A YEAR IN THEIR LIVES

A *WITHOUT A TRACE* FANFIC SERIES

BY AJB

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I : TO HAVE AND HOLD

CHAPTER ONE

"Don't lie to me!" Martin roared.

Kim's eyes hovered within the sights of Martin's gun - soft, brown and pleading. "I just need a traveling companion. Someone to get lost with. I want it to be you," she pleaded. Her eyes wavered with tears never shed. He wanted to see remorse, he tried to see love, but instead saw a hard sorrow that only told him that her only regret was that of getting caught.

She bolted. Martin gave chase, running thorough a warehouse of bloodied children and wasted drug addicts. He lost her, but the last line of light framing a closing door told him where to go.

Martin pushed into the light and ran along an empty sidewalk. When he turned a corner, Samantha and Jack looked up in surprise.

"Where'd she go?" he screamed.

They only stared at him, surprised. Martin never paused in his pursuit as he pushed between them, running up behind Danny and Elena walking hand in hand.

"WHERE IS SHE?"

The two agents turned to him, smiling, and parted just enough for Martin to pass between them, physically splitting their connection.

Then he was running in woods, dusty air choking him until he couldn't breathe. Only then he paused, gasping, and the assassin jumped from behind a tree, knocked the gun from his hand and started choking him. Martin fought back, kicking and punching, but the assassin just smiled darkly, unflustered, as his victim's vision tunneled dangerously. He managed to wrap his hands around his attacker's neck and squeezed hard, grunting with effort.

They fell with Martin landing on top. Martin leaned into the choking hold, his face flushed and burning hot. Finally, the assassin's hold loosened and his lips turned vivid blue. Just as the assassins' eyes rolled back, his face shifted into that of Kim's. She was slick with bright red blood and her mouth opened in a silent scream. Martin released her in horror and found that he was suddenly on the ocean's floor, kicking off and trying to make it to the surface to breathe. He kicked harder, facing upward and seeing a wavering sky above.

He knew it was too far. He wasn't going to make it . . . everything slowly turned crimson . . .

Martin awoke fighting for air, drenched in sweat and his blood hotly racing. He sucked air through flared nostrils and gaping mouth, pressing his hands to his chest in hopes of keeping his heart intact; surely, the organ had hammered its way out through the old scars . . .

Panicked, he glanced down, frantically patting his chest. As he caught his wind, Martin's hands captured his attention - they throbbed in syncopation with his heart but were clean of blood. Gathering his wits and shattered nerves, he studied the back of his hands and slowly rolled his fingers into a fist. Pain. He uncurled his fingers and turned his hands palm up, finding eight reddened crescents branded into his palms. He studied them in surprise.

When his alarm clock abruptly warbled, Martin finally ripped his gaze from the self-inflicted wounds and slapped the clock into silence.

The apartment was quiet and dark – it was just before dawn and Martin remembered that he intended to run this morning, hoping the physical exertion would help him to . . . what? Concentrate? Deal? Slow his go-crazy rate? He shook his head to clear out the remaining fog.

With a snort of self-disgust, he wiped the line of cold sweat that trailed along his temple. When he turned to wipe his hand on his pillow, he noticed it was too damp to help. Instead, he plucked up a section of the sheet to dry his hands.

What was wrong with him?

Throwing back the bedcovers, Martin twisted and set his feet on the floor, finally feeling the air's chill on his bare torso and legs. He'd slept nude for nearly a month now because any particle of clothing, even boxers, felt like they were strangling him into submission. He stood and shivered, welcoming the distraction.

The dream was getting more vivid as time passed. Shouldn't it be gone by now?

Martin was sure it would eventually fade but its persistence was beginning to cause worry. He had enough on his plate at the office with Danny and Elena gone on a short honeymoon, Samantha adjusting to her new life changes and Jack – well, there was a man on a mission, to say the least. His boss' mission lately seemed to be holding him on the shortest leash possible and humiliating Martin of it at every opportunity; not that it was completely undeserved.

Heading to the bathroom, Martin scolded himself and restated the last. Jack had his own worries – a daughter he was trying to keep a hold on and a girlfriend he couldn't, working with a short crew, a bag full of cases and one screwed up subordinate. Martin sighed. He *was* screwed up, he admitted. All he needed was a little time and a little space but neither Jack nor the job was giving that to him.

There was no way to control the number of cases that came in but Jack's attitude was something else. There were times the man didn't seem to remember Martin was screwed up, times when his boss treated him like the trained agent he was, but those times had been rare in recent days.

Thank God for Vivian Johnson. She, at least, was the one sane, stable soul in the whole pile of them and Martin appreciated her steadiness. Sometimes he was sure she physically planted her body between him and Jack like a shield. It was irritating, but he wasn't about to snap at the only serene spot in the office.

Donning his running gear without thought of matching or even cleanliness – whatever his hand touched he pulled on - explained the stained Knicks tee and worn academy sweats over shorts of dubious origin, the tags and sportswear logo long worn down to either an unreadable or a nonexistent state. His socks didn't match but they were close enough because his old Nike friends would cover them up, anyway.

Martin chugged some water and ran damp fingers thorough unruly hair, momentarily distracted at the length it had become. Shaking his head in bewildered amazement at how time passed too quickly sometimes, Martin pulled open his apartment door and left it all behind for a while.

As soon as he stepped from the elevator to the MPU floor of the Federal building, Martin felt the buzz in the air - something was up. He hadn't taken six steps before Samantha lurched from an office doorway, sharply changing course to miss him, juggling a jumbo cardboard coffee cup and several files.

"Martin!" she exclaimed, puffing a wayward strand of hair from her mouth. "Where have you been? Jack's about to blow a gasket."

His exercise-induced, sated mood vanished. "What?" He looked at his watch and felt his nerve endings tingle. "I'm a few minutes early."

"You haven't answered your phone."

"Phone?" Martin patted his pockets and realized he didn't even *have* his phone. In fact, he couldn't recall where he saw it last. He slowed and checked his pockets again, completely stymied.

"Hey!" Samantha said sharply, yanking him from his dazed state. "You better pull it together pronto. We're stretched thin."

He felt her glare and finally met her stormy eyes. "Uh, yeah. Right."

They slowed to a stop. Samantha's eyes softened and she cocked her head. "Martin? You okay?"

He blinked at her then stuttered, "Y. . . yeah, yeah. I'm fine. I . . . I must have left my phone here."

Samantha rolled her eyes and stepped away, shaking her head. "Come on. Maybe you can sneak in and convince him you've been here all along." She shoved a file at him. "Phone records on our latest victim."

"Great," Martin muttered, following. He flipped open the file, but his mind was elsewhere. Where the hell was his cell and why didn't he miss it? He stopped by his desk and Samantha continued to the conference table.

The cold realization of where the phone was suddenly hit him at the same time he noticed his boss - his obviously agitated boss - striding purposefully down the hall with a dark glare centered right between Martin's eyes. Martin gulped, his throat instantly dry. He ducked his head as if studying the file in his hand and unconsciously shifted his stance to keep his gun side away from Jack as the man marched his way into the bullpen.

Malone stopped just inside Martin's personal space and the intrusion was enough to cause him to raise his eyes enough to meet Jack's. If looks could bore holes, the buildings across the street would be clearly visible through Martin's skull. Jack didn't say anything for a few, very charged moments. In Martin's peripheral vision, it seemed that the entire office froze.

Finally, Malone growled just loud enough for Martin's ears. "My office. Now."

Jack turned and stalked off. Martin took a moment to put the file down and rub his forehead before following. Now he knew what the term "dead man walking" really felt like. He worked to hold his chin up and gave Vivian a weak smile as she passed him in the hall. Martin read pity in her expression and hoped it wasn't for him.

When he pushed open the glass door to Malone's office, Jack was already settling in his chair and watching him closely. Martin slipped inside and paused long enough to run his fingers down his tie before sitting in one of the chairs facing his boss. He let out a tight breath of air he hadn't realized he was holding and then met Jack's stare.

"You look like shit." Jack's voice was flat and hard.

Martin chose to stay silent. He clasped his hands together in his lap but refused to drop his eyes. Percolating sweat tickled his hairline. His teeth squeaked as he clenched his jaws, waiting for a question.

"Do you know where your phone is?"

That wasn't the question Martin wanted to hear. It took a moment, but Martin realized that Jack knew *exactly* where the phone in question was, so there was no point in dancing around the subject. "I, um, think I left it at the Longshot."

Jack reached into his jacket pocket and tossed the wayward phone on his desk. It was well out of Martin's reach so he refrained from retrieving it.

"Thanks to a guy named Toby who likes Molson's for breakfast, your phone was returned to reception. He asked for enough reward to cover a six-pack, pre-lunch appetizer. You owe me ten bucks. It was all I had."

A few beats of silence pulsed by before Martin said, "Oh." He leaned forward for access to his wallet, pulled it free and fumbled to separate a $10 bill. He laid the money on the desk as he returned the wallet to his pocket.

Jack leaned back in his chair the entire time, silently evaluating. Martin clearly pictured the check-box list his boss followed with his visual, head-to-toe examination, hard pressed to subdue a need to squirm.

Jack took in the too-wide eyes reminiscent of the proverbial deer-in-the-headlights, pale complexion and flat-planed cheeks crowned by charcoal sashes and the way Martin's tense fingers unconsciously twitched as he maneuvered the wallet. Martin's neck swam in

his shirt collar in the same way it did when he had returned to work after the Dornvald shooting - a shooting where, in Jack's opinion, he'd returned to work much too soon. Thinking back through the last few weeks, he didn't see any signs of reoccurring addiction, so Jack's initial fury dissolved to a reasonable level of anger.

He knew Martin's professionalism and work ethic. In fact, if not for Martin's loyalty to him, their roles would be reversed right now. Jack wondered if Martin *had* accepted Medina 's "promotion" if this agent would be in this shape at this time. And, admittedly, that Kim Marcus thing was quite a bit more than the usual girlfriend-discovered-cheating scenario.

So, although red flags fluttered everywhere in his head, Jack chose to ignore them for the time being. Even though the capable agent he knew wasn't the one sitting before him at this moment, there were missing people that depended on this team and Jack needed Martin.

Jack leaned forward, planting his elbows on his desk as he steepled his fingers and tapped them against his upper lip before speaking. "My first inclination is to send you home but I don't have that luxury right now. You need to pull yourself together, *Agent* Fitzgerald, and get to work." He shoved the cell phone within Martin's reach and took the cash. "You will stay in this office. You will not go into the field today, or as I said before, until you have my permission. You do not leave for the day until I tell you to go. You check in with me the second you arrive at work each day. Do you understand?"

Martin chewed his lips as listened, nodded, and choked out a raspy, "Yes, sir," before retrieving his phone.

Jack did not see any speck of relief in the young man's face and didn't expect to; Martin Fitzgerald knew full well that he was responsible for his own short leash and Jack was satisfied the agent would get back on track eventually. Whatever Martin was dealing with was just a complicated bump in the road and Jack was very familiar with those kinds of obstacles. They seemed to be a continual presence in his life, too.

"Get to work."

Martin nodded and shot to his feet. He hesitated a moment as if he was going to speak, but then just ducked his head and left the glass cubicle. Jack watched him depart, pursed his lips in thought and then moved on to the case in hand.

CHAPTER TWO

The day dragged painfully onward even though Martin was busy. The current missing subject, Mia Swenson, seemed to be a typical 18-year-old texting champion with enough cell phone records to wallpaper the Taj Mahal. She was last seen at a huge party attended by other texting champions and Martin had the paperwork to prove it. By eleven, he'd decided to simply tag any daughter he ever had with a subcutaneous GPS device at birth. By noon, he considered self-surgery with his letter opener to excise the throbbing in his temples and by three, he wondered if slamming his fingers in the door would be enough to distract him from the pain in his head.

Viv and Sam were in and out of the building all day and at one point, one of them dropped an egg salad sandwich and coffee on his desk. Viv, Martin figured; she'd been giving him that narrowed-eye, evaluating look for the past few hours whenever she breezed through with more information. Martin finally ate the offering with a thought of thanks a little before four.

The food must have powered his brain because around four-ten, a number popped out on the reams of paper representing the last month of Mia's calls. Martin traced it to a person named B. Collins, and Vivian pulled a fact from an early interview about a Barry Collins leaving a phone message for Mia about a month ago.

"So who's Barry Collins?" Jack growled.

Sam contacted Mia's mother once again and the woman finally thought it time to mention that she had been pregnant with Mia when she married the man that Mia thought was her father.

"When was she planning to tell us Barry Collins was Mia's biological father?" Vivian snapped in the conference room. "What's wrong with these people?"

A couple of phone calls to the local police in Mr. Collins' city confirmed that she was with her bio-dad, meeting him for the first time without mom's knowledge.

"Another happy ending," Samantha growled, checking her watch. "I've got to go."

"We seem to have a lull at the moment," Jack said. "Take off, troops. Make it a long weekend."

Viv rolled her eyes after looking at the clock and noting that it was fifteen minutes until quitting time. "How benevolent of you," she said drily. "Oh, how will I spend the time?"

"Get out of here before I change my mind," Jack replied. "Reports on my desk by noon, Monday."

"Danny and Elena will be back," Viv reminded them. "Be prepared to pester them with overly inquisitive questions."

"Well, there's something to look forward to." Samantha hurriedly slung her purse over her shoulder and turned to go, but paused when her eyes found Martin. After a moment, he noticed her stare and looked up. Sam frowned. "Get some sleep, Martin."

"Yes, mom," he replied huskily.

Sam snorted and departed. Viv gave him a considering look then departed a few seconds later. Martin tiredly pushed to his feet and gathered his jacket, trying to ignore the fact that Jack was still there and looking at him. Again.

"Avoid the Longshot for a while," Jack finally growled as Martin shrugged his jacket on.

"Yes, sir. Can I go now?" Martin tried hard not to sound like a petulant fifth grader, but he was sure he failed.

"See you Monday. Viv and Sam are on call. Take care of yourself, will ya?" Jack almost sounded concerned, Martin thought.

"Sure. See you then." Martin walked out feeling immensely tired and managed to flag down a cab in an unusually rapid fashion. During the ride home, he decided to go running again so he wouldn't fall asleep too early and, therefore, wake up too early. He also hoped it would make him tired enough to sleep through the night without waking. Simple goals, really, but recently, ones proven difficult to obtain.

It was a gargantuan effort to avoid the couch and change into his running gear once he got home. He again dragged on the first things he found and noticed that they still had the pungent odor of his last run which produced the random thought that, wearing this, he could easily fit in with the homeless crowd. That idea produced his first chuckle of the day. Good thing Saturday was laundry night.

Giving the couch a longing look as he headed to the door, Martin noticed that his headache was finally fading.

"*Maybe I'm just allergic to work,*" he thought with an amused snort. Snatching his car keys from the counter, Martin headed out the door.

"Where the hell is Martin?" Danny groused as he dropped onto his chair. "He always brings donuts on Monday. And where's the coffee?"

"Are you whining? I endured enough whining over the weekend from Reggie, thank you." Viv settled into a bullpen chair in a queenly fashion.

Danny twirled the chair around to face his senior partner. "That's easy for you to say. You have coffee."

Viv smiled. "That's because I'm a grown-up that can take care of herself."

His rebuttal stalled with the sight of Samantha striding down the hall with four large, logo'd coffee cups in hand. By the time she dropped one off in Jack's empty office, Elena appeared behind her with her own cup and a satisfied expression. When the pair turned into the bullpen Danny broke into a dazzling smile and extended a hand. "Agent Spade, you're an angel!"

Sam's course eked around Danny's chair and stopped by Martin's desk where she carefully set down the cardboard tray and plucked out a cup. "Here," she said, turning to Danny and handing off the cup to his grateful grasp. "You know better than to upset the balance of the coffee tray." She threw the cardboard tray away and sank into a chair near Vivian with a tired sigh. Elena wandered over to Danny's desk and stood beside him, smiling sweetly.

After Danny swallowed his first sip, he whined again. "No doughnuts?"

"Get your own sustenance, Agent Taylor. You're lucky to get the coffee. I ran late again," Sam grumbled. She took an appreciative sip in the relaxed silence and looked around. "But not as late as others. Where's Martin? And Jack?"

Elena's gaze flicked to Jack's office and back. "Thankfully, not here to see your tardiness."

Danny grinned lopsidedly. "I know Elena has an excuse for being tired this morning, but what about you, Sam?"

"I hate newlyweds," Sam muttered into her coffee.

"Hm," Viv hummed as she sipped from her cup. "You should know better than to speak to her before her first cup, Danny." Elena chuckled as she swayed sideways and hitched her hip on the corner of Danny's desk.

Danny smirked. "I'll cut her a break only because she brought me this." He indicated the coffee. "What about Martin and Jack? Maybe they're having their coffee together? A little bonding session?" He waggled his eyebrows

Sam choked on her drink over the rude insinuation. "Danny, jeeze, thanks!" Vivian and Elena chuckled at the exchange.

"You're just trying to deflect our upcoming nosey questions," Vivian said knowingly, turning her chocolate gaze to Danny and his new wife. "We've come up with some good ones." The distant ding of the elevator caught her attention and she glanced down the hall. "Uh, oh. Martin's going to be in the doghouse again."

The others turned and saw Malone walking down the hall toward them holding a small paper cup. His face brightened visibly when he spied the bigger cup on his desk which was a cut above the brand he currently held. He pushed into his office, dropped the cheaper cup in the trash and picked up the fresh one before heading into the bullpen.

"Where's the doughnuts?" He asked brightly.

"That's what I wondered!" Danny said.

Sam rolled her eyes.

Jack look disappointed for a second then raised his cup. "Thanks," he said with a pointed look at Samantha. "My treat tomorrow."

"Martin's turn tomorrow. Don't mess with the system," Danny said. "And I know *he'll* bring doughnuts."

"Pfft!" Samantha snorted.

Meanwhile, Jack looked around. "He's not here yet?"

"Um," Vivian finally offered.

"Great," Jack snapped, instantly peeved. "Viv, Sam, your illustrious leader expects reports on his desk by noon." Jack carefully sipped his coffee as the others stared blankly at him. "I meant me," he growled.

"Oh," Sam uttered.

"'Illustrious'?" Vivian repeated with a soft snort as they got to work.

Jack retreated to his office, where there was a clear line of sight to the elevator, to lie in wait. Both Viv and Sam were finished with their reports by eleven thirty and gathered by Danny's desk.

"Has anyone heard from Martin?" Elena finally asked.

"I don't think so." Samantha said. She walked over to Martin's desk and glanced at his calendar. "Nothing here," she announced as he pulled out her cell phone. She hit a few buttons and listened. "Right to voicemail." Her phone closed with a snap.

The four of them put their heads together and came up with nothing. If Martin had any plans, he hadn't shared them. Their discussion sputtered to a stop when Jack approached them. They looked at him expectantly.

Jack stood at the end of the table, one hand holding a pen that tapped a rhythm on the opposite palm. When he saw that he had the team's attention, he spoke. "Martin's car was found in a parking lot. It had a ticket on it from last night for being in the lot after hours. Apparently, it's been there all night. They were getting ready to tow it when they noticed the registration."

"Which lot?" Samantha quickly asked.

"Off 86th, in the Park."

"He parks there when he runs a certain trail," Sam offered.

"None of you have heard from him?"

"I just called and it went right to voicemail." Samantha voice had a tight edge.

Danny stood and retrieved his jacket and the others moved to follow.

"Danny, you and Sam check his apartment. Viv, check the car. Elena will do some follow up from here and I'll put the current case paperwork to bed. Get going."

Urgency dragged Martin's consciousness from some pillowy place to the unpleasant reality of distressed bodily demands. Vomit pushed upward, threatening to overflow. One hard swallow stopped the action – for the moment. A tight gasp, accented with another quick swallow was all he could manage to hold off the rising bile a second time before the throbbing in his head blossomed to a full and painful rhythm. He forced his eyelids to part and eventually stay apart – he thought. Everything was fuzzy.

Martin gulped again, focusing on keeping his stomach where it belonged while he sorted his wildly scattered thoughts. With his riotous gut somewhat under control, he blinked and bit back a gasp of pain. Had his head exploded when he wasn't paying attention? He squeezed his eyes shut again with hopes that things would change for the better.

"Oh, honey, you don't look very good."

A cool, soft hand gently stroked his cheek in an attempt to comfort. Instead, it confused.

"I have a basin here, sweetheart, in case your tummy's upset. I bet it is, huh?"

The words floated on a soothing tone and deep memory told him such words should make him feel better but the voice was wrong. He only thought about opening his eyes this time around.

"There, there. I'll take care of you, my love.

Whose love? *My love*? Where the hell was he? There was a mental scramble to get his thoughts in line while keeping his body still because any movement prodded his fractious belly toward revolt. With a bit more time behind him, he carefully peeled his eyes open. Slowly, the kaleidoscope ceiling rotated into focus. It was knotty pine. It wasn't a ceiling he recognized. Martin swallowed hard again.

"I'll open the window a crack. Some fresh air will make you feel better, don't you think, darling?"

Darling? That sounded so – wrong. Sucking in a breath, he ever so slowly turned his head, narrowing his eyes with the pain of motion. A woman fussed with some lacy curtains for a moment and then moved to open the window, her back to him. She wore a flowered halter dress and had her long and wavy, dark hair held in a loose roll with a comb-clip. She was vaguely familiar . . .

Martin tried to sit up, only to get physically tugged back to the soft mattress. His couldn't move his arms. Lifting his shoulders as far as he could, he was horrified to see that sheep-skin padded restraints held him onto the bed where he reclined. A sun-colored coverlet draped across his otherwise naked body.

"Hey!" he yelped, headache forgotten. His stomach, though, could not be denied and it rolled threateningly with the rush of fear-infused adrenaline. He tugged frantically on the restraints but had to abandon his effort to turn aside when his stomach finally heaved.

Everything clicked into absurd place.

"Oh, Martin!" Felicity rushed to his side and thrust the basin under his mouth to catch the last of his sickness. She stroked his cheek. "Oh, baby, it's okay. I'll take good care of you, I promise. You know I will. I'll get you all cleaned up and everything will be all right."

His skin crawled where she kissed his cheek.

CHAPTER THREE

In spite of the lingering headache, Martin's brain finally engaged. The question of how he got here was his first puzzle to solve and he could still feel linger effects from whatever he'd been given as he tried to recall the previous . . . day? Days?

The last things the he remembered were two miserable nights trying to sleep and a parade of Kim-related dreams. He'd ended up in the Longshot again late Saturday night and tried to tire himself out by running in the park Sunday afternoon. After finishing his run, he recalled doing some warm-down stretches near his car but after that, nothing, until he saw Felicity Rickards at the window of this unknown room.

And as soon as he realized who she was, Martin knew he was in trouble.

Felicity was one of the nurses at the hospital where he'd recovered after being ambushed by Dornvald. He'd been pretty out of it at first but when he was finally on the road to recovery and able to focus, he noticed she always seemed to be there at his bedside - arriving early, leaving late and eventually hired as his in-home caretaker when he was first released.

When he'd finally worked through the pain enough to be able to really pay attention, Martin came to realize that something was off about the woman. After a time, she began to "suggest" what he should and shouldn't be doing, and whom he should or shouldn't be doing it with. When Felicity eventually made a disparaging remark to him regarding Samantha, he'd fired her.

After that, she'd showed up unannounced one too many times in public places and then the phone calls and letters started. Martin got a restraining order against her and called the local police one time when she blocked his car with hers one morning. He hadn't seen her since and he never told anyone about the situation. He hadn't seen or heard from her in nearly three years.

Martin thought the problem was solved, but apparently he was wrong. Scenes from the movie "Misery" flashed through his mind and his stomach fluttered. The only point in his favor at the moment was that most of the team had seen her at least once; it was only a matter of time before they sought her out. He hoped.

"Hi, sweetie!" Felicity swept into the room carrying a steamy bowl. "Well, you certainly look like you're feeling better."

"Felicity," Martin started, his voice sharp. "Let me go."

"Don't be silly, Martin. I'm doing you nothing but good, you know that." She set the bowl down and pulled a washcloth out, wringing soapy water from it. "I make you feel better and you know you need that right now. You weren't doing so well on your own, you know."

Martin jumped as she wiped down his neck and shoulders. "Stop it," he snapped. "Let me go!" He tugged on the restraints at his wrists, a feeling of dread starting in the pit of his gut.

"You need to be taken care of, love," she continued brightly, rinsing the cloth and returning to his body. She rubbed down one arm and then the other.

"Felicity," Martin tried again, keeping his voice level. "You're breaking the law keeping me here. You have to let me go."

"No, no, no," she said, her voice growing husky. The firm strokes of the cloth paused while she folded the lightweight coverlet down from his chest. When she started on his chest, her eyes fixed on the scattering of scars there. One hand gripped the cloth while the fingers of the other traced the puckered skin, transfixed.

The slightly reddened marks still bothered Martin. Physically they were numb to the touch, but emotionally they were still sensitive. He could ignore them for the most part but when he did notice them, he still felt a quick wash of fear. It had been too close. If he studied them any length of time, he always dreamed of gunfire afterward. Maybe that incident with Kim's assassin was dragging up the old along with the new

And now, as Felicity traced each inch of damaged tissue, Martin could feel the rest of his body tingle with growing apprehension.

"Don't," he rasped, trying to twist away. "Don't touch me!"

"You're so beautiful," she whispered, unaffected by his demand. "It's because of me that you're still beautiful, you know." She trailed her touch with the warm, wet cloth. "I kept you alive. I took care of you. I fulfilled your every need. I've been watching you and you need help, Martin. You haven't been sleeping, have you?"

She pushed the edge of the yellow sheet farther down his body, stopping at a perceived line between his hipbones. Even though the drape covered him from his hips downward, Martin never felt so exposed in his life as the flat of her hand slowly stroked downward from his chest, following the lines of damage.

"That cheap whore wasn't good for you anyway. She's definitely not worth losing sleep over."

He threw his body to one side as hard has he could, twisting out from under her hands. "Get away from me!" he yelled. "I said don't touch me!"

Felicity stumbled back a step, startled, blinking in surprise. Her face twisted from an enrapt stare to a furious glare.

"What's the matter with you?" Martin pulled at the restraints, unable to control his fear. "Let me go!"

Without a word, Felicity turned away and pulled the top drawer of a nearby dresser. "It's that scar, isn't it? That killer hurt you again. And that surgeon . . . he could have done a better job but I did *my* best." Her voice was flat and strong. "I need to help you. I can't stand back anymore when you're in so much pain. It's my job to keep you safe and get you back to where you were. For now, you need complete and total rest." Her voice muffled as she donned a cloth mask. Then she snapped on rubber gloves and reached back into the drawer. "You need to forget that Kim bitch. She was evil, Martin."

Martin's gut turned when she faced him again. She held a brown bottle and a cloth, unscrewing the top of the bottle as she spoke, her voice muffled from the mask.

"I don't want to do this, my love, but you give me no choice. You need to calm down and rest. You can't do that when those wounds still hurt you." She carefully dampened the cloth and resealed the bottle. "I'll help you. I have to finish my duties. When I'm done, you'll be all over that whore and the scars will be gone."

"Felicity," Martin started, forcing his body to still when he realized her intent to knock him out again. "Don't. Look, I'm calm now. I'm not in pain. Let's talk. Don't do this . . ."

She shook her head with a sad expression. "I don't want to do this either, my love."

"Then don't!" Martin shrank away as far as he could from her approach. "Stop this now before . . ."

"Shh, shh, my darling," Felicity crooned as she pressed the cloth over his mouth and nose. Martin fought as hard as he could, shaking his head violently and reigniting his headache, but she held the cloth firmly in place. "You'll feel much better when you wake up, sweetheart." Her voice sounded fuzzy and soft as blood roared in his ears.

Martin tried to hold his breath but Felicity was calm, strong and unyielding. It wasn't long before he felt his consciousness flee into darkness.

Viv peered in the window of Martin's car without touching the glass. At Jack's request, two NYPD officers stood by and checked the nearby area and now waited for Agent Johnson to direct them further.

The car was locked and appeared undamaged. They were lucky to be contacted before the vehicle was inventoried for towing - no one had been inside yet. As much as Viv wanted to get in there and search, she was afraid of disturbing any trace evidence like hairs or fibers. If it came down to it, she'd let the forensics team have first crack.

She quizzed a few runners as they returned to the lot and none of them reported seeing anything along the trail. Viv requested an NYPD equestrian unit to search the trail - the riders would have a higher point of view to see off the trail. For now, that was all she could do. If Martin became a case - and the idea of that shook her - there would be a more detailed foot search of the area. She made a note to come back here again to quiz runners at about the same time Martin would have been here. After confirming with Jack, she

requested one NYPD unit stay with the car and talk with anyone that came by. She transferred a photo of Martin to the officer's phone.

All in all, Agent Johnson felt helpless and she didn't like that one bit. She wasn't alone in her feelings - Danny and Samantha felt much the same after their walk through of Martin's apartment.

The place wasn't as neat as usual - the bedclothes were rumpled, a few drawers were partially open and a pair of jeans was in a heap on the floor. The empty beer cans on the living room table and in the trash did not bode well. Danny felt a ping of disappointment about Martin's obvious fall from the wagon - he hoped that it was only booze and was relieved that the medicine cabinet was as bare as it should be. He hoped that his friend's addiction wasn't the reason for his disappearance.

After a quick cursory exam, the pair split up and took a slower tour of inspection, careful not to touch anything. The entry doors looked unmolested as did all the windows, but then again, the apartment was on the ninth floor. A lack of messages on the phone didn't mean much but being unable to find his duty weapon or flat badge possibly did.

"Hey," Samantha called from the kitchen. "The coffee maker isn't set up to go."

Danny rounded the corner and entered the kitchen, his head cocked slightly aside in thought and a question in his eyes.

"He sets it the night before so it brews automatically." Danny rolled his eyes and Samantha frowned. "So he's a little AR about stuff. Added to the fact about his car, it means he probably wasn't here last night." She gave him a smug look.

"He wasn't here Sunday night, but he was here Saturday night. The laundry basket is empty." Danny looked slowly around as he spoke, looking for any more clues. "No t-shirt or briefs from yesterday. I know he did his laundry Saturday night because he told me about a woman he usually saw down there. It looks like he went out for a run yesterday afternoon and never came back home." Now it was Samantha's turn to give Danny a look. "What?" he asked, all innocence.

"What woman would do her laundry on a Saturday night?"

"A married one?"

"Martin was flirting with a married woman?" Surprisingly, Samantha felt an odd pang with that thought.

"Who said he was flirting? Is that what you expect from all of the male species?" Danny's crooked grin indicated he was more than willing to go off on that tangent. "And I didn't say she *was* married, you just asked . . ."

Samantha threw up her hand in a "stop" motion. "Okay, okay. I withdraw my question. So our usually tidy, anal-retentive, has-no-dating-life, WASP-like partner did his laundry Saturday night. He went for a run sometime Sunday and never made it home." She rubbed her forehead hoping to hold off the growing headache. "We don't know if he stopped anywhere before going to the park, but apparently he got there and . . . never left?"

"Or he never got there, or left with someone else?"

"He knows there's no overnight parking so I doubt the second part. The first part would indicate someone with a plan?" Sam consulted her watch and then dug for her phone. "We need to know if the car runs. Maybe he left it there because it wouldn't start."

Danny chuffed as they turned toward the apartment door. "He babies that car like he does his coffee maker. Even takes it in on time for the 10,000-mile servicing. It starts."

"Viv?" Sam spoke into the phone. "Have you checked the car out yet? Do you know if it starts?" She paused to listen. "Uh - huh. So it's intact." She paused again. "All we can tell is that he left here sometime Sunday. We wondered if he left the car there because it wouldn't start, but that theory's blown." She listened again and nodded. "Okay." She pressed the phone closed. "The car's getting towed to the evidence yard for processing because Martin's now - ," she glanced at her watch. "- at least 20 hours missing. Jack finally called Victor."

"Glad that wasn't my chore," Danny muttered.

"None of his family have heard from him. We're convening at the office. Think we should try to find laundry lady?"

Danny smothered his slow grin, recalling his partner's uncharacteristically lewd description of the woman. "Don't think we can do much with what Martin told me."

Samantha's eyes narrowed with her glare. "Did he at least say what color her hair was?"

"Um," Danny started. "I'm not sure if he noticed she even had a head."

Samantha's hair swung as she shook her head and made a noise of disgust as she led the way to the door. After exiting, Danny locked the front door, being careful not to touch the door knob out of sheer habit. They contacted the neighbors and left their cards instructing them to call if they saw Martin or anyone else enter or leave the apartment. When they left the building, they stopped at the manager's office and left their card with him, too.

Once in the confines of their car, Danny and Samantha had time to think. The gravity of what they were dealing with finally struck the - one of their own was missing. They rode in silence all the way to the office trying not to allow the dire possibilities to shanghai their imaginations. And with what they'd seen in the past, their imaginations had a lot to draw from.

Striding down the hall side by side from the elevator, Sam saw that Viv was already back. She nodded a silent greeting and was slightly taken aback to see Martin's photo stuck to the timeline board. Jack was writing information with a black dry erase marker and she heard a soft gasp at her side.

It was real after all. Samantha's stomach turned.

The slight hitch in their stride disappeared as they approached the stacks of paper on the conference table. Phone records and credit card records - standard stuff originating from a too familiar source. It was unnerving. Danny grabbed the phone numbers while Samantha took half of the credit card reports, shoving the other half over to Viv. Elena searched Martin's computer. There were murmurs of unease about prying into a co-worker's records,

but as each hour passed with no contact from Martin, the feeling was replaced with respectful professionalism.

Danny was ready for a break when Jack called the agent into his office. His boss looked thoughtful as Danny sat. Jack seemed to take a moment to collect his thoughts before speaking.

"Did you notice anything . . . off about Martin's behavior lately?" Danny picked up on some hesitance in Jack's words.

Danny thought before answering. "Well, before Elena and I took our vacation he seemed a bit quiet, but then again I was a little busy at the time. Why?"

"Yeah, we've all been a little busy," Jack agreed. "And I think we missed something going on with Martin because of it. He hasn't looked well these past few weeks - since the shooting."

Danny didn't need to ask which shooting - he'd been there as Martin's backup when his friend had to shoot his own girlfriend. "You have to admit, that whole incident was pretty messed up. It had 'ugly' written all over it from the start."

"Yeah. True." Jack sat back and heavy in thought.

Danny wasn't going to beat around the bush. "Come on, Jack. Spill it. You didn't call me in here to ask if Martin was eating his vegetables. You want to know if I think he was using again?"

The corner of Jack's lips quirked. "Yeah, for starters."

"I don't think so. His apartment tells me he's been having a few drinks, though."

Jack nodded. "He left his cell phone at a bar the other night. Didn't even miss it until a bar patron turned it in the next day."

"Whoa." Danny's eyebrows rose and he leaned back into the chair. "I didn't think he was that bad."

"Me either. But now," Jack hesitated. "Now, I have to wonder if it's related somehow. He's gone downhill physically this past week, Danny. Lost weight, bags under his eyes, tired."

"Do you think he just took off?" Danny asked. "Do you think that's possible?"

"Do you?"

Danny thought back to when Martin was at his lowest, to all the N.A. meetings he witnessed along with their private conversations and made a decision. He shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "No, I don't think so."

Jack looked thoughtful. "Okay. That's what I want to believe, too, but I don't think we should dismiss the possibility completely. If you don't think he's using, then ask Viv if she knows what's been going on with him. I noticed that she's been keeping an eye on him for the past few days."

Danny stood and nodded, and headed out. "Hey, Viv?" Danny called as soon as he entered the bullpen. "You know if anything's been going on with Martin in the past few weeks?"

Samantha turned to the pair and grew still. Viv looked thoughtful, as if she was carefully weighing what to say. "Well," she started. "I think he was having trouble sleeping."

"He said that?" Sam asked.

"No, but he didn't have to. We all know what sleep deprivation looks like and Martin had all the signs. I don't know why he wasn't sleeping; maybe I should have asked sooner."

Sam bit her lip and looked a little embarrassed. "Yeah, me too. I've been a little too wrapped up with my . . . um, situation. He did look a bit ragged on Friday."

Then, Samantha started to think back on the past weeks and suddenly became acutely aware of the narrowness of her memory. Her life now revolved around Finn and her odd little "family". The picture Danny painted so long ago of her and Martin along with the big house and picket fence didn't seem so alien anymore and she wondered how things would be at this point in time if she and Martin hadn't parted ways.

Then it struck her: Was she the reason Martin was gone? Had he started down some doomed path because he was unable to breach the wall she'd built around her heart? Had she been so wrapped up in her own issues that she'd failed to see that Martin was sinking fast?

Samantha thought back to when she'd noticed Martin's addiction. It had felt so good to be the one to realize the problem, and to be the one to spearhead his recovery. But it had stopped there, hadn't it? She'd handed the problem over the Danny.

And when Martin was shot, she'd told him she'd be there for him, but she really hadn't; she'd handed that one off, too.

Was all of this her fault? Did Martin just take off because he felt there was no one he could rely on in his own back yard?

"Samantha?" Viv's voice broke into Samantha's train of thought. "What are you thinking?"

"Oh, um," Sam paused to tuck her hair behind her ear. "I was just thinking, I mean, do either of you think that maybe he just . . . left? Things have been pretty tough for him lately and everyone has a breaking point, right?"

The three of them were silent for a few moments, the only noise punctuating the air being Elena's keyboard as she continued her research. Danny finally broke the silence.

"Jack and I discussed that possibility and don't think so."

"But it shouldn't be ruled out," Viv pressed.

Danny and Samantha looked at each other and he shrugged. "Let's see what his car tells us," Sam finally said, unwilling to push Martin aside again.

CHAPTER FOUR

The world was a swirl of upsetting discontent as Martin's senses slowly and reluctantly dragged him to consciousness one again on a wave of nausea. Gagging, he tried to turn to the edge of the bed but was only able to twist his pulsing head to the side.

The cool cloth on his forehead felt wonderful. He concentrated on that one good feeling as he swallowed drily in an attempt to settle his stomach. He felt a pinch on his arm and ever so slowly, the headache ebbed. When it reached a tolerable level, Martin finally understood the whispered words of encouragement on the warm breath that tickled his ear. Then the realization of the dire situation he was in slammed back into his mind.

He gasped and snapped open his eyes to find Felicity's smiling face inches from his own.

"There are those pretty eyes! How do you . . ."

"Get away from me!" His headache flared and instantly joined by a new pain from his abdomen. He hissed, unable to suppress the reaction. Martin pressed back into the pillow to minimize movement and kept a wary eye on the woman sitting on the edge of the bed.

Panting seemed to distract him from physical pain a little, so he concentrated on that while he eyed his surroundings. Beside Felicity was an IV pole and Martin was horrified when he realized that she'd inserted an IV line. He blinked at the bag suspended from the metallic arm and was only a little relieved to see that it was only a saline solution - assuming the label was correct; at this point in time, he wasn't taking anything for granted.

"Just don't touch me, okay?" he panted, fighting to rein in panic.

Felicity frowned. "That must be the chloroform talking. You were the same way coming out of anesthesia." With jerky motions that hinted of irritation, she plucked the cloth from Martin's forehead, folded it neatly and then placed it in a shallow bowl on the nightstand. "I know you're in a little pain but everything should be fine." She reached toward his torso and a knife-like pain electrified him at her touch.

"Shit!" The word escaped through clenched teeth. The pain's location was frighteningly familiar and Martin unleashed fear wrenched his gut. "What the hell did you do?"

"I said I'd fix you. Just like before. The saline should help the dehydration headache. You'll need something else for the other." She leaned aside in a motion to stand up.

"Other?" Martin said, noticing that his tongue seemed thick. “Other what? What did you do, Felicity?”

“I fixed you all up, darling.” Felicity paused next to the bed, her head cocked aside as she looked at his abdomen. “Just like I promised. Now just let me take the pain away.” She turned away, humming a tune as she moved toward the dresser and reached for the top drawer.

Martin’s racing brain tried to discern what she meant by “the other”, alarmed to realize it must be tied to the fresh pain emanating from his stomach and chest. He blinked to clear his fuzzy vision and craned his neck to look down at himself. A thin, white sheet replaced the sun-colored coverlet and shrouded him from neck to toes. It looked a bit lumpy over the painfully throbbing areas and he could feel the sharp pull of bandages and tape.

“What did she do?” he whispered aloud. He tested his bonds again, and then spoke sharply. “What did you do?” Panic fluttered in his chest once again.

Still humming, Felicity turned back to him yielding a full syringe in one hand and a disinfectant wipe in the other. Her face was softened in contentment and completely unscathed by Martin’s tone. When she reached his side, she swabbed the IV inlet.

“Felicity?” Martin asked, now truly scared. “What did . . .?”

Continuing to hum softly, Felicity inserted the needled into the port and depressed the plunger. Martin’s words fell away with the familiar warm rush of morphine. Before he was completely under its spell, however, Felicity happily turned down the sheet.

“I said I’d fix you,” she said dreamily. “That surgeon left awful scars and I simply took them away. You should be able to truly rest now, sweetie.”

The horror of her words drifted away in a warm wave that obliterated everything.

“Hey? I think I found something.” Elena said after a few minutes of silence. When she found nothing on Martin’s computer, she concentrated on making a list of past cases that may have come back to haunt Martin. “There are a lot of cases with Martin’s name on it filed with the court, as expected, but this was a bit of a surprise.” She pointed to a line of text on the screen when Jack leaned over her shoulder.

“What is it?” Viv asked from the conference table, elbow deep in papers.

“Almost three years ago, Martin filed a restraining order against a woman named Felicity Anne Rickards.”

“Who’s that?” Danny said, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t remember Martin mentioning a Felicity. And I think that's a name I’d remember.”

Viv looked thoughtful as she straightened in her seat, a manicured finger tapping her chin. “What was going on in his life then?”

“He started attending NA meetings the previous fall, so he wasn’t dating. NA suggests not dating for the first year,” Danny summarized. “Martin followed the rules to the letter that first year.”

Elena's fingers flew over the keyboard and soon there was a New York driver's license photo of a thin, wavy-haired brunette on her screen. "Felicity Rickards. Address is in the Village." She tilted the screen in the direction of the conference table.

"Kinda cute." Lured from his office, Jack moved to stand at her shoulder, scowling. "And familiar."

Samantha's voice piped in. "Yeah, now that you mention it, she does look familiar."

Elena and Viv traded glances. "I've never seen her," Viv said.

"Me either," Elena added. "Here," she brought up another screen. "One of her work addresses is St. Vincent 's Hospital?"

"She was the nurse assigned to Martin when he was shot." Danny's statement was direct and sure.

"That's right, I remember." Samantha added, perking up. "The way she looked at me gave me the creeps. Didn't she home nurse Martin that first week he was released?"

Jack jumped in without pause when he walked into the bullpen. "Which would give her access to Martin's house and car keys."

"Which is why there was no sign of forced entry on Martin's car," Danny finished, standing to pull on his jacket. "Sam and I'll go to her place. Martin never mentioned the restraining order to you?"

"Nope," Jack replied. "Not a word. Must be that Fitzgerald pride. Viv and I will head to the hospital. Elena, hold the fort and keep us updated on Ms. Rickards and forensics.

"Yes, sir," Elena said, spinning around to attack the keyboard once again.

23 Hours Missing

Vivian and Jack were shown to the Human Resource office of St. Vincent 's Hospital and offered a pair of stained and plucked cloth covered chairs in which to wait. They both opted to stand. It wasn't long before they were escorted to the office of Merrill Abernathy, the hospital's HR manager and chief.

"Agents," Abernathy greeted them from where he stood behind his desk. He waved at a pair of much cleaner chairs in front of his desk. "Please. How can I help you?"

"We're here about Felicity Rickards," Viv started. "I understand she was a nurse here?"

"Yes, she was," Abernathy said slowly, clearly being cautious. "What do you want to know?"

"Why was she fired?"

Abernathy shifted in his leather chair and pulled his hands from the top of his desk to his lap. "I'm not comfortable discussing staff records. Why do you need to know?"

Viv glanced at Jack, a look crossing between them acknowledging the sore spot she'd struck. "Please just answer the question Mr. Abernathy. We know Ms. Rickards worked here, both full time and part time, for at least five years. Why was she let go?"

There was a long pause of silence and Abernathy's body language - his stiff posture and hands drawn inward - emanated reluctance. "I think you need a subpoena for that information."

Jack leaned forward, his glare boring directly into the manager's eyes. "We are looking for a missing FBI agent. We have reason to believe Felicity Rickards is involved. The only thing we want is our agent back. We aren't interested in anything that happened here, legal or illegal. We need to speak to Ms. Rickards. Understand? Was she fired?"

Abernathy's piggish eyes shifted as he weighed his options and finally, with a grim line to his mouth, he leaned forward, crossing his arms on the top of his desk.

"We had a problem with . . . things . . . disappearing."

"'Things' as in drugs?" Viv pointedly asked.

"Well, yes. And other supplies. We ran an investigation but got no results. We've since tightened access and security and solved the problem. Felicity was one of several on our suspect list but we didn't have any hard evidence."

"What kinds of drugs were taken?"

"OxyContin, some antibiotics, lidocaine. It was over several months' period."

"And other supplies?"

"Basic things like gauze, syringes, surgical packs. Things like that always seem to disappear, but this was noticeably more in a short period of time. As I said, we couldn't pin it on any one person. It seemed to happen in a certain time frame and we pulled together a list of employees that worked in that period and had access. Then it stopped."

"When was this?"

"A little over a year ago? I don't know the exact date but I have it in a file. I can get that for you."

"Thank you," Viv said. "Did you fire her?"

"No, she chose to leave. We didn't try to keep her."

"Can you also get us what you have on Ms. Rickards?"

Abernathy nodded, but didn't seem very happy about it. "I'll notify the records department. It's in the basement. You can pick the items up there." He picked up the phone and ordered the documents as Viv and Jack stood to leave.

When he hung up, Jack asked, "Are there any nurses or doctors on duty now that worked with Ms. Rickards? I'd like to speak with them."

The leather chair squeaked in protest as the rotund Abernathy spun around to nudge his computer screen out of hibernation. "I have today's schedule here . . . let's see . . . ah, Mary Price was Felicity's supervising nurse for quite a while. She's in Critical Care at the moment."

"Fourth floor," Malone said. "I know where it is. We'll stop by there and then get those files. Can you call her and tell her we're on our way?"

"Sure." Abernathy sounded relieved to be off the hot seat.

Viv and Jack thanked him and headed to the fourth floor. Once in the elevator, Jack let out a sigh and fixed his eyes on the floor indicator. "I know this place far too well."

"What's your take on Felicity Rickards?" Viv asked, also staring at the ascending numbers.

"To early to tell. Spurned girlfriend? I don't think so. Angry ex-employee? Maybe. Ask me again after we leave here."

When they arrived at the fourth floor, Jack made a comment about how unusual it was to go four floors without stopping. Viv chuckled as she looked around and nodded toward a central kiosk surrounded by glass-walled rooms. As they approached, she glanced in one of the rooms and saw a young man lying on the bed with numerous wire, lines and cords looping from him to their associated machinery. A shudder passed through when her mind's eye saw Martin in his place.

"Mary Price?" Jack asked the first nurse the encountered at the desk area.

"Over there." The young woman pointed to a silver-laced redhead sitting behind a computer in a separate area.

Nurse Price looked up as they approached. "You must be the agents Mr. Abernathy sent up?" Viv's first impression was of a very organized, no nonsense woman based on the short-shorn hair and neat desk. "How can I help you?"

"We'd like to ask you some questions about Felicity Rickards."

At Jack's question, Viv saw a slight tensioning around the woman's mouth. Nurse Price looked aside and motioned toward a nearby room. "We'll have a little more privacy in here," she said as she led the way. Once inside, she turned and faced the two of them and gave them an evaluating look-over. "What do you want to know?" The wariness in her voice was obvious.

"Were you her supervisor at the time she quit?" Vivian met the woman's gaze straight on.

"Yes," she replied.

Vivian took a moment to collect her thoughts on how to approach this woman. Getting any substantial answers wasn't going to be very easy, she could tell. She decided on the direct approach. "Look, we think Felicity may have put herself in a dangerous position. We have a missing agent and there's a possibility she's involved."

With than information, Nurse Price's eyes flicked immediately to Jack. "I remember you now. You visited that GSW we had in here . . . what, three years ago? You managed to get in here after regular hours."

"Guilty," Jack said. "Martin Fitzgerald was the agent and it was a little over three years ago."

Something seemed to click in Mary's mind and her expression changed from that of a stern schoolmarm to a concerned mother. "He's the missing agent, isn't he?"

Jack glanced at Viv and raised an eyebrow. "Yes. What made you say that?"

Mary ducked her head and turned away for a moment, her hands parked firmly on her hips. An index finger tapped nervously against her hipbone. "I should have known," she whispered.

"What was that?" Viv asked. "Known what?"

It took a few moments for Mary to turn back to them. Viv noticed that her green eyes reflected something akin to conflict. What she had to say wasn't going to be pleasant.

"Ms. Price," Vivian began. "Anything you can tell us will help, even if it's conjecture."

"I do not condone spreading rumor and I do not initiate it. All I can tell you is what I saw. How interpret it is up to you."

"But you obviously came to some kind of conclusion."

"Well, not exactly. Let's just say that I would not be surprised if Miss Rickards was involved."

"Please, tell us what you know."

"I remember Agent Fitzgerald for several reasons. One, because of the amount of press his case generated. Admin required twice-daily updates which is something we don't usually do. Two, because of the number of people visiting after hours. Especially you." Jack cleared his throat and shrugged his shoulder at Viv. "And three, the way Nurse Rickards hovered over him. It wasn't so much the time she spent with him as the expression on her face when she was there. It was . . . unusual."

"Unusual how?"

"It was . . . awe . . . or infatuation . . . I'm not sure. I noticed that she seemed to spend the most time with him. She even came in during her off hours. I had to counsel her about it. The time she spent in his room was inappropriate."

"What do you mean by that?"

Mary shook her head in frustration. "That's just it, I can't pin it down. It made me and some of the other nurses uncomfortable. It became kind of a joke amongst them. My first job after getting my nursing degree was in a psychiatric facility and something about the way she looked reminded me of my time there. It was unnerving. A feeling only. Nothing I can specifically list. As I said, I won't start rumors."

"Fair enough," Viv conceded. "What happened after you counseled her about her behavior?"

"About that time, Admin was looking into some thefts within the hospital. Felicity and two other nurses under my charge were on a watch list along with a half-dozen orderlies so my time was spent keeping an eye on them. I noticed that she backed off on the free-time visits and after a few weeks, she quit the hospital. I heard she went to a private agency. It's not unusual - agencies allow nurses more flexibility in their work hours. She subbed here occasionally."

"Did you know that Agent Fitzgerald filed a restraining order against Felicity?"

"That's what I heard. News, true or not, spreads quickly in the nursing world. Again, the jokes about it circulated through the ward. I do know that I didn't see her subbing here anymore after I heard that bit of gossip, but I see now that it was true. I'm guessing it's also true, then, that she was his home nurse?"

"Yes. Is there anything else you can tell us about Felicity?"

"Well, I think I remember that she was going through some kind of stressful family situation about the time your agent was here. Someone was sick? I don't recall exactly, but I

do remember that it made sense at the time for her to join an agency. She needed more time at home and we couldn't accommodate her - we're always shorthanded. Her reason for quitting may in her files."

"Thank you, Ms. Price."

Jack and Vivian left the ward and headed for the elevators. They weren't as lucky on the trip to the basement in that they stopped at every floor in between and didn't have a chance to discuss theories until they had the files from Records and were in the car and on the way back to the office.

Jack drove while Viv perused the files. "Everything Mary Price told us is in here. The counseling slip, watch list from the theft investigation . . . and Felicity's reason for quitting was a sick relative."

"She was Martin's home nurse for just one week?"

"Martin was pretty stubborn about getting up to snuff again, I hear."

"I remember. Vividly." Jack's phone chirped from his pocket. He pulled it out, looked at the caller ID and tossed it to Viv.

"Hi, Sam," Viv answered. "What do you have?"

"We're at Felicity's last known address. She hasn't been here for at nearly a year, according to the building manager. No forwarding address. We spoke to all the neighbors and no one has seen her since she moved. I was going to call Elena and see if there was anything more to follow up on."

"She had a sick relative. See if you can find anything on him or her, and let us know what you find out. I also have the phone number of an agency she worked for." Viv read the number aloud. "See if they have anything." She closed the phone and handed it back to her boss. "Nothing at her address. She moved a year ago, no forwarding address."

Jack grunted, his tightened grip on the steering wheel the only indication of his frustration. "If she has him, where would she take him?"

"We're not even sure she has him, Jack. I'll check with forensics to see what they found in Martin's car." Agent Johnson retrieved her phone.

"Don't bother. We'll drop in."

When they arrived at the garage and inserted themselves into the busy scene, Jack looked around and waved at the supervisor while Viv poked her head in the car.

"Hey, Morgan. Find anything?"

"Jack, I was just about to call your office. We got a couple of things."

Malone followed the head evidence tech to a nearby workbench. "We didn't find any blood, fluids or any other residue. Someone was wearing gloves at one time. Latex. There were some glove prints on the rearview mirror and door handle. We pulled a lot of prints, but most of them were old. I sent them to the lab and they immediately hit on Agent Fitzgerald. Outside those two finds, nothing. Looks like the car was recently detailed, inside and out." He turned to the bench and picked up several sealed evidence bags. "Hair. Short ones matching Fitzgerald's color," he held up one bag, and then another. "And several

strands of brown. Either female or a long-haired male." Malone noticed that the long ones were wavy, just like Felicity Rickards' hair on her license photo.

"I'll take that up for DNA sampling. Anything else?" He took the hair samples from Morgan.

"We found the long hairs on the center console, the driver's seat and the back seat behind the driver's seat. We also found some soil on the floor behind the driver's seat and on the floor under the pedals."

"Morgan?" Viv called from beside the car.

Jack pocketed the soil samples along with the hair and the two men walked over to Vivian. Morgan looked at her questioningly.

"Is this the way the car was found? I mean, have the seats been moved?"

"Let me check." Morgan waved over a technician. "Photos?"

The younger man handed over a digital camera. "Haven't uploaded yet."

Morgan turned on the camera and brought up the images. "What are you looking for?"

"The driver's seat," Viv said. The three of them crowded together and looked at the camera's captures.

"This is how it looked when we brought it in." Morgan ran the series from the start. First there were general outside shots from all angles, and then the same photos with the doors open.

"There," Viv pointed out. She looked back at the car. The seats were unmoved. "Look at this, Jack." The pair walked back to the car. "Martin's taller than that."

Jack agreed. "Are you done in there?" Morgan nodded, so Jack opened the driver door to sit in the seat and found it nearly impossible to fit his knees under the steering wheel. "This is adjusted for someone shorter than Martin and me."

"Well, we'll just add 'short' to the suspect description, then, along with 'brunette'." Viv said with an unsatisfied frown while Jack struggled to get out of the car.

"One other thing," Morgan added. "The driver's seatback was jammed."

"Jammed?"

Morgan returned to the workbench and picked up another bag. "Yeah. When we collected the dirt from the carpet behind the driver's seat, we had a time leaning the seatback forward. This was stuck in the mechanism."

Jack took the bag and looked at it closely. "Cloth?"

"It's a piece of a bigger piece. Terrycloth. Possibly a wash cloth or a dish cloth."

"Hm," Jack grunted. He tucked the plastic-encased yellow bit into his pocket with the other evidence.

"So, someone else drove Martin's car. We just have to figure out who and when." Viv cocked her head at her boss.

Jack slammed the car door shut. "And where. Yeah, piece of cake." He patted his pocket. "I'll take these to the lab and meet you in the office. Tell the others what we have. Thanks, Morgan. Let us know if you find anything else."

CHAPTER FIVE

Martin thought his eyes were open – it was too dark to tell. He forced a blink and deduced it was, in fact, nighttime. The furnishings in the room slowly emerged as shapes in the shadow. The one window glowed around the edges from silver moonlight and a wedge of it spilled onto the floor from under the edge of the heavy curtain.

Martin blinked again as he surveyed the room to make sure he was alone. All he could hear were crickets and the soft waft of the curtain in the slight breeze. No car sounds, no talking, no breathing other than his own. He was definitely out of the city.

Deciding he was alone, Martin tested his bonds next. Gentle tugs told him that he was still restrained, both hand and foot. He sighed, and the motion of his chest awakened pain, not quite as sharp as before. The slices in his torso ached, the affected area forcing recall of another time when it hurt a whole lot more. Martin gritted his teeth to stop a gasp; he needed to focus on the here and now. He needed to formulate some kind of plan.

He turned his attention to the room. Whatever Felicity gave him hadn't quite worn off yet, and the cloying comfort of being completely numb to everything dangled in his mind like a carrot on a string. He was still fuzzy, and Martin had to work to ignore it as he assessed his situation.

After committing the furnishings to memory, Martin then focused on the bonds. He tugged and twisted, and found the limits of freedom each limb had. He tried to make out the locking mechanism, but it was impossible to see any detail in the dark so he searched his memory.

He'd seen restraints on patients before; some had locks and some had buckles. He knew his had locks, and that the locks he'd seen before were similar to handcuffs – and he knew how to pick handcuffs. Getting his hand on the key was probably not possible but a hairpin would work just fine. The only obstacle he could think of was his traitorous mind – it had fallen too easily as prey to the unwanted drugs.

All this sounded like some old movie's lame plot. He groaned softly at the ridiculousness of it all. A sharp noise caught his attention – the muted click of a door closing close by. It was followed a soft tread of footfall drawing near and Martin found his breath stalled in his chest. He forced his lungs to inhale, and then exhaled slowly to calm his pulse.

The vague fog on the edge of his awareness was the only trace left of the injected drugs and he found the pain of his "surgery" growing difficult to ignore.

"I see you're awake, Martin." Felicity sounded pleased. Her hand rested lightly on his forehead and Martin worked not to cringe. "I'm sure it was a dreamless sleep. I would have heard you."

The phrase caught his attention. "Heard me?"

"Monitor." She nodded toward the nightstand.

When Felicity clicked on the small lamp, Martin noticed what looked like a baby monitor sitting next to it. He wondered where the receiver was as he dragged his attention back to his captor. She was leaning over to tuck in a loose sheet edge when his eyes caught a flash of metal around her neck; but what made his heart surge was what dangled from it at the edge of her blouse neckline – the restraint key.

Martin acted without thought and shoved his hand forward. There was just enough play in the leather's length, and he wrapped his fingers around the key with determination.

Felicity gasped when Martin then yanked sideways with all his limited strength. It was enough for her to lose her balance and fall across him. Pain zinged outward from his wounds and raced down his extremities, but he fought to work through it.

Martin grabbed a handful of her hair with his other hand pulled, forcing her head under his hand. He could feel the key in the opposite hand, and worked his fingers up the chain until it was taut. Then, he pulled.

Felicity's muffled scream was hot against his side. At first, she tried to push away, but when she felt the tug of the chain and realized that her head was trapped, she changed tactics.

The first strike was a slap to his shoulder. Martin worked his fingers into her hair, tightening his grip. The second strike was a slap to the freshened wound in near his shoulder and the pain flared sharply. Martin gasped, and finally felt the chain give away from her neck.

It was the third strike that took his full attention. Felicity made a fist and ground it into to the awakened wound and Martin's world turned blinding white with pain.

"Ahhhh!" he screamed as his body arched against the mattress. Felicity took advantage of the distraction and pulled away, spitting curses. Martin, dazed, felt waves of nausea and pain, and panted harshly to try to get some kind of control over it.

"Damn you, Martin, now look what you've done!"

Felicity's voice, shrill and near hysterical, pierced Martin's skull as she patted him down. Martin felt the necklace yanked from his nerveless fingers as he cringed from the new onslaught, but a tiny piece of his mind held satisfaction. He focused on that one positive, and was concentrating so fully that he didn't notice Felicity's actions right beside him.

Eventually able to soften the pain through controlled panting and focused thought, it was only after she'd stabbed the IV port with full syringe that Martin became aware of what Felicity was doing. "No," he groaned, realizing he wasn't going to be aware of much in very few seconds.

"I'm sorry, Martin, but you did this to yourself." Now, her voice was low and hard with anger.

He hated the conflicted emotions of relief and fear he felt as the first edge of the drug's warmth hit him, but Martin worked to look beyond that in the seconds of thought he had left.

In those few seconds, he managed to tuck away the bobby pin from Felicity's hair under the mattress. With a tiny amount of satisfaction, he then he allowed his body to drift away into a painless sleep.

Jack dragged into the bullpen with two steaming cups in his hands. He stopped in the doorway and pursed his lips at was he saw.

It was the middle of the night and the building was predominantly dark. Viv and Danny were getting some sleep, leaving Samantha and Jack to go through everything they could find on Felicity Rickards. In the few minutes it took Jack to get coffee, Samantha had dropped off.

At the moment, her cheek rested on a short stack of files, facing an open file still in her hand but tipped backward onto a taller stack of papers. Blonde hair flowed over the shorter stack and puddled on the table, glowing rich gold in the soft light. Jack snorted with affection and moved forward.

When he dropped into the chair next to her, Samantha's eyelids fluttered. Jack waved a cup near her nose, and her nose twitched.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty," he said.

One eye peeled open, followed by the other, and Samantha sat up with a frown and a groan as she reached behind to rub her lower back. "There better be a couple espresso shots in there," she grumbled, reaching for a cup.

"I stand corrected. You're Shrek."

Propped on both elbows with the cup between her hands and under her nose, Samantha glared darkly at him.

"I guess I'll have to wait for the caffeine to hit your brain before I get a snappy reply." Jack took the chair next to her and watched her face as worry overtook the tiredness in her eyes. Samantha scanned the piles surrounding them and sighed. Jack reached out and rubbed her back. "We'll find him," he said. Then he sighed and scrubbed his cheek.

"What if we're wrong?" Samantha said softly, her gaze on the papers. "What if we're spending all this time looking for Felicity Rickards and it's actually someone else?"

"It's the best lead we have, especially since there's been no ransom demand."

"No ransom demand *yet*," she clarified. "It's still early."

"There's my trained agent," Jack said amusedly. "True, but in the meantime we have Ms. Rickards. My gut tells me it's the way to go."

Samantha rubbed an eye with her palm, sighed, and put down the coffee. "Well, we can't ignore your gut, now can we?" She picked up Felicity's old phone records and stared at it.

Jack watched her for a few, long seconds. "He means something to you, doesn't he?" he asked softly. Before saying anything, Jack noticed her brown eyes flick his way for a scant second.

"Of course he means something," she said guardedly. "We work together. He's my partner."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it." There was no rancor in his voice. Instead, it was full of concern. For a moment, he saw a glimpse of the private Samantha he'd known years before. He was well aware that beneath the tough, sharp investigator personage she wore at work, was a warm, giving woman. He'd breeched her wall of self-protection at one time and wondered if Martin had managed to do the same thing without him noticing.

Samantha looked up and held his gaze, as if trying to read the intent behind his question. Finally, she answered. "Yes, he means something. I have to find him."

"Does he know?"

She returned to the work before them. She didn't want to say she didn't know, either, until this minute. Instead, she said, "I don't think he cares, really."

"His loss."

With that, they continued their search.

Samantha, however, had a new nugget in her head. Was it Martin's loss? He'd been the one to call off the relationship, and, looking back, she didn't blame him. What brought her attention back to him was the fact that, despite their past, they had managed to become friends. He knew her better than most – he'd seen her highs and lows, and she'd definitely seen his. Even with that, they'd built a strong friendship. In her experience, that was unheard of.

In a rare flash of self-examination, Samantha reviewed her "dating life" since their split; it was noting but superficial. And from what she'd seen of Martin's, it was pretty much the same. There was, of course, the 12-step year of non-dating to take into account, which, in her opinion, had led to the Kim Marcus fiasco. Martin was obviously looking for something.

Could it be her?

She felt a flush of heat at the thought. Was she the reason Martin had made such bad choices? Did he still care for her that way? Samantha resolved to find out, but first they had to find him.

CHAPTER SIX

A vaguely familiar lullaby drifted sleepily through his head as Martin ever so slowly became aware. He felt as if he cowered in a dark corner and the gentle song coaxed him to face the sun once again. Carefully, he felt his way from the darkness, following the sweet sound.

"*Mom*?" he thought, but when the tune didn't waver, he called again. "*Aunt Bonnie*? *Sam*?"

Puzzled when the song continued, Martin realized that he must still be asleep. He forced his eyelids apart and blinked at the brightness. The soft voice was coming from his right, so he turned his head to find the source. When Felicity came into focus, Martin felt his blood surge. He gasped.

Felicity's head snapped around and her face lit up with a bright smile. "Hey, there! You're just in time." She stood from the small secretary where she had been sitting and writing.

Martin's place in this dream snapped into clarity but he managed to curb his panic. The result of his last outburst came to mind - he had to keep calm. Martin swallowed hard and tried to control the fear in his heart as Felicity approached. When she reached for his forehead, he managed to keep still and dredge up a tight smile.

"You feel better? You've been asleep for a while." Felicity stroked his cheek. Martin worked to lie still.

"Water?" he croaked.

Felicity fussed with the pillow and brought the head of the bed up, and then filled a cup from a bedside pitcher. She talked, happily, as she directed the straw to his mouth and he drank. Martin's mind slowly cleared and his thought process began to work again.

"I'm making a list for the store. I've got all your favorites on it." When Martin was finished, she put the cup down and straightened the sheets. "You still need to take it easy and let those incisions knit. I'll let you sit up for awhile. How about I open the curtain so you can see outside?"

Felicity moved to the window and pulled the curtain aside. Beyond the window, Martin saw nothing but trees and heard only singing birds.

"It's a beautiful day!" She picked up a remote control from a nearby table and came to him, placing the device in his hand. "In case you want to watch television while I'm gone." She turned away and gathered her purse from the secretary.

Martin glanced up, surprised to see a flat screen television mounted on the wall. He hadn't noticed it before. Blinking rapidly to get his wandering thoughts in line, Martin quickly looked around and tugged his limbs; still restrained.

"Felicity?" he managed to croak, his voice sounding a pitch higher than normal.

She turned and beamed at him. "Yes, honey? Something you want from the store?"

"Um, not really, but can you undo these?" Martin lifted his arm as far as it would go. He could still feel the fuzzy effects of the drugs and it was difficult to dredge up a smile - it felt more like a grimace.

She stared at him a moment, her face frozen in a plastic looking smile, before saying, "No, you have to be still so you can heal. I'll be back in a little while. You rest."

"No, wait." Martin pleaded. "Just my legs, then? I can curl up a little that way. My back's sore and it will help. Please?"

As soon as he mentioned his back, Felicity frowned with concern and put her purse down. "I'm sure you are a little sore from being in one position. I'll give you a back rub when I get back." She moved to the bed and slipped the chain from around her neck. "I'll release your legs so you can put your knees up."

"That would be great," he sighed, his heart racing. He had to keep still.

Felicity stood at the foot of the bed and well out of Martin's reach when she released his legs. Although part of him screamed to try to wrestle her down with his free limbs, he remained outwardly calm. After she left, he'd have the time he needed to pick the lock.

She smiled at him and collected her purse again as she placed the key chain back around her neck. Then she cocked her head, staring at him.

"Thanks," Martin said. He bent his knees and sighed. "That feels much better."

"You need to be careful of the stitches. Don't move too quickly."

"Okay." He managed to hold her stare without showing any anger. She stood a bit too long, though, and Martin wondered what she had in mind. Then she put the purse down again.

"I can't leave you in pain." She headed to the medicine drawer.

"I'm not in pain," Martin said quickly. "Really. Just a bit stiff. It'll loosen up." Felicity did not acknowledge him. When she turned to him with the loaded syringe, his heart sank.

"Just a small dose to take the edge off," she said happily. Felicity grabbed the IV port and started injecting the liquid.

Martin had to fight back all desire to use his legs. It would be quite a stretch to connect using his leg and he was sure the stitches in his guy would not like it. Disgusted, he also had to fight back the wanting he felt for the drug. As he felt its relaxing effect, he watched Felicity put the syringe away, grab her purse and turn to go. She started humming that lullaby again, but this time it made Martin's skin prickle.

He fought the cloying effects while listening for indications that Felicity was, in fact, leaving. Finally finding a foggy zone where he could dwell somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, Martin heard a car start up and was sure she was gone. Then started the fight to find and retrieve the hairpin with thick, numb fingers that resisted orders to function.

The level of concentration required was mentally exhausting for what should have been such a simple task. Martin, sometimes close to tears, pushed to his limit. Cold sweat sheathed his body and caused the light sheet to stick to bare skin. Sparing a glance from his fumbling fingers, he saw faint pink spots bleeding through the gauze and sheet and was thankful for the level of drugs in his system. He felt the edge of pain as he worked, but it was tolerable. A feeling of elation tickled his nerves when he managed to get the hairpin in the keyhole, causing his fingers to tremble and the pin to drop to the mattress.

"No, no, no!" he breathed in near hysterical disappointment. Hard fought tears mixed with the sweat on his face. Martin felt on the edge of control, recognized it, and forced himself to relax and regroup. He had no idea how much time he had until she returned and it was nearly impossible to push back the desire to rush, but, somehow, he managed.

It was tricky to gather his concentration and control again, especially with the lure of the soothing darkness always hanging at the back of his mind, but he managed and eventually felt ready to try again. Martin took a deep breath, focused on the hairpin lying on the mattress, and started over.

"I don't understand this," Vivian grumbled. "The woman has dropped off the planet."

"I agree." Samantha, just returned from a too-short sleeping stint, rubbed her eyes. "If we could only prove the hair from the car was hers, I wouldn't feel like we were chasing a ghost."

"Let's start over," Danny sighed. "We must have missed something."

"Start over from where?" Elena asked. "Maybe that's what we need to look at."

Samantha frowned. "We have her work history. That puts her in the city for a long time. Start before that, you mean?"

"We've checked family. Her parents are dead." Danny sounded discouraged as he dug through the paperwork.

"What about before that? Extended family, maybe? The sick relative?" Vivian looked lost in thought.

"Wasn't that the mother? She passed away about that time." Samantha tapped on the computer keys. "Here's the death certificate. Felicity inherited everything, but sold the house."

Vivian twisted her chair around and looked at the screen. "I wonder," she mused softly.

Samantha, Elena and Danny looked at her. "Maybe there's more here."

"What do you mean?" Tired, Samantha stood and stretched, and then leaned against her desk, allowing Vivian a better view of the monitor.

"What if there was another family issue going on? I mean, it looks like we're talking about a very disturbed person. There may have been a catalyst - like emotional stress." She leaned forward and pointed at the screen. "What do we know about Felicity's father? Was he around when mom died?"

"He died when Felicity around ten years old," Elena said. "That's about all we know."

"Did we check his family? What about the mother's family?" Vivian's demeanor lifted as her mind clicked into action. "After the father died, did another relative step up to the plate? If so, where's he or she now?"

With a new trail to follow, there was a burst of activity.

"Mother's maiden name was Silverman," Samantha said aloud. "Born in Clanton, New Jersey."

A flutter of activity kept the team busy until Vivian nearly growled, "A lot of the records for that city were lost in a fire not long after Felicity's mother was born. It's going to take a little time to find siblings, if any."

"I'll check with the Social Security office. And there's still school records to check," Danny volunteered, and the team dug in again.

An hour nearly passed when Jack entered the bullpen. "Well," he started after a quick glance around. "You all look busy. Something come up?"

As Vivian briefed their boss on their line of thought, Samantha's desk phone rang and she plucked it from the cradle and tucked it between her shoulder and ear as she continued to type. Then, she stopped and sat up straight. "I'll be right there. Keep an eye on her, but don't approach her, understand?" Standing, she hung up the phone and grabbed her coat.

Danny rose from his chair as the team turned their attention to Samantha.

"That was the grocery store manager near Felicity's old address. I left a photo and my card, just in case, and Felicity's there right now." When she bolted to the elevator, Danny was on her heels with Elena and Vivian close behind.

"Keep in touch!" Jack called as they disappeared. Then he approached the conference table and continued from where the others left off.

They took two cars. Samantha found it difficult to sit still while Danny drove much too slowly for her taste. Danny gave her a glance and asked, "Did the clerk say anything else?"

"Manager," Samantha corrected as she checked her watch yet again. "When I spoke to her before, she told me that before she was manager, she worked the night shift and remembered Felicity because she'd do her shopping in the middle of the night."

"One of the joys of shift work," Danny commented.

"Yeah, I guess the normal middle of the night shoppers just hit the snack aisles. Not many hung out in the fresh fruit section, so she remembered Felicity. She liked to come in as they stocked the fruits and vegetables right from the delivery trucks."

"Health nut?"

Samantha snorted. "Guess so. If she has Martin, he's probably craving a cheeseburger." She found it difficult to keep the worry from her voice and knew she wasn't

successful when she saw the sympathetic glance from Danny. She pressed her lips into a tight line in an effort to keep control.

"We'll find him," Danny said softly.

Samantha glanced at her watch again and decided to change the topic away from her confused feelings and thoughts. "I wonder if Brian remembered Finn's doctor appointment."

"Is Finn okay?"

Samantha looked out the side window, distracted. "Yeah. It's just a check up." She tried to gather her thoughts and emotions at the same time. Having Brian at her place certainly made things easier, but she knew that their future was not set in stone. She was fond of Brian and loved the way he interacted with their son, but she was beginning to see that he didn't fill that empty spot inside her. Now that her little boy had managed to break down the wall around her heart, Samantha realized what - or who - was missing.

And she intended to find him and find out if there she still a chance with him.

Danny stopped in the red zone in front of the small market while Samantha called Vivian and told her to take the back alley. They quickly walked into the store, and were greeted by the manager as soon as they flashed their identification.

"She just left," the woman said. "I followed her out. Here's her car information."

"Where did she park? Which way did she go?" Danny asked.

Samantha relayed Danny's conversation to Vivian, who headed in the direction indicated. The two agents sprinted back to the car where Samantha relayed the license plate information to Lucy. She stayed on the line, impatiently waiting for the registration information.

"Car comes back to a post office box in the Stamford area," Samantha told Danny.

Danny whistled. "A fair distance," he said lowly just before turning sharply at the next intersection. "If she's headed that way, we need to notify State Patrol."

Samantha did so, and then notified Vivian. Danny continued out of town. With each passing mile, Samantha's nerves tightened to the point where she felt like screaming. Just when she was about to encourage Danny to drive faster, her phone rang.

"Spade," she snapped. When she heard the message, her heart soared. "They have her stopped on the 95, south of Stamford. Vivian's going to beat us there and stay with the car. We're to bring Felicity back with us." Danny nodded and accelerated.

It still wasn't fast enough for Samantha.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Felicity Rickards' glare encompassed her entire face, but one feature caught Danny's attention.

"Crazy eyes," he stated aloud.

"Excuse me?" Samantha asked, her partner's statement pulling her from her own worried thoughts.

"She's got Crazy Eyes." Danny waved a finger at the woman sitting in the interview room. As he spoke, Jack entered the room and Felicity swiveled her head in his direction.

"Is that a Dannyism evolved from personal experience?"

"Nah, it's a reality. Men flee from women with Crazy Eyes. It's a sign of desperation. Clinginess. Possessiveness. You know what I mean. It scares men away." Danny crossed his arms over his chest and slouched against the observation room wall, studying Felicity.

Surprisingly, Samantha made no comment. Instead, she narrowed her eyes and turned her attention to the woman behind the glass as Jack sat down across from her. They heard Jack introduce himself.

"Crazy Eyes," Samantha murmured, thoughtful.

"Why am I here?" Felicity snapped on the other side.

Jack adjusted his tie and then folded his hands on top of the folder in front of him, his forearms resting on the table. He was a picture of calm. "We're gathering information on the disappearance of Martin Fitzgerald. I understand you were his nurse at one time?"

"Yes, I was." Her face softened a little. "He was shot. He's missing?"

Jack led her down a deceptively innocent path with a series of statements and harmless questions gauging every response and reading every nuance of body language. Over time, Samantha knew what to look for and what certain inflections meant, but she was nowhere as schooled as Jack was. She found herself studying Felicity more closely as the interrogation continued.

"Either she's psychotic or she completely innocent," she finally said. "She's not showing any indication of stress or guilt."

"Don't underestimate the Crazy Eyes," Danny said, also transfixed with the interview ongoing before them. "First impressions are usually correct."

"That would make her psychotic," Samantha muttered, a chill shivering her spine. "We need to look in her car."

"She didn't allow that. She certainly knows her rights."

"All we need is a hair to compare to the one in evidence. We're getting nothing here." She waved a hand at the glass.

The two of them continued to watch an interview they knew was going nowhere. Apparently, the same idea crossed Jack's mind because Samantha noticed the shift in his technique.

"Nursing must be hard work."

Felicity paused a second, then replied. "It can be."

"I mean, all those sick and hurt people relying on your care to get well. It's quite a responsibility. You must be very rewarding to see your patients recover."

After a momentary pause, she nodded. "Yes, it is."

"On the other hand, it must be very difficult to see those that don't recover. Those that don't quite make it back to what they were. Those that leave your care a lesser person."

A slight twitch of Felicity's features quickly smoothed. She glanced at her hands, crossed in her lap.

"Not that it's your fault," Jack continued. "I mean, you can only pick up where the doctors leave off. You can only work with what's left for you."

Felicity's face minutely hardened and her words seemed rehearsed. "Doctors do the best they can." She raised her chin and looked directly at Jack. "Just like I do."

"I'm sure Martin appreciated everything you did for him, Ms. Rickards."

"It's Callaway," she corrected. "I've changed my name to Callaway."

The atmosphere immediately charged in the observation room when Danny straightened from the wall and Samantha flipped open the thick folder in her hand. "Mother's maiden name was Silverman," she said, leafing through the pages. "Why Callaway? Any Callaways die about a year ago? That's when Felicity fell off the radar."

Samantha surmised that Jack had to be as surprised as they were at that bit of information, but there was no indication of it as the interview continued.

"I remember you from the hospital," Jack continued smoothly, leaning back in his chair. "You were very attentive and caring. I don't think I ever thanked you for that."

Felicity muttered a quiet reply to the thanks and even offered a tiny smile. "Nurses don't get thanked very often, but that's not why I do it."

Jack continued in that vein as Danny and Samantha scrambled to follow up on the new intelligence.

Danny's fingers flew across the keyboard in the Observation Room. "Silverman. A husband and wife died within months of each other. Says here in the obituary that Jake died of a broken heart after his wife's passing. The only relative listed is a niece, Felicity. No last name. I bet she took care of them," Danny flipped open his cell. "Jake and Ruth Silverman.

Ruth's maiden name was Callaway!" Momentarily triumphant, he continued to pound the keys. "There must be a will on file that will list property holdings."

"Jake was her mother's brother, I bet." Samantha took over the computer while Danny called the County Recorder. "And I also bet they raised Felicity. No wonder we couldn't find her. But why use Callaway instead of Silverman?"

"There must have been something about Ruth she identified with, more than her mother," Danny surmised.

"I'll tell Jack." Samantha picked up the wall phone. Inside, Jack stood and picked up his end. She quickly told him what they found, and what they were looking for. She knew, however, that even with property listings, they didn't have enough for a warrant. As she spoke to Jack, she ran her eyes over Felicity and noted how her hair was twisted and clipped off her neck with a simple comb-style hair clip.

In the interview room, Jack kept his face neutral, studying Felicity as he listened to Samantha.

"We need a hair sample," Samantha said. "I want to try something. When you're done, I'll come in to escort her out."

Jack flicked his eyes at her through the glass and nodded. "Fine," was all he said, preparing to hang up.

"Hold on," Danny called.

"Wait," Samantha said into the receiver. On the other side of the divider, Jack paused.

Danny picked up the tablet that had his hastily scribbled notes. "There are five possible addresses, scattered all over Stamford." He looked at Samantha. "Why not let her lead us to the right place?"

"You hear that?" Samantha asked. "If I can get a hair sample, we can have preliminary results by the time we get there. Then we can get a warrant."

"I hear you," Jack answered. Then he hung up and turned back to his chair.

Samantha carefully hung up the phone, watching the subject of the interview as she did so. Felicity sat quietly, eyes downcast to her hands and appearing thoughtful. The agent wondered at the fact that Felicity, at no time, had shown any sign of nervousness; anger and pride, yes, but not an iota of nervousness.

That fact said that Felicity Rickards/Callaway was either innocent or a sociopath, and Samantha's stomach twisted at what her instincts screamed. She swallowed hard and waited for Jack's cue that would indicate the interview was over. And the fact that Danny didn't scoff at her unvoiced plan to get a hair sample told her that Danny's gut was just as queasy.

Her boss settled in his chair and apologized for the interruption. Felicity didn't respond. Jack took a moment before saying, "I bet it was very difficult for you when Martin was discharged."

Felicity raised her head and met Jack's eyes. Still, there was absolutely no indication of what was going on in her head.

"I think he left too soon." Jack turned slightly sideways and flicked the edge of the folder on the table as he turned his attention to it. "He wasn't ready, but Martin insisted. He should have stayed longer. I'm certainly not a medical expert, but I think the doctors were wrong, releasing him when they did." He looked back to Felicity.

"Yes," Felicity whispered sadly.

"He really needed to be looked after." He glanced to the glass wall, giving Samantha the head's up she was looking for. "I think you said something to the doctors, too. I mean, Martin could hardly walk."

Samantha heard the last part as the Observation Room door closed behind her. She covered the distance to the Interview Room door in a few steps and heard Danny right behind her.

When she pushed the door open, she heard Jack ask, "I think you were right to take care of him after that. I think you still want to take care of him." He shoved a copy of Martin's restraining order across to her.

She glanced at the order and laughed shortly. "I don't know what you mean," she said, pushing the chair back and picked up her purse. As she straightened, Samantha reached over and bumped the comb clip in Felicity's hair hard enough to loosen its hold. "Ouch!" Felicity yelped, lurching to her feet.

"I'm sorry," Samantha said quickly. "I was reaching for the chair."

Felicity glared hotly at her while reaching up for the clip with one hand. At seeing the blonde agent, Felicity's cheeks flushed and her face grew hard. Motionless, she raked Samantha with a burning look and then turned to Jack. Releasing her hair from the clip, she spoke sharply as she used both hands to pull her hair back and twist it into place. "Please take me back to my car," she snapped. The clip was replaced, and as she reached for her coat, Samantha plucked it from the back of the chair and held it close.

"An agent's here to take you down." Danny said, distracting her as he smiled and held the door open.

"Thank you for your time, Ms. Callaway." Jack circled around and held out his hand. "Here's my card. Call me if you think of anything else."

The way Jack approached her forced Felicity to turn her back to Samantha, who quickly brushed her hand down the length of the coat in several long strokes. She even managed to give it a good shake before Felicity turned back toward her. Then, the agent solemnly held it out. Felicity grabbed it and walked out of the door, where Danny bade her goodbye.

Jack, instantly on the phone, spoke quickly and hung up. "Lucy has a GPS. You need to get to Felicity's car before she does. I'll have the agent driving her stall as much as he can, but you'll have to move it. I'll get Forensics to look for any hairs in here. Go."

He spoke to his agents' retreating backs.

It was a nearly impossible task to take command of disconnected fingers. Martin teetered precariously on an edge between focus and despair - a tiny, dark voice dogged him to give up and give in while a visage of Samantha and his mother urged him to keep fighting.

He was exhausted. The inexorable pull of the drug proved to be too much early on and Martin jerked into awareness more than once, both ashamed and furious that his body betrayed him so easily with surrender. When he finally became aware, he immediately renewed his attack on the lock with his now twisted and scratched hairpin.

He counted two times when his body gave up. When the third time called, he managed to hold the effects at bay and knew the drug was finally running its course. Martin had no idea of the time, but marked the passing of the hours by the way the shadows slanted through the window and the gradual rise of pain from his wounds. Felicity should have already returned; she'd indicated a short excursion based on the small amount of Morphine.

What if she'd been in an accident and couldn't return? What if he died here, trapped in this bizarre prison? When would anyone find him? Those thoughts injected nervous adrenalin into his blood, hopefully hastening the exit of what Felicity gave him. The resulting trembling didn't help his fat, fumbling fingers, though, and Martin thought he'd scream when he dropped the pin yet again.

His fingers and forearm cramped painfully. Martin hissed, both glad to feel again and furious at the interruption. He could feel droplets of sweat trickling down his temple and rubbed the side of his face on his pillow when it stung his eyes. The pin tipped in his fingers but he didn't drop it, encouraged that things were finally going his way.

Martin set his jaw and focused on his hand, willing his fingers to cooperate. Ever so slowly, the pin moved into position over the tiny keyhole. He could feel pain in his extended joints but ignored it. With one final order, his fingertip tilted just enough and the pin tip dropped in the hole. Martin hissed with joy and increased the grip on the makeshift key.

He heard the crunch of gravel outside and panic flared. Martin's fingertips pinched the metal and he twisted the pin, feeling for the click of the locking mechanism.

A car engine shut off and after a moment, Martin heard a car door slam.

"Come on," he whispered, sweat popping out all over his body, his wounds pulling and stinging. He twisted the pick and felt the resistance he was looking for. He nearly sobbed with joy and summoned all his strength to his fingers, grunting as pain stabbed his overly stressed fine muscles.

A door opened close by. The lock resisted in his hand. Footsteps tracked closer. The small mechanism finally gave away to pressure and Martin pulled.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie, I got held up." Felicity's voice said lightly. Her tone abruptly changed. "Martin!"

Martin tugged and twisted and the restraint released with antagonizing slowness.

"No!" Felicity dropped the shopping bags she held and ran to the bed through a current of rolling apples and oranges.

She reached for the loose restraint, but Martin used his leg to push her away. Holding the hairpin in a sweaty grip, he twisted to attack the other restraint, marginally aware of the tearing pain of his stomach and a sudden smear of blood on the sheets.

"Martin, stop! Stop!"

He felt her hands on him again and he shrugged her off, using his elbow to give the motion some bite. Felicity squeaked when he connected. "Get away from me!" he snarled, kicking backward with one leg. He heard a crash but didn't take the time to see what damage he'd inflicted. His hand shook as he inserted the pin and he bit his lip in desperate concentration.

Seconds ticked by in his head. "*Too long.*" The thought rocketed to the forefront - Felicity's silence was too long. Martin felt the wanted resistance in the lock and risked a glace to his captor. She was withdrawing a syringe from a small bottle and the sight made his gut twist. He turned back, gave the pin a hard twist, and it leaped from his fingers and skittered on the floor.

"SHIT!" he yelled, tugging at the leather. Abandoning escape for defense he turned to Felicity, now only a few steps from the bed, and saw her reach for the I.V. still inserted in his shackled arm. Martin quickly pulled out the line, the sharp pain making him gasp.

"You shouldn't have done that," Felicity wailed, her eyes big. Before she could retreat, though, Martin lunged for the chain that peeked out from the neckline of her blouse. He caught the chain, but the effort made him roll over the bed railing. The resulting spike of pain was debilitating.

Still, he held on, the chain digging into his hand as Felicity pulled back. Her motion dragged him the rest of the way over the railing and he screamed with the sudden, breath-taking pain. The chain broke from her neck but Martin was temporarily stunned. He hung from one restrained arm, his legs on the floor. It took some time to get his feet under him and when the blossom of pain ebbed slightly, he became aware of Felicity close by on her hands and knees, looking for something she'd dropped.

Martin dug deep and turned away, training all his attention to the final lock. Sweat stung his eyes and blurred his vision as he fumbled to get the key between his fingers. Finally, he managed to fit the key in the lock and twisted.

He felt sharp pain shoulder as the restraint unlocked and quickly loosened from his hanging weight. Martin flopped to the floor tangled in the bloody sheet with Felicity latched on his back. He twisted and slammed her to the floor, kicked free from the sheet and rolled to his hands and knees, panting heavily and hurting all over. Something dangled from his shoulder and he glanced aside, spying a bobbing syringe.

A groan welled from deep inside as he slowly reached toward it with a trembling hand. Martin plucked the syringe and needle out as he felt the warmth of the drug start its paralyzing cascade. Finding his feet was challenging due to pain, dizziness and the growing vertigo, so he took a moment, clutching the bedrail to stay upright and fighting to resist a black tide rising.

Panting, and with eyes whose focus was precarious at best, Martin looked around, taking in the gore that was his torso - black centipede-stitches crawled where puckered scars had been, marching over bloody and raw flesh. When Felicity showed signs of coming around, moaning quietly and blindly reaching for support, Martin's shocked self-examination ceased and his heart thundered anew. He willed back the drug's effects. Pulling the low-slung scrub pants higher on his hips, he held them in place as he wobbled toward the hallway.

His wavering vision zeroed in on the woods outside at the end of the hall. Martin locked his eyes on the gently swaying branches in the growing darkness, knowing the setting sun would cover his escape, and tried to run. One hand was a balled fist in the material of the thin pants and he leaned on the wall with the other, knocking unidentified things off the wall as he moved closer to his goal.

Martin's speed picked up as determination steeled. When he hit the end of the hallway and crashed through the glass of the sliding door, he barely paused, driven onward by desperation.

He kept going, ignoring the pain, ignoring the cold and ignoring the call of the drug's promised peace, falling into the welcome embrace of the surrounding forest.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I don't see the tail lights anymore," Danny said. "Did she turn?"

Samantha angled the hand held GPS so she could see the street names better on the display. "Um, right. Turn right . . . here? I can't see anything in these woods."

Danny slowed the sedan so they wouldn't miss the turn. A typical two-lane roadway wended it way through the bucolic country deep within the Stamford area state park. One part of the park remained private property, and this was where Felicity had led them.

"You sure there's houses out here?" Danny asked, leaning forward as he squinted into the darkness. "Damn, its dark."

Instead of answering, Samantha rolled down her window. It was cold - autumn was definitely afoot, and the thought crossed her mind that the trees should be changing soon. Unconsciously, she tugged her jacket closer. Then she smelled something.

"Stop a second," she said. "Turn off the headlights." As Danny edged to the side of the narrow pavement and stopped, Samantha stuck her head out of the window. "I smell dust. She must have turned off right around here." She pushed the car door open and stepped outside, resisting the urge to use her flashlight. If there was a house close to the road, the beam would be visible and she didn't want to give their presence away.

She waited for her eyes to adjust and realized the moon not only supplied an adequate amount of light, but its soft light would cast better shadows and that's what she looked for. The tire tread from Felicity's car should be visible because of the shadows the indentation would cast - fresh tracks had sharp ridges. Old tracks, smoothed by the wind and elements, wouldn't be as obvious. Sam concentrated on the indistinct line where the pavement ended and the dirt shoulder began.

Finally, she saw where a car had turned off very recently. She stopped and peered into the trees. She heard Danny come up behind her, and she quickly raised her arm to motion for silence. Sam tilted her head and listened. Something caught her attention and she stared between the trees.

"I see taillights," she whispered. "Here." She pointed out a turnoff that must have been a driveway. She looked around again and pointed to a small, wooden sign that appeared to be very old hanging from a tree on a rusty nail. The long peeled away white paint left the etched numbers stained a vague grey.

"The address matches one on the list," Danny confirmed. "This is it."

"Leave the car out here," Samantha said quietly, still staring through the trees. She heard Danny tell Jack their location.

"Jack said to hold on and just watch until they get here. We can make a strong perimeter with everyone here."

"Just a little closer," Samantha said. "I heard a car door close. Let's see how far in the house is." She started down the path without waiting for a reply. Behind her, Danny swore softly as he jogged back to the car to lock it up. Samantha pushed on.

The dirt driveway curved one way and then the other, circumventing the older, established trees. The gentle down slope ended at a small creek and the drive continued over a rickety one-lane bridge. This was where Samantha waited for Danny. From here, she could see a light turn on in the house but the size and shape of the structure was still hidden behind the trees.

"See anything?" When Danny reached her side, she pressed on.

"Just a light - can't really see . . ." her observation stopped with the sound of shattering glass and they both reached for their guns. "I'll take the back!" Sam snapped.

They closed the distance to the house side by side, splitting apart as they cleared the trees. She heard Danny giving a quick run-down to Jack on the phone as he moved to the front door. When she lost sight of him, Samantha slowed, gun firmly in point position.

She stayed back from the side of the house, outside the reach of the yellow light cast on the ground through the windows. She couldn't see much inside due to the lacy curtains and glided carefully to the rear of the house.

Then she saw the shattered sliding glass door window, Samantha paused. She knew full well that she should wait for cover but an undefined urgency made her step up to the chaos.

The glass had been broken outward. She could see traces of blood spattered on the deck and the larger pieces of glass. Inside the house, she saw a line of blood smeared along the hallway wall, and framed pictures broken on the floor.

Samantha's heart beat wildly. The blood trail on the wall led to a room at the other end. She took a deep breath and steeled herself to enter, but hesitated when she heard someone following the path she'd taken down the side of the house. She backed up to the wall next to the shattered doors and waited, relieved to see Vivian side step into view. For a second, their guns pointed at each other.

Vivian frowned deeply and redirected her weapon skyward at the same time as Samantha, and then quickly moved alongside her teammate.

"You go in," Samantha said hurriedly. "I'm looking out there."

"But Jack said . . ."

Samantha didn't hear the rest because she was already heading for the woods, following the clear, bloody trail in the dirt. She heard Danny announce his presence inside the house just as the trees swallowed her whole.

The blackness was complete within the hold of the trees. Samantha stopped to listen and fish out her flashlight from her coat pocket. She shivered as the cold air caressed her throat when the coat pulled open for a moment. She tugged it closed again while she angled the bright beam to the ground and swept the area. A scuffed trail led from the back door to where she stood, and she was alarmed to find smears of blood on some of the tree trunks. Samantha swallowed hard and followed the rough trail, moving slowly because of the treacherous footing the woody roots presented.

Samantha's breathing evened out with her slower pace. The soft rustle of the leaves infused an eerie feeling to the air that she blamed on her anxiety. The scuffled dirt path told a heartbreaking tale; flat spots marked where her quarry fell over the roots, bone-jarringly hard in some areas. Blood flecked the roots and leaves along the way. The occasional clear print was of a bare foot, which caused her worry. Samantha could tell she was close when there were no more clear prints - instead, dragging lines connected the impressions.

They were running out of steam.

Then the churned path turned sharply and - stopped. Samantha frowned as she studied the abrupt end. She was next to a particularly large tree, its massive roots bumped up from the soil as evenly spaced humps that reminded her of a scaled sea-serpent's back. Playing the light around the tree and finding nothing, Samantha was about to back track when the light caught a flash of color on the trunk. Refocusing her attention, she almost missed the bloody handprint.

Hovering her spread fingers over the print, she saw it was slightly larger than her own and in that moment, she knew whom it was she was trailing.

"Martin!" She called, and then wondered if a woman's voice was something Martin would respond to at the moment. "Martin! It Samantha! Where are you?"

She used the reptile roots as stepping stones around the tree and pushed into the thick, thigh-high shrubs that cozied up behind the tree. Then she saw a light patch under the shrubs and she gasped in surprise.

"Oh my God."

Samantha dropped to her knees and shoved the bushy branches aside. She found Martin curled into a tight ball, covered in blood and dirt, barefoot and wearing only a thin, torn pair of scrub pants against the frigid night.

CHAPTER NINE

His world was very small; a cold, painful existence that centered in his gut. Martin tucked in tight, imagining himself encased in a protective shell that repelled any further hurt. He floated on an ocean, buffeted by wind and swells. Everything swayed and rolled as all levels of pain tried to break through his shell.

He was frozen. He rolled up tighter and groaned as a large swell broke over him, rattling his defenses and making him tremble.

"It's all right, Martin. You're safe now. Everything will be all right."

The voice was soft and familiar. Warm. It didn't belong out here in the middle of all this chaos, so it had to be a trick of his mind; it was so easy, though, to focus on the welcomed familiarity. *Samantha.*

"Come on Martin, help's on the way. Can you hear me?"

A soft hand caressed his cheek and he recognized her scent. He pressed his cheek into the warmth, wishing it could his focus, but it had to be a trick of his senses. When she withdrew her hand, he gasped.

"Here. This will help."

Suddenly, warmth draped over his body and he felt Samantha tuck in loose edges of a blanket around his shivering body. His teeth chattered, and he grimaced against his twisting stomach. He almost cried in relief when her warmth returned as she cupped his face with both of her hands. Her thumb brushed his dry lips.

"You'll be okay, Martin, you hear me? Everything will be fine."

Martin allowed himself to accept the words even though his rebelling body made it nearly impossible to think. Pain, both sharp and dull, burned in every part of him. He refused to open his eyes and take the chance that his only comfort could possibly be imagined. He locked onto the balm of her words. The hands disappeared again and he whimpered, tucking his chin to his chest and shivering as her words grew faint.

"We're straight back in the woods, behind the house. My flashlight is on. The EMT's will have to carry him out." Sam's voice was sharp and professional, making Martin think that maybe she was real after all. "I need blankets. He's cold." Pause. "He's breathing, but I'm not sure about the conscious part." The last word sounded strangled. "Just hurry!"

In the vague background of his misery, he heard a click, followed by a sniff and a tiny cough.

"You aren't leaving me, Martin, you hear me?" The words were louder and close to his ear. Then he felt her length against him as she pulled him into her warm arms. "I'm here now. I'm really here. I'll get you through this."

Martin wanted nothing more than to return the embrace, but his body was in a struggle of its own and all he could do was ride the tide using Samantha as his soul's anchor.

Beams of light probed the shadows of the woods and soon Sam could hear voices. She'd propped her flashlight against a humped tree root to act as a beacon, satisfied that they would find her. Holding Martin as close as she could as they both lay on the ground, her main concern was protecting him. She wasn't even sure if he heard her anymore.

"Here they are. We'll have you out of here soon and then you can sleep. Stay with me Martin, okay? Just stay with me."

She cradled his head just under her chin and held him to her body as much as she could. Martin felt like ice. The few warm spots were bloody. His body shuddered in waves, not quite reaching the level of convulsions, but much too close to it for her liking. She heard Jack order someone to lead the EMTs in, and then felt more than saw him drop next to her.

"Sam? How's he doing?" Jack rested one hand on her shoulder and reached out with the other to feel Martin's pulse at his neck.

"He hasn't spoken yet. I don't think he can." Her voice sounded strangled as the words pushed out.

"He's breathing and his pulse is strong," Jack comforted. "Are there any wounds that need pressure?"

"No . . . I don't know. He was just so cold, Jack. He's shivering. There's blood . . ."

She felt Jack move around to Martin's head. It was difficult to maneuver in the brush, but the team leader forced an opening. He lifted an edge of Samantha's jacket that was Martin's blanket and pulled it aside, shining a light in the small space between them. Martin's knees were drawn up tight and his arms folded firmly to his chest.

"I can't see much, but I don't see any pooling blood. His wrist is pretty raw." Jack replaced the jacket, tucked it in again and turned his examination to Martin's feet. "Pretty shredded," he said lowly. "Running through glass will do that."

"Where are the medics?" Sam snapped as she gently rubbed Martin's quaking back.

"They are on their way." As if in response, Sam heard the faint sound of sirens.

"Is she in custody?"

"Yes. Elena and Viv have her. She's not going anywhere."

"Good." Although Martin's breathing was ragged and irregular, the warmth of his breath was reassuring against her chest. Samantha held him tight and murmured words of encouragement right up to the time the medics carried him away.

Samantha wanted Martin whisked away from all this, but in the cold light of reality, it took longer that she liked for the medics to stabilize him for transport. When they finally

carried the gurney through the woods, Martin fought the restraints that forced him to lie flat. His guttural pleas for release wrenched her heart - from what little she'd heard, such pleas had been Martin's existence of late. It sickened her to think of it.

Samantha rode in the ambulance. She didn't ask permission or enter into any debate; she simply followed on the heels of the EMTs right into the vehicle and no one tried to stop her.

That changed in the hospital the moment when she was barred from entering the emergency room. Instead, a clipboard was shoved into her hands and a nurse that had to be related to Genghis Khan directed her to the waiting area. Samantha was surprised that it creeping toward midnight, and called Brian, feeling a tiny bit guilty.

"I'm so sorry," she said into the phone as she paced the waiting room. "Everything okay? How's Finn?"

"He's fine and don't worry. I'm glad to be here, you know that."

"Yeah, I do." As she spoke the words, an uncomfortable feeling edged into her mind. "You're great, you know that?" *But not what I need*, a tiny voice spoke. She was saved any more conversation with the arrival of Jack and Danny. "I've got to go, Brian. I'll be there as soon as I know Martin is okay." She snapped the phone closed without waiting for a response.

Jack veered to Attila's cousin's desk while Danny came to her and gave her a quick hug. "How are you doing?" he asked.

Samantha frowned. "Me? Martin's the one in here." She resisted the urge to slap the knowing smirk on Danny's face. It was a little too close to a look of pity.

"I know that. I also know how you really feel about Martin and how frightening this must be for you."

"Me? And Martin?" She sputtered, flustered and unable to voice a rebuttal.

The condescending grin returned and Danny pulled her toward the cluster of hard, plastic chairs. "'Methinks the lady doth protest too much.'" He pushed her into a chair. "How come we don't use 'doth' anymore?"

"Probably because it sounds so stupid coming from your mouth," she snapped. Looking at Jack, she could tell her boss wasn't too pleased with his encounter, either. Danny's silence finally registered in Samantha's worried brain. When she turned to him, she saw the same ragged, fearful face that she saw on Jack. He gave her a weak smile before scrubbing his cheeks with a tired sigh. "I'm sorry," she said lowly. "I didn't mean . . ."

"It's okay," he replied, and she knew he meant it.

"Where's Felicity?"

"Viv and Elena are processing her. Another team is processing the scene. Everything's under control." He stopped and contemplated his hands. "He looked bad." Danny's voice was nearly a whisper.

"Yeah," Samantha agreed. She looked at her hands and, for the first time, noticed the spots of blood on her sleeves. She distractedly rubbed them with a fingertip.

The shared camaraderie somewhat soothed her jittery nerves and allowed her to think rationally. Did the emotion of this whole affair account for her feelings toward Martin to resurface or were they real? The answer was surprisingly quick and clear, unclouded by recent events. Apparently, Danny had seen it all along. She felt her cheeks flush.

She wanted Martin back. Samantha pushed to her feet just as Jack approached. "What's going on?"

Jack sighed tiredly. "Martin's parents have been notified. Because I said we were the investigators, they'll keep me updated. They've sent out blood samples to see what's in there, but we have a good idea based on what we found at the house. Lots of cuts and bruises and . . ."

"Is he going to be okay?" Samantha demanded.

"He's still being examined, but it looks like Felicity did some surgery of her own. There are some fresh stitches . . ."

"What?" Danny snapped. "Surgery? Removing a kidney kind of surgery?"

"No, it's more superficial than that. Apparently, she cut out the scars from the shooting."

Samantha's stomach flipped and she pressed her fingers to her lips, stifling a gag. She heard Danny swear softly and turn away.

"They are mostly worried about infection. She didn't do too bad of a job, I guess, but they're going to have a plastic surgeon take a look. Some cuts on his feet and arms need stitches, a sprained wrist, bruises. Not as bad as it could have been."

"Can I see him?"

Samantha's question made her boss pause. Jack eyed her for several long moments as if trying to read her mind, and then slowly replied, "Well, I can insist on a guard for now. What about Finn? Is he covered?"

Sam could tell there was more to Jack's verbal concern, but she didn't want to deal with that now. "He's fine. Brian's there. I'll wash up and head in."

She didn't wait for a reply and headed to the closest bathroom. Quickly washing her hands and face, she corralled her hair into a decent pony tail and brushed off her clothes before striding to the emergency room entry. Jack pushed the door open for her and pointed to a curtained off area humming with activity.

Only then, Samantha realized that Martin wasn't the only patient here, but his area had the most activity. She set her jaw and headed purposefully to his cubicle. When she brushed the curtain aside, she paused, shocked by what she saw. Even though Jack had warned her of Martin's injuries, the reality of it was difficult to accept. Sam's gaze took in every detail before she swallowed hard and waited to take her place at his side.

Once there, it felt right.

CHAPTER TEN

Spilling in from the windows at the end of the linoleum hallway, dawns light was only noticeable to Samantha when she blinked awake and saw that the nurse had turned off her desk lamp at the main nurses' station. The second thing she noticed was the tall, steaming cup of coffee in the nurse's hand. Samantha's nose twitched and she contemplated theft.

Her life of crime was cut short when the annoyingly chipper form of Danny waltzed into the room, the only thing saving him from being put out of Sam's misery being the two cups of coffee and bakery bag he bore.

He paused. "Sleeping Beauty you ain't," he quipped as his gaze raked Sam's slumped form sprawled in the torturous plastic hospital chair. "But I think that's been previously established."

"That," she said nodding at the coffee, "is the only reason you're still alive."

Danny chuckled and, after surrendering the booty, turned a somber eye to the miserable form curled under the thin hospital blanket. Martin had twitched at the sound of Danny's arrival, but there was no further motion after that except for his ragged breathing. The blankets shuddered rhythmically. A single IV line drooped over the far edge of the bed.

Samantha rubbed her eyes and felt every second of lost sleep. The pair sipped their coffee in tumultuous silence and studied their colleague. The team had the latest updated on Martin's condition so there was no reason for discussion. Samantha wanted a vastly different kind of discussion, but only with Martin. She would just have to wait for now.

"I need to call Brian," she muttered. "See how Finn's doing and get the day arranged."

Danny nodded and moved closer to the bed as Samantha slipped from the room. He peered down at Martin's face and saw the telltale lines of pain around his eyes and mouth even in sleep. As he watched, his friend's breathing changed and his eyes jerked beneath pale eyelids. Martin became frantic in his twitching.

"Martin?" Danny called softly before reaching down and gently shaking his shoulder. Martin's breathing hitched and his body tensed suddenly. "Hey, Marty - wake up, man!"

With a gasp, Martin's eyes flew open and he struggled to sit. Danny abandoned his coffee on the bedside table and held Martin down with both hands. Martin blinked rapidly,

panting, and then locked gazes with his teammate, looking clearly confused and entirely startled.

"You're okay now, Martin. You're in the hospital." Danny waited until the tenseness drained away under his hands. "You okay now?"

Martin stared at him for a moment before nodding shakily. He groaned as he sank back into the mattress and dragged a trembling hand over his eyes. "God, it hurts."

"I can only imagine. You're cut up pretty good." Danny retrieved his cup and stood quietly while his friend pulled himself together.

"No," Martin said, his voice raspy. "The other. My gut. I didn't want it, Danny. She just gave it to me. I don't want to go through that again. I didn't want it." He curled on his side and wouldn't meet Danny's eyes, sounding like he was trying to convince himself as well as Danny. Clearly, Martin wasn't talking about his visible wounds or his imprisonment; this was about the drugs Felicity had forced on him.

"We know you didn't want them," Danny replied softly. "There's no reason to be ashamed, Martin. You had no control." Inwardly, Danny was a little alarmed that Martin blamed himself for any of what happened to him.

There was a long pause where Martin's heavy breathing was the only noise in the room. Danny could tell he was trying to manage his pain. When he spoke again, Danny had to lean over to hear.

"I'm in a bad place, Danny. I was in a bad place when she took me. I . . ." Martin grimaced. He squeezed his eyes closed and sucked air between his teeth as he rode out a cramp.

Danny reached for the nurse's call button. "You need something . . ."

Martin's hand moved surprisingly fast as he stopped Danny. "No, don't."

"It doesn't have to been addicting. Tylenol or something like that."

"No. Nothing. Please. I don't want it."

Danny nodded and stepped back, waiting for Martin to gather his wits again. Marin rolled to his side with his back to Danny and curled slightly, careful of the thick bandages around his torso and the I.V. tether.

Danny turned when Samantha entered the room and she instantly read the concern in his face.

"I heard you talking. Is he awake?" She glanced at the bed.

"Yes, he's awake," Martin grumbled, his weak voice muffled from the pillow.

Samantha immediately moved to the bed and dropped the side rail. She leaned over, speaking softly with one hand on Martin's shoulder while she gently combed through his short hair with the fingers of her other hand.

Surprised at the intimate posture, Danny suddenly felt like an intruder. He wondered if he should tell her what Martin said. Instead, he smiled when he heard Martin gruffly replying to Sam's queries - Danny couldn't hear the words, but recognized an interrogation when he heard one. A mom rather than an F.B.I. investigator, though, was running this one - he could tell by the tone. It made him smile and he made a decision.

Feeling wise, Danny tiptoed from the room and silently closed the door. He waved off the nurse heading for the room and asked her to give Martin a few minutes. She grudgingly agreed and moved on to the next room. Satisfied, Danny turned to leave and bumped into Jack.

Juggling his coffee cup with an exasperated gasp, Jack quickly got the cup under control and then gave Danny a sharp look. "Well?" he demanded. "How's he doing?" Danny laid a hand on Jack's shoulder and turned him back around. Jack glanced back over his shoulder to Martin's room. "He asleep?"

"No, but he's in good hands." Danny explained, grinning. "He's gonna be okay."

Samantha sat quietly on the edge of Martin's bed, gently stroking his temple. It felt incredibly soothing and it was a welcomed distraction from the painful cramps. When his stomach finally quieted, he exhaled deeply and his body relaxed. He felt clammy and his numerous cuts throbbed, but that was tolerable.

"Are they getting any better?" Samantha asked softly.

"N . . . not really sure," he whispered, closing his eyes in response to her caress. "M'head's not real clear yet."

"You'll be okay soon."

"Glad one of us thinks so."

Sam's quiet chuckle did more for him that any drug. Her rhythmic stroke through his hair was incredibly soothing. The pain of his wounds faded away and he hovered in a safe, comforting place, wishing to stay there until this was all over.

Martin's thoughts drifted back through recent years in search of what went wrong. How did he get on the path that brought him here? When did that fork in the trail happen, and why did he take the turn he did? Scenes of his life played silently in his head, starting with his arrival in New York and the feeling that hit him when he'd first seen Samantha in the bullpen.

She was always there as he mentally moved forward, always nearby either physically or in his thoughts. Martin followed the trail of his history and realized she was simply a part of his life from the star of his life here. They both had grown a lot since that day - a silly thing, he realized, since they were both adults, but it was true. Having to live with hard choices did that to a person.

Right now, in these peaceful minutes, Martin knew he'd come full circle. Her fingers felt right on his skin. Familiar. Calming. He compared her touch to Kim's - even before the betrayal, Kim's touch was never like this.

At this moment, Samantha's touch felt completely natural. She knew him like no other. Accepting that, Martin knew he'd just stepped on to another path, one not without its own obstacles and he no longer felt lost. Willingly leaving the cloying numbness of his safe place, Martin forced his eyes open and twisted his head aside, stopping when he met Samantha's worried gaze.

He fumbled and captured her hand in his, holding tight as he looked for encouragement in her eyes. The relief he felt when he found it overwhelmed him.

"Sam?" he croaked.

"What?" she replied, becoming still.

"Don't leave? Don't leave again, okay? Stay with me."

Samantha' brown eyes glistened with tears and her soft lips quivered into a tiny smile. "Okay," she breathed. "I'll stay."

Holding her hand in a sure grip, Martin pulled Samantha's arm down and wrapped it across his chest so she could feel his heartbeat. He felt the mattress shift as she stretched alongside him, and felt her warmth when she snuggling close against his back. Samantha wormed her other arm under him and hugged him close, her cheek resting on the back of his neck. Martin sighed deeply, naturally accepting the medicine of her body; pain slipped away.

"I'm not going anywhere," she promised.

This time, he knew it to be true.

EPILOGUE

The sidewalks were remarkably clear for mid-December in New York City. Darkened drifts were shiny as the day's melt froze like icing on the slumped mounds. Martin was glad the center walkway was mostly dry; he was also glad to be rid of the cane he'd been using until the numerous cuts on the bottom of his feet were no longer tender. Wearing hard soled shoes for the first time in a long while, he could still feel the tug of fresh scar tissue on his abdomen as he walked alongside Samantha. The distraction was easy enough to ignore. Sam pushed a sturdy pram and leaned forward to adjust the blanket that swaddled her son.

"Stop it, Finn," she ordered in a sing-song voice. "Can't you just leave the blanket alone?" The request resulted in a playful squeal and mostly toothless smile.

"Some scolding that is," Martin chuckled. "You're just inviting him to play, talking like that."

"Samantha straightened and snorted. "Like you would know, Mr. Bachelor."

"That's Uncle Bachelor to you, young lady," he chided. Raising one eyebrow, he leaned in and wiggled a finger at the chortling Finn. "And you, young man, are taking advantage of your mother."

Samantha's relaxed laugh warmed Martin and he reached over and took her hand.

"Hey," she protested. "I can't drive this thing with one hand."

It was true. In fact, she didn't do a very good job with two hands, either, Martin quickly pointed out. He ended up with an elbow in his side and thankful for his layers of winter clothing. He laughed and held his hands up in surrender. Samantha pursed her lips and returned both hands to the stroller and Martin opted to wrap an arm around her shoulders instead. By the way she sighed and rested her head on his shoulder for a moment, he knew it was acceptable.

"So Brian's all moved into his place?" Martin asked as the walked.

"Yup." She glanced at him. "Honestly? I think I'm gonna miss the adult company."

"Really?" Martin said. "Will, I think that can be taken care of. When's he picking up Finn on Saturday for their first play date weekend?" Martin asked as they walked.

Samantha chuckled. "'Play date'. Funny. He's coming by around nine. Why?"

Martin gave her a sidelong look that sparkled with amusement. "You're awfully nosy."

"Comes with the job. You know that. So? Why?"

Martin smiled broadly and slowly shook his head. "You'll just have to wait and see," he teased.

When they rounded the corner, Martin had to press against Samantha to allow a jogger to pass. There was more foot traffic here, along with a small cluster of people that huffed into their hands and stomped their feet waiting at the bus stop. Martin guided her around the obstacles while Samantha playfully scolded Finn and again fixed the rumpled blanket. Halfway down the block, they stopped.

"Meet you here in an hour?" Samantha asked, turning to face Martin and standing well within his personal zone. He circled her waist with his arms. "Or in the bookstore over there?" She nodded across the street, wrapping her arms loosely around his neck.

"Bookstore," Martin replied just before he kissed her nose. "No need to stand out in the cold, especially since the little guy isn't being very cooperative about staying covered up." He smiled and leaned around Samantha, ticking the baby's feet as he spoke.

Finn laughed and kicked. The blanket flew off.

"Well, you're a big help," Samantha grumbled unconvincingly, and then her voice turned soft and serious. She sought out his eyes and caught his gaze. "You okay? It's been awhile."

"I'm fine. I need this." He captured a kiss. "And that." She held up a finger between their faces. "One hour."

After a moment, she circled is neck again and instigated another kiss. Martin intended it to be a quick peck, but the warmth and taste of her lips made him groan and close his eyes. He pressed harder and tried to draw her against his chest to deepen the kiss, but she gave just a little, teasing him, before abruptly pushing back.

"Keep that up and you're going to be late." Her voice was soft and husky, and her cheeks flushed.

Martin reluctantly released her. "Yeah," he said, glancing at the doorway behind him with a sigh. "I've been gone too long already." He stepped back and let his arm trail across her waist and along her outstretched arm, pausing to keep their fingertips joined seconds longer.

The smile she gave him was all the encouragement he needed. "I'll be here," she said quietly.

"I know," he acknowledged.

They parted and Martin watched her cross the street. When she was safely on the other side, she briefly turned and waved at him. He waved back and grinned when Samantha's attention refocused on the wayward blanket one more time before disappearing into the bookstore.

Martin turned and pushed open the door, standing aside and nodding an acknowledgement to a departing man. Once inside, he walked quickly down the hallway and slipped through a set of double doors at the other end. The people inside the room were just being called to order and Martin slipped into a seat in the front row.

He caught the eye of the man behind the podium and received a welcoming grin. After the man called the room to order, he motioned for Martin to come forward.

It had been a while. *Too long,* Martin admitted to himself as he stepped behind the podium and swallowed hard to settle the flutter in his stomach. He looked out to the group, cleared his throat, and spoke with the confidence that came with walking a welcomed new path.

"My name is Martin and I'm an addict," he began.

For the first time in a long time, everything felt right and his path was very clear.

II : MOTHER'S DAY

PROLOGUE

Soft breathing lured him from sleep but before opening his eyes, Martin nuzzled the warm, soft skin of Samantha's shoulder and appreciated her musky smell for a moment. Dawn wasn't far away- he could feel it. He tucked in her close to her, glancing at the glowing red numbers on the clock – 4:48. Smiling, he worked his nose through the tangle of golden hair until it rested right behind her ear. Then he kissed the pliable flesh under her ear lobe.

She groaned and stretched her neck, not quite awake. Martin pressed a pair of soft kisses in his favorite spot before moving on. He worked one arm under her waist and around her hips, pulling her closer as he stroked a long line down her flank with the other hand.

"Mmmm. . ." she breathed, fumbling to find the stimulation with her hand. Once done, she rested her palm on the top of his fingers, encouraging the exploration.

Martin kissed her neck and pressed his growing interest into the erotic curve of her lower back. Samantha turned her head toward him, her eyes still closed. The ambient light made her skin glow. Martin kissed the corner of her mouth and she swam to wakefulness.

They both startled when her cell phone sang from the bed stand.

"Aw, shit," Samantha sighed.

Quick to put aside the disturbance, Martin continued mapping her body with his, cupping her breast and hoping the phone was a dream. It persisted. Samantha's hand left his to quiet the intruder. She fumbled the device, cursed, and then silenced it with a flick of her wrist. "Spade," she croaked somewhere in the area of the receiver.

She tried to ignore her paramour's advances as he lightly fingered the silky line of hair that lead to her most warm and ready place. A quickly suppressed gasp followed by her clamping her hand over the phone's speaker encouraged him onward. He readjusted just enough to slip his hardness between her legs and thrust against her, teasing.

"I'll be there in twenty," Samantha managed to gasp before she snapped the phone closed and let it drop to the floor. "Martin," she whined. "I've got to . . ." She didn't get a chance to finish the statement.

Several minutes later she caught her breath, swatted Martin's tousled head and rolled from the bed. "I can't wait for the shower to heat up now thanks to you."

Martin, sated and smiling, chuckled as he left the rumpled bed at a slower pace. He grabbed his robe from the closet door, pulling it on as he navigated the clothes strewn across the floor from the night before. "I'll get you some coffee."

Samantha's voice echoed behind the bathroom door just before the shower knob squeaked. "Check on Finn?"

"Sure." He was sure she didn't hear him, as she was busy muttering curses about tepid water.

Down the hall, Martin poked his head in Finn's room and saw that the baby was sleeping soundly so he pulled the door closed with a quiet snick and headed to the kitchen. Coffee was in progress before the shower sounds stopped. In the few quiet minutes to himself, Martin threw together toast and scrambled eggs, combining them into a to-go sandwich that he wrapped in a paper towel. Samantha was on call for the weekend and he knew the chances were against her getting a meal anytime soon with a new case to handle.

Her coffee was in a travel cup and the sandwich ready to go when she rushed down the hall brushing her hair. She paused to look in on Finn and Martin heard her whisper, "I love you, baby." He peeked around the corner and watched as she wrestled her hair into a ponytail. She was in motion with the finishing touch, pulling on her coat as she headed to the front door. He moved to the door and waited to hand off the sustenance seconds before her arrival in a well-rehearsed dance.

"Brian should be here by nine for Finn," she said. "Thanks for being here."

"My pleasure, you know that." He sneaked in a peck to her cheek when she reached for the food.

"Mmmm," she complained through a mouthful of egg. "Stop that. You're gonna make me even later."

Martin opened the door with a grin. "Guilty. I called a cab. It should be here any time now. I'll let you know when Brian picks up Finn."

Samantha headed out the door but stopped on the threshold and turned to him. "I don't know what I did to deserve you," she said, then gave him a quick kiss. "Gotta go."

Martin watched until she turned the final corner then went to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee for himself. Holding the warm mug between his hands, he moved to the front window and watched her get into the cab just as pink fingers of the approaching dawn marked the sky.

Taking a careful sip as the cab disappeared from sight, Martin felt like a very lucky man.

CHAPTER ONE

Martin got through two cups of coffee and a majority of the sports pages before Finn demanded release from his crib. Entering the boy's room Martin found the boy standing up, squealing happily, as he clutched the side rail and bounced on the mattress with joyous abandon. Martin's face broke into a smile.

"Well, look who's a morning person," he said as he moved to lower the panel. "I don't think you got that trait from your mother." Finn released the rail and reached up to Martin, falling to his bottom in the process. Finn chortled and wiggled as Martin lifted him and held him to his chest. "Don't tell your mother I said that."

"Mamamamamama," Finn sang in reply.

Making short work of the clothes and very wet diaper, he again appreciated the expertise acquired from the close relation with his nieces. He kept his eyes on the clock through a messy but successful breakfast and then regaled the energetic bundle to the bouncy chair hanging in the doorway while he cleaned the kitchen. Finishing in good time, he started out of the kitchen to get dressed when his cell rang. He plucked it from the counter as he passed and flipped it open without checking the caller ID.

"Fitzgerald."

"Hey. How's the morning going?" Sam's voice caused a warm tingle.

"Great. Just getting things together for the Finn transfer."

"About that," she began. "I just got a call from Brian. Weather delayed his flight and he won't be in until early afternoon. I'm sorry – can you hang on until I can make arrangements?"

"Hey, no worries. I'll take care of him. I had nothing planned." Martin grinned. "You will owe me, though."

When she replied, her voice dropped to a husky near-whisper. "I think I can pony up enough to keep you happy."

Martin could visualize the smokiness in her eyes at the tone and it caused a hitch in his stride. "I bet you can." There was a beat of heated pause. "Anyway, I'm sure we can keep busy. We can hang at my bachelor pad for some manly bonding."

Samantha groaned. "Just keep in mind that he's too young for pizza and beer, okay?"

Martin chuffed. "Well, there goes my lunch plan." They both chuckled. "How's it going?"

Turning serious Samantha said, "Not sure yet. Teenage girl, twelfth hour, multiple scenarios. I don't know." She sighed. "I have a bad feeling about this one."

"I hope you're wrong, then." In the brief silence that followed, Martin pursed his lips and then forced a smile. "Well, you better get to it. Don't worry about Finn. Brian has my cell number, right?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Marty."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

Martin waited for Sam to disconnect before closing his cell. Turning his attention to the carefree, bouncing, near-toddler lifted his spirits. "Hang on a sec, bud, and we'll go for a run and get some fresh air."

Once changed into a worn tee shirt, running pants and jacket he kept in his allotted drawer space, Martin retrieved his cross-trainers from the closet floor and returned to the living room. Dropping on the chair closest to Finn, he pulled on socks and tied his shoes and held a one sided conversation with the happy, burbling child.

After several minutes and a bit amazed at how long it took, Martin had Finn changed again, dressed and the sport stroller unfolded and ready to go. He loaded the small pouch in the back with his flat badge and FBI identification, phone, wallet and off duty gun. Ever since he'd witness a boy's kidnapping in front of a busy school while on a morning run a couple of years before, Martin always made it a point to be prepared.

Now ready, he gathered Finn in his arms and pulled the sturdy stroller into the apartment hallway where he locked the door, added the keys to the pouch and headed to the elevator. Once on the bottom floor, he stepped out into the lobby and greeted two of Samantha's neighbors just returning from their morning walk.

"Hey there, Finn!" Mrs. Waverly cooed as she tickled the child's chubby chin. The Waverlys seemed to be the classic grandparents – grey hair, kind faces and cheerful.

"Good morning," Martin said. "How are you two this morning?"

"Great. Beautiful morning," Mr. Waverly answered as he held the elevator door.

"You ready for your Mama's first Mother's Day?" Mrs. Waverly asked Finn in a sing song voice before glancing at Martin with raised eyebrows.

"I've got a few ideas," Martin answered. "It's covered."

"That's great. The first one's always the best." She straightened and gave Martin's arm a friendly pat. "Enjoy the day!"

They exchanged good byes and Martin continued outside. Once the stroller was down the building's front steps, he settled Finn in the stroller and moved off at a leisurely pace.

Mr. Waverly was right – it was a beautiful morning. Martin kept an even stride and thought about Samantha and the current case; knowing there was one set of parents out there today that would be oblivious to the nice, spring day. Martin shook his head to clear it of the depressing scenario and, instead, turned his thoughts to future possibilities.

He and Sam were nearing the six-month mark. His re-dedication to Narcotics Anonymous dictated that he shouldn't be in a serious relationship for a year and the idea was one he struggled with constantly. They discussed it in early on and decided to tailor the program point by keeping separate households and limiting overnight stays. Not only was it a good plan for Martin, it made sense with young Finn in the picture. In the past half-year, a solid framework was in place between him, Sam and Brian. Right now, everything was perfect. At times, it seemed too easy and it made Martin wonder when the next shoe was going to drop.

"One day at a time," Martin reminded himself. "Live for the moment and see what the next six months bring."

Being Saturday, the sidewalk was clear and running with the stroller was easier than usual. Getting further along than he'd expected, Martin perked up as an idea struck. He changed course slightly, hopped over a couple of blocks and grinned when he reached his destination. He glanced at his watch and dropped down to a walk to catch his breath.

"Hey, buddy, how about some shopping for Mom?" He peered over the top of the stroller and saw that Finn was sound asleep. "Not to worry. I'll take care of it for you."

The block was a mix of businesses. It was just hitting nine o'clock and some of them were just opening. Foot traffic was light, which Martin appreciated as he pushed the stroller and window-shopped. The shops were small and quaint with many interesting things displayed in the windows, but none seemed quite right for Samantha until he reached the jewelry store.

Martin paused and studied the shiny baubles behind the glass. The clerk was busy stocking and arranging the display window and Martin smiled a silent greeting. The older woman working inside nodded in return as she worked. When she reached in to place a ring on a plastic finger, Martin's found his gaze drawn to a shiny bracelet encircling her wrist.

He pointed at her wrist and the woman held up her arm. It was a gold charm bracelet heavy with various shaped charms. Martin remembered his mother having a similar thing. He looked up and the woman pointed to the other end of the display. A sign said "Remember Mother's Day With Style" and it was set behind a several kinds of link bracelets and a few examples of charms.

Martin knew Sam would love the idea. He tried the front door and found it locked. The woman pointed at the impressive grandfather clock inside that showed one minute until nine. He spent the time looking at the rest of the displays visible from the sidewalk, but nothing came close to the charm bracelet. Once the clock struck nine, Martin heard the door's automatic lock disengage and the clerk pushed the door open for him.

"Good morning!" She greeted.

Checking Finn and seeing that he was still asleep, Martin entered the store. The woman wore an ID card on a neck lanyard that told him her name was Lena.

"What a little darling," Lena crooned as she looked at the sleeping boy's face. "Are you shopping for Mom?"

"Looks like it. Yes."

Lena directed him to the back of the store. "There are more bracelets and charms back here," she said as she walked in that direction. Several glass display cases arranged in a circle held a variety of items.

Lena walked through the center of the circle obviously meant for employees as Martin walked an outer path. Knowing Finn's grabby, drooling nature, he was glad the boy was asleep and congratulated himself on his timing. It was as if the idea was fated. He snorted at the concept of Fate. "Never saw myself as a romantic," Martin muttered.

Once they arrived at the proper display case, Martin realized the decision would be more difficult than he first thought – not only were there at least a dozen bracelets to choose from, the number of charms in the case was mind-boggling.

Lena must have noticed the flash of panic because she chuckled and leaned over the case to pat Martin's hand in sympathy. "You concentrate on the bracelets. I'll put together a few charms for you that would be appropriate for the occasion. First Mother's Day, I assume?"

Martin nodded, grateful for the input. "Yeah. Thanks."

As Lena selected charms, Martin studied the chains and imagined how each would look on Sam's slim wrist. After several minutes, he pointed out two of them and Lena placed them on the velvet tray along with her charm selections.

"Now for the difficult part," she said. She directed his attention to the first charm. "Here we have . . ."

Martin glanced up at Lena 's abrupt pause and straightened at her wide-eyed stare toward the front door. He followed her gaze as she gasped and the sound of shattering glass accented Martin's instant realization of what was going down.

CHAPTER TWO

"GET DOWN!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Martin saw Finn startle awake, tiny arms flinging aside as his eyes shot open. Five figures streamed into the shop, clad in black from their full-face stocking masked heads down to their laced leather boots.

Finn blinked in shocked surprise just before he burst into terrified tears from the noise. The first robber in smashed a second display cases and then strode to the center of the store where he leveled an automatic rifle at Lena. The next two robbers moved left and right, smashing cases as they moved. Two more of the crew followed and grabbed display items, stuffing them into canvas bags.

The lead robber on Martin's side of the store stopped a few feet from him and pointed an automatic handgun at his face.

It all happened in a few scant seconds. Martin aborted his initial lunge toward his stored gun with Finn's hysterical screaming. Instead, he raised his hands and took a step sideways so he stood between the intruder and the boy. Lena gasped as if unable to breathe and immediately crouched to the floor, hands over her head.

"I SAID GET DOWN!" The rifle wielding robber bellowed at Martin, jabbing the weapon toward him.

"Okay, okay," Martin said in a level voice. "I hear you." He dropped to his knees, his chest still a barrier protecting Finn, maintaining eye contact with whom he assumed to be the leader. "Just take it easy!"

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" Becoming more agitated, the man shoved Lena aside with his booted foot and then quickly moved around her and stormed up to Martin leading with the rifle barrel. He stopped when the rifle tip was mere inches from Martin's face.

In those fleet tense seconds, Martin flicked his eyes to the next closest intruder, noting wide, green eyes fixed on something behind him. "Finn," he concluded as his heart rate leapt – he also realized that they were the eyes of a woman and cold fear clutched his gut.

Now the leader stepped between them, forcing Martin to tip his head back to see into the masked face. Smoldering dark eyes bore into him as the man stepped up and twisted, slamming the stock of the rifle to Martin's temple.

Someone screamed. Finn cried. Martin tipped aside, falling to the floor in a heap. Something deep inside rose up and he held on to consciousness with precarious tenacity. One arm flailed and found the stroller - he grabbed it, taking a determined hold. Stars whirled before his eyes as a dark edge narrowed his vision. He could hear loud voices arguing, the words jumbled.

Martin brought his other hand around and clutched the stroller, using the sturdy frame to get his knees under him. Once upright, he blinked hard to clear his vision. The first thing he saw was blood

spatter on his hands and Finn's blanket. The little boy cried hard, his face screwed up and bright red. Martin hung on tight as his vision wavered.

Something hit him hard between his shoulder blades and he tipped forward across the screaming baby. His head throbbed. It took a little time for him to realize that someone was talking to him and a few seconds longer to figure out the words.

"Pick him up before I kill you where you are! PICK HIM UP AND SHUT HIM UP!"

"Yeah, yeah," Martin mumbled as he ordered clumsy fingers to obey. Finally, Finn was free and Martin pulled him close to his chest. "Shhh, shhh," he soothed, even though the pain in his head made him want to vomit.

A fist twisted into the back of his tee shirt and lifted him to his feet. Martin, fearful of dropping Finn, fought for balance. A body closed in on one side and physically propelled him forward and out the front door amidst more yelled orders and chaos.

A dark SUV waited at the curb with the doors open and someone pushed Martin into the middle row bench seat with Finn safely enclosed in his arms. Once seated, bodies settle in on either side of him and he heard the doors slam closed. His head roared with pain. The vehicle leaped away and Martin screwed his eyes shut as a man in the front seat yelled, increasing the sharp throb in his head. Finn wailed, adding to the chaos in his head.

"Shhh, shhh," Martin crooned softly. He tipped his head and rested his cheek against the crown of Finn's sweaty crown, hot from the child's state. Martin kept his eyes closed and continued to utter quiet reassurances as he gently rocked in the tight space. He willed his own agony to subside.

The SUV weaved wildly down the road and the yelling stopped, replaced by sharp orders. Martin heard the rub of material and the brush of shed clothing. Finn finally quieted, reduced to wet hiccups. When the throbbing subsided to something he could deal with, Martin opened his eyes and without lifting his cheek from Finn, looked around.

There were six of them, two in each of the three rows of seats with him and Finn smack in the center. Their masks and black cover ups were gone and Martin noted their more colorful shirts. The one riding shotgun in front of him was the rifle-toting leader from the store.

"Is he okay?"

Martin turned to the person to his left and met the stare of the green-eyed woman. Her dark red hair was thick, wavy and long enough to brush the tops of her shoulders. A spray of freckles powdered her nose. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two.

Martin noticed the handgun still in her grip, resting across her lap. "Could you point that somewhere else?" he growled, keeping his voice low to keep Finn quiet. He was relieved that the boy appeared to be dozing off from exhaustion.

The woman glanced down and seemed surprised to see the gun. She quickly tucked the weapon between her side and the door, out of sight. Then she reached out to brush Finn's temple with her finger tips. "Is he hurt?"

"Keep your hands off him," Martin snapped, twisting just enough to deny her touch.

"I wouldn't hurt him," she said, her gaze fixed on the sleeping child in a way that churned Martin's stomach. "I wouldn't . . ."

"Shut up, both of you," the man on Martin's other side ordered. "What's the deal, Sid?" Martin noted his shorn head and green shamrock tattoo on the side of his neck when he leaned forward to address the man riding shotgun. "I didn't sign up for this shit!" Shamrock Man waved a hand at Martin and Finn. Finn tensed and his breath hitched, pushed to the edge of awakening.

It happened so fast, it took Martin's shattered senses a few heartbeats to catch up and realize that the redhead now held her handgun to Shamrock's shiny temple. Her arm stretched out mere inches from Martin's nose, so he pressed back into the seat and shielded the child with his arms.

"You're disturbing the baby," the woman said in a low, dangerous tone. She pressed the muzzle into her partner's skull and ground out, "Don't. Wake. The baby." She accented each word with a push of the gun. "Understand?"

Shamrock nodded. Transfixed by the scene and the man's reaction, Martin now realized what he was dealing with and it caused his blood to run cold. The redhead was insane.

The SUV traveled easily through the nearly empty streets for several minutes before slowing to enter a low-slung parking garage. They headed to a lower lever and parked near two mid-sized sedans. The driver turned off the ignition. The hot motor popped.

"Okay now, let's move," Shotgun Sid ordered.

The others exited the SUV in quiet order, leaving Martin and Finn. The red-head stood aside long enough for the last two to exit before stationing herself in the vehicle's doorway, her gimlet eyes locked on the sleeping child. Martin shifted and glanced around. The others were splitting up between the two cars, dividing the loot into four backpacks.

He had to take a chance now. Martin turned his attention to the woman.

"Help him," Martin said quietly. "Help me get him to safety. I know you don't want him hurt but I don't think your partners feel the same way." She blinked. Her eyes flicked to Martin's and then back to Finn. "His name is Finn," Martin said. "I'm Martin."

The woman swallowed hard. "Savanna," she whispered. "I had a little boy . . ." Then she shook her head as if to clear her head and frowned. "Shut up!" She snapped, bringing the gun up to put Martin square in her sites. Her eyes sparked. "Shut the hell up!"

Martin hugged Finn closer. "Okay, okay. You're the boss, Savanna."

"Hey!" Sid barked as he threw a backpack in the silver car. "Let's go, Van!"

"Get out!" Savanna motioned for Martin to get out of the car using the gun.

As he slid toward the open door, Martin quickly evaluated his surroundings. There was a smattering of cars in the structure but Martin hadn't seen any people. An engine turned over on one of the two sedans and he heard it drop into gear as the door closed on the last of the three. Shamrock man sat behind the wheel.

When Martin slipped from the SUV and stood, he saw an elevator bay a short distance away. Flanking it, the stairwell grabbed his attention.

He moved without a second thought - he didn't have the time to think. Every bit of Martin's engrained tactical training kicked in when he bolted. There was plenty of cover with the scattered cars, building support posts and solid elevator shaft, but the addition of Finn's small body was enough to slow Martin's pace and shift his usual center of gravity.

An outraged shout was quickly followed by several shots that echoed in the enclosed structure and hit closer than he liked; pieces of cement bit his face and neck. Hunched over Finn as he sprinted, Martin's body protected the boy.

"DON'T SHOOT! DON'T SHOOT! MY BABY!" A woman's voice shrieked. He heard more yelling and scuffling movement as he hit the stairs.

Martin pounded down the flights and focused on maintaining balance. Above, he heard squealing tires as a car left the scene and he tried to calculate timing – would he make it to an exit before the car?

Finn stirred, jarred from a shocked state, his sudden squirming unbalancing Martin. Staggering sideways on the last step, he brushed a pillar hard with his shoulder. He sucked air in shock, knowing it was the birth of a spectacular bruise. His fingers tingled and his grip on the boy loosened involuntarily.

"Ahhhh," Martin breathed as he danced a lopsided path at the bottom of the stairs, nearly falling over his own feet. "Shit!" he hissed. Finn slipped downward and Martin had to stop and adjust his grip. His bruised arm felt numb and his head throbbed. Finn clutched his shirt and gasped spasmodically, red-faced and slick with sweat. "Shh, shhh," Martin soothed as he tucked into the corner of the stairwell's enclosure.

He was on the bottom floor and the final door was right in front of him. He just had to get out of the stairwell and through an exit doorway. Martin spoke quietly and brushed back Finn's hair as he tried to slow his own breathing and listen for pursuit. Although the gunfire had stopped, he could still hear racing engines and squealing tires. With the echo of his concrete prison, it was impossible to fix a direction.

Martin held Finn close, noting the boy's sudden silence, as he stepped through the stairway opening and scanned garage. A green "Exit" sign led his gaze to a bright rectangle of daylight about twenty feet away. He grabbed the opportunity and ran.

If he had been alone, he would have made it, and the error of his estimation skidded to block him just shy of his escape. Martin managed to stop before running into the car and came nose to muzzle with a very large automatic handgun. The crazy redhead's eyes locked onto Martin's. She sat in the driver's seat, one hand on the steering wheel and the hand wrapped around the gun's grips. She leveled the weapon without a flinch through the open passenger's window.

"Get in," she snapped. "I won't miss at this distance." Another engine roar echoed through the structure but the woman's stare did not flinch. "They want you dead," she added. "I want him. You're forfeit."

"Okay, okay," Martin, knowing he had no other option, opened the door and slid inside. The moment his door closed, his captor cranked the wheel and accelerated, leaving behind a smoking black semi-circle. Martin had to concentrate on bracing his feet to keep from flying sideways. That was when he noticed the blood spray staining the car's interior and the woman's profile.

The car plunged toward the single exit. In is peripheral vision, Martin caught a frightening glimpse of another car coming toward them on his side at a sideswiping angle. All he could do was hunker down and do what he could to protect Finn.

"Bastard."

The woman's low voice chilled Martin's bones. He happened to be looking at her as she spat the word and didn't know what alarmed him more: Her cool and collected demeanor or the wicked smile and glittering eyes. She enjoyed this game. The seemingly befuddled woman from the jewelry store was long gone, replaced by a personality that scared him on many levels.

Quickly, he twisted away from the window and bent over the boy. Almost immediately, he felt the car make one, sharp movement to the right and then both heard and felt a solid bump. He squeezed his eyes closed, amazed that his car's path barely wavered. The other care, though, fared worse. He flinched at the sound of a loud, metallic collision, imagining their pursuer's demise as his ride crashed through the flimsy exit gate relatively unscathed.

As they raced away from the parking garage, the woman's chuckle erased any hope Martin had for a peaceful conclusion to this situation.

CHAPTER THREE

Jack Malone snatched the phone from its cradle without raising his eyes from the report in front of him. He tucked the receiver between his shoulder and ear. "Malone," he said as he continued to read. "Yes, he's on my team."

Jack straightened as he listened, the report forgotten. He stood and held the phone to his ear in a tight grip. "What? How long ago?" He fumbled a pen and tugged a notepad from underneath the file. "Address?" He jotted something down. "I'll be right there." He dropped the receiver on the cradle and stared at it for a second. Then he looked up toward the bullpen across the hallway where he saw Samantha and Elena working at their desks.

The agents called Jack in when they gathered more leads than they could efficiently cover on their own. The pair was preparing to hit the field now that Jack was here to cover the phones and phone records – he could have called any of his other subordinates, but lately, his apartment seemed too empty. Slipping into the rotation was better than staring at the walls.

This new complication, though, required the rest of the team and he was relieved that he was here to take that particular call. As a result, precious time had been saved. He notified Vivian and Danny to come it, keeping the new information to himself. Mentally dividing the labor, he stepped into the bullpen directly into the path of his agents. Jack raised a hand to stop the two women from leaving. Puzzled, they stood before him with questioning eyes.

"Elena, stay here and brief Danny and Viv when they arrive. Sam, you're with me."

Something in the way he spoke derailed any questions and Elena nodded once, her head tipped in a quizzical way, before turning back to her desk. Sam simply shrugged and fell in step behind him. Once in the elevator, he faced her.

"There was an armed robbery at a jewelry store on Kensington Avenue," he said as the elevator door slid closed. "A smash and grab with five, possibly six, suspects. They left a shaken up clerk behind, unharmed."

After a moment, Sam frowned. "And? Does this have anything to do with the case?"

"No," Jack said lowly. "The suspects took hostages. A man and a baby. They were in the store at the time." Then he made a point to meet her eyes.

The apology she saw in his eyes was very familiar to Sam, and whatever she was going to say stuck in throat as wary panic tightened her features. "Martin's I.D. and gun were in the stroller that was left behind, Sam. It looks like they took Martin and Finn." The elevator came to a stop on the ground floor and the door slid open. Jack took Sam's elbow and turned her through the doors when it looked like she wasn't going to move on her own. Once in the hallway, he again turned her to look directly at his face.

"Oh, no," She choked, sagging against him. Jack took a firm grip on her forearms. "Finn . . ."

"Sam, look at me." Jack gave her a little shake. "Sam!"

When she finally looked at him, the depth of fear he saw in her brown eyes tore at his heart. "They were both alive. We have a partial plate. We'll find them. Focus, now."

Sam blinked rapidly, pulled free and swiped an errant tear before nodding. "Okay, okay. Let's go. I'm okay, Jack."

They jogged from the lobby to Jack's car and tore from the garage using lights and siren. Glancing aside, Jack saw Sam chew her lip for a moment and wipe her eyes again. "Brian was hung up at the airport," she whispered. "He was supposed to take Finn this morning. I should call him."

"Wait until we know more," Jack said. "I need to know more before I call Victor, too."

The ride to the scene was mostly in tense silence, both of them listening to the police radio chatter for any clues. When they arrived at the scene, Jack stopped just outside the yellow crime scene tape a half block away from the jewelry store. Samantha erupted from the car before he turned off the engine. She ducked under the warning tape and Jack had to jog to catch up to her. Together, they flashed their identification at the door of the small store.

Broken glass covered most of the floor, crunching under their feet. Investigators dusted the larger bits for prints. Photographers' cameras flashed amidst the murmur of the men inside. Jack saw two men standing near a trembling, seated woman. She dabbed her eyes with a tissue as she spoke. He headed in their direction but stopped when he realized that Samantha was not following him. Instead, she stood, frozen, staring at a three-wheeled jogging stroller parked in the back. There was blood spatter on the light colored wall behind it.

Jack gripped her elbow and broke the trance. "Let's see what they have." After a moment, she nodded and followed, looking decidedly pale.

"Officers, I'm Jack Malone." He showed in I.D. "This is Agent Spade."

"Detective Morris," the bigger of the two replied. "This is my partner Detective Wade. This is Lena Guiney. She was here during the robbery." As Lena nodded a greeting, Morris handed Jack a flat badge wallet with the familiar F.B.I. card inside. "This is your man?"

"Yes," Jack said. "Martin's been on my team for almost seven years. The baby is Agent Spade's."

"I'm sorry," the Detective said to Sam.

"Just tell me what you have." Her words were abrupt.

"The baby is yours?" Lena said, tilting her chin so she could look at Samantha. "Your husband did everything he could to protect your son. He kept him safe. Even after they hit him. . ." she choked.

"He's not . . . they hit Martin?" Sam asked, eyes wide. Before she lost it completely, Jack put a hand on her arm. She threw it off and turned on Morris with fiery eyes. "Show me everything you have. Everything."

"Is there video?" Jack asked, pulling Samantha back from Morris.

"In the office," Wade said. He gave Samantha a wary look.

Jack made a point of being between Sam and the detectives as they made their way to the back room. An officer sat at a computer screen of black and white images of the store area. "Play it," Morris said.

The officer adjusted the screen and tapped on the keyboard. Jack watched as Lena silently greeted Martin at the front door. He could tell by Finn's posture that he was asleep as Martin pushed the stroller to the rear of the store. While Lena and Martin talked over one of the display cases, Jack stole a glance at Sam and saw her staring hard at the screen – only someone who knew her well could see the pain in her eyes.

Suddenly, the shop door opened and five people dressed in black stormed in. Jack found his attention drawn to Finn, now awake and weirdly silent in his obvious distress. He saw Martin start for the stroller storage bag, but change direction when he realized the threat was too close. He physically blocked Finn from the intruders. Sam caught her breath when the rifle slammed into Martin's head, in eerie silence.

"Oh, Martin," Sam said softly as they watched him fight off unconsciousness and continue to protect Finn with his body. When he was hit in the back, he continued to cover her son. Finally, after a tense few moments, Martin lifted the wailing boy to his chest. His unsteadiness was obvious, but Martin kept a firm hold on Finn as three of the suspects appeared to argue. Finally, they turned to leave, the final man prodding Martin with the rifle as he stumbled through the ruins. Dark lines of blood trailed down the side of his face and neck.

"The security camera at the front door got a partial license plate," Morris added. "We're checking now. We haven't had any similar MO. I have a feeling we're seeing the first of a series. They seemed well organized."

"I'll get some nationwide info for you," Jack offered. "Maybe it's just the first in this state. It looks like they are used to working together."

"They were arguing," Samantha said, almost successful in hiding the quiver in her voice. "Just before they left."

"Mrs. Guiney said they argued about the baby. This one," he pointed to the first thief to encounter Martin, "is a woman. She told the apparent leader – the one with the rifle – that she wanted the baby. Wouldn't leave without it. That's what the argument was about."

"But she couldn't carry him because she had the loot bag and a gun. That's why they took your man." Jack met Sam's frightened eyes as Wade spoke. "After they get where they're going, they won't need him anymore."

"Let's not jump ahead," Jack snapped. Then he took Sam's elbow and spoke quietly to just her. "We will find them. Can you do this? I need to know now."

Since her throat was tight with fear, Samantha replied with a mute nod and Jack gave her a sympathetic smile. When he turned to leave the scene, she followed on questionable legs; this was all so surreal. As they stepped into the street, there was a jump of activity and several officers sprinted to their cars. Jack snared one uniformed elbow and forced him to stop.

"What's up?" he barked.

"Reports of gunfire at a parking garage across town."

Jack released him. He and Samantha jogged to their car and followed the line of marked units. "Call Elena and give her an update on everything. They need to split up the duties."

Jack and Samantha seethed behind a row of black and whites in route to the scene. When they finally arrived, red and blue light bounced off the moldy cement walls of an aged parking structure. Although a cracked, weathered sign announced "Weekends Half Price!" it was obvious the garage was mostly empty. Jack spotted the splintered exit barrier and, with the scare occupation, concluded that this was where the thieves switched cars. Eavesdropping on the PD's radio confirmed his evaluation when a description of a bullet-ridden, black SUV came over the air.

He also knew that Samantha was about to explode. She was as tense as a riled guard dog and just as subtle. "How long does it take to clear a scene, for God's sake?"

As if cowed into submission, a voice said over the air, "Scene secured. Let the EMT's in and see if those agents want in on this."

Neither of them waited for permission. They weaved between the marked units, up the short driveway and stepped into the dark interior. Samantha ignored the black and yellow striped bits of

barrier arm and headed toward an obscene twist of metal that used to be a car, embedded into a cement pillar.

Jack rested his hand on Samantha's arm, ready to pull her aside if needed. He knew she shouldn't be here since it was unclear as to what was inside the wrecked car, but Jack knew it to be futile to try and hold her back. A hot, bitter scent of mixed engine fluids hung in the air as they approached the scene and Jack felt Samantha's step falter. A uniformed officer noticed their arrival and approached.

"Two men inside, both dead," he reported.

Jack nodded, feeling Samantha grip his hand as they peered into the car. Neither man was Martin. Sam's grip melted away and she circled the car with sharp eyes.

The officer pointed to the ceiling. "There are cameras, but they're turned off."

Jack took in the area with a snort. "No surprise. It doesn't look like upkeep is a priority."

Samantha stopped at the driver's side and looked inside again. "They aren't wearing black," she noted.

"Yeah," the officer responded. "There are black jumpsuits and ski masks in the SUV." He pointed at the ceiling. "Next level."

Jack scanned the car remains, the skid marks and the broken barrier arm. "Whoever they were chasing obviously got away. The barrier's broken outward and the skids indicate a sideways bump. Check what you can on the left, front bumper area for paint transfer."

The officer looked from Jack to the wreck and back again with a skeptical expression.

"Just do it," Jack snapped. Samantha pushed the officer aside and stormed toward the stairs. Jack retrieved one of his business cards from his suit pocket and stuffed it into the reluctant officer's hand before trotting after Sam. She was at the first landing between floors when Jack caught up with her. Side by side, they climbed to the next level in silence. When they stepped through the doorway into the parking area, Samantha stopped so suddenly, Jack nearly bumped her.

Surrounded by bullet-chipped walls, a body, dressed in a green Hawaiian shirt, sprawled on the cold deck. The red fleck pattern of the shirt was blood. Next to it, a black SUV stood with all the doors flung open. It, too, was marred with scattered bullet holes.

"Looks like quite a shootout." The tall officer that joined them had an air of tenured experience. "One live, one over there." He pointed to a small sedan with open doors. "Two bags of jewelry in the back. One in the car below."

"And one missing." Jack kept a sharp eye on Samantha as she wandered slowly though the scene. If she heard that one of the robbers was still alive, she didn't show it. Jack excused himself and moved to put his body between her and the suspect.

His timing was perfect. An EMT unit drove up and stopped where an officer indicated - just out of the crime scene. Samantha's head lifted and he saw her eyes narrow when she realized the possibility of a live target for her worry and anger. Jack knew the second she spotted the suspect when her eyes ignited. He grabbed for her elbow as she broke into a jog, but she slipped around him and Jack had to sprint to catch up. He was seconds too late as she wedged herself between two policemen and dropped to her knees. Her hand shot out and seized the man's neck, startling the officers.

"Where the hell is my son?" she demanded, leaning into the man's dazed face.

"Hey!" The policemen grabbed her arms and attempted to drag her off, but her pit bull grip on the suspect was unshakeable.

At first barely conscious, the suspect roused immediately to the attack. Blood blossomed from a vicious wound in his shoulder, rendering his right arm useless. Samantha shook him like a dog's chew toy and the arm flopped like a landed fish. His face paled to the color of paste under copious spatters of blood. Marble like eyes rolled in Samantha's direction and he gagged.

"Knock it off!" Jack ordered near her ear as he latched onto her wrists.

"Tell me, you piece of shit! Where's my son?"

Jack managed to pry her thumbs from the depths of the man's bloated jowls and peel her hands off, but he backed Samantha's play. "Telling us is the only hope you have to avoid the needle. Who has the boy?" The uniforms backed off for the moment, the double-teaming obviously taking them by surprise. Jack knew they had just a few seconds before forcible ejection from the area so he pushed the line. Leaning in, he said, "Tell me who has him or I will turn her loose and turn my back."

Bloodshot and watery, the man's eyes blinked in fear as he croaked, "Van. Savanna. And she's a crazy bitch."

"Savanna who?" Samantha barked. She'd stilled in Jack's grip, her hands curled into white-knuckled fists.

"O'Connell, I think. She's Sid's bitch."

The medics broke from their frozen state and pushed to their patient's side. "That's enough," one said with quiet determination. His eyes, though, showed sympathy with Samantha's situation.

"Sid who?" Jack demanded.

The bloodied suspect looked to the EMTs for support. One medic began treatment by attaching a blood pressure cuff and the other unwrapped sterile packing for the wound. As the second medic worked the bandage, he glanced between the suspect and the agents.

"SID WHO?" Jack repeated.

Free from the wrapping, the medic applied the thick pad to the injured area. After a moment, the EMT leaned heavily on the gaping wound. The suspect screamed but Jack still heard the medic's quiet voice near his patient's ear. "I suggest you tell him. There's a lot of bleeding here and I need to apply . . ." he leaned on the dressing again and the suspect yowled. ". . . lots of pressure."

"Radcliff! Sid Radcliff!" With the admission, the medic's attention became brisk and efficient. "Did you see that?" the man wailed. "I'll sue you all!"

Jack wrapped his arm around Samantha's shoulders and propelled her toward the exit.

"I didn't see anything," one of the patrolmen said to another as they agents passed. "What's he talking about?"

"Hell if I know. I'm way too busy documenting the scene," the other muttered.

Jack remained silent until they were on the stairwell. "I didn't mean for you to pick up my *bad* habits, too," he grumbled. Samantha ignored him as she called in the new information.

CHAPTER FOUR

Time was a vague notion. A throbbing head and stinging eyes caused Martin's focus to waver. One arm was numb and clumsy and the other tingled from exertion but somehow, he managed to keep them locked around the small boy in his embrace. Finn was oddly quiet and growing heavier.

Their captor remained mostly silent, occasionally humming along with the country music twanging from the car radio. She raised no suspicion as she drove like an everyday soccer mom and Martin wondered if she was even aware of her situation. She had to be, because the one thing she had done was cover Finn with a jacket, quashing Martin's hope that an officer would notice an unsecured infant in his lap.

The darkness that dogged the edges of his mind was becoming difficult to ignore. Twice, his head nodded forward and he'd jerked back into awareness. Twice, the action lashed a fiery pain that shot through his head and down one arm. One eye had swollen shut. The jacket covering Finn held in the heat they both generated and now sweat made his shirt feel like a second skin. All of Martin's mental energy focused on staying alert.

The span of time could have been either minutes or hours when Savanna slowed the car and pulled off the road onto the dirt shoulder. Gravel popped the undercarriage and tattooed the bottom of Martin's feet through the floorboard. He forced his head up and around and realized that he had no idea where they were, and what he did see was fuzzy. The lost time frightened him.

Savanna put the car in park when it rolled to a stop, unbuckled her seatbelt and shoved her door open. Martin turned and squinted against the stinging glare stabbing his good eye through his window. He blinked to clear his sight and outside he saw that the ground eventually sloped sharply downward and beyond that, trees. There was no other traffic. Hope for help vanished in the tick of a second. A previously unnoticed hum dampened his hearing enough that when Savanna jerked his door open, Martin flinched in surprised. His gut tingled warning.

Savanna pulled the jacket off Martin's chest, balled it up and tossed it in the back seat. She huffed out a breath and then smiled when her gazed locked on Finn's sweaty head. She held out her arms. "Give him to me."

Martin leaned away, back into the car, and instinctively tightened his hold on Finn. "No," he said in a grating whisper, wincing at pain's flare. Savanna's hazy smile faded and she set her jaw and leaned in. Her hand shot out and slapped Martin's cheek, and he thought his head would explode. Finn twitched, but did not waken.

"Give him to me or I will kill you." The circle of cold steel against his throbbing temple superseded the sting of his cheek. "You don't want the boy to see his daddy die, trust me."

Something in the phrase caught his dubious attention. “Wait,” he insisted in a shaky voice as his brain tried to engage. “Wait . . .”

“No. Get out. Now.”

Finn’s squirming made Martin’s struggle to climb from the car both painful and difficult. When he finally stood on wobbly legs, he used the car for support. His stomach churned and he took several deep breaths of the cool air to recapture any sense of stability. The cold press of gunmetal against his temple finally relaxed when Savanna backed off a step to give them room. When her gaze locked onto Finn, the gun dipped and redirected to Martin’s knee.

“You are going to drive now,” she told Martin in a calm voice as she stared at Finn. “I’ve missed holding my boy. I shouldn’t have let him go.”

Martin sidled down a few steps along the side of the car to escape the gun’s line. “Where are we going?”

“Home.” Savanna said dreamily, her unsettling gaze still locked on Martin’s precious bundle. The gun barrel drifted back toward his knees as if on automatic pilot.

“Put the gun away first.” Martin managed to keep the rising panic from his voice. A shot of adrenalin muted his pain and sharpened his vision, but his head still felt like a bag of mud and broken glass. He needed a plan, and fast – stalling tactics wouldn’t last long. “You need both hands.”

Savanna frowned at that idea and when a few seconds that ticked by, the sure and maniacal woman shifted back to the overwhelmed girl from the store. Martin didn’t trust his eyes, but somehow Savanna now appeared to be barely an adult.

“Both hands,” she repeated in a whisper. “Yes, both hands.” She tucked the gun into the waistband at the small of her back and wiped her hands on her jeans. “Both hands so I don’t drop him. Don’t drop the baby.”

Her tone was soft and eerie. As Martin’s muddled, frantic mind tried to come up with his next move, he heard the tires-on-asphalt sound of an approaching vehicle. They both looked up the road and Martin’s heart skipped when he saw a police car swing around the curve in the road. He glanced at his captor to gage her response. Savanna blinked, and in that second, any sign of weakness disappeared when her features hardened. She managed a smooth motion to recover her gun and pull Martin to her side so their closeness concealed the weapon.

The black and white unit pulled in behind their car and stopped. Martin felt Savanna’s warm breath on his cheek and before giving him a light kiss, she said, “Don’t say anything or I will shoot.”

A single trooper exited the vehicle. He adjusted his gun belt as he eyed the car and then set his sights on the pair. “Having some trouble?” he asked. He closed his door and started toward them, crossing between the two cars. Martin could hear faint rhythm of chatter on the police radio and noticed the spiral cord that trailed behind the officer’s ear - the earpiece made it impossible to eavesdrop on the radio traffic.

Crunching gravel marked each step as the trooper approached. Although he wore sunglasses, Martin knew that he was evaluating both of them and that the officer noticed Martin’s disheveled appearance. The man’s approach was careful - his hand rested lightly against his holster.

“Hi.” Savanna greeted the trooper with a smile. “We’re fine, sir. Twisty roads give me a stomach ache so we took a break. We were just about to leave.”

The trooper stopped about eight feet away and his head tilted aside, listening. Parallel lines furrowed between his eyebrows as he glanced at the car again, and Martin knew the exact moment the trooper realized what was before him when he went for his side arm.

Savanna was faster.

Instinct and training took over and Martin moved without cognizant thought, the sole need to find cover driving him to the shoulder's edge. His mind registered a shout a fraction of a second before gunfire. He lost footing at the crest of the slope and fell, managing to twist just enough to hit hard on his hip and the length of his leg - for a moment, he saw stars and his head felt like molten metal. Holding Finn, who startled awake at the first shot, Martin felt the burn as he slid to the bottom where he struggled to his feet and dashed into the embrace of trees nearly blind from pain.

Several twists between the close cluster of trunks put them out of sight, but the *POP!POP!POP!* of gunfire pushed Martin forward. Finn screamed and clutched Martin's shirt, pinching skin beneath, but the pain was negligible compared to the blossom of agony awakened in Martin's skull. Still, he pressed on without any sense of time or place and functioned with a frightening narrow field of vision that sliced through ever pressing darkness. His only hope was widening the distance between them and Savanna.

Finn's screaming was all he heard. Martin's shoulders brushed the trunk of several trees that seemed to jump into his path, each strike interrupted Finn's wail with a quivering "Uh!" Finally, one hard hit jarred the boy into sniffling silence where he took bizarre solace in sucking wetly on his tiny fist.

After splashing through a narrow, muddy run of water that could only kindly be called a creek, Martin slowed, gasping. He only paused a moment, and then took three steps before his right shoulder winged off a tree hard enough to spin him in a tight circle. Stumbling to keep balance, Martin's back slammed into another tree and he slipped down along its rough bark, collapsing into an ungainly sit at its base among a cluster of root humps.

Martin panted. Every intake of are burned his chest and caused the hanging shadows shrouding his vision to throb and pulse. He was sure the unnatural weight of his head would make him topple so he pressed back against the tree trunk. When his breathing eased a little, Martin tipped his head sideways just enough to check Finn.

He didn't like the shocky look of the child. Healthy pink cheeks had bleached to a waxy paste color and his eyelids drooped with exhaustion. One tiny hand snared Martin's sweaty t-shirt in a panicked grip and he still sucked on the fisted knuckles of his other hand. He was shiny with sweat, his hair plastered to his head like a skullcap. Fear of dehydration made Martin's heart flutter – Finn needed liquids. His diaper also needed changing. He brushed the boy's hair back and dropped a kiss on the crown of his head. . "Shhhhh," Martin crooned softly before trying to stand again.

Martin failed in his effort to rise and run. His legs quivered and felt like rags. Finn began to squirm and grunt, spitting out his fist to protest.

"Nononononon*NONONOOOO!*"

A new fear blossomed in Martin's mind - he couldn't let Finn get away from him, but his body was beginning to fail. He had to come up with a way to keep the boy with him.

"Shh, shhh, it's okay," Martin murmured through a desert-try throat as he ordered his rebelling arms to hold the child closer. When he rested his cheek on Finn's head to comfort him, Martin's one-eyed gaze landed on his own feet. The shoelaces of his running shoes caught his attention and a solution came together in his mind.

Martin drew his legs in and crossed them, making a nest of sorts for Finn and bringing his shoes within reach. Clumsy fingers of one hand worked to free the laces while the other hand kept Finn tethered. The effort did not help to dampen his pounding head; in fact, Martin was sure

an alien was trying to break out of his skull as he worked. He chuffed a dry laugh at the idea and became suddenly aware that his thought process had taken a bizarre turn. He mentally regrouped.

It seemed to take forever to remove the laces. Martin had to pause several times to keep Finn from escaping his lap and the child's verbal protests did little to help Martin's headache, but he finally freed the strings and even managed to tie them together into one long strand after several fumbled attempts. He had to stop, though, when sudden nausea twisted his gut and he was instantly awash in a chilling sweat. Martin turned his head and fought down a dry retch. *"Could this get any worse?"* he thought, eyes streaming tears as he squeezed them closed against the pain. For the first time, he wondered if he'd done the right thing by running.

A tendril of doubt wormed through the dark agony of Martin's exquisite pain and a feeling of defeat washed over him. He took a fortifying breath that seemed to quell the nausea and calm his trembling hands. Slowly, he worked to make a slip knot and finally slipped the shoelace loop over one wrist and tightened it. It was no small feat when trying to subdue an unhappy baby at the same time. With that done, all that remained was to attach the other end to Finn, but he slumped back against the tree instead, bereft of energy. *"Just a short rest,"* he thought, focusing his wavering concentration fully on keeping a grip on Finn's wet, dirty Onesie. Aware of descending shadows and his drift toward unconsciousness, Martin fought to find that deep reserve of drive to keep going. His search jump-started with a surge of adrenalin when he heard a soft voice nearby.

"I thought I'd lost you."

There are a million tragic stories out there in the real world and those tales crossed the path of the Missing Person's Unit more often than not. Innocent people confronted circumstances that changed their lives in a second or a day, or occasionally fell into a long string of events that took them so far off the path of what society considered normal that they never even knew they strayed until they arrived at the horrific end.

Danny was well aware of this phenomena, but sometimes - and he would rather it was sometimes than often - he came across an event that was too heinous for him to grasp. As he read the papers in his hand, he wished he'd never seen it; this one would stick with him for a long time and his only exposure was reading an eight-year-old report. He pitied the officers that handled the incident, the medics that cleaned up the scene, and he especially pitied the individuals at the center of the mess. Some things should never happen to anyone, but it happened to Savanna O'Connell.

"What's the matter, Danny?" Elena's touch was gentle on his hand. It was then that he noticed his hand trembled. "Are you all right?"

Danny looked up into his wife's smoky eyes and visions of Sofie playing crossed his mind. He silently prayed that their life together would never be scorched by anything even remotely similar to the events the report brought to life in his head. He closed the folder and took her hand, squeezing it affectionately. "Yeah," he finally replied. "Yeah, I'm okay. Savanna O'Connell, though, is not."

Elena cocked her head and frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

He held the folder close to his chest without realizing it, protecting his beautiful bride from its ugliness. Ultimately, he knew that he couldn't keep it from her. "Here." He forced himself to hand the folder over. "I need to brief Jack."

Danny stepped around Elena and headed to his desk phone. As he punched out Jack's number, he watched his wife open the folder and flip through the pages to the photos at the end. One hand instantly covered her mouth as her brain registered what she was seeing. Shock knocked her back a half-step.

This one would stick with all of them for some time. Danny sighed as he dialed. Not only was it personal, it was a tragic story that did not yet have an end. All they could do was endure it together, do their job to the best of their ability and pray that they could make a difference.

Across from him, slouched against a tree in an awkward-appearing sit, Savanna panted and watched the little boy with tender eyes. She still had a gun, but her hand rested palm up in the dirt at her side and the silver weapon sat in an open grip. Occasionally, her fingers twitched. Her other hand pressed against her stomach and blood stained her skin and blouse.

She was pale, Martin thought, and he wasn't sure why she didn't come closer. He tried not to dwell on it, but an unwelcome coldness was creeping up his limbs, the sharp, piercing ache in his head was getting worse and his one-eyed vision was fading in and out, so, at this moment in time, Martin didn't really trust his judgment. He was tired and terrified that he would miss something and Finn would be lost.

"Michael," Savanna said in a voice as soft as the breeze. "He's so beautiful. I see him -"

Martin blinked his good eye in an effort to focus on the woman. He couldn't take anything for granted when Finn's safety was at risk. It was difficult, though, to keep Finn close and corralled, but if he could attach the shoestring to him . . .

"I shouldn't have dropped you. Don't drop the baby."

The woman's muttering was an odd comfort to Martin. If she talked, he could track her location without having to keep his eye on her and work with the shoestring. The *damn* shoestring, that seemed to have a mind of its own; it was like trying to thread a wet noodle through a wiggling button hole. He frowned, wondering where that idea came from.

"I'm coming baby. Mommie's here." Savanna's voice hitched. Martin shook his head to regain focus and glanced her way. He saw the sun flash on a tear as it rolled down her cheek. "Oh, baby, I've missed you so much."

Martin had a remote thought that maybe he should feel sorry for her, but he couldn't dredge up the emotion. It was her fault Finn was here in the first place.

"I shouldn't have dropped you. I shouldn't have let you go. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Something in her tone begged Martin's attention. He paused and watched, and with one especially deep sigh escaping her pale lips, Savanna seemed to collapse inward. Her shoulders drooped and her body shifted slightly, taking the posture of a boneless rag doll. Her head tiled aside as life fled with a final, rattling breath, her empty gaze fixed on Finn writhing in his lap.

Martin swallowed hard and then took in a shaky breath. Now Finn's safety rested squarely on his aching shoulders and Martin couldn't deny the fear he felt with the realization. Even though she had been "the enemy", she had also been an extra set of eyes on the child. Now, Martin felt strangely abandoned. Clenching his teeth with resolve, he returned to his chore. His vision pulsed with his heartbeat, casting a higher level of difficulty to the chore.

Finn wiggled and wailed, perhaps sensing Martin's spike of fear. "Hey, now, settle down," he muttered. His voice sounded far away. "Shh. Mom'll be her soon." He just wondered if he'd still be conscious by then.

That frightening thought renewed his effort to tether his charge before the darkness overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jack drew a thumb and forefinger across closed eyelids and then pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a deep breath. Bureaucracy was going to kill him someday. He stood there for a moment - eyes closed, pinching his nose - and listed to Sam berate yet another uniformed officer, her third in the past three hours. He couldn't really blame her since all they could do for the moment was wait, and waiting really and truly sucked. No more evidence would come from this scene.

Jack finally moved when his phone trilled. He plucked it from his pocket and growled, "Malone" at the same time he grabbed Sam's elbow and pulled her off the stuttering policeman just before she poked his chest with her finger – a sure way to be thrown out of the loop.

"What?" she snapped, turning on Jack as he dragged her toward their vehicle.

"Hold on, Danny, I'm putting you on speaker." Then he turned to Sam. "Get in the car."

Jack slipped behind the wheel with a sigh as Sam tromped around the car and dropped in the passenger seat frowning, eyes ablaze and jaw set in a stubborn angle. Through all the posturing, Jack still saw the fear that dwelled in her eyes so he gave her a mental bye.

He pressed a button on the phone and then held it in his open palm between them. "Okay. Go, Danny."

"Savanna O'Connell came from upstate via the foster care system. She entered the system when she was ten after her father beat her mother to death and then killed himself in their living room, in front of her. Blew his brains out. When she aged out of the system, Savanna managed to get her GED and then got a job with a cleaning company, where she hooked up with Austin Green, the boss' son, and got pregnant."

Jack snorted. "The great American love story." Sam gave him an angry glare and he threw a hand up. "Sorry."

"Anyway, the boss and Austin had a falling out over it, so Savanna and Austin moved in together in an apartment they could afford in the city. On minimum wage, you can imagine what that was like."

"Borrowing a cup of sugar from pushers, hookers and pimps," Jack said.

"Yeah. Just so happens there was a meth lab two floors under 'em. One day, about seven months after Savanna had baby Michael, the lab exploded. Austin was killed."

Jack glanced to Sam and saw an unsure flicker in her eyes; he imagined she mentally put herself in Savanna's place. Jack had a bad feeling about what Danny would report next.

"Apparently, she was trapped upstairs with a few others. Before the fire rigs arrived, people jumped from the upper floors into a blanket held by a group of rescuers. After a lot of encouragement, she finally dropped the baby. They caught him, but then there was a second explosion and she watched Michael and all his rescuers burn right under her window. We have the coroner's photos. Pretty grisly."

Sam uttered a sick noise and Jack looked over. With her chin tucked to her chest and her fist pressed against her lips, she looked as if she was trying not to vomit. She cleared her throat and stared at some spot on the dashboard. Jack turned his attention back to the phone.

"Where did she go after that?"

Danny sounded a little on the shaky side himself. "She fell off the grid after that. A couple of drunk in public arrests, one stint in County Mental Health for evaluation but that's it."

"Until now. Any idea who she hooked up with before Sid Radcliff?"

"Not really. They identified the bodies at the parking garage. . ."

"I don't give a crap about three dead crooks. She has Finn!" Sam's determined attitude had returned, twofold. "Where is she going, Danny? Anything in that file about that?"

"Sam," Jack's calm tone did little to help.

"Shut up, Jack! Danny?" The slight edge of desperation in her voice kept Jack from responding to the slight with more than an eyebrow arch.

"The only place listed is her original home, upstate. She'd have to take Highway 87. It's in the sticks near Hillburn. Aside from that, she's listed as a transient."

"Let's go."

"Sam," Jack said. "We don't know . . ."

"Just go, Jack!"

"Sam! Stop!" Jack grabbed her hand and squeezed, and then gave it a sharp tug to get her attention. Sam pulled free, crossed her arms across her chest and sat back with a furious glare. "We need more information. You know that." Her posture did not soften. He turned aside, regrouped and spoke to Danny while keeping a sidelong eye on Sam. "Get any names associated with that house. Contact local law enforcement and make sure they're keeping a lookout."

"Will do, Boss. Sam? Hang in there."

After a moment, she replied in a near apologetic tone, "Thanks, Danny."

Jack flipped the phone closed and kept his eyes on Samantha. Several seconds passed before she deflated visibly. "Sam," he started.

He saw her conflicted eyes flick toward something behind him just before there was a knock on the driver window. He turned the key and rolled the window down to speak to the detective waiting outside the car.

"There's a report of an officer down at a shooting off Highway 87. Suspect car comes back matches the description of the car that fled this scene."

Samantha bolted upright in her seat. "Savanna. Let's go!"

Jack started the car and accelerated from the scene as soon as the detective stepped clear. His cell rang as they hit the main road and he handed it over to Samantha. She glanced at the screen, flipped it open and snapped, "What do you have?"

She relayed Danny's information as they drove and Jack was relieved that she had something to do during a drive that was going to be too long, no matter how far they were going.

Thanks to their car's emergency lights, they arrived at the achingly familiar yellow barrier tape in good time. The plastic ribbon stretched across the roadway prior to a long turn and they didn't see anything of the scene until they cleared security and rounded the curve on foot.

Red and blue lights pulsed over the collection of cars and people, washed out by the day's light. A tan sedan sat on a wide, dirt shoulder sporting several bullet holes in the trunk lid and parked behind it, the marked police vehicle's windshield was shattered. Uniformed officers mingled with plain-clothes detectives that had bullet proof vests thrown over their suits.

Jack easily spotted the scene supervisor by the way the others deferred to him, so they headed toward him with purpose. Once Jack stood before the man, he realized Samantha was not on his heels. He found her with a glance, standing between the sedan and the slope of the shoulder, staring into the woods. Jack turned to the supervisor and flashed his identification.

"Jack Malone. My agent was in that car."

Dark eyes leveled with Jack's. "Sergio Alvarez. My officer's in the emergency room."

"Prognosis?"

Apparently, Jack portrayed an acceptable amount of concern because Alvarez nodded shortly and replied. "He was wearing his vest. Bullets clipped his neck and thigh, but he was center-punched. He'll be okay. He says he hit the girl. Looks like your agent – Fitzgerald? – took off into the trees. So did the girl."

"Did you know he had a baby with him?"

"Yes. We've been in contact with the jewelry store detectives."

Loud voices drew their attention, and they turned and saw Samantha getting into a detective's face.

"Um," Jack said, turning back to Alvarez to get his attention. "Blood trail?"

Alvarez nodded, his hard stare still on Samantha. "We're waiting for a dog unit. I'd appreciate it if you'd do the same."

"I'll talk to her." Jack turned to go, but Alvarez' next question stopped him.

"She related to your agent? Director Fitzgerald has the same temper." Alvarez rubbed his ear as he held his cell phone aloft.

Jack had to chuckle at the query. "Not by blood. It's her baby."

Alvarez turned that over in his mind and then nodded. "Keep her in line or I'll have to remove her from the scene. Picaro here will keep you updated." He indicated his right hand man with a nod, and quickly introduced Jack.

"Thanks. We'll behave."

As Jack departed to intercept Sam, he saw the dog unit arrive. An excited German Shepard jumped from the car, tongue lolling as he looked brightly to his handler for orders. Sam's greeting wasn't anywhere near the animal's cheeriness; she glared at Jack's approach so he sidled in next to her and kept his tone low but firm. "Rein yourself in or we won't be joining them."

"They haven't followed yet. The trail's clear . . ."

Slipping his hand into the crook of her elbow, Jack didn't back down. "And she's armed and tried to kill one of their own. They can't be too careful."

For the first time, Sam's eyes glittered with threatening tears and she was unable to speak. She ducked her head and fought for control. Jack could feel her trembling. Finally, she cleared her throat. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse. "Is the officer okay?"

"Yeah, he'll recover. And now that the dog's here, they're going into the woods. We can go, but you have to back off, Sam. Understand? We will find them." She nodded and allowed Jack's embrace. Jack was encouraged to feel her relax in his arms.

Twenty minutes later, when they assembled for the sweep search, Samantha looked like a poorly contained explosion. Armed officers stretched out in a ragged line, awaiting orders to move forward. A fruitless helicopter survey could not see through the tree crowns, but it was able to establish a perimeter with the help of additional dogs. Somewhere in the woods ahead, Finn, Martin and Savanna waited.

Samantha tried not to torture herself with imagined scenarios, but it was impossible. Since her arrival, the woods had been quiet. No shouting, no shooting, no crying and as every mother knew, too quiet was a bad thing.

Focused on Savanna's blood trail, the dog and his handler finally moved off into the trees. Samantha allowed one other officer between her and the canine unit, and no one disputed her claim to the spot.

At first, she followed the trail with ease and wondered at the necessity of the dog. As they progressed, however, and the line of officers staggered into a loose line, and the trail became nearly invisible but the dog pushed confidently forward. Sam, Jack and the handler became the point of a wedge as they led the way. The rocky, brushy and root laden habitat took its toll and bent the line further. It was eerily quiet.

They came to a muddy run of water. On the near side, mud held footprints. On the far side, a thick carpet of leaves revealed nothing. The dog hesitated, circling at the water's edge. Sam heard Jack's heavy breathing but was unaware of her own as she stared at the dog. Finally, the animal headed upstream and Jack started to follow.

Sam, however, looked beyond the water - the dog's direction didn't feel right. Jack stopped and turned back.

"Coming?" he asked. The others brushed by, ignoring them. "Sam?"

"That way," she said, taking a small jump to clear the water. Jack followed immediately and jogged to catch up as she pushed onward.

"I don't suppose you noticed that the dog doesn't agree with you."

"The dog's looking for Savanna. I'm looking for Martin." Her voice caught. She cleared her throat, ducked under a low branch and immediately stopped. Jack bumped her shoulder before he could stop. "Look." She pointed to a flat spot in the leaves next to an older tree.

Before Jack could comment, Samantha strode forward to the crushed leaves, glanced around, and followed a path that she internally recognized as instinctual. She felt Jack's presence on her heels and was comforted by his support.

The trail was clear in her eyes and distinct in its consistency. In her mind's eye, Sam visualized Martin using the tree trunks as concealment, his path zigzagging with purpose but slowly degrading in subtly as he tired. It tore at her heart to see the degradation; Martin's growing desperation felt like a band tightening around her lungs. Panic blossomed deep inside, demanding release. Sam slowed, staggered, and fell against the rough bark of a tree where she clutched for support and tried to breathe. A dry sob escaped and her nails dug into the wood to keep her upright.

"Hey! Samantha!"

Jack's voice seemed far away even though she felt his warmth supporting her. His arm wrapped around her shoulders and he whispered condolences that she didn't hear because something else called to her in the background. She shifted, turning her face away from Jack and toward a noise that simply didn't fit the circumstance.

"Take a breath. Come on, you're okay. . ."

"Shhhh!" she hissed, pushing away from the tree and standing firm. "Quiet!"

Shocked, Jack took a half-step back and froze with one hand on resting on her shoulder and the other suspended between them in an interrupted motion. She heard the frown in his voice. "What?"

She frowned, tilting her head slightly as her lips pressed into a tight line. She forced her muscles to relax. "I don't . . ." she whispered, fighting to hang on to the faint noise. "Shh . . . hear that?"

Jack scanned the trees with a tentative expression. "I don't -"

Deaf to his voice, Samantha bolted. With each step the elusive noise became clearer until it was undeniable and only then did she realize that Jack was on her heels. She heard him demanding caution but, driven by another instinct, ignored him.

"Finn!" she choked as the child's weak cry became clear. Crashing through a wild hedge, Sam's toe caught in a tangle of branches and Jack's firm grip on her shoulder was the only thing that kept her from falling to her knees. Time seemed to slow as she paused to let her mind grasp the scene before her that slowly broke her heart.

Savanna O'Connell sat at the base of a thin tree, her dull, unseeing eyes visible between half-closed lids. Her hands, loosely clasped together and resting limply in her lap covered with the same dark blood that stained her shirt. Wild red hair framed her lifeless face. Dark flies dotted her chest, agitated with the disturbance of Sam's arrival.

Martin sat on the ground across from her, cross-legged in the mass of another tree's roots. He leaned back against the substantial trunk; one arm draped across his lap while the other stretched out to the side and bobbed unnaturally, the wrist bent sharply and his hand swaying in rhythm with his arm. Samantha's heart fluttered, trapped within her ribcage.

"Martin," Sam choked, taking a wobbly step closer. His swollen, closed eyes gave the appearance of sleep because his color told her he was alive. Where Savanna's face was a cold, pasty white, Martin's flushed pink and warm with life. The blood trail from scalp to jaw line was bright red instead of ominous dark.

Then the faint cry that called her to this place urged time engage and Samantha stumbled forward. "Finn?" After a few more steps, he came into sight and her heart soared again. Her son, trying to crawl away from Martin, was at the end of a shoe-lace tether and frustrated; his tugs caused Martin's lax arm to bob. His mother's voice made Finn give up his escape attempt. He pushed back into a peeved sit. Seeing her made him reach up and start crying indignantly for her to fix this situation.

Sam laughed hysterically once through her tears and scooped him up. He was filthy, sweaty and generally annoyed, but unharmed. He relaxed against her shoulder after he found his fist and jammed it in his mouth. She held him close, gently bouncing him into instant, exhausted sleep.

Once Jack confirmed that Savanna was indeed dead, Sam turned back to Martin and kneeled next to him. Jack squatted at his other side and checked his pulse, forehead and temple. "He's got quite a knot here. Probably caused the black eye. He's hot."

With Samantha kneeling close, Martin's arm now lay quiet at his side. Jack lifted his hand and picked at the shoestring noose. Sam noticed that Martin's hand was a purplish color.

"His hand," she noted, finally following the string line to Finn. The shoestring ran up one sleeve, against the back of Finn's shoulders under the cotton Onesie, and out of the other sleeve. The cloth gathered at the knot between his tiny shoulder blades. The other end of the lace fought against Jack as he worked to loosen its hold on Martin's wrist.

"He made sure Finn wasn't going anywhere," Jack grumbled. "Ah." Finally, the string slipped away. Jack rubbed Martin's hand between his. "I think he'll be okay. I'll call the medics."

Sam ran her fingers through Martin's hair and didn't bother to fight back grateful tears. She didn't feel the dry, crusty blood or the gritty dirt or even the sticky dried sweat that made it a tangled mess; all she felt a surge of love that stole her voice warmed her heart.

After a few heartbeats passed, she finally found words. "Thank you," she whispered. Then she leaned in, kissed his hot cheek and rested her forehead against his. With Finn tucked safely to her breast and Martin so close to her heart, she closed her eyes and finally felt at peace. "I love you so much."

Jack must have noticed her loss of composure because he rose and took a step back, giving her a few moments of peace while he called off the search.

CHAPTER SIX

The pair's temporary moment of peace was broken with the arrival of the core search team following Savanna's circuitous route. Samantha attempted to stay by Martin's side as she cuddled Finn, but was forced to step back to avoid waking her son. She paced a short track a short distance away and tried to eavesdrop on the rescue personnel's rapid discussion. At one point, she realized that their hovering and tone of voice indicated that Martin was worse off than she or Jack knew. A scant few seconds after the realization, Jack pulled her back even farther from the busy crowd.

"But wait! What are they saying? Jack?" Finn tensed in her arms, threatening to wake.

Jack took both of her forearms in his grip and caught her gaze. "You're going to wake up Finn. You need to calm down."

"But Martin . . ." She tried to see around Jack's broad shoulders.

"I'll find out what's going on. You concentrated on Finn, Sam. You need to be calm. Hear me?" He waited until he had her full attention, and then waited for her sharp nod.

Samantha took a deep breath and watched Jack approach the rescue team. A medic toting a huge white box with a red cross painted on the top weaved his way through the trees and joined the team. She felt helpless as they rapidly worked and exchanged information – there was something about Martin's eyes and vital signs that seemed to cause them worry. She chewed on her lower lip, trying not to scream, and waited none-too-patiently for Jack to return.

When a few of the team members broke away and jogged toward the road, Sam watched them depart with narrowed eyes. Her alarm then skyrocketed when she heard an approaching helicopter. Were they airlifting Martin?

She felt Jack's return when he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and directed her along the same return path as the rescue members.

"The chopper's for Martin, isn't it? That means he's bad, right?"

Jack spoke in an even tone as he propelled her along the trail. "They're just being careful. They don't like the fact that he hasn't responded. His vital signs aren't stable."

"What? His vitals? Are there new injuries? He was running!" Planting her feet, Samantha tried to turn back but Jack pushed her forward.

"You'll get your answers at the hospital but if you want to get there anytime soon, keep moving. There was a cut along his back that's probably a bullet graze, but it's not serious."

"His back?" Sam's stomach fluttered with awakened butterflies. "He was protecting Finn. . ."

Jack's voice softened. "Yeah, that's what I figure. Do you want to go in the ambulance with Finn or let me drive both of you?"

He had to ask twice before she answered. By then, he was helping her up the slope to the road and informing the investigators to save their questions for the hospital. Sam heard all of it through a

thick fog of worry – how bad *was* Martin? She couldn't even form the idea of Martin dying – it just couldn't happen. It couldn't.

She snapped back to the present situation when Jack pushed her into the sedan. Her heart raced as Jack slipped behind the steering wheel and she opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Her dry throat squeezed closed. The car trembled in the helicopter's rotor wind and a puff of debris billowed over them. Outside the car, the others turned their backs to the mild buffeting as the craft settled on the closed roadway like a great bird on its nest. Medics jumped down with a Stokes basket and trotted into the woods.

The scene then receded in Samantha's view as Jack pulled away and things grew fuzzy as her eyes burned with tears. She already felt lost without Martin at her side.

Danny parked in the hospital lot, grateful that their current missing person made it easy for them by using their credit card to by junk food. The case closed quickly after that and Vivian volunteered to wrap up the paperwork which allowed Danny and Elena join their teammates at the hospital. So far, they knew far less than they wanted and Danny needed answers.

The Emergency Room wasn't a busy as it could have been and Danny had an unpleasant flash of déjà-vu from the last time he was here for Martin. He absently rubbed his forehead as he scanned the waiting area for a familiar face and spotted Jack at the admission window. Danny touched Elena's elbow and steered her in their boss' direction.

"Jack," Elena called as they approached. When he looked up, Danny didn't like what he saw. "How's Finn?"

"Hey," Jack grumbled. He looked tired. "Sam's back there with him now." He flicked a wrist in the direction of the exam area. "He looked good when we found them. A little dirty, tired and hungry but otherwise, good. They should be out soon."

"What about Martin?" Danny asked, the unsettling déjà-vu still hanging on his mind.

Jack pursed his lips and shrugged. "Don't know yet. He arrived a little ahead of us and we haven't seen him. Be forewarned, his parents should be here soon. I hope to get more information before they get here, but as far as I know, he's got a head injury that's worrying them."

"If Finn's alright, maybe Sam will let me take him home so she can stay with Martin," Elena said. She glanced to Danny, who nodded in agreement. "But I can understand if she doesn't want to let go of him quite yet."

"I'll tell her. Stay here, I'll be right back." Jack flashed his badge and the door to the exam area buzzed, allowing his entry.

Unable to sit, Danny and Elena elected to stand in an area that let them view the main entrance and the door to the exam rooms. Elena sighed and hooked her arm in Danny's elbow.

"I hate this," she said.

"Me too," Danny muttered. "I feel completely useless."

"You're not completely useless," Elena soothed. "You're my solid reassurance. I can't imagine what Samantha's going through."

"I can," he admitted. "And that's what I hate."

The next half-hour seemed endless. A slight feeling of relief lifted Danny's heavy thoughts when Samantha, hugging Finn tight to her chest, pushed through the door into the waiting room.

The happiness in Elena's voice was clear. "Hey, there! How's our boy?" She reached out and stroked Finn's tiny head, nestled securely into Sam's neck. He was sound asleep and any indication of his rough day washed away. "He's all clean."

"Yeah," Sam softly replied. "He got a bath, clean clothes and lunch. Now all he needs is sleep." She tilted her head and smiled a weary smile. Samantha looked as if she hadn't slept for a week - sooty bags hung under her reddened eyes, and her skin had a pale, tired tint.

"You could use some rest yourself," Elena said. "Have you heard any more about Martin?"

"No. Not yet. He's not in the exam area." She paused to clear her throat and swallow. Raw seconds passed and when she spoke again, her voice was hoarse. "I didn't catch anything about . . . I mean, I don't know what his condition is. Was. He wasn't conscious when we found him." She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. "Jack's trying to get information." The tremor in her voice gave away the anxiety she felt. Danny slipped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a quick hug. Sam let out a grateful sigh.

"Listen, I can take Finn to our place if you want. You know Sophie would love it, but I'd understand your reluctance to let him out of your sight."

"Thanks, Elena, I really appreciate it. Now that I've been able to check out every part of him and know he's fine, I think I'll take you up on that. I need to see about Martin." The last words came out strangled and Sam took a deep breath to gather courage. Then she looked at Elena with shining eyes. "Thanks," she whispered as she carefully transferred the tiny, sleeping soul to Elena's willing arms. "It really helps knowing he's safe. Thank you so much."

Elena held Finn close and smiled. "De nada," she said. Then she turned to Danny. "You coming with me or staying here, *querido*?"

"Staying." He gently rubbed her arms and smiled at the sleeping child. "He looks worn out. I'll check with you later?"

"Sure." They kissed and then parted. "I'll update Vivian when I get home. Prayers to Martin."

Danny stood by Sam and they both watched Elena leave. Danny rubbed Sam's back in small circles. "You ready?"

Sam nodded and glanced up to her teammate. "I'm scared, Danny. The medics were worried - what if . . ?"

"Shh, don't think that way. It's too early. Martin made it all that way into the woods, right? We both know how stubborn he is."

Sam choked out a short laugh and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "Yeah, we do. I just want to find out what I can before Victor and Katherine get here. I'm not sure they'll keep me in the loop."

"I thought you were getting along with them."

"Yeah, his mom's okay but I still not sure that Victor approves. There's some tension, but he's polite."

Danny turned her toward the exam room doors. "Then let's see what Jack's dug up. That man won't take 'no' for an answer, that's for sure."

Sam chuffed a short laugh as the entry door buzzed them in. "If the staff here thinks Jack is a pain in the ass, they'll think again after meeting Daddy Fitzgerald."

"You're talking about your future in-laws, you know."

"Shut up, Danny." Warm tears fell easier with trusted backup.

Once in the exam area Jack was easy to locate - his dark suit stood out in stark contrast with the scrub-clad medical teams and as soon as Samantha's eyes connected with his, she knew things weren't good. When she and Danny stopped in front of him, Jack immediately gripped her elbow and turned her back out of the exam area. Sam found that she was unable to speak because fear stole her voice.

"Where's Martin?" Danny asked as they headed for the bank of elevators. "Jack? Where are we going?"

"Surgery. Martin's got a brain hematoma and it's causing pressure. That's why he was out when we found him."

"It takes a while for that kind of pressure to build," Danny said. "I guess it started when he got hit on the head in the store?"

"Looks like it."

"They drill a hole." Sam whispered as the elevator rose. Her teammates looked to her and she clarified. "They have to drain the pressure on his brain. They'll drill a hole in his skull."

"That's the usual procedure," Jack said with reluctance. "But I don't know if that's what they're doing. I'll find out."

Sam didn't need to find out. She knew. The clues were there from Martin's actions since the robbery to the hurried attitude of the medical staff. They were going to drill a hole in Martin's head. *Like he needs another scar,* she thought with overwhelming sadness.

The elevator doors opened and she felt her body escorted into a sterile hallway. Samantha felt disconnected, as if this were all a dream. The first thing she noticed was a plain, industrial style clock on the wall that told that it had only been a few hours since the robbery, and just a few more since she'd felt the warmth of his body against hers this morning. Was that right? Surely it had been longer than that – it felt like a lifetime ago. How could things change so quickly? Would she ever feel his comforting length against her back or feel his eager lips again? Would he be the same man she loved?

"Hey." Danny's voice whispered next to her ear and she realized she'd stopped at the threshold of the surgical waiting room, her fingers pressed to her lips. She blinked, dropped her hand and turned her head to meet Danny's worried brown eyes. "He'll be okay, I'm sure. Come on, let's sit."

She allowed him to steer her into the room but she had no desire to sit. All Sam wanted to do at this moment was throw up. "Restroom," she choked.

"Over there." Danny turned her body and pointed at the clearly labeled doorway across the hall.

She bolted without thanking him and was relieved that no one else was in the small room. After vomiting what little remained of breakfast in the closest toilet, Samantha panted a few minutes and leaned against the stall's cold partition wall. Satisfied she was finished Samantha wobbled to the sink and rinsed her mouth. Then she splashed cool water on her face and took a reluctant glance at the mirror.

"Shit," she breathed softly at the washed out, frightened face that looked back. She had to be strong for Martin and Finn, she scolded herself. After her own dressing down, she felt better and patted her skin dry with a paper towel and tried to ignore the quiver of her hands. She threw the towel away, stood up and straightened her clothes as she faced her reflection straight on. "Hold it together, Spade."

Then she took a breath, lifted her chin, and walked confidently from the room and right into Victor Fitzgerald.

"Oh!" she squeaked. The Assistant Director stopped and regarded her for a moment with a frown. "I didn't see you. I'm sorry." Her voice sounded tight in her own ears. Victor nodded acceptance of her apology, his lips in a tight line, and then continued into the waiting area. Samantha was relieved to see Martin's mother beyond where he'd stood, waiting with a stricken expression.

"Samantha," Katherine Fitzgerald breathed. "Have you heard anything?"

Moving with an elegance that always amazed Samantha, Katherine approached and reached for Sam's hand. Sam felt her trembling when she wrapped her fingers around Katherine's, and hoped the woman felt the support Sam offered.

"No," Sam said, finally finding her true voice. "Nothing yet. He's in surgery now, that's all I know."

Jack met Victor as he walked ahead and entered the waiting room. "They have to release some pressure from bruise on his brain," Jack told him. "It shouldn't take long."

"Any other injuries?"

"Just superficial scrapes and bruises. There's a gash on his back that might be from a bullet, but it's minor."

"Who is handling the investigation?" Victor and Jack moved deeper into the room, their conversation becoming too quiet to hear.

Sam looked to Katherine and gave her a weak smile. Katherine hooked her elbow in Samantha's and followed her husband.

"I understand Finn is all right? I'm so glad for that."

"Yes, he's fine. Martin . . " Sam's bravado deflated a little, but she continued after clearing her throat. ". . . Martin kept him safe."

They settled into seats close to the surgery information desk. "You know," Katherine said as she released Samantha's arm and opened her purse, "Finn will always be your little boy in your heart, no matter how tall he grows." She pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes, unable to hide the waver in her voice. "You will always worry about his safety, his health and his happiness. It's a mother's nature. Having a good man by your side helps a great deal when times are rough."

Samantha glanced at Victor with new eyes at that revelation, but the logic of it made sense and she was a little surprised it hadn't dawned on her before. Martin was a good man; he must have had a good example.

Samantha's attention turned back to Martin's mother when Katherine took Samantha's hand in a firm grip. It was in that second that Samantha realized from whom Martin had inherited his soulful eyes. Those same eyes, swimming with tears, held her gaze at this moment and warmed her heart.

"I know my son has a good woman by his side, and you can't know how grateful I am for that, Samantha. He loves you and I am glad that you are here. We will get through this. Together."

Over Katherine's shoulder and across the room, Samantha saw Danny smile. *She's right,* she thought. *I am not alone.* One way or another, she had family and she would get through this with their help.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When waiting, time was like flowing water. Running over the hard rock of anxiety without pause, eventually the rock smoothed and rounded, losing the rough edges that caused pain. The pain becomes an ache and soon the void left becomes noticeable.

Gathered together in the surgical waiting area, Sam began to notice things that pain and shock had blocked. Lifting her chin, she noticed that she sat separated from the others. Across from her, she finally heard Jack's low phone conversation – and felt the corner of her mouth twitch in amusement when she saw that he sat directly under a sign reading "No Cell Phone Use In The Waiting Area". The red circle-and-bar-slash trapping and bisecting a black cell phone graphic hovered above her boss' head like a perverse halo.

Two seats down, Danny sat with his back angled to Jack and flipped through a golf magazine. "*Golf?"* He looked tired with his head slightly bowed, but his lazy smile softened the stress lines etched across his forehead. Sam didn't have to guess about whom he thought of – she knew. Elena had that effect on him. His content smile came from his thoughts and Sam wondered if he really saw any of the magazine pages he fanned with his thumb. A warm spot that their happiness stoked flickered inside her. She was happy for them, but seeing her partners alone in the waiting area made Martin's absence palatable.

Tears threatened to rise. She held them off with a quick, deep sigh as she pushed to her feet. Ducking her head, the constricting bands around her throat loosened with a cough. Samantha turned aside and felt someone watching her. She raised her head just enough to discover Katherine's tortured, blue gaze fixed on her face. Her heart jolted at the resemblance to Martin and the horrible memory of when she'd confronted him about his addiction. It was the same look. The chairs flanking Katherine were empty because Victor haunted the nurses' station, his fingers tapping annoyingly on the unmanned counter. His sharp questioning had chased away the staff.

Sam found herself automatically moving in Katherine's direction, a thing she'd been unable to do before. Katherine rose to meet her and Samantha reached out, taking the woman's hands.

"How are you doing, dear?" Katherine found her voice first.

Samantha gave her a weak smile. "About as well as you, I think."

Caught, Katherine's bravado crumpled a little, causing her shoulders to droop. "We should hear something soon."

As if on cue, the swinging doors to the surgery area opened with a mechanical groan. A distinguished-looking, scrub-dressed man stopped in front of the doors and addressed Victor.

"Mr. Fitzgerald?" Martin's father stalked toward him. The doctor looked aside to speak to Katherine. "Mrs. Fitzgerald, you and your husband can come with me."

Katherine reached out and tucked Samantha's hand into the bend of her elbow, but did not approach the doctor. Instead, she huddled close to Sam and fixed a determined look on the surgeon. "These are Martin's friends and coworkers. They can hear what you have to say, too."

Victor shot her a look, surprised. By the way Katherine stood her ground, Samantha realized this wasn't the first time Martin's mother called the shots. Behind her, she heard shuffling noises as Jack and Danny took up positions of support. The surgeon understood the winner of this round and spoke to the group in a low voice meant for privacy. The five of them gathered close enough to hear.

"I've relieved the pressure on Martin's brain and everything went smoothly. We drained a significant clot, but I am confident the bleeding is in control and that he will recover. He'll need rest, of course, and we'll keep a close eye on him for a few days. Barring any complications, he should be able to go home next week."

"What kind of complications?" Victor asked, frowning. Katherine released Samantha's elbow and stepped to his side. Victor's arm lifted and wrapped around her narrow shoulders without dropping his eyes from the doctor, the motion automatic and familiar.

"Infection, mostly. That's always a concern with surgery. His other wounds are superficial in comparison. He sustained a couple of cracked ribs and that bullet graze, which should heal nicely, and a severe concussion. He'll be sore for awhile."

"Can we see him?" Even though her eyes glistened with tears, Katherine's voice was even and strong.

"He's in recovery at the moment, so do not be alarmed at the equipment. I'll move him to ICU as soon as a bed is available. It shouldn't be long. Follow me, please."

As fear drained away and relief engulfed her, Samantha found that her feet wouldn't move. Behind her, the bright lift in Jack and Danny's conversation was clear, but the exact words escaped her. Instead, she watched Martin's parents move away. The surgeon slapped the button that opened the automatic doors and as the hallway opened up before them, Katherine paused and turned from under Victor's arm and found Samantha with perplexed eyes.

"Aren't you coming, Samantha?"

Someone pushed her from behind and an annoyed glance in that direction revealed Jack's familiar smirk and Danny flicking his hand in her direction. "Shoo," he said, one eyebrow angled upward.

"Tell him hello for us," Jack added.

Katherine's warm hand grasped hers and drew her to their side. Victor gave her a sidelong look but did not object. The three of them walked through the open doors shoulder to shoulder.

Her first look at Martin brought Samantha to an abrupt standstill. Katherine swept to the side of the gurney and her trembling hand traced Martin's hairline from forehead to ear. The lightness of her motherly caress froze Samantha in place at the foot of the bed, the cold rail pressing against her stomach like an icy fence.

Martin looked horrible. The livid purple bruising that spread from his temple was the only color against the sheets, the left side of his face swollen to unrecognizable proportions. The right side appeared freakishly normal in its pale laxness. White bandages crowned his head and all manner of tubes and lines trailed from his nose and face like a tangle of fishing line on a white sand beach.

Katherine murmured soothingly from one side of the bed while Victor looked down at his son from the other. Samantha felt herself blink when she read the anguish on Victor's usually stoic face. This was how parents reacted to the trials of their children – Samantha had been witness to this many times in her line of work but this was the first time that the depth of the connection struck her.

Since she and Martin had reunited, she occasionally wondered how his parents acted during his recovery from Dornvald's ambush. She always assumed Martin returned to work so quickly afterward to prove something to Victor or escape the pressure for him to change his line of work. *"I was supposed to go into politics,"* he'd once told her.

What she witnessed now did not fit what she'd assumed all this time. Maybe she was wrong all along, or perhaps Martin's parents finally accepted her and therefore allowed their feelings to show. Whatever the reason, she intended to seize the chance to do what she had promised - and failed to do - after the Dornvald shooting and be there for him.

Victor stepped back and waved in one of the nurses. Samantha edged around the corner of the bed and took Victor's spot at Martin's side and worked her hand through the tangle of wires and lines. She took Martin's lax hand - a little startled at its coldness - and leaned down.

"You can wake up anytime now," she whispered in his ear. "I'm here. I'll always be here." She lightly kissed his temple and swore she heard a soft sigh. Samantha stood a little straighter and squeezed Martin's hand. "Come on, Martin. Open your eyes."

She wasn't imagining it. Martin rolled his head slightly in her direction and she saw his closed lid ripple from the motion the eyeball. She leaned in again and carefully stroked his swollen cheek with her other hand. "That's it, sweetheart," she whispered. "Open your eyes. I'm here."

The heart monitor's beat sped up and Martin's hand twitched. Martin's struggle to consciousness deepened the lines of his face as he frowned. His eyelid fluttered and eventually rewarded Sam with a crescent of hazy blue.

"There you are," she whispered, smiling down at him. She carefully stroked his mottled cheek and brushed his forehead with her lips. Sam found her next words stuck in her throat. Even though banked tears muddled her vision, Martin's response was the best thing she'd ever seen. He blinked slowly and worked uncooperative lips.

"Sam?"

Her name was nearly too soft to hear, but loud enough for Katherine to sigh with relief.

. . . And then step back.

The significance of the motion flew right over Samantha's head because her focus was entirely on erasing Martin's fears as well as her own. She was aware of increased activity in the room but ignored all of it. The confusion in Martin's pained expression melted away with Samantha's reassurances, and the various monitors' dancing lines and erratic beeps calmed.

The surgeon appeared and quickly examined his patient. "We'll move him to the ICU now," he said, waving someone over.

"Excuse me. I'll take him."

Sam felt a warm hand on her forearm and realized the speaker had repeated the statement twice. Samantha spared the speaker an apologetic glance and straightened. "Sure. Let me tell him what's going on." The two nurses moved in and busily prepared the related equipment for the move.

"I think he's asleep now."

Samantha looked down and saw that Martin's closed eye, but she still felt a tremble in his hand. Ignoring the nurse, she bent down amidst the bustle and kissed his cheek. "I'm right here, Martin. They're moving you to another room, but I'm right here."

She stood and nodded at the nurses, but refused to release his hand. Her attitude brooked no argument so the nurses worked efficiently and included Sam in their conversation as they maneuvered the gurney out of the recovery room. She vaguely noticed passing Martin's parents

where they stood out of the way against a wall, Victor's arm around Katherine's shoulders, but she didn't acknowledge them - Martin needed her, and it was clearly her place to be right where she was.

Time's flow had worn a new path. The enormity of the Fitzgeralds' acceptance of this new fact escaped her completely.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sam lost Martin on the way to ICU. Holding his hand, she looked down on his face as the gurney journeyed to his room and she held his eyes for a few seconds, but then his lids slipped down and he was gone. Not dead, only disconnected, but a feeling of loss overwhelmed her just the same. A short sob prefaced burning tears and Sam received sympathetic glances from the nurse and orderly.

"He's fine right now," the nurse assured her. "He just needs some rest so his body can heal."

Sam nodded, not trusting her strangled throat enough to speak. She kept her gaze locked on his lax face and unsuccessfully tried to find some kind of reassurance in the lines and features of Martin's face. All she saw were shadowed bruises layered and dried specks of blood on pale flesh.

The hospital staff situated him in the ICU closest to the nurses' station and after checking the beeping, flashing mechanical paraphernalia and the web of tubes and lines, they left with quiet efficiency. Sam lingered in the corner and out of the way as they worked, but when finally left alone she found herself hesitant to approach. What was she supposed to do now? Just wait? That wasn't nearly enough . . .

Samantha's ascent toward impatient rant was cut short when a nurse returned with a bowl and washcloth.

"I was going to clean him up a bit, unless . . ?" The nurse lifted an eyebrow in question as she set the bowl down.

"Yes," Sam answered immediately. "I don't mind."

She was grateful for a simple chore that would keep her hands busy. Taking her time, she cleaned the flecks of blood and dirt from Martin's face, hands and arms. Before starting on his chest, the nurse magically appeared with a new bowl of water. With the fresh water, she worked down his torso and then legs and feet. Refreshing the water in the small bathroom, she washed his hair but did a poor job; the bandages around his head scared her. She returned the bowl to the nurse, and then settled in the room's only chair feeling less tense. It only took a few moments before a sense of déjà-vu struck her.

It was a different hospital, but ICUs tended to look alike so the memory of her "being there" speech came to her quite clearly. Her cheeks warmed with embarrassment and she took Martin's hand. She hadn't followed through last time, but this time, she would. Her heart allowed nothing less.

So, she leaned in, wrapped both of her hands around his and quietly encouraged him to come back to her. The mechanical noises and sterile environment faded from her senses and

Martin became the center of everything. Her reward was a flicker of movement between her hands.

"That's it, Martin. I need to see your eyes."

His eyelids rippled. She rested a hand on his cheek and whispered reassurances. Soon, a crescent of blue between translucent lids brightened the room.

Samantha choked. "Hi," she managed, smiling and tasting salty tears on her lips.

Martin stared for a moment, blinked slowly and then squeezed her hand. "Sam," he said on a soft breath.

"You're in the hospital. Don't move too much, okay?"

His brow furrowed in thought. "What . . ." he started, then his eye widened and the heart monitor raced. "Finn," he gasped. "Finn!"

"Shh, he's fine, Martin. You kept him safe. He's fine. Do you hear me?"

It took several seconds for the beeping heart monitor to slow as the message finally sank in. "Okay. Good." Martin's head sank into the pillow as he relaxed.

"Thank you for keeping him safe. You did a great job. Thank you so much. I love you, Martin." Samantha whispered inches from his face and stroked his forehead until he fell asleep. Only then, did she release his hand and lean back. She jumped when someone behind her spoke.

"He should sleep for a while now. Why don't you take a break?"

"Oh," she stammered, rising to her feet. "I don't know . . ." Sam looked beyond the nurse and saw Martin's parents looking anxious outside the room. "Yeah, okay. I'll be back."

Leaving the nurse to check the monitors, Sam stepped from the room under Victor's hard stare. Katherine immediately took her hand. "How's he doing?"

"He seems better. And he spoke to me again - asked about Finn." She offered a brief smile. "He's going to sleep for a bit. I think you can go in."

Katherine gave her a teary smile and slipped into the room. Sam heard low murmurs as the woman spoke to the nurse. A short cough broke her attention from the room and she faced Martin's father.

"I'm glad your son is alright," he said. The usual guardedness and disapproval that Sam usually felt from him were gone, and in his place stood a concerned father. He took her hand, surprised by the warmth, and looked into his face. "It's difficult, being a parent."

She smiled briefly. "Yes. Sometimes it is, but the rewards are worth it, isn't it?"

They regarded each other a second longer, and then he nodded once and released her hand. "Check on your boy and get some rest. We'll hold the fort here."

"I," Samantha started, glancing at the wall clock. She'd been here over two hours! "Oh! I had no idea! It's later than I thought! I'm sorry, I should have let you," she glanced toward Martin and saw his mother holding his hand.

Victor actually gave up a tiny smile. "It's alright. I'm glad you were here for him."

Samantha tucked her hair behind her ear and nervously returned the smile. "Right. Thanks. Well, then, I'll come back in a while."

The pull to see Finn finally won and she walked away. There was some relief knowing Martin wasn't alone but at this moment. What she really wanted was to be in two places at once. She sighed in frustration when she stepped into the elevator and punched the lobby button. It was during the downward trip that she realized she needed a cab to get home.

On the lobby floor, she retrieved her phone from her coat pocket and headed toward the exit, poking the cell buttons. She felt more than saw a presence beside her, glanced aside, and was surprised to find Jack falling into step.

"Come on," he said, lightly touching her elbow. "I'll take you to get Finn. How's Martin doing?"

"He asked about Finn. He's sleeping now. . ." Samantha's voice softened and cracked with the last words. Fighting for control, she released a heavy sigh and rubbed her eyes, very relieved that Jack didn't ask any more questions as he steered her down the hall into the elevator. She frowned at the crowded car. "

"What's wrong?" Jack asked.

"It just seems like it should be closer to midnight." She rolled her head in an attempt to loosen the tightness in her neck. "This has to be the longest day in my personal history."

Jack's dry chuckle teased a tiny smile from her lips and there was a sudden lightness as a great weight lifted from her shoulders. Martin was going to be fine, Finn was safe and not only did she have friends and coworkers that supported her, it looked as if Martin's parents finally accepted her into their lives.

The warm thoughts hovered in her mind as Jack took her elbow and steered her through the hospital exit and into the parking lot. Once buckled in and on their way, she spoke again. "Jack?"

"Hmm?"

Samantha leaned back in the seat and relaxed into it, her head comfortably cradled in the headrest. She turned just enough to see Jack's profile as he concentrated on the road to Elena's. At that moment, she wondered how he could bear being states away from his children; separated for only hours, the emptiness she felt without Finn was beyond words. She wanted to ask Jack how he could stand it. Instead, she said, "I never thought I could be like this."

Jack glanced over with a knowing smirk and then returned to watch traffic. "I think I know what you mean, but enlighten me anyway just so know for sure and don't put my foot in my mouth."

Samantha laughed and then tried to explain herself. "I always saw myself as a loner. After I left home, I was sure I'd be alone for the rest of my life. I had no idea I could be like this - be a family member, I mean. I thought II'd left any chance of that in Wisconsin. I didn't know the power of this bond. It's all encompassing. And honestly? It's pretty scary. So much responsibility."

Jack nodded. "When you think about it, yes, it is more responsibility than you think you can handle. I suggest not thinking about it and just go with the flow. You're doing great. Martin's doing great. You are good for each other."

She looked at him with surprise. "Really? You think so?"

"Yes, I do. Really. What we had was completely different. It wasn't healthy."

Samantha let out a short laugh. "Jeeze, Jack, you sound like Dr. Phil."

"Please," he protested. "If you're going to make comparisons you could at least choose someone with hair. Sheesh." He shook his head as if greatly insulted. "I don't need a shrink, TV or otherwise, to tell me what's unhealthy. Don't get me wrong, I am thankful for our time together, but what you and Martin have is better for you. Much better."

Suddenly, Samantha felt a giddy lightness of being. "Yeah," she agreed, settling back into the car seat. "I agree with you on that. It's just weird that I can celebrate Mother's Day now. I honestly didn't think it would ever happen to me."

"It's just too bad that your first one is a little . . . untraditional."

"Oh, I'm happy with it. Finn is safe and Martin's coming home soon. Those are the best gifts I can think of."

"I can't disagree with you there." Jack reached over and patted her knee. "Happy Mother's Day, mom."

The sentiment caused her eyes to prickle with banked tears. A comforting warmth rose from her heart and encouraged a smile as she searched various pockets for a tissue. Unsuccessful, she used an edge of her sleeve to dab her eyes. “Thanks, Jack,” she managed as a tight croak.

His short, responding laugh confirmed that everything was going to be all right.

EPILOGUE

The day's glow brightened the bedroom with white gold. Samantha blinked awake, the curious silence confusing for a moment. Soft breathing at her side drew her attention and her sleep-jumbled mind sorted itself - Martin's warm body shifted, and her arms automatically reached for him.

Outside, the street was quiet. The window curtain rolled with the slight breeze that slipped through the cracked open window. Samantha felt the wind's coolness brush one cheek while the other warmed comfortingly on Martin's shoulder. The rise and fall of his chest as he breathed suspended time in a magical way. It was a perfect moment.

She ran the plane of her hand across his flat stomach and up, resting it flat over his heart where she was reassured by its strong beat. She let the feeling of completeness envelope her. After a time, Martin's head rolled in her direction, drawn to her even in sleep. Samantha's hand then moved across his chest, traveling lightly over the odd smooth-roughness of old scars. She tipped her head just enough that she could watch her hand as it wandered up his neck, across his strong jaw and stubbled cheek, and get tangled in his unruly hair. Smiling, she gently combed the mess, noting its unusual length and the cropped patch over his new scar. Under her fingertip, she felt a perfectly round divot in his skull. Instead of feeling sadness by this particular scar, she was overwhelmingly grateful as it had saved Martin's life.

The corner of Martin's eye twitched and a soft sigh escaped him. He was drifting to wakefulness. Samantha kissed his temple and Martin's hand automatically rose in answer, his fingers tentatively brushing her cheek. From there, his fingers trailed along her skin and he cupped the back of her neck as his eyes fluttered open.

She smiled. They kissed, the embrace deepening. Sam wiggled until they shared a pillow, and they paused, forehead to forehead. The corner of Martin's mouth twitched upward as he pulled her unresisting body close.

"Morning," she whispered, a thrill zinging up her spine where his fingers traced a wandering line down her neck and spine.

"Morning," he answered softly as his eyes drifted open. A few thrilling seconds passed as twinkling blue smiled at her.

He slipped his other arm under her warm, willing body, filling his arms with her.

She pressed impossibly closer and felt the mutual arousal that sparked so easily between them. His wandering hands loosened a breathy groan from deep inside and she threw back her head, closing her eyes to fully savor his touch. Martin's warm lips swept up the long column of her neck and she shivered.

His kisses paused at that certain spot just below her earlobe . . . and he chuckled.

Flustered, Samantha gasped. "What are you . . ." It was then that she heard it.

"Mama! Mama! MAMA!"

Finn. "Oooooh grrrrr . . ." Her body sagged. She heard Finn's crib rattle.

"He actually gave us an extra hour," Martin laughed lightly, kissing the tip of her nose.

"His timing has always been just great," she noted with a frustrated tone.

They parted, flopping sideways to lie on their backs and hold hands. Finn didn't sound upset, she realized. Instead, he quieted and was having a pleasant conversation with himself. It was cute.

"How long do you think he'll entertain himself?" Martin asked as his rolled sideways so his free hand could tease her nipple.

"Not long enough," Samantha answered, twisting a little more so he could reach all of her. She rested her hand on his hip. "But he does sound kinda busy at the moment." She leaned in to nuzzle his neck.

They kissed again, working to attain their previous arousal.

A muted thump froze their motion and they listened, cheek to cheek. Finn was oddly quiet. Samantha frowned. "What the . . ." was all she was able to utter before the bedroom door, which had been ajar, opened wider.

Martin and Sam sat up abruptly as Finn toddled drunkenly into the room, dragging his favorite blankie and babbling happily.

Samantha gaped. After a moment, Martin chuckled. "Uh, oh. The game's changed for good now. Looks like he learned to walk and escape his crib at the same time, Mom!"

"Wha . .?" was all she could manage as her son made a wavering line to her side of the bed. Once there, he reached for her but fell, and then closed the gap with an accomplished crawl. Sam automatically leaned over scooped him up. "Look at you!" She corralled him with a hug. "Houdini walking!"

Martin rubbed the boy's back, a silly grin on his face. "I shouldn't be surprised that he's an overachiever. Just like Mom."

"Very funny!" Samantha laughed. Then she turned and pulled Martin into the giggling, squirmy embrace, leaving him with no chance of escape. Not that he would escape, because Samantha knew with absolute certainty that Martin would always be a part of her – their - life.

Mother's Day had been weeks ago, and it had been a very good day, but this was the moment that would always define the celebration in her heart and mind.

THE END

III : NOWHERE MAN

CHAPTER ONE

Samantha missed the old-style telephones which supplied convenient receivers for a satisfying slam down. Snapping a cell phone closed just didn't have the same appeal. So, after her very unsatisfactory conversation with Finn's father Brian, all Samantha Spade could do was glare at the time and date showing on her phone's screen.

"Parental dispute?"

Dry humor poorly concealed colored Vivian Johnson's question. Samantha, though, who knew her work partner well, detected the tone and refocused her glare. Vivian threw up her hands in surrender, her eyes large but warm with understanding. The standoff ended with Samantha issuing a short laugh.

"I didn't see this one coming," Samantha admitted with a shake of her head. "I didn't think Brian would object to vaccines, of all things." She slipped her phone into her jacket pocket.

Vivian gave her a sympathetic smile. "Is that what you've been stressing over for the past few weeks?" Sam looked sheepish. "I guess it's a good thing that you had him sign that release of parental responsibility, then."

Samantha closed her eyes and rubbed a spot just between her eyebrows as she sighed. "Yeah, I can see that now. I was just trying to be nice and keep him informed. Lesson learned, I guess."

"And it's just the beginning."

"Thank you Captain Obvious," Samantha muttered.

Vivian chuckled and turned back to her desk and Samantha shifted into work mode with a passing thought to tell Martin of the latest turn of events involving Brian. She dropped onto her desk chair, glanced at the clock on the bullpen wall and calculated that over thirty-six hours had passed since she last heard from Martin. She frowned and thought back over the past two days. Yes, the latest cases were a distraction, but it did seem like a long time without touching base. Samantha pulled out her cell phone again and looked at it, wondering if she should call him. A wash of sadness surprised her - she missed him.

"Willing it to ring?" Danny sounded like he was just asking for a slap. Of all of them, Danny was the one that could read her the best. Samantha gave him a sidelong glare and allowed his smirking face to pull her from the doldrums.

"Funny, Danny. I was trying to decide if I should call Martin." She set the phone on her desk. "I haven't heard from him since he headed for the hills."

Danny stopped at her desk, hitched a hip on the edge and grinned down at her. "I doubt there's reliable cell phone use when backpacking. That's why I avoid that outdoorsy stuff."

Samantha snorted and rubbed that spot between her brows again. "Don't even try to sell me that bill of goods, Danny. Remember, I know you too well. You don't like sweat."

Danny jutted his chin and checked his hair. "And chance ruining this work of art? You bet!"

She gave him a sharp glance and then rolled her eyes with a sigh. "Spare me. I'd come back with a witty repartee but I'm just too tired."

Danny stood and adjusted his jacket, and then gave her a patronizing pat on her shoulder. "Oh, the travails of the modern-day, working mother."

"You better distance yourself now, *querido*, before both us mothers go medieval on your ass." Elena none-too-gently whacked the back of Danny's head as she strode by with a load of files tucked under her arm. "Quit pestering Samantha and help me with these phone records."

"Slave driver," he whispered as he fixed his disturbed hair.

"Ah, ah," Sam warned with a wave of her finger. "Please don't shatter my image of your perfect marriage, mister."

"Ha!" Elena exclaimed as the files thumped on the bullpen conference table. "Be sure to relay that image to me sometime. I need a good laugh."

Samantha's mood lifted. She knew that Martin would call when he could. The time away with his Narcotics Anonymous sponsor was overdue - Martin admired the older, retired law enforcement officer and always returned from their infrequent hikes revitalized. A pang of guilt struck her when she looked back over the past weeks and realized how distracted she'd been with Finn and Brian. Samantha was glad Martin had a friend with similar interests as a backup "willing ear".

Things would be better when they finally moved in together, she reasoned. His year deadline of living apart was almost over, and they were more than ready to take the next life step together. She glanced at the clock again and calculated that Martin should be on his way back by now. "I'll try him at lunch," she decided before turning back to her accumulated workload.

"Hello?"

Not much scared Nettie Wells but she was also very aware that her advanced age and small stature could make her an easy victim. She'd been living alone in this back country as a widow for many years now and therefore very cautious of strangers. Normally, the shotgun rack in her vintage pick-up truck held her Spencer carbine. She'd never wielded it at a human but had no problem with the concept.

There was something about the solitary figure wandering down the road, though, that raised her dormant motherly concern. It was raining and although the winter's snow all but gone with the breaking of spring, its chill remained and the precipitation was cold. Dusk wasn't far off. She slowed the truck a few paces behind the man as he walked a crooked line and looked him over.

He wore a light colored t-shirt that was wet enough that she could see the color of his skin through it. His jeans were worn white in spots with frayed hems that dragged the ground at his heels. Tears in the thighs presented as dark slashes. He had soggy socks on his feet and no shoes. He wasn't a typical hitchhiker.

Nettie made sure her door was locked and sped up to pull alongside him, and then cracked her window just enough to offer a greeting. He didn't respond and continued to stare straight ahead as he dragged his feet. She studied his profile. The rain washed him clean but she could see scrapes and cuts on his face and arms. She suspected the dark spots on the wet shirt were blood.

"Hello?" she called again with rising alarm. "Are you hurt?"

When the man failed to acknowledge her in any way, she noted the glassy look in his eye and made a decision. Nettie pulled ahead of him and stopped the truck. Before getting out, she unlocked both doors and settled her coat hood over her head. When she stepped out, the stranger was a few yards behind her truck. She walked back to where the exhaust pipe puffed out a steamy stream that swirled around her legs veiled the scene in a surreal cloak of fog. She raised her hands and the man walked right into her, stopping only when she gripped his biceps in a firm hold.

"Are you hurt?" She asked again, trying to catch his attention. The blank stare made his blue eyes seem vacant, but his athletic physique and trimmed hair told her a different story. Up close, she could see some injuries the rain washed clean. This young man was in trouble.

"Let's get you warmed up," Nettie suggested gently. The man didn't blink or resist when she guided him around to the passenger side of the truck. She spoke all the while, telling him what she was doing as she maneuvered each limb into the truck. Once there, she pulled a blanket from behind the seat and tucked it around him. As she did all this, she thought back and didn't recall seeing any sign of a car crash, which was the only thing that made sense of his condition.

Once he was all wrapped up and buckled in, Nettie returned to the driver's side and climbed in behind the wheel. From there, she studied him again. "I don't think my little town's got what you need, honey, but it's all we have."

She dropped the truck into gear and headed into town.

CHAPTER TWO

Two cases kept Samantha so busy that Martin didn't cross her mind again until it was time to go home. The longer days of spring meant that when she picked up Finn and fed him, there was still a chance for a walk before putting him down for the night, a habit Martin instilled into their routine. She smiled and shed the cases from her mind, leaving them to her teammates to close. At this point, it was all paperwork, and she let them know her portion was done and in Jack's inbox.

By the time she said her goodnights and hit the elevator, she started making a "to do" list in her mind for the next day, Finn's doctor appointment topping the list. By the time she reached the garage, her issues with Brian were again in the forefront of her mind. As she got into her car, she fought the urge to leave a snippy voicemail on his cell phone, knowing it was out of range since he was on his way to South America for business.

"What, am I still in High School?" she scolded herself as she buckled her seat belt. "Grow up, Spade."

She didn't know why this was bothering her so much. After all, she did have the final say in anything involving Finn. It was in Finn's best interest to have his biological dad around, right? Was it possible for him to be around and not involved? Martin doted on the boy so it wasn't as if Finn didn't have a male role model. Sighing, she made note to have some sort of guidelines in place before she and Martin moved in together and make sure that Brian knew of them.

Suddenly, Samantha was tired, but accepted that her day wasn't over because she had to take care of Finn. Not that it was work - she loved it - but it left her with no time to herself. As she wormed her way through traffic she though back over the last several weeks and began to feel a little guilty. She'd neglected Martin recently. Juggling the demands in her life was trickier than she'd expected, especially since Finn started walking a few months ago.

Now with Brian gone on an extended assignment, she'd take care of Finn's vaccinations and pamper Martin for a while. When they agreed to wait a year before moving it, it had made sense. What she didn't count on was the extremely slow rate at which the time crawled by. With the deadline in sight, a giddy rush of excitement produced a happy grin at the thought.

She parked her car and, before exiting the car to collect Finn, pulled out her phone with the desire to hear Martin's voice. Her smile changed to a pout when the call went straight to voice mail. She savored the sound of his short speech before leaving a blatantly suggestive message.

"He's in a catatonic state and has no I.D. that we can find," Dr. Cross reported to the two people before him. "His wounds are minor, really. There's a sizeable bump on his head, just above the left temple, and a variety of scrapes and bruises. They could be from a car accident, or they could also be from falling down a hill. I can't tell. There are no abrasions indicating a seat belt or window glass, but

we don't know how long he's been wandering in the rain. There have been some pretty harsh downpours in the past few hours."

"So is he catatonic from injury or something else?" Nettie asked, knowing there was no reason Dr. Cross should tell her anything, but she'd known Carl Cross since he was in kindergarten and knew that the trust went both ways.

"I can't say. I speculate something mental."

"Like what?" Deputy Gary Stevens inquired. Nettie had known him since boyhood, too. Being a retired school teacher and counselor left her with deep ties to this small community. These men were like the mountains and trees that embraced all of them - part of the landscape of River Bend.

"Can't say, Gary. He could be an at-risk adult or a regular guy with a regular job. I can't tell right now."

"I'll get some prints and run them. He doesn't look like a criminal, but you never know these days." Deputy Stevens put his pen away and shoved his small notebook in his coat pocket. "I have a print kit at the station. I'll be right back." He nodded to Nettie and left the tidy clinic.

"So he'll be staying here for a while?" Nettie asked.

"I can't think of what else to do with him," Dr. Cross sighed. "I'll have to notify Social Services if nothing turns up with the prints, but for now he needs monitoring because of that knot on his head. Twenty-four hours should be adequate." He smiled down at the diminutive woman. "I take it I can count on your help with that, Mrs. Wells?"

She snorted. "I do have a weak spot for the troubled ones, don't I?"

The physician gave her shoulder an affectionate pat. "And I, for one, am thankful for that. Go home and get some sleep. I'm on duty until midnight so you can spell me after that. Right now, Urgent Care needs me."

Nettie nodded and gathered her damp coat. "Let me look in on him one more time, then I'll go."

Dr. Cross patted her back as he started to walk away. "You're one of the good ones, Mrs. Wells."

Nettie shook her head and headed down the short hall to the clinic's only occupied room. "One of the gullible ones, maybe," she muttered to herself as she walked. The door was propped open and a nurse met her on the way out.

"I'll be at the nurse's station, Nettie," the nurse said. "I'm tackling some of those files while I have a chance."

"Okay, Rosie. I'm going home in a few minutes but I'll be back later." She turned her attention to the still form propped up in the bed.

Now that she saw him cleaned up, Nettie realized that her find was a little older than she first thought. The fine lines around his eyes and mouth put him in his thirties, but those haunted blue eyes were ageless and without guile. The fixed stare was disconcerting but she had the sense that it wasn't the norm. This young man was physically fit, with healthy skin and trimmed fingernails. His smooth palms told her he was used to office work but a callous on his index finger troubled her. Scars on his torso indicated some violence in the past; a soldier or perhaps law enforcement of some sort? She hoped for that, anyway, and her gut told her she was on the right track. With that, the young man won a champion without uttering a word.

"We'll get you where you belong," she said, automatically smoothing back his hair. "Don't worry about anything right now, honey. You just get better."

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, Samantha pondered Martin's silence as she rode the elevator up to work. Her two voicemails from yesterday were still unanswered. She left another message while she got ready for work and thought she might have sounded a little grouchy, so when the elevator door opened she dialed again. This time she got a report stating that his mailbox was full and unable to take any new messages.

She frowned, still puzzling over that when Jack strode from the bullpen leaving Danny and the others behind. "Sam," he said in his no-nonsense tone. She could tell from his expression that something was wrong. She slowed to a stop in the middle of the hallway.

"Jack?" She asked tentatively, open phone still in her palm.

He barely broke stride when he cupped her elbow and turned her back toward the elevator. "Martin's at a clinic in town called River Bend."

Her heart fluttered. "What? Where's River Bend? Is he all right? What happened?"

They stepped into the elevator and Jack started talking as the doors slid closed. His voice was low and even, its calming cadence doing nothing to slow her heart. "River Bend's in West Virginia. I talked to a Deputy Stevens there. He said a local brought Martin in to their clinic when she found him wandering down the middle of a road in the rain late yesterday afternoon. He didn't have any identification on him. They made him through fingerprints."

Icy fingers trailed down Samantha's spine and knotted as a fist in her gut. "That's not even close to where he was backpacking," she said, slightly dazed.

"Well, Martin's not talking so we may have to figure how he ended up in Mayberry to find the hiking partner."

"But . . ."

"We don't know any more, Sam," Jack said. "Olczyk called me after trying to contact Victor. Officially, we are looking for Martin's missing hiking partner. The others will carry on with our current case."

"They can't contact Victor? What about Martin's mom? Or cousins? The Tolands? "

Jack shook his head. "All dead ends. It's like the entire family disappeared." The elevator bumped to a stop. "Victor's not answering his cell and hasn't returned any calls from his office since yesterday morning, according to his receptionist. It seems the Assistant Director suddenly took time off three days ago, but has been keeping in touch with his office up until yesterday."

Dread rolled Samantha's stomach. Her instincts screamed negatively. She pushed it all aside and hurried after Jack to the car pool.

The flight was short and uneventful but gave Samantha entirely too much time to think. While Jack rented a car, Samantha arranged child care with Elena's help. Jack drove and she tried to find more on Martin's hiking partner and sponsor, but both cellular and internet capabilities were spotty along the route. All she could do was start a timeline, which was much too bare for Samantha's taste. Frustration, along with worry, slowly rose and churned her already delicate stomach.

Suddenly Jack spoke, jarring her from her frantic thoughts. "Were there any - issues - between you two lately?"

Samantha felt a blush rise on her cheeks. "No." Now she knew how spouses felt during case interviews. She shifted uncomfortably and tried to think like an agent. "Um, I have been a bit distracted with Brian," she confessed.

"But Martin's been okay? He's been sleeping, eating - ?"

Samantha stared out the windshield as she searched her memory. "I thought so. He hasn't mentioned any problems. The few times he's stayed over recently he got up with Finn in the night so I could sleep, but he hasn't been sleep deprived or anything like that." She fought a losing battle to quell guilt. Did she miss something since being distracted with Brian? She changed the subject to force an organization to her scattered thoughts. "Ah, any idea why he's in West Virginia?"

Jack gave her a sidelong look as if she should know the answer to that one. "No," he said. "You know of any relatives in that area?"

"No - not really. There's a family hunting cabin somewhere, but I don't know where. West Virginia never came up that I can remember."

Sporadic rain teased them during the drive making the car's wipers smear a muddy arc that refused to clear. Closer to their destination, a downpour was so heavy it was difficult to see the road but the slurry windshield was properly rinsed. Both agents voiced the possibility of rain causing Martin to crash somewhere, but without any clues as to his reason for being in this part of the state in the first place they wouldn't know where to start a search. The blanket state BOLO on Martin's car was all they had working for them now.

When they reached the outskirts of River Bend, Samantha's stomach hatched more than a few butterflies as her imagination took her to places she didn't want to go. At this time, the female voice of Jack's GPS annoyed her to the point where she wished she had a hammer. Finally, the rain suspended and a tiny clinic tucked among the trees came into view as they rounded a sweeping turn.

"I'll call Deputy Stevens and let him know we're here," Jack said as he parked in the small lot. Samantha was out of the car before the engine quieted.

Jack spoke on his phone as he trotted to catch up with her, disconnecting when they walked into the clinic doors side by side. They marched to the reception desk where a wide-eyed woman straightened in alarm with their aggressive approach. River Bend's Urgent Care Center was nothing like a large city hospital, but seemed appropriate for the small, rural community. It was clear that the receptionist was not used to strangers and their intimidating urgency.

"We're here for Martin Fitzgerald," Samantha snapped. The badges flashed in the receptionist's face only furthered her fluster.

"Uh. . . . Oh, yes. Dr. Cross' patient. He'll be with you in a mo - "

"What room?" Samantha demanded. She locked a steely glare at the poor woman and Jack put a restraining hand on her arm.

"We'll be waiting over there," Jack said in a level tone before redirecting to Samantha. "Agent Spade, a word, please?" He used his grip on her arm to maneuver her to the five-chair waiting area.

"What the hell, Jack? I want to see Martin!"

Jack turned her to face him and got a firm grip on both of her forearms - at this moment, he was probably the only person who could get away with such an action. He gave her a little shake. "Sam, shut up a second and look around." He waited until she did so, ignoring the fire in

her eyes. "I know you're upset. So am I. Remember that we are out of our territory here and we need more information."

She shrugged away his grip and stood fast, locking her angry eyes onto Jack's calm ones. The connection had its effect and she finally let out a frustrated breath and nodded acquiescence. Jack released her and she ran her fingers nervously through her hair, pulling it back and away from her face. She held the pose for a few seconds, eyes closed, before dropping her arms and nodding. "I need to see him," she said, an emotional quiver painting the plaintive request. She jammed her hands in her coat pockets and opened her worried eyes to him.

Jack's dark smile twisted with sympathy. "I know, but we need to be prepared. You need to be prepared. Trust me?" He held her gaze.

She gave him a tiny nod, not sure of her voice. Her surrender was well timed with Dr. Cross' arrival in the in the lobby. He approached them with an extended arm and introductions and handshakes were quick. Sam gave the doctor her grudging respect when he took the time to properly check their identification cards.

"Mr. Fitzgerald has been through some kind of trauma, be it physical or mental, or even a combination of both. Physically, he has minor wounds, none that required stitching, and scattered bruising. There's also a head trauma."

"How bad is it?" Jack asked.

Dr. Cross pointed to his own head to show the location. "There's a good sized lump here, but no indication how it occurred. It doesn't seem severe enough to account for what we're seeing, but he does have a low grade concussion."

"He had another head injury four months ago in that same area," Samantha said. "Could that complicate things now?"

The doctor nodded. "Definitely. Can you get me the attending physician's contact information?"

Samantha nodded, plucked her phone from a pocket and jabbed the buttons with a trembling finger. "Sure. I have it on my history . . ." She scrolled for the number while Jack listened to the doctor.

"We washed bark, leaves and dirt from some of the wounds, but not much. The rain washed most of it away before he got here, and between that and the way the bruises are coloring up, it tells me that he must have been walking quite a while before Nettie found him."

"Nettie?"

"Yes, a local woman. Nettie Wells. She's lived in River Bend a long time and knows most everyone here. She brought him in and has been with Mr. Fitzgerald since then. We're a bit short staffed."

"She's a volunteer?" Jack tried to clarify.

"She used to be a nurse before her husband died. She lost her taste for hospitals at that point, but started volunteering a few years after. She handles a lot of the administrative paperwork." He pointed to one of two hallways when Sam ended her call. "This way." Dr. Cross spoke as they walked. "Deputy Stevens searched the area where he was found for any sign of a car wreck without any results. We still don't know what happened."

Near the end of the hall, he paused in front of a door as Samantha handed him a phone number she'd scrawled on her business card and refrained from pushing the doctor away from the door as he thanked her. When he finally pushed the door open with impossible slowness, Samantha stepped past him and into the room. A small, grey-haired woman rose to meet them.

"Nettie, these are Mr. Fitzgerald's cohorts." Dr. Cross made introductions, but his voice faded to the background of Samantha's mind.

As soon as the room's door opened, Sam's eyes were on Martin. He was sitting up, clean and scrubbed and staring at a faraway spot on the opposite wall. Faint red lines marked his face and arms,

but as the doctor noted, they were minor. She found herself moving forward to his bedside where she stopped and gripped the cold side rail. Her eyes never left Martin's face.

"Hey, Marty," she whispered.

The blankness in his eyes turned her stomach. When she'd first confronted him about his drug use, he had the same wide-eyed look, but this time, instead of anguish, his eyes were completely empty, shadowed beneath with sooty purple curtains.

Martin simply wasn't there.

She reached out and stroked the side of his face with her fingertips. There wasn't a quiver of response to her touch. Samantha felt her throat close and the room suddenly seemed too warm. Then she heard a metallic ting as the bedrail lowered and a gentle hand rested on her shoulder and steered her to sit on the edge of the mattress.

"I'm sure he hears you," a woman's voice said gently. "It's just too much for him to answer right now."

Samantha swallowed a growing lump and turned her eyes to the speaker. Nettie Wells' form wavered through her tears and Samantha nodded an acknowledgement. Gulping once, she ran her hand down Martin's neck and shoulder, looking for any response in his eyes. Finding none, she traced his arm and wrapped her fingers around his hand. Leaning in, she cupped his jaw with the other hand, stroking his cheek with her thumb. "I've got you now," she whispered. "Everything will be okay."

Jack watched from just inside the doorway. The one person that mattered to Martin was taking care of him, which left the job of finding out what happened to him and his missing sponsor. Or was he up here in this part of the state alone? Jack knew that was the first thing they needed to figure out, but it was usually the last things discovered in their line of work. He backed into the hall and tried the Assistant Director Fitzgerald's phone number again. He got a message that the inbox was full.

As he hung up, he asked the doctor, "Did Martin have his phone on him?"

"Not that I know of. Everything he had with him is in there." The Doctor pointed at a tiny closet. "Does he have any family?"

Jack headed to the closet. "Yes, but we haven't been able to reach them either." He pulled the still damp clothing from their respective hangers and patted them down. The filthy white t-shirt and jeans were torn and stained with blood, the pockets empty. Jack surmised the small pile of muddy white on the closet floor was Martin's socks. They, too, were shredded. No shoes?

"I'm off duty in ten minutes," Dr. Cross said. "I'll call Martin's previous physician for some more information. After that, Nettie knows how to reach me if you need me."

Jack glanced at the small figure standing aside in Samantha's shadow. "Thanks, Doctor," he replied. "For everything."

"Sure. Good luck. I think this young man could use some right about now."

Vivian frowned at her monitor. The property tax records of their current case gave her a headache - this guy dealt property deeds like a gambler dealt cards; he could be anywhere. When her cell rang, she welcomed the interruption. She listened quietly as Jack's gruff voice summed up the situation.

"But physically, Martin's okay?" she asked. Both Elena's and Danny's heads swiveled her direction with the comment. "What can we do?" Her teammates moved to her side as she listened and jotted notes. "Uh, huh. Got it. We're on it." She snapped the phone closed.

"Well?" Elena asked, arms crossed in front of her. Danny tilted his head and waited expectantly.

Vivian pushed to her feet. "Our current case has been shifted to another team. Officially, our new case is Martin's hiking partner."

"And unofficially?" Elena inquired, arching an eyebrow.

"Unofficially, we're looking for Victor Fitzgerald. It seems he's gone missing in the same time frame and the brass isn't looking at it to be a coincidence."

"Probably because it never is," Danny agreed, propping an elbow on the opposite crossed arm and resting a finger over his lips. "What's Martin say?"

Vivian's soulful eyes softened. "Nothing. He's not talking."

Elena frowned. "He's unconscious?"

"No, it looks like severe shock. He has a concussion and is awake, but not responding to anyone. Catatonic." The three of them exchanged worried looks. "The weird part is that Olczyk couldn't get in touch with any family. That's why they called Jack this morning."

"Did Jack say where he wanted us to start?" Elena asked.

"He's going through Lucy to ping Martin's phone since it's not with Martin at the moment. I'll order his phone records and go through Martin's computer. Danny? You know this hiking buddy, right?"

"Yeah, I know who he is, so I'll start there." He glanced at his watch. "The N.A. office will be the faster way to get his info." Danny snatched up his coat from his chair.

"I'll hit Martin's apartment?" Elena asked.

Viv nodded, picked up her phone and began punching in a number. "Jack said the Tolands have a hunting cabin somewhere, too. I'll try to locate it. Give me anything you find since phone service is spotty in West Virginia. Clock's tickin', people."

CHAPTER FOUR

Cell reception remained as predictable as a teenager's emotions, but Jack found it to be more or less stable in the Urgent Care parking lot. The offered land lines in the building worked well, too, but he found the need to pace as he listened to Lucy ping Martin's cell phone. The skilled tech had been trying since Jack's departure from the building without luck until now. Where ever Martin's phone was, someone finally powered it up.

"It's west of here and, so far, out of state," Lucy started. Jack heard paper rustling and Lucy thanking someone offline. "Jack? Agent Johnson's here. The BOLO on Martin's car got a hit. It's at the airport. Security found it an outer lot. I'm putting Agent Johnson on speaker phone." There was a rustle and a click, and then Jack could hear office noises in the background.

Jack frowned. "I thought Martin drove to his -" he paused when he heard a beep in his ear. "Hold on, Viv, incoming call." Jack read the display and frowned at the unfamiliar number. It was a Pennsylvania area code. He took the call. "Jack Malone."

"Mr. Uh - Malone, did you say?" A male voice asked.

"Yes, Jack Malone. F.B.I. New York. And you are - ?"

"F.B.I.?" The man sounded surprised. "This is Phil Stafford, U.S. Airlines. We have a cell phone here with your number first on the Contact list. An attendant found it on one of our planes."

"U.S. Air? What airport?" Vivian's information about Martin's car wasn't so peculiar now.

"Pittsburgh. The name on the phone is Fitzgerald?"

"He's one of my agents. He can't pick it up anytime soon so send it to his office in New York." Jack gave him the address and disconnected. "Vivian?"

"The phone is in Pittsburgh," Lucy's voice piped up without preamble.

Jack smirked. "Yeah, I know. It's at the airport."

"Which is makes sense with the location of Martin's car here," Vivian said sagely. "Would be nice to know why he flew to Pittsburgh."

"Looks like he went there to drive here - or somewhere around here," Jack summed up. "Viv? Run Martin's phone records and check with the head office about digging into Victor's records. Compare the calls to Victor's for the last few days. And credit cards. See if either one or both rented a car in Pittsburgh. Maybe we can confirm that they were together or meeting up somewhere."

"I'm on it. Shouldn't be a problem since I just got orders to hand over the case we were working to Davis' team to work on this. Shall I go check Martin's car or have airport security look inside?"

"Have security do it. Have them look for receipts or anything that would give us a clue as to where he was going. And thanks, Luce."

Jack was about to hang up when Lucy asked, "Jack? Let us know how Martin's doing?"

He smiled. "Sure. I'll keep you in the loop."

"Thanks," she said, sounding relieved. "Bye, sir."

Jack took a deep breath and stretched, trying to loosen the stubborn muscles in his lower back. Before going back inside, he decided to take a lap around the tiny parking lot to clear his head. The damp, woodsy smell and peaceful quiet was nothing like Manhattan; it should have relaxed him, but it just drove home his reason for being here.

Jack's hand just felt the cold of the clinic's entry door handle when his phone rang. "Malone."

"Jack? Viv. They found bloody clothes in the trunk of Martin's car and nothing to tell us where he went from there."

Danny didn't expect to have too much trouble nailing down Martin's sponsor. He knew Ed, too, but only as "Ed D." according to N.A. rules. In the handful of times he spoke to him, Danny discovered that he was retired NYPD and a very funny guy. Although Danny never directly inquired, he also knew that the man was very helpful as Martin's sponsor and the two got on quite well together.

Getting Ed's address would breach all kinds of N.A. rules but Danny felt it would be possible; after all, the organization knew him, too. When he pushed open the local headquarter door and stepped inside, a wash of uncomfortable familiarity rushed through his veins.

To the uninitiated, the room was plain and dark, the plastic chairs uncomfortable and rickety; to someone trying to get some modicum of control into their lives, however, it was a safe haven and life preserver. Every time he stepped in here, he remembered the dark place in which he used to dwell. Now, the room was empty, save for the single person that raised his head upon Danny's entrance.

"Danny," he greeted. "Good to see you."

"Mitch," Danny replied as they shook hands and took immediate note of the man's sad features. Usually, Mitch G. was energetic and outgoing; now, his expression was grim. Danny glanced over Mitch's shoulder at the bulletin board and frowned. "Something going on?"

A black-edged announcement for a memorial service was centered on the board and just above it, Ed D's face smiled from a black and white photograph. Danny leaned in and his pulse jumped. "What's this? When did this happen?"

"Two days ago," Mitch reported. "What a waste. He was shot during a hold-up at a market." He handed Danny a news clipping. "It's a great loss to our Chapter."

Danny scanned the story and wondered if Martin knew about it. Mentally backtracking, he realized that the murder occurred the same morning Ed and Martin were supposed to leave town. Fishing his phone from his pocket, Danny called one of his Police Department contacts and got the name and number of the detective investigating the incident, and then excused himself from the room.

Since the local precinct was only a block away, he called Detective Jansen as he walked and arranged a meeting. Danny hoped he could at least look at the file if Jansen wasn't in the office but luckily, he was in and Danny sat at the Detective's desk just a few minutes later. The room was noisy with chatter and ringing phones so Danny had to lean in to carry a conversation.

"Yeah, it's a shame," Jansen said as he slipped a file from the pile on his desk and slid it toward Danny. He had a phone tucked between his shoulder and ear as he brushed donut crumbs from his desktop. A mug half full of coffee sat to one side, "Proud to be a Pig" emblazoned on the side. "I didn't know Ed but apparently some of the older guys here did. Disability retirement after getting shot on duty and then he goes out the same way. Dirty shame. Hello?" Jansen turned his attention to his phone and indicated with a wrist flick that Danny was free to look at the file.

Danny flipped through the papers, noting the date and time of the crime. The last pages of the file were photographs and Danny studied them closely, surprised when he picked out Martin in one of them. His missing partner was standing in front of a crowd on the sidewalk, his head canted downward as he forever stared at Ed's bloody body at his feet. Danny could see the despair in his eyes and his heart broke. Blood stained Martin's t-shirt, arms and hands, but what sickened him most was that it was painfully clear that his partner and friend wasn't hearing anything in that moment in time even though a uniformed Officer, a sympathetic hand resting on Martin's shoulder, spoke directly in his ear. Danny saw that same expression on his friend's face before. He hated it then - this was worse.

He returned the photo to the file and scanned the witness list and the summary of the event. When Jansen ended his phone conversation and dropped the cell on his desk, Danny asked, "Martin was first on the scene?"

"Fitzgerald? Yeah. One of your guys, right? He tried to stop the bleeding. Ed died right under his hands."

"Jesus," Danny muttered. He ran his hand over his eyes and then covered his mouth for a moment. He felt sick. "Did he see the suspects?"

"No. They split out the back. Ed fell outside; he must have walked in on them. They shot the owner, too."

Detective Jansen frowned and tipped his head. "Fitzgerald didn't tell you any of this?"

"No," Danny said. "He's – uh, not in the City at the moment."

"Well, tell him about Ed's memorial, will ya? He may want to be there."

"Sure. Thanks." Danny shook Jansen's hand and left the station. Outside, the cool air helped settle his stomach as he walked briskly to the corner and stopped with a sigh. "Damn, Fitz, your timing stinks," he muttered as he called Vivian.

Jack could gage Sam's weariness by the curve of her body. Even invisible, the weight she carried on her shoulders affected every part of her. He also knew she would deny her obvious weariness and couldn't blame her. She looked up at his approach and forced a tired smile before turning back to Martin.

"He's asleep." She stood and gently placed Martin's arm across his stomach before leaning down and brushing a kiss on his forehead. "I'll be close," she whispered.

Jack took her elbow and steered her to the door. She stopped abruptly and shot a glare his way. "Don't worry, I just wanted a little distance," he explained quietly.

She caught his eyes. "You found something out, didn't you? Did you find Victor?"

"No, but we found Ed," Jack said, watching her carefully. "He's dead. Murdered."

"What?" Sam yelped, then in a quiet voice, asked, "When? Where? Here?"

"In New York when he was meeting Martin, I guess. Walked in on a robbery at a market. They shot Ed and the market owner and Martin was the first on scene. He tried to save Ed." Jack decided to skip the bloody details for now. Sam appeared shaken.

"But he . . . He didn't . . . Why didn't Martin call me?" She turned and cast a worried look toward the still figure in the bed. "That was two days ago, Jack!"

"Shhh, shhh, I know, I know. It looks like he went to the airport from there. The clothes he wore at the scene were in the trunk of his car, which is parked at the airport."

"The airport?"

"He flew to Pittsburgh." Jack shook his head at Sam's perplexed expression. "Not sure why yet, but his last call received was from Victor shortly after the shooting. He left his phone on the plane in Pittsburgh. I had the finder read off the last received calls."

"Why Pittsburgh?"

"I hoped you could shed some light on that."

"No." Samantha shook her head slowly and rubbed her eyes. "God, it must have been awful. Martin really liked Ed. I can't believe it. Why didn't he call me?"

They stood quietly side by side in the muted light of the room and watched Martin's chest rise and fall in sleep. Jack could feel Sam's quiet despair through the tense set of her jaw and watery eyes. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

"You'll get through this. He'll get through this. He's lucky to have you, Samantha." They walked back to the bedside and Samantha gathered up Martin's hands in hers. "I'll get you some coffee."

He could hear her whispering as he walked away and had the strangest feeling that this was not over yet.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elena did not expect the invasion of privacy feeling when she stepped into Martin's apartment; this was not the usual stranger's home. She thanked the building supervisor and pointedly closed the apartment door in the man's face to keep some of Martin's life private. It was little comfort, but the motion helped build feelings of camaraderie with her missing work partner.

As she expected, the apartment was neat and tasteful. Samantha told her once that she was embarrassed because Martin's place was usually tidier than hers was, even before Finn was in her life. Recalling the conversation made Elena smile as she cruised the rooms looking for anything tell-tale or odd. Nothing struck her, so the next thing she did was locate his personal phone book.

The book was in a kitchen drawer. On the counter above, an older model answering machine blinked ominously. It indicated that there were 15 unheard messages. Elena hit the play button which began a parade of brief messages as she leafed through the phone book. Martin's crisp handwriting was easy to read and the book held information on people across the country. The oral messages reminded her missing partner of a dental appointment, confirmed an order's arrival at a local bookstore, a pair of pre-recorded sales pitches and a woman's sultry reminder that he was overdue for a haircut. That one made Elena chuckle.

After a quick look through the entire book, she flipped back to the "F" tab and found Victor's impressive list of numbers and addresses. Elena ran her finger down the first three lines, and then stopped abruptly at the changing tone of the messages on the machine.

"Marty, please pick up! Where are you?" a young woman's voice begged, hanging up after a sob of frustration. Elena heard other voices in the background before the connection broke.

"Martin, please call me! Where are you? Answer your cell!"

Elena noted the date and time of the calls - late morning on Tuesday. Based on the team's timeline, Martin should have been on the road with his hiking buddy when the calls recorded. Did he turn off his cell phone?

"Martin. Please. It's Allie." The calmer demeanor was a second woman's voice, but the tone was just as agonized as the first. "It's dad. We need you here, okay? Call my cell as soon as you get this."

Elena flipped to the "T" section, recalling a couple of cousins named Toland. She paused at the crossed out cell number for Bonnie Toland, remembering Samantha's sad description of the events prior to the woman's passing. Allison, Jamie and Roger's names and numbers were under Bonnie's.

Next on the tape were several hang ups with no messages, one of a crying woman – Elena figured it was the first woman – and, after that, one last message from Allie. Sorrow hoarsened

her voice: "Martin? We need you here. Love you." The last call's time stamp was 12:20, early Tuesday afternoon.

Elena called Vivian. "Hey, Viv, I think something is going on with Martin's cousins - is Allie one of them?"

"Yes. Their father, Roger, is Martin's Uncle. Did they say where they were?"

"No, but here are the time of the final calls and the cell numbers in Martin's book." Elena relayed the times captured by the machine and the list of numbers filed under the letter "T".

Elena heard papers shuffle. "Both Martin and Victor received calls from these numbers - all cell phones, so no locations. The locals can go by their homes because no one is answering the numbers now." There was a touch of frustration in Viv's tone.

"Did Danny find Ed yet?" Elena asked. This whole situation was nothing but frustrating.

"Yes, and it's not good." She briefed Elena on the tragedy and Martin's grisly role.

"Good God," Elena sighed as she rubbed the tense furrow between her eyebrows. "Poor Martin."

"Tuesday definitely was not a good day for him, that's for sure." There was a slight pause as both women's thoughts turned over. "Sounds to me like the Tolands are the reason Martin's in West Virginia. He left his cell on the plane in Pittsburgh, which is an easy drive to West Virginia."

"Sam told Jack something about a hunting cabin, right?"

"I'm looking into that."

"I'll contact the upstate police," Elena offered. "I have the cousins' addresses right here."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Viv?"

"Yes?"

Elena hesitated, not wanting to think the worst, but her instinct told her that Martin was in for more heartache. "Give my sympathies to the family? You know, if it's appropriate? I have a very bad feeling."

She could hear the sad smile in Vivian's reply; she, too, was thinking the worst. "I will. And call Danny. He could use a little sympathy, too."

Nettie returned to the hospital after finishing her chores, drawn in some invisible way to the silent patient. When she parked her car, she saw Agent Malone talking on his cell and looking distinctly unhappy. His eyebrow raised at her approach, eyeing the three coffees lodged in the tray she carried. He uttered a gruff "Thanks" when she offered him one, intent on the phone. Whatever he heard was not good - not a difficult assumption due to his expression - and it directly affected Martin. Nettie's heart had skipped.

Dumping the tray in the lobby, Nettie held two large cups of coffee when she paused in the doorway of Martin Fitzgerald's room, looking for an indication that she was welcome. It did not take long to gage the atmosphere; the frustration and anxiety on Samantha's face drove her forward. "Hi," Nettie greeted softly once she was at the woman's side. "Here, honey. You look like you could use this."

Samantha straightened in the hospital chair pulled as close to the bed as possible and turned weary eyes in Nettie's direction. One hand held Martin's hand tightly and the other rubbed away what Nettie suspected were tears from flushed cheeks. Samantha sniffed, confirming Nettie's suspicion, and then forced a fragile smile.

"Thanks," she whispered when she accepted the coffee. With something else to focus on, Sam released Martin's hand and wrapped both trembling palms around the cup. Her eyes slipped closed for a

moment while the pungent steam curled around her nose. She inhaled deeply, opened her eyes, and then took a careful sip as her gaze returned to the still form in the bed.

Nettie stood quietly at her shoulder and assessed the patient. Martin appeared to be awake. His wide, blue eyes stared ahead into a void Nettie couldn't begin to understand; what he saw was more than likely more painful than any of them could imagine. The need to comfort him was strong, startling Nettie with depth of feeling she had for the young man. Over the years, a handful of patients managed to worm their way into her heart, but this one managed to do so without uttering a word. It mystified her.

Allowing instinct to move her, Nettie circled around the bed, lowered the rail and fussed with the linens. Using a low, comforting voice, she straightened the sheets, fluffed a fresh pillow and switched it out, and adjusted the bed to raise and slightly bend Martin's knees.

She checked his pulse and skin, noting the blossoming bruises starting reveal themselves.

Before she could stop herself, Nettie's hand smoothed back Martin's hair and she cupped his chin in her hands for a moment. "You just wait until you're ready, okay?" she said, trying to catch his eyes with hers. "There are people here that love you and will stand by you, but only when you are ready."

She paused, clucked once, and then took a step back and raised the bedrail on her side. She checked the I.V. next.

"Thank you for all you have done for him." Nettie glanced to Samantha and acknowledged her with a smile. "I - I'm not good with . . ." Samantha started. Then she ducked her head and licked her lips, obviously treading on uncomfortable ground. She took a breath and pushed her hair back with one hand before speaking again. "I have a son. He just turned a year old." She stopped again as if perplexed at to where the words came from and how they related to her current position.

"No one can tell you what it's like to be a mother," Nettie offered, turning her attention back to the empty blue eyes between them. "Something just rises up and takes over - no amount of warning can prepare you for it."

Samantha let out a dry chuckle and nodded. "That's for sure," she whispered.

Nettie's hand lifted to Martin's cheek seemingly on its own accord. "Instinct is an amazing thing," she said quietly. "Don't fight it, and you will find you can do more than you believe."

There was a faint tap as Sam put her coffee cup down and Nettie heard the chair squeak. She glanced aside and saw that Samantha now stood, and that all of her features had softened, losing their pinched appearance. Weariness and worry still etched every line on her face but there was new depth of strength in her eyes.

Nettie let her arms drop and took a step back as Samantha claimed the space at Martin's side. Nettie nodded once when offered a grateful smile. As she retreated to the foot of the bed, Samantha's soft whispers now created a solid feel, one that offered nothing but loving support and safe harbor. She had no doubt that when he was ready, Samantha would be just the solid base he needed to come home.

The door whooshed open and Samantha ignored it. Nettie looked up to see Agent Malone standing in the doorway, an unreadable, closed expression on his face. His eyes, however, flashed something that surprised Nettie - it was quick to fade, but the disappointment that was clear for only a moment made her realize his feelings for the woman with Martin.

At first, Nettie wondered if Samantha knew, and then as instinct took over, she stiffened. Was this going to hamper Martin's recovery in any way?

The diminutive woman stood silently and watched Agent Malone walk to the bed. Samantha glanced back, aware of his approach, and repositioned by sitting on the bed as close to Martin as possible and holding both of his hands in both of hers.

"What's up?" Sam asked, her warm gaze never leaving Martin.

"Vivian located the Toland family cabin. It's west of here, near Shadow Ridge."

"Shadow Ridge?" Nettie repeated. "That's about an hour from here. That's the road where I found Martin."

"Is it the only road?" Jack asked.

"No. There's two ways in. The road splits not far from where Martin was walking."

"Then we have a place to start looking."

"Looking?" Samantha asked. "For what? Why was Martin up here?"

Jack took a breath and Nettie knew the next thing from Malone's mouth would be bad, and by the glance he threw Martin's direction, he debated saying anything in front of the still form.

Samantha's grip tightened on Martin's hands. "Jack?"

"Martin and Victor were on their way up here to lock up the cabin and bring Roger Toland's car back to New York. It seems that Mr. Toland had a heart attack while he was there."

Samantha bit her lower lip trying to control the tremble. Her eyes became bright with tears.

"Roger Toland died early Tuesday afternoon. His girls got there just in time to say goodbye."

Samantha stifled a sob and turned to Martin, who continued to stare into nothingness.

"Oh, Martin," she whispered hoarsely, raising a hand to stroke his cheek. Tears traced a line down her face. "I am so sorry I wasn't with you."

CHAPTER SIX

Vivian Johnson rubbed her eyes trying to banish the all too familiar tiredness from her brain. She snorted at the thought - could a brain really be tired? - and then forcefully exhaled in the hopes that all she needed was more oxygen.

"Any luck with all that?"

The agent looked up and smiled at Lucy. The technician's eyes were wide and she shifted her stance as if nervous. Viv always suspected that Lucy had a little crush on Martin, and that her anxiety surrounding Martin's case was just as deep as Martin's team members'.

"Yes, I'm sorry to say." Viv turned her attention back to the stacks of phone records before her. "Twice now we've learned that someone close to Martin has died. It's weird."

"Oh, no," Lucy whispered.

"On the good side, if there is a good side, we know that Victor rented a car in Pittsburgh. According to Allison Toland, Victor and Martin met at the airport and should have left together in one car. I let Jack know the vehicle information so at least they know what to look for. Where to look is still a bit of an issue."

Lucy shifted again. "I wish there was more I could do," she said. "Let me know if I can help at all. I feel bad for Martin; I mean, Agent Fitzgerald."

Nodding, Vivian pulled a stack of papers closer. "The thing is, I'm not sure it's over yet. Victor's phone records show several calls to one number starting almost a week ago." She shut her eyes and again rubbed them. "The number comes back to a hospital in Virginia."

"Oh. That doesn't sound very good." Lucy covered her mouth with one hand as if afraid to ask any more questions.

Viv sighed and sat up straight and, after a moment, picked up the phone. "Can't delay it anymore," she said as she called the number in Victor's records. "Pray that someone has heard from the Director."

"Fourth floor." The female voice was brisk and business-like.

Vivian identified herself and asked to speak with anyone there connected with Victor Fitzgerald. She heard a computer keyboard clacking and then a long pause. Low voices, other keyboards and the swish of clothing made up the background noise as she waited patiently for any response.

"I'm sorry, Agent Johnson, is it?"

"Yes," Vivian confirmed. The fine hairs on the back of her neck began to tingle – that was never a good sign.

"You are going to have to speak to Dr. Clement. Do you want to wait while I page him or have him call you back?"

"Page him, please. Oh, and what department am I calling?"

There was a slight pause before the nurse replied, "This is the Massey Cancer Center. All departments are Oncology related, but this is the generally the woman's floor."

Vivian's throat dried suddenly and her tongue felt encased in dust. "Thank you," she managed to croak. "I'll hold for Dr. Clement."

It actually felt good when she was put on hold. A plethora of feelings swirled in her head and her palms prickled with anxious sweat as every bad medical related memory surged forth – Martin's shooting and recovery, her own heart diagnosis and surgery, Jack's beating and near drowning and the time they rushed Reggie to the emergency room for heat stroke during a summer basketball game. All those results were positive, but the term "oncology" always shaded things a darker hue. Martin's Aunt Bonnie came to mind, and when Vivian quickly checked the Fitzgeralds' files while Vivaldi punished her ear, her thoughts had already gone to the dark side. Her eyes stopped on a line in Victor's background file: Bonnie was Katherine Fitzgerald's sister.

Finally, a voice broke through the too-loud classical music. "Dr. Clement." His voice was strong and unrushed. "May I help you?"

Vivian introduced herself and her reason for calling. "I know you have doctor/patient relationship, sir, but Victor Fitzgerald is missing and anything you can tell us could help us find him. Has he been at the hospital?"

"Yes," the Doctor replied after a moment. "He first came here last Friday afternoon. He accompanied a patient. He told me he'd arranged it so he could work while he was here."

"When did you last see him?"

"Let's see – the last I saw him was late Tuesday morning, near noon. I understand he left around that time. I'm rather surprised I haven't seen him since."

"Have you spoken to him since he left?"

The hesitation before his words sent icy fingers up Vivian's spine. "No," he said very slowly. "I didn't speak to him, but I called his cell and spoke with his son, Martin Fitzgerald."

Vivian took a quick breath and tried to slow her heart. "When was that?"

"Let's see." Vivian heard rustling paper and the louder noise of a keyboard. "I spoke to Martin Fitzgerald at about six twenty-one in the evening, last Tuesday."

"And why do you remember the time so exactly?" Her question came automatically, and it sounded to her ears like someone else talking. Dread had made her mind take a mental step away from the conversation.

There was another thick pause. "You say Victor Fitzgerald is missing? Isn't he with his son?"

"They were together on Tuesday. We found Martin alone on Thursday and he can't tell us where his father is."

"Can't tell you? What do you mean?"

Vivian considered for a moment and took a gamble, hoping for a trade of information. "Martin was found wandering on foot along a road in West Virginia, alone, and with contusions and a concussion. Right now, he's in a catatonic state. He's not able to tell us anything and we are concerned about his father."

The silence dragged on for several long seconds before Dr. Clement responded. "When I called Victor's cell phone, I informed Martin Fitzgerald – who answered the phone - that his mother, Katherine, passed away at six- oh- three, twenty-two minutes earlier. Kidney cancer. Victor was here from the day she was admitted until Tuesday. That's why I'm surprised he was gone when she passed."

"Oh," Vivian breathed. She felt like a deflated balloon and slightly sick to her stomach. "I see. Thank you, Doctor. That information may be helpful to Martin in his situation. Can I have his doctor call you if needed?"

"Certainly," the Doctor said. "If it helps any, the phone connection was terrible."

"I'm sure it was." Vivian pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut. "West Virginia has a lot of mountains and poor reception."

"I hope you find Director Fitzgerald. Tell him we are following his wife's directions, but we still need some signatures."

"Thank you. Good bye."

Vivian replaced the receiver gently and dropped her chin to her chest in an effort to get a grip on the foggy numbness that gripped her body. Could this day possibly get any worse? She knew that Jack needed this information but her clammy hand rested on the receiver for a few minutes while she regained focus. Martin's past year was one for the record books. How could so many bad things happen to one person?

Lucy reminded the agent of her presence by clearing her throat. When Vivian glanced up, Lucy's eyes were wide, reluctantly asking for information. "Martin's mother passed away on Tuesday." The words made Viv's stomach clench as they crossed her lips.

Lucy let out a tiny squeak that could have been "Oh". She turned on her heel and left the bullpen with her hand across her mouth.

"I hear you," Vivian thought as she watched the woman depart, obviously upset. She sighed knowing the delay really was not going to make anything better, so she got to it and snatched up the phone to call her boss.

"Jesus." Jack squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his forehead. "What the hell else can happen to him?" The arm holding the cell phone dropped to his side as he tipped up his chin and made a silent appeal to the heavens. Then he sighed, got back on the line with Vivian and ended the conversation.

He leaned against the brick façade of the clinic, reluctant to report the news to Samantha. She was already teetering on an emotional edge; this news could wait. Jack glanced at his watch and again at the sky - it was not as late in the afternoon as he thought. Black and grey clouds hung above, slowly rolling south and building in ominous color. Rain was on its way.

Drawn from his musings by the sound of an approaching car, Jack looked around and saw a marked police car pull into the small lot and head in his direction. Deputy Stevens stopped in front of him and rolled his window down.

"Agent Malone," he greeted. "I've rounded up a team to check one of the routes to the Toland's cabin. I figured you and I could check the other."

Jack didn't have to think about it. "Gladly," he said as he circled the vehicle. He got in on the passenger door and searched for the seat belt. "Looks like rain by sunset. Do you have an extra rain slicker?"

"Sure do. It's in the back seat." Stevens exited the parking lot and headed north.

The two-lane road unrolled before them as a wavy line, the paint marking faint in the dull daylight. Trees loomed skyward on either side, the branches occasionally intertwining above them in a natural tunnel. At any other time, it would have been a relaxing ride, but his reason for being here and the multiple tragic events that had unfolded made the trip surreal.

After a few minutes, Jack relayed the latest grim news to the deputy. The man shook his head, uttering a low curse. He glanced aside at Jack.

"I am beginning to understand your man's condition now. Can't say I blame him for escaping."

Jack chuffed. "Me either. It seems that Martin has a penchant for bad luck this past year or so." He turned to look out the side window and Stevens grew quiet. The muted muttering of the police radio was the only noise for the next twenty minutes.

"Here's where Nettie found Fitzgerald," Stevens finally said, slowing the patrol car.

The unremarkable roadway was no different from the miles behind them. Except now, a light drizzle darkened the pavement, making it shiny in the last of the daylight. From here onward, the men turned their attention to the roadsides, looking for any anomaly that could be a clue.

The drizzle changed into rain, a slow and small-dropped kind of rain that called for intermittent wipers and allowed Jack to keep his window rolled down. The afternoon grey inevitably changed into the dark of night, hastened by the thick clouds cover. The police unit's spotlight made a silvery white circle on the side landscape and Jack focused all his attention on the moving arena of light. The clue they sought had to be extremely subtle or else the Sheriff's office would have heard about it by now. The locals would notice anything out of place.

About a quarter mile beyond Martin's meeting place with Nettie Wells, the road split.

"This is where Craven Road changes to Craven East and Craven West. It makes a big loop. The Toland cabin is at the top of the loop."

Jack noticed that the east side rose upward along the foothills while the west side descended downward. Stevens explained that they traversed a shallow valley. The trees were so thick and dark that Jack couldn't see any of the terrain beyond the roadside.

"What's at the bottom of the valley?" Jack asked.

"Suicide River," Steven's replied.

Jack glanced at him. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, that's really the name. Way back in the 1800's and early 1900's, this part of the river took a lot of lives. It's deeper than it appears and there's a deadly undercurrent. It flows over jagged rocks so any unfortunate that falls in doesn't have much of a chance. We find a floater every couple of years." Jack scowled, but Steven's only shrugged. "What can I say? It happens." The Deputy steered downward. "The other team is checking Craven East."

Jack swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. The river's story did little to encourage optimism. Jack didn't believe in portends, but after the events of the day he couldn't help but feel dread creep into his gut.

The police car crawled along the road. The lazy rain changed into a more determined rain as the drops fattened. Stevens flipped the overhead light bar on and the landscape pulsed blue and red around the bright white of the spotlights.

Perhaps it was the multiple angles of light, or it could have been to the low speed at which they inched along, but when they reached a level section of road that curved along a rocky face of the mountain, something caused Stevens to stomp on the brakes. Jack felt the tug and light burn of the seatbelt across his bare neck when he jerked forward.

"Tire marks," the deputy pointed out. "And fresh-broken branches." Rain hammered the roof.

Jack leaned over and barely saw the faint rubber mark on the road's edge. Crawling vines shrouding the thick trees and bushes already started to patch the fresh wounds of the greenery. In another day or so, its job would be complete and the wound, invisible.

Steven's spoke into the radio microphone as Jack snagged the yellow slickers from the back seat. He shoved one in the deputy's lap, kicked open his door and slipped his arm into one sleeve. Once outside, he pushed the door closed and donned the rest of the garment. His hair was drenched and dripped inside his collar. Jack absently tugged the hood up as he strode to the road's edge.

Now that he was closer, he could make out the large divot in the greenery, all well screened by limber branches that snapped back to conceal Jack's passage. He heard Stevens behind him as he fished

a flashlight from his inner pocket. The vehicle's lights only managed to penetrate a foot or two and Jack was beyond its help. He could hear Suicide River now, its rushing noise far from comforting.

The ground suddenly sloped downward. Jack paused at the ridge and played the light around. Parallel wheel marks showed as black shadows in the soft, wet ground and Jack took a couple steps sideways so he was between them. Ahead, he could see faint marks of more destruction - a broken sapling, a set of toppled rocks with fading dirt belts marking their previous orientation and young, green leaves scattered across the ground.

The rain increased, its pounding now competing with the roar of the river. Jack barely controlled his slip downward, managing to keep his feet but ruining his shoes. He felt cold, damp dirt work its way under the arches of his feet and grind at the edge of his shoe leather. His hands were wet from pushing through brush. Something scraped his cheek and Jack sympathized with Martin's injuries.

Deputy Steven's shouted, but Jack barely heard him over the river's growl and the rain's whisper. He bobbled and caught his balance, and the flashlight's beam arched over the landscape. A reflected flash of red ahead caught Jack's attention. In his next step, the earth disappeared from under his feet and Jack slid the rest of the way down on his ass. A car's bumper stopped his descent.

Faint thunder rolled up the valley as an earnest downpour blinded him. Jack, though, didn't need his eyes to know that he'd found Victor Fitzgerald.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Night seeped into the small hospital room turning the walls velvet black. Samantha, curled on her side next to Martin's still body, played with the edge of his hospital gown. The only light in the room came from the monitors - a pulsing green glow that told her that nothing had changed. She nestled her cheek on his firm shoulder and traced the line of his jaw while she listened to his heart and felt the even rise and fall of his chest. He appeared to be asleep.

"I don't know what else to tell you," she whispered. "I don't know what you need to feel safe enough to come back to me. I certainly can't make any promises as to how long I will be at your side, Martin, but I can promise you this: As long as I draw breath, I will be here, with you, and in your life. Our life. I need you, Martin Fitzgerald, I need you and your smug smirk and your beautiful eyes and your unbelievably goofy sense of humor, and how your touch makes me shiver . . ."

She choked on the last word and forced herself to take a deep breath through her nose to stop the clench of her throat. "I just need you. Come back to me. I can help you through this. I want to help you. We'll get through this together."

She felt her phone vibrate in her hip pocket and gave Martin's cheek a light kiss as she drew the cell from her pocket. Sitting up, she rubbed an errant tear from her eye and looked at the number. She sighed, pushing down a sudden feeling of dread, and flipped the phone open.

"Jack?" she said. At that moment, Nettie Wells pushed the room door open and stopped in the yellow rectangle of light, looking to Sam for an indication to proceed. Sam waved her in and refocused on the phone, frowning. "Jack? What's that noise?" Nettie didn't move from the doorway.

Sam wiggled sideways and let her legs drop so she was sitting on the bed's edge. As she listened, she drew Martin's arm around into her lap where she held his hand in a firm grip, listening with dismay to her boss and friend.

"Oh, God," she choked after a minute. "This can't be happening. It just can't; it's impossible. The odds . . ." Her hand nervously played with Martin's, her thumb rubbing his knuckles as if confirming his presence. "He knows?" She tipped her head to regard Martin's face. "He spoke to the doctor?" As Jack relayed what he'd learned and what he later discovered, Samantha drew the solid connection of hands to her trembling lips. Tears coursed, unheeded, down her cheeks, anointing their union with sorrow. The phone slipped from her hand and rapped the floor.

Sobbing, she twisted and embraced Martin's still body, burying her face in the side of his neck weeping for the day's losses.

Nettie chewed her lip, her eyes misting. Taking a moment to collect her aching heart, she finally left the threshold and approached, first stooping to pick up the phone and close it before putting it on the bedside table. She paused again, allowing Samantha her grief and trying to keep her own at bay. Deputy Stevens filled her in a minute before and she knew this kind of loss; she also knew that there wasn't a thing that she could say or do to make it better. Both of them, Martin and Samantha, just had to go on feeling this way until they just . . . didn't.

Gently laying her hand on Sam's shuddering shoulder, she hoped the message of support carried through. While Sam wept, Nettie looked to Martin hoping to see a flicker of awareness, and shook her head at the vacant expression in his blue eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said, not exactly sure which of the pair she addressed; there was something about Martin's eyes, however, that drew her in and she regarded him curiously. Finally, Nettie forced a blink and focused on Samantha. She held Sam's shoulders and leaned in, murmuring apologies for a situation over which none of them had control.

Samantha finally sat up, tucking her feet under her, wiping her eyes with the back of one hand while the other gripped Martin's. Nettie plucked tissues from the bedside box and offered them up. Sam released Martin's hand and accepted them with a small, grateful smile before dabbing her eyes and nose.

"You . . . heard?" Sam finally rasped. She fiddled with the tissues, folding them into a puffy square.

"Yes, honey, I did. I am so sorry."

"They don't know what happened," she said. "Martin spoke to the doctor and then . . . what happened?"

Nettie opened her mouth to speak when something in Martin's face again caught her attention. She tipped her head and a thought crease gathered between her brows. There was something about his eyes; they appeared . . . clear?

"How could he stand it, hearing that news?" Sam lamented. "He didn't tell me anything . . ."

"I . . . didn't know . . ." Tentative and raspy from disuse, Martin's voice was barely audible from where Nettie stood. Time stopped for a fleeting second before she gasped and tightened her grip on Samantha's shoulder.

Samantha twisted and met Martin's wide, dazed eyes, etched with confusion. He reached out with a trembling hand and stroked away her tears with his finger. "Sam? Don't . . . cry. I . . . I didn't know."

Samantha held her breath and sat, frozen, as Martin's touch affirmed his presence.

"Martin," she whispered just before losing her ability to speak. This time, though, she cried tears of relief that washed away the dark anxiety. Martin awkwardly pulled her close, and she rested her cheek on his chest, worked her arms around his body and just hung on, each of them becoming the other's lifeboat.

Nettie choked at the emotional scene, finding her throat too raw to speak. Blinking to try to stop her own tears, she suddenly felt like an intruder and took a quiet step back before turning and leaving the room. Right now, she would inform Dr. Cross that his patient was awake. Later, though, she intended to visit again to get the end of the story. She knew that there was more than physical healing needed here, and now that a pair of chicks had found their way under her protective wing, she intended to make sure they got everything they needed to recover fully, both inside and outside.

Jack stood miserably in the cold rain, holding an umbrella that appeared from somewhere, and watched the Coroner's team work to extricate the body bag from the clutches of vine and shrubbery. Mud spattered shiny patterns below their knees that the rain slowly washed away. Numerous spotlights illuminated the roadway and bushes and cameras whirred

and clicked as they documented the scene. A tow truck stood by, idling misty vapor from its growling throat.

Jack counted a dozen responders. The FBI bigwigs requested State Police investigate the crash while County deputies secured the scene. Firemen and paramedics cleaned and repacked their equipment. A reporter ambushed individuals in search of the story and Jack was glad he hadn't been approached. There was nothing about him that invited interview – in fact, the reporter looked Jack's way once and seemed to slink away in fear, much to Jack's relief.

The jump-suited Coroner helpers, breathing hard, lifted the bag onto a waiting gurney, which was then loaded into the Coroner's van. Jack waited until the leader snapped off his gloves and ducked inside the van's cab before approaching.

"Any idea of the cause of death?" he asked. Previously, Jack made sure to identify himself to the gentleman. "Was it the crash?"

The man behind the wheel wore an embroidered polo shirt with the state seal and "Medical Examiner" over his heart and had a voice that reminded Jack of Eeyore.

"I doubt it. His heart was not pumping when he struck the boulder. I can't say for sure, mind you, but everything points to his being dead before the car left the road. He was the driver, based on the tissue damage from the seat belt. I'll send you a copy of the autopsy report."

"Call me instead?"

The man sighed tiredly and then nodded. "After I inform the next of kin."

"I think he already knows," Jack handed him a business card. "His next of kin works for me. Call if you can't get in touch with him."

The M.E. took the card and tucked it between the pages of his note pad. "Will do."

Jack nodded his thanks and stepped away, suddenly feeling exhausted as the county vehicle pulled away. When the van disappeared in the rain, Jack felt a presence and turned to find Deputy Stevens at his side, rain dripping from the edge of his slicker hood.

"Hell of a night," he said. "Did you give your statement?"

"Not yet. Can you wait a few more minutes? I'll talk to them now."

"Take your time. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks." Jack felt odd receiving the condolence. He wasn't quite sure how to feel about all this; neither did he know how this would affect the team. He watched the State Police Officer approach with shuttered eyes, exhausted.

"Agent Malone? I understand you called this in?"

"Yes. I found the body."

The officer tapped his breast pocket. "I'll be taking notes and I am recording this. Is that alright?"

Jack nodded and then sighed, his breath hovering as an icy cloud before dissipating. "Okay. We backtracked from where Martin – Agent Fitzgerald – was picked up on Craven Road and Deputy Stevens saw the tire marks on the edge of the road. They aren't skid marks. They're rub marks where the car went over the curb edge. There's no evidence of braking that we saw.

"I found the tire tracks in the mud and followed them to the vehicle . . ." From there, the picture flashed vivid in his mind as he recalled what happened next.

It wasn't easy to get to his feet with the angle of the slope. Jack grabbed the rear bumper of the car and held on tight, using a hand-over-hand motion to maneuver to the side of the vehicle. Pushing a foot against the rear tire, he awkwardly gained his feet and looked around, puffing. The right side of the sedan was wedged against a tree, but a very large boulder had stopped the car's forward motion.

Tree branches draped over the open driver door and Jack noticed that although the low brush along the left side of the car appeared recovered, it was still apparent that it had been trample down recently. He sidled along the vehicle, peering in the windows.

Violently scattered clothing dotted the car's interior. The opposite rear window was open and a button down shirt, caught and torn on the interior door handle, trailed through the open window and dangled outside.

The rain lessened. The tree crowns shielded Jack from most of it as he moved on. When he reached the open driver door, he glanced inside to confirm the sedan's emptiness. From there, he searched carefully with his eyes, proceeding slowly so he wouldn't miss any clue. Nature's repair fixed the flattened grass and brush, but a trail was apparent and Jack followed it. At this point he heard Deputy Stevens up on the road calling for help on the radio, and Jack yelled at him to stay away so he could search the area unencumbered.

The downward path leveled out closer to Suicide River's rocky bank and Jack saw a sock-clad foot. Clenching his teeth, he took the steps necessary to stand alongside the body of Victor Fitzgerald, shrouded with green growth, his dress shirt torn open to expose his blue-tinged chest. Jack immediately had a vision of Martin kneeling over his father, administering chest compressions to an unresponsive heart. In his vision, Martin was frantic - swearing, demanding and screaming all at once. Either tears or rain dampened his flushed and his breathing was rough exertion. Blood streamed down one side of his face and dotted his clinging white t-shirt. Martin's eyes were huge with fear.

Jack took another step and the vision disappeared, replaced with the roar of the river and the shush of rain. He followed the centerline of Victor's body to his face and was surprised to realize the similarity of the Fitzgerald eyes – he hadn't noticed it before. Now, Victor's, fixed and dilated, were a hazy blue-grey in death.

"I followed Martin's trail through the mud from there to the road. I saw the broken branches that would account for his superficial injuries and the crash explains his head injury. The doctor says he wasn't wearing a seatbelt at the time of the crash - that's the only detail I can't figure."

The officer nodded and closed his notepad. For the first time, Jack noticed his name tag. Officer Jackson said, "You know who wants this report. It's not finished until I talk to Agent Fitzgerald." Jackson slipped his notepad away and produced a business card from his shirt pocket. "I still have to go through the car after it's towed. After that, I'll come by the clinic. Call me if there's any change in your agent's condition?"

"Sure." Jack tucked the card away and rubbed his eyes. A small part of him debated staying with the Director but he knew that he would be one of many once the FBI contingent arrived. No, he would be better received at the clinic.

Jack waved at Deputy Stevens and headed to the patrol car. The tow truck's engine revved as it backed up to the edge of the road. Tow chains clanked and rattled as they were dragged from the bed of the truck, causing Jack to wince and rub his eyes as he settled in the unit.

Stevens pulled his door closed and glanced at his passenger. "Need to stop anywhere first? Food? Coffee?"

"Nah," Jack breathed. "I need to get this over with but I think Martin already knows what happened."

The Sheriff's car made a wide U-turn and headed back to the clinic.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The rain blew away moments before Jack and Deputy Stevens arrived at the clinic. When Jack unfolded from the vehicle and closed the door, he took a moment to stretch out stiff limbs and a lower back that threatened to seize at any moment. Bending back to release tight muscles, he tilted his face heavenward with a slight groan; his slide into the rental car's bumper would leave a mark on his arms and chest. He could already feel it.

Jack opened his eyes to a velvet black sky full of sparkling diamond stars that were strangers to a big city. His pains momentarily forgotten, Jack realized that the term "stardust" had true meaning. Nothing else could describe the bright swath of Milky Way above, usually hidden by city lights.

"The doc has muscle relaxers," Deputy Stevens commented cheekily. Jack straightened and tipped his head in the deputy's direction. "I plan on asking for some." Steven's rubbed his lower back, his amused grin turning into a wince, and ambled toward the entrance. Jack followed with a muted grunt.

Stevens stopped at the reception desk as Jack shuffled down the hall. In the hallway's light, he noticed the specks of dried mud and the generally rumpled appearance of his suit. It didn't take long to realize that his hands couldn't brush away the damage.

"Did you bring a change of clothes?"

Nettie's voice surprised him. Jack lurched to a stop and tugged his coat together. The small woman blocked his way into Martin's room and studied him over the edge of a steaming coffee mug. Jack felt as if he'd just failed some kind of test.

"How's Martin?" he asked, somewhat surprised that he wanted to rate higher in her evaluation.

"He woke up about forty minutes ago. Samantha is with him. He was a little muddled, but awake and aware."

Jack brightened. "That's great."

He took a step to pass her but found Nettie in his path. She moved with determined skill to block the door, forcing him to meet her eyes again. Her eyes had an accusing edge.

"They are both asleep at the moment. They need the rest, don't you think?"

Jack pursed his lips and held her gaze. "Okay," he said. A tickle of anger edged his tone. After several seconds he asked, "Is there a problem, Mrs. Wells?"

As she regarded him, Jack could tell that she had questions. Uncomfortable questions.

"I hope not," she said slowly.

Jack crossed his arms over his chest and set his feet. "Spit it out," he growled. "Although, I don't see why I need to answer to you regarding my agent." Still, he felt compelled to stay where he was, made to stand attention before a tiny, wizened guard.

"Which one?" Nettie snapped, eyes smoldering.

"Excuse me?"

"Which agent, Mr. Malone?" There was a silent stand off for a tense moment before Nettie sighed and set the mug aside on a chair next to the room's doorway. "I'm sorry," she breathed, rubbing her eyes. "We are all tired."

"It has been a long day," Jack agreed, relaxing his stance.

Nettie eyed him again, this time with curiosity rather than animosity. "I'm feeling rather protective about Agent Fitzgerald." She smiled wearily. "That hasn't happened in a while - it's one reason why I stopped volunteering here. Too many losses . . ."

Jack nodded. "I can understand that."

She sighed again and managed a tight smile. Her eyes narrowed as she focused directly on Jack's. "I couldn't help but notice your . . . attachment . . . to Agent Spade."

Jack quirked an eyebrow, both surprised and annoyed. "You are quite astute," he said slowly, annoyed at his flash of guilt. "But it's none of your business, really."

"Probably not, but I have to wonder how this will affect Martin's recovery. As I said, I've developed a certain protectiveness." She mirrored Jack's crossed arms stance and steady stare. "Does she know? Does *he* know?"

"As I said, this is none of your business." What was it about this woman that made him want her acceptance? "Sam and I have a mutual affection. Martin knows." Nettie's eyebrow mimicked Jack's questioning quirk. Jack snorted in amusement. "There's nothing more. She and Martin share a much deeper connection and I am happy for them." He could see her weighing his words. "Really," he finished lamely.

Finally, Nettie acquiesced with a sharp nod and stepped aside with a smile. "And I believe you," she noted. "That boy is going to need all his friends. I heard about his father." Her eyes turned bright, shimmering with tears. "He's very lucky to have Samantha."

"Yes, he is. He has all of his team, Mrs. Wells."

"Okay, then." She stepped aside and cleared the way to the door. "I wish you all the best of luck."

Before the word "thanks" passed Jack's lips, Nettie Wells was already striding down the hallway. Jack watched her disappear around a corner, muttered, "What the hell just happened here?", then shook his head and pushed the door open to look inside.

It took a few moments for Jack's eyes to adjust to the dim light of the room. He didn't hear anything at first, but as the forms on the narrow hospital bed slowly became visible, he heard soft, even breathing. Samantha's hair fanned across her shoulder onto Martin's chest.

Stretched out on her side, she nestled against Martin, fitting perfectly to the silhouette of his body with her head snuggled deeply into the curve of his neck. Martin was on his back, one arm wrapped protectively around her. His cheek rested on her crown of gold.

Jack couldn't seem to move from the doorway as he mulled over Nettie's words. "He's lucky to have her." As he watched, the shadows etching Martin's face twitched. His breathing hitched, and Jack heard a low moan. Samantha reacted in her sleep, reaching across Martin's torso to pulled him impossibly closer. He responded, his arm crossing hers as he completed the embrace and tucked his cheek deeper into her hair. Martin quieted.

Feeling like an intruder, Jack stepped back and allowed the door to swoosh shut. He stood in the hallway for a few minutes and sorted through his thoughts, feeling a little useless and a lot lonely. He put the feelings aside and addressed his wrinkled situation; he needed clean clothes and sleep, but not necessarily in that order. At this moment there wasn't much left to do, but tomorrow promised to be a very long, emotional day. Running his hand through his tangle of hair, Jack turned to seek Stevens and the possibility of finding a bed for the night.

The scent of flowers teased him, luring him through the open field circled by towering trees. He tilted his head back and saw the canopy alive with birds and butterflies. Billowing clouds puffed lazily across a deep blue sky. He scanned the grassy meadow, curiosity pushing him into a walk to try to locate the elusive garden that tickled his nose.

The field was beautiful - dark emerald grass edged in light sea foam where bleached by hot, golden sun rays - but it did not yield a single blossom. A hummingbird's wings thrummed the air near his ear as it zinged past, seeking nectar. Martin followed its sharp, woven path and his heart lifted. They were close. The wild, sweet scent grew stronger as he approached the edge of the woods. The hummingbird zipped into the stand and disappeared, leaving Martin behind.

He pushed through the grass, now thicker and hip-high, puzzled at how difficult it was to move forward. When he reached the dark shadow-line of the trees where deep green turned muddy black, Martin stopped, breathless. The air was heavy now, pressing against his lungs from the outside instead of the inside. He forced his chest to expands and suck air. Spots dotted his vision. The ink of the woods was cold, its fingers reaching to suffocate the lone figure.

"Martin! Help him, he can't breathe!"

An unpleasant buzz cut through his brain and it awoke, pounding to awareness. Martin scratched at his head, his hands full of hair. A groan rolled up his throat and though his teeth. There was nothing but blackness and red pain.

Then cool hands cradled his cheeks. He forced his eyelids apart, stunned by the golden field before him that urged his lungs to work. Martin inhaled deeply, finding the flowers' scent in Samantha's hair.

"Martin? Come on, look at me. Wake up, please? Martin?"

Wide, worried brown eyes hovered before him, drawing away his pain. Samantha's face became clear when his suffering faded. The sharp buzz ceased, replaced by a racing, but muted, beep. As his breathing eased, the beep subsided. His total focus was on her amazing eyes. He was safe.

Suddenly weary, he sighed and sagged back into the hospital bed. The recognition of where he was oddly reassuring. He heard a strange voice, lilting upward in a question.

"No, we're fine now, thanks." Sam spoke to the unseen person, but kept her eyes locked on Martin's. "Thank you, he's fine."

Martin blinked sleepily. Sam's mouth twitched into an unsure smile and her eyes glittered.

"You awake now?" she asked, stroking the side of his head.

"Yeah," Martin sighed, allowing his eyes to slip closed as he absorbed her touch. He felt her back under the flat of his hand. She trembled, and his eyes peeled open. "I scared you. I'm sorry." It was an enormous effort to talk and his words felt as heavy as stone.

"You have nothing to be sorry about. I am so happy you're here to scare me." Her voice was light with joking.

He saw truth in her eyes and smiled. He also saw concern, weariness and most of all, love. He couldn't look away. Loss washed over him when her hands left to adjust the pillows, the cool sheet and the wire leads that trailed off the bed to a monitor.

The feeling of loss bubbled in his chest. Martin touched her arm with his hand to confirm her presence as the bubbles grew and boiled, pressing his lungs again. Sam immediately noticed his growing distress and she gathered his hands in a firm grip.

"Martin, I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I'm here."

"Mom," he choked. "Dad . . ." It hurt to breathe and his vision swam. His throat was a raw wound, open and bubbling and taking away the air.

"I know, I know. I don't know what to say to take the pain away." She drew his hands up and caressed them with her lips. "I'm here. I will always be here, I promise you."

Bright tears split the shadows on her face with silver. Martin locked his eyes on them. Their warmth trailed over his knuckles, hypnotizing him. Words drawn from his parched throat reported a memory as it boiled forth.

"He didn't tell me she was sick," Martin rasped. "He said she wanted it that way. I didn't believe him -"

They met in the airport baggage claim area in Pittsburgh. Martin thought he looked distracted and wondered if Uncle Roger's death actually mattered to his dad. "That's pretty cold, even for him," Martin thought. He was about to chastise himself when Victor's distraction turned to disapproval.

"Glad to see you dressed up," Victor snipped.

Martin's defenses shot up. Already worn thin from dealing with the violent death of his friend, Martin felt lucky that he had a change of clothes in his car. Sure, a logo t-shirt and cargo pants weren't Esquire inspired, but at least they weren't bloody. Anger warmed him and he curled his fingers to hide any dried blood still caked under his nails. Fuck you and your judgments, he nearly snapped when he noticed the lines on his father's face. Okay, they were both tired. Martin chuffed shortly and remained silent as they left baggage claim and headed to the rental car counters.

While Victor arranged for a vehicle, Martin reached for his phone to call Samantha and came up empty. Slightly puzzled, it took a few moments to remember and his gut coldly rolled. He'd just stepped on the plane when Allie called and told him that Uncle Roger had passed. In shock, Martin vaguely recalled sitting and hearing the request to go to the cabin, and then tucking the phone in the seat pocket in front of him.

"My phone," he said aloud. Victor turned, car key in hand. "I left my phone on the plane."

"You can get it later," his father snapped. "We need to get this over with."

Martin, taken aback at the venom, failed to fall in line with his father. Anger simmered again and Martin barely pushed it down. It wasn't the time or place. He followed his father out into the humid air where they collected a rental sedan. Martin tossed is backpack onto the rear seat and dropped in the front passenger's seat.

Victor put his travel bag next to Martin's and slipped behind the wheel. "Don't you have a suitcase?" He started the car as Martin buckled up.

"I was heading out to go backpacking," he replied hotly. "I'm lucky I had that. I was in a bit of a hurry. I hoped to see Uncle Roger before…" His throat closed, cutting off his voice. Martin turned to look out the window.

Once they discussed the quickest route to the cabin, heavy silence endured. Martin's mind swirled with half formed thoughts and visions as the scenery raced into darkness. The recalled sight of Ed's blood on his hands caused sweat to prickle his palms. He fought the urge to look at them, imagining blood instead. When he finally looked, odd relief made him feel sick.

A sign welcoming them to West Virginia distracted him and his thoughts turned to Roger and Bonnie. He'd spent many summers at the cabin, many happy summers filled with swimming, hiking and camp fires. His eyes burned and he cleared his throat. His children would have the same experience, he thought. Martin knew that his and Sam's parenting skills would be the exact opposite of his parents; they were reverse role-models.

"Change your shirt." Victor's first words since the airport were terse.

Martin felt up to the challenge. "There's nothing wrong with what I have on," he said distractedly, his eyes still on the passing of black woods. It began to drizzle. He felt his father's glance.

"Must everything be an argument with you?"

That got Martin's attention. He turned to his father, his face illuminated by the dashboard lights. The lines around his eyes seemed deep as he rubbed his head. Victor's frown did little to improve the map of his face.

"There's a plain t-shirt and a button-down shirt in my bag. It's better than-" he glanced at Martin. "-than whatever advertisement that is." He flicked a sharp wave in Martin's direction. "If we don't look like beggars maybe the neighbors won't call the Sheriff."

Martin's growing rage caught him off guard. He opened his mouth to argue, but something about Victor's demeanor stopped him. Victor stared straight ahead, seemingly unaware that Martin was even there. After a moment's pause, Martin unbuckled and reached back, working his dad's small suitcase open. He turned on the dome light to see and noticed Victor flinch at the sudden brightness.

Martin pulled out a white t-shirt and traded it for the one he wore. Then he flipped the suitcase completely open to dig for a cover shirt. Just as he found one, Victor growled, "Turn off the light. I have a headache."

"What is your problem?" Martin finally growled as he flicked off the light. He shook out the shirt to find the inside tag. "Honestly, I'm surprised you're even here. I didn't think you even liked Roger; or Bonnie for that matter!"

"Don't talk to me in that tone. I deserve more respect than that." Victor rubbed his temple as he spoke.

"The last I heard, respect is earned." Martin was shocked at the words spilling from his mouth. He glanced aside, waiting for the reaction.

"You need to grow up, Martin. The world doesn't revolve around you. Your aunt and uncle spoiled you too much."

Martin blinked. "Grow up? What the hell does that mean?"

Outside, the steady drizzle turned into fat raindrops, each thud on the roof too loud in Martin's ears. Victor only gave him a grunt in reply as he turned on the wipers and gripped the steering wheel hard enough to whiten his knuckles.

"I would expect Mom to be here, seeing Roger was her sister's husband. Not you. Where is she?" Something in Victor's hesitation caught Martin attention. Alarms rang and his heart pounded. "Dad? Where is she?"

Victor's phone sang and he pulled it from his shirt pocket. It was then that Martin noticed how bad his father really looked. Martin grabbed the phone from his hand. "You're driving." He flipped the phone open, still watching his father. The look Victor gave him turned Martin cold; his father wore a mask of fear. "Martin Fitzgerald speaking."

"Martin," his father choked. The car swerved.

The caller identified himself as Doctor Weaver. After that, Martin heard only "You're Katherine's son" and "I'm sorry to report", something about "passed away" and "condolences" before the phone slipped from his grasp.

"She didn't want you to know." Victor's ragged voice replaced that of the Doctor. "We argued about it, son. It wasn't right…"

No words. Martin had no words, no thoughts, no emotions. Then an inhuman noise escaped Victor's throat and his hands flew up and clutched his head. The car shimmied and Martin automatically reached for the wheel…

Samantha cried silent tears for her lover. He blinked slowly, his huge eyes filled with despair, pain and unimaginable loss as his story trailed to a halt. His eyes pleaded for her to take it all away and all she could offer was her body. Without uttering a word, she pulled him close, enveloping him in her arms as sobs from the very depth of his soul rocked them both.

CHAPTER NINE

When he arrived at the hospital the next morning, Jack pulled up to the front doors of the clinic and parked. Leaning aside, he could see his agents through the building's glass doors. Samantha nodded to someone behind the reception desk and then pushed Martin's wheelchair toward the exit and when Jack saw Nettie Wells rise from the desk and follow, he snorted, already moving to button his jacket. Jack, somewhat amused at his automatic response to the sight of Nettie, acknowledged the undefined need to stay in the older woman's good graces. Once outside, he straightened his posture and laughed at himself while he waited for the others to join him.

The automatic door whooshed open and he got his first good look at Martin in the daylight, Jack doubted Dr. Cross' judgment on Martin's release. The way he slumped in the wheelchair, his face pale and shadowed, and the settled bruising that blackened one eye made Martin look like he suffered a terminal disease. Samantha appeared just as wan and weary to the bone as she pushed the wheelchair toward the rental car. Jack saw his feelings reflected in Nettie's eyes as she trailed behind the pair.

Samantha stopped next to Jack's car and locked the chair wheels. Martin rose, resembling a shaky newborn colt as he waited for Sam to open the door. Jack stepped up, flanking the pair in case the patient collapsed during the transfer. Once Martin settled in the car and Samantha closed the door with an encouraging smile, Jack grumbled, "Tell me again why there's a no fly order?"

The shaky smile disappeared when Sam faced Jack. "He needs to leave this place," she said tersely. Then she sighed, tipped her head skyward to find patience and gathered her wits before continuing in an apologetic tone. "It's just in case there's a problem, Jack. If there is an emergency, it's better he's on the ground than in the sky. Dr. Cross said that the prior brain injury complicates any prognosis. And to be honest, I don't think he could handle the stress of flying at the moment."

Jack shrugged. "That is a good point."

"He has a lot to sort through right now," Nettie added quietly. "The down time is a good thing."

Jack smiled at her and nodded agreement. "True." He looked to Samantha. "I guess you'll drop me at the airport?"

"If you don't mind, I can take you," Nettie volunteered. "That way, these two can head straight to New York."

"Okay." He cleared his throat and shrugged back his shoulders. "I'll get my bag from the trunk."

"Samantha, would you return the chair so I can say goodbye to Martin?"

Although phrased as a question, Nettie assumed compliance because she then turned to the sedan and slipped into the front seat, leaving Sam open-mouthed to reply. Jack chuckled when Sam snapped her mouth shut without speaking. She scowled in his direction and turned the chair back to the building.

With the doors closed, the insulated car was numb with quiet. The muted outside noise was as if they floated underwater. The thought crossed Nettie's mind if this is how Martin heard all things right now - gauzy and distant as if in another room. His wide, blue eyes looked at her with lost puzzlement, begging to know what was next.

"I understand your cousins called?" Nettie started with an affectionate smile.

Martin nodded, blinked and then ducked his head, picking at the hospital bracelet dangling on his wrist. "Yes," he whispered, his voice as dry as an autumn leaf. "Allie and Jamie. They apologized for not being here." A humorless chuff escaped and he rubbed his eyes. "They have a lot to deal with at the moment."

"And you don't?"

Martin grew still and stared at the vinyl bracelet. "Yeah," he finally whispered. His forehead wrinkled as his eyebrows dipped, and then his features smoothed with a quirk of his mouth. His fingers fiddled again. "Yeah."

Nettie expected more - he obviously needed to say more - but she understood. She reached out her small, age- worn hand and rested in on Martin's restless fingers. His motion quieted and he raised his eyes to hers. She smiled. "Remember that I am here if you need me. Sometimes a neutral party makes a good sounding board. Well, maybe not so neutral." She patted his hand. "I've met Roger, Bonnie and the girls before. I think I even met you once when you were about ten?"

Martin frowned, surprised into thought. "That's when I broke my arm."

Nettie chuckled and nodded. "I believe you fell out of a tree house?"

"A tire swing. Allie pushed me . . ." Martin's face relaxed with a fond smile. "I'd forgotten about that. We were at the cabin."

"And I worked here. So, see? We aren't really strangers after all." She squeezed his hand. "Any time you feel the need, I'd be happy to listen. Okay?"

Martin took her hand and returned the affectionate grip. "Okay. Thank you."

Samantha opened Martin's door and the quiet farewell was over.

"Martin? Why don't move up front? Mrs. Wells is taking Jack to the airport."

With the small woman's help, Martin changed seats and they were ready to go. His mind, now stirred into action, whirled with disconnected thoughts and memories of the area when he waved goodbye to Nettie.

"That should be fun for Jack," Samantha said lightly. "She's not one to mess with."

Martin saw Jack follow Nettie to her truck. "She was here when I broke my arm when I was ten," he said, sounding slightly dazed.

Samantha glanced at him, smiling. "Really? That's funny."

From there, the ride turned silent as Samantha left Martin to his thoughts. The radio played quietly in the background, tuned so low that song was not discernable from commercial. Both of them dwelled so deep in themselves that it didn't really matter. The noise did an admirable job to soften the heavy quiet of the well-insulated car.

Samantha's peripheral vision cast a wide net. She knew Martin's every move even as she concentrated on the winding road and with his every distressed action, her heart pinched. The first hour passed rather quickly with Martin dozing off and on. Generally awake after that, she saw his body shift not so much with physical pain, but more with uncomfortable memory. His hands are what gave him away.

Samantha loved Martin's eyes - they were wide and deep and alive with what made Martin, Martin. His hands, though, gave his eyes a run for the money when it came to expression. It never failed to amaze what he could communicate with a mere touch.

Embarrassed, she recalled how a sympathetic stroke to her cheek used to fly her into a rage because it seemed like he intruded so easily on her well-guarded privacy. Once she allowed her protective walls to fall, the touch said, "I feel your ache and if I could take it on my shoulders, I would." With her defenses down, a single touch on her leg; her shoulder; her wrist; drew her into a hedonistic want, and the heat of his body fueled the flame.

Now, his hands told an old story she thought long buried, and they spoke loudly as they furtively clutched his jacket's pocket. Along with everything else forced to shoulder, Martin harbored a lie and as the miles unrolled behind them, Samantha became more and more concerned. She looked for clues by thinking back and came up empty - well, nearly empty. There was unaccountable time with Dr. Cross, which suggested only one thing - no. She refused to think along those lines and yet the one thought is where all the lines led.

"Martin?" she said after every scenario she played ended the same. He twitched when she spoke - a bare, subtle motion, but one she still noticed like a slap to the face. Her stomach turned. "Martin," she said again a little louder.

They were on a long, straight highway with light traffic and Samantha considered pulling over, but she didn't want to give him a physical chance to escape.

"Look at me," she demanded is a gentle tone.

It took a moment, but he finally did. She also noticed his hand slip into the jacket pocket and form a hard fist. She damned her vast peripheral sight and set her gaze on the road. She didn't want to see his eyes when she finally asked the question she dreaded - feeling the weight of them on her was all she could bear.

"What?" Martin's voice was a whisper of its usual self.

She hesitated. Would she batter any fragile buttress of security he had left? In the end, it didn't matter. A lie was never a good cornerstone. Samantha gripped the steering wheel a little harder.

"Did Dr. Cross prescribe anything for your headaches?"

Again, every wash of emotion that crossed his face in those first few seconds were clear in her 20/20 peripheral - fear, shock, anger and then black, deep despair.

"I . . . I . . ." he started. He didn't need to say anymore and he must have seen that she knew the truth. He ducked his head and withdrew the tight fist of his hand from his pocket. "I didn't ask for it." The last was so quiet, Samantha nearly missed it. He opened his hand, releasing the yellow prescription bottle. "I haven't taken any, Sam."

"But you were going to?"

Martin ducked his head. "Yes."

One part of Samantha wanted to brake and pull over immediately. Another part wanted to take an off-ramp and just follow it anywhere and never return to New York. Instead, she relaxed her grip on the wheel and fixed her eyes on the road ahead. "Why?" she finally asked, dreading the reply.

It took nearly a minute for Martin to answer in a voice stronger than Samantha expected; he'd held these thoughts for a long time.

"I just want to go to sleep," he said. "I want to wake up and have everything different. I want to say things I never got to say, do things I never did." He voice was raw as if he teetered on the edge of a very sharp blade fighting the inevitable, bloody end. "I want to turn back time and

do things differently. There's such a hole . . ." His fingers wrapped around the bottle and he pressed his fist against his chest. "It hurts so much I can't breathe."

The car didn't waver from its path. Sam fought all desire to stop and simply pull Martin into a protective cocoon to help him forget. Then she realized that whatever he held in his hand was her competition and that Martin had to be the one to make the choice: He had to willingly turn his back on the artificial fix and walk toward the real thing on his own.

"I know." The words sounded thin and papery. "I know pain, Martin. Maybe not on the level you do right now, but I know the road. So do you. You have to be the one that chooses your path." She shook her head and took a deep breath to steady her nerves and bank her tears. "I want to help you, but . . ."

Protectively holding his fist to his chest, Martin turned to look out the side window. "I know," he whispered roughly. "It's my road."

They drove like that for many miles - Samantha, watching the black pavement unravel before them. Martin's posture did not change very much. He stared out the side window, fist clutched to chest, studying things she could not see and said nothing more. Two hours came and went. Samantha shifted in the driver's seat as the demand to stop became uncomfortable.

"I have to find a rest room." When she glanced to Martin, he nodded as she felt an odd sense of relief that he heard her. "I could use drink of some kind, too." The next crossroad boasted what looked like a small truck stop with fuel pumps, a busy convenience store and a trailer-converted-to-restaurant sharing the lot behind. "Any port in a storm, huh?" She said brightly.

She pulled into the parking lot to one side of the small store where the only space available was shoe-horned between two gigantic SUVs. A smile finally smoothed the lines on Martin's face as she swore her way into the space. Finally done, she cut the engine and let out a sigh as she patted his thigh. She watched him for a moment, finally rewarded when he lifted his chin and met her eyes. His were still dull and lost, but their connection was still there and it warmed her heart. "Come inside, Martin," she asked quietly.

In the span of seconds that followed her request, Samantha saw something in his eyes she could not pin down. She also felt his devoted love toward her and its power stole her breath. She felt his hand on hers, and she turned her palm up to meet him. He held on tight and lifted her fingers to his lips, where he kissed her knuckles as he looked deeply into her eyes.

"I can't." The words barely carried on his warm breath. Martin's eyes turned vague and in that second, he looked completely exhausted.

Sam swallowed and forced a smile. "Okay," she said. "I'll get you something." She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss, feeling his lips willingly accept and reciprocate. The kiss lasted longer than she expected, and her spirits rose. Reluctantly, her bladder insisted an end to the encounter and she pulled away, leaning in for a moment to touch his forehead to hers. She licked her lips and straightened her thoughts with a real smile. "Try and sleep." She felt a slight nod and turned to extricate herself from the vehicle with a tinge of remorse.

Reluctantly outside, she closed the door and headed around the corner. Before leaving sight of the car Samantha glanced back one more time and saw Martin watching her. She smiled back, threw him a kiss, and pushed into the store.

When she returned a few minutes later with two sodas and bag of Martin's favorite junk food, the car was empty.

CHAPTER TEN

Martin felt the pull of the river the moment he cracked the window seeking fresh air. The smell carried on the cool breeze, a heavy, recognizable mixture of algae, watercress and wet rock tempting him to follow its call to the source and escape the press of civilization. Breathing heavily, his newly purchased running shoes muddy and scratched, Martin climbed the last knoll and heard the roar of water reach its peak when he reached the crest of the slope.

Every scar and every fresh wound pulsed with pain as he stood and regarded the river that called to him. This is where Suicide River ended up, being a tributary to much larger Valley Bend River; Martin didn't think he could throw a rock to the other shore. The flow here was even more treacherous - stronger, faster, rife with rocks and boulders that discouraged navigation of any sort. Its humid whisper held him in a grip surer than quicksand and just as deadly.

Pounding water washed out any man-made sounds behind him. The thriving wilds and rolling hills blocked the sight of anything other than nature. It was just Martin, the brushy terrain and the river. He couldn't help but stare at the water's awesome power, clutching his prize to his heaving chest. The hole where his heart had been was still vast, untouched by the raw power and beauty that surrounded him. He dipped his chin and forced his fist to open, craving the contents of the unnatural plastic container.

Its call was as strong as that of the river.

"Damn it," Samantha snarled as her eyes swept the busy lot again. She held her phone in one hand, still unused. She didn't want to call anyone and cursed Martin for putting her in this position. At the same time, worry plucked at her anger; it niggled at the back of her mind and told her to hold off.

Once finding the empty car, she'd contacted every living body she could see in the immediate area and nothing indicated Martin left with anyone else - instead, a spotty trail of witnesses put him walking across the busy lot to its end. It felt right and she followed the feeling.

When she reached the end of the pavement, she prowled along the asphalt edge looking for clues. "Come on, Martin," she whispered. "Give me a break, here." Eventually, she stopped in complete and total frustration, grabbing her hair on two sides and pulling back with a growl-cum-moan. The action forced her eyes up, and that's when she saw the subtle path through the greenery formed by growth unnaturally bent in the same direction. She plunged ahead without a second thought.

She saw Martin as soon as she topped the farthest hill. He stood like a statue just a few yards below and to one side. Beyond him was the rippled top of a fast-moving river and for a moment, she wondered if he was going to jump. "Martin," she tried to call, but with her heart in her throat, it came out a dry croak that she barely heard over the sound of the rushing water. Martin continued to stare downward, beyond the edge at his feet.

Samantha forcefully slowed her breathing and made her way to him. As she got closer, she saw the tight fist that she knew held the pill container and choked back a warning. She was about a yard away when he turned and met her eyes. The pain there started her eyes burning; was he already lost to her? Taking one more step she reached out and took his fist, raising it up and forcing his fingers open. The white lid to the pill container was gone and the jar, empty.

"Oh, Martin," she breathed, brushing the plastic from his hand. The container dropped, rolled over the edge at their feet, and she pulled him to her, wrapping her arms around him as she choked back tears. Martin did not move at first, but then he responded slowly as if recovering from a daze by returning the embrace.

"I didn't," he whispered in his gravelly voice. "Sam, I didn't."

Martin turned slightly and Samantha's watery gaze fell to the river's edge where swirling eddies twisted between an archipelago of exposed rocks along the shore. Tiny white pills bounced and disappeared in the ruddy whirlpools and as she watched, the yellow cylinder joined them, bobbing seconds longer before sinking into the rage of water. She closed her eyes and let her tears of relief flow. Martin held her close and their combined heartbeats eroded the powerful draw of the water.

"I thought it was a choice I had to make." Martin's lips brushed her ear when he finally spoke. Their closeness allowed his voice to override the river's roar. "I thought it would be hard, but it wasn't. It wasn't."

Samantha found it difficult to speak and fought to control her tears.

"I felt trapped," he started. "Those cars next to us – I couldn't see anything. I was suffocating. I had to get out and just . . . walk." He paused and re-established his embrace. "When I got here, it was so open, so free. I opened the bottle and expected relief, but that's not what I felt. It surprised me. I've been fighting the pull for so long . . ."

Sam closed her eyes and ducked her chin just enough to nuzzle his strong jaw. "Tell me," she demanded, unafraid. "What did you feel?"

"I missed you," he said. "I needed to feel you next to me. There was a void where you should be standing. Now that you're here, everything is –balanced." She felt him shake his head. "I'm not explaining this very well."

"You're explaining it perfectly." Samantha leaned back just enough to meet his eyes straight on as she cupped his face with her hands. "I know exactly what you mean. I will always be here for you, Martin, even if you fight me."

"And me for you," he confirmed.

They held each other close, feeling the warmth and solid presence for several minutes and then shifted to stand side by side. Martin's arm draped comfortably over her shoulder while Sam encircled him loosely with her arms. He moved slightly. When Sam looked up, she caught him rubbing the bruised part of his skull as he stared out over the river. His mind drifted somewhere else. She reached up and stilled his fingers in a light grasp which brought him back to the now and made him smile sheepishly at her. When he turned his attention back to the water, he began to speak in the gravelly softness that she'd grown to love.

"I didn't know mom was sick. Dad said she wanted it that way." Sam kept silent when he paused. "I yelled at him – I mean, I answered his phone and it was the doctor telling me . . ." The words squeaked as his throat clenched. Sam rubbed his back until he could speak again. "I was completely

blindsided, Sam. I had no idea – I yelled, he said she wanted it that way . . .” He paused to swallow and gain control. His eyes grew bright. “Then he grabbed his head and . . . and . . .” He pulled her closer and choked back tears. “Then we went into the trees. The next thing I know, we’re outside on the ground and he’s lying there; I must have pulled him out but I don’t remember. I started CPR . . .”

With his next pause, she tucked him closer and they rocked together until he found his voice.

“My head started to hurt and everything was fuzzy. I remember hearing the river and the smelling rain. His eyes . . .” Martin gulped and his voice wavered. “They were open and black and . . . empty. I swear I saw them glaze over.” Martin rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his eyes squeezed shut. “I still see it happening. I knew he was gone.”

“I’m so sorry, Martin,” Sam whispered.

He ducked his head, looking down to where he’d dumped the pills and was quiet for several minutes.

“That’s all I remember. They said it was probably an aneurysm. Worry. Stress. Me yelling . . .”

“Stop it.” Samantha covered his lips with her fingers until she looked at her. “It won’t help or change anything to blame yourself. If it’s true, it’s something that’s always been there. It’s not your fault.”

She held his wide, sorrowful gaze until he blinded and nodded with a sigh. It was a start.

“I remember hearing you,” he said in a voice scratchy with emotion. He reaffirmed his hold on her. “It was like sunrise. It was so dark.”

“I’m glad I helped.” She tilted her head back and found his lips with hers. The kiss was tender, warm and unrushed, and it made her heart pound faster. They parted and she looked into his eyes and found a bit of peace. “You still need time, Martin. You can’t rush this.”

“I know. It’s fine.” He probed the tender spot on his head again and she bumped him with her hip. “Okay, okay,” he grumbled. “I am so grateful to have you.’

She laughed and her tears flowed again. “I thought you would say something along the lines about me being all you have now.” She wiped her cheeks and snuggled closer.

Martin’s short chuckle was dry. “That sounds so desperate,” he said. “And not exactly right. You’re everything I have now, both you and Finn. Family. You’ve been that for a while and I’m just now realizing that.” He kissed her temple. “Thinking back on my last conversation with Mom, I think she knew it then.” The last words trembled, and Martin fell silent.

They stood on the edge of the river suspended in time, feeling each other’s warmth and support pooling strength between them. Samantha never felt as grounded as she did at this moment. From here, she felt like she – they – could take on anything. What really surprised her was the realization that outcomes didn’t really matter as long as they stood side by side.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Vivian Johnson looked at Samantha through her thick lashes, an amused tint to her words. "Have you even met these people?”

“Yes, of course I have.” Samantha sniffed and set her paper coffee cup on her desk, jabbing the computer keys into life. “In fact, we spent the weekend together. They are lovely people.”

Vivian’s eyebrow arched. “'Lovely people'? I’ve never heard you use that term before.”

Sam tucked a loose hair behind her ear and tapped in her computer password. "Well, they are. They're from Iowa. That's where lovely people come from." Ignoring her partner, she attacked the keyboard.

Vivian chuckled and shook her head as Danny and Elena stopped to join them.

"She's only saying that because she backgrounded the crap out of them before letting them take Finn to Brian's apartment." Danny punched Sam affectionately on the shoulder. "I know you did. Don't even try denying it."

Samantha shrugged away Danny's touch and threw him an impotent glare before nodding shortly. "Of course I did," she muttered. "You would, too. They're looking after him for nearly a week."

"Since Finn is their only grandchild, I can understand their stepping up," Elena added, bumping Sam's shoulder with her hip. "When's Brian coming back?"

"Next week." Sam sighed and leaned back in her chair as the F.B.I. website uploaded. She rubbed her forehead. "This is so surreal."

Viv placed her hands on Sam's shoulders. "We are all happy for both you and Martin," she said. "It's time."

"It's overdue," Danny threw in. Elena smiled at him and took his hand. "You deserve each other." Vivian chastised him with a look. "You know what I mean!" he defended. Elena chuckled.

"Yeah," Samantha said dreamily as she stared at the screen. "It's time."

Elena smiled at her. "Are you nervous?"

"No," Sam replied immediately. "No, I'm not. I'm relieved."

The past Friday marked Martin's one-year commitment to N.A. for living unattached. His horrible day of losses was over a month ago and among all the things he had to deal with, the decision to marry was the easiest. Martin was focused, his life prioritized and each crisis handled with a level headed calm that Samantha envied. Every now and again, she caught him staring into nothingness as his mind drifted, but he always came back to her, solid and ready to move forward. They made a great team and a united front to all obstacles.

Although Martin still attended N.A. meetings, his new sponsor wasn't attached to the organization. Nettie Wells fit into their lives as if she'd always been around. Nettie never judged or gave advice - she simply listened. Martin wasn't the only one that called her; Samantha found that she always came to her own conclusions when they talked. Nettie fit an unknown void in her own life, too.

Nettie also fit on their very short list of witnesses. Sam smiled when she imagined Danny's first encounter with her.

"Don't you have a dress fitting at ten?" Elena glanced at her watch. "I still can't believe you're even here."

"Eleven. Then I'm leaving for the day." Her partners drifted to their own stations as Samantha quickly sorted through her email and skimmed the last of her reports for the week. She added a few details and rearranging the conclusion on one, saved her work and sent them to Jack's inbox.

Leaning back in her office chair, Samantha looked to Martin's desk. He wasn't ready for work for another three weeks and she missed seeing him there, but with the multiple traumas he'd suffered and the unbelievable amount of decisions forced on him in the past weeks, the time off was well warranted.

Tonight, they started their life together and the cold feet she'd always anticipated had yet to make an appearance. It was right. It was time. She wiggled her toes and smiled.

EPILOGUE

Long shadows rippled across the manicured lawn and neatly trimmed shrubs, telling Martin that time for his new life starting was short. Standing on the front portico of the stately house, he heard a pair of car doors slam followed by low voices and the crunch of footsteps on asphalt. The squared hedge lining the long drive was just low enough for Martin to see the tops of two heads. He smiled as Vivian and Marcus cleared the hedge, turned through the gateway and started up the brick path toward him.

Vivian noticed Martin standing there and after a visual sweep of the magnificent front lawn, she turned a warm smile in his direction. Martin gave her a brief wave- the last of his evolved family was here. The giddy grin she wore invited a chuckle.

"Sorry about the time," Marcus said as she reached the bottom stair. "It took longer to get Reggie settled at his friend's place than we expected."

"Not a problem," Martin replied. He shook Marcus's hand. "You can bring in your luggage later."

"There's enough room for all of us to stay?" Vivian topped the stairs and stepped between Martin and her husband. She gave Martin a quick, sideways hug as they walked, her eyes continuing to scan the area.

"Plenty of room," Martin reassured her. "Stay as long as you wish."

He escorted them through the impressive oak doors where a neatly dressed, middle aged woman with a warm smile met them immediately. She offered to take their coats.

"This is Sarah," Martin said in way of introduction. "She's the one to see if you need anything. Sarah, this is Mr. and Mrs. Johnson."

"Your room is all ready. We'll get your things situated after the ceremony if you would leave your keys over there." She indicated a marble table to one side of the front doors.

Marcus did as instructed while Viv gave Martin a visual once-over. "You look great. You've put on some much needed weight." She reached out and smoothed his tie and Martin smiled a little self-consciously.

"I'm doing fine. I miss work."

"And we miss you, too." Vivian glanced to the archway of an adjoining room where soft guitar music indicated their ultimate destination. "Nice place."

"Thanks," Martin answered. "There's a restroom over there if you need it. Please make this your home, too." He straightened and glanced toward the living room. "We're starting soon. You're just in time."

"We'll see you inside, then." Vivian gave his elbow an affectionate squeeze then took her husband's elbow and moved toward the music.

Martin watched them enter the living room and then let his gaze wander over the spacious foyer. He walked to the center, his footfall echoing coldly on the marble floor, and

stopped. The sweep of stairs to his right curved gracefully upward to the second floor, the Mediterranean iron railing both elegant and imposing. He regarded the stairway as flashes of memory popped into his mind.

He remembered running, sliding and jumping up and down the stairs and trying to ride the handrail, knowing the behavior was forbidden here, in the "public" part of the house. It was more tolerated on the less formal and private stairway that led directly to the kitchen, what Martin always considered Sarah's part of the house. He rarely saw his father there. He felt a pang of loss.

His thoughts drifted in Sarah's direction. Martin turned his attention to the gargantuan flower arrangement gracing the center foyer table, the size of the entry managing to make the display seem small. He smiled, fingering a colorful petal; Sarah outdid herself once again when she readied this house for his ceremony. Past gatherings welled from his memories - Katherine Fitzgerald definitely knew how to host a party. He recalled spending most of his time in his room after formal introductions, falling asleep to murmuring voices, muted music and the ring of crystal stemware. Earlier, Sarah thanked him for asking her to prepare the house for his nuptials; she was happy for him and glad to have a celebration to help her work through her grief.

Martin regretted that his parents weren't here to witness this step in his life. He did know, however, that at the end, they did approve of Samantha. With that precious nugget to hold on to, a swell of satisfaction consoled him and eased the heartache of their loss.

Martin abruptly shifted his attention from the past to the present at the sound of Danny's teasing tone.

"Nice digs, Ese." His friend punctuated the comment with a friendly back slap. Martin turned enough to spot the expected smirk and evil, glittering dark eyes. "I'm looking forward to a closer inspection of the game room later."

"*Mi casa es su casa*." Martin shrugged. "It's still weird thinking of this as mine." The pair surveyed the foyer for a moment. "Everyone settled?"

"Almost. You know women." Martin opened his mouth to make a scathing reply, but their attention shifted upward with the sound of children's laughter. A pair of girls appeared at the top of the stairs and Danny took a step closer to the rail. "Careful, Sofie!" he called softly. "Hold Ava's hand!"

"Okay, Papa!"

Martin's cousins quickly caught up to the girls and followed them down the stairs. The girls' dresses were frilly, flouncy puffs of pink and purple whereas Allie and Jamie wore classic lines and looked simply elegant. Jamie's pregnancy, just now becoming apparent, explained her husband's protective arm and glowing expression. Ava's father cautioned the girls in a gentle tone, slowing their descent but increasing their giggles.

"Life goes on," Martin said quietly.

Danny gave him an understanding smile. "That it does, brother. One day at a time." He gave Martin another affectionate shoulder slap as he stepped away to gather Sofie. "I'll get her settled and then it's your turn."

Martin nodded, emotion choking his verbal "Okay." His cousins hugged him and pecked his cheeks, murmuring their love and support before wiping tears from their eyes and following their spouses into the living room.

As they disappeared from sight, Martin felt the pull of family and wandered toward the room's threshold, stopping when the gathering came into his sight. It was a short list of witnesses, but everyone they needed was here. He watched them find their seats, exchange pleasantries and settle down, happily to the very center of his being by their presence. Sarah's touch was obvious in the ivory draped chairs tied back with yellow flowers - It was a far cry from the numbers usually entertained in this room, but Martin and Samantha knew and held dear every single one of them. They were family.

Vivian and Marcus, Danny, Elena and Sofie, Brian's parents and fidgety Finn, Martin's cousins - the remaining part of his blood family - and their significant others. The sight of newly found Nettie Wells sitting next to Jack invoked a grin and he wondered if that arrangement was Jack's choice. Surprisingly, Sam's sister sat on Nettie's other side. On her arrival, she offered her mother's expected excuse.

Danny straightened and walked up the aisle toward Martin, smiling broadly. "That's it." he said when he reached Martin, his hands lifting to straighten the groom's boutonniere. Martin grinned lopsidedly at the attention. "You ready?"

"Yeah," Martin answered, surprised at the jolt of excitement that raced up his spine. "Thanks, Danny. I'm glad you're here. This is perfect."

Danny rested his hands on Martin's shoulders and gave him a little shake, grinning like a fool. "It's nice that our last time together as a team is a happy one."

"Yeah." Martin nodded. Earlier in the week, Danny announced his transfer "upstairs" in accordance to FBI rules about married couples not working together. They were all surprised it took so long for the rule to be enforced, and both he and Danny suspected Jack's prickly nature had something to do with the delay. When Martin and Samantha announced their nuptials, the point was finally addressed. Martin and Sam had three more weeks to talk over their options. Currently, Martin considered jumping ship to the CIA and leaving his father's legacy behind.

Danny's little push brought Martin back to the moment. Sarah appeared, shoulders square and all business. "It's time," she said. She gave Martin's hand a squeeze, her eyes sparkling with banked tears, and entered ahead of them. She took a seat at the outside end of a row.

Martin straightened his jacket and smoothed the lapels. He gave Danny a sideways glance and fought back a laugh when he caught his Best Man smoothing his hair back. Danny caught the look, returned it, and then propelled Martin forward at the elbow.

Stepping into the room, Martin angled so they would walk down the center of the very short aisle. At its end, a white lattice arch and the Justice of the Peace waited. Behind him were floor to ceiling windows overlooking Katherine's beloved rose garden in full bloom. The sky was dusky purple, dotted with round, pink clouds. White lights, winding through the garden's trees, sparkled and the colored blossoms made a living Monet painting.

Before he knew it, Martin felt Danny stop him. He gave the Justice a quick nod before turning to face the gathering of friends.

"Nervous?" Danny whispered as they stood side by side with their hands clasped in front of them.

"Only if you lost the ring," Martin whispered back. He glanced at Danny when there was no response and saw him pat his jacket pocket with a frown." Danny?"

Danny immediately broke into an impish grin. "Gotcha," he said.

Martin snorted in disbelief and the guitar and flute combo paused. The two men stood straighter. Martin felt remarkably calm.

The music started again and Elena appeared in the doorway looking elegant and beautiful in her pale yellow, knee length gown. She held a small bouquet of ivory and yellow flowers.

"Wow," Danny breathed. Martin had to agree.

When Elena reached them, she gave Martin a wink and took her place at his right hand. The music switched up again, and the Bride stepped into view.

"Whoa," Danny squeaked.

Martin was breathless. Samantha wore shimmering, satin ivory with long, simple lines that clung in the right places. Lace trimmed the neckline and sleeves, and there was a tiny line of

pearls at the waistline. Martin's eyes, though, settled on her glowing face framed with a tumble of wavy gold hair and a simple lace veil. Her eyes locked with his and her smile exuded the same calm confidence he felt. This was more than right. This was perfect.

At that moment, Martin knew his life was really just beginning. Whatever trials resulted from the recent string of incidents were simply gateways to this new life - a life that bound their two souls forever.

THE END