mud off to reveal that my skin was covered in cuts and scrapes.

“Ah, so I am.”

“Do you need an ambulance?”

“No, I’ll see to it. Thank you.”

The SUV up next to the police car, leaving the other police cars to investigate the wreckage of the civic. Todd got out, looking over at the cop who was arresting the robber to make sure he had the situation under control, then scowled at me. There was a lot of anger in his eyes, but also disapproval, concern, surprise, and a possible hint of admiration. It was such a

satisfying expression to see on his face that I almost forgot that I was covered in mud and that my hair and makeup were ruined.

I brushed as much mud from my dress and skin as I could with my bare hands before retreating to the passenger side of the SUV. I waited and watched Todd talk to the officers as they pushed the despondent bank robber into the backseat of their cruiser. The last sight of the robber I had before they slammed the door shut was him hanging his head in his muddy, cuffed hands.

After his chat, Todd swung into the driver's seat and started the engine. This time, as we started back towards HQ, he, regrettably, did not give me the silent treatment, at least not right away.

"You should know better than to act on your own like that," he scolded.

"It worked, didn't it?"

"It did," he admitted.

"And in less time than it would have taken for you, by yourself."

"Perhaps, and yet, if you had just let me handle it, you wouldn't be such a mess right now." He allowed himself to smirk. "That's a great look on you, by the way."

"Ha, ha, look at who's Mr. Funny Man all of a sudden." I rolled my eyes and watched the raindrops hit the window.

"My point is," he said. I turned to look; he was no longer smiling. "This time, you got yourself all dirty. Next time, you could get yourself killed."

"I appreciate your concern, dear, but you just let me worry about that, all right?"

“Suit yourself.”

Then, the silent treatment returned. I shifted to a more comfortable position, trying not to smear mud all over the seat as I did.

As we drove, the scene from right before the crash replayed in my mind on repeat. I had been asking the robber why he had done it when he lost control, and yet, the answer was obvious to me. He clearly wasn't doing it for the thrill, and he certainly wasn't a professional; he didn't even know about the ink packets that banks use to devalue any stolen currency. This crime was an act of desperation caused by poverty, and that man truly felt he had no other choice.

Admittedly, I could somewhat relate. Years ago, in a lifetime before I became Cordelia Livingston, there was a time when I had nothing to my name. At my lowest, I even resorted to shoplifting.

I had inherited my poverty from my mum, who spent most of her life washing dishes at a pub in Romford. When she met my father, a businessman from Osaka, he was having a meeting with some colleagues at a table adjacent to one she had been clearing. It must have been love at first sight, because even though she had never spoken a word of Japanese in her life, she agreed to return to Osaka with him.

For half a decade, they lived in happiness. My father continued to achieve great success in the business world and, bit by bit, taught my mother Japanese while she became an ideal housewife, cooking and cleaning all day for him. Any time my father spent away from work was time he spent on my mother. Their relationship was the envy of all their acquaintances, and it came as no surprise when my mum announced her pregnancy. It came as a very shocking

surprise, however, when two months after I was born, my mother's new best friend happened to see my father, drunk on sake and fondling a waitress, while on a late-night business meeting.

Completely beyond consolation, my mother immediately ended the marriage and returned to London with me in tow. And so, she was back to square one, working paycheck to paycheck at the same little pub in Romford, except now she had an infant daughter to support as well.

I do not recall my childhood fondly. Mum was too stubborn to rely on any form of payment assistance from my father, so we relied instead on food banks and school breakfast programs to get by. I never had the coolest toys or the nicest clothes, like all the other kids. On top of that, I was the only East Asian child in my primary school and I was bullied. It started with jeers, name-calling, and rude gestures. A frequent joke among classmates would be to turn around while the teacher was writing on the board, look directly at me, and pull back the skin around their eyes to mock the shape of mine.

The situation did not improve over the years. Rumours would be spread about me and my mother, I was regularly laughed at, and my peers would speak to me only to say something rude, usually with a bad Japanese accent, even though my own accent had always been British. As time went on, however, the insults and mockery faded to dismissal and snubbing. In secondary school, there were a couple of Korean students that often hung out together, but by the time that I met them and they, noticing my solitude, began to invite me to join them, I had gone so long without any positive interaction with those my own age that I no longer cared about the potential for companionship, and I declined. I pretended that they didn't exist, just like the white students did.

My only positive relationship during my childhood, other than with my mother, came from my grandmother, whose roof we stayed under and who watched me when Mum was working. She was retired, and although her modest pension didn't allow her to support us much beyond babysitting and letting us live with her rent-free, she loved me and treated me as any grandparent should treat a grandchild. My grandmother's sticky toffee pudding was one of the few memories that I can look back and smile upon. Even today, I can still taste the warm, soft dessert drowned in caramel sauce that melted in your mouth the instant you tasted it.

Eventually, as I grew into my teen years, I got a job as a waitress at the same pub as my mum. I had been tired of having little beyond life's basic necessities, and, even though I used some of my pay to help Mum with the bills, it was the first time in my life that I had some spending money. So, I bought some makeup and started to experiment.

Over time, the looks of mockery or indifference turned into looks of captivation, envy, and admiration. Boys and men began to look at me not as someone to be ignored but, for the first time, someone to be desired.

One man who took to my new looks like no other was Mr. George Livingston, the widow who owned the pub, along with a handful of other establishments, that employed me and my mother. This was originally to my chagrin, as I considered his longing gazes to be a nuisance, motivated by some perverted ideas, but as time went on, I realized that he was lonely and missing the companionship of his wife. He took to me with a passion and kindness that no one outside of my family had ever shown me before. He gave me gifts, promoted me as often as he could, and never stopped complimenting me and lifting my spirits, and all he asked in return was for someone to listen to him recounting tales about his wife and the happy marriage they had together.

“You could have been her doppelganger,” he said, on more than one occasion. She looked just like you, back when we first met. Minus the coloured hair, of course.”

It was from George Livingston that I learned how to manage a pub, and it was from his death, when I was twenty-two years old, that I gained the means, through his inheritance, to do so on my own.

After opening my very own pub to much success, I had my name legally changed from Yumi Tanaka to Cordelia Livingston as a tribute to Mr. Livingston (plus, I’ve always liked the name ‘Cordelia’). I used the profits to provide for Mum and my grandmother, as much as Mum’s stubbornness would allow, and the business did so well that I was able to open a second location on the south bank of the River Thames after only three short years.

The more I sat, reminiscing about my childhood, the more guilt I felt about the bank robber. I knew there was nothing I could do; I had to help arrest him because he broke the law. And yet, it didn’t seem fair to me that he was going to be punished with a likely severe sentence, for such a desperate act. The feeling, the same as if I was walking past a beggar with nothing to give, didn’t sit right with me, and I tried to disassociate myself from the situation in my mind.

Finally, Todd pulled into the flooding parking lot and stopped the SUV. I teleported to the door of the lobby to avoid getting any wetter while Todd walked to the door, unperturbed by the rain.

“Hailey is in the main laboratory with Adrien,” he told me as he entered. “You should go get her to see to your wounds.”

Although the patchwork of scrapes covering my limbs was admittedly starting to sting, it wasn’t my priority.

“I think I’ll have a quick shower, first. Would you be a doll and tell Adrien he’ll get my report by the end of the week?”

Todd responded only by rolling his eyes and giving me a dismissive gesture as he started down a hallway.

“Thanks, dear,” I called after him, before wandering to the bathroom adjacent to the training hall, which was the only bathroom in the building outfitted with a shower.

As I let my hair down and washed the grime from my body, my mind kept wandering back to the moments before the crash, but I once more disassociated myself from the situation, focusing instead on the stinging of my wounds in the hot water. *His problems are not my problems*, I told myself. The only problems I needed to worry about were my own.

After my shower, Itoweled myself off and changed into a loose-fitting spare tracksuit before beginning the journey up to my office, where I kept some backup makeup in my desk. As soon as I left the bathroom, however, I almost ran into Hailey.

“Cordelia,” she exclaimed. “Todd said you’d be here. You’re hurt?”

“Well, yes, I am.”

I rolled up the sleeves of the tracksuit so that Hailey could heal me. She gently placed her hands, which emanated a golden glow, on my arms and rubbed up and down. As her hand moved past each wound, the pain subsided as the scrapes disappeared. I rolled up my pants so she could do the same to my legs.

“Thank you, darling,” I said, unfurling my sleeves and pant legs.

“Of course,” Hailey chimed. Then, her eyebrows twitched as she made the realization I had been dreading. *Oh no*, I braced myself, *it’s been so long since I’ve been seen without my makeup. Here comes the insults and the ridicule.* “Hey, Cordelia,” she said, much softer than I dared to hope. “I don’t want to be rude, but are you... Asian?”

To my chagrin, I could feel my cheeks flushing. “I’m half Japanese, if you must know.”

“Wow, I don’t know how I haven’t noticed, before.” Then, getting flustered, herself, she added, “sorry, I just... I’d like to travel to Japan someday. I have a list of things I’d like to do there. Not just Japan, but all over Asia.”

“Ah, I see,” I sidestepped, trying to escape this awkward situation.

“Cordelia?” Hailey stepped forward to block my path.

“Yes?”

“You’re very pretty.”

We stood there, facing each other in silence for a long time. I was speechless. It had been so long since I let someone see my naked face, and that was not the reaction I had been expecting.

“Sorry, again,” Hailey finally said, stepping away. “I just wanted to say that.”

She walked down the hall, leaving me to stand there in silence.

Chapter 14

Gabriel Hunter

As I exited off the Beltway, Interstate 495, I recalled the handful of times I'd driven this route in the past year. My first visit to my current destination was on my final day as a supervisor at the National Reconnaissance Office, and, by the time I had returned home that night, I was the director of a newly formed government agency.

I took a left turn and passed a large, decorative plaque with a shiny silver finish that read "1500 Tysons McLean," neatly framed by two squarely trimmed hedges on either side and a bed of red, white, and blue peonies beneath. A few feet away was another sign, much less decorative, that read "U.S. Government Controlled Property – No Trespassing." The road twisted passed gardens with more hedges and flowerbeds, as well as the circle of large, jagged stones that seemed to me to be mandatory outside of every federal office, until it came to a security checkpoint with two armed guards, a woman with a hand on her hip and a man with his arms crossed, blocking my path.

The male guard uncrossed his arms and walked over to lean into my window as I rolled it down.

"State your name and purpose."

"Gabriel Hunter," I showed him my badge, "here to see the Director of National Intelligence."

"Ah, Mr. Hunter," the big man said, backing away and motioning me forward. "Go right ahead."

The other guard, still with a hand on her hip, gave me a nod as I drove by. I parked in an empty section of the lot, grabbed my briefcase, and walked towards the entrance.

“Mr. Hunter?” a secretary called as I pushed through the doors into the lobby. I nodded. “The Director will see you in his office. I understand that you know where that is?”

“I do,” I replied, not breaking my stride.

“Have a nice day,” she called, shifting her attention back to the paperwork she’d been organizing.

The door to the Director’s office was open. Still, I knocked to make my presence known. The Director, a bald man with a grey goatee, set down the file he’d been reading, took off his glasses, and beckoned me inside, smiling.

“Gabe, it’s good to see you. Take a seat.”

“Yes sir,” I sat in the chair opposite the Director as he cleared space on his desk in front of me.

“I’m glad that I chose you to head this project. You’re approaching it with more enthusiasm than I could have hoped for.”

“What can I say? I believe in the project’s potential.”

“Quite so, and for good reason, given everything in your report.” He lifted the corner of the file he’d been perusing to show me that it was labeled “Gabriel’s Report” and dated two days prior. “So, you really think your team is ready to step things up a bit?”

“That seems to be the logical progression of things.”

“Well, Gabe, this is impressive,” he tapped the report with the point of his finger, “but I’d like to know more about your team, not just their abilities and accomplishments. What do you think about them, personally?”

“They’re all incredibly intelligent and capable; we got pretty lucky on that front. Todd Coyle has the most experience with law enforcement, and I trust him the most. He’s been serving as my right-hand man since the beginning, and he has exceeded all expectations. His brother, Spencer Delosier, is also very diligent...”

The Director noted my hesitation. “Do you not trust him as much?”

“I trust him well enough, he’s just... hard to read, at times. Although, I must say, I’m impressed at how he keeps up with the others, even when he doesn’t have his powers.”

“I see,” the Director said, leaning back into his chair. “Go on.” My nerves were beginning to act up, and I wondered if my employees felt the same way I did now when they sat in my office.

“Let’s see... Adrien Clamence has a brilliant mind, and his loyalty is admirable. When he isn’t on a mission, he works with our research teams to conduct experiments to find more practical applications for the team’s abilities. His dedication to the cause is exceptional. On the other hand, Cordelia Livingston’s dedication is somewhat tenuous, but she’s predictable, and I’m sure I can keep her in line.

“Jake Virnova, as you’ve seen in my report, has had some struggles, but he’s been getting stronger with each passing day. He has some time off right now to collect himself, and I’m sure he’ll be as eager as ever when he gets back. He’s still pretty young, so his potential to grow is boundless. I look forward to overseeing his growth. Hailey Kinder is even younger, but despite

that, she's pretty mature. She's always followed orders, she gets along with the others, and she's curious, but she doesn't ask the wrong questions. Lacey Heightman, I have to watch out for. She seems suspicious of me, for whatever reason, but she does good work, so I can't complain."

The Director nodded along as I spoke, stroking his goatee, carefully considering my words. After I finished, he sat forward and grunted in approval.

"I like you, Gabe. You're a good man: logical, intelligent, and hard-working. You're just what this country needs more of. I need to thank your old boss for recommending you." He stood up slowly, holding my report. "I've got to go get lunch, but I will forward this to the higher-ups in D.C. and put in a good word for you."

He walked around the desk and I rose to shake his hand.

"Thank you," I said.

"No, thank you, Gabriel. I think you've got a good thing going, there." He broke off the handshake and clasped my shoulder. "Let's keep this country safe, and make the world a better place."

"That's the goal, sir." The director's cliché platitudes were beginning to grate on me, but I was appreciative of his praises, nonetheless. The higher the esteem he has for me, the easier it will be to get what I want.

"Good, good." He patted my shoulder and walked towards the door. "I trust you can see yourself out?"

I didn't linger after the director left. I made my way through the halls of the bland government building, past the secretary and out to my car. One of the security guards gave me a casual salute as the other operated the barrier gate to let me out.

The drive back to Stafford would take the better part of an hour, but I didn't feel like beginning the journey just yet. Instead, I turned the onto the highway headed southeast, to Arlington.

Arlington was where I spent the first half of my life. My parents worked government jobs and enrolled me in fancy private schools and finally, thanks to my parents' love and encouragement, as well as a great deal of time and effort on my part, I was accepted into the George Washington University. Some years later, I graduated with a degree in applied science and technology and a minor in systems engineering.

When I finally moved away from Arlington, it was to Chantilly, where I worked at the National Reconnaissance Office, contracting engineers to create more efficient satellites, and helping data analysts communicate the most crucial improvements that could be made to the intelligence systems for more valuable data. After a few years of that, I was promoted to project manager and began taking a more involved role in the decision-making process. My co-workers always said that I was born for the job, which I attributed to my lifelong appreciation of scientific advancement. I was six years old when Neil Armstrong took his famous first step on the moon, but I still vividly remember how I was glued to the television screen, watching as history was made.

Memories flooded my mind as I drove past my old high school, the office that my mother worked at, the grocery store that had always been my go-to choice, and finally, the cemetery that had become way too familiar in recent years for my comfort.

The grounds of the Columbia Gardens Cemetery were always pristine. The grass was always freshly cut and vibrantly green, the monuments always smoothly polished, and the flower beds were always teeming with life and colour, all for which I was eternally grateful to the groundskeepers.

I parked my car and strolled slowly through the graves, both anxious to arrive but also wanting to put it off, as if being away from the monument made it any less real. Eventually, I arrived at the small black tombstone and read the engraved words that I hated the most: 'Here Lies Cynthia Hunter, 1967-2008'. Freshly replaced chrysanthemums and carnations filled the space on either side of the tombstone, and I wondered who had replaced them, her parents, or the groundskeepers. I smiled, knowing that her resting place was being tended to either way.

"Hello, Honey," I said. "Sorry that it's been a while since my last visit. I love you."

I stood over the grave for some time, remembering.

Cynthia and I had met at university. She was a business major, and she'd had an assignment that required her to interview another student. I ended up being her interviewee and we hit it off, so I invited her to coffee afterwards. Never had I meet such a vibrant, caring soul before her. She would always listen to me rattle on about whatever inconsequential problems I would be going through at the time, and then provide thoughtful commentary or point out a solution I somehow hadn't seen. Before her, I had never really paid attention to girls or ideas of romance, but as it turns out, I simply hadn't met such a beautiful and intelligent creature as her. I

didn't even know such a strong feeling of attraction could exist; I had always thought that adoring love songs and sappy movie plots were just hyperboles, but Cynthia had me convinced that there may be something more to the idea of true love or soulmates than I had thought.

We were married as soon as we had both graduated. The wedding was no extravagant affair, as neither of us really cared to squander a boatload of money for frivolities when the only thing that really mattered was our commitment to one another.

The first ten years of our marriage was bliss. We honeymooned in Cancun, and after we moved to Chantilly, Cynthia began working as a travel agent. Travel was always a passion of hers, so we tried to get out of the country on some vacation at least once a year. We never tired of each other's company, and the joy I felt in my heart when I was around her never diminished, even a little, over the years. We fought, of course, as any couple did, but our fights would never go beyond a couple of misspent hours.

The second half of our marriage, however, despite our best efforts and the warmth we had for each other, was marred with pain and sorrow. I still remember the night everything went wrong. It was in September of '99. We were eating at one of our favourite restaurants when Cynthia suddenly felt a headache come on. She was prone to headaches, so I didn't think much of it at first, but it quickly worsened to the point where we had to leave the restaurant because the pain was too great for her to finish her meal. I drove her to the hospital, and as I was talking to the receptionist, Cynthia began to seize up and fell to the floor. Sometimes, late at night as I lie in bed, I can still hear the impact of her skull hitting the cold, tiled floor of the waiting room.

The doctors found out that the cause of her headaches was a clump of meningioma, tumours of the membrane surrounding the brain and spinal cord, and they underwent an

operation that night to remove them. Cynthia was released a couple of days later with a newfound appreciation for life, but our respite was not only temporary, it was brief. By the turn of the millennium, the headaches had returned, accompanied by the loss of hearing in her left ear. It was then that she was diagnosed with a series of recurrent meningioma.

Cynthia spent the last decade of her life moving in and out of hospital rooms, desperately grasping at potential treatments to ease her chronic suffering. I did everything I could, poured every bit of money I could into treatments, but it felt like I was doing nothing more than watching from the sidelines as the disease sapped from her everything I had loved, from her cheery disposition to her sharp intellect, and of course, her happiness, which had meant more to me than anything else. It was such a frustrating feeling, that there was nothing I could do to make things right.

As the situation turned even more bleak, with the doctors finally announcing that the tumours were cancerous sometime in 2007, we were both resigned to the inevitable. And yet, as I sat at her bedside, watching her die, I realised that I was becoming less concerned about my wife's mortality and more about my own.

Even though her deterioration happened over the span of a decade, it somehow felt sudden. Ten years before, Cynthia was the pinnacle of health; that her life would end before she was even fifty years old seemed inconceivable. And yet, how fast things had seemed to spiral downhill out of nowhere. Why did this have to happen to her, someone with so many joyous years yet to live?

And if it could happen to her, could it happen to me, just as easily?

Not a day has passed since her death that that thought has not crossed my mind. It's a terrifying thought, that the end can come so unexpectedly for anyone, someone who did nothing wrong, someone who had been so healthy. Breathing, thinking, talking, loving, being, and then, one day, nothing. The idea was horrifying, and I became obsessed with the idea of myself dying, even as my wife lived out her last days.

I hated myself for feeling how I felt. How selfish was it to be agonizing over the possibility of my own death, when the person I loved more than anyone else on this planet was dying right before my eyes? Why couldn't I focus on bringing Cynthia some solace in her last months? I never told her how I felt, but I could tell that, even in her diminished state, part of her knew what I was thinking and wanted to comfort me. As close to the end as she was, she still felt the need to try to cheer me up, when I should have been taking care of her. I was a weak, uncaring, self-centered failure of a man who caused his dying wife to worry about him in her final days. Thinking back on it makes me want to throw up.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the empty air above the grave. I sank to my knees and hung my head in shame. "I'm sorry," I said again.

The worst part is that I haven't changed at all, since then. Cynthia has been in the ground for three years, and I still find myself thinking about when I'll end up joining her, to no end. *Why can't I stop thinking about myself? Why can't I properly grieve for her? She at least deserves that much. She deserves that and so much more.*

I clutched my head in my hands and squeezed, as if trying to physically remove the thoughts from my mind. Then I stood up, taking a deep breath and killing the emotions stirring within me.

“Goodbye, Cynthia,” I said. “I’ll visit you again, soon.”

I turned and I fled. My business was done, and it was time to return to Stafford. With any luck, the Director will have already met with his peers to discuss having our organisation take on the additional responsibilities I had requested.

As I walked back to my car and drove out of the Columbia Gardens Cemetery, I focused all of my attention on figuring out my next course of action, taking any reassurance I could from the comforts of pragmatism.

Chapter 15

Jake Virnova

Little more than a month had passed since my week-long vacation when Gabriel brought us all together for a very important briefing. My anxiety was lessening with every successful mission, although my psyche would be forever stained with the image of the pained expression on the face of the man I'd stabbed. This disturbing visual was particularly vivid during sleepless nights, which were becoming frustratingly frequent. However, I've been more confident in my own abilities and those of my allies, and I haven't been injured or even had to resort to violence since that day.

As the seven of us sat in around the conference table in the meeting room, waiting for Gabriel to arrive, I felt as though my nerves were back to square one, as my palms were soaked with sweat and my stomach was twisting itself in knots. I dreaded whatever was in store for us. We hadn't had a meeting with all of us since we finished with training. *Whatever this is, it's important, and I have substantial doubts that the outcome will be positive.* I looked around the room for reassurance only to find that the only person who seemed to feel the same way as me was Spencer, who was seated right beside me. Although he hid it well, I could tell by the way he was fidgeting, alternating between his fingers and his legs, that he was just as uneasy as I. I expected Hailey to share my concern as well, considering her inexperience and sensitive demeanour, but her boundless optimism must have prevailed over any other factors, as she was chatting away with Lacey with a casual passivity.

I looked the others as I gnawed on my lower lip. Cordelia was cleaning her nails, as distant as ever, while Adrien and Todd were having a conversation about a job they'd done

yesterday as Spencer half-heartedly listened on. After a moment, Spencer noticed my gaze and stopped fidgeting.

“You okay?” he whispered.

“Yeah, just a little nervous.”

“I get that,” he said, bobbing his head almost imperceptibly. “I’m sure it’ll be fine, whatever happens.”

The door to the meeting room swept open then, and Gabriel came in carrying a briefcase in one hand and waving with the other.

“Hello, everyone,” he said as he sunk into the chair at the head of the table and set his briefcase down in front of him. “It’s great to see you all here so nice and early. I have big news to bring to all of you, but first, you’ve all earned my praises. You’ve all been performing flawlessly, in a way that befits your superhuman abilities. You should all be proud of yourselves.” Gabriel paused with a smile on his face, and I felt the tension in my muscles begin to ease. “As such, I’ve arranged for each of you to receive a raise to your salary as I’ve seen fit.”

Wow! It seems early for a raise, but I’m not complaining. We’ve been working hard, we deserve it.

“Hell yeah,” Lacey pumped her fist in the air. Beside her, Hailey was beaming. Even Spencer managed a smile and he no longer seemed as restless.

“I figured you’d be quite pleased with that,” Gabriel continued. “And for the big news, our organization has been given permission to be put to a better use.” *What does he mean?* The sudden delight I felt from receiving a raise was just as quickly spoiled by my returning sense of

unease. “I’m sure some of you have taken notice of the inconsequential, for lack of a better word, nature of your jobs up until now. Yes, you’ve put some criminals behind bars, but they’ve all been petty criminals, small-time thieves, drug dealers, and the like. You’ve yet to deal with the truly dangerous criminals of the world, the type that getting them off the streets and into a cell would save innocent lives. The type of criminal who would, at least in my opinion, be worthy of your talents.”

Spencer and I shared an uncertain glance. On my other side, Lacey and Hailey’s smiles had faded.

“You’re probably wondering what this entails,” Gabriel said as he opened his briefcase and pulled out a thick file. “I’ll cut to the chase: Last year, the bodies of 72 Central American immigrants were found by authorities in an abandoned ranch in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. The Mexican officials determined that those to blame for this massacre belonged to Los Zetas, one of the country’s most aggressive cartels, and several dozen arrests were made in the aftermath. Last Tuesday, however, 59 new bodies were dug up from a series of mass graves in the same municipality, San Fernando, and authorities fear that a repeat of last year’s massacre has happened again, within the past couple of months. An investigation was launched immediately, leading to the discovery of even more mass graves. Just this morning, 23 more bodies were unearthed, bringing the death count to 145, and with the investigation ongoing, they’re expecting to find many more.”

I could feel my breath hastening with every word. *Don’t tell me you’re expecting us to deal with this. I’ve risked my life too many times already to be confronting mass murderers.*

Lacey gently caressed my arm in a pacifying gesture I was becoming ever more accustomed to while she spoke up.

“Isn’t this something for the Mexican authorities to handle?”

“Of course,” Gabriel affirmed, “but who do you think would be better suited for the task? A small force – a militaristic force, sure – but one comprised of mere mortals, or a squadron of near-invincible professionals with the backing of the most powerful government on the planet?” Gabriel paused to give Lacey time to reply, but not even she could refute his logical answer. Even though his point was made, he continued, “plus, one of the bodies was identified as an American DEA agent, so the CIA have a heavily vested interest in the matter. Which reminds me, since this will be an external operation, you will be acting under the moniker of the CIA instead of the FBI. Any other questions?”

“When will the operation begin?” Spencer’s voice cracked.

“You’ll depart the day after tomorrow, for Texas, where you’ll rendezvous with local authorities who’ll fill you in on the details. I don’t imagine the operation will take longer than a few days. The Mexican Army has already narrowed down a list of possible hideouts that the perpetrators could be using. Anything else?”

No one spoke.

“Good. Well, there’s one last thing. Spencer, you’ll be in charge, and Todd, you won’t be participating.”

“What?” Both brothers cried out in unison. Spencer’s mouth gaped and his eyes darted around for an answer. Todd looked surprised for the first time since the briefing began.

“If we want our agency to be a force to be reckoned with, we need to cultivate outstanding leadership capabilities in every single member of the team. We cannot rely on the same two or three people to lead every assignment, else where would we be if those usual leaders were out of commission? Do either of you object to this arrangement?”

Todd appeared more annoyed than anything, while Spencer appeared to have his shock under control. Neither man objected.

“Very good. Now, I believe that’s everything.” Gabriel clasped the buckles of his briefcase shut and stood, leaving the thick document on the table before him. “Remember, I wouldn’t have arranged for this task if I thought it was beyond you. You’re all very talented – these last two months attest to that. I have no doubt that you’ll all make me proud, and maybe even rouse some pride in yourselves.” All eyes in the room followed Gabriel to the door. “For today and tomorrow, you’re free to catch up on reports or get some extra training done. Take some time for yourselves, too.”

With those parting words, the boss was gone, leaving most of us in a stunned silence.

Cordelia, who hadn’t said a word during the entire meeting, broke the silence with a sigh.

“This ought to be quite burdensome.” She rose, clutching her purse and retrieving her jacket from the back of her chair. “Well, I’ll leave it to you lot to figure things out. Apparently, I have arrangements to make for my upcoming absence at the Queen.” With that, the pub-owner took her leave, neglecting to push in her chair as she did.

“I just don’t get it,” Todd said listlessly. “I don’t get what he’s thinking, sometimes.”

“I know,” Lacey echoed, “sending us to Mexico? What the hell?”

Todd raised an eyebrow. “Huh? No, I mean, why would he put Spencer in charge of such an important operation, and not even include me?”

“You mean, you don’t have any objections to the fact that we’re being sent to essentially invade another country?”

“It’s hardly an invasion,” Todd scoffed. “You’ll be helping keep innocent Mexicans safe, not attacking them.”

“But why us?” Lacey said, putting increasingly more emphasis on each successive word. “It’s not the US’s problem to solve. We shouldn’t be interfering.”

“Interfering?” Todd let out a single chuckle. Genuine amusement was a rarity, coming from him. “You’d consider apprehending criminals, keeping their streets safe, to be interfering? I consider that to be helping.”

“As a matter of fact, Todd,” Lacey spat, “there’s a difference between helping and doing someone else’s job for them, and one of them is the very definition of interfering.”

Todd rolled his eyes. “So, you think the Mexicans should handle things themselves? That hasn’t seemed to have worked out for them, so far, what with all the cartels roaming the streets and a murder rate over three times that of the States.”

“Well, they have been disadvantaged by the US’s war on drugs creating a multibillion-dollar smuggling industry in their country. After all, it’s wealthy Americans that are buying and using all the drugs that get smuggled. Not to mention, where do you think the cartels are getting their American-made guns?” Lacey was leaning forward on her forearms, which were folded on the table in front of her.

“So, you think the States caused the problem, but you don’t think that we should help clean it up. Got it.” Todd got up and pushed in his chair. “I’ve got better things to do than listen to this nonsense. If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my office.”

“You’re missing the point,” Lacey called after him as he stalked out of the room. Upon being ignored, she huffed and folded her arms as she sank back into her chair.

“Stubborn, isn’t he?” Adrien was smirking; he had been for some time. “*Tête de mule* is what we say about people like him, back home.”

“And what do you think?” Lacey asked, exasperated.

His smirk disappeared, but only for a second. “Well, I think it’s a debate worth having, but unfortunately, I don’t think we’ll have the luxury of choice. A decision has already been made on the matter.”

Lacey gave a wry smile. “You’d make a good politician. What do the rest of you think?”

“You made some good points, Lacey,” said Hailey, her blue eyes shining with curiosity. “I never thought about things like that. How do you know so much about the situation in Mexico, anyway?”

“Well, I’m from San Diego. I’ve got a lot of Latin American family, and I’ve been across the border a few times. It’s all worth knowing, anyway.”

“I just don’t know why Gabriel would put me in charge,” Spencer said, changing the subject as he shook his head in disbelief. “Am I qualified for this? Are we qualified for this?”

“Hey, that’s not how a leader should talk,” Adrien urged. “You need to have unwavering confidence in yourself, no matter what.”

Spencer mulled over these words, then took a deep breath and said, “Yeah, you’re right. This is the hand I’ve been dealt.” He managed a smile. “Sorry, I won’t let you all down.”

I admired Spencer’s strength. *It’s clear that he’s afraid, but he’s willing to make a brave face even under the weight of responsibility that leadership brings. I wish I could be like that.* I couldn’t even begin to imagine what I would do in his shoes. It felt wrong to admit, but knowing he was under so much pressure made the pressure I was under feel smaller, more bearable.

As for the situation as a whole, I was somewhat torn. Lacey made some good points about America meddling where it doesn’t belong, and of course, on a personal level, I didn’t want to go confront a group of professional mass-murderers. On the other hand, why should anyone else have to confront them, someone without the advantages that we have? And Adrien was right: we didn’t have a choice. This is our job. Even if I quit, I couldn’t bear the thought of abandoning the others and leaving them to get killed.

“And where are you at, Jake?” Lacey asked.

“I don’t really know anything about international politics or foreign relations, so I don’t think I’m qualified to answer the question of whether or not we should be involved,” I said. “But now that we are involved, I’ll do everything I can to help save as many lives as possible.”

Her raised eyebrow told me she hadn’t been expecting that answer. Maybe she was expecting me to be more on her side. Her brow furrowed as she thought my answer through, and for a moment she seemed conflicted, but she eventually gave a satisfied nod.

“I suppose that, as long as we remember our place as foreigners and we don’t cause any trouble, it wouldn’t be too problematic for us to help out.”

After that, the conversation faded into farewells, and everyone went their separate ways. Adrien left to find Todd, while Hailey headed to the common office area to finish writing some insubstantial report with Lacey in tow to keep her company. For my own part, I made my way to the training room to practise my combat skills. The more prepared I felt, after all, the less anxious I knew I'd be.

I arrived to find Spencer already hammering away at a punching bag with his fist. When I took off my blazer and dropped it to the floor, Spencer stopped his onslaught and looked over at me.

“Hey,” he flicked his wrist to give a curt wave. “Here to brush up on your techniques to prepare?”

“Yeah, you?”

“Same idea.” He turned back to the punching bag and took another swing at it.

As he battered the hanging bag, I held out my hand and channelled my energy into it. My bracelet let out a flash of brilliant blue and the light gathered in my open hand to become solid. I swung the familiar glassy sword as it appeared, listening to the satisfying swoosh of the blade cutting through air. The two of us spent ten or fifteen minutes with no words, only the thuds of Spencer's fists against leather and the slicing sounds that accompanied my practice swings.

“Don't be over-reliant on your powers. You should practise your hand-to-hand combat, too.”

My mind flashed back to the first day I set foot in this room, back when I had fought Spencer in order to assess my skills. Even though I had tried to beat him with my powers, he

handily defeated me whilst unarmed. I wondered how much I'd grown since then, more than half a year ago.

“Do you want to practise together?” I offered.

“Looking to get revenge for your skills assessment?” His face was stoic and I couldn't tell if he was joking or not, so I decided to play along.

“Something like that,” I laughed.

He did crack a smile, then.

“Get ready, then.”

We removed our shoes and took our places on either side of a padded mat. I clenched my fist, crushing my sword back into nothingness.

Without saying a word, he came at me. With his fist veering towards my head, I realised how far I'd come. I easily twisted out of the way of his punch and countered with my own jab, which Spencer caught in his other hand. He squeezed my fist and tried to drag me closer, but I leaned into the momentum of his pull and tackled him to the ground. As soon as he released his grip on me, I somersaulted away from him and back onto my feet.

Spencer was already back on one knee, so I seized the opportunity to launch my own attack before he could stand. I took a large stride towards him with my left leg and twisted my body to deliver a powerful kick with my right. I connected with his forearm while he used his other arm to push himself to his feet. As I tried to follow up my kick with a punch, Spencer was a moment quicker in sweeping me off my feet.

This is so much easier than last time, I thought, rolling away as he tried to stomp on me. Of course it is, after everything I've been through. He doesn't have a bat, or a gun, or a knife. If I can deal with those things, I can deal with this.

I was back on my feet, but Spencer didn't let me catch a break. He swung at me repeatedly in a barrage of straight jabs, but I blocked or moved out of the way of every hit. He followed up with another sweeping kick only to swipe at the air as I leapt away. Spencer was off-balance from missing his kick, so I lunged forward to deliver a punch of my own. He blocked it, stumbling back as he did. I lunged forth again, and this time, my fist caught him square in the jaw and he collapsed to the ground.

As I peered over his body to make sure he was all right, he grabbed my ankle and yanked my leg out from under me. I landed with my back on the cushiony mat and brace myself for a follow-up attack.

"I think that's good for now, wouldn't you say?" Spencer pushed himself off the ground.

"Sure, right after you get the last hit in," I joked. My sparring partner held out a hand to help me up.

"You're a lot better," he commented. "But don't check on an enemy to see how hurt they are. Compassion is a good thing, a wonderful thing, and you should never get rid of it. But don't let anyone take advantage of you because of it."

I smiled as I nodded.

"You know," I told him, "You shouldn't worry about being a good leader. You definitely have what it takes."

He walked over to his coat on the floor against the wall, pulled it over his shoulders, took his glasses from one of the pockets and placed them on his face. I had a hard time reading his facial expression. His mouth was a straight line, and his eyes seems lost in thought.

“Let’s hope so,” he said, after a while. His mouth smiled, but that pensive look never left his eyes.

Chapter 16

Spencer Delosier

I squinted through the thick wall of clouds outside of my window, trying and failing to spot anything beyond, as the jet that carried us soared 40,000 feet somewhere over Texas. Abandoning the window, I looked around at my colleagues. Hailey and Adrien had somehow managed to fall asleep while Lacey and Jake, who were seated across from them, were having a chat, but I couldn't hear what they were saying over the aircraft's engine. Cordelia, meanwhile, was sitting by herself, taking full advantage of our first-class treatment with a glass of champagne in one hand while the other typed away at some business of another on her laptop.

The six of us are my responsibility, and mine alone. I took hold of the necklace's pendant, cradling it in my palm and admiring its green lustre. My thoughts couldn't help but turn to Todd, and the conversation we'd had when he had given me the necklace the day prior.

"Here, take this, and good luck," he had said. "And hey, I probably overreacted yesterday. Gabriel must have his reasons and I'm sure you'll do fine."

"How can you be so sure?" was my reply.

"That you'll be fine?"

"No, that Gabriel must have his reasons."

"How many times do we have to have this conversation, Spencer? We need to have faith in those on top. Gabriel was chosen to be our leader by the government's highest officials. He must know what he's doing."

From as far back as I can remember, Todd has always prioritized rules over anything else. For him, rules provide structure, and structure is necessary for a society to run. It fits, given that we were raised by two police officers. I have a similar respect for leadership, but Todd's reverence went well beyond respect. Todd was much stricter than either of our parents had ever been. He was a teacher's pet in school, and he's always been a chronic backseat driver. As soon as he had his diploma, he resolved to follow in our parents' footsteps and by the time he was twenty-one, he had passed all of the NYPD's exams with flying colours and was ready to be appointed an officer.

Todd's worldview had completely solidified by the time our father was arrested and sent to prison for fraud. Some of the higher-ups in the department had gone crooked and found a scheme in which they could turn a profit from falsely accusing innocent people of their own crimes. When our father eventually discovered this corruption, they ordered him to stay silent, but he couldn't. He tried to bring his bosses to justice and they, in turn, pinned much of what they had been doing behind the City's back on him.

I can't imagine the betrayal my father must have felt at the fact that the department he'd dedicated his life to, the department in which he'd met our mother, would do this to him, but it must have been nothing compared to the betrayal he would have felt when Todd, his own flesh and blood, believed his accusers over him. My mother and I were the only ones who fought to maintain his innocence, while Todd even went so far as to abandon the Delosier family name for our mother's maiden name, much to her dismay.

"I don't want to be stained with the name of a criminal," he'd said on more than one occasion.

Even when bribes were exchanged in the prison system to assure that no guards would be assigned to protect our dad, Todd never faltered in his conviction up until the day they found a shiv sticking out of our father's lifeless neck.

"He didn't deserve that," Todd would admit, but would discuss the matter no further with anyone. That was seven years ago, and we haven't had any meaningful conversations about the subject since, and not for lack of trying. Our poor mother couldn't be more distraught at the idea that her beloved husband's legacy will forever be tarnished in Todd's eyes.

To say I don't understand what Todd is thinking is an understatement, but I can't help but hazard a guess that his misplaced faith in authority is what keeps him going. After all, everyone needs to have some ideal to cling onto, whether spiritual or philosophic, that gives them hope. For me, it's truth that I choose to believe in, not some arbitrary set of rules or laws. In any case, whatever faith I had in authority was erased the moment that the law condemned my father, an innocent man trying to tell the truth. It was then that I began on the path to becoming a freelance investigative journalist, up until I was roped into this whole situation. I wanted the truth to be transparent for as many people as possible, and I wanted to expose those who would spout lies to cover their own asses.

And yet, here I am, miles above a state that I've never set foot in, heading to a foreign country to lead a group of superpowered government agents to fight a drug cartel. If the me from two years ago could see me now, he'd wonder what kind of drugs I'd been taking to conjure such a nonsensical psychosis.

The jet began its descent, breaching the thick layer of clouds so that I could finally see the sights below. The distinctly dark greens of live oak trees were juxtaposed against the softer

greens, yellows, and browns of farmland. In the distance, I could just make out the narrow coastal isles that served as a buffer between the Gulf of Mexico and the Lone Star State.

We touched down on the sole runway of a small private airport on the outskirts of Brownsville. The pilot, a CIA operative, helped retrieve our luggage from the hold.

On the other side of the tarmac, two men wearing windbreakers emblazoned with 'DEA' in large, yellow letters were standing beside two unmarked SUVs. One of the men waved us over. As we got closer, I could make out that the man who was waving was an older white man, while the younger man at his side had more of a tanned skin tone. Meanwhile, as the older man watched us approach, he scrunched up his face in confusion.

"You..." He stammered as we reached earshot. "Are y'all really the representatives from the CIA?"

"Yessir," I presented my badge from the pocket of my blazer.

"But you're nothin' but a bunch of kids," he exclaimed before I could explain further. "Who's in charge, here? You?" He turned to Adrien.

"No," the Frenchman replied. He put a hand on my shoulder. "That honour goes to my friend, here."

The DEA agent took a step towards me. He was a tall man; I had to tilt my head up to look into his scrutinous eyes.

"You're in charge? You can't be older than thirty, and you're the leader?" his gruff voice grated my ears.

“I’m twenty-seven,” I admitted, “but it’s not like that matters. What matters is that the CIA sent us. Are you really doubting their judgement?” With dismay, I realized that I sounded just like my brother, and my momentary spark of rage turned to embarrassment.

“Struck a nerve, did I?” The agent smirked and adjusted his cowboy hat as he turned to his partner. “What do you think, Espinoza?”

The younger man was leaning against the hood of the nearest SUV with his arms crossed and his face unamused. “It doesn’t really matter, does it? This is the group they sent down, and this is the group we’ll work with.”

The first man sighed. “You’re right about that. All right, kiddos,” he turned back to us, “pick a car and hop in.”

Cordelia and Adrien piled into the backseat of the frontmost SUV, while I pulled myself into the passenger seat. The Texan, who introduced himself as Henry Browns, hopped into the driver’s seat and started the engine.

When the others were all loaded into Espinoza’s vehicle, Mr. Browns began to drive into town as his partner followed behind.

It only took a few minutes for us to arrive at the border. The US Customs agent recognized the DEA agent and waved us through without a search. At the Mexican border station, they let us go when Mr. Browns showed them his badge and said something to them in Spanish.

“So...” Henry said once we were moving again. “What was your name, again?”

“Spencer.”

“Right. So, Spencer, do you know anything about who you’re up against?”

It was too embarrassing to admit that I didn’t, particularly when it was obvious that Mr. Browns didn’t think much of me already. I cursed Gabriel for not supplying us with more information sooner. Shouldn’t we have had a much more detailed briefing by now, for such an important and dangerous task?

“I only know that they’re members of a cartel called the Los Zetas.”

“Well then, I reckon I’ve got some explaining to do.”

Our convoy of two made its way through the city of Matamoros until we reached highway 101. For some reason, I’ve always had the idea that the other side of the border would be desert, but the pastures on either side of the road could have been straight out of a particularly impoverished area of the Midwest. The only signifier I had that I wasn’t still in the U.S. were the road signs that I, despite their familiar symbols, colours, and fonts, could barely read with what little I could remember from the Spanish class I took in high school. The architecture, too, was different, perhaps more cubical, but not as different as I had expected.

“They call this road the Highway of Death,” Henry said.

“Oh. Why?”

“It’s a popular drug route and a cartel hotspot. Carjackings, drive-by shootings, all kinds of degenerate shit. Sometimes they’ll leave decapitated bodies on the side of the road, just as a warning not to mess with them. They’re evil people, I’ll tell you.”

As we passed a farmhouse, I noted another distinguishing feature that set it apart from a typical American farmhouse: the fence that surrounded the property was not wooden and its

purpose was not to keep animals in. It was tall, made of metal, topped with barbed wire, and it had a thick lock chained around the front gate. Within the fence, a little boy and a little girl were kicking a ball between them while a pit bull barked enthusiastically as it circled the playing children in an attempt to join in their game. My heart panged for them, that they were forced to live in such a dangerous area by no fault of their own.

“And it’s the Los Zetas doing all of this?” I asked.

“For sure, but they’re not alone.” Mr. Browns cleared his throat. “You see, the Los Zetas started out as a faction of the much larger Gulf Cartel – have you heard of them?”

The name sounded familiar enough that I nodded. Browns gave me a brief look, and I couldn’t tell if he believed me or not.

“Right, well, the Zetas were made up of ex-commandos that ditched the Mexican army for the much more lucrative smuggling business. They had the skills and equipment of soldiers, and they used them to bring new levels of violence to the trafficking game. As the start of last year, though, they had a falling out with the wider Gulf Cartel, and the two groups have been at war ever since. And just so you know – and I’m not saying this to scare you or anything, it’s important – if they get the better of you and your group, here, they will make a message out of you, and by that, I mean that they’ll torture you to death and film it.”

My comfort with this mission had slowly been improving, but my body involuntarily tensed up and I felt beads of sweat beginning to form all over my head at that last sentence.

“Thanks for the warning,” I stammered.

“I really hope there’s more to you than meets the eye. Do you people have previous experience dealing with gangs, or something?”

“We are trained and equipped with the States’ latest and most advanced technology,” I chose my words carefully. “I’m afraid that the details are classified, but rest assured, we will not falter.”

Mr. Browns gave me a nervous look, then refocused on the road. “I don’t see and fancy equipment, but I’ll take your word for it. Better you than me, anyway.”

I finally realized why Gabriel didn’t give us more details himself. If he had, no one in their right mind would consent to partake. I flicked my eyes to the backseat to see if the others felt the same, but Adrien and Cordelia both appeared unsurprised or, at least, unconcerned. I wondered if the man called Espinoza was having a similar conversation with Jake, Lacey, and Hailey in the SUV behind us.

After an hour and some change, we passed through San Fernando, the site of the massacres, both last year’s and the one we’re responding to. Mr. Browns pointed out one of the mass gravesites as we passed, as well as the location where the bus that the victims had been travelling in had been hijacked.

“God bless their souls,” he shook his head. “The poor bastards. They had a hard end. Apparently, they made the men fight to the death and then forcibly recruited the victors. You don’t want to know what they did to the women, but you can probably guess.”

Jesus, I didn’t think this could get any worse. Again, I found myself wondering how much Espinoza was telling the others.

We continued along the Highway of Death for another two hours, during which time I did my best to make small talk with Mr. Browns. I learned that he has been a member of the DEA since the '80s, he speaks only enough Spanish to get by, and that his headgear was part of a collection of more than two dozen 10-gallon hats.

“Really?” I asked. “I’m a bit of a collector, myself.”

“I didn’t know that,” I heard Adrien remark. “What do you collect?”

“Stamps, for the most part. I have a smaller coin collection, too.”

“That’s unique for someone your age,” Henry commented. “Anyway, we’re here,” he nodded to a passing road sign. “Ciudad Victoria, the capital of the state. The men who are said to be responsible for the massacre have fled to a ranch on the edge of the city. They’re working for a man who goes by El Kilo.”

The sun was setting behind a distant chain of mountains to the west and the orange light it had been casting was beginning to fade. After driving for another mile or two, Mr. Browns exited off the highway into the parking lot of a motel. Espinoza’s SUV pulled up next to ours.

“This is where we’ve been instructed to take you,” the Texan told us, as we got out of the vehicle. “It should be safe. There are two rooms ready and waiting for you.”

Whilst I reflected on what he could have meant by “should be,” Cordelia sighed. “Surely, they could have opted for something with at least a little class.” She was looking at the billboard advertisement at the side of the highway, coated on both sides with graffiti.

“Of course you’d say that,” Lacey laughed as she, Jake, and Hailey rejoined us.

Espinoza walked over to me and pushed a stack of papers into my hands. Paperclipped to the top of the stack was a photo of a wide faced man with a shaved head underneath which the name 'El Kilo' was written.

"Thanks," I said. After an awkward moment, I asked, "is there anything else that we should know?"

"Be careful," he answered. "More careful than you've ever been in your lives. These people will use the dirtiest, rottenest tactics you can imagine. They would use hostages in a heartbeat."

"All right, Victor, let's get going," Browns called from the driver's side of his car.

Espinoza nodded, looked me once more in the eye, then walked away.

"Good luck," Browns said to us. "We'll be staying nearby. You have my number if you need backup, or anything else. Stay safe."

We watched the jet-black SUV, now stained with dust from the journey, as they merged back onto the highway and further into the city. They left the other SUV for our own use.

The sun had disappeared behind the mountains by this point, and the darkness was setting in. Once the taillights of our guides had faded into the dark, I turned to Jake.

"Did that guy, Victor... How much did he tell you?"

"He told us about the bodies they found last year," Jake replied. "And how they were all bound and gagged before they were killed. He also talked a bit about what they think happened based on the gravesites they found, but he was pretty quiet for most of the drive."

“He had good taste in music, though,” Lacey chimed in. As much as I admired her attempts to lighten the mood, I couldn’t help but wonder if this was the appropriate time for such frivolity.

Adrien put a hand on my shoulder. “So, what’s the plan, boss?”

“We act in the morning.” I flipped through the paper in my hands and found a map. “I’ll fill you in on the plan after we’ve rested up and gotten something to eat.” *And after I think of it.*

- - -

The hideout that El Kilo and his men were using was a small, single-story ranch house on a tiny, unassuming cattle farm on some backroad just outside the city limits. We had parked the SUV on the shoulder a minute up the road, with me and Adrien in the front seats, and Hailey, Jake, and Lacey in the back. I examined the mechanisms on the dashboard as we waited.

Eventually, there was a flash of pink light from just outside my window followed by a tap on the glass. I held down the button to lower the window and looked up at Cordelia.

“There are twelve of them,” she said, “or at least, that’s how many I could see from the windows. They’re all wearing what look to be bullet-proof vests, and there are also three men that look like hostages.”

“Thank you, and awesome work.” I turned so that those in the backseat could hear more easily. “All right, listen up. We have two distinct advantages, which we’ll be using to the fullest: they shouldn’t be able to see our powers, and, theoretically, they shouldn’t be able to understand us.” I paused to make sure everyone was on the same page. “Here’s the plan. First, Lacey, I want you to start a fire to cut off any escape route. With no escape, they’ll be forced to confront us

directly, which they'll probably use their hostages to do." I pointed a thumb towards the dashboard. "This car is equipped with a megaphone. We'll pretend to negotiate – Adrien, you translate – while I use my power to get close enough to separate them from the hostages. Jake, I want you to make armour for everyone, as usual, and Adrien, I want you to enhance the armour's strength. Hailey, you and Cordelia should stand by so that in case someone gets hurt, you can deal with them. Does everyone understand?"

All five of my teammates nodded, and so we put the plan into motion.

Adrien drove us up the road and parked directly in front of the ranch. Curtains shifted in the window, but other than that, the house was quiet.

Five of us got out of the car, enveloped in the blue light of Jake's armour, while Cordelia appeared from another flash of pink a moment later. As Jake reached out to Cordelia to surround her with her own blue armour, Lacey held out an arm towards the nearest part of the wooden fence that surrounded the property. The ruby on her bracelet lit up while the air around the fence morphed into a swirl of brilliant crimson flames. The wooden fence served as a conduit for Lacey's red fire as it spread almost instantaneously across to the other corners of the empty farm. More natural-looking orange flames were left wherever the red flames passed over and, soon enough, the entire fence was lit up in a large but controlled blaze.

Adrien, meanwhile, had finished enhancing Jake's power with his own and reached through the car's window for the microphone receptor. His amplified voice blared through the loudspeakers as he commanded all the occupants of the building to come out and surrender, in Spanish. Jake and I unholstered our Glocks and stood in the open gate, the only part of the fence that wasn't burning.

After a few tense moments backdropped by the crackling of flame, the front door of the farmhouse swung open. The man who stepped out was holding a pistol in front of him, but he was not wearing a bullet-proof vest, or any gear at all, for that matter. His thin clothes were torn and he was barefoot, and his face looked bruised and bleeding. A larger man, clad all in black, stood behind him with one hand grasping the back of the hostage's neck and the other holding an assault rifle to his spine.

“Suelten las armas,” the man in black bellowed. *“O le volaré la cabeza!”*

“Drop your guns or they’ll kill him,” Adrien translated.

Jake and I let our pistols fall to the ground. At the same time, a vine sprouted from my palm and dropped to the ground as well.

The cartel member barked another order.

“He’s telling us to get back in the car and leave,” Adrien said.

“Tell him that we will if they release the hostages,” I told him.

As he relayed the message, my vine began slithering through the overgrown grass towards the building. The man in black pushed the hostage farther out onto the patio. From the doorway behind them, two more armed hostages each with a Zeta member hiding behind them. I recognized one of the Zetas as El Kilo, and this time, it was him that spoke.

“Go now,” he yelled, in English. “Or we shoot.”

“We will,” I yelled back, “if you let them go.”

Adrien began to translate, but he was cut off by the sound of a gunshot.

The bullet ricocheted against my chest plate and tore a hole in the ground next to me, stirring a plumb of dust. It was El Kilo's hostage who had pulled the trigger, his hands still trembling.

"*Más,*" Kilo shouted, over and over, violently jerking around the man at his mercy. More gunshots sounded as the hostage emptied his clip, each bullet either missing or deflected by our armour. The hostage was joined by the others, who also emptied their guns in a frenzied flurry of lead. My vine, meanwhile, had covered almost three quarters of the distance between us and the hideout.

Once the air was silent again, Adrien repeated our response: we will not leave unless the hostages are freed.

The tip of my vine splintered into three, with each of the branches slowly growing up the side of the patio. When I was just about in position to launch my attack, four more cartel members burst through the front door and all hell broke loose.

"*Cuidado,*" one of the men was shouting and pointing frantically. "*Vides verdes!*"

Adrien gasped. "Spencer, they can see your vines!"

What? That's not possible!

I froze, watching as the panicking Zeta pointed his handgun at the closest strand of vine and fired three shots. Only one bullet hit the mark, but it was enough to cut the vine in two. The tip that has been severed shattered into tiny fragments of green light as it hit the ground. The other cartel members unloaded their own clips in our direction. El Kilo readjusted his grip on his hostage so that the barrel of the gun was against the man's temple.

“One move,” El Kilo roared, “he’s dead.”

My mind seemed to work as fast as the bullets whizzing past either side of me. I knew they’d kill the hostage if Cordelia teleported or if Jake made a move, and Lacey is focused on controlling the fire. I was the only one who could do anything.

“Adrien,” I said, trying to sound calm, “stop enhancing Jake’s power and enhance mine instead.”

For the briefest moment, Adrien hesitated, a wary look in his eyes, but then the ring on his hand flashed orange and I felt a surge of energy coarse though my body. The dim green light emanating from my vines turned orange as they became stronger, thornier, and easier to control.

The Zeta who had first seen my vines began shooting at them again, but the stem flicked back and forth, weaving through the bullets. El Kilo turned his head at the noise, and before he could do anything, the orange vine sliced upwards, cutting through the air like a whip, into his arm. The gun he’d been holding flew uselessly into the air, unfired.

As El Kilo screamed, clutching at the invisible thorns in his arm, his men fired another volley. A bullet found my arm and this time, instead of deflecting the bullet, my blue gauntlet shattered into light. My helmet broke as another bullet found its mark, followed quickly by my chest plate, and two more whizzed by my ear. At the same time, I was maneuvering and multiplying my vines as quickly as I could.

The patio was turning into a thick jungle of orange vines until, in one swift moment, they struck all at once. They wrapped around the wrists of the six remaining cartel members and jerked them upwards to that their weapons flew in all different directions. The hostages, terrified

beyond measure, threw down their empty guns and cowered on the ground, finally free from the grips of their captors.

“There should be more of them inside,” I started running towards the house with Jake hot on my heels. “Get the hostages to Hailey, quick.”

The five thugs that were still inside the ranch home didn’t put up much of a fight. Once they realised that the majority of their gang had already been restrained, including their leader, they surrendered their weapons and held up their hands. Their poor preparation told me they hadn’t even considered the possibility that their comrades would need their backup.

By the time we had all twelve Zetas in handcuffs and Hailey had healed all three hostages, a fleet of police and army vehicles had pulled up to the ranch with their sirens blaring. At the front of the convoy was the familiar SUV of Agents Browns and Espinoza.

“Is it over already?” Henry Browns was incredulous.

“It is,” was all I said.

Espinoza looked over at the hostages, who were surrounding Hailey, trying their best to convey their thanks to the girl who didn’t speak their language. He looked back to me and nodded, and for the first time, he cracked a smile.

“Well,” Henry began, once he’d recovered from his shock. “I suppose we can leave it to the Mexican officials to clean up from here. We should start heading back.” He patted my shoulder. “Well done.”

I called out for the others. Jake was supporting Lacey, who was sweating from the effort of controlling the now extinguished flames. Hailey and Cordelia were saying goodbye to the

hostages and making their way towards us. Adrien was talking with one of the Mexican commanders, and I thought I saw him hand the other man some cash, but I couldn't be sure.

“Let's go, Adrien,” I called, and the redhead turned from the commander and walked over to me. When he was close enough, I leaned in to ask, “what was that?”

“I was just encouraging him to minimize our involvement in the official reports,” he whispered.

“Good idea.” I sighed with relief. “It's a good thing you're here. I don't know how I would have done this without you.”

Chapter 17

Hailey Kinder

I knocked on the door and took a step back, clutching the vanilla cake I'd bought from the grocery store on my walk over.

"Hi Hailey," Lacey greeted me as she opened the door. "What's this?" she indicated the cake.

"I thought I'd bring over a snack for everyone."

Lacey suppressed her laughter. "That's more of a dessert, don't you think?"

"Snacks and desserts aren't mutually exclusive."

"Fair enough." She opened the door and ushered me into the apartment. Spencer was sitting in an armchair in the corner of the living room, while Jake lounged on one side of the matching sofa. I greeted both men as I noticed them, then I set my cake down on the coffee table amongst mostly full bottles of liquors and mixers.

"Are Cordelia and Adrien coming?" I asked, taking a seat on the opposite side of the couch from Jake.

Lacey rolled her eyes. "I invited them, but they're too busy or whatever."

"That makes sense. Cordelia probably has a lot to deal with at her pub, and Adrien always seems to be doing some experiments. Actually, he asked me to help him with some, tomorrow."

“Yeah,” Lacey sighed, sitting Jake and I. “it makes sense, but you’d think they’d at least take a day off. It was only yesterday that we were risking our lives in Tamaulipas.”

Spencer, who had been cradling a rum and coke in his lap, brough his drink to his lips and finished it before pouring himself another.

“Spencer,” I said. He looked up from his drink. “Thanks for doing such an amazing job as leader.”

Lacey nodded her agreement. “We would probably all be dead, if not for you.”

“You would have figured something out,” a red-faced Spencer stammered. “It wasn’t a very complicated plan.”

“But it was a good one,” Lacey took a glass of tequila from the coffee table and raised it above her head. “Cheers to Spencer’s leadership.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t happen too often,” Spencer added. The three of them drank.

“Help yourself,” Lacey told me, nodding to the array of alcohol before us.

I poured a splash of Smirnoff vodka into a glass and tried it, then, recoiling at the taste, I filled the rest of the glass with coke.

“So, what did everyone think of Mexico?” Lacey asked.

“Beautiful place,” I said, her question having stirred some excitement within me. “It’s such a shame that my first time there was so gruesome, but it’s definitely on my bucket list to go back and see the less dangerous parts of the country.”

“I’d like to visit again, too,” said Jake. “But it’s so hot. If we end up going again, we should aim to do it in the winter.”

“Winter is the best time for it,” Lacey agreed. “My family used to take a vacation every winter to the tip of the Baja California peninsula. You know, we should do this, just the four of us. Whenever we have some vacation time saved up, let’s have a peaceful yet exciting trip down South. Was yesterday the furthest south any of you have ever been?”

“By far,” I replied. Jake and Spencer were nodding.

I thought about the notebook buried in my purse, and about the page labeled ‘Latin America’ and the many names of landmarks scribbled below.

“I’d like to go even further south, some day,” I thought aloud. “I want to see the Amazon and the Panama Canal. I want to visit the ruins of Machu Picchu. I want to stand on the edge of the world, at the tip of Tierra del Fuego.”

“This is sounding more and more like the perfect vacation,” Lacey beamed. “What do you two think?”

Jake and Spencer hesitated.

“That’s all a bit much, wouldn’t you say?” Spencer said. “I mean, all at once, at least. Why don’t we take it one little step at a time? A country-hopping journey just sounds a little too exciting for me, but I wouldn’t mind going back to Mexico for a day or two, so long as we stay away from the cartels.”

“I’d be up for that,” Jake agreed. “If you’d really want me to come.”

“Why wouldn’t we want you to come,” Lacey exclaimed, playfully pushing his shoulder. “Don’t be silly.”

Butterflies were swarming in my chest and I couldn’t keep the goofy grin off of my face. For the first time in my life, I had something to look forward to. As I listened to Lacey ramble excitedly about all of the sightseeing spots in Mexico that she remembered as a kid, from the National Museum of Anthropology to the ruins of Chichen Itza, I fiddled with the golden ring on my finger. *Finding this ring was the best thing that could have ever happened to me.*

Growing up, I never ate three meals a day. I was lucky if I got one meal, whenever my mom could afford it from the leftover money she hadn’t wasted on her dirty habits. From an early age, I learned that I had to support myself independently if I wanted to survive. I worked under the counter for some of the shopkeepers around the neighbourhood until I could legally get a job working the drive-thru at McDonald’s when I was fourteen. I never thought I would ever get to set foot outside of Indianapolis, let alone the country, and yet, thanks to Gabriel and this opportunity he has given me, I’ve been to Canada, England, and Mexico, all within the span of a year. I’ve also gotten to meet some amazing people to call friends, and now I’m even planning a vacation with them! Two years back, I never would have thought that this kind of luck was possible.

Sure, there have been some downsides. It’s terrifying, knowing you could get hurt or even killed any day, and I’d love to be able to live the rest of my life without ever again feeling the knot I get in the pit of my stomach when I know the others are in danger. At the same time, though, it’s nice to be needed, especially knowing that my presence can help keep everyone safe. I’d felt needed at my previous jobs, of course, but there’s really no comparison between your boss needing you to stock a shelf and your teammate needing a life-saving medical treatment that

only you can provide. It may be possible to find purpose in the former, but not once you've experienced the latter.

Lacey's eventually shifted from wistful to bored, then livened up again as an idea came to her. "We should play something," she said. "I've got some board games." She got up and left the room, returning a moment later carrying a tower of colourful boxes. "What does everyone think, huh? I've got Monopoly, Jenga, Buckaroo... Oh, and Guess Who? No, wait, that's only for two players."

Monopoly was the only game she had listed that I had ever played, or had even heard of, but I was too embarrassed to say as much. An old friend of mine from middle school had a version of Monopoly, but it had American landmarks and cities instead of the fictional real-estate of the original game.

"I'd be okay with Monopoly," I said.

"Any objections?"

Spencer took another swig of his rum and coke, but there were no objections.

Lacey set down the pile of boxes and took Monopoly from the top. As she pulled out the pieces and started handing the fake money out like a dealer handing out playing cards, I popped open the plastic case of my vanilla cake and pushed away the familiar pang of regret that I felt whenever I thought about what my childhood could have been.

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Adrien held open the door to the medical laboratory, giving me a warm smile as I entered. Dr. Peter Bright, who had been sitting behind his pristine desk, lifted his eyes from the clipboard full of documents that he had been scrutinizing.

“Hello, Hailey,” the doctor greeted me with his typical cheery enthusiasm. “Thank you for coming in.”

Dr. Bright is a friendly man who, as one of the leading researchers of medical technology in the United States, has been studying the effects of our powers – mine in particular – alongside Adrien’s own research team and the other scientists that Gabriel employs. Out of all the researchers, Dr. Bright is one of the few researchers that always has time to chat, with many of the others being too professional – or uptight, in some cases – to give me the time of day. When asked why he thinks that might be, Dr. Bright chalks it up to his daughters. “It’s hard to be gloomy when you’ve got such a great family to come home to every night,” he’d say. Adrien, on the other hand, has suggested to me in private that both he and Dr. Bright simply weren’t ensnared by the tendency towards egotism and over-competitiveness that is prevalent in certain scientific circles.

There were a few other lab technicians at work around us but, case in point, they didn’t bother to look up from their work. The only exception was a man with straight jet-black hair who stood from his seat in the corner of the room. With a shock, I realized this man wasn’t just another technician, it was Gabriel wearing a white lab coat over his standard black suit and tie.

“Good morning, Hailey. You look well.”

“Hi, Gabriel,” I returned. “Thanks, you too. So, what are we doing today?”

It was Dr. Bright who answered. “We’ll be working with some patients again today. Gabriel’s here because he wants to see the results for himself.”

That’s weird, I thought, trying to keep my uncertainty from showing. Dr. Bright and I had worked with live patients before, but this is the first time Gabriel has decided to involve himself, and I couldn’t help but wonder why.

“Sounds good. Are the patients here, yet?” I asked.

“They’re each in their own examination room. Are you ready to begin?”

“Whenever you are.”

There’s no better feeling in the world than taking someone else’s pain away. No job benefits, not the money or even the travel, can compare to witnessing the sense of relief that accompanies my patients’ sincere gratitude.

Dr. Bright lead Adrien, Gabriel, and I to the first exam room.

The patient inside was a woman with a several fractures to one of her legs. There were already a pair of technicians in the room working to set up an x-ray machine, wheeling it closer to the bed and adjusting it to the proper height. An anesthetist stepped away from the patient as we entered the room.

“She’s under,” the anesthetist said. “You may begin the procedure.”

The cast had already been cut away to give me room to work. This poor woman’s leg looked like it had been crushed; vivid splotches of bruised skin had overtaken most of the thigh and shin, culminating with her ankle, which was swollen to the size of a soft ball and the bone jutted out at an unnatural angle.

I looked away from the leg to see Gabriel, Adrien, and Bright sitting behind the screen of the x-ray machine.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

Although it wasn't the first time Dr. Bright had offered up those words, the novelty of hearing them from a figure of such authority had yet to wear off. It was as if I were the doctor, and he was a nurse. Even so, I shrugged off my feelings of self-satisfaction and got to work.

The ring on my finger flashed and, for a moment, visible only to Adrien and I, the white walls of the room flushed a golden yellow.

I brought my hand to the woman’s foot, close enough to feel the heat radiating from her skin. The air between us changed, and her foot started to wobble back and forth, to the awe of the technicians watching on. After another moment, the ankle joint jerked itself back into place with a sickening *crack*. Once the swelling had subsided, I moved my hand up her leg, erasing the bruises as I went.

“Amazing.” Dr. Bright pulled away from the x-ray machine, shaking his head in disbelief, as has become his routine for these procedures. “Flesh and bone, mended just like that.”

I backed away from the unconscious woman and the anesthetist took my place, but the rest of us didn’t stay to see the patient wake up.

Before entering the second patient’s room, Adrien pulled me aside to brief me.

“You’ve healed broken bones before, but the rest of today’s tests would be so simple. The ailments of our next patients are typically thought to be incurable. Today’s the day that we test the limits of your powers.”

“Let’s do it,” I replied. Even with the chance of failure, I will not be deterred. It’s not as though it costs me anything to try, and not matter how slim the chances, you've got to try if you want to succeed.

Patient Two, a young man who, despite his age, was greying and losing hair, lay unconscious on the examination table. The only other abnormality I could see was a portion of his forearm and the palms of his hands were bright red. He was nonetheless hooked up to all kinds of beeping machines that I couldn’t identify with my ironically limited medical knowledge.

“What is this?” I gestured to the man’s red skin. It looked like a sunburn, but I felt strangely uncomfortable just looking at it.

“Radiation poisoning.” Dr. Bright’s tone was more somber than I thought he was capable of. “He came into contact with some radioactive scrap metal at a nuclear facility in Illinois. Normally, there wouldn’t be much more we could do for him than pray.”

I felt a rush of sympathy and a spark of determination as I channeled the ring’s energy through my hands once again. The red faded from the irritated skin as my magic took effect. I watched the man’s face as I worked. Despite his unconsciousness, I thought I could see a hint of relief in his expression.

Once all the red skin had returned to normal, I took a step back to observe. The expression of relief I thought I’d seen gave way to a grimace and he twitched with pain. Looking back to his arm, I noticed a small splotch of red skin remained. Symptoms of irritation were

returning to the palms, as well. My ring flashed as I tried again to heal the man, but the affected area refused to recede any further.

Adrien appeared at my side.

“Here, let’s try this,” he said, taking my hand in his.

Orange light flowed from his own ring into mine and I felt a sudden rush of energy flow through my veins. Adrien let my hand go, and I brought it once more to the red spot on the patient’s arm.

In an instant, all of the man’s flesh returned to normal. The red disappeared from his limbs while a livelier colour returned to his face. This time, there was no guessing; the relief was palpable through every fibre of the man’s body, not just his facial expression. His skin was smooth and soft, and a sheen had returned to his thinning hair.

“Incredible,” Dr. Bright uttered. He seemed to be in a momentary trance, unable to process the results until Adrien addressed him.

“Peter?”

Dr. Bright snapped out of it and told the nearby technicians to begin testing for any sign of radiation that might remain. “All right,” he said, turning back to Adrien and me, “let’s go see the next patient.”

I began to step towards the door, but as soon as I shifted my weight, I collapsed. My legs seemed to have no strength left at all. Adrien quickly moved to catch my fall.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“I’m fine,” I gasped. “Wow, that took a lot out of me.”

“It’s all right, just take it slow.”

“Do you think you can handle one more?” Gabriel spoke for the first time since he’d greeted me in the lab.

Adrien helped me steady myself as I took deep breaths. I made a fist, feeling my strength slowly returning. I put some weight on one leg and focused on the tension in my muscles as they moved. My body felt normal again.

“I can. That was nothing.” I stood up straighter. “Let’s go.”

Gabriel and Dr. Bright led us to the next room over, where the anesthetist was watching over another unconscious patient. Like the last, this man was hooked up to all sorts of monitors and mechanisms. The heart-rate monitor was the only gadget in the room that I could name. The patient himself appeared to be weak, but there were no obvious injuries about him.

“What’s the diagnosis?” I turned to the doctor.

“Astrocytoma,” Bright replied, and again, his tone was severe. “A clump of malignant tumours on the cerebrum. They grow aggressively and, in this case, aren’t responding well to treatment.”

I was turning back to the patient when I noticed the look on Gabriel’s face. His dark eyes, which were usually clear and attentive, were clouded as he stared into space. His mouth formed a grimace, as if whatever he was thinking of was hurting him deeply. Then, he caught my eye, and his face tightened back into the calm, analyzing face I was used to.

“I’ll power you up again,” Adrien said, bringing my attention back to the patient.

“Ready?”

I nodded and held out my hand. Adrien brushed his fingers against mine and both of our rings flashed.

As I brought my palm to the man's forehead, I visualized the inside of his head. In my mind's eye, I saw a gorging mass of black flesh nested in the cervices of the soft, gray brain. Then, as energy was sapped out of me, I saw the mass shrinking before vanishing altogether.

"I think it's done," I gasped. Like with the last patient, I was left completely drained, heaving for breath, but I was steadier on my feet now that I was expecting the weakness.

"Get this patient ready for a CAT scan," Dr. Bright ordered the nearby techs, who, along with the anesthetist, began the effort of disconnecting the patient from all of the machines. The doctor turned back to me. "Great job, Hailey. Are you up for one more?"

"Of course," I replied, but I was once again distracted by Gabriel. He was staring at the patient with such intensity that I wondered if he would stare a hole right through him. I could not tell if the look in his eyes bore anger or sorrow. Before I could figure it out, he took a few steps backwards and then wordlessly left the room.

Dr. Bright's attention was back on his technicians, assuring they were handling everything carefully. Adrien was the only one who noticed my apprehension. He grabbed my sleeve and turned me away from the others.

"Gabriel lost his wife to brain cancer a few years ago," he whispered. "I believe it was meningioma. I'm sure it's hard to see something so similar cured as if it were nothing more than a common cold, but I doubt he wants to talk about it. I'm sure he'll be fine. He's a strong man."

Even so, it can't be healthy to keep that bottled up. My heart lurched for Gabriel, but I knew there was nothing I could do. I wouldn't even know where to start. If only my powers could heal emotional wounds as well as the physical ones and provide comfort in the face of trauma and grief.

Finally, Dr. Bright was ready to move on to the last patient, a middle-aged woman who, as the doctor explained, developed mesothelioma because of a childhood incident in which she was exploring a demolition site and was exposed to some asbestos fibers.

“If it’s all right with you,” Adrien whispered, while Dr. Bright examined the woman’s condition, “I’d like to take this chance to do an additional experiment.” He slid the ring from his finger and discreetly handed it to me. “I’d like to know if you could use two powers at once. Gabriel would have noticed, but the doctors won’t.”

I didn’t see any problem with trying, and I was admittedly curious to see for myself if it would be possible. Adrien’s ring was too big for my fingers, so I closed my fist around it before letting its power flow into me and mine into it. The interchange of energy I felt was incredibly unique but somehow also nostalgic, as if this ability had already been channeled through my body at some point in the past.

The orange light that enveloped my fist filtered to yellow as I tapped into my own power. I closed the distance between myself and the patient and poured my essence into her.

The exhaustion was immediate. My power was being drained twice as fast as normal and, before I knew it, my vision faded to black.

I awoke with Adrien's arms around my torso, slumped inches off the floor. My limbs felt like they were made of stone but, with Adrien and Dr. Bright's support, I managed to pull myself to my feet

"Take it easy," Adrien bent down pulled my arm over his shoulder to that I could lean against him. I noticed his ring was already back on his finger.

"How long was I out for?" I slurred through a stiff jaw.

"Barely a minute. Come on, there's a chair in the other room. You should sit."

"Did it work? Did I heal the patient?"

"We're waiting on the test results, now," Dr. Bright assured, "but given your track record, I doubt there's any need for concern. You should get some well-deserved rest."

I relented, taking the men's advice and letting Adrien carry me back to the medical lab and set me in a comfy armchair in the corner of the room. As Adrien let go of me, I closed my eyes and let myself rest, pondering the events of the past hour. *Why did Gabriel involve himself in today's experiments? Had he wanted to witness the results personally, even if he knew it would hurt him?*

Technicians and analysts buzzed all around me as they worked, coming in and out of the room constantly. I heard them talk about compiling results and sending off the data. Eventually, one of them said that all of the patients had been discharged, each one having made a miraculous recovery.