



*Nova*

THE DOCTORS CLUB BOOK 4

TAMSEN SCHULTZ

# NORA

#4 DOCTORS CLUB SERIES

TAMSEN SCHULTZ

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*To all the empty nesters who inspired me to embrace the change.*

## PROLOGUE

November, the Friday after Thanksgiving  
Massachusetts

STANDING on the porch of her home, Nora Amiri waved goodbye to her date. He lifted a hand in response, then executed a three-point turn and disappeared down her driveway. She watched until the woods at the end of her drive swallowed the taillights of his car, leaving her in darkness. Well, as dark as it could get with her security lights shining on the frost-laden ground. The first snow of the season hadn't yet fallen, but if the temperatures were any indication, it was on its way.

Scanning her property, her gaze lingered on the picturesque three-story red barn three hundred yards from her house. Built in the late 1800s, it was originally a cowshed, stables, and a carriage house. Now it housed the plethora of stray animals that she took in, nursed to health, then released again—to better owners than they'd had before. She made sure of that.

Unusually, the barn was empty now except for the feral cat and her litter occupying the heated office. The mother wanted nothing to do with any humans. She was, however, content to watch Nora, and her few employees, socialize the now four-week-old kittens. It was as if she knew her babies would have a better life with people than on their own. Especially as winter sank its claws into the Northeast.

Nora glanced through one of the picture windows into her home. Tulah, her oldest dog, and her three others—Paddy, Luna, and Oscar—were waiting for her inside. Despite the weariness that came from yet another lackluster date, though, she wasn't ready to walk into her empty house. Instead, she

turned and headed toward the barn.

The ground crunched under her boots as she crossed the frozen grass, then stepped onto the gravel. Letting herself into the barn through a side door, she walked in the shadows toward the office. As a courtesy to the mother, who preferred to disappear when people were around, Nora knocked softly, then opened the door.

At four weeks old, the kittens were starting to explore. The boldest two were even beginning to experiment with play. When Nora flicked on the soft desk lamp, meows sounded, and five little balls of fur started making their way toward her. Some more confidently than others. Nora sank to the floor to play with them, laughing at the calico that trailed the group. She was the runt of the litter but had a fighting spirit. She'd make it, and she'd likely grow into a strong cat. But for now, she looked like a drunkard stumbling across the wide-plank floors.

Two kittens crawled over her outstretched legs, then up her jacket. A short while later, they were bumping their faces against hers and exploring her curtain of long, thick hair. Another two riffled around the edges of her coat, looking for the treats she always carried. And yes, despite being out on a date, she still had a few in her pocket. Retrieving the bag, she started to dole out the tiny goodies as her mind played over her evening.

She'd known Daniel Gervais for years. Like her, he was a vet. Although unlike her, he specialized in large animals. His very successful sport horse rehabilitation center was located two towns over.

His wife had left him for a horse trainer three years ago, and Daniel hadn't been shy about getting back into the dating game. In fact, she'd been kind of insulted that it had taken him three years to get around to asking her out. Not that she had any special feelings for the man, but he'd dated a lot of women since his wife's departure. By the time he finally asked her out, she felt like leftovers.

She picked up the little calico and rubbed her cheek against its soft fur, acknowledging that she shouldn't have agreed to the date in the first place. It wasn't that Daniel was a bad person, but had he truly been interested in her, he would have asked her out sooner. She'd known this when he'd asked. And she'd known it when she'd agreed. Yet she'd agreed anyway.

With a sigh, she set the calico down on her lap and encouraged the kitten to climb down her jean-clad legs to practice balance. Tiny claws pierced the fabric of her pants as the little female rocked side to side and inched its way



down her legs.

The kitten paused below her knees, then performed a dismount that was something between a leap and a fall. Nora smiled, then let her head fall back against the wall and closed her eyes. It didn't take a genius to know why she'd accepted the invitation. Her friends had all found partners they loved and respected. Men who were strong enough for them. Men who appreciated and loved them.

They'd all found what she wanted.

So, yes, she accepted the date, telling herself that maybe she hadn't ever given Daniel the right chance. Maybe, given time, the friendship they shared could grow into something more. She should have listened to her instinct and saved them both the night out.

With another sigh, she lifted kittens from her lap and began to rise just as headlights swept through the windows. Frowning, she pulled out her phone. She'd left it in silent mode and had missed the notification that pinged her when someone drove up her driveway.

Friday night at nine was an odd time to have a visitor, but Nora wasn't worried. She had a variety of weapons stored around the barn. Not to mention the element of surprise on her side, since whoever was coming wouldn't expect her to be in the barn. Not at this time of night, and not with the temperatures hovering in the high teens. There was also a much more practical reason she needn't worry. Cos Cob, her hometown, had next to no violent crime. Had someone truly been interested in committing such a thing, they wouldn't have driven straight up her drive and announced their arrival with high beams.

Still, erring on the side of caution, Nora unlocked a desk drawer and pulled out a small handgun. Staying in the shadows, she made her way out of the office toward the barn door. Through a small window, she watched a black Escalade pull up her driveway, then into the guest parking area.

The driver got out of the car and opened the back door. Long legs emerged first, then the full man. With the lights coming from behind him, her visuals weren't great, but she didn't need to see his face to know who he was. Though what he was doing here, in Cos Cob, she hadn't a clue.

Slipping the gun into her pocket, she stepped from the shadows. The sound of the barn door opening brought both men's attention to her. The driver tensed and reached inside his jacket, but the other man, the older of the two, remained still.

She walked toward her house and paused at the slate stone path to her front door, ten feet from the back of the SUV. The older man's gaze took her in, and she returned the favor. He wore gray trousers with black shoes, and his black wool coat hung to his knees. His hands were in his pockets, and he wore a scarf. With his pale blue eyes and his shock of gray hair, he was still a handsome man.

Unfortunately, he was also a man who rarely brought good news.

Nora welcomed the churning of her stomach that his arrival brought. Not that she enjoyed it, but there was nothing to do to prevent it, so it was easier to acknowledge the reaction and move on. She drew in a deep breath, bracing herself for what might come next.

"Nora," he said, inclining his head in the semblance of a bow.

She returned the gesture, then spoke the question she was quite sure she didn't want to hear the answer to. "What brings you here, Franklin?"

## CHAPTER ONE

NORA SET a mug of tea on the dining table in front of Franklin, then took a seat opposite him with her latte. With the dogs settled on their various beds scattered around the kitchen, she had her first chance to really look at him. He was a man who aged yet never seemed to really age. His hair was grayer than when she'd first met him more than twenty-five years ago. His skin held a few more wrinkles. But his blue-gray eyes, a mirror of his niece's, her friend Cyn, were even more alert. Sharper now than ever before.

He wasn't visiting her in his capacity as Cyn's uncle, though. He was also Nora's handler. Hers and her friends'—Cyn, Six, and Devil—to be precise. Nora had no idea how he had managed to con the powers that be to allow him to have such a role in their lives. Six worked for the Italian intelligence agency and Devil, the Chinese. Nora was an agent for the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate, while Franklin, like Cyn, worked for MI6.

They'd all stopped asking that question long ago, though. He'd never give them an answer, and after several years in the game, they agreed that how it came about wasn't important. His devotion to, and support of, the four of them was unflagging, and that was all they needed to know. But that support came with a cost. Franklin tended to leave her and her friends with more questions than answers. Not a comfortable place for four intelligence agents to be.

“What's that?” Nora asked, nodding to the file Franklin had set on the table. He slid it over and she opened it. Scanning the first page, she frowned. “I've heard of this program, but what does it have to do with me?” She closed the folder, hoping that Franklin would be in a rare mood to answer questions.

“Group Six of the NATO K9 project will be arriving in Massachusetts on

Monday. They are starting the second year of the two-year course. This will be their fourth training session together. It's a three-week program, and I need you to be the on-site veterinarian throughout."

Nora eyed him, then reopened the folder. The NATO K9 project was an elite training program for K9s and their handlers. NATO had launched it a few years earlier and each year, twelve pairs—handler and dog—were chosen to attend. The project was intended to build skills and strengthen ties among NATO countries. Most of the participants were military who deployed with their dogs. But some were search-and-rescue or law enforcement.

It didn't surprise Nora to learn they had a resident vet at each session. The dogs were extraordinarily valuable assets to their countries. The question that hovered on her tongue, though, was "Why me?"

She skimmed the training schedule for the next session, taking place not far from Cos Cob in Western Massachusetts. The land was a former army base that the military had decommissioned eight years earlier. Now it served as a temporary training ground for all sorts of activities, including the NATO K9 project.

The first few pages were brief bios of the participants: four women and eight men from six different countries. There were three search-and-rescue dogs, four combat dogs, and five patrol dogs. Finding nothing to pique her interest, she flipped to the next set of documents.

Her eyes scanned the first page and when she reached the end, she looked up and met Franklin's gaze. He nodded for her to continue, and she dropped her attention back to the file. She read the first page again, then flipped to the second, and then the third. When she finished, she looked up.

"Three murders during each of the three prior training sessions?" she said, more than asked. Franklin nodded. "And this is just coming to your attention now?"

He tipped his head, accepting the subtle rebuke. "With the exception of the first, all the murders took place more than ten—though less than fifteen—miles from the training grounds. The MO may be the same across each of the three sets of murders—one stabbing, one burning, and one strangulation—but within each set, it's different. Local authorities never connected the three murders to each other, let alone to crimes in other countries."

Nora turned her attention back to the folder. Setting the three summary pages in a row in front of her, she scanned the details side by side. The victims were ethnically diverse, a mix of men and women, and represented a

fairly broad age range.

“Hardly standard for a serial killer, is it?” she commented, mostly to herself.

“Which is yet another reason it went unnoticed.”

“Until?” she prompted.

“Until the family of Loretta Campion hired a PI. The PI didn’t link Ms. Campion’s murder to the strangulation or burning that occurred in the same area, but she connected it to the other two stabbings from the prior sessions. All three victims were stabbed once on the right side of their torso, puncturing their lung and nicking an artery. Death wouldn’t have been instantaneous, but it would have been mercifully quick.”

She glanced at the files again. “The PI linked it to the training sessions?”

Franklin shook his head. “A member of the local constabulary did,” he answered. “Ms. Campion was murdered last August in a small parish on the outskirts of New Orleans. In the PI’s search for similar crimes, she discovered the murder of Michael Hampton. Mr. Hampton was killed in a small village in the Highlands of Scotland four months prior to Ms. Campion’s death. The PI rang the local constabulary to share notes. The locals had all but chalked up Hampton’s death to being the result of a deranged hiker. But after the PI’s call, the lead detective started reexamining the case. The only thing out of the ordinary happening around the time of Mr. Hampton’s murder was the NATO training session held at a nearby army base. Once he realized that, he alerted the local army officials.”

Nora frowned, then took a sip of her latte. “He didn’t think of that before?”

“He was an army man himself, didn’t want to consider the possibility. Also, Mr. Hampton was killed thirteen miles from the training location, and none of the handlers have cars.”

“Ever?” she asked, then clarified. “They don’t ever have cars when they are in session?”

Franklin shook his head. “They aren’t in lockdown, but they aren’t allowed to drive. If they can get a ride or walk, then they aren’t prohibited from going places.”

She looked down at the pages again. The first set of murders had occurred while training in Turkey. The second in Scotland. The most recent in Louisiana. From the minimal information she had, it certainly looked as though someone from the program was a serial killer. Although his or her

MO was like none Nora had ever studied before. *Studied* being the operative word.

“I’m not sure what you think I can do, Franklin. Serial killers aren’t what I’m used to dealing with—not like this one. Treason, sure. Espionage, no problem. Arms trafficking...you know I’ve been there a time or two. But a serial killer? Wouldn’t this be the job of Army CID or naval intelligence or something like that? Jordan isn’t even a member of NATO.”

“Which is one of the reasons you’re the right person.”

“*One* of the reasons?”

“Another is that we don’t want to bring anyone new into the equation. It could risk alerting the killer to our suspicions in a way that sends them into hiding. A new veterinarian, we can explain. A new person with no particular role, we can’t.”

She shook her head. “I don’t have authority to operate in the United States, you know that.”

At that comment, a small smile played on his lips. “You act as if that’s stopped you before.”

Nora bit back her reply. He had a point. Over the past year, her friends had found themselves in some rather interesting situations. All of which had occurred on US soil. And all of which she’d provided significant backup for. But still...

“It’s one thing to have something fall in our laps that we needed to take care of. This is different, and we both know it. This is intentionally inserting myself into an ongoing criminal investigation that implicates six countries.”

“Then it’s a good thing you have clearance to move ahead.” He removed a folded sheet of paper from his coat pocket and slid it across the table to her.

She held his gaze as she unfolded it. Once the paper was flat on the table, she dropped her eyes and scanned the text. Not surprisingly, Franklin had somehow managed to get NATO authorities to authorize her to lead the investigation.

Slowly but surely, Franklin was backing her into a corner.

She took another sip of her latte to buy herself time before responding. She had a practice to run, and rescheduling three weeks of appointments wasn’t a walk in the park. Yes, she did it when she was activated by the Directorate, but this was different.

To say she wasn’t happy to have her services farmed out was an understatement. Not that she had anything against NATO, but the way

Franklin had orchestrated the situation was a reminder of how much her life wasn't her own, and that thought sat uneasily on her shoulders.

Then again, it was possible that her issue wasn't so much the assignment, but the fact that it amplified the general malaise she'd been feeling about her life. She had a successful practice and a solid group of friends, but there was no denying she'd been restless. She wanted what her friends had and had been spending far too much time wondering if she'd ever find someone to share her life with. To have a family with.

But even if she did find someone, what kind of life would it be if her government had the right to call her away at the drop of a hat? And now she was being farmed out for something that should be handled by a different agency, too? Franklin's request was a stark reminder of how untethered she was.

But none of that was Franklin's doing, and so she took a deep breath and asked, "Do you have additional files?"

True to form, Franklin's expression changed not a bit at her acquiescence, and he nodded. "We'll have them sent over. You should know that three of the handlers have been cleared. They have unshakable alibis for all the murders."

She nodded. "That's good. What about the others?"

"Four have no alibis for any of the murders, and five have partial alibis."

"Partial?" she asked.

"We were unable to confirm their whereabouts for at least one of the murders at each location."

She considered that for a moment, then thought about the handlers involved. "Is there any chance it's a game between two of the participants? A sort of 'you kill one, I'll kill one, and we'll see who gets away with it'?" It was a sick thought, but one she couldn't ignore. For as many honorable people as she'd met in various military positions, there were just as many my-dick-is-bigger-than-yours types, too.

"At this point, we're not ruling out any options," Franklin replied.

"And what about the trainers? I assume they are being looked at as well? And the vet I'm replacing?"

"The veterinarian you'll be replacing is in the clear. The trainers are being looked at as well, and none of them have an airtight alibi."

She quickly did the math in her head. "I have three weeks to investigate twelve people—three trainers and nine handlers. And if I don't find the killer,

three more people might die?”

“You were always an overachiever, Nora.”

“Laying it on thick, Franklin.”

That elicited a smile. “The club can help, of course,” he said, referring to her group of friends. “The club” was a shortened version of “the Doctors Club,” a name Six, also known as Violetta Salvitto, gave the group when Cyn completed her PhD and was the last of the four to earn a title with the name “doctor” in it. It started as a joke and over the years had simply morphed into an easy way to refer to her friends. It had morphed again in the past year, but in size not name, when Joe Harris, Gavin Cooper, and Darius Washington had partnered up with Cyn, Six, and Devil, respectively.

“They would regardless,” Nora shot back. They didn’t need an okay stamp from NATO to help. That wasn’t how they operated.

“To my everlasting chagrin,” he replied, though Nora didn’t miss the pride in his voice. But then his expression sobered, and he tipped his head toward the file again. “There is one more reason I wanted you a part of this.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“Read the last page,” he directed.

Her heart started climbing into her throat as she thumbed through the pages to reach the final document. The one she had yet to look at. On the front were bios of two of the trainers. A woman from Sweden and a man from the UK.

“Turn it over,” Franklin said.

She hesitated, then flipped it over to read the name of the third trainer. She skimmed his bio, then read his name again before looking up. “He’s not involved,” she said with more certainty than she felt.

“He hasn’t been particularly stable since his wife died ten years ago.”

“People grieve in different ways,” she countered.

“He left his position.”

“As would most people when the love of your life is brutally murdered, and you think it’s your fault.” Her heart was beating an erratic tattoo.

“Was it his fault?”

Nora’s eyes narrowed. “As far as I know, no one knows who actually killed her. It could have been a vagrant, a clever neighbor, or someone from his other life. Regardless, it doesn’t matter. He blamed himself and no doubt left his position because he knew he was no good to anyone.”

Franklin held her gaze. “Possible. Or he left believing the work his



government asked him to do was the reason for his wife's murder, and he's been harboring a grudge ever since."

Nora shook her head. "If he harbored a grudge, he wouldn't have agreed to be a trainer for a government-led project."

Franklin's cool blue eyes assessed her, then he inclined his head. "Perhaps. But I expect you to treat him as you do all the others."

"Franklin," she said. Just his name. She wasn't sure what else to say.

"I trust you grasp the sensitivity of the situation and why I wanted you assigned. It isn't just that someone on a NATO program is killing innocent people. But the fact that one of the suspects is a former agent for *Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna* has everyone walking on eggshells."

Nora's gaze dropped back down to the paper. A former Italian intelligence agent was most definitely a suspect. A man she'd known for twenty years. A man who had been her one and only one-night stand.

A man who was also Six's cousin.

Lucian Salvitto.

## CHAPTER TWO

NORA PROVIDED her ID to the man staffing the gatehouse of the training grounds. The facility was no longer an army base, but it was still under military control, and the guard was kitted out in field camo, boots, and a weapon.

“Will this be the car you’ll be bringing in and out of the facility, ma’am?” he asked. She nodded, and he made a note on the clipboard he held. Cold air seeped through her partially open window as the man did whatever he needed to do to clear both her and her car. Then finally, he handed back her ID.

“Follow this road and at the first stop sign, turn left. You’ll see the main facilities on your right about three hundred meters down.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. She started to roll her window up, then stopped. “Is there a trail system on the grounds?” She didn’t miss the flicker of interest in the man’s blue eyes—his very young eyes. Which did not hurt her ego at all. “I like to run in the mornings,” she added.

“There are a lot of trails. Any particular distance you like?” he asked.

“My preference is five to seven miles, but I can work with longer or shorter.”

“The perimeter route is six point two miles. If you continue down the road past the facilities where you’ll be staying, you’ll see a trailhead at the very end. It’s a well-used trail, so you definitely won’t get lost.” He eyed her again, and she was starting to like this young man. “There’s a group of us who go out at five each morning and run it,” he said. “We run a steady seven-minute mile. If you want to join us, we usually pass by the trailhead I just told you about around fifteen minutes after five.”

She smiled. “Thank you, I may do that.”

His gaze lingered, then he smiled, nodded, and stepped back so he could raise the gate for her. She gave him a little wave, then drove through. Following his directions, she pulled into the designated parking lot for the building she'd call home for the next three weeks. Well, for most of the next three weeks. She *had* negotiated two nights off, but only two. One for a date she had already scheduled, and the second for the collective birthday celebration for her, Cyn, Six, and Devil. All their birthdays fell within ten days of one another, and it had become a tradition to have a single big blowout party to celebrate all four. There was no way she was going to miss it.

After grabbing her rolling suitcase and duffel bag from the back of her Land Cruiser, she locked the vehicle and made her way inside where another soldier greeted her. This time a woman who looked to be in her early thirties.

"You must be Dr. Amiri," she said, rising from a makeshift reception table. "I'm Staff Sergeant Markley, the army liaison for this training session and your general coordinator extraordinaire," she added with a smile.

Nora shook the woman's hand. "Yes, I'm Nora Amiri. Please call me Nora."

Staff Sergeant Markley nodded, though Nora doubted the woman would take her up on the offer to call her by her first name. "Follow me and I'll give you a quick tour before I show you to your room." She started walking toward a set of double doors, talking as she did. "Through these doors, you'll see the main lounge area that the group, including the K9s, is more than welcome to use. There's a kitchen as well should anyone wish to cook. There are a couple of bars and restaurants within walking distance, but the grocery stores are a bit farther away. You have a car so it's less relevant, but many of the stores will deliver should attendees of the program choose to do that."

They pushed through the doors and walked into an area that was surprisingly homey. Nora had expected industrial chic, but what greeted her looked more like a large British pub. Wide-plank floors gave way to dark wood-paneled walls. A fireplace, surrounded by couches and chairs, anchored the left side of the room. A pool table and a foosball table lay to the right. There were also several alcoves and window seats that invited her to curl up and read a book. They'd also be good spots to watch the snow fall. Not that snow had fallen yet, but over the next three weeks, she had faith it would. And when it did, she knew where she'd be.

Behind the fireplace area, she could see a kitchen. From where she stood,

she couldn't see it in its entirety, but if it was anything like the lounge, she suspected it would be more than well-stocked.

"I assume the program isn't expecting people to cook for themselves every day," Nora said. "Is there a mess hall or cafeteria?"

Markley nodded. "Leave your bags here for a moment and I'll show you the rest of the common areas," she said, then motioned to her left. Nora set her roller bag against a wall but kept her duffel and followed. "The kitchen is here, as I'm sure you guessed," Markley said, leading them by the room that also held a single dining table long enough to seat twenty people. "To the left here"—Markley waved at a series of closed doors as they started down a hallway—"are the offices. This is mine," she said, pointing to one. "If you ever need anything, I'm usually there." Nora nodded, and they continued toward the end of the hall.

A few seconds later, Markley pushed a door open, and they walked into a second dining area. The decor was somewhere between "budget hotel" and "bed-and-breakfast." The carpet was thin and industrial, and the empty buffet bar was utilitarian. But scattered around the room were tables—some two-tops and some four- and six-tops—made in the Shaker style. And at the very end of the room was yet another fireplace, lined on either side with built-in bookshelves.

"All meals are served here," Markley said. "The welcome packet in your room lists the hours of operation. If the group decides to cook, we ask that you inform us twenty-four hours ahead of time so we can let our cooks know." There wasn't much else to see in the room, and Markley led her back to the hallway. "The welcome packet also has a map of the facilities, and the trail system should you wish to go for a walk or a run."

When they reached the lounge area again, Nora rested her hand on the handle of her roller bag. "So, the lounge, kitchen, and mess hall are on the ground floor. What about the living quarters?"

Markley smiled. "Come with me, and bring your bags this time." Nora nodded and followed her through another set of doors and into a long corridor. "This hall houses all the handlers and their K9s. We know the dogs wouldn't have a problem on any of the floors, but we figured being on the ground floor was easier for the handlers to just pop outside when their dogs need to relieve themselves." She paused, then added with a smile, "We've also heard from other facilities that have hosted this program that the handlers like to have a good time while they are here. We thought putting them closer

to the lounge was the best idea. You and the three trainers, however, are up on the top level.”

“Top level?” The building had three levels; it seemed odd to have the handlers on the ground floor and the trainers and her on the third.

Markley pushed a button on the elevator and smiled again. “Trust me, it’s a better floor. The second is essentially dorm rooms with a few private ones mixed in. The top floor originally hosted official guests, so the rooms are bigger and much nicer. There are also a couple of conference rooms for the trainers to work in and an outdoor patio. It’s a little cold for the patio, but it’s got a nice view, and someone recently brought a fire pit up there, so it can be cozy.”

“And will the trainers be using the entire grounds?” Nora asked as the elevator rose.

Markley shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m just here to make sure you all get situated and have what you need. The trainers are in the second conference room, if you want to ask.” They stepped off the elevator and she pointed to the right. “It’s down there, the third door on the left. Your room is this way,” she said, leading Nora to the left and to the end of the hall. It appeared she had a corner room. Right by the door to the outdoor patio and fire pit. Although there was no fire pit hot enough to induce her to sit outside in the below-freezing temperatures.

“Here you go,” Markley said, using a key card to open the door. Moving aside, she made room for Nora to enter with her luggage. “Your key is on the table. If you lose it, let me know and we can key you a new one. Your welcome packet is on the desk as well. Since it’s only you and the trainers for lunch, we just brought it up a few minutes ago. The participants and the K9s will be arriving later this afternoon, and there will be a welcome dinner tonight at seven for everyone.”

“Thank you,” Nora said, setting her duffel bag down on the bed as she wheeled her suitcase beside the dresser. Markley hadn’t been kidding; the room was far better than she’d expected. It had a four-poster king-size bed, gorgeous built-in bookshelves, and its own window seat. The little nook wasn’t quite as cozy as the one in the lounge, but from up on the top floor, it had a spectacular view.

She looked out the window, scanning the grounds that spread out for acres and acres. “Where are the vet facilities?” Nora asked.

“There’s a portable clinic about a quarter of a mile from here. The

original vet requested it be put up at that site, rather than close to the living quarters. It's closer to the field where a lot of training will be taking place. It's marked on the map if you want to walk over and check it out," she answered, pointing to the welcome packet.

"I assume it's locked?" Nora asked.

Markley nodded. "Key is in your welcome packet," she said.

Again, Nora nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate the tour."

The woman smiled. "I know I won't get to interact with the dogs at all, but we're looking forward to having you all here just the same. Animals tend to make the days go by better, don't they?"

Nora smiled back. "I couldn't agree more. And again, thank you. It's nearly lunchtime, so I'll grab a bite and then head out to the clinic."

Markley nodded, then left, shutting the door behind her. Nora stood by the window until she heard the ding of the elevator taking the staff sergeant down to the ground floor. Then moving to a beautifully carved armoire, she opened it and found exactly what she'd expected—a large safe. She hadn't brought many weapons, but those she had, she pulled from her duffel and locked away.

Eyeing her roller bag, she decided to leave her unpacking for later. She had a few hours before the participants arrived, but she was anxious to see the clinic. After grabbing the map from her welcome packet, she swiped the key from the desk, then made her way to the conference room. Muffled voices filtered through the closed door as she approached and, not wanting to just barge in, she knocked and waited.

"Come in," a woman called.

Nora poked her head in, then, seeing the food set up along the side wall closest to her, she stepped inside. "I'm Dr. Nora Amiri, the attending vet," she said.

An older woman, perhaps in her mid-sixties, stepped forward first. "Ingrid Morven, one of the trainers." Her blue eyes were pale against the warm tone of her skin, and her cropped gray hair curled around her prominent cheekbones.

"Nice to meet you," Nora said, taking the woman's outstretched hand.

"And I'm James Topham," a man about her age, maybe a few years younger, said as he stepped forward to offer his hand.

After she released James's hand, an awkward silence filled the room as three sets of eyes turned to the last person. The one who hadn't introduced

himself. Although in truth, he had no need to.

Standing on the other side of a long table, Nora studied Lucian Salvitto. He had the same whiskey-colored eyes as Six, but that's about the only trait he shared with his cousin. At six foot four, Lucian towered over everyone in the room. His Mediterranean skin was darkened by time in the sun, and his black hair was as curly and as unmanageable as it had been the first day she'd met him. Only now it was sprinkled with just the right amount of gray. He'd been a good-looking young man, and he was striking now. If she painted, he'd be a man she'd want to capture with bold oils.

Well, if he weren't scowling at her.

"Lucian," she said with a nod. She didn't walk over and extend her hand. Nor did she greet him with a kiss on each cheek. His countenance all but screamed at her to stay away, and so she did. Although she didn't understand why. The last time she'd seen him had been three years earlier. She'd stopped by Rome on her way home from Jordan and joined Six's parents for a dinner he'd also attended. He'd been quiet, but friendly. Nothing like the man now glaring at her.

"Nora," he finally said. She held his gaze, then dropped it and turned away. James and Ingrid shared a look. But even if Nora had been inclined to explain Lucian's attitude toward her, she wouldn't have been able to.

"I understand there's lunch?" she asked.

James jumped to the side and made a dramatic gesture to the food sitting on the counter. "A feast of the gods," he said with a smile. She smiled back and walked over to look at the spread. Sandwiches, chips, and a large salad lined the counter, along with an assortment of canned drinks. Thankfully, there was a vegetarian option. Picking up a plate, she grabbed an avocado, cheese, and veggie sandwich before snagging a bag of chips. She finished off her selections by sliding a can of seltzer water into her quilted vest along with some napkins.

"We were about to break," Ingrid said. "Care to join us?"

Nora's gaze flickered to Lucian, who hadn't moved since she'd arrived. Ingrid's question had been polite, and Nora didn't doubt she was sincere. But she also heard the strain of uncertainty in the woman's voice, as if she'd like her to stay, but wasn't sure it was a good idea.

Nora wasn't sure either. She'd intended to stay and ask a few questions about the planned training. But with Lucian still glaring at her, perhaps not. She also didn't want to make Ingrid and James uncomfortable. "Thank you,

but I'll leave you three to your session," she said. "I'll head over to the clinic, but if there's time afterward, I'd appreciate an overview of your plans. I'd also be grateful for any insight into the dogs and their handlers." She directed her statement to Ingrid, but James was the one who replied.

"We'd be happy to. Meet back here at four? The others are scheduled to arrive between five and six," he said. Nora glanced at Ingrid, who nodded. She didn't bother to look at Lucian.

"That sounds great. I'll stop by then," she said, moving toward the door. James took three strides across the room and opened it for her.

"What happened to Dr. Kline?" he asked as she passed by. Rebecca Kline was the vet who'd worked with them during the three prior sessions.

Nora paused in the hallway. Shaking her head and shrugging, she answered. "I don't know. Family emergency, I think. I didn't ask."

James gave a little nod. He seemed to want to say something more, so she waited. But then he took a sharp breath and smiled. "See you at four."

She smiled back. "Yes, see you at four."



## CHAPTER THREE

BACK IN HER ROOM, Nora opted to go over the robust set of files Franklin had sent as she picked at her lunch. The three handlers she didn't need to investigate were Cencio, Willa, and Jonah. Cencio, a gentleman from Italy, had been either in his room or at a confirmed location for each of the murders. Willa, a young woman from the UK, had been in her room every night of every session, not just the nights of the murders. Apparently, she was rather introverted and didn't join in many, if any, of the social aspects of the program. Jonah, from the US, had been either in a bar, out with other members of the team, or, for five of the nine murders, in bed with a woman. Nora smiled and made a note to herself that he was likely the playboy of the group. There was always at least one.

Scrolling through the dossiers on each of the handlers, she made a mental list of who was who. Willa and Collin were from the UK, Anne and Marie were from Belgium, and Cencio and Angelo, from Italy. Jonah and Craig would travel the least and hailed from the US. Gerhard and Jurgen were German, and Jean and Sophie, French. She smiled at herself. She'd forget their names the minute she turned her computer off. It wouldn't be until she met the dogs that she'd remember the people.

There were three people she would remember, though. And as she started into the second half of her sandwich, she pulled up the file on James Topham, Ingrid Morven, and Lucian Salvitto.

Starting with James, she clicked open the file. Aged thirty-six, he hailed from Oxford and had been raised in a family that revolved around animals. His father was a world-class equestrian, and his mother was a vet. They were also well-respected dog breeders with several champions, both field and

show, to their name. He'd gone to university, then into the British Army, where he naturally ended up assigned to a K9 unit. An IED in Afghanistan had damaged his hearing, and he'd been honorably discharged. After returning home, he started a training program that now produced some of the best working K9s in Europe. Nora was used to being around overachievers, but even she was impressed with his CV and accomplishments. And based on her short interaction with him, he appeared relatively humble as well. All in all, a very interesting package.

Ingrid was a different story, though no less impressive. She'd enlisted in the Swedish Army to escape a violent home life. Five years in and a confirmed alcoholic, she ran into trouble. The army gave her the option of jail or working at the kennels that trained and rehabilitated military and police working dogs. She chose the latter and spent six years cleaning, maintaining facilities, and basically being a grunt. The stint had sobered her up, but she'd also learned. She'd read, watched, and taken every opportunity that had presented itself to experience more. Fifteen years after first setting foot in the kennels, she was hired on as a junior trainer and had been working in the field ever since. She had a reputation for being a tough, no-nonsense, and call-it-like-it-is person. Handlers seemed to take a while to warm up to her. But in the end, most recognized her skill, and often cited her as being one of the most influential trainers they worked with. At least according to the files Nora had.

Nora smiled, thinking of the woman. She seemed warm enough, but then again, Nora wasn't one of her trainees. It would be fun to watch those interactions tomorrow when the training started.

Closing out Ingrid's file, her cursor hovered over Lucian's. She already knew his story, roughly anyway. He'd started his career as an agent for AISE, the Italian intelligence agency. He'd married at twenty-five and his wife had bred, raised, and trained working dogs. When he was thirty-two, Alessandra Salvitto had been brutally murdered. The crime remained unsolved. Four months after his wife's death, Lucian left AISE and took up her business. To some, the shift from spy to dog trainer might seem odd. But he, like James, had grown up in a family surrounded by animals. And despite his erratic travel schedule, he'd been more involved in his wife's business than most people knew.

Her gaze lingered on his file. Did she need to know more? Somehow, intruding into the lives of people she didn't know felt different from digging

into that of a man she'd once slept with. It was years ago, of course. But her history with Lucian, coupled with the fact that he was Six's cousin, made it, well, awkward. And then there was Six to think of. Would she feel betrayed by Nora poking around in his life? Most likely, but probably only for a few minutes.

Nora sighed and clicked on the file. She had a job to do, and it wasn't in her to not do it well. The document popped open, and she scanned his early life story. Much of it she knew, and her review was swift. But her perusal slowed when she reached the murder. The point in time when everything seemed to change for Lucian.

He'd been on an op when Alessandra was attacked and killed on the couple's property in Umbria. That much, Nora had known. What she hadn't known was that the op he'd been on had gone bad. Someone had outed Lucian, and he'd nearly lost his own life. Her report included the case file of the AISE investigation into the incident. The findings were—and remained—inconclusive. To this day, no one knew who had leaked the information on Lucian's identity.

Interesting.

Nora's stomach turned at the thought of a leak at AISE, the agency Six worked for. It also seeded another thought. On top of his wife's murder, Lucian's own agency might have been responsible for the end of his career—and life. No wonder he'd left. Spies didn't trust often or easily, but one thing they did rely on was the discretion of their agencies. Not so much because they felt the agencies cared about them, personally, but because intelligence work couldn't happen without it. Spies needed their identities to be kept secret in order to gather intelligence, and agencies needed the intelligence to protect their interests. Secrecy was self-serving on the part of the government, but it ensured the safety of those involved. For the most part.

The botched op gave weight to Lucian's decision to leave. It also gave credence to Franklin's theory that he might hold a grudge. If Lucian believed the agency that he'd pledged his fidelity to had betrayed him, well, Nora could see how that might fester. Especially if that betrayal occurred simultaneously with the death of his wife.

Nora gave a moment's thought to how dark those days must have been for Lucian. She couldn't imagine what he'd gone through. Yet somehow, he'd managed to crawl out and make the business his wife had started a success.

Wanting to read about those intervening years, she started scrolling to the next page, but startled when someone knocked at the door. Nora frowned. She hadn't heard anyone's footsteps in the hall. Even so, chances were it was only one of three people. She called out, "Come in," and set her computer to sleep mode.

To her surprise, Lucian stepped into the room. His gaze swept over the space, taking in the large bed, her two bags, and her computer before meeting hers. She remained at the desk but turned to face him.

"Can I help you?" she asked, unsure what to do or say to him. Despite their history, he wasn't quite a friend. But because of it, he was more than an acquaintance. Although with the way he'd treated her in the conference room, she wondered if he considered her either of those.

"I know why you're here," he said, his voice taut with anger.

Her brow furrowed. She was quite certain he didn't know why she was there. She had no idea what he might mean, though, so she played at being obtuse. "I should hope so. I am a vet, after all."

She didn't think it possible, but his eyes narrowed even more, and his expression darkened. She studied him as she waited for him to make the next move. His work boots were well-worn, and the dark brown leather was scuffed to a lighter color at the toes. His jeans were frayed at the cuffs but looked soft and durable as they wrapped around his thighs. The hunter-green vest he wore over an off-white button-down would be enough to keep him warm while inside. She wondered if he had the right kind of coat for winter in Massachusetts.

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," he bit out as he ran a hand over his more-than-a-five-o'clock shadow.

She frowned. "Actually, I don't know what you mean, Lucian. I don't know why you're angry, and I don't know why it's directed at me. I haven't seen you in three years. And even when I did see you, we had a friendly evening with your aunt and uncle. I can't imagine I did anything to warrant this."

He scowled. "You're here because they sent you to look after me," he said, stalking toward her. He was an imposing man, but Nora wasn't afraid of him. Curious, yes; afraid, no.

"You're sounding a bit paranoid, Lucian. Who is this *they* you're talking about?" She remained seated but tipped her head up to look at him as he approached.

He paused, looming over her, his arms crossed. Dark eyes searched hers, and she fought the urge to scoot her chair back. She didn't feel the need to move away from him, but craning her neck to hold his gaze was getting uncomfortable.

"Honestly, Lucian, I have no idea what you're talking about," she said. And it wasn't a lie.

"How did you end up here?" It was worded as a question but came out as a demand.

"Why don't you try that again and see if you can be less growly about it?" she countered. Among her friends, she was the one they all considered the caregiver. And she was definitely more of a nurturer than a fighter. But that didn't mean she was a pushover. She'd done nothing to deserve his ire, and it wasn't that hard to be polite. Especially to someone you knew.

His jaw ticked.

"Bears growl, Nora. I ask. And again, how did you end up here?"

She shot him a look of mild disbelief. "Sounded more like a demand to me. But seeing as it seems important to you, I'm here because I was asked."

Was that his teeth grinding she heard?

"Who asked you?" he asked through his clenched jaw.

She took a deep breath and let it out. Worried for his dental health, she cut to the chase. "I don't know who you think sent me here, let alone why that might set you off. I assure you, though, I'm only here because the other vet had a family thing come up. Not only do I have experience with working dogs, but I'm local. I guess it seemed like a win-win to the organizers since they didn't have to pay for any travel." Not entirely the truth, of course. But her real purpose for being there had nothing to do with whatever Lucian seemed to think was going on, so she didn't feel too bad about the white lie.

He glared down at her. She held his gaze. Seconds ticked by and as they did, she started to notice tiny things about him. A small scar just below the hairline on the left side of his forehead. A spot of dark brown in his right eye. Seated as she was, she also happened to be eye level with his groin. She never dropped her eyes, but in her peripheral vision, it wasn't hard to see that his height wasn't the only large part of his body. They'd had that one night together, but a young man of twenty-two was a very different thing from a man of forty-two.

"My family sent you," he said, dragging the words out.

Her mind flew out of the gutter it had been headed into, and she drew

back. “Your family?” she asked, frowning. “Why would your family send me here? And even if they wanted to, for whatever reason, how would they even do that?” His eyes bored into hers. She was genuinely confused and hoped he’d see that.

“Violetta knows you’re here?”

She nodded. “Of course she knows. I’m here for three weeks. I could hardly leave without telling my friends where I was going.”

“She didn’t send you?”

More and more questions were popping into her head. “Again, why would she do that? Not to mention the fact that even if she wanted to, how would she accomplish it? I love Six like a sister, but she is *not* an animal person. The veterinary needs of working dogs aren’t on her radar, let alone something she would orchestrate.”

He glowered down at her for another beat, then spun on his heel and left. She remained silent as he marched out. When the door swung shut behind him, her gaze lingered. Had something happened recently that would have his family concerned? And concerned to the extent that they felt the need to have someone watch over him?

Those questions gave her pause. Maybe Franklin had been right. She still didn’t think Lucian was the type to hold a grudge and take revenge by killing innocent people. But that didn’t mean something else hadn’t happened that might make him snap.

Her gaze dropped to the darkened computer screen and slowly, she raised her hand and restarted it. Her view of Lucian was influenced by the week they’d spent in Capri all those years ago. And the one night she’d never been able to forget. That one night when they’d laughed and danced and swum in the sea. That one night when they’d come together in the way that only young people—and their hormones—did.

She took a bracing breath. It was time to take the blinders off and see who Lucian Salvitto really was.

## CHAPTER FOUR

AN HOUR LATER, Nora mulled over Lucian's file as she meandered toward the clinic. The more she'd read, the more concerned for him she'd become. Not because of what was in the file, but because of what wasn't. His life had been quiet since Alessandra's murder and his departure from AISE. He lived in the house in Umbria he and Alessandra had bought after they'd married. He continued to breed and train dogs. He traveled occasionally for gigs like the one he was currently on. But mostly, he was a homebody.

Nothing in the file gave her cause to think his family had a particular reason to be concerned. Which meant that whatever was going on was more likely emotional or mental, something that wouldn't be in his files unless he visited a mental health professional. Which he hadn't.

As her boots landed quietly on the paved walkway, her heart went out to him. Six's family was close. If they were worried about him, then there must be cause. She considered calling her friend and asking. But Six and Gavin had left that morning for a week in the Caribbean, and she had no wish to interrupt their time together.

Pausing at the edge of a large field, Nora scanned the area. There were obstacles and training tools scattered over the five-acre grounds. An area to practice attack skills was to her left. A tightrope was visible on the far end of the field. And if the fading light wasn't fooling her, there was a maze of tunnels in the north corner. Application of the skills grown and honed on the field would take place all over the property.

To her immediate left sat the clinic. It was the kind of portable building that schools used for extra classrooms. It was even the same weird color, somewhere between yellow and beige. With a smile at the incongruity of

seeing the ugly building amid the beauty of the field, she walked toward it. And once again, revisited her thoughts on Lucian.

Her natural inclination to want to help him warred with her promise to Franklin. With every step she took, though, she realized that the latter would take precedence. Lucian was unlikely to accept any overture of friendship she might extend, anyway. Which left her with no option but to treat him like all the others—as a suspect. She was self-aware enough to know it would be difficult for her. It was against her nature to ignore someone in pain. Especially when she had a connection to them, as tenuous as that might be. But she'd done difficult things in the past and somehow made it through. She'd muddle through this as well.

After spending an hour familiarizing herself with the contents and layout of the clinic, she took a roundabout path back to the residential quarters. Arriving at her room with twenty minutes to spare before her meeting with James and Ingrid, she started preparing for the well-checks she'd give the dogs upon their arrival. Satisfaction settled on her shoulders as she emptied the contents of her equipment bag onto her bed. It was always well-stocked, but it didn't hurt to be extra prepared. Especially since she had a feeling Lucian would be keeping a close watch on her.

One by one, she mentally checked items off her supply list as she returned them to her bag: stethoscope, ophthalmoscope, otoscope, test tubes, and needles. She also had a plethora of items she didn't anticipate needing that night, including bandages, tweezers, and ointments. When the bag was repacked, she glanced at the clock. Perfect timing. It was four o'clock. She was looking forward to hearing more about the training program from James and Ingrid. Whether Lucian would be there was anyone's guess.

After grabbing her water bottle, a notebook, and the key to her room, she walked down the hall to the conference room. Knocking lightly, she opened the door and poked her head in. James and Ingrid were sitting at the table, each with a cup of coffee, but Lucian was nowhere to be found.

"Come in," James said with a smile.

"I checked out the clinic after lunch," she said, taking a seat. "It's a good setup for a portable. More equipment than I thought there'd be."

James flashed her a cynical smile. "The first program NATO ran wasn't so well equipped and they almost lost a dog to heatstroke. After that, they've been pretty good about ensuring the on-site vets have everything they need."

"Well, hopefully we won't need it, but it's always good to be prepared."



Both trainers nodded.

“Why does Lucian not like you?” Ingrid asked, startling Nora with her abruptness.

A pile of pens sat in the middle of the table. Nora rose and reached for one. When she was reseated, she lifted a shoulder and decided to be completely honest. “I don’t know. I’ve known him since we were kids. He’s one of my best friends’ cousins. I haven’t seen him in three years so have no idea what I could have done to make him so angry.”

“What happened three years ago?” James asked.

Nora wasn’t keen to dive into the personal questions but recognized that she was the outsider here. James, Ingrid, and Lucian had been working as a team for over a year. Behind the question, she heard a concern that she shared: Would her presence pose a challenge?

“We had dinner with my friend’s parents, his aunt and uncle,” she answered with a shake of her head. “I have no idea what’s going on in his mind. Like I said, I’ve known him for years, but I’ve never known him well, so I can’t say. What I can say, though, is that whatever it is, it won’t interfere with the program. I’ll be in the clinic most of the time, and not with you and the participants. There’s a big window in the portable so I’ll be able to keep an eye on the dogs from the comfort, and warmth, of my domain,” she added with a smile.

“What about when we aren’t working in the field?”

Nora tipped her head. “I’ll be wherever you all need me to be. I’ve cared for a lot of working dogs in my career, but I’ve not participated in a program like this before. You obviously have a method”—she waved to the large sheets of paper taped to the opposite wall that detailed, to the minute, the schedule for the first week—“so just put me where you need me.”

Ingrid gave a sharp nod. James acknowledged her statement as well, but his nod was a little longer in coming. His hesitation could be for any number of reasons, so Nora decided to ignore it. The best way to prove she meant what she’d said was to let her actions speak for themselves.

“So,” she said, pointing to the sheets of paper again. “Why don’t you tell me what you have planned and anything you think I should know about the dogs.”

An hour later, Nora was in the lounge waiting for the first arrivals. James and Ingrid sat with her by the roaring fireplace. Lucian had opted for a seat on the other side of the room, by the pool table. The well-checks would happen later. For now, she just wanted to observe the dogs. And their handlers.

The first to arrive were Craig and Jonah. Being from the US, they'd had the least travel. Both Miles, Craig's German shepherd, and Lena, Jonah's Belgian Malinois, strolled in looking as if they belonged there. After Staff Sergeant Markley checked them in, the two men and their K9s joined her and the trainers in the lounge for a few minutes. When the introductions and greetings were done, they made their way to their rooms to get settled.

For the next ninety minutes, the participants trickled in. Anne and Marie from Belgium with their two Malinois, Kroger and Fidele. Then Jean and Sophie from France, with their shepherds, Adela and Abel. They arrived at the same time as Angelo and Cencio from Italy and their two Malinois, Cesare and Vita. They were followed by Jurgen, with his Malinois, Dieter, and Gerhard with his shepherd, Falk, from Germany. The last to arrive were Collin and Willa from the UK. Collin's dog was the biggest of the bunch, a huge all-black shepherd named Raum. Willa's was the only non-shepherd/Malinois, but her Majestic Tree Hound, Hagen, was one of the best tracking dogs in Europe.

All the dogs had passed vet checks prior to traveling, and they'd probably slept most, if not all, of their flights. Even so, Nora was pleased that none looked stressed. Their handlers were another story, though. Most were fatigued from travel, and for their sake, she considered starting her well-checks before dinner. She wouldn't be able to spend as much time with each pair as she'd like. On the other hand, jet lag was real. After nine-thirty, she doubted the Europeans would be up for much conversation anyway.

Starting at the room closest to the lounge, she knocked on Jurgen's door. He called for her to come in, and a few minutes later, Dieter, his K9, stood docilely as Nora began her check. She took all his vitals, writing them down in her notebook, then drew a blood sample. She'd compare it to the one taken before the flight to help her check stress levels.

As she went through her routine, she chatted with Jurgen. She'd identified him and Jonah as playboys of the group, and she hadn't been wrong. Twenty seconds into their conversation, he asked her if she was single and hinted at getting dinner together. His invitation implied more than just a drink. She wasn't the least bit interested, but staying open and friendly was the best way

to gain his confidence. So rather than brush him off, she gave him a vague answer that wasn't a commitment either way.

After leaving Jurgen's, she attended to seven more dogs—and handlers—before dinner was called. In her short time with each pair, she learned quite a bit. Gerhard, the oldest of the group, viewed the others as his nieces and nephews. The two women from Belgium were both friendly, although Anne seemed more outgoing than Marie. Sophie, from France, was quite harsh—with both Nora and her K9. Jean was more like Jonah and Jurgen and oozed French charm. And last of her first group, Cencio and Angelo, were about as opposite as two people could get. Angelo was so serious that Nora wondered if he had any sense of humor. While Cencio was gregarious and loud and loved his wine. He'd even brought a case from his family's winery with him to share.

Willa, Collin, Craig, and Jonah graciously agreed to wait for their checks until after dinner. She'd complete those four quickly, though, since neither Jonah nor Willa were suspects.

As soon as Nora finished with Cencio and Vita, she jogged up the three flights of stairs and walked to her room. Once she had blood samples from the last four dogs, she'd head out to the clinic and start the tests. But for now, she needed to wash her hands and freshen up before dinner.

She had her key on the reader when the door across from her opened and Lucian stepped out. He paused, then let the door close behind him. His eyes remained fixed on her, and she held his gaze. She considered saying something. She considered asking him what had him so upset. But then good sense got a hold of her. Judging by the scowl directed at her, he wasn't in a chatty mood. Instead, she simply nodded and slipped into her room.

From behind her closed door, she heard his footsteps travel down the hall, then he entered the stairwell. When the floor was quiet again, she set her bag down and started pulling out the labeled samples. A few minutes later, the samples and her notebook were locked in the safe—an overly cautious decision, no doubt—and she was washing her hands.

Glancing at herself in the mirror, she debated whether to put makeup on. She didn't tend to wear much and never wore it on a daily basis. Her olive skin coupled with her dark brows and lashes did a decent job of highlighting her features. And her lips. She had no idea where the naturally pink hue had come from. No one else in her family had it. It certainly made it easier when it came to choosing lipstick, though. Because that was a special kind of hell

she didn't have to do. A little gloss and she was good to go. That is, if she even bothered with that.

Deciding to skip the makeup, she changed into a clean pair of jeans and pulled on an olive-green cashmere sweater. Then, tucking her key into her back pocket, she headed down to the dining room. The rumble of conversation and an occasional laugh filled the hall as she neared, and the atmosphere seemed congenial and pleasant.

When she entered, she found the fire roaring and everyone already seated with their dinners. And of course, the only open spot was beside Lucian at the end of the table closest to the fireplace. Biting back a sigh, she headed to the buffet and helped herself to salad, a serving of vegetarian lasagna, and a bread roll. Not exactly the most inspiring of meals, but it would fill everyone up.

"Lucian," she said, taking a seat beside him. He barely tipped his head in her direction. Sophie sat across from her—another cheery person to spend time with—and Willa was beside Sophie. At least Willa would be pleasant. Hopefully.

Nodding to both the women, she made small talk with them as Lucian remained silent. She learned that Willa was getting married in two months and that Sophie had recently lost both her parents in a car accident. That bit of news had Nora questioning her quick judgment of the woman. But even as she formed opinions about the two women, her mind wandered to Lucian.

He'd been such a fun young man when they'd first met the summer after her graduation. She, Six, Cyn, and Devil were all scheduled to attend Harvard in the fall and their families—well, everyone's family but Devil's—had encouraged them to take the summer off and have some fun. With the means to do so, the four of them gladly followed their families' advice.

For nearly three months, they traveled the world. From Vietnam to Zanzibar to Chile and so many places in between. Until they wrapped up their trip with a week at one of Six's family homes in Capri. Lucian and his brother, Gianni, had joined them. Together, the six of them had whiled away the nights with cocktails, wine, and good food, and slept the days away by the sea. Thinking back on that time, there were two things Nora remembered most. The first was that she was pretty sure she'd had more to drink in that week than in the next five years put together. But the second was that Lucian had been *fun*. Not only had he been fun, but he'd encouraged her to have fun. To come out of her shell. He'd encouraged her to dance at the café, swim at

midnight, and sing karaoke. He'd even convinced her to skinny-dip with him in the Mediterranean one night. Never in her life had she been so bold—not with a man, at least.

But his love of life had inspired her. He hadn't bullied her or dared her to do any of the things she'd done. He'd simply reminded her, in so many ways, that life was meant to be lived and savored. Yes, sometimes it could be scary and dangerous, but dancing at a café or singing karaoke? Those weren't the scary things. Those were things to be enjoyed and laughed about. Even more so if you were bad at them. Which, ironically, she was not.

This man who now sat beside her, though, was so far from the young man she knew that he was a bit of an enigma. Most people carried traces of themselves throughout their lives. People grew and changed, sometimes for the better, sometimes not. But usually, there was some part of them that remained the same. Not the exact same, but similar enough that people who knew them could recognize them. But Lucian was almost unrecognizable. At least in the short interactions she'd had with him since arriving.

That thought gave her pause. She hadn't actually had many interactions with him in the six hours she'd been on-site. Maybe with time, she'd see hints of his old self?

Internally, she cringed as she heard her friends' voices inside her head. No doubt they'd be telling her that not everyone was as good or as kind as she was. She didn't think she was particularly good or excessively kind. But she did have a habit of looking for the best in people. Even if they didn't deserve it.

Did Lucian deserve it, though? And if he did, where would giving him the benefit of the doubt get her? There might be remnants of the young man he'd been inside him somewhere. But if she found them, that didn't change the fact that she still had to investigate him. That didn't change the fact that he was still a suspect in the murders of nine people. Despite the drastic changes to his demeanor, she still didn't think he was involved. But she had her duty to Franklin, so what she thought didn't really matter all that much.

"Willa, as soon as you're done, shall we go check Hagen?" Nora asked, unable to let her mind consider the conundrum of Lucian any longer.

Willa glanced at Nora's half-eaten dinner, her straight blond hair swinging into her face as she did. "I can wait," she said. Then stifled a yawn.

Nora smiled and rose. "There's no need. I had a late lunch. Why don't you go get him ready? I'll run up and get my equipment and meet you at your

room.”

She felt Lucian’s eyes on her. She wished she could ignore him the way he’d been ignoring her, but she didn’t have it in her. Turning, she gave him a small nod. “Good night, Lucian.” Then to Sophie, she said, “Sophie, it was lovely to spend more time with you.” That was a little bit of a stretch. Nora felt a tremendous amount of empathy for her, but Sophie still wasn’t someone she wanted to spend a lot of time with.

Before heading up to her room, she walked to where Craig, Collin, and Jonah were sitting. Pausing, she waited for a break in their conversation, but Jonah cut himself off and turned to her. With a charming, if not entirely sincere, smile on his face.

“I’m heading out to do my check on Hagen. Don’t cut your dinner short on my behalf, but if you could text me when you’re ready for me, I’d appreciate it. My number is in the welcome packet,” she said.

Craig rose before she’d finished her request, leaving her to wonder if her offer was an excuse for him to exit the conversation. He offered to have Miles ready for her as soon as she was done with Willa, then he strode from the room. She glanced at Collin and Jonah. They both mumbled something about not being far behind, but she suspected they’d be more than a few minutes.

Regardless, if she had to stay up late to finish the blood work, she’d stay up late. The gig was long, but it wouldn’t be particularly strenuous. After tonight, she’d perform the same well-checks periodically throughout the course. But unless an emergency arose, she’d have time on her hands. Time she would need to use for the investigation, but time nonetheless.

## CHAPTER FIVE

A FEW MINUTES LATER, she knocked on Willa's door, her bag in hand.

"Come in," Willa called

Nora entered to find the room already immaculately arranged with nary any evidence that Willa had arrived only a few short hours ago. She even had two books on her bedside table.

"This is Hagen," Willa said, resting her hand on the dog's head. "Friend, Hagen," she said. The dog's tail swished across the floor.

"May I?" Nora asked, gesturing to him. Willa nodded, and she approached, holding out her hand for him to get a good sniff. "He's gorgeous," Nora said. "I love the shepherds and Malinois, but you, you beauty," she said, kneeling in front of the huge dog, "are a gorgeous creature." Hagen's tail swished again, and he leaned forward a touch.

She rubbed the dog's long silky ears for a moment. It was always a pleasure to work with working dogs. Their intelligence shone through in their eyes, as did their pride. That was one of the things she loved most about them. As a vet, they were some of the easiest dogs to work with because of their training. But what made them so special was how much they *loved* their work. They loved being useful and wanted nothing more than to do a good job. There were some people who claimed it was cruel to train any animal to the extreme level working dogs were trained. But the fact of the matter was, if they didn't love it, they wouldn't do it. You couldn't beat an animal into being a good tracker or a military K9. It didn't work that way. That wasn't to say people didn't try. Because they did. And as far as Nora was concerned, those who did had a special place in hell reserved for them. But for dogs like Hagen, and all the others participating in the training session, they wouldn't

want to be doing anything else. Of that, she was certain.

Nora started her check and, knowing Willa wasn't a suspect, she used her newbie status as an excuse to ask all sorts of questions about the program. Including the camaraderie among the handlers. Willa's careful answers revealed a woman who saw far more than she let on. Nora didn't begrudge her caution, but she did make a note to herself to befriend the British handler. She had a feeling that Willa's insights might prove valuable.

When she finished with Hagen, she thanked Willa, then made her way to Craig's room.

"Miles, stay," Craig snapped after she knocked on the door two rooms down from Willa's. After a beat, he called, "Come in."

She stepped inside to find Miles sitting properly. He was still as a statue, except for his tail which was swishing across the floor. There was also a light in his eyes that was hard to miss. This one was going to be a heartbreaker; she recognized the type. The type that performed his job exactly as needed but waited for the moment he'd be released to frolic and play. This was a dog that, not unlike Lucian in his younger years, loved *everything* about life.

Craig stood three feet behind him. With his arms crossed and a stern expression on his face, he looked none too happy.

"Everything okay?" Nora asked, setting her bag down. "May I?" she followed up, gesturing to Miles.

Craig nodded. "Miles, friend," he said, then he answered her question. "Miles is young. He's just a little more excited about being somewhere new than I'd like him to be."

Miles was two. Not that young for a working dog. Still, Nora knew nothing about him other than his medical records and what little Ingrid and James had told her. And what she'd gleaned from him the past fifteen seconds, an observation based on years of experience. She withheld her judgment on Craig's statement, though, as she held out her hand for Miles to sniff. He leaned forward, but dutifully remained sitting.

"I understand you applied to this program with a different dog," she said, her gaze moving between Miles and his handler. Pain flashed across Craig's face, and he gave a tight nod.

"I applied two years ago with my prior dog, Annie. She was amazing. She would have loved every minute of this training." He paused, and his gaze dropped to the floor before meeting hers again. "She was killed chasing a suspect. He was running and I sent her to chase and subdue him. He bolted



into the street. She'd just gotten hold of him when they were both hit by a car. She died. The man did not." He paused again, his jaw ticking. "At least he's in jail now. Not for what happened to Annie, of course, but for all the drugs and women he was trafficking."

Nora let a quiet moment pass before speaking. "I'm sorry for your loss. I can't imagine how difficult that must have been to lose a partner." She considered offering a platitude about Annie dying doing something she loved, but she stopped herself. It was such a stupid thing to say to people who'd lost someone. Or in this case, a partner. It was like telling them they shouldn't feel so bad about their loss. But the truth was, it didn't matter how their loved ones died; they were still gone. She also suspected Craig might be feeling some guilt about Annie's death. She wouldn't have been in pursuit unless he'd ordered her.

Craig nodded in response. Her hand rested on Miles's head, then she knelt in front of him. "You are a handsome boy," she said, rubbing behind his ears. "I know looks aren't everything, but you were still blessed with them."

"At least he's pretty," Craig said. The derisive tone in his voice brought her eyes up. He offered her a half smile. "It's nothing," he said. "Just an inside joke. My ex-wife is beautiful *and* an extremely talented artist. But she has a lot of learning disabilities that made school hard for her growing up. Her parents didn't help. One of the things they used to say to her was 'at least you're pretty.' It became a joke between the two of us."

Nora smiled, not entirely sure Craig had meant it as a joke.

"So what kind of check do you do?" he asked.

She reached for her bag beside her on the floor and pulled out her stethoscope. "Nothing invasive," she answered. "Vitals and a blood draw, that's it. I like to get a baseline and compare it to the before-flight reports. The more information I have the better we can care for the dogs should anything happen." Miles sneaked a lick on her face, and she dropped a kiss on his forehead. "Not that we anticipate anything happening, of course."

She listened to Miles's breathing, then his heart. It was a little higher than his preflight count. "When he had his preflight check, was that at your usual clinic or on base?"

"On base," Craig answered. "We'd trained during the day, then had the check before going home. Why?"

"It's a little higher than normal, but not high by any stretch," Nora said. "I was trying to figure out if being here had him a little more excited than when

he had his other check.”

Craig grimaced. “Likely. He’s an excitable dog.”

Nora studied Miles as she pulled out her blood draw equipment. Looking into his eyes, he appeared eager. But like the well-trained dog he was, he remained seated and at attention.

A few minutes later, the check was complete, and she was packing up the few items she’d taken out. Craig had released Miles, and he lay sprawled on his back in front of her, his tail sweeping the floor and his tongue hanging out of his mouth. She smiled and gave him a belly rub before rising.

“Two more tonight?” Craig asked.

Nora nodded. “Just Raum and Lena.”

“Jonah and Collin,” Craig said. She nodded. “Jonah will hit on you. Collin will try to convince you he knows more about veterinary medicine than you.”

Nora hid a smile as she zipped her bag. She’d suspected as much about Jonah, but the insight on Collin was new. “Not a big fan?” As she spoke, her phone buzzed with a text from Collin letting her know she could stop by when she was ready.

Craig shrugged. “They’re good with their dogs. That’s all I care about. I don’t need to be best friends with everyone on the program.”

If Nora were younger, she might have thought the comment callous. But with her years of experience, his approach was practical, if a little blunt. “Well, I’ll be sure to watch my step,” she said. Then she rubbed Miles’s head one more time and nodded to Craig. “I don’t anticipate finding anything, but if I do, I’ll tell you straightaway. If not, I’ll see you tomorrow. And good luck,” she added as she headed toward the door.

A few minutes later, she was standing in Collin’s room meeting Raum. Nora knew better than to be taken in by a pretty face, but Raum had a gorgeous sort of bad-boy look that made it hard not to admire him. His thick coat was a glossy black, and his bright yellow eyes tracked her as she crossed the room to him. He remained sitting, as Collin had ordered him to, but even in that position, his head came up to well above her waist.

“I’m sure you get this a lot, but he’s quite arresting,” she said, after getting Collin’s permission to approach Raum. She rested her hand on his head, her fingers sliding into the silky fur. Raum’s expression didn’t change a bit at the affection. Which was a striking difference from Miles. Miles’s eyes had lit up when she’d spoken to him or given him a rub.

“He’s the best. Knows it, too,” Collin said.

“Your first dog?” she asked, pulling her stethoscope from her bag. She knew he’d had one before Raum, but she wanted to get Collin talking.

“No, I had a female Malinois before Raum. She was tough as nails, too. But in a different way. He’ll be fine, you know. You don’t need to do this.” He nodded to her bag as he spoke.

Again, Nora found herself hiding a smile by ducking her head. “NATO says I do, so I will. You’re a soldier, you know how it goes.”

“You’re not, though. How long have you been a vet?”

“You’re right, I’m not a soldier. But I am on retainer with the organization, so have to abide by their rules. To answer your question, I’ve been in practice for twelve years. I do some work with farm animals, but the bulk of my work is dogs and cats.”

“Working dogs are different.”

Nora continued her exam, looking in Raum’s ears. “I’m aware. I’m the primary vet for the Boston Police K9 unit. I’ve also filled in more than once for a few of the military vets in the region.”

Collin grunted. “Don’t get me wrong, but you don’t look like a vet.”

Nora didn’t answer right away. Not only was the statement inappropriate, it was beyond rude. Finally, she countered, “I’m curious what you think the right way to take that is?”

Collin lifted a shoulder. “Just most vets I know don’t look like you.”

She wasn’t sure if that was a comment on the fact that she was a woman, Jordanian, or attractive. Either way, she was better off dropping the subject.

“I’m going to draw his blood, and then I’ll be done,” she said, reaching into her bag for her equipment. “How are you both liking the program so far?”

Again, Collin shrugged. “Raum doesn’t really need the extra training, but it was something my superiors wanted me to do. Something to do with camaraderie between the countries and all that.”

She prepped the vein on Raum’s front leg. “It wasn’t your choice?”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s a good program. We just don’t need it,” he said. Nora wondered how many times she’d hear “don’t get me wrong” in the next few weeks.

“Do you at least have some fun? The group seemed pretty collegial at dinner.” She slid the needle in, then snapped the test tube in place. Not once did Raum so much as twitch.

“They’re fine,” Collin said, taking a seat on the edge of his bed. “There are some good handlers. Am I going to call any of them a best friend? I doubt it.” That didn’t surprise Nora in the least. She doubted Collin had any real friends at all, let alone a best friend. He was the sort who had people he hung out with. People who tolerated him. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, people he could wow with his self-proclaimed awesomeness.

“Do you get out much during the sessions? Seems like you’ve been in some interesting areas.” She popped the test tube out, then withdrew the needle and pressed a piece of gauze to the puncture site.

“A bit, but not as much as the others. Jonah and Jurgen are usually out every night. Sometimes Jean and Anne join them.”

“What about Angelo, no, I mean Cencio?” she asked. She intentionally confused the names, hoping he’d talk about both. He wasn’t short of opinions, and she was curious what he’d say about the Italians.

“Angelo’s too quiet for that group. He spends a lot of time on his own. Like Willa does. Cencio likes a late night as much as the next guy, but he prefers to have them on-site rather than out at a bar. I’m sure he showed you his wine already?” She nodded. “He brings a case every session. It’s not bad. As for Jonah and Jurgen, they like to troll for hookups. That’s why they go out so much. That’s not really Cencio’s thing. Or Gerhard’s, for that matter. Both are married.” He said that last sentence as if he couldn’t explain the stupidity of the two men.

“Well, sounds like an interesting group,” she said, rising and giving Raum one more rub. He was eye-catching, and she didn’t doubt he was a phenomenal working dog. But she preferred Miles’s mischief and joy.

Collin tilted his head in acknowledgement but didn’t say anything.

“I’ll have all the blood work back tomorrow before your session starts. As you said, it’s unlikely I’ll find anything, but I will let you know either way.”

“You’re going to run that tonight?” Collin asked, rising from the bed and pointing to her bag, where she’d just placed the blood sample.

She smiled and nodded. “Won’t take long, and I’m not jet-lagged. Just need to check Lena, and then I’ll head to the clinic and run all the samples.”

“You want company?” he asked. Nora refrained from rolling her eyes, barely, and shook her head.

“I’ll be accompanying her.”

Her gaze jerked up to see Lucian standing in the door. How long he’d been there, or nearby, she hadn’t a clue.

She narrowed her eyes at him. Unfortunately, like her, he was a trained spy. Ten years had passed since he'd been in the game, but he was still excellent at not revealing anything with his expression.

"I see," Collin said, speculation heavy in his voice.

She shot Lucian a glare. She did *not* need the participants thinking she was anything other than a vet there to do her job.

"I don't think you do, Collin," Lucian replied. "Nora is my cousin's closest friend. She's been an honorary member of our family for more than twenty-five years."

That was laying it on a little thick, but she appreciated Lucian cleaning up his inadvertent mistake.

"You two knew each other before today?" Collin asked, not bothering to hide his surprise.

Lucian nodded as he stepped back, inviting her to walk through the door. "We did. As I said, we've known each other for many years. Small world and all that."

Nora entered the hallway, then turned to face Collin. "Has he ever sung for you?" she asked him, gesturing to Lucian with her head.

"Nora," Lucian said in warning.

"No," Collin replied.

"You should get him out on a karaoke night if there's one around. He does a damn good Frank Sinatra."

Collin's lips twitched. "That right, Salvitto?"

Lucian's jaw clenched. "I leave the late nights to you all. Nora, I'll walk you to Jonah's, then to the clinic. We can catch up on the way."

"You should definitely work on him," Nora said, flashing Collin a smile and a wink. Lucian grabbed her upper arm and all but dragged her away before she saw Collin's response. Although she did hear him chuckling as he shut the door.

"Funny, Amiri," he said, using her last name. Maybe trying to put some distance between them. Although with his hand wrapped around her arm holding her close, *distance* didn't seem to be what he was going for. She shrugged and moved away. His hand lingered, then dropped to his side.

"You didn't need to step in, Lucian. And given how unhappy you are with me being here, I'm surprised you did." He didn't have a chance to respond, because they were already at Jonah's door.

Jonah answered Nora's knock and his gaze bounced between the two. She

ignored the questions there and looked for Lena. The Malinois was sprawled on her handler's bed. Her eyes were open, and her tail thumped against the mattress, but she didn't rise.

"She shouldn't be up there," Lucian said. Nora didn't agree. Some working dogs preferred kennels and crates, but others liked to cuddle. Finding what made their K9 tick and perform better was the job of every handler. If letting her sleep on the bed made her a better working dog, then so be it.

"She's seven and hasn't spent a night away from me since I got her at six months. She's also done six tours. She gets to sleep wherever she wants," Jonah replied, leading them into his room. He might be a playboy, but Nora liked how he stood up to Lucian and defended Lena. With six tours under her belt and having been selected for the program, her sleeping arrangements clearly didn't interfere with her work ethic.

With Lucian present, she didn't chat as much with Jonah about the program or other participants. In fact, she barely chatted at all. Jonah and Lucian did most of the talking. What little there was of it. A question here. A monosyllabic answer there. Or, if the question warranted, even a short sentence.

She sighed as she packed her bag. It was going to be a long night.

## CHAPTER SIX

AFTER SHE FINISHED DRAWING Lena's blood, Nora headed upstairs. Lucian followed, trailing after her like a puppy. He wasn't sure why he'd stepped into her conversation with Collin. He just hadn't liked the idea of the Brit accompanying Nora out on a dark, late-night walk. He had no reason to suspect Collin would do anything, but if something did happen to her, Violetta would never forgive him.

"I thought you said you're going to the lab," he said, irritated at himself for insisting on accompanying her.

"I am. I have some work to do while the samples are running. I'm grabbing my computer," she answered without bothering to turn around. He watched the sway of her hips as she walked up the stairs ahead of him. He wondered if Jurgen had hit on her yet. For certain Jonah would have had he not been there.

"You don't need to go to the clinic with me, Lucian," she said as they reached the third floor. "In fact, I'd prefer if you didn't."

"Why?"

She paused at her door and looked at him. "Why what? Why don't you need to go with me or why would I prefer you didn't?"

He frowned. He didn't remember Nora being this difficult. "It's going to be a late night, you're not familiar with the area, and you shouldn't be alone." It was a pretty simple concept. Not one she should read anything into. Not that she was reading anything into it, judging by the way one of her dark brows raised.

A small smile teased her lips. "You do remember where I went to school and what that means?"

Yes, he knew all about St. Josue. When his cousin had started, he'd been green with envy that there wasn't something similar for boys. Not that he was even supposed to know about the true purpose of the school. But keeping secrets from kids wasn't easy, and two weeks after Violetta had left, he'd overheard her parents discussing it. The thought of a spy school tucked into the Alps appealed to his young imagination.

So yes, he knew that Nora was an accomplished veterinarian and that she worked for the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate. But just because she *could* take care of herself didn't mean she had to.

"Get your stuff, Nora. It's been a long day," he all but ordered.

She gave him a look but turned and unlocked the door to her room. "I have work, so won't be good company. Not that you've proven to be good company either, so we'll be well-matched." She mumbled that last sentence under her breath. He didn't deign to respond.

She grabbed a down coat, hat, and jacket then rejoined him in the hall with her computer bag slung over her shoulder. He reached for her veterinary bag to take it, but she ignored him. Shutting her door, she started down to the ground floor.

Stepping out into the cold December air, Lucian sucked in a breath. He wore a long-sleeved shirt and a North Face quilted vest, but he wasn't dressed for temperatures that hovered in the twenties. Unlike Nora, who was bundling up as she walked. How she managed to carry two bags while simultaneously pulling her jacket on, he didn't know.

"You know you could hand me your bags while you put your jacket on," he pointed out.

"Yet another reason I didn't want an escort. You've been so pleasant all night. If I'd wanted help, I would have asked for it."

He scowled at her backside as she marched down the dimly lit path, clearly confident in where she was going. Following her, he decided to keep silent. He didn't remember Nora being so forthright, and he wasn't interested in experiencing any more of her ire. Then again, it wasn't as though he didn't deserve it. He hadn't exactly been welcoming.

At that thought, his mind turned dark at the question she'd never answered.

"Is there a reason you couldn't just tell me if my family sent you?" he asked. It would be like them to do something like that. Despite Nora's belief otherwise, the Salvittos had the money and influence to do a great number of



things. And if his cousin was involved, well, pulling NATO strings wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

Nora let out a huff of air. He could hear it, but mostly he could see it in the burst of fog that one of the few path lights illuminated. "You're confusing me not telling you with you not believing I don't know what you're talking about. I can't help you with the latter."

She might have told him her version of how she ended up on the program, but he was certain she hadn't told him everything. In all fairness, it was also possible she didn't know everything.

"Why are you so paranoid about that?" she asked, rounding on him as they reached the steps to the clinic.

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm not paranoid."

Again, she arched a brow at him. They stood like that, in the frigid temperatures, for a long moment. Long enough that Lucian started to wonder if maybe Nora was trying to freeze him to death. Not that he'd cave that easily.

Then she shook her head and rolled her eyes, no doubt a trait she'd picked up from his cousin. "I don't have time for this," she muttered, then she spun, walked up the steps, and unlocked the clinic door.

A few seconds later, he followed her in. Well, he might have pushed her in. It was fucking freezing out. The portable wasn't much warmer, but the bite of fresh air wasn't as sharp. Once the door was closed, his muscles started unlocking, and his body began to relax.

"Where's the heater?" he asked.

She waved in the general direction of the far corner, and he walked over to examine it. Nora set her computer bag down on a table, then disappeared into a room with her vet bag and the samples. He set the temperature to something reasonable, then took a seat at the end of the table and pulled his phone out.

He answered a few emails that had come in during the day and checked the cameras on his dogs back in Umbria. He had good caretakers, and his two assistant trainers lived on-site. Even so, he liked to make sure the animals were all tucked in and safe for the night. Especially Mia and her newest litter of seven puppies.

Very little made him smile these days, but the sight of Mia and the six-week-old puppies curled all around her did. Mia was nine years old. The only female from the last litter Alessandra bred. She'd been born after Alessandra

died, and Lucian hadn't been able to let her go. For many reasons, he was glad he'd held on to her.

A chair scraped at the other end of the table, and Nora rose from where she'd been seated. He hadn't even noticed her reenter the room, let alone that she'd set up her computer and had been working. Glancing at the clock, he realized she must be changing the samples out as the machine could only handle six at a time.

If she was already on the second set, that meant only an hour left before he could return to the residence hall. To be fair, he could return now. Nora had made it clear she neither needed nor wanted him. But staring at the back of her laptop, he wondered what she was working on. He also noticed the computer had a camera. Had she filmed him at all? Maybe sent pictures to his family?

He frowned. The questions he'd posed about whether his family had sent her were, to his mind, reasonable. But even he recognized that thinking she might be filming him bordered on the paranoia she'd mentioned.

His thoughts brought another scowl to his face and when Nora reentered, she paused in the doorway. "I'd ask if everything is all right, but we both know how you'd answer that," she said. Then with that, she retook her seat and started working on her computer again.

Picking up his phone that he'd set on the table, he brought up a familiar, but not often used, number.

*"Did you send Nora?"* he texted his cousin, Violetta.

*"Did I what?"* she responded a few seconds later.

*"Did you send Nora?"* he repeated.

*"I have no idea what you are talking about."*

*"It's a yes or no question."*

*"Nora is not a child. I don't send her anywhere. On occasion I might ask her to run to the store for ice cream or wine."*

*"So you didn't send her?"*

*"Oh my god, what is wrong with you??? No, I didn't send Nora anywhere, dick. Besides, even if I wanted to send her somewhere, she's on this three-week training course somewhere in the wilds of Western Massachusetts."*

It was possible his cousin was lying, but he didn't think so. Which meant he might owe Nora an apology.

*"Oh my god, you're one of the trainers, aren't you??"* Violetta

demanded. He should have known she'd put two and two together.

*"I am."*

She sent an emoji that resembled someone snorting with laughter. *"And you thought I sent Nora to what? Look after you? Good god, Luc, pull your shit together. The world revolves around me, not you, asshole."*

Lucian couldn't help the smile that curved his lips. He'd always liked Violetta the best of all his cousins. Even if they'd drifted apart in the past few years.

*"I'll try to remember that."*

*"And for the love of all that is holy, including Father Pete, if you pull any of your angsty bullshit on Nora and make her feel bad about anything, I will hunt you down and fill your days with Shakespearean insults."*

*"Wow, Shakespeare and Father Pete in the same sentence."* He despised Shakespeare with a passion. And Father Pete had been the family priest when he and Violetta were young. He'd terrified them with his bushy eyebrows, wild hair, and habit of spitting when he spoke.

*"That's how you know I'm serious. I know you're having a shit time right now and you are, of course, free to feel however you like. You are not, however, free to make other people feel the same shittiness you do. Especially not Nora."*

And that was his cousin in a nutshell. Go have your feelings, but don't take them out on others. Easier said than done.

*"I'll be good from now on,"* he promised. Although it would probably be best to stay away from Nora altogether. Violetta was right. He'd had a rough few years, and it was hard not to acknowledge that his family might have a reason for being concerned. Despite their best attempts, he'd been doing a good job of keeping everyone at bay. Something he accomplished by doing exactly what Violetta had ordered him not to...mostly by being a dick. So much so that it was almost habit by now. If he wanted to keep his promise to his cousin, it would be easiest if he just stayed away from her friend.

Nora's phone dinged, and Lucian didn't have to guess what that message was about. Nora picked up her device and read the text. Her eyes flickered up to him, but she said nothing. After typing in an answer, she went back to whatever she was doing on her computer. He had no idea what she must have said to Violetta, but his cousin didn't reply.

His own phone dinged, and he looked down. *"I don't need to remind you that you are ten years out of training. Not only can I make you regret being*

*an asshole to Nora, I also have a British Special Forces soldier—a well-decorated one—at my beck and call. DON'T BE A DICK.”*

His cousin wasn't joking. Her fierce loyalty to her friends was one of the things he admired most about her. That, and she didn't tend to tiptoe around him like the rest of the family. At least with Violetta, he didn't have to worry about getting annoyed by her fussing over him.

“*She'd never tell you if I was,*” he countered, enjoying an interaction with someone for the first time in a long time. He really should have kept in better touch with her.

“*You are so mistaken if you think I need her to use words to tell me anything, cousin. I'm inclined to kick your ass anyway when we get back from the Caribbean. I can't believe you're less than three hours from Cos Cob and didn't bother to tell me.*”

“*Maybe I'll visit.*”

“*Maybe you won't be welcome.*”

Again, he didn't doubt her. He was certain Nora wouldn't report back on him to Violetta. But that didn't mean his cousin would forgive him for traveling to Massachusetts without telling her.

A machine in the back of the portable beeped, and Nora rose from her seat. If the second set of samples was done, they could head back to the residence hall. And he could continue on keeping his distance from Nora. He just had to remember to stay out of it when Jurgen, Jonah, and Collin hit on her. She was a trained intelligence agent. She could take care of herself.

Nora walked back out of the room carrying a piece of paper. Without a word, she sat down and started typing in her computer. He opened a word game on his phone, but not ten minutes later, she shut her laptop.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Are you going to ignore me?” He shouldn't have asked. He couldn't seem to stop himself, though.

“As I'm sure Six reminded you, the world does not revolve around you, Lucian. I had intended to have these past few hours to myself to get a few things done. I was just getting them done.” With any other woman, he might have thought her comment passive-aggressive. But coming from Nora, it was so reasonable, he questioned his observation. Maybe she hadn't been ignoring him. Maybe she was just working.

“How are the samples?” he asked as she gathered her things, then pulled

on her coat.

“All the dogs look good. They didn’t suffer any effects from the travel, and I’ve entered all the data into the NATO system. Everyone will be good to go tomorrow.”

He nodded, not sure what else to say. It would have surprised him if something had shown up, but it was always good to have confirmation.

“Can I help you with a bag?” Nora shot him a look, but he didn’t miss the smile that touched her lips. At least this time, he’d asked.

She shook her head. “I have it, thank you.”

His brow dropped and he almost snapped at her to stop being so stubborn. Then thoughts of Violetta crept into his head. Nora wouldn’t tattle, but it appeared that Violetta was becoming his conscience. A thought he didn’t want to contemplate too deeply.

She locked the door behind them, and they headed back into the night. It was too cold for him to try to make conversation—or so he told himself—and they made the ten-minute walk in silence. A silence that continued as they climbed the stairs to the third floor. He did get a “good night,” though, when she unlocked her room.

He nodded and waited until her door closed before opening his own.

Now, if he could only avoid her for the next three weeks, his life could get back to how he liked it.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEXT MORNING, Lucian stood looking out his bedroom window. This time of year, it would be hours before the sun rose. The minimal streetlamps in the parking lot reflected off the frost-covered ground. With not enough moisture in the air for snow, the world below him appeared dry and brittle.

He was certain he wasn't the only one awake at this hour. Like him, most of the participants had traveled from time zones five or six hours ahead, making it closer to ten in the morning than five. He, James, and Ingrid had arrived the day before the others, but even so, at his age, two days wasn't enough time to adjust.

Thinking of the coffee maker sitting on his desk, he started to move away from his spot. Then suddenly, a shaft of light poured from the building onto the parking lot. He paused. Who on earth would be outside at this time of the morning and at these temperatures?

Curious, he remained in place, and a few seconds later a form he knew well emerged from the residence hall. She was accompanied by another he also knew, though less well. Based on what Nora and Willa wore, it was obvious they were going for a run. Why they were out in twenty-two-degree weather and at five o'clock in the morning was a question he had no answer to. The training program didn't start until nine. It wasn't as if they had to rush and fit the workout in. They had plenty of time. And when had Nora even coordinated with Willa?

He remained by the window until the two women were no longer in sight. He considered going after them, but he had no idea where they were going. In the time it would take him to change and get downstairs, they could be anywhere.

Scowling to himself, he stalked to the coffee maker. Forcing his thoughts away from Nora, he mentally ran through the schedule for the day as he made a cup. The morning session was dedicated to straightforward exercises that would give him, James, and Ingrid a chance to assess all the dogs. Then, in the afternoon, they'd split the group and work half on scenting and half on agility.

By the time he'd gone through the exercises he'd planned, and sorted out what clothing to wear, his coffee was ready. Taking his cup from the machine, he returned to the window.

Fifty minutes later, Nora and Willa came back into view. Judging by the way their breath was fogging in the morning air, they were talking as they walked. Maybe even laughing.

He watched until they disappeared into the building. Then he waited until he heard Nora's door open and close before jumping into the shower himself. Fifteen minutes later, he was dressed and toweling off his hair. A few minutes after that, he was taking a seat in the lounge beside the fire with another cup of coffee. Breakfast wouldn't be ready for another thirty minutes, but the staff had laid out coffee and some fruit.

He stared into the fire for over an hour before Nora came down. Unfortunately, she was talking to Jonah and Craig, and they did little more than offer him a "Good morning."

With his plan to pull Nora aside thwarted, he waited another ten minutes before joining the group in the dining area. Scanning the room, he saw Nora and the two men sitting with Anne, the four chatting amicably. He considered asking her to join him at a different table but stopped himself. He didn't really have anything to talk to her about. He was curious why she was out so early. But was it a problem? No. Was it something he needed to worry about? Again, no. Well, probably not. She could take care of herself. Of that, he had no doubt. And yet he still didn't like the idea of her out running in the pitch-dark of the early morning. Even though she'd had company.

Giving himself a mental shake, he turned away and grabbed a plate. Picking a few items from the breakfast buffet, he then joined Ingrid and James at a table. He was there to help run the program with his co-trainers. He needed to focus on that.

Once again, Lucian found himself alone in the lounge. This time, at least he had a glass of wine. And since it was from one of Cencio's bottles, it was a good one, too.

He twirled the glass, and the firelight reflected through the deep red wine, turning it shades of ruby and garnet. The day had gone exceptionally well, and he'd been pleased to see that both the K9s and their handlers had retained what they'd learned in the prior sessions.

He'd kept his distance from Nora and joined Anne, Marie, and Jean for lunch. He'd even made an effort to talk with his tablemates and had asked Anne about her young son. The looks of confusion on all their faces had been an uncomfortable revelation. Had he been so antisocial before that a harmless, common question had come as a surprise?

He didn't think so. He was obviously social enough to know Anne had a four-year-old son. Of course, he only knew that because he'd overheard her talking to Cencio about kids one day.

After lunch, they'd worked long into the afternoon. Darkness fell early this time of year at this latitude, allowing them to fit in nighttime exercises without it actually being nighttime. Unfortunately, the temperatures dropped, too—not too cold to work, but they'd have to keep an eye on that.

Now he was enjoying a glass of wine and a warm fire in the hour before dinner. And maybe waiting for Nora.

As if conjuring her, she pushed through the hall doors and walked into the lounge. Seeing him, she nodded and said, "Lucian," but she didn't join him. Instead, she continued to the foyer just as a young soldier walked in carrying a long packing tube and a large envelope.

"Hi, Andrew," Nora said, her natural warmth bringing a smile to the soldier's face.

"Nora, how are you feeling?" he asked. "And here you go. They were just dropped at the gate," he added, handing over the two items he held.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm good. We'll see what tomorrow brings, though."

Andrew grinned. "You did great. So did Willa."

Nora laughed. "We managed to keep up with you, but only because we weren't wearing packs. Seriously, you guys made us feel a little inadequate."

Andrew chuckled. Lucian's grip tightened on his wineglass.

"I love being in the army, but this posting isn't the most exciting. We have to find ways to keep ourselves challenged."



“Including running with eighty-pound packs?” Nora teased.

Andrew grinned. “Like I said, gives us something to strive for. Will you join us tomorrow?”

Nora bobbed her head. “That’s the plan, but the day after I want to hit the gym. We have access to that, right?”

Andrew nodded, and Lucian knew what was about to come out of his mouth. “I’ll show you where it is tomorrow afternoon,” Lucian said, cutting off the offer Andrew had been about to make.

Both Nora and Andrew looked at him. “There’s no need,” Nora said. “I can find it on my own. But thank you anyway, Lucian,” she said. He was sure she added that last bit only because it was part of her nature to be polite. Turning back to Andrew, she lifted the two items she held. “Thank you for bringing these over. I appreciate it. See you tomorrow?”

Andrew’s eyes flickered to Lucian, then rested on Nora, and he smiled. “Looking forward to it.”

Nora remained in the foyer as Andrew left, then turned and started toward the stairwell again.

“He’s a little young for you, don’t you think?” Lucian asked.

Nora stopped and looked at him. Her green eyes searched his face, drifting to the glass he held between his fingers, then back up again. She took a deep breath, as if to say something, then let it out with a shake of her head.

“I’ll see you at dinner, Lucian,” she said, then turned and walked away.

He watched. And wondered. What had Andrew delivered to her? She’d been eager to get her hands on it, whatever it was.

He pondered the question as participants started filtering out of their rooms, intent on a little socialization before dinner. Cencio arrived with a few more bottles of wine, and then a young woman dropped off a grocery delivery. Jurgen took possession of the large box that Lucian was sure held wine and spirits. Or beer and spirits.

When seven o’clock rolled around, everyone made their way into the dining room and to the buffet. Again, he found himself seated with Jean and Anne. Only instead of Marie, Willa rounded out their foursome. Nora was nowhere to be seen. Nor did she arrive in the next twenty minutes.

“I understand you and Nora went for a run this morning,” Lucian said to Willa. She nodded and finished her bite.

“Bloody freezing out there, but it was good to get out,” she answered.

“You ran with the soldiers?” he asked.

Willa nodded, and Anne wagged her eyebrows.

“I know you’re getting married in a few months, but seeing all those fit young men must not have been a bad way to wake up,” Anne teased.

To Lucian’s surprise, Willa laughed. He wasn’t sure he’d ever heard her laugh. “It wasn’t bad,” Willa conceded. “And I think a few of them have a little crush on Nora. She raced two and won. Of course, they were carrying packs and she wasn’t. But I think the fact that she even agreed to take them on won them over.”

Lucian frowned. That wasn’t like the Nora he knew. The Nora he knew would have been too shy to propose, or accept, a race. Not that there was anything wrong with it, it...just wasn’t her. Then again, it wasn’t as if he knew her well. Especially not in the past few years.

“What in god’s name inspired you to run at that godforsaken hour?” Jean asked, raising his wineglass. As if he needed the brace of alcohol to even contemplate the thought.

Willa shrugged. “I mentioned to Nora that I’m a runner, and she texted me last night to see if I wanted to join her. She wanted to get a good sense of the property, of everywhere the dogs might go. She thought joining the running group would be a good way to do that.”

“Anything we should know?” Anne asked.

Willa shook her head. “The terrain is varied, which is one of the reasons they picked this location. But I didn’t see anything that would be a problem. Especially not for our dogs. There are a couple of holes in the fence, so we may want to be careful about any pursuit training we do in those areas. But if something like that poses a problem for any of us, we shouldn’t be here.”

Lucian let the conversation flow around him as he made a mental note that Nora was scoping out the grounds. And befriending the participants. After his texts with Violetta, he’d accepted that his family hadn’t sent her. But was she here for another reason? Was there a problem she’d been sent to investigate?

“Where is she?” Jean asked. “I had hoped to get her opinion on a dog I have back in France.”

Willa gestured upward. “She had some work to do so asked me to bring her a plate of food once we’re all done. I was planning to, but if you want to chat with her, you could take it up?”

Jean gave a Gallic shrug. “I’d be happy to take it up, but my question isn’t pressing. I can always speak to her tomorrow.”

“I’ll take it up,” Lucian said. Three sets of eyes turned to him. “I’m done, and her room is right across from mine.” His old instincts were beginning to bubble back to life. If there was something going on with this group, and she was investigating, then he wanted to know.

Willa frowned but nodded. “All right,” she said, drawing out the words. “She’s a vegetarian, you know that?”

Lucian nodded and rose. “Are you up for a game of pool later?” he asked Anne. She was a bit of a shark and always fun for a few games.

She smiled. “I would like that. Though just one or two. Still feeling the time change a bit.”

“Deal. I’ll go take Nora her plate and meet you back down here in thirty minutes.” Thirty minutes should give him enough time to figure out what Nora Amiri was really up to.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN THE KNOCK came at her door, Nora concealed the document she'd been reviewing and called for Willa to come in. Only it wasn't Willa who stepped into her room.

She blinked. "Lucian."

"Nora," he replied.

She stared at him. She hadn't forgotten what an attractive man he was. In the past two days, his personality had somewhat overshadowed that fact, though. But as he stood there with her plate in hand, looking just a little disheveled, he struck her as...charming. Maybe even sweet. Which made no sense, because he'd been anything but.

Giving herself a little internal shake, she stepped forward and took the plate and napkin-wrapped utensils from him. "Thank you for bringing this. I hope it wasn't a bother?"

"It wasn't," he said.

She shifted her computer to the side and set everything down on her desk. When he didn't turn to leave, she arched a brow in question. "Is there something I can help you with?"

His attention drifted around her room, taking everything in. Her spidey-sense started to tingle, but she wasn't going to jump to conclusions yet. Although it sure as hell appeared as though he was looking for something.

Finally, his gaze landed back on her. "I owe you an apology," he said. She fought a smile at the way he said the words. As if he'd forced them over a bed of rusty nails before pushing them out.

"Apology accepted," she replied. She hadn't a clue what had brought on his initial suspicions and although she knew Six would tell her, she hadn't

asked. She had a job to focus on—two, actually—and getting to the bottom of Lucian’s issues wasn’t one of them.

“Whatever it is that has your family worried enough that you thought they’d send me here to watch over you, I hope you figure it out,” she added, unable to completely ignore his pain.

His eyes searched hers and in those fleeting seconds, she saw something she’d never seen in him before. Uncertainty.

Lucian had always been someone so sure and confident. Not that he always got things right, but he had the kind of confidence to know that if he got it wrong, he’d be able to fix it. That wasn’t what she saw now.

After a beat, he nodded. “Thank you.”

They stared at each other for another moment, then she pulled her gaze away. Hoping he’d sense it was time for him to leave, she picked up the utensils and began unwrapping them.

“What are you doing here, Nora?” he asked.

She closed her eyes. How were they back to this point?

“I know you’re here as the vet,” he added. “But there’s something else going on, isn’t there?”

With his background as an agent for AISE, and hers with the Directorate, it didn’t surprise her that he’d noticed certain things. That he’d done it so quickly did, though.

She hid her reaction with a shake of her head. “Just focus on your training, Lucian. I’m sorry for whatever is going on in your life. I really am. But you have a job to do here, and so do I. Can we concentrate on that?”

His eyes bored into hers. “Are you in danger?”

She cocked her head at the question. “No,” she said, drawing the word out.

His eyes remained fixed on hers, then he gave a sharp nod. “If you are, despite everything, I hope you know you can count on me.”

She nodded. “Thank you. I don’t anticipate needing any, but I appreciate the offer.” In truth, she wasn’t sure he could be counted on for much of anything other than training the dogs. Not that he was flaky, but there were other things on his mind.

His eyes narrowed, but then softened. He looked as if he was going to say something more, but she cut him off. “Thank you for bringing me dinner.”

A beat passed. “You’re welcome,” he said, then abruptly, he turned and left.

Nora remained rooted to her spot until his door shut across the hallway. Then, letting out a deep breath, she picked up her plate and crossed the room to the closet—not the beautiful armoire, but one built into the wall with two sliding doors. Pushing one of the sliders to the left, she eyed the large satellite map of the area—compliments of Franklin—that she'd tacked up.

Taking a seat on her bed, she started to pick at her dinner as she familiarized herself with the region. The image showed everything within a twenty-mile radius of the training center. She'd drawn three circles on the laminated map. The first was around the training center itself, the second was a ten-mile radius from the center. And the last outlined the fifteen-mile radius.

Eight of the nine prior murders had occurred between ten and fifteen miles from the training location. Eyeing the ring, she noted there wasn't much inside it—two very small towns on the northern side, several farms, and a state park. Roads bisected it in different locations, but it was a remarkably rural stretch of land.

Her gaze drifted to the inner ring between the ten-mile radius line and the border of the training center. It was different from the larger ring. It was still rural, but it also contained three decent-sized towns, a small university, another state park, and a monastery. Business parks and strip malls also lined a few of the state highways that transected the area.

Staring at the poster, she started to wonder about the earlier murders. All but the first had taken place more than ten but less than fifteen miles from the training grounds. But was that as the crow flies or as one might drive? If it were the latter, her area of interest might be much different from what was currently circled on the map.

Frowning, she set aside her half-eaten vegetarian cassoulet and rose. When she stood in front of the image, she pulled out her phone and mapped one of the towns in the inner circle. Her heart sank when she saw the directions pop up on her tiny screen. As the crow flies, the town of Plainfield was only three miles away. By car, it was just over ten.

Retrieving her computer, she pulled up the files from the prior murders. Analyzing the data against a map of each area, she realized that the distances Franklin had mentioned were driving distances. Not geographic distances.

She set her computer to the side and approached the map again. Measuring by driving distance changed her entire perspective. The outer line was still her border, but the line marking the ten-mile radius was no longer

relevant. There were too many places between the training center and that line that met the criteria when looking at driving distances.

She winced as the impact of that realization sank in. Her search area just got a lot bigger and, given the twisty roads in this rural part of the state, a lot more complicated. On a whim, she mapped out the driving distance to the college. Eleven miles. If she could fly there, it would be seven. The monastery was similar. It was less than three miles away, but driving there was a twelve-mile trip.

The sound of Lucian's door opening and closing again pulled her attention from the map. After his exposure to the cold the night before, she didn't think he'd be going out. But was he actually going to the lounge to socialize? The thought piqued her curiosity, and she considered heading down herself. Then just as quickly, she quelled that impulse. It was nearly nine o'clock. She hadn't promised Andrew anything, but she had every intention of running with him and his group in the morning. They'd been a wealth of information about the grounds. Pointing out the good, the bad, and the ugly as they'd run the perimeter. She suspected they'd be a wealth of information about local hangouts, too, and she had every intention of chatting them up about it tomorrow so that she could recon the spots over her lunch break. There was no guarantee that the participants would pick one of those locations when they did decide to go out, but being familiar with them couldn't hurt.

Which meant she needed to get to bed early tonight. With a sigh, she slid the closet door over to cover the map, then picked up her phone and texted Willa.

*"Joining the run tomorrow?"* Nora asked.

*"Was planning on it,"* she responded.

*"Great, see you downstairs at five."*

*"Want me to come grab your plate and bring it down to the kitchen?"*

Nora frowned, somewhat surprised at the offer. *"You don't need to do that,"* she answered.

*"I'm out on a short walk with Hagen. We can pop up when we get back. He'll appreciate the new smells."* Nora smiled at that. *"Besides, I get the feeling you'd rather not walk through the crowd in the lounge. They're used to me not joining them. If I walk by without stopping, they won't even notice."*

Lucian would notice, but Nora didn't feel like thinking about that. *"If you*

*wouldn't mind, I'd appreciate it. I want to get a good night's sleep and have a feeling if I take it down myself, I might not make it back for a few hours."*

*"You have no idea," Willa said. "Be there in ten mins."*

Nora set her phone down and let her gaze drift around her room. There was nothing out of the ordinary for Willa to see.

Nothing to indicate that Nora knew there was a murderer among them.



## CHAPTER NINE

“Do you want to see the gym?” Lucian asked as they walked back from the training ground to the residence hall for lunch. Flurries swirled around them, making Nora feel as if she were inside a snow globe. It was the first snowfall of the season, but it wouldn’t be enough to stick. *That* storm would come in a week. If the forecasters were to be believed, which in Massachusetts wasn’t always the best bet to make.

“I can find the gym later. No need to show me,” Nora replied. She wasn’t about to tell him that she didn’t have time because she was going to recon sites a murderer might find his or her victims.

“It was young Andrew you wanted to spend time with, then?”

Nora bit back a sigh. “Not that it’s any of your business, but if I wanted to spend time with Andrew, I wouldn’t need a trip to the gym as an excuse. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an errand I need to run.” Nora peeled off from the group and headed around the building. She glanced back as she reached the corner. Sure enough, Lucian was standing, arms crossed, snow drifting and swirling around him, watching her.

Her eyes caught his. A sharp stab of *something* lanced through her. Anger radiated from him as he stared. A deep, resentful sort of anger. She had no idea why it was directed at her. They hadn’t been getting along these past three days, but his irritation with her had been more of a general sort. What she saw now was altogether different.

Pulling her eyes from his, she continued to the parking lot. Climbing into her Land Cruiser, she turned it on and flicked the heat to high as she removed her jacket. Once the car was warmer than a refrigerator, she backed out and drove away. She had a bar—or two—to check out, and Lucian was a big boy;

he could deal with his own issues.

Waving to Andrew as she exited through the gate, she turned left and headed to the first place he and the running crew had mentioned. It was the closest to the grounds, but Nora didn't think it would be the participants' first choice of places to hang out. It was a fairly down-market joint and not in the appealing dive bar kind of way. Andrew had said it resembled an old pizza parlor with tile floors, laminate tables, and cheap metal chairs. Located in a nearby strip mall, he and his friends only went there when they wanted a quick, cheap beer.

Not exactly the kind of place to meet a potential murder victim.

Of course, she was assuming that the murderer was actually meeting his or her victims before singling them out. It was entirely possible the killer was targeting them randomly.

As she pulled into the parking lot of the mall, Nora considered the option that the killings were all random. At first glance, it made more sense than anything planned. In each of the three locations, none of the three victims had any ties to one another. And many hadn't ever set foot in any of the bars the participants frequented during the session. The disparate nature of the victims *seemed* random. But in the randomness...well, Nora had to wonder if there was a pattern she just wasn't seeing. The crimes were almost *too* random to be arbitrary.

The more she mulled it over, the stronger she felt that there was some tie among the victims. Or between the victims and the killer. There was a reason the killer selected each of them. She just hadn't found that reason yet.

She finally spotted the bar and agreed instantly with Andrew's description. It looked like every other storefront in the 1970s-built strip mall. It had a glass front with a swinging door, and the windows were tinted with a laminate film. In the upper right corner, a neon "Open" sign blinked.

Not bothering to go in, she pulled around the back of the mall to see if there was a spot that screamed "potential murder site." She was approaching the area behind the bar when her phone rang. Glancing at the screen, she frowned.

"Franklin," she said after connecting the call.

"You're already out."

"I am. I'm scoping out the local bars the participants might visit."

"A body was found late this morning. I'll send you the coordinates."

At the stark statement, Nora's mind blanked for a split second. Then, like

a dam breaking, questions started pouring through her mind. When? How? Who had left the building? But first things first.

“Since you’re calling me, I assume it’s one of ours?” she asked.

“A man was stabbed in the right side of his torso, then left to die.”

Yes, definitely one of theirs. “When?”

“The body was discovered thirty minutes ago. You’ll have to talk to the ME to find out time of death. Detective Ben Miller is expecting you.”

“What’s my story?”

“That you’re a government employee investigating a string of murders. It isn’t far from the truth. You are on contract with NATO, and you *are* investigating the crimes.”

Nora nearly rolled her eyes. Franklin was reaching, but she could go with it. “Roger that,” she said.

“Keep me informed,” he ordered. Then, not bothering to say goodbye, he hung up.

Pulling to a stop beside a chain-link fence separating the back of the mall from an adjacent field, Nora transferred the coordinates he’d sent to her GPS. When the map popped up with a recommended route, she pulled away and followed the alley to the main road.

Taking the road north for about three miles, she then made a left and began winding west. If she had her bearings right, she’d pass through one of the small towns, and then a few miles past that would be the monastery on the south side of the road.

Her gaze skated to the clock. The participants had a little over an hour for lunch, giving her forty-five minutes at the scene before she’d need to leave. She had a duty to be on-site during all the training sessions, but she also didn’t want to risk Lucian’s notice. He already suspected something. If she started showing up late—or not at all—there was no telling what he’d do.

As she made her way west, snow hit her windshield with tiny little pings. It wasn’t falling fast enough to stick, though, and navigating the unfamiliar roads was easily done. Ten minutes after leaving the mall, she pulled into a parking lot filled with police and emergency vehicles.

After slipping on her jacket, gloves, and hat, she exited the car and headed toward a young officer standing at the head of a trail. Pulling her driver’s license from her pocket, she held it out as she approached.

“I’m here to meet Detective Ben Miller,” she said as the woman reached to take her ID. The officer scrutinized the document, then handed it back

before using the communication device on her shoulder to call it in. A few seconds later, she stepped to the side.

“Follow the trail back a half-mile and you’ll see the scene to your left. You won’t miss it. There are a lot of people out there.” Nora nodded. She bet there were a lot of people. This area of the state didn’t see many murders. Especially not murders that weren’t the result of a domestic altercation.

Hurrying along the path, Nora soon reached the spot she needed to turn. It was obvious, as she’d been told. Not because of the buzz of activity to her left, though. No, the man standing on the trail waiting for her gave it away. His arms were crossed, and he wore an expression that somehow managed to be both blank and judgmental.

Nora slowed as she approached the tallest person she’d ever met. Stopping a few feet away so as not to have to crane her neck too far, she looked up.

“Detective Ben Miller,” he said, holding out his hand. Nora took one step closer and shook it.

“Nora Amiri.” Detective Miller stared down at her. He looked a few years older than her, and his blue eyes appeared even bluer against his weather-tanned skin.

“Seven feet,” he said, holding her gaze.

Her brow furrowed, and she looked toward the scene. It was far more than seven feet away. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m seven feet tall. Most people ask. Or make some comment about the weather up here.”

Nora blinked. That wasn’t exactly what she’d been expecting the detective to say. “Well, I’m five foot three and I can tell you, it’s probably as cold down here as it is up there. What have you got?”

His lips twitched with a smile, then he gestured toward the scene. “Male. Early sixties. We believe he’s a member of the monastery but haven’t confirmed yet.”

“Any ID on him?” A few of the crime scene techs looked up as they approached. The ME was kneeling beside the body and didn’t acknowledge their arrival.

“No. Looked like he was out for a morning run. No ID, no phone, nothing.”

“What makes you think he’s a member of the monastery then? This is a public path, right?”

Detective Miller nodded. "It is, and people do use it for running and hiking. But he has an everlasting life tattoo on his forearm. I know it's a stretch. Lots of people have those. Not to mention, I don't know too many tattooed priests, but it's a start. We're not far from the monastery, and the path he was on was one only people very familiar with the area would know." As he spoke, he pointed at a mountain to the west of them. Squinting through the snow, she could just barely make out the outline of a building perched atop its peak.

"Time of death?" she asked.

"We're not certain yet, but the ME put it sometime between five and nine this morning. Although it would have taken him a while to bleed out."

"Any chance you know how long?" she asked with a hopeful smile. She pushed aside the thought of what it must have been like to be attacked and stabbed and know you were likely going to die.

"Won't know until I get him back to the lab," the ME replied, interjecting himself into the conversation. Nora turned toward the man. He reminded her a little of Santa Claus with his round face, pink cheeks, and long white beard. "Dr. Birch, at your service," he said.

Despite the grisly scene, Nora smiled. "Nora Amiri."

Dr. Birch's gaze went to Detective Miller. "She's a government consultant. I've been told to extend all courtesy to her," Miller said.

Nora hid a wince. Detective Miller didn't seem to hold her interference against her, but he hadn't sugarcoated the fact that the edict had come from on high. He also sounded as though he wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or amused.

Dr. Birch's attention came back to her. "A government consultant who just happens to be in the area?"

"Believe it or not, I did just happen to be in the area. What can you tell me?" she asked as she looked at the victim for the first time. The man was dressed in long running pants, gloves, and sneakers. His surprisingly thick gray hair was mussed, and there was dirt on the fingertips of his gloves. Shifting her gaze to just beyond his feet, she saw a path of disturbed ground. As if he'd crawled across the frozen land.

Dr. Birch hesitated but after a nod from Detective Miller, he answered. "Stabbed once here," he said, pointing to a gash in the man's side. "He was on one of the side trails about a quarter of a mile that way." The doctor pointed toward the marks she'd already spotted. "He was dragged off the

trail, then stabbed about three hundred yards in. If you head back, you can see where it happened. More blood there. I guess that's one thing the cold is good for. Not much absorbed into the soil."

Nora nodded, her mind conjuring the scene. "Why crawl this way and not back to the trail he'd been on?"

"The side trail is rarely traveled," Detective Miller answered. "We think he might have been trying to get to that one." He pointed to the one she'd come down. "It's much more popular, and he would have had a better chance of finding help. Had he made it," he added.

And had it not been flurrying. The chances of someone else being out that morning for a walk were slim.

Her eyes scanned the area. "Do you mind if I take a look around?" *Alone* was implied.

Detective Miller eyed her, then gave a single nod. "Find me before you go?"

"Of course," she said.

"And watch the markers," Dr. Birch called out as she started to follow the crawl trail toward the main crime scene. She didn't bother responding but stayed well clear of the first one she passed. It wasn't where the victim had been stabbed, but the spot was more disturbed than the rest. Maybe he'd paused to rest there.

Following the markers to the main scene, she paused twenty feet away from the buzz of activity. Crime scene techs were collecting evidence, taking measurements, and shooting pictures. She couldn't get a good look at the central location, but it wasn't what she was primarily interested in anyway. Skirting the site, she walked toward the trail Miller had said the jogger had been on. Markers set by the team guided her. Judging by the way the rocks were kicked up and the rough winter foliage disturbed, Nora agreed that the victim had been dragged from the trail to the more isolated spot.

Studying the scene as she walked, she considered the options. Subduing and dragging the victim several hundred yards wouldn't have been easy. He wasn't a young man, but he was tall and obviously in good shape. Was it something a woman could have done?

Willa had been out on a run with her and wasn't a suspect anyway. That left Sophie, Ingrid, Anne, and Marie. Size didn't always equate to strength, but Sophie was shorter than Nora. With the height differential, there was no way she could have wrestled the victim off-trail on her own. She would have

had to subdue the victim somehow—maybe with a drug—before dragging him anywhere.

Both Marie and Anne were taller than Sophie, but not exactly tall. Making it possible, but not likely, that either had committed the crime. Ingrid was certainly tall enough, but Nora just couldn't see it. She'd paid for her crimes early on in life. She wasn't the most joyful person, but she was a woman who'd fought hard for the life she had. She didn't strike Nora as the sort to put that at risk.

The men, though, that was a different story. She considered each of them as she reached the trail Miller had noted. He was right—it appeared little used and was so overgrown and narrow that she'd almost stepped over it. The only reason she hadn't was the cluster of yellow markers and the crime scene tech taking pictures.

The woman behind the camera looked up as Nora approached. "Is this where he was taken off the trail?" Nora asked.

The woman hesitated, clearly not sure who Nora was or if she should talk to her. "Detective Miller gave me permission to come this way," she said. "I'm a consultant for the government."

"Go ahead and talk to her," Dr. Birch called as he strode toward them. "I need these images done in the next few minutes or we're going to lose the scene," he added, pointing up. Nora looked at the thick, dark clouds, then noticed that the snow had started sticking. She didn't think they'd get much more than a half-inch. But to the doctor's point, anything that coated the ground would obscure the evidence.

The tech started taking pictures again as she answered. "Yes. We think he was headed south on the trail and was met here by someone. That someone subdued the victim, then maneuvered him off the trail."

Nora contemplated that scenario as she took in the scene. Then, with a nod to Dr. Birch, she turned and headed south. She wanted to see the direction the victim had been headed before meeting his untimely death.

When she was far enough away, she pulled out her phone and mapped her location. Sure enough, as the crow flies, she was less than two miles from the training center. She looked down the trail toward the direction of the center. Had the killer come from there?

Zooming in on the map, she saw no direct routes from the training grounds to where she currently stood. But the image didn't pixelate well on her phone. When she returned to her room, she'd consult a satellite image.

Standing in the cold, the snow drifting down around her, she debated whether to follow the trail or not. Glancing at the display on her phone, she accepted she'd have to come back later. If she remained much longer, she wouldn't make it back in time for the start of the afternoon training session.

With a frustrated huff, she pinned her location on the map for later reference and walked back up the trail. When she reached the spot where the tech had been taking pictures, she found the woman and Dr. Birch gathering the markers. Detective Miller was there as well, surveying the scene.

"Thank you," she said, turning off the trail to head back to the main branch. "I'll be in touch," she added with a nod to the three officials.

"I'll walk you to your car," Miller said, inviting himself along. It took him less than two minutes to ask the question Nora had known was coming. "Any chance you're going to tell me what agency you work with?"

"I work for several," Nora answered, picking her way through the snow.

A few minutes later, he spoke again. "And you just happened to be in the area?"

Nora smiled at the cynicism in his voice. "You don't believe in coincidences?"

Miller tipped his head as he held a branch out of the way for her. A few seconds later, they stepped back onto the main trail. "I do, actually. Just not right now." Smart man.

Knowing it was better to keep any exchange to the bare necessities, Nora remained silent. They reached the parking lot a few minutes later and paused at the newly strung crime scene tape.

Miller let out a deep exhale. "Look, all I need to know is if this is going to become a problem. Not working together, but this murder. If it isn't a coincidence, and you were sent here, then that means someone expected this or something like it to happen. I want to know if we can expect any more."

Nora respected that. It was his job to police this area. It wasn't unreasonable for him to want to know—to want to prepare—for something more if more were to come. She shoved her hands into her pockets and let her gaze drift to the field across the road. "Between you and me?" she asked. She didn't know him well enough to know if his promise meant anything, but she sensed that it would. He nodded. "It's possible," she said.

His jaw ticked. "How many?"

Nora's attention shifted to him. "Two. Unless I can stop it."

His eyes bored into hers. "And you're not going to tell me any more than



that?”

She held his gaze and answered. “Right now, there’s not much to tell. If I discover something I think you should know, I will tell you.”

His expression hardened. He hadn’t missed her qualifier—if *she* thought he should know, she’d tell him. It couldn’t be any other way, though. She wasn’t going to put the K9 program at risk because of one, or possibly two, bad actors. Especially not when the murders likely had nothing to do with the program itself. They all felt too personal to her for that to be the case.

After a long pause, he nodded. She wished she could give him more, but what more could she give him? He didn’t need to know that one victim would be set on fire and the other strangled. She didn’t know who or where or even when those events might take place, so there wasn’t anything he could do to stop them. And if she could figure out who the killer was, they wouldn’t happen at all.

“We’ll be in touch,” she said. Again, he nodded, then lifted the tape for her. After slipping underneath, she hurried to her car. She’d be late for the afternoon session, but only by a few minutes. Hopefully, Lucian wouldn’t notice. But she wasn’t counting on it.

## CHAPTER TEN

LUCIAN WATCHED Nora hurry up the path. Her gaze flickered to his but didn't linger. Where had she been? Wherever it was, it had taken her the entire lunch hour. And then some. To be fair, she was less than ten minutes late and they'd only started the session a few minutes ago, but still...

"I'd never fuck around with Lena's health, but I wouldn't mind an excuse to spend some time with the good doctor," Jonah said. Lucian didn't turn his head in the man's direction. He didn't need to see him to know who Jonah was talking about. Or who he was talking to.

"We'll invite her out tonight. Jean said she might be interested in joining us," Jurgen answered.

"Shall we place bets on whether either of us has a chance?"

Jurgen chuckled, but Lucian cut off the conversation before he had a chance to answer. "Jonah, you and Lena go with Ingrid. Jurgen, you're with James," he ordered. Both men might be man-whores, but they were dedicated handlers, and they each snapped out a nod and jogged off.

Ingrid gave him a look from her position across the field. He raised a hand—part acknowledging he'd changed the plan without consulting her and part thanking her for going with it. After a beat, she nodded and returned her attention to the group.

"Craig, Anne, and Willa, you're with me," he said. "Craig, you and Miles are up first."

Craig stepped forward and reached into a box filled with clothing. Pulling out a child-sized T-shirt, he held it out for Miles to scent. Search-and-rescue wasn't Miles's vocation, but basic scenting skills were required for all the dogs. Miles sniffed the shirt, then started spinning. Not the most auspicious

response. But as soon as Craig corrected him, Miles obediently sat.

When the K9 remained seated, his attention on his handler, Craig gave him the signal to go. To Lucian's surprise, the dog bolted in the right direction. Not that he was surprised Miles had caught the scent, but not once had Miles put his nose to the ground. It was as if he were air scenting, rather than the more common ground scenting. Something he most definitely hadn't trained for.

Mistaking his dog's behavior, Craig barked out a cutting rebuke. Miles froze, then looked back. He eyed his handler, then glanced toward the woods. A sound, half whimper, half bark, came out. Craig snarled out a command for Miles to return. Miles looked to the woods again, then started walking back, his tail low. Lucian watched as Craig approached his dog, leash in hand. Once Miles was close enough, Craig slipped the lead on and gave a corrective jerk of the chain.

And that was the extent Lucian was going to let Craig get it wrong.

"Craig," Lucian growled. The handler looked up as he returned to the group.

"I don't know what his issue is," Craig said.

"I do. Give me your dog," Lucian ordered, holding his hand out.

To his credit, Craig hesitated. It wasn't in the nature of a handler to hand his or her dog over. But in this Lucian wasn't going to compromise.

"I can train him," Craig said.

"Not if you don't know him. Give me your dog," Lucian ordered, taking a step forward. After a beat, Craig handed the leash over. "You need to take a break. Go back to the residence hall. I'll keep Miles."

"I don't need a fucking break, Salvitto. I need to train my dog."

"Craig?"

Both Lucian and Craig looked over to find Nora standing on the edge of the training grounds.

"Not a good time, Nora," Lucian called.

Not surprisingly, she ignored him and walked toward them a few feet. "Craig, I have a question for you about Miles's paperwork. Can you join me while Lucian has him?"

She was up to something, though what it was, Lucian didn't know. Between this and her tardiness at the beginning of the session, they were going to have a little chat later.

"Nora." His voice came out a warning. When Craig shot him a look

telling him to back off Nora, Lucian found he kind of liked the guy. If he could get his head out of his ass about his dog.

“Coming,” Craig said. “It appears I need a break.” The smile he flashed at both Nora and Lucian was as close to predatory as a man’s smile could be.

Nora’s gaze flickered to Lucian at the provocation. He didn’t react. But it took a lot for him not to. He felt Nora’s eyes on him with every step Craig took toward her. With deliberate effort, Lucian turned away.

Forcing thoughts of Nora from his mind, he reached down and sank his fingers into Miles’s thick fur. Then giving him a good rub, Lucian told the shepherd what a good boy he was.

“What’s the problem?” Craig asked her as he stepped into the portable.

“There isn’t any, but I wanted to get you away from Lucian,” Nora answered as she walked to the window with a view of the training grounds.

“I hardly need you to protect me, Doc. But I’m not going to begrudge a chance to get out of the cold.”

“Or coffee?” she asked, gesturing to the carafe on the counter beside her.

“Or coffee,” he confirmed, walking over to pour himself a cup. “Want any?”

She shook her head and watched Lucian direct Anne to start the exercise. Less than a minute later, Craig was beside her as Anne’s dog, Kroger, put his nose down and followed the scent.

“That’s what Miles should have done,” Craig said. “He’s actually a pretty good scenter. I don’t know what happened.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Nora asked.

Craig hesitated. “I do. Two sisters and a brother.”

“Are you all similar? Or not alike at all?” She kept her gaze on the training ground as she waited for his answer.

“Different. My sisters are twins, and not too dissimilar from each other. But my brother is an egghead. A great guy but lives and breathes his computer. Doesn’t socialize much.”

“And are you close to your parents?”

“What’s with the questions? I get the feeling you’re leading me somewhere.”

She smiled. "I am. Are you close to your parents?"

He sighed. "I am. No trauma or broken home. We have our moments, but we're close."

"And do your parents love you all the same?"

"Of course," he answered without hesitation.

She let the moment hang between them. Then finally she spoke. "Miles isn't Annie," she said.

"I know," he snapped back. Again, she let the silence hang between them. Craig was a smart man; he'd figure out what she was saying.

"You think I'm too hard on him because he isn't her?"

"I think you don't *see him* because he isn't her," she corrected.

Craig snorted. "You saw that last exercise. I think I see him just fine."

"Do you?"

He sighed again. "You obviously don't think I do. What do you see?"

"Walk me through what happened," she said. "From the time you picked a shirt to the time you walked in here. Talk me through it."

And he did. Only the moment he got to the part when Miles hesitated at the woods, Craig hesitated, too. Then he fell silent.

After a moment, he turned to her. "Holy fuck, he was air scenting, wasn't he? He was air scenting, and I didn't even notice because he wasn't doing what I expected him to. He was doing what I *asked* him to, but not in the way I expected him to. The way Annie would have done it."

Nora faced him, leaning her hip against the window. "He's a great dog, Craig. He isn't Annie, though. He will do things in his own way, and you have to listen to him the same way he listens to you. Handlers and K9s have a relationship, you know that. But that relationship is a two-way street."

He stared at her for a moment longer, then dropped his eyes in shame. "I've let him down, haven't I?"

Nora tipped her head. "Miles is a pretty forgiving guy. He's also pretty special, and if you let go of some of your guilt about Annie's death, you'll see that. He has a love of life that is unique and quite wonderful. Enhance it, Craig. Don't kill it."

After a beat, his lips tipped into a smile. "You don't pull any punches, do you?"

She smiled back. "I don't. But I try to do it as nicely as possible. I don't believe in hitting a man when he's down."

"Lucian saw what I didn't, didn't he?" Nora nodded. "He doesn't miss

much, does he?”

She inclined her head. No, unfortunately, Lucian didn't miss much. “How's Miles doing with the cold?” she asked, changing the subject. Craig was based in North Carolina. They had their share of cold days, but not quite like Massachusetts.

Craig smiled. “That's one thing I do know. He loves the cold. He's in his element here. Especially if we get more snow.”

“Have you taken him out for any long walks or runs? I've been running the perimeter route with a couple of guys on base. It's a good path.”

Craig frowned. “I saw the trail maps in the welcome packet but haven't hit any yet. I went out the main gate and ran along the road this morning. Figured if I go out and back, I don't have to think about getting lost. Or think about much of anything other than running.”

Nora smiled at that. She knew a lot of people who liked to zone out on their runs. Devil being one of them. Once she got going, she could go for miles without a second thought. Nora, however, liked company.

“You didn't take Miles, did you?” she asked.

Craig shook his head. “I went out around five-thirty. I wasn't sure what the roads would look like in terms of ice or debris, so figured I'd scope it out first. If the perimeter route is dirt, I might try that with him.” He paused and looked out the window to where Miles sat beside Lucian, Lucian's hand resting on his head. “Or maybe I should do that now. Think Lucian will give up my dog?”

Nora smiled. “If you tell him you fucked up and know it, yes, he'll give you your dog back.”

Craig chuckled. “Again with the truth bombs.”

“I figure you can take it.”

He nodded, then hesitated. “Thank you. I don't think I'm really over Annie's death. I probably shouldn't have accepted another dog so quickly.”

“But you did.”

“I did,” he said. “And I owe it to him to help him be the best he can be.”

“You do,” Nora agreed.

“Thank you,” he said again. Then he turned and left, grabbing his coat and winter gear on his way out the door.

The minute he was gone, Nora pulled her laptop out. She had access to the security system on the training grounds, and she wanted to confirm Craig's story. A few minutes later, she watched a video of him pass through

the front gate at five forty-five. He returned at seven-fifteen, and he'd been at breakfast at eight. If the victim's time of death was between five and nine, there was no way Craig could have been involved. Not unless someone had picked him up in a car outside the base, which wasn't a likely scenario.

Seeing the video made Nora wonder who else had left their room that morning. The residence hall didn't have cameras inside—something she was going to talk to Franklin about—but she had access to the key card readers. Pulling up that data, she saw that Craig wasn't the only one who'd had a morning excursion.

Anne had keyed into the gym a few minutes after six and ninety minutes later, returned to her room. Marie had done the same. Lucian had left his room shortly after she'd left for her run and returned a few minutes before her own arrival.

That record gave her pause. She and Willa were only out for a little over an hour. Not enough time for Lucian to make it to the crime scene, commit the crime, then get back again. But it wasn't this possibility that she pondered, because despite her promise to Franklin, she was sure he wasn't involved. The timing of his outing *was* suspicious, though. Not in terms of the murder, but she had a sneaking feeling he might have been following her. To what end, she didn't know, only it wouldn't surprise her if he had.

Setting that thought aside, she returned to her perusal of the security system. Jonah and Jurgen had also left their rooms at the same time, then returned together a little over an hour later. She didn't know where they'd gone, but she'd ask them about it that evening. Jean had also stepped out, but his outing lasted less than fifteen minutes. She assumed he'd taken Adela for a quick walk. Regardless, he hadn't been gone nearly long enough to commit the crime.

Wanting cameras inside the residence hall, she sent Franklin a text requesting he make the arrangements. A few minutes later, he confirmed he'd have it done during tomorrow's morning session. The feeds would be on a closed circuit, and she'd be the only one with access.

Setting her computer aside, she looked out the window in time to see Craig walking back from the woods. Apparently, he'd forgone the run and gotten right back on the horse. Successfully this time, it appeared. Craig carried the dummy doll his dog had scented, and Miles trotted jauntily at his side. Every few strides, Craig reached down and rubbed his dog's head.

It would take a while for Craig to build the kind of relationship with

Miles that he'd had with Annie. At least it looked as though he was trying now. And Miles really did strike Nora as a forgiving animal. Most dogs were, but Miles particularly so.

Nora's eyes strayed to Lucian. When he eventually learned the real reason for her presence at the program—which he inevitably would—she didn't think he'd be so forgiving.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

LUCIAN, James, and Ingrid remained on the training grounds as the participants and their dogs returned to the residence hall. The temperatures had dropped, and it was colder than the hinges of hell, but it was easier to debrief the day's activities now rather than fit it in later. Especially since James and Ingrid planned to join a few folks heading out to a local bar after dinner.

They finished comparing notes and settled on a plan for the next day. As they started back to the residence hall, a light in the portable caught his attention. Lucian frowned. Nora should have gone back with the others.

"I'm going to check on Nora," he said, peeling off from the small group as they passed the clinic. James shot him a curious look—which he ignored—and Ingrid simply waved in acknowledgment.

Climbing the few steps to the door, he stomped his feet to get the dust of snow off before entering. His eyes immediately landed on Nora standing at the end of the table with her cell phone pressed to her ear. Her eyes flickered to his, but she remained focused on the call. He unzipped his jacket and removed his hat as he listened.

"That was fast. Can you email me the report?...Yes, I'll text you my address...I'll have a look tonight and call tomorrow if I have any questions... No, I don't have any more to share right now. But as I said, if I can, I will."

Lucian's eyebrows shot up. He hadn't heard the question, but her answer was certainly evasive. She looked up and met his gaze. He half expected her to turn away from him, but he should have known better. She might be sweet, she might be kind, but she wasn't one to back down.

"That sounds good, Ben. Thank you," she said.

Ben?

“We’ll talk tomorrow.” And then she hung up.

“What was that about?” he asked, not even trying for subtlety.

“A report I’ve been waiting for. What can I help you with, Lucian?” she asked as she started packing up her bag.

“Who’s Ben?”

She shot him a look as she flipped the cover of her bag closed. “Just someone I’m doing some business with. Again, is there something I can help you with?”

He regarded her before speaking. Then deciding to change the subject, he asked, “What did you say to Craig?”

She walked by him and set her bag on the end of the table as she reached for her winter gear hanging on the clothes tree. “Not much. We just talked about family.”

“You rescued him from me.”

The look she turned on him surprised him. He’d thought she might take umbrage at his comment, but she was smiling. “So you admit he needed rescuing?”

He bit back a growl—because humans did not growl. Then after a beat, he shrugged. “He would have deserved any tongue-lashing I gave him. He doesn’t deserve that dog, though.”

At the mention of his tongue, her gaze dropped to his lips and for a searing moment, heat flashed through his body. Yes, it had been twenty years, but he—and apparently, she—still remembered that night in Capri when he’d used his tongue in so many interesting ways.

The memories he saw playing across her features slid away as quickly as they’d appeared, and she shrugged. “He’ll come around.”

“You sound certain of that.”

She wagged her head as she zipped her jacket. “Call it a hunch. He was already better with Miles by the end of the day.”

He’d give her that. Miles was a little unconventional but extraordinarily talented, loyal, and smart. In Lucian’s mind, Craig had a lot to make up for, but Nora was right—in the past few hours, he’d been different.

“You were late to the session this afternoon,” he said, zipping his own jacket. It was clear she was getting ready to lock up and leave, and he was *not* stepping out into the evening unprepared.

She shrugged and slung her bag over her shoulder. “It won’t happen

again.”

He glanced up at that. Again, he hadn't expected that response. “Where were you?”

“Like I said, errands.” She opened the door and gestured him out. He exited but waited at the bottom of the stairs for her to lock the clinic. She turned her back on him, and he saw a little puff of fog in the dim security lighting. She'd just exhaled. Deeply. It seemed she wasn't as blasé as she was pretending.

“What kind of errands?” he asked, falling into step beside her after she'd come down the stairs.

She lifted a shoulder. “Are you headed out with the group tonight?”

More evasion. She was definitely hiding something. From him, for certain. But he suspected from whomever she'd been talking to earlier, too.

“Perhaps. You?” He thought it best to keep her guessing.

“Collin and Jonah asked me. So did Anne. But I haven't decided yet. I have a few things I need to do.”

He bet Jonah had asked. Collin, too, for that matter. “What do you have to do? You're here for three weeks. The dogs are all doing well. You don't have another well-check until tomorrow...”

She looked up at him through her thick black lashes. “Believe it or not, this isn't a vacation for me, Lucian. I was asked at the last minute to step in. I had to call in all sorts of favors from colleagues to fill in for me. I have reports to read, labs to review, and notes from those generous colleagues to keep up on. Everyone back home is already doing more than enough to cover for me. I'm not going to keep dumping things on them because I want to go out and have a glass of wine or two.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes. The lights from the residence hall came into view, and by the time they reached the door, he was properly chastened. “You're right, I apologize.”

She froze, her hand on the door. “I beg your pardon?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I apologize. Again. I should probably apologize for more than just assuming you were whiling your time away here, but let's take things one at a time.”

She studied him for a bit, then smiled and shook her head. “You are a piece of work, Lucian Salvitto,” she said, opening the door.

A blessed blast of warm air hit them, and he unzipped his jacket. Together, they climbed the stairs and walked toward their rooms. Her hand

was on her door when he stopped her. “Are you going down to dinner?”

Not knowing where she’d been during lunch had made him feel twitchy. Yes, she was capable of taking care of herself, but she was being sneaky and ambiguous. And he wasn’t a man who liked uncertainty.

She nodded. “I missed lunch, so yes, I’ll be there.”

He didn’t acknowledge the relief he felt in knowing that at least for the next few hours he’d know where she was. Maybe not what she was doing behind closed doors, but at least he’d know where she was.

“Cencio is bringing more wine out tonight.”

She smiled. “At this rate, he’s going to go through his case by tomorrow.”

Lucian didn’t quite meet her smile, but he thought about it. “His brother is an exporter. The first case was to get us started. Rest assured more is on the way.”

At that, Nora laughed. The only real laugh he’d elicited from her since seeing her for the first time a few days ago. “Then I’ll definitely be down.”

His gaze took in her face. The hint of a dimple she had in her left cheek. The amusement in her eyes. Her full pink lips, and her thick black hair, tumbling over her shoulders. She’d been a beautiful girl, and she’d grown into a stunning woman.

That thought drew Lucian up short and with a sharp nod, he turned and walked into his room. The door closed behind him and for a moment, he simply stood in the small hallway that led to the rest of the room. Why was he suddenly aware of how very attractive Nora was? In the many times he’d seen her since that summer in Capri, he hadn’t been blind to her beauty. But his notice had always felt more like an observation of fact than anything else. Of course, for several of those years, he’d been married. Then in mourning. Even so, something had just changed. In one infinitesimal moment in time, something had changed. She’d gone from being empirically attractive to being *attractive*.

And he didn’t like it. Not one bit.

Nora hurried into her room and dumped her bag on her bed as she started stripping out of her outer layers. She felt raw and exposed after that weird moment in the hall, and she needed to focus on something else. Thankfully,

Miller had sent her the reports from the ME along with the preliminary findings. There wasn't a lack of things to do in the two hours before dinner.

Deciding a hot shower was in order first, she turned on the water, undressed, and pinned her hair up. Stepping under the hot flow a few minutes later, Nora let out a long sigh. She *loved* hot showers. Even in the summer, she loved hot showers. The first sting of heat that slowly subsided into a comforting warmth relaxed her. She didn't question why she needed help relaxing right now. Instead, she focused on the feel of the water hitting her shoulders, then sliding down her body. She focused on the warmth of the ceramic tile under her feet. She focused on the heat soaking into her bones.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled her cashmere robe around her body and took a seat on her bed under the duvet. Pulling her computer onto her lap, she opened the files and began reading the ME's report. Based on temperature calculations, the time of death had narrowed to be between five and six-thirty. Bruising on the victim's neck indicated that he'd been subdued from behind in a chokehold and dragged off the trail. He'd then been stabbed once in the right side, nicking an artery and puncturing a lung. He'd bled out in less than ten minutes.

Nora considered that timeline. The freezing point of human blood was about twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit. The temperatures that morning had dipped into the low teens. Had that impacted the time it took for the man to die? She tapped the edge of her keyboard as she pondered the question. It wasn't really a question for an intelligence agent. Ask her about the flow of information or weapons or how much certain state secrets sold for, and she'd be right on it. But whether or not outdoor temperature would impact the time it took for a man to bleed out? She hadn't a clue. Nor did she know if it was relevant.

Making a face at her computer, she cursed Franklin for putting her on this assignment. It would have been much better suited for an actual detective or law enforcement officer. When no brilliant ideas came to her, she switched to Ben's report, which proved much easier for her to analyze.

The victim was Michael Kelly. Sixty-three years old and a resident of the monastery. He'd lived in the community for ten years and prior to that, he'd been a teacher at a Catholic boys' school in upstate New York. An advocate of "healthy body, healthy mind," he ran every day unless the temperatures dropped below ten degrees.

His fellow monks, including the abbot, had no clue who might have

wanted him dead and seemed adamant that it was random. It was entirely possible that *Michael Kelly*, as a victim, was random. The killing itself wasn't arbitrary, though. No, the killer—whoever he or she was—had a plan.

Nora leaned back against her pillows and rolled two questions over in her mind. The first was whether the killer could be a woman. The second was how the killer picked his or her victims.

Given what she'd seen that morning, and the size of a few of the prior victims, Nora was leaning toward the killer being a man. It wasn't that she thought a woman couldn't have committed the crime, but more that the specific women on the program couldn't have. Between their body types and their personalities, she didn't see it.

The second question was much harder, though. The participants had only been in town for two days, hardly time to get to know anyone. And where Michael Kelly had been running wasn't well-traveled enough that the killer could assume he'd find a victim. So how did he know Michael Kelly, or someone like him, would be traveling that path at that time?

Only one potential answer came to mind. Picking up her phone, she dialed a new number. "Miller," Detective Ben Miller answered.

"It's Nora," she said. "Have you checked the victim's electronics?"

He paused. "He doesn't have a computer. He did have a phone, but there isn't much on it. Very little email. A couple of apps. Why?"

"Someone knew he'd be on that trail that morning. If that someone was local, it wouldn't be a hard thing to find out. But if the killer isn't local—"

"Then maybe it was someone he communicated with who learned his schedule that way."

"Yes," she said. "That is what I was thinking."

"We'll go back through his phone and the computers at the monastery. He didn't have one of his own, but the abbot said they have two that are available to the community."

That sounded rather tedious. There was also no way to know when, or even if, Michael Kelly had ever used either of those computers. The poor techs would have to look at everything for the past several weeks. At that thought, another floated into her mind and settled itself there.

"Let me know?" she asked.

He sighed. "Of course."

She muttered a thank-you, then ended the call and quickly dialed another number.

“Nora, to what do I owe this pleasure?” Sabina O’Malley answered. Sabina was a tech guru who worked for a friend’s security firm. She wasn’t Nora’s first choice to reach out to, but she was good—damn good—at what she did.

“I was hoping you might have an algorithm or something AI-ish that might help me,” she answered.

Sabina laughed. “Lucy on vacation or something?”

Lucy James would have been Nora’s go-to. She was newly pregnant, though, and experiencing extreme morning sickness. Not only did Nora not want to burden her but Brian, Lucy’s husband, wasn’t letting anyone near her. Not unless they were bearing weak herbal tea and crackers and *only* weak herbal tea and crackers.

“Not to make you feel like second fiddle, but she’s out of commission right now,” Nora answered, hoping she hadn’t offended Sabina. They’d worked together only once before and while Nora liked and respected her tremendously, she didn’t know her as well as she knew Lucy.

Sabina laughed. “Lucy is a legend. I figure if I’m second to her, I’m not doing too badly in life.”

Nora smiled, liking her even more. It was true—being second to someone who was considered the best in the world was not a bad place to be.

“So what can I help you with that’s AI-ish or algorithm-y?” Sabina asked.

“You’re making fun of me.”

“Maybe a little.” Sabina chuckled. “But I’m always happy to help you all. What’s going on?”

Nora spared a thought for Franklin. She should have cleared this with him. But forgiveness was easier to ask for than permission, so she filled Sabina in on everything. She told her about the K9 program, the murders, the participants, the potential suspects, everything. Including the morning’s murder of Michael Kelly.

Sabina was silent, then she chuckled. “Well, wow. That was not what I expected to hear. Although I probably should have known better. You ladies of the club tend to lead interesting lives.” Nora grinned at her reference to her and her friends. “So what specifically do you need?”

Nora took a deep breath and asked for something she didn’t even know if Sabina could deliver on. “If I send you the files, can you run all the victims through a program to see if you can find *any* similarities between them? The killer is picking his victims somehow, it’s not completely random. But I can’t

see what the connection is. We have a church secretary, a teacher, a former mayor, a housewife...the victims are different ages, genders, and ethnicities. Something ties them together. It might be something they have in common among the group or it could be some sort of link to the killer.”

“You don’t think it’s random?” Sabina asked. “It has been known to happen that a serial killer doesn’t have a pattern.”

Nora shook her head. “A true serial killer always has a pattern, but it may not be an attribute the victims share. It might be something they have in common with the killer so not easily observable. Besides, even if we just look at the man who was killed today? The trail is remote. If the killer went looking for a truly random victim, it’s not the spot he’d go.”

“So he knew to be there at that time.” Sabina’s tone was thoughtful. “Which means the killer had some prior knowledge about the victim.” Her voice drifted off in thought as she spoke.

“That’s my hunch. But the reports I have don’t go into the kind of detail needed to uncover that link. And even if they did, I’m not sure a human brain could find it in any sort of reasonable time frame.”

“Ha, but a computer...”

“You think you can help?” Nora asked, hopefully.

Sabina was silent, but Nora heard her clicking away on her keyboard in the background. After a beat, she spoke. “I can help. I’ve been trialing a new AI program I developed that might work. I’ll have to tweak it a little, but it will be a good test case. Send me everything?”

“I’ll do that right now,” Nora answered.

“I’ll ping you when I have anything,” Sabina said.

“You have no idea how helpful this will be,” Nora replied.

“Can I send Chad up to deliver the reports?”

Nora laughed. Chad Warwick was one of Sabina’s colleagues who’d worked with Nora and her friends a few times. He had a love-hate relationship with all of them. Mostly he loved them, but he was an easy man to tease, and Cyn and Six definitely pushed his buttons just for the fun of it.

She was about to tell Sabina to go ahead and try to get Chad to come up when the thought of Lucian flashed through her mind. She didn’t know why, but it sobered her. “Normally, I’d welcome his company,” she said. “But I’m sort of undercover so maybe next time?”

Sabina snorted. “Next time. Definitely next time. He’s always so worked up after seeing you ladies. It’s hilarious.” Cyn and Six riled him, but the



devilish tinge Nora heard in Sabina's voice made her think it wasn't just her friends who enjoyed the results.

Nora made an offhand comment that she didn't really believe about people being nicer to him, then she ended the call.

Staring at her laptop, she considered her next move. If Sabina was going to dig into the victims, then she needed to do the same with the suspects. And hopefully, sometime before the next murder, the two paths would intersect, and she'd be able to stop a killer.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

LUCIAN SAT in front of the fire, his legs sprawled toward the flames and a glass of Cencio's wine in hand. To his left, Nora, Willa, Angelo, and Craig were playing, of all things, the board game Life. He'd been prepared to go out to a bar after dinner, but when Nora changed her mind and decided to stay in, he'd done the same.

He hadn't missed the suspicious look she'd given him. He had no doubt that she knew he suspected her of something. They were like two cats circling each other in a fight. No, that wasn't quite right. They weren't *fighting*, not in the usual sense of the word. But maybe playing something more like chicken, circling each other to see who would be the first to give.

Only he didn't have much to give. He'd noticed her behavior, but he didn't *know* anything.

Or did he?

He took a sip of his wine and contemplated what he'd learned in the past few days. She'd been out running with the soldiers several mornings. She'd gone off at lunch to do something that had taken her longer than expected. She'd received a mysterious package, hand-delivered by young Andrew. And once she'd realized who was going out that night and who was staying in, she'd opted to stay in.

It was possible she'd simply changed her mind about going out. But it was also possible that she'd seen an opportunity to spend time with a few of the less social participants and had grabbed it. Willa, Angelo, Craig, Gerhard, Sophie, and James had stayed in, too. All except Craig were the quieter ones of the group. As for Craig, his decision to remain in for the evening had surprised him. It was possible he was developing a *tendre* for Nora. Or that

he wanted to work on his relationship with Miles, who lay sprawled beside his handler with his head on Craig's lap. It was also possible those two weren't mutually exclusive.

But Lucian had been watching Nora all evening and if Craig was interested, he was pretty sure it was one-sided. What really piqued his curiosity, though, were her interactions with Gerhard and Angelo. If he hadn't been trained himself, he would have missed her subtle probing. She managed to keep the conversation flowing, and yet pulled answers from both men that surprised him. Such as the fact that Gerhard's first wife had died fifteen years earlier. He had twenty-year-old twins from that marriage, both of whom were now in college in Freiburg. And apparently, he had a bum shoulder that had precipitated his move from active duty to the training job he now held. He also disliked escargot. Lucian was in full agreement with the man on that.

As for Angelo, Lucian already knew a fair bit about him, as he'd been a poster boy for the Italian Army a few years earlier. His parents had died when he was a child, and he'd been put into a state-run orphanage. He'd grown up not far from where Lucian now lived but had moved away to join the army as soon as he was able. He'd gotten married a few years back, and he and his wife now had a two-year-old son. From the look on Angelo's face when he talked about his family, Lucian guessed that with his wife and his son, he'd created the life that he'd never had.

Compared to Gerhard and Angelo, Craig was more or less an open book. At least when speaking to Nora. He was so open, in fact, that Lucian struggled not to roll his eyes every time the man spoke. He'd been good all night about minding his own business, but a man could only take so much. When Craig started talking about a drug bust he and his former K9, Annie, had, according to Craig, single-handedly orchestrated, Lucian couldn't take it anymore. He opened his mouth to interrupt but closed it when his phone buzzed. Pulling the device from his pocket, he glanced at the name and really did roll his eyes.

Opening his texting app, he didn't even bother to read the message from his cousin before responding. *"I'm being nice. You don't have to check in."*

*"I don't trust you, so thought I'd remind you I have my eye on you,"* Violetta wrote back.

*"You sound like Nonna."*

*"One of the best women I know. I'll take that as a compliment."*

Nonna was badass, if not a little scary. She ruled over them with an iron fist, and at the risk of falling into the cliché of the matriarchal Italian family, no one crossed Nonna. Especially not any of her grandkids.

Taking a chance, he asked, *“Do you know how Nora ended up here? Who asked her to step in?”*

*“I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you believed me when I said the family had nothing to do with this and that you meant who specifically asked her?”*

*“Yes, please make that assumption.”*

*“I hear that eye roll.”*

*“I was hoping you would. Now can you answer the question?”*

There was a long pause before he saw the bubbles popping up. *“You know, I don’t actually know. I can’t recall if she didn’t mention it or if she mentioned it and I didn’t pay attention because I was getting ready for my trip.”* He was mulling this answer over when another text from her came in. *“Why don’t you ask? Do you think something’s wrong?”*

Wrong? No. Something going on, though? Definitely. But did he want to share his suspicions with his cousin? She was on holiday, and there wasn’t much she could do. As soon as he had that thought, he laughed. There was *always* something Violetta could do. She might be on vacation, but she wasn’t exactly out of touch. Not to mention that if he said something to Violetta, Cyn and Devil would know in the next five minutes. Part of him wanted to keep his suspicions from them. Part of him wanted to be the only one who held this secret. But then glancing at Nora, he changed his mind. If something was going on, it would be better if her friends knew. In fact, he couldn’t believe they didn’t. But Violetta’s concern was genuine, she didn’t know anything either.

*“I don’t know,”* he answered. *“She is the acting vet and doing everything the on-site vet is supposed to. But that training you keep mentioning that is ten years out of practice is telling me there’s another reason.”*

*“Have you asked her?”*

He snorted again. *“Of course.”*

*“And because you were an asshole to her, she’s not saying anything?”*

He scowled at the phone. *“If something is going on, she’s not saying anything probably because she’s not supposed to.”* Which meant it likely had something to do with the participants of the program. That wasn’t a new thought, but it definitely grew stronger roots the longer he texted with

Violetta.

*“I see you didn’t deny being an asshole?”*

He didn’t deign to respond.

After a beat, she responded *“(Sigh), I’ll text her and find out. If she’s up to something and didn’t tell us, she’s in for an ass-whupping.”*

Again, he rolled his eyes. Six, Cyn, and Devil might whup each other’s asses—an Americanism his cousin had picked up in her twenty years stateside—but they’d never do that to Nora. In fact, he was certain they’d panic. And worry and fret. But never in a million years would they get mad at her.

*“She’ll blame you for tattling on her,”* Violetta added. *“I’ll be as subtle as I can, but you know me.”* Yes, he did. Violetta was about as subtle as a freight train. The minute she asked Nora how she really ended up on the program, Nora would know he’d voiced his concerns to his cousin.

*“Yes, I do know you, and she can blame me all she wants. If she’s not going to share with me, I’d feel better knowing you all are at least in the know. That way, if she needs help, she has people to turn to.”*

*“Good answer, cousin. And even if she doesn’t tell me anything, she always knows she has us to turn to.”*

Lucian knew that. Nora did, too. But knowing it and doing it were two different things. He didn’t know Nora well, not anymore, but he’d bet she wasn’t the type to “bother” her friends.

*“I’m glad to hear that. Now leave me alone to enjoy my wine and the fire. It’s fucking cold here. I don’t know how you stand it.”*

She sent him a snorty-face emoji. *“Helps to have someone keeping you warm.”*

His gaze flickered to Nora, who glanced up at him. Yeah, he bet it did help.

Nora held Lucian’s gaze before a spin of the wheel brought her attention back to the ridiculous game they were playing. She hadn’t played Life since she was eight. But they’d had just enough to drink to agree to a rousing game when Craig had pulled it out from the stack of games on the bookshelf. And it actually was fun. It was just that her perspective on life, *real* life, was a

little different at thirty-eight than it had been at eight. It was hard not to let just a little bit of cynicism taint her enjoyment.

With his most recent move, Craig accumulated his third child, and the group laughed. Miles's tail thumped on the floor, but he didn't raise his head from where it rested in Craig's lap. Nora smiled as the handler rested his hand on his K9's neck.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, drawing her attention, and she pulled it out. Six's name was on the screen, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that she'd just been texting with her cousin.

*"How are things?"* she asked. Nora frowned. That wasn't a Six-like message at all.

*"That's not what you want to ask, is it?"* she countered.

She could almost hear Six sigh. *"Fine. No. Did Franklin send you to that training camp?"*

Nora's gaze rose and met Lucian's. She'd known he suspected there was more to her being there than just her veterinary qualifications. She hadn't, however, expected him to go running to his cousin. She also hadn't expected him to be unabashed about it, and he held her gaze with a steady one of his own.

Finally, she dropped her eyes back to her phone and answered. "Yes." It was all she needed to say. Not two minutes later, there was a group text, and all her friends were demanding to know what the hell was going on.

She shot Lucian a glare, but he shrugged and raised his glass to her before taking a sip. The jerk. She narrowed her eyes at him as another impatient text from Cyn came in. Then she smiled.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have to get this," she said to her opponents, raising her phone. "But I'm certain Lucian would be happy to take my place. Wouldn't you?" she asked. She plastered a saccharine-sweet smile on her face and even batted her lashes at him. He scowled. Another text came in. This time from Six. "Oh look, a message from Six," she said, directing her comment to Lucian. "I have so much to tell her."

With a growl—which Lucian wouldn't consider a growl—he rose from his seat and ambled over. She smiled up at him and held out her hand. He hesitated, then reached down to help her up from where she'd been sitting on the floor.

"Always so kind, Luc," she said, giving him a little pat on his chest before turning to the others. "Please kick his ass."

Craig laughed and Willa smiled. Angelo's gaze bounced between the two. "We'll talk later," Lucian said, speaking in low tones.

She arched an eyebrow at his presumption but said nothing as she walked away. Stepping into the elevator, she responded to the text string. "*Everything is fine. I'm on my way to my room. I'll call you in a few minutes.*"

Cyn didn't bother to wait and two seconds later, her phone rang. "I figured I'd call you and by the time we have everyone conferenced in, you'll be in your room."

Nora nearly sighed but stopped herself. Her friend's response was born of concern; she needed to remember that. Cyn might sometimes be a bull in a china shop, but she always had good intentions. At least when it came to the club.

"Let me get my earbuds so I can use my keyboard," she said, walking into her room as Six, the last to join, said hello. "Okay, I'm back," Nora said when her devices were in her ears and she was seated at her desk. She had no doubt her friends would want to see all the files, and she'd already opened her computer and turned it on.

"And?" Cyn demanded.

"And what?" Nora asked, distracted by entering her password.

"What the hell is going on?" Six demanded.

"You should be on vacation, Six. You don't need to worry about me. Go back and, I don't know, have sex on the beach or something."

Silence filled the line, but when Six next spoke, Nora realized she'd vastly underestimated her friends' concern. "I can't believe you just said that, Nora. Not once in the entire time I've known you have you *ever* backed out of helping one of us. I can't believe you'd think I, or any of us, would even consider leaving you alone with something like this. Whatever *this* is."

Nora paused at the hurt she heard in Six's voice. That hadn't been her intent, but somehow, she'd managed to hurt her friend. "You don't take vacation very often, Six. This thing Franklin has me doing isn't like the terrorist attack we helped Cyn prevent or the conspiracy you stumbled into when Jeremy died. I didn't mean to offend you. I just want you to enjoy your vacation."

Earlier in the year, Cyn had uncovered a small but deadly group of terrorists and together, they'd stopped the attack the students had planned. A few months after that, Six and the club had brought down a company that was

responsible for a number of atrocities. Even more recently, the club had helped Devil and her partner Darius stop an attempt on the Chinese president's life. But this *was* different. It wasn't a plot to kill hundreds or espionage or an act of war. This was, to sound callous, a simple case of murder.

"Well, I can tell you now that I won't enjoy my vacation until I know exactly what's going on," she countered. Nora frowned but knew her friend spoke the truth.

"What is it?" Devil asked, stepping into the conversation for the first time.

Nora took a deep breath and told them. She told them about the NATO program, the prior murders, and the body discovered that morning. They asked questions about the participants and victims. Forty-five minutes later, her friends knew everything she did.

"Three of the fifteen people are clear, leaving you with twelve people to investigate," Devil summarized.

"Eleven if you take my cousin out of it. He's had a rough time lately, but he's not a killer. Well, not a cold-blooded one," Six amended, no doubt referring to his time at AISE. Nora had no idea if he'd ever had to kill someone when he'd been an active agent, but she held the same opinion as Six.

"I agree, but I told Franklin he'd stay on the list because he doesn't have alibis," she responded.

"And Sabina is looking at all the prior victims?" Cyn asked.

Nora confirmed it, but to head off the next comment, she added, "I've sent you everything Franklin sent me. It should be in all your emails."

"And what about this morning? Who had alibis for this morning?" Devil asked.

"Anne and Marie were at the gym. Jurgen and Jonah went out, but I don't know where. And I've confirmed with CCTV that Craig was on a run. Lucian was out as well, but, well, I think he was following me."

A pause followed. "Why would he follow you?" Cyn asked.

"And where were you?" Devil chimed in.

"I went for a run with a few of the soldiers assigned to guard and manage the facilities. It's not an active base anymore, but it is still military-owned. As to why—"

"He was following you," Six said, obviously having texted her cousin.



“He said it’s because he suspected you were up to something and that I’d kill him if he let anything happen to you. He’s right about that,” she added.

Nora sighed. “I don’t need him to look out for me, Six. Whatever is going on in his life is enough for him to be dealing with. Like I said, this isn’t a terrorist attack or anything like that. No one from the program has been hurt or threatened. As the vet, I’m considered part of the program. I’m investigating, but I’m not in danger.”

“Until your killer realizes you are closing in on him or her,” Devil pointed out.

“I’m inclined to think it’s him,” Nora said, ignoring the main point of Devil’s comment. “I believe most of the women are *capable* of killing, I just don’t think they could have done it the way Michael Kelly was killed. Kelly was big. Not heavy, but tall and fit. He was put in a chokehold and dragged off the trail. I don’t think any of the women would physically be able to do that.”

“So if you exclude the women, along with Jonah and Cencio, who Franklin cleared, that leaves eight men,” Cyn said.

“I’d take Gerhard out of that group,” Nora said, then explained his bum shoulder. Keeping a man as tall as Michael Kelly in a chokehold would take a fair amount of strength. Something someone with a bad shoulder likely wouldn’t be able to do.

“And my cousin,” Six said. “If you remove those two, you’re down to six suspects.”

“James, the trainer. Craig from the US—although he was on a run this morning, so I don’t think it’s him. Jean from France. Jurgen from Germany. Collin from the UK. And Angelo from Italy,” Nora recited. Her suspect pool had dropped from twelve to six. Not bad for a day’s work.

“I’ll take James and Craig,” Cyn said.

“And I’ll take Collin and Angelo,” Six chimed in.

“Leaving me with Jean and Jurgen,” Devil finished.

“Wait, what?” Nora asked.

Cyn chuckled. “You didn’t think we would let you do this alone.” It wasn’t a question.

“You can focus on their recent movements and get to know them. We’ll do the deep background stuff,” Six said.

“You’re on vacation, Six!” Nora exclaimed.

Ignoring her, Devil interjected, “You’ll also need to focus on the most

recent killing. I know you have the preliminary findings, but more tests and reports will come in. I have no doubt you'll be hearing from Detective Miller again."

"And I know Lucian is supposed to stay on the list, but let's just tell Franklin he's on it to keep him off your back," Six said. "Luc might be going through some hard times, but he's solid. If you need someone, he'll have your back."

"Or you'll kill him," Cyn said.

Six chuckled. "There is that."

"I don't need him to watch my back," Nora insisted. A weird panicky feeling was sinking its claws into her. She tried to push it back. She didn't want to involve anyone else. She just wanted to stop a killer without damaging the reputation of the NATO program.

"Remember what we promised each other back in January?" Cyn said.

"No one goes alone," Six said.

"Not while we're here in the US," Devil added.

Nora bit back a groan. Her friends were right. While on assignment, they were alone all the time. But after Cyn had a run-in with a knife and a terrorist while on her own, the club had made a promise to one another. If they didn't *have to be* alone, they wouldn't be alone. She couldn't remember exactly, but she might have even been the one to insist on that agreement.

Which put her in an awkward position. She was already planning to take a walk a little later. She wanted to check out how—or if—someone could have gotten from the training grounds to the murder site. And she'd planned to go alone. Unbidden, her eyes went to her closed door. On the other side, across the hall, and through another door was Lucian.

"He can't be with me all the time," Nora pointed out. "But if I need someone, I'll ask." Maybe. But that was as far as she'd go to appease her friends.

"Nora," Cyn warned.

"He's a trainer, Cyn," Nora said, cutting her off. "He can't just leave like I can." Not entirely true, but she'd go with it. She was required to be on-site during all the same sessions he was teaching. But, like her, nothing prevented him from leaving when a session wasn't taking place.

"Promise us, Nora," Six insisted.

"I promise that if I need someone and he's available, I will ask."

"Not exactly the promise I was looking for," muttered Six.

Nora chose to remain silent.

“I’ll start on this tonight,” Cyn said. “I also want to look into Michael Kelly. You said you didn’t think the killer would have just happened along that trail at the time Michael Kelly was running through?”

“I did,” Nora confirmed. “I think the killer must have known beforehand that he, or someone like him, would be there.”

“And the most likely way that could have happened is through chat boards focused on running or something like that,” Cyn said. That was what Nora had hinted at with Detective Miller. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing having her friends help out.

Nora glanced at the clock and took a deep breath. “Thank you all. And I’m sorry I didn’t say anything earlier. It’s just that, well, Six was going on vacation, and Cyn has the party to get ready for and, well, you know how it is. Since I’m out here on my own, I didn’t see the need to interfere with anyone’s plans.”

In addition to the big birthday bash Cyn threw for the four of them, she also hosted a holiday party every year. Decorating her forty-thousand-square-foot house took a few weeks. And then there was Devil. She was enjoying her new relationship with Darius, and that was something Nora didn’t want to interfere with. She *really* wanted them to work out as a couple.

Her friends grumbled, but eventually, Six spoke. “Just promise you won’t leave us out in the cold again. And promise you will call on Lucian should you need him.”

Nora repeated the promises back and after a few minutes of catching up, they ended the call. Nora set her phone on the desk and powered off her computer. Then turning her head, she looked out the window. The snow had stopped that afternoon, and the accumulated inch had already melted away.

She glanced at her winter gear hanging up in the closet. She’d heard Lucian’s door open and close while she’d been on the phone. Hopefully, everyone in the lounge was back in their beds.

She had a trail to find.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LUCIAN WAS about to crawl into bed when his phone dinged on the bedside table. There was only one person who would text him this time of night. Sure enough, Violetta's name appeared on his screen.

*"Are you with Nora?"* she asked.

A simple question, but a sharp spear of panic had him shooting off the bed. *"No, why?"*

*"I'm going to kill her,"* Six wrote.

Lucian thought he might, too. He had no idea what she was up to, but he did *not* like the feelings he was currently experiencing.

*"Why?"* he repeated.

*"She's out. From what I can tell from the GPS locator on her phone, she's still on the grounds, but it's past eleven o'clock at night. Where is she going?"*

Damn, she must have gone out while he'd been in the shower. He hadn't heard her door open or close. And yes, he'd been listening. He'd half expected her to show up in his room and give him a set down for bringing Violetta into whatever it was she was doing. He'd wanted to be prepared.

*"Send me the coordinates. I'll go find her,"* he said. And then he'd throttle her. Not really, of course. But he'd be sure she knew how much her little nearly-midnight jaunt had upset his cousin. And him. But she didn't need to know that part.

Five minutes later, he stepped out into the frigid night, thankful for his layers of clothing and the hand warmers he'd shoved into his gloves. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his phone and used facial recognition to unlock the device. In the time he'd taken to get dressed and get outside,

Violetta had sent a second set of coordinates. It appeared that Nora had circled around the north side of the perimeter and was now off the grounds. He'd seen the few holes in the fencing when he'd been following her that morning. He had a pretty good idea which one she'd slipped through.

Setting his phone to vibrate, he slipped it back into his pocket and started jogging toward the training grounds. From there he turned north toward the path he was sure Nora had taken. The movement warmed him up but as he neared the gap in the fence, he slowed to a walk. Texting his cousin, he asked for an update. She responded with new coordinates, and he checked the map on his phone, confirming his original assessment.

Careful not to snag any of his clothing, he ducked under the curled-up chain link. Once on the other side, he brought out a small penlight. The grounds had been dimly lit, but on the trail, it was dark as pitch. Especially with just a sliver of the moon peeking through the night clouds every now and again.

Using the penlight, he navigated his way onto the only trail in the area. It didn't appear to go in the exact direction Nora was, but he hoped it would around and would lead him to her.

He was ten minutes into the woods when he froze. A noise. Footsteps. But not on the trail, in the woods.

Switching his light off, he stepped silently into the forest, where he stilled and listened. Frozen foliage and detritus were scattered across the ground. It would be next to impossible to move through without making any sound.

A minute passed, and still he waited. It was possible he'd heard nothing more than an animal, but he wasn't going to take any chances. There! Another noise. This time, the grunt that accompanied the sound of a cracking stick confirmed what he'd heard was human.

And male.

His adrenaline spiked, and he fought the urge to text Violetta. He desperately wanted an update on Nora's position—or to be able to reach her himself. But pulling out his phone would be like sending a homing beacon up. There was no way to use it without it lighting up everything around him and giving away his presence.

As his eyes adjusted to the night, he caught sight of a figure moving slowly through the woods. Black hooded jacket, black pants, black shoes. The form was nothing but a shadow moving through the dark. But from his position about thirty feet away, Lucian took note of how the man moved. He

was remarkably quiet given the circumstances. He also possessed a grace that led Lucian to believe he had either experience or training. Or, perhaps, both.

The shadowy form passed Lucian, and he debated whether to follow him or find Nora. The debate lasted less than two seconds. He stepped back onto the trail and continued north toward the last coordinates Violetta had sent. He needed to find Nora. And he needed to find her safe and healthy. If not, and the man he'd just let pass by had hurt her in any way, then Lucian had let him get away.

Five minutes up the trail, he heard another sound. Just a quiet shuffle of leaves crunching under a foot. Again, he stepped into the shadows and listened. This time, the noise was ahead of him and whoever it was was moving away. He strained to see, but in the dark, and with the distance, there was nothing.

Then the slim moon slipped from behind the clouds and a soft glow filtered through the branches. The light was just enough for Lucian to see the woman in front of him. Nora was indeed moving away, and she was indeed safe and healthy.

Until he got his hands on her and then, at the very least, her ears were going to be blistered.

Moving back onto the trail, he hurried to catch up to her as she rounded a bend and disappeared from his view. He wanted to call out, but he didn't trust that the other man he'd seen was gone. Perhaps he was, but if not, Lucian had no wish to call attention to his and Nora's presence.

He reached the bend Nora had just passed, but when he came to the straightaway on the other side, he stopped. In the faint light of the moon, he could see the trail stretching ahead of him. What he couldn't see was Nora.

Frantically, his gaze searched the sides of the path. Had she disappeared into the woods? He hadn't heard a scuffle or any other noise that indicated something had happened to her. He cocked his head to listen.

Nothing.

Then a branch snapped. But the sound had come from somewhere behind him. It was possible Nora had circled back, but he wasn't going to take that chance. Once again, he moved off the trail and under the cover of a large sycamore tree.

He cursed the dark, and then he cursed Nora. Why had she gone off on her own? And just what the hell was she doing? His mind started traveling to all sorts of dark possibilities. In his mind's eye was an image of Nora's body,

beaten without remorse and lying in a pool of her own blood. He hadn't been the one to find Alessandra, but he'd seen the pictures. And now, when he least needed the reminder of what he'd lost, all he could see was Alessandra's body with Nora's face.

Forcing himself to take a slow, deep breath, he shoved that image into the back of his mind. Nora wasn't Alessandra. She was trained and likely armed. *He* might not know what she was doing, but Nora had been in the intelligence field for nearly twenty years. She wasn't blundering around.

Once his breathing—and his imagination—were back under some control, he focused on listening. Again, a small shuffling sound on the other side of the trail. Perhaps forty feet away. He turned his head to see if he could spot whether it was the man or Nora.

So focused on his goal, he didn't notice he had company until a hand was over his mouth and his back hit the tree.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LUCIAN RAISED his arms to shove her away, but Nora leaned in. “It’s me,” she said, keeping her voice low. In a flash, his arms were around her. She let herself be pulled against him but kept her hand across his mouth. Looking up, she waited to see the recognition in his eyes before removing it.

Whiskey-colored eyes glittered down at her. He was pissed, but she didn’t have the time, or luxury, to figure out what the problem was. “There’s someone else out here,” she said, lowering her hand.

His eyes narrowed. “I know.”

“He was ahead of me, but he circled back and is now coming up behind.”

“Do you know who it is?” he asked, dipping his head so his lips all but brushed her ear as he spoke. She shook her head, and his day’s growth of beard rubbed against her cheek.

“Shh.” She raised a finger and placed it over his lips. She’d heard another sound, another snapping of a twig.

They stood that way for another minute—his arms wrapped around her, one of her fingers pressed against his lips, and her other hand resting on his chest. Then she heard their third wheel again. Whoever he was, he seemed to be moving farther away. Back toward the fence. And the training grounds.

Slowly, she became aware of the press of Lucian’s body against hers. The top of her head came to below his chin and if she turned her head, her cheek would rest perfectly against his chest. The way it had in Capri.

Startled at the direction of her thoughts, Nora stepped away. Lucian’s arms tightened, then released her.

“What are you doing out here?” he demanded. He might have released her, but he held the sides of her coat so she couldn’t go far.



“I might ask you the same thing,” she countered.

Again, his eyes narrowed. “My cousin sent me.” It took her a minute before she sorted out how that might have happened. When things clicked into place, he grinned down at her. It wasn’t a nice grin. “You forgot to turn your location tracker off. My cousin probably isn’t the only one waiting for you to explain this little outing.”

She rolled her eyes at him, a trait she’d picked up from Six so thought he’d appreciate. “I didn’t forget to turn it off. I just didn’t think anyone would look.”

“You underestimated your friends’ concern.”

Yes, apparently she had. Not that she didn’t know they cared. She just didn’t think that they’d start tracking her movements. Or that Six would send Lucian out after her.

“Do you know who he is?” Lucian asked, jerking his head in the direction her mystery man had gone.

Again, she shook her head. “I need to make sure he’s out of the area.”

“We need to get back to the grounds.”

“Why don’t you head back to the grounds and follow our friend?”

He looked down at her and said nothing. Yeah, she didn’t think her suggestion was going to fly, but she had to try. She sighed. “Fine, I get you aren’t going to leave me, but I actually do have something I need to do, maybe a few things. So if you stay with me, I need to you stay quiet and not get in my way.”

He was trying very hard to keep his face expressionless, but a muscle in his jaw ticked, and his head drew back ever so slightly. Yes, he was definitely pissed, but at the moment, his feelings weren’t her priority.

After a beat, he must have recognized the determination in her eyes, and he gave a curt nod. Without a word, she moved away from him and rejoined the trail. Walking quickly, she led him back toward the fence, not slowing her pace until she was about a quarter-mile away. There she paused and listened. Hearing nothing, she walked closer to the break they’d all come through. Pausing about a hundred meters away, she was gratified to hear the distinct sound of the chain link fence being shifted. She waited a few minutes more, then crept to the edge of the woods and peered at the perimeter path. The man was hurrying back toward the residence hall, his form sporadically illuminated by the trail lights.

When he was out of sight, she turned and almost ran into Lucian. He

grabbed her to steady her, but she stepped out of his arms and brushed past him. Certain it was just the two of them now, she glanced at her watch, then hurried back toward her original destination.

Twenty-two minutes later, they reached the spot where Michael Kelly had been dragged from the trail. As she'd thought, the monastery might be a twelve-mile drive from the training grounds, but it was less than a three-mile walk from the residence hall. And closer to two miles from the perimeter fencing.

Having gathered the intel she needed, she turned and started back toward the fence.

"Want to tell me what that was all about?" Lucian's low-pitched voice came from behind her.

No, she did not. But she wasn't sure she'd be able to get away with not saying anything. She understood her friend's concern, but at the moment, she wasn't particularly happy Six had intervened.

"Nora," he said, his voice a warning.

"It's a long story," she said. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, his hand clamped on her arm. A split second later, she'd been spun around and was facing him.

"Not good enough," he said.

"You're growling again." Why she said that, she didn't know. It was little more than a taunt, and he did not look in the mood to be taunted or teased. Well, to be fair, he *never* looked in the mood to be taunted or teased. Not anymore.

His hands tightened on her shoulders, and the muscles in his jaw worked. His eyes held hers. With each breath they took, puffs of fog filled the space between them. His gaze dropped to her lips, and Nora recognized the look. He was considering kissing her. And even more shocking, she was considering letting him. Instinctively, she knew it wouldn't be the fun, gentle, teasing kisses they'd shared all those years ago. The energy vibrating off his body was too overpowering for something so fun or lighthearted.

Which gave her pause. He was angry, and although she supposed he thought he had a good reason to be, whatever his reason, she didn't agree. She hadn't asked him to come with her, nor did she need him to be with her. And she wasn't about to let him kiss her out of anger, let alone misplaced anger.

"Let go of me, Lucian," she said. His gaze jerked back to her eyes. His

hands tightened again as he weighed her words. Then just as quickly as he'd spun her, he released her. She stepped back, and he eyed her warily. As if he knew he'd flirted with crossing a line neither of them was prepared for and he wasn't sure what she might do about it.

She wasn't sure either, so she opted for the path of least resistance. She dropped her gaze to the trail, turned, and started walking again. He followed without a word, but she was uncomfortably aware of his presence at her back. Of the sound of his breathing. Of every step he took.

When they reached the fence, he held up the chain link and she passed beneath. A few seconds later, he was beside her and they were walking toward the residence hall along the perimeter path. As they passed the trail that led to the training grounds, Lucian gestured toward it in question.

She shook her head. It would be much shorter to cut across the field, but they'd be exposed. She much preferred the tree- and bush-lined route she'd chosen. "We'll follow this around and return to the hall the way that Willa and I come when we run. That way, we won't be passing in front of any of the participants' bedrooms." If someone was up and looking out their window, there was a chance they'd still see her and Lucian returning. But the participants' rooms were on the other side of the building, and the chances were much lower than if they walked in front of them.

To his credit, he didn't question her, just followed along. When they reached the residence hall, they slipped in through the front door. She started toward the stairs, but Lucian grabbed her elbow and directed her through a door immediately to their left. She'd assumed it was a utility closet, but it was a second stairwell that took them up to their floor without having to go near the other bedrooms.

Pulling her key out of her pocket, she grimaced when her fingers brushed against her phone. She'd turned it to silent when she'd left the hall, and no doubt there would be a barrage of texts from her friends. She considered turning her geo locator off from now on, but the thought was short-lived. If she did, Devil and Cyn would come and park in her room. And Six would join them as soon as she returned from the Caribbean.

"Don't even think you're going to slip away without telling me what the hell is going on," Lucian said. As he spoke, he moved in front of her, blocking her access to her door.

She eyed him. Then, pulling her phone out, she confirmed what she'd dreaded...fifteen messages from her friends. It was well after midnight, and

she planned to get up early and join Andrew and the runners again. The early-morning activity might have started as a way to get information on the area, but she found she liked beginning her day with the rowdy group. They were fun, and their constant ribbing and teasing made her laugh.

“Not now, Lucian. We can talk tomorrow.” She started to move around him, but he stepped in her way.

“Now, Nora. I don’t want to give you any time to think of ways to evade me.”

She let out a long breath, reaching for some patience. That wasn’t normally hard for her, but knowing she was only going to get about four hours of sleep was making it difficult.

“Tomorrow,” she insisted. He opened his mouth to say something, but for the third time, she reached up and covered his lips with her fingers. She’d taken her gloves off when they’d come in, and now her skin was against his. They both froze at the contact, but then Nora pushed on. There was nothing between her and Lucian; she needed to start acting like it. “I will tell you what I can, and you can confirm with Six if you think I’m holding anything back.”

His hand came up and wrapped around hers. Slowly, he pulled it from his lips until it rested against his chest with his palm covering it. “Promise?” His eyes remained fixed on hers, daring her to do anything other than agree.

After a beat, she nodded. “I promise.” His eyes searched hers for another few seconds, but otherwise, neither moved.

“Are you going running again tomorrow morning?” he asked.

She frowned at the question but nodded.

“I’ll come with you.”

She started to shake her head but the look in his eye stopped her. She took another deep breath. “I need to go back out to the trail,” she said. “If you want to help me, come with me then. I’ll go as soon as I finish the run. I want to be back for breakfast so that no one notices my absence.”

He paused, then asked, “Why?”

Her mouth tightened at the question. Not because he’d asked it, but at the implications of her answer. Lucian’s hand twitched over hers, and she dropped her gaze to where her fingers were pressed to his chest. He wore a jacket, but he’d unzipped it when they’d entered the hall. Her hand was now pressed against a deep green sweater. Inexplicitly, she had the urge to start stroking her fingers against the soft merino.

“Nora?” Lucian’s voice rumbled out.

She looked up and brought her mind back to the task at hand. “I need to go back out because whoever we saw tonight was looking for something, and I need to find it first.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HE AND NORA left the residence hall at just after six the next morning. The sun wouldn't be up for another twenty minutes, but it would take them almost that long to get to the break in the fence. As soon as they were out of earshot, Lucian started asking the questions that had been swirling in his head for the past few days. Starting with the most important one.

“Other than to be the on-site vet, why are you here?”

She cast him a look, then returned her gaze to the shadowed path. “There have been nine murders during this program. Three at each location you've trained. I was asked to come in and investigate. Being a vet let me slip in unnoticed.” She glanced at him again. “Mostly,” she added.

A hundred and one thoughts went through his head at her answer. It hadn't been what he'd expected, but the surprise wasn't foremost on his mind. “They sent you alone. To catch a serial killer. With no backup, no support, nothing.”

It was a statement, but she answered anyway.

“I'm alone most of the time, Lucian. This *is* different in that I don't tend to do murder investigations. Not like this one, anyway. But for the most part, I'm on my own. I live alone, work alone, and often travel alone.”

She wasn't looking for pity or platitudes, but the pitch of her voice held a hint of resignation. Or perhaps sadness. He knew that Cyn, Violetta, and Devil had all recently met men they now shared their lives with. Did she feel left out? Did she want what her friends had? If so, it was hard for him to believe she couldn't find it. He didn't tend to like a lot of people, especially these days, but it was hard not to like Nora. She was smart, caring, patient, and had a quirky—though quiet—sense of humor. She was also strong. An

aspect of her personality that many didn't notice because of her tendency to nurture.

"If it makes you feel any better, ever since you ratted me out to Six, the rest of the club is all over me. I may be physically here on my own, but they are a phone call away," she said.

He should feel bad, but he didn't. Not in the slightest. "And last night?"

She exhaled, her breath fogging in the gloomy light of the early morning. "A man was murdered yesterday. That's why I was late for the afternoon session. Same MO as three of the others. I wanted to see how difficult it would be to get from the training ground to the location of the attack."

"And?"

"No more than thirty-five minutes. And that's walking. If he jogged or ran, it would be less than that," she answered.

Fuck. "And it's someone in the program? You're certain of that?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "There have been three murders during each of your prior three sessions. One stabbing, one burning, one strangulation."

"And yesterday's death?"

"He was stabbed. A single wound to the right side. The killer is precise. In each, he both nicks an artery—but doesn't sever it—and punctures a lung," she responded.

Lucian winced at the thought. It wouldn't be the quickest way to die. Then again, neither were strangulation or being set fire to. "So we can expect a strangulation and a burning?"

She lifted a shoulder. "If I can't stop it, yes."

They walked a few hundred yards before he spoke again. "You think that was the killer who was out last night?"

She nodded. "I tried to get in front of him to see if I could get a good look at his face. Between the woods and the lack of light, though, I couldn't do it. I considered chasing him down, but we have no solid evidence yet, and I didn't want to tip him off that we're onto him."

Lucian might have been out of the game for a decade, but he knew how hard that decision must have been for her. Did she go after the man and maybe stop the next murder, but risk not having enough evidence to prosecute? Or did she let him go and hope she found the evidence to bring him in before he went after his next victim?

"Any idea how he is picking his victims?"

Nora shook her head. "You have enough going on with your duties to the

program, but I'll show you my files if you want to see them. The victims are a mix of age, race, and gender. I can't find anything that ties them together. That might change over the next few days, though. I have someone digging into it." They walked in silence until they reached the break in the fence. She paused before ducking under. "The thing is, your question is what's been bothering me. If it's one of the participants from the program, how is he even finding his victims? A few visited the same pubs and bars the participants frequented. But some victims have no apparent crossover with the program at all."

The frustration in her voice was heavier than what he expected from a seasoned intelligence officer. Then again, this was Nora. She probably felt for every one of the victims. She was new to the situation, and yet he knew she carried the weight of the prior murders on her shoulders.

He lifted the curled-up section of fencing, and she slipped through. He wished he could do more for her, but he had more questions than suggestions.

"Or no crossover you know of yet," he said, following her into the woods. She inclined her head in agreement, though it was a little hard to tell, bundled up as she was. "Who are you looking at?" he asked.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. No doubt checking in on him. Any of the suspects on her list would be people he knew. Maybe even people he considered friends. Her concern surprised him. Most of his family had written him off as a man who didn't care much about anything or anyone other than his dogs. Well, that wasn't exactly true. His family would never write anyone off. But his lack of interest in just about everything and everyone was the focus of their concern about him. They worried and fretted. And the more they worried and fretted, the further into his shell he climbed. And yes, that's how he felt sometimes. A shell. Because the truth was, he *didn't* much care for anything but his dogs. He didn't wish anyone any *harm*, but he also didn't have any interest in making, or keeping, any friends. Most of the time, he wanted to be alone.

"It's fine, Nora. You can tell me. I like most of the people on the program, but I don't consider any of them friends," he said.

She glanced at him again, then answered. "James, Collin, Angelo, Jurgen, Craig, and Jean," Nora said. "Although, I'm inclined to pull Craig from the group since I know he was out running yesterday. Cyn will double-check that he was, in fact, on a run. But if so, he's out, too, leaving the five."

Lucian wanted to defend James. Of the suspect pool, he was the man



Lucian knew the best, and he was certain James wasn't the killer. But she needed to look into everyone, and he wasn't going to make it harder on her by questioning her process.

"And what are we looking for today?" The sun had come up although it was still shadowed in the forest.

She shook her head, and her long black hair swung across her jacket. The sight of all the curls caught his attention. She usually wore it up. Given she'd been on a run already, he was surprised it wasn't at least pulled back. But no, it wasn't. He felt an insane urge to reach forward and sift his fingers through the strands. Instead, he shoved his gloved hands into his pockets.

"I don't know," she answered. "Many killers revisit crime scenes for all sorts of reasons. But when I first caught sight of him, he was using a penlight to look on the ground."

"As if he'd lost something."

Nora nodded. "He was on the trail, but then went off into the woods."

"There's a lot of woods around here, Nora. We can't search the entire area."

"You're right, we can't. But I want to check the area around where the attack occurred. Chances are, if our killer lost something, it would have happened in the scuffle of subduing and killing his victim. I know, that may not be the case—"

"But you have to start somewhere," he finished. "What if you don't find anything? Or what if he found it last night?"

"If I don't find anything this morning, I'll call Ben and tell him what happened last night. He seems like a good guy. He'll probably send a team out. It's possible the killer found what he was looking for last night, but I don't think so. I think he was making his way to the location of the attack, but then heard one of us and got spooked."

"Who is Ben, and do you think getting spooked is what sent him into the woods?"

Nora lifted a shoulder. "It's possible that he went into the woods because he heard one or both of us rather than to look for something. And Ben is the detective on the case. His team did a pretty good perimeter search. Still, I want to look."

"They conducted a good search and yet they didn't find whatever it is the killer lost?"

Nora slowed, then came to a stop. She turned to face him, her cheeks

pinkened in the cold. “Ben and his team don’t know who I really am, nor do they have any idea that the killer is part of the program. I’m sure they are aware that the old base isn’t far away. However, they think, and I didn’t disabuse them of this, that the attacker came from one of the public trails that leads here from the road.”

“And so they didn’t search very far to the south. Toward the grounds,” Lucian said, turning around and surveying the area. “Is this where it happened?”

She nodded. “They think he was attacked here and dragged off the trail in a chokehold in that direction.” She pointed to their left. He could see trampled grass and disturbed bushes, although he wasn’t sure if it was from the killer or the crime scene techs.

“Did they find anything?” he asked, as they both started looking along the trail. Nora even grabbed a long stick to help move brush and ground cover aside.

“The victim’s headlamp was there.” She pointed to a spot on the narrow trail. “But that’s it.”

He didn’t have much to add, so instead, he started searching in earnest. Wandering off the trail, he followed the trampled path for several meters before stopping. Judging by the disturbed ground, he suspected it was where the body had fallen. The woods around them were thick, and there was no evidence of another trail.

“That’s where he crawled to,” Nora said, nodding to where he stood. “They think he was stabbed about there,” she said, pointing to a spot north of where she stood. “After that, they think he started crawling toward the main trail, probably to look for help. It’s that way,” she said, moving her finger to the west. “He only made it to where you’re standing.”

He eyed the area with that context in mind, then made his way to where she’d indicated Michael Kelly had been stabbed. As Nora said, if the killer had lost something, it was probably during the scuffle. However, the forensic team would have searched the area and immediate vicinity.

Opting to join Nora at the edge of the woods, he studied the options. The easiest and fastest way back to the grounds was via the trail they’d come in on. But it was also possible he *had* made his way back under the cover of the trees.

Again, he surveyed the area, letting his gaze drift lightly over the sights. A few minutes in, he saw something.

“What?” Nora asked. He looked down at her, surprised to find she was watching him. Her green eyes held his for a moment, then he tore his attention away.

“There’s a deer trail,” he said. “It’s not a real trail, but it might be worth looking at.”

Nora cocked her head, no doubt looking for the subtle signs he’d seen. It didn’t take her long to recognize it. She lived in the country and probably saw them all the time. She looked back to the spot of the attack, then again at the deer trail. After a beat, she nodded. “It’s not much, but at least it gives us an area to focus on.”

He gestured her forward, and she led the way to the small, barely-there deer path. They’d walked for ten minutes, Nora looking to the left and him to the right, when she drew up short.

“Did you find something?” he asked, coming to stand behind her. She was small enough that he could easily look over her shoulder.

“There,” she said, pointing to something with her stick. Something yellow.

Sinking to his haunches, but careful not to touch anything, he examined the find. A small gold coin. No, a charm. Something that would go on a necklace or bracelet. Pulling out his phone, he opened the camera app and took a few pictures. When he rose, he found Nora on her own phone. Based on the side of the conversation he heard, he guessed she was talking to Ben. The detective.

Lucian’s brow furrowed in confusion. Why did the thought of Nora turning to another man for help irritate him? She was doing her job. And she was doing it in a way that would allow the Americans to use the evidence, if it was evidence, in any subsequent court case. Still, he didn’t like it. And he didn’t like that he didn’t like it.

Rather than continue to listen, he walked several meters farther into the woods. Keeping his attention focused downward, he looked for additional evidence. The frozen ground gave no purchase for footprints. The best he could find was a couple of broken twigs and branches that the killer might have brushed against as he’d passed by. Or maybe it had been some other animal.

“He’ll be here in fifteen minutes,” Nora said, walking toward him. She had a wary look on her face, and he suspected he knew the source.

“You don’t want me here when he gets here?”

Her eyes met his, and she hesitated. “He doesn’t know I’m working with the group. If he sees you here and then sees us both walking back into the woods toward the grounds, he’s going to figure it out.”

“And then he might start looking at where we came from, and he’ll definitely come knocking on our door,” he finished.

She hesitated again, then nodded. “He knows he has to work with me, but for now, it’s still his investigation. Until I know Detective Ben Miller won’t show too much interest in the participants, I don’t want him to be able to tie me to the group.”

“I’m not going to leave you out here, Nora.”

She bit her lower lip and looked away. “I’d appreciate it if you did.” At least she knew she couldn’t physically make him leave. Of course, that made him feel like a bully, using his size and strength to get what he wanted.

He exhaled. “How about this. As soon as we hear him, I’ll disappear. I’ll jog back to the center, grab your keys, then drive your car around to pick you up from the parking lot. That way, you won’t be seen walking toward the grounds, either.”

She returned her gaze to his but didn’t answer right away.

“I promise I won’t look at any of your case files,” he added. He even offered her a little smile. Or at least he thought he did. It had been a while since he’d smiled. The look she gave made him wonder if maybe it had come out looking more pained than anything.

Finally, the left side of her mouth curled up. “I already offered to share my case files. I was actually trying to remember if I’d picked up my room before I left.”

He laughed. Well, chuckled. It came out rusty, but it was honest. He couldn’t imagine what Nora might be embarrassed about. He’d seen her naked. Several times. It had been nearly two decades, but still...damn, now he was curious.

“I’ll be in and out. We need to make sure we’re back for the morning session, so you know I won’t take my time,” he promised.

She cast him a dubious look. He’d been sincere with his promise. Mostly. If something was in his line of sight, he wasn’t going to look away.

She made a face but handed him her room key. “My car key is in the side pocket of my purse, which is hanging in the armoire, not the closet.”

He took the small piece of plastic and slid it into his pocket. They continued searching the area until they heard a group of people walking

toward them. Sticking to his word, he gave Nora a nod, then slipped deeper into the woods. He stayed in the shadows for a little bit, then rejoined the trail and jogged the rest of the way.

What had taken them thirty minutes to walk took him less than twenty to jog. Sooner than he'd thought, he walked in the front door of the residence hall. Craig and Collin were passing by as he entered, and though he waved, he didn't stop to chat.

Letting himself into Nora's room, he was immediately struck by the smell. His room smelled of whatever soap and shampoo the army provided. But her room smelled of *her*. Something a little vanilla, a little musky, and just a hint of spice. Inhaling, he could almost swear she was standing beside him.

With a shake of his head, he walked to the armoire. Opening the door, he found her purse hanging on a hook just inside. Right beside it was a dress that was far too nice to be anything she'd need for the next three weeks. He paused and looked at it. That's when he noticed the champagne-colored sheer bustier with matching silk panties on the same hanger.

His mind went blank, filled only with the image of Nora in the lingerie. It didn't help that he'd also noticed silk thigh-high stockings gently draped over the rod.

Where was she planning to wear those items? Did she have a date or something? Was she seeing someone who was planning to come visit? His cousin hadn't mentioned Nora dating anyone, but Violetta, Cyn, and Devil were. Was it so hard to believe Nora was, too?

No, it wasn't hard to believe that at all. He knew she wasn't married, but he'd be surprised if she wasn't in a relationship.

That thought caused him enough discomfort that he quickly reached into her purse and withdrew her car key. He didn't want to think about Nora wearing those items, let alone wearing them for someone he didn't know. Actually, wearing them for someone he *did* know would be worse, but that wasn't possible. Right? Unless she'd planned to hook up with one of the program participants?

He shook his head at that question and quickly left the room. After making sure the door was locked, he jogged back down the stairs and to her car. Twenty minutes later, he pulled into a small car park along the side of the road near the turnout to the monastery. She'd somehow managed to get his number—probably from Violetta—and had texted him directions.

He was sending her a text, letting her know he'd arrived, when she came walking out of the woods alongside a tall man. A *very* tall man. Two officers trailed behind them, but Lucian couldn't take his eyes off Nora and the man who had to be Detective Ben Miller.

The detective leaned down as he and Nora spoke. Nora nodded at something he said, then glanced up. She gave Lucian a little smile and a wave but remained beside the detective as they finished their conversation. A few minutes later, she climbed into the passenger seat.

"Detective Miller, I take it?" he asked, as she buckled up.

Nora nodded. "He's a good cop. He's having a hard time letting me be a part of this, but he wants it solved."

"You don't have to defend him if he's being a dick," Lucian pointed out.

Nora slid him a flat look. "He's not being a dick. He's trying to understand why the Feds would have sent me here. He's smart enough to know they wouldn't have if they hadn't suspected something like this would happen. It's pissing him off that no one bothered to tell him. That no one is *bothering* to tell him."

"Fine, as long as he's not being a dick to you, then I don't care."

Nora snorted. "Given that you've been a dick to me more often than not this week, are you the pot or the kettle?"

He grunted but didn't answer. He did owe her another apology. "I should have brought you some coffee. Want to stop on the way back?" Okay, so not an apology. But maybe he could start with an olive branch. Although between the events of last night and this morning, they'd both sort of extended those already.

"Andrew told me about a coffee shop a couple of miles from the entrance to the facilities. He said the coffee and breakfast sandwiches are great. And quick," she added with a pointed look at the clock. It was close to eight, and the morning session started at eight-thirty.

"Andrew? Your running buddy?" He knew perfectly well who Andrew was, but he wanted to see if he could get a sense from Nora how she felt about the young man. She'd packed that dress and lingerie before meeting him, but maybe she'd packed it in case an opportunity presented itself?

"He's one of them," she said. "There are six that run together in the morning. Eight including me and Willa."

"You going to wear that dress for him?" He shouldn't have asked. For so many reasons he shouldn't have asked. He didn't really want to know if she'd

say yes. But more to the point, he'd made her uncomfortable. Or at least that's what he assumed, since she was turning an interesting shade of pink.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Forget I asked. It was just right there next to your purse. I didn't go hunting around."

She didn't respond, and he started to second-guess himself. Years ago, he would have teased her about it. He would have made her smile, and he would have told her she'd look amazing in it. And she would. But now, instead of making her feel like she would rock that dress and lingerie, he'd made her uncomfortable.

They rode in silence until she directed him to the coffee shop located in one of the many strip malls in the area. It wasn't until they were standing in line to order that she finally spoke.

"I have two nights off during the program. One of them is for a date I have in Boston on Saturday night," she said, her voice quiet.

He should say something supportive. He should tell her that he hoped she had fun. He'd be lying, but he should say it anyway. "You couldn't reschedule?" he asked instead.

She didn't meet his eye as she shook her head. "He's a friend of the family. He's only in Boston for a night before he heads to New York, then back to Jordan."

He blinked at that. He understood her family wanting to set her up. But was she really interested in dating a man who lived in Jordan? Granted, her family lived there, too, but her *life* was here in the US.

She stepped up to the counter and placed her order. He followed, then paid for both. When they were standing off to the side, waiting for their food and drink, he asked, "Would you really date a man who lives six thousand miles away? Why not look for someone closer?" A little pitch of his stomach told him he didn't like that idea, either.

She rolled her eyes and finally met his gaze. "You ask as if I haven't tried. Do you know how many dates I've been on in the last nine months?"

He shook his head.

She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Yeah, me neither. Too many to count."

"What is wrong with the men in the United States?" he asked, sincerely confused. *He* wasn't looking for a relationship, but he could see the kind of woman Nora was—smart, kind, funny, and yes, attractive. Very attractive. He was indignant on her behalf that the men in her life didn't seem to see the

woman she was.

Or maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe they did see, but she was being picky. She had every right to be. She had a lot to offer a relationship. She should expect the same from a partner.

And why was he thinking all these things?

The man behind the counter called his name, giving him an excuse to think about something else. They grabbed their coffees and breakfast sandwiches, then headed to her car. He wasn't much of a breakfast sandwich kind of person—it was a very American concept—but he'd already had a long morning, and he wouldn't eat again until lunch.

“What did we find?” he asked when he was behind the wheel again.

Judging by the way her shoulders relaxed, she was glad for the abrupt shift. “A medal,” she answered. “A saint medal, actually. The kind that would go on a necklace or maybe a bracelet.”

“Do you know which one?”

“Saint Adrian, I believe. I didn't get a good look before Ben handed it off to his deputy, but that's who I think it was.”

Lucian shifted in his seat and pulled his phone from his pocket. After unlocking it, he handed it to Nora. “I took some pictures. You should be able to enlarge them and see.”

Keeping her coffee in one hand, she reached for his phone with her other and opened the photos. Much as she'd done earlier, his mind went through all the photos on his camera app to recall if there were any he might not want her to see. Not that he had anything risqué. Most of his pictures were of his dogs. But there were a few he'd taken of various injuries his animals had suffered. Some were a bit gruesome, but probably nothing she hadn't seen before.

“Definitely Saint Adrian,” she said, handing the phone back and picking her sandwich up. “He's wearing armor.”

“Ah,” he said as she took a bite. “The patron saint of soldiers?”

She finished her bite, then smiled. “You grew up in one of the most Catholic countries in the world. It seems like that's something you should know.”

He turned onto the grounds and slowed at the gate. Andrew wasn't there, but another soldier was. “I was right, wasn't I?”

She chuckled and leaned over as he rolled the window down. “Hey, Chris, how are you?” she called. The young man beamed.

“Hi, Doc, what are you doing out here?”



“Just went for another walk and got a little lost. Lucian came to pick me up.”

Chris gave her a funny look, but there was nothing on Nora’s face that raised any suspicion.

“You got lost on the grounds?” Chris asked.

She shook her head. “You know those few breaks in the fence we’ve been running by?” He nodded. “I wanted to check some of them out. I know there’s a state park that abuts the property, and I wanted to see if I popped through one of those holes if I could find it. I did. But got turned around.”

Chris was back to smiling. “It’s easy to do when you aren’t used to the woods. There’s a great park a few miles from here. If you want to go hiking over the weekend, let us know. We’d be happy to go with you. And Willa, too, if she’s interested.”

Lucian narrowed his eyes at the young man. To his surprise, the young man didn’t back down. Instead, he sent Lucian a look that could only be interpreted as a silent “bring it, old man.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. We have sessions all weekend, but think we have a day off next week,” Nora said.

“Great, you know where to find us. Have a good day,” he said, stepping away from the car and back into his booth.

“Another one of your running buddies?” he asked, rolling the window up and easing forward.

Nora nodded as she finished another bite. “His father is from Jordan. We’ve bonded.”

Lucian shot her a look to see if she was teasing him. Her gaze was focused out the window as she took the last bite of her sandwich. Apparently not.

“I’m not much of a breakfast sandwich person,” she said. “But Andrew was right, that was pretty good.”

He hadn’t even started his yet. He’d eat it on the way to the training grounds. “What is your usual breakfast?” he asked, not really sure why he’d asked. It wasn’t as though he was planning on making it for her.

She shrugged as they pulled into the lot. “Sometimes Six brings me *cornetti* and I’ll have that with my coffee. In the summer, fruit and yogurt. I’m not a big breakfast eater.” She paused, then looked down at his uneaten sandwich. “I hope you aren’t, either. The sandwich is more than I usually eat, but it isn’t big.”

“By American standards, it’s not. By Italian standards, it’s huge.”

She smiled at that, then opened her door and slid out. “I don’t have time for a shower, but I’m at least going to change. I’ll see you out on the grounds, and thanks for picking me up.”

“Nora!” he called, stopping her.

She turned and he jogged toward her. “You’re going to need these,” he said, handing over both her car key and her room key. “Unless you want me to walk you in?”

The smile that had been flirting with her lips at her forgetfulness faded. It was replaced with something altogether less cheery. Something a little sad.

“No need,” she said. “I’m just fine on my own.”

She took her keys from him, then walked into the residence hall. Through the glass doors, he watched her turn and head up the side stairwell. Her words echoed in his mind.

She might very well be fine on her own, but she wasn’t happy about it.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DESPITE THE WAY the investigation dragged, Saturday afternoon came faster than Nora expected. Which was an odd observation, because it was time, and in reality, time happened at a steady pace.

Lying on her bed after the end of the last session, she stared at the ceiling and went over everything again. For the seven thousandth time. There wasn't much else she could do, though, other than replay everything in her mind. She had no new information from Ben, Sabina, Franklin, or her friends. And she definitely hadn't been able to suss out the killer among them. She'd had a number of conversations with the participants over the past few days, but nothing had come of any.

She sighed and pulled a throw blanket over her legs. Sabina had promised she'd have something in the next day or two, and her friends were digging into all the victims. New information was on the way, but she was getting more and more antsy with each passing day. And feeling more and more guilty about doing little more than just talking to people.

She was grateful for her friends' assistance but couldn't help but feel that she was passing the buck a bit. Compared to her tasks, they were doing so much more. If the situation were different, she wouldn't think twice about stepping in and helping her friends. In fact, she'd expect them to ask. Even so, the situation was...uncomfortable. She didn't like that Sabina and her friends were doing so much work for her.

A knock came at her door, and there was only one person it could be because everyone else texted.

"Come in, Lucian," she called.

He walked in, dressed in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved Henley. His

dark hair was still wet, no doubt from a hot shower. In the past two days, the temperatures hadn't crept above thirty-four.

He paused. His eyes traveled over her, then he leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "Violetta wants me to go into Boston with you tonight."

Nora arched a brow. "Six is always harping on me to get out there and meet someone. What she really means is have sex. But even though she seems to have made that her life's mission, I have a hard time believing she'd suggest a ménage à trois."

He studied her. She couldn't tell if he was considering it or if he was appalled at the idea and trying to think of a graceful way to respond. She smiled, then laughed. "Come on, Lucian, twenty years ago you would have laughed or offered to convince me it was a good idea. I was teasing you."

If anything, his expression darkened. She rolled her eyes, then shifted to her side and swung her feet to the floor. "I assume you have a reason to be in the city?"

"I do. But you make a good point. I'm not into a ménage à trois, and sharing has never been anything I've been interested in. But *you* may have plans for the evening that...don't include me."

She'd showered after coming in from the session, too, and was wrapped in her robe. She tightened the belt. "I haven't changed that much, Lucian. Sex on the first date isn't my style. I don't judge those who do, it's just not me. Especially not with a man my father set me up with. I plan to have dinner, maybe a long one depending on Emil, and then drive back here so I can be ready for tomorrow's session. What's taking you into town?"

He hesitated. "There's a couple who own a breeding facility just south of Boston, toward the Cape. They've been wanting to meet with me for a few years about doing some cross-breeding between their dogs and mine. Now seemed a good time to do it."

He didn't take his eyes off her, but judging by the way his hands were now shoved into his pockets, and he was rocking back on his heels, he was nervous. He wasn't sure if he was intruding or if he should have asked. She didn't relish spending two hours in the car—each way—with him. Especially not when he'd know exactly what she had on under her dress. But she'd been telling the truth about Emil. She had zero plans to spend the night with the man. What would it hurt to share the drive?

"Leave at five?" she asked.

He nodded and pushed away from the wall. That gave her an hour to tame

her hair and apply some form of makeup. The makeup she wasn't too worried about. Her hair on the other hand...

"Are you sure?" he asked when he reached the door.

"Yes," she said. She appreciated his consideration, but she was sure.

"I'll meet you downstairs in an hour then."

She nodded and three seconds later, her door closed behind him.

The elevator door hadn't even shut behind her when she heard a catcall in the hallway. A fond one, but a catcall, nonetheless.

"Damn, you clean up good," Collin said, striding toward her with Raum at his side. Her opinion of the dog hadn't changed—he was still too stoic for her liking—but he was a magnificent beast. "Willa said you had plans for tonight. Big date?" He came up alongside her, and together they walked toward the lounge.

"Dinner with a friend of the family," she answered.

"Well, he's definitely a lucky bastard." Collin held the door for her, and they walked through. To more catcalls. Even Willa joined in, making Nora laugh.

"Believe it or not, ladies and gentlemen and my furry friends, I do have a life outside of being your vet." As she spoke, Craig released Miles, who'd been his constant companion since their talk a few days ago, and the dog came trotting up to her.

"Your dress!" Sophie exclaimed as Nora squatted to give the shepherd a good rub behind his ears and a kiss on the forehead. If dogs were as petty as humans, she was pretty sure Miles would have stuck his tongue out at Raum. Raum would have just rolled his eyes.

"It's just a dress," Nora said, nuzzling Miles's soft fur. "And besides, if my date can't take a little dog hair, he's definitely not worth my time."

"Hear hear," both Willa and Marie said.

"You know I don't mind a little dog hair," Jonah said.

"Your bed would get a little crowded with both me and Lena," Nora countered as the group laughed.

"I'd invite you into mine, but Miles would force me to sleep on the floor," Craig said.

“And I bet you’d be an excellent cuddler, wouldn’t you?” she asked Miles, who smiled at her, then butted his head against her chin. Balanced on her heels, the move almost knocked her over, but a hand wrapped around her bicep and pulled her up. “Oh, Lucian, you’re here. Ready?” she asked. He was dressed in a pair of black slacks, dress shoes, and a soft white button-down. In the hand not wrapped around her arm, he held his jacket.

“You clean up good, too,” she blurted out. He looked good in jeans, boots, and his winter gear when he was out working with the dogs. But in his business attire, as casual as it was, Nora had the uncharacteristic urge to muss him up.

He didn’t quite grin, but amusement flickered in his eyes. “Thank you. You as well. Shall we?”

“Why doesn’t he get any ribbing?” Nora teased the group as she slipped into her jacket.

“Not my type, love,” Collin said.

“I’ve already offered, but he won’t take me up on it,” Ingrid threw in, making everyone laugh. Nora glanced at Lucian to see just a hint of pink. Ha, Ingrid wasn’t kidding.

“Have fun tonight, Nora,” Willa said. “Hike tomorrow morning?”

“Definitely. And have fun tonight, you all. Don’t go too crazy.” It was a Saturday night, and the Sunday session didn’t start until noon. The handlers would be up early with their dogs, but a slow morning would give the partiers of the group a chance to recover from any debauchery. “Are you joining them?” she asked Willa as Lucian started inching toward the door.

Willa shook her head. “Angelo and Cencio are going to teach me, Sophie, Jean, James, and Jurgen how to make gnocchi from scratch.”

That almost made her want to stay. But Lucian cleared his throat behind her. She was dragging her heels. No surprise there. Her brother had told her Emil was a good man. But as Lucian had pointed out, he lived in Jordan, and her entire life was in the US. With an internal sigh, she waved goodbye to everyone and followed Lucian out into the cold. If nothing else, it would be a good meal and a chance to reminisce about her home country.

“Do you want to drive or shall I?” Lucian asked as they passed through the

main doors of the residence hall.

“You can. That way you can drop me at the restaurant and go from there.”

Lucian nodded, not trusting himself to speak much more. Nora was always beautiful, but tonight, she was fucking gorgeous. Her dress hugged her curves, her hair was half pinned up with the rest cascading down her back, and her spiked heels made her legs look miles long. Recognizing she was an attractive woman was one thing, but it was the sense of possessiveness that had sunk into him at the sight of her that made him twitchy. It had taken everything he had not to snap at Jonah, then Craig, when they'd invited her to bed with them. It was best if he held his tongue. He didn't want to say something he shouldn't.

Of course, it didn't help matters knowing what she had on underneath her dress.

Keeping his eyes on the asphalt of the parking lot, he walked to the passenger door and opened it for her. As she stepped in front of him, he couldn't stop inhaling. She smelled damn good, too. It was still the vanilla spice with a hint of musk, but it was a clean and subtly seductive scent.

She murmured a thank-you, and he closed the door, then circled to the driver's side. By the time he climbed in and started the car, she had the map to the restaurant up on her in-dash screen. Without a word, he guided them along several miles of country roads before merging onto Interstate 91.

“Are you really considering doing business with these breeders in Boston?” Nora asked. It was dark already and in the dim light of the car, he felt, more than saw, her eyes on him.

He lifted a shoulder. “They have an excellent program. Their dogs are top-notch. Not just military and law enforcement. They also breed and train them for medical purposes, including assisting the blind and sniffing sugar levels in diabetics. They are the only operation I know of with such a spectrum. At the very least, it will be an interesting meeting.”

What he didn't tell her is that he'd already bred and trained a litter of Labs to help diabetics. Three years ago, a good friend's ten-year-old son was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes and Lucian had wanted to help. Pax, the dog, had already prevented two close calls. Two others of the litter had also gone on to families with diabetic children. The last two hadn't been cut out for that job but had turned out to be excellent explosive sniffers and now both worked at Fiumicino Airport in Rome. Lucian understood the value of breeding and

training military and law enforcement dogs, but there was something extremely gratifying about being able to help his friend and his son.

As he navigated Nora's car along the interstate an odd thought occurred to him. He hadn't spent time with a woman who didn't want anything from him in a very, very long time. It wasn't just women—he ran a business, people wanted things from him all the time. But on the rare occasions he'd been on dates in the past few years, the women wanted a Salvitto and everything that came with that. They didn't necessarily want *him*. They wanted the fancy dinners, the access to the second, third, and eighth homes, and the private jet. He didn't judge them, but he judged himself. How, and why, had he picked such women?

Ruefully, he realized that even as he asked the question, it wasn't hard to answer. Although the answer didn't reflect well on him. He knew the kind of people the women were when he asked them out. They wouldn't dig into his psyche, nor were they interested in anything overly emotional. The truth was, he picked women who wouldn't ask anything of him other than what his family's name and money could give them. But he wasn't much interested in the society life many of his family members participated in. And dating women who wanted what he had no interest in gave him an easy out. He intentionally picked women who weren't his type.

But Nora was different. She didn't want his money. Her family had plenty of its own—probably more than his. Nor did she appear interested in digging into his psyche. At least no more so than casual chitchat between two people who'd known each other a long time. Despite some moments of discomfort, he realized that being with her was...relaxing. That was the word. For the first time in a long time, he felt like he wasn't letting someone down. She didn't allow him to walk all over her, but she also didn't judge or push him. Nor did she cling or hover. She was just *Nora*.

"Do you mind if I call Sabina?" she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Who's Sabina?" he asked, grateful to have something else to think about. His mind had been wandering in a direction it had no business wandering. He was comfortable with Nora. She appeared to be comfortable with him. He should just leave it at that.

"A woman who does a lot of incredible tech work. She's with a private security firm and is looking into the prior nine victims for me. She's pulling data from all sorts of places, adding it to what I sent her, then using a new AI algorithm to see if she can find any connections among them," she answered.



Lucian gestured to the in-dash screen that was hooked up to her phone. “Please, go ahead.”

Nora hit a few buttons on her phone, and soon the sound of ringing filled the car. Two rings in, a woman answered. “Nora.”

“Sabina, how are you? I half expected to just leave a message given it’s a Saturday night.”

“Ha,” the woman laughed. “As if I have a life, weekend or not. But let’s not get into that. I assume you want an update?”

“I figured you’d call if and when you had something major. But a lot of questions are swirling in my head, so I thought I’d reach out.”

“Did you know that the first kill in each of the three sets was a stabbing?” Sabina asked. “Like what happened on Wednesday with Michael Kelly? The remaining two murders at each location varied as to which method came second. In Scotland, the burning came next—and gross, how medieval. In Louisiana and Turkey, it was the strangulation. But they all started with the stabbing.”

Lucian glanced at Nora for her reaction. She was staring out the window, her forefinger pensively tracing the line of her lips.

“Have you found anything that ties them together? Not all the victims, but the first ones?” she asked.

“They are all runners or amblers or hikers. Which I know isn’t much of a tie. The man in Massachusetts was a runner, and the man in Scotland was an ambler. The woman from Louisiana and the woman in Turkey were both hikers.”

“Any chance they were active on online forums?” Lucian asked. Nora turned her head to look at him.

“Nora?” Sabina asked.

Nora let out a small breath. “Sabina, meet Lucian Salvitto, Six’s cousin. Lucian, meet Sabina O’Malley,” she said, making the introductions.

“Not to be nosy, but I’m going to be nosy. Wasn’t he suspect?”

Lucian had assumed that at some point, he was. But even so, he darted a sharp look at Nora, who’d returned her gaze to the window. “Not to me, but I promised Franklin I’d treat him as one.”

“What changed?” Sabina asked.

“I decided that if Franklin assigned me to this crazy op then he could deal with how I run it. Which includes not treating Lucian as a suspect.”

Sabina snorted, and Lucian’s lips twitched. Nora might be all that was

kind and gentle, but she was never a pushover.

“Okay,” Sabina said, drawing the word out. “So back to the question—which is a very good one—yes, they were all part of various online forums.”

“We suspected the killer used the internet to meet Michael Kelly before his arrival here. It was the only way to explain how he could have known where to find him on that trail. But we didn’t know where or how. I suggested Detective Miller look into it and Cyn is as well. I’ll have to point Cyn to those forums,” Nora mulled out loud.

“It would explain why they are the first to die,” Lucian suggested. When Nora looked at him, he continued. “The participants were told the location of all the sessions when they were accepted into the program. It wouldn’t be hard for the killer to cultivate relationships online with people in those regions, not just Michael Kelly. And forums on hiking and running are common enough. If he accessed those, then by the time he arrived for that session, he’d have a victim and, likely, a location already picked out.”

“Leaving him with some time on the ground to identify the second two victims,” Nora said.

“Assuming there’s nothing tying the others together in the same manner as the first victims?” he asked.

“Nothing like that so far,” Sabina answered. “I’m still working on those, but nothing has popped.”

“I’ll ask Cyn to dig into the social media accounts, including the forums, of all first victims. Maybe she can identify conversations they might have had with our killer,” Nora said.

“I’ll keep working on the other victims. I got the algorithm updated yesterday, so it shouldn’t take me as long to run them,” Sabina replied.

“I’m grateful for anything you can do. Thank you,” Nora replied, always gracious.

“Any time,” Sabina said, then unceremoniously ended the call.

Several minutes passed in silence. Then Lucian asked the question that had been weighing on him since he’d first learned about the murders. “How soon before the next one?”

He glanced over and in the filtered light of the occasional highway lamps, he saw her lips thin.

“I don’t know. In the past three sessions, there’s been one murder per week. But they don’t happen evenly spaced. The first murder might occur on the last day of the first week but the second on the first day of the second

week.”

“Making them just a day apart?”

She nodded. “But in Turkey, the first one occurred on the second day of the first week and the second one didn’t happen until the last day of the second week. Twelve days apart.”

That gave them nothing to go on except one thing. “At least you don’t have to be concerned about a murder tonight or tomorrow. If that pattern holds, it won’t be until Monday that we need to start worrying.” It also meant they had only two days—not even—to try to stop the next killing.

“What about the medal?” Lucian asked, looking for something to talk about that might be a real lead.

“It was the victim’s,” Nora answered.

Lucian frowned. “A memento the killer took, then dropped?”

Nora lifted her shoulder. “It’s hard to know for certain, but it’s a likely scenario. I’ll look at my files to see if something similar was missing from any of the other victims. I also need to call Cyn and ask her to look into those social media accounts and forums.”

He took that as his cue to stop talking, and he refocused on the road as she made a call—not on Bluetooth this time—to Cyn. The night was clear and cold, and the Massachusetts Turnpike now stretched out before them. He’d always liked this part of the United States. He liked the trees and green fields and the gently rolling hills. Even though it was dark and shadowed, it was easy to simply drive and let his eyes take in the scenery.

Once Nora finished her call with Cyn, they chatted on and off about everything and nothing. She talked about her plans to visit her family in Jordan in February. He told her about his plans to avoid his family for Christmas. They talked about food and wine and holiday traditions. They also lapsed into occasional comfortable silences.

Too soon, he was pulling in front of the restaurant where she was scheduled to meet Emil. Her date. He looked through the big picture window and into a cozy room. He could see a bar along one wall, and tables filled with patrons dotted the small space. Based on the name, he thought it must be French.

“What time should I return?” he asked, feeling reluctant to drop her off and leave.

“Ten,” she answered without hesitation. “Three hours should be plenty for dinner.” He was glad to have a definitive time for the end of her date.

She'd told him she wasn't contemplating spending the night with Emil, but even so...

"Are you sure about this?" he asked.

She tossed him a wan smile. "No," she replied, ever honest. "But it's just dinner. It will make my father happy, and he doesn't ask much of me. Not that he'd be upset if I'd said no when he first proposed the dinner. But saying yes, then changing my mind last minute, wouldn't be very sporting of me."

He thought her father would rather her do whatever she wanted, but it wasn't his place to say, so he nodded. "I'll be back by ten, then."

Her green eyes held his for a moment, then she reached for her purse and jacket. After putting her jacket on, she opened the door and slid from her seat into the frigid December night. "Thank you, Lucian, and I hope your dinner goes well."

He nodded again and seconds later, she walked away.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NORA WALKED into the quaint restaurant, one she'd always thought overrated though good enough. She was handing her jacket to the host when a man, about her age, left the bar and walked toward her. The minute she saw the look on his face she knew the evening wasn't going to turn out the way she'd planned. She hadn't had high hopes for it to begin with, and it was, she was certain, about to take a nosedive.

"Nora?" he asked as he approached. She nodded and took in the man who was about to give her an excuse as to why he couldn't stay for dinner. She'd seen the look on her father's and brothers' faces often enough to recognize when business called.

"Emil, it's nice to meet you," she said, holding out her hand. He seemed somewhat startled by the formal gesture, but he took her hand in his.

"I'm so sorry to do this, but I'm going to have to cancel dinner tonight. I know, I should have called or texted you, but something *just* came up. My plane is already waiting for me, and I need to leave for Los Angeles tonight. I figured the least I could do was to tell you in person."

He gave her a chagrined smile. The least he should have done was cancel his business plans. In fact, the more she thought about it, the sketchier it sounded. He might have business in LA, but if he left within the hour, he wouldn't be reaching the West Coast before ten o'clock. An odd time to be conducting business.

She'd not been sure of this date to begin with, and now she was certain she shouldn't have accepted. It wasn't worth making a fuss over. In fact, having the night to herself sounded quite nice.

"I've given the waiter my card and told him to spoil you tonight. I know

your father wouldn't have it any other way," he continued, leaving her somewhat astounded. Many would consider that the polite thing to do, but to Nora, it was offensive. She wondered if he realized that he'd just treated her like little more than her daddy's pet. Although to be fair, Emil was also probably trying to make sure she didn't have cause to complain to her father. Saleh Amiri, and his three sons, would bury him if they thought he'd disrespected her. Which he had.

"That's very kind of you," she said, eager to have him gone. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." He eyed her. He seemed to catch on to her rapid capitulation, and his brow dipped. "You have a plane to catch, don't you?" she hinted.

His gaze darted around the restaurant as if he expected a boogeyman to jump out or something. Then he nodded. "Again, I'm sorry about this. Maybe next time I'm in Boston, we can try again?"

Nora smiled. "I live here, Emil. My life is here, yours is not. I don't think trying to plan another dinner is worth either of our time, is it?"

He frowned. "Things change."

She arched her brow and held her ground. "Not that much, they don't. Please, have a safe trip to LA." She stepped to the side and gestured toward the door. With one last look, he apologized again, then left. She watched his form move down the sidewalk, then she turned to the host. "I will take the table, but if you charge any part of my meal to that man, you will regret it." She softened her comment with a smile, and the man grinned.

"He was an ass. I know I shouldn't say that about a customer—"

"He wasn't a customer, though, was he?" Nora countered.

The grin turned into a smile. "He was not. And I hope he regrets standing you up. You, on the other hand, are going to have a night you will never forget. I'll make sure of it."

Nora smiled back and was about to follow him to a cozy table tucked in the corner when she heard someone call her name. Turning, she saw a man standing at the door.

"Nora, it is you! How are you?"

Nora blinked, her mind racing. When it caught up, she smiled, a genuine smile. "Charlie, how are you?" He approached and dropped a kiss on her cheek before wrapping her in a hug. "How long has it been?" she asked when he pulled away.

"Fifteen years or so," he answered. "Are you still in the area?"

Nora glanced at the host, who was standing politely by his lectern, a menu in hand.

“I am. I live just north of the city. My date for the night did a runner. If you don’t have plans for tonight, and Constance won’t mind, would you care to join me?” She and Charlie had dated for close to two years during college. Their relationship had ended senior year and a few years after, he’d married Constance, his high school sweetheart.

“Connie and I divorced last year, and I’d love to join you.”

A gleam of interest came into his eyes, and Nora’s heart sank. Dinner with a newly single ex-boyfriend wasn’t high on her wish list. Having dinner with an old married friend would have been much better. Unfortunately, it was too late to withdraw the invitation.

She glanced at the host again, who flashed her a sympathetic look. The man was more observant than most. That thought had her smiling, as if the two of them were accomplices in this farce of an evening.

“I’ll grab another menu,” he said. Nora murmured a thank-you, and Charlie beamed. In all fairness, he hadn’t changed much from their younger days. He was still fit, had most of his hair, and had aged just the right amount. If she’d felt anything other than friendliness toward him, the dinner could prove interesting. Unfortunately, she didn’t think that would be the case.

Two and a half hours later, her prediction had come true. In an attempt to rekindle their young affair, he spent most of the time explaining to her how great it was to be single again. And how much more he appreciated it now that he was such a successful lawyer with money and prestige to spare. He asked a sum total of four questions about her. And yes, she counted.

“Nora?”

She looked up to see Lucian standing behind Charlie. So lost in her own thoughts, she hadn’t even noticed his approach. She frowned and looked at her watch.

“I’m a little early. I can grab a coffee or something,” he offered.

She shook her head. Maybe a little too quickly, because Charlie turned in his chair to glare at Lucian. “Charlie Henderson,” he said, rising and holding out his hand.

Lucian looked down, then to Nora, before finally shaking it. “Lucian Salvitto,” he said. “Friend of Nora’s and her ride.”

“I’ll give her a ride,” Charlie said.

Nora's eyebrows shot up at the presumption, and when Lucian looked at her, she gave a little shake of her head. "We're working together in Western Massachusetts for a few weeks, and it's several hours away," Lucian said.

Charlie started to say something but stopped when Nora rose. "Thank you for joining me tonight, Charlie," she said. "But Lucian is right. We have a long drive ahead of us."

Charlie's gaze bounced between the two, then landed on Lucian. "Are you related to Six? Same last name and all."

Lucian nodded but didn't say anything. Charlie switched his attention to Nora. "Maybe we can meet up again soon?"

She had no interest in meeting up with Charlie again. And definitely not in the way the gleam in his eye was suggesting. But it wasn't worth discussing now. "I'm out of town for the next several weeks," she reminded him. Disappointment flashed across his features, and Nora almost smiled. He'd anticipated an easy conquest. She doubted his interest would hold for the next few weeks. At least she hoped it wouldn't.

He nodded. "Well, it was good to see you, Nora. You look amazing. As always. And thank you for dinner."

She was batting zero for two tonight. She didn't begrudge paying for their meal—a luxury she had—but to not even offer to pay seemed, well, presumptuous. She always offered to pay, at least for her part of meals, when eating out with friends.

She tipped her head to the side in acknowledgment. "You're welcome. And it was good to see you, too. Take care," she said, then quickly slipped around the table and walked toward the host. Lucian followed, halting behind her when she stopped to pay the bill and collect her coat. A few minutes later, they were in her car, heading out of the city.

She desperately wanted to go home to Cos Cob rather than back to the training facility. She wanted the comfort of her bed, the peace of her property, and the familiarity of everything that was her life. But they had a killer to catch, and Lucian had a session to run tomorrow. She also had well-checks to perform in the morning.

Leaning her head against the window, she watched the sights of Boston transition to the suburbs, then to rural Massachusetts. And as the miles clicked by, fatigue washed over her. She was tired of dating but tired of being alone, too. Why was it so hard for her to find someone?

"Nora?"



She rolled her head from where she'd been resting it against the window. "Hmm?"

"That wasn't Emil."

She let out a little huff of a laugh. "No, it was not. He had business to attend to but was kind enough to meet me at the restaurant to tell me that he was flying to LA tonight." Yes, she sounded bitter. It wasn't a common thing for her to feel, much less express, but she was too tired to hold it back.

"His loss," Lucian said.

A sad smile touched her lips, and she rolled her head back to look out the window.

"The man, Charlie, he seemed interested, though."

"Charlie and I dated in college. He's recently divorced and the only thing he's interested in is trying to revisit the life he had before it fell to shit. Including the two years we were together when we had no responsibilities and were ruled by hormones. He's not interested in me, he's interested in that life we used to have."

Several miles passed before Lucian spoke again. "I'm sorry," was all he said.

She shrugged. "Me, too. Maybe I'll adopt a baby and become a crazy cat lady."

"You want kids?"

She nodded. "I always have. I figured I'd meet someone at some point in my life who I wanted to have them with, but that doesn't seem to be in the cards for me."

"You're still young," he pointed out.

"I'm thirty-nine next week, Lucian. Not that young." She paused, then asked, "You've had some major curveballs thrown at you, so maybe this isn't a good question, but do you ever look at your life and realize it's not what you'd thought it would be? I know that sounds stupid. Life happens in ways we can't predict, especially when we're younger. But there are some fundamentals that I don't have that I was so certain I would."

Lucian acknowledged her statement with a small nod. "My life is definitely not what I thought it would be. Aside from Alessandra's murder, there was everything that happened with AISE. If you'd asked me fifteen years ago where I'd be, I would have said with AISE. I would have still been married. Not sure about children. Alessandra didn't want them."

Maybe it was the late hour or the dark of the car, but whatever it was, it

gave her the courage to ask her next question. “Will you tell me about her?” She hadn’t known Alessandra at all. They’d met once, at some dinner affair, but hadn’t spoken more than a dozen words to each other. She knew Lucian’s family shied away from talking about her. But Nora had never been sure if that was because *they* chose to not talk about her or if Lucian had made it clear *he* didn’t wish to speak about her.

Several minutes passed, and she was about to tell him he needn’t answer when he started speaking. “She was tough,” he said with a fond smile. “She knew what she wanted, and she went after it. Including me. She was great with the dogs. She had a talent I’ve never seen since. She liked to cook, but not entertain. She was slow to smile but had a beautiful one when she did. She didn’t care that she’d married into the Salvitto family. She just cared about her dogs and me. Probably in that order.”

“How did you meet?”

Again, he smiled. “In a café of all places. She was meeting her sister, but her sister never showed up. I happened to be sitting next to her. We struck up a conversation, and everything sort of went from there. We spent the rest of the afternoon and long into the night talking, walking, eating, and debating. There was nothing Alessandra liked more than a good debate.”

His voice fell quiet with his last words, and Nora almost regretted asking. Her mother had died when she was seven, and her father had always insisted that they not forget her. They didn’t dwell on her memory, but she, her brothers, and her father kept it alive. They talked about her laugh and the crazy things she liked doing. She’d been an unconventional woman—a painter and poet—who had swept her father off his feet. He’d never remarried but was always grateful for the years he’d had with his wife and the mother of their four children. Talking about the dead was more natural to Nora than not, but that didn’t mean it was like that for Lucian.

“I’m sorry if that was painful,” she said. “You don’t need to say anymore.” A chill washed over her skin, and she shivered. Reaching over to turn the heat up, her hand brushed against Lucian’s, who must have been doing the same.

“You’re cold,” he said, turning the temperature up a few degrees.

“A little,” she acknowledged, accepting that the conversation was likely at an end. It was probably for the best. She didn’t take Lucian’s confidence lightly, but she did have a murderer to catch.

“I don’t know if we would have made it,” Lucian said quietly. The

admission seemed torn from his lips, but the minute he said it, his shoulders relaxed. As if the thought had been weighing him down.

“Why do you think that?” she asked.

He hesitated. She wouldn’t push him on this. If he wanted to drop it and ask her to forget he ever said a word, she would. But he didn’t. “I don’t know. And maybe it’s not worth thinking about? Sometimes, I remember the debates we had, and how particular she could be, and how she treated people. She wasn’t unkind, but she wasn’t one to welcome others into her life. And I wonder if it would have become tiring. It was exciting and exhilarating and fun when I was younger. But now? Now it sounds exhausting.”

Nora considered his words very carefully. She didn’t doubt he’d loved his wife. And contrary to his opinion, she suspected that had Alessandra not been killed, they *would* still be together. Couples evolved and changed. Alessandra and Lucian likely would have as well.

“Your life now was shaped by what happened to her and the years that followed,” she said. “Perhaps that kind of relationship *would* be exhausting for you now. But who you are now, and what you want now, is shaped by your loss. If you’d never experienced that—if Alessandra hadn’t been murdered—who’s to say what you would want or what would appeal to you in a relationship?”

Long minutes passed before he spoke again. “It feels like a betrayal to even think it.”

“Of?”

“Of my marriage vows. Of the love I know we had for each other.”

His answer didn’t surprise her. She wasn’t about to point out that if Alessandra loved him, she’d want him to be happy. Nor was she going to point out that spending his time thinking about whether he and his wife would have stayed together had she not died was a sure way to make himself crazy.

“When my mother died, my father went into deep mourning,” she said. “For more than a year he struggled with everything. He didn’t want to be in the house she’d lived in, he didn’t want to see her friends or eat at the restaurants she loved. He kept the four of us kids close. Then one day, it was as if he flicked a switch and he changed. I remember he called us all to lunch and said that he was done mourning. He told us he’d always miss her and always love her, but that the time for sadness was over. I don’t actually think it was that easy for him, but from then on, we spent more time talking about

the things we loved about her. The things that made us smile and laugh. We didn't shy away from the hard things, from the times she lost her temper or lashed out. But when we remembered those, it was easier to remember them as part of a complex person we loved and who loved us back."

"Is that your gentle way of telling me that I shouldn't torture myself with questions about whether we would have made it had she not died?" His voice held a subtle teasing tone that let her know she hadn't overstepped.

"You know it's not," she said with a soft chuckle. "People mourn differently, but I am curious as to what made you think about it. You're a smart man, Lucian. Torturing yourself over something that isn't ever going to happen doesn't seem like something you'd do."

He exited off the turnpike and headed north on Interstate 91. They were ten minutes past the tollbooth before he spoke again. "Maybe like you, my life isn't where I thought it would be. And thinking about Alessandra, and her murder, gives me something to blame it on. It doesn't have to be my fault if everything wrong started with her death."

"So instead of making it right, you're thinking of what your life would be like if it had never happened?"

He chuckled in the dark car. "Which is all kinds of fucked up, because instead of romanticizing how perfect our life would be, I'm thinking we would have ended up divorced. I know," he said, lifting a hand from the steering wheel, "it makes no sense, and yet somehow, I can't seem to get out of this spiral."

Nora turned her head and looked out the window. It was a quarter moon, and she could make out shades of shadows in the bucolic hills and occasional lights.

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm not much better. I want a partner. I want kids. But I hate dating. And I don't understand why it's so hard to find someone. I don't think I'm a hideous person—either physically, mentally, or emotionally. And I know my own value, my own worth. Yet with each failed date, I end up asking, what is it about me that isn't *enough*?"

"You know those men are idiots, don't you?"

She laughed, the sound quiet in the cab. "Yes, it makes no sense and yet somehow I can't seem to get out of this spiral," she repeated his own words.

Lucian smiled. A real smile. "If I had a glass of wine or any sort of drink, I'd raise a toast to us."

"And our inexplicable spirals," she said.

“And our inexplicable spirals.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHEN LUCIAN and Nora walked into the residence hall, Willa, Sophie, Craig, Jonah, Anne, and Collin were still in the lounge. Craig and Willa were in the middle of a pool game while the others were playing a game of cards.

“You’re home early,” Jonah said.

“She couldn’t stand to be away from me,” Collin said with a teasing wink. “No one’s man enough for her after meeting me.”

Nora smiled and shook her head. “You still up for the hike tomorrow, Willa?”

“At that nature reserve? Definitely. I’ll be ready at eight-thirty.”

“What’s this?” Craig asked.

“A reserve Nora found not far from here. We’re going for a hike,” Willa answered.

“Why was I not invited?” Craig asked.

“Or me,” echoed Collin, followed by everyone else saying something similar.

Nora’s phone pinged in her purse and, holding a finger up to the group, she withdrew the device and looked at her screen. It was a message from Cyn. She flashed it at Lucian, who nodded but didn’t say anything. “I need to get this. I can seat three other people in my car, four if you want to squeeze, but all the dogs will have to fit in as well. If you can figure that out, however many of you can fit are welcome to join us.” She didn’t really want to invite everyone, but she was the one who’d opened her mouth. She should have known better with Craig, Collin, and Jonah around.

She nodded to Lucian who, thankfully, didn’t follow her up—with Collin and Jonah in the room there would be no end to the juvenile teasing.

Hurrying to the third floor, she texted Cyn telling her she'd call her in ten minutes. Her clothing was comfortable for what it was, but she wanted to change and wash her face.

Nine minutes later, she was sitting on her bed in her pajamas with her laptop open and her earbuds in.

"Before we start," Cyn said, "I want to know about the date."

Nora made a face, not that Cyn could see, and as succinctly as possible, relayed the events of the night. Cyn had a few choice words for both Emil and Charlie but, to Nora's relief, didn't linger on the topic. She'd dissected it enough with Lucian that she wanted to focus on something more productive. Like finding a killer.

"Thanks for looking into the social media," Nora said. "I'm surprised you and Joe didn't have plans."

"Pfft," Cyn said. "Joe is out at some state police chiefs' dinner, but even if he weren't, you know we'd be helping anyway. It's what we do."

It was what they did. It's what the club had been doing for more than twenty-five years. The only reason Six and Devil weren't on the call was because Six was on her way home and Devil was having dinner with two of her funders.

"So, let's cut to the chase. Yes, I found something. There is an avatar that each of the victims communicated with. Looking at the name alone, it appears to be four different people. But since each name has the word *Bingo* in it, I'm nearly certain it's the same person."

"Bingo?"

"Yes. The handles are things like 'WalkswithBingo' and 'Bingoruns.' No way to connect them, but if you know what you're looking for, which I do, then it's easy to see the similarities. Aside from the names, the language patterns, questions, and those sorts of things are similar as well."

"How long were the conversations going on before the sessions?" Nora asked, opening the file Cyn sent with the links to the sites and information on "Bingo."

"Several months. Do you know if the participants knew the locations of all sessions from the outset or are they told as the program evolves?"

"They knew," Nora confirmed. "I don't know where the next two sessions are, though. Let me ask Lucian." She picked up her phone and switched to the texting app. Lucian replied within seconds.

"The next session is in Norway and the last is in Greece," she told Cyn.

“I’ll start looking into social media sites for running or hiking in those countries,” Cyn said.

“Is there any way to track where Bingo is posting from?”

“There is, and I’ve started that. It will take a little time, but I’ll let you know as soon as I find anything.”

“I’m going to visit the sites and go through the conversations. Maybe there will be something that ties the posts back to one of our suspects.”

“Good idea. Also, I was looking into James and Craig. You’re right about Craig. I scoped out some local CCTV cameras in the area and he definitely went on that run he mentioned. And he was alone. There was no way he was out in the woods miles away killing Michael Kelly.”

That news didn’t surprise Nora. “What about James?” she asked. She’d catch up with Devil and Six in the morning on Jean, Jurgen, Collin, and Angelo.

“I’m inclined to say it’s not him, but I don’t have anything concrete yet.”

“What do you have?”

“He has hemophobia, did you know that?”

Nora sat back. “A fear of blood?”

“Exactly. Kind of hard for a killer who stabs people to have a fear of blood.”

“I had no idea, and I agree. Although he was in the military *and* grew up breeding dogs. Kind of hard to avoid blood in either of those positions.”

Cyn paused. “Fair point. Let me look into it a little more. Maybe it’s possible to condition himself for things like dogs giving birth, but I’m not sure how that would translate to the military. Hemophobia isn’t the only reason I ixnayed him, though. Like Gerhard, he has a bad shoulder and elbow. He injured both in a fall three years ago and has had three different surgeries. I looked up the procedures and chances are, he only has about fifty percent strength in that arm. If he’s really strong, that might not be a problem. But if he’s your slightly-above-average Joe, he probably couldn’t have dragged Michael Kelly off the trail any more than Gerhard could have.”

Nora considered the intel. “I don’t want to completely cut him from the pool of suspects. But if we do, that leaves us with Jurgen, Collin, Jean, and Angelo, and I’d much rather have four suspects to focus on than five.”

Cyn chuckled. “Yes, me, too. But I’ll do a little more digging and see if we can make a definitive decision.”

“Thanks, you’re the best.”



“I am badass, that is true. But only because I have you all.”

“The power of many,” Nora murmured. Since graduating from St. Josue, each of them had worked as solo intelligence agents. But in the past year, they’d had the opportunity to work as a team. It had been a new experience for all of them, but Cyn was right—they worked well together. Not a big surprise, given their years of friendship, but a surprise nonetheless.

“What are your plans now?” Cyn asked.

“I’m going to review the footage from the cameras Franklin had installed downstairs. There hasn’t been another murder, but I want to see if I can start to get a feel for people’s patterns. After that, I’m going to review the social media sites you sent me.”

“And when will you sleep?”

Nora snorted. “Coming from you, that’s rich. I’ll sleep a little tonight, then try to catch up tomorrow night.” Nora couldn’t quite make out her friend’s reply, but she was pretty sure Cyn was cursing her uncle for sending Nora to investigate alone. Her friends were helping, but they couldn’t physically be with her, which is what Cyn would have preferred.

Letting the comment slide, they ended the call, and Nora climbed into bed with her computer. She was just getting comfortable when someone knocked on her door. She’d known Lucian would come and had left it unlocked. “Come in,” she called.

Lucian stepped into the room and paused. Nora gestured toward the chair at her desk. He eyed it, then shook his head and walked to the window. “I won’t stay long. I just wanted to know what Cyn had to say.”

As succinctly as possible, she relayed their conversation. As she did, Lucian kept his attention focused outside.

“Is there anything I can help with?” he asked once she’d finished.

“No,” she said. “I’m just going to spend some time analyzing the language of the posts to see if I can pick up any patterns. Cyn is looking for similar sites in Norway and Greece.”

“You think you might be able to figure out who will be his first target at those locations?”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that. Hopefully, it stops here. But if not, then yes,” she replied. Lucian remained at the window. “Is there something out there I should know about?” she asked.

He jerked his head around and met her gaze. Then his eyes dropped to her clothes before he looked away again. Her pajamas might be silk, but with the

long sleeves of the button-down top, they were hardly sexy. Or maybe he was uncomfortable because she was in bed. She assumed he'd had sex in the years since Alessandra's death. But there was something oddly cozy and intimate about their current positions. It didn't bother her, but it looked as if it affected him.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well?" he repeated, confused. At least he turned around again.

"Is there something out there? You've been staring outside since you walked in. Or am I making you uncomfortable being in bed?"

It was a little bit of a gamble to ask the question so baldly, but she was genuinely curious. He'd never struck her as a prude—at least he hadn't been twenty years ago—but something was bothering him, and it was the only thing she could think of.

He crossed his arms over his chest and asked a question rather than answer hers. "Are you really going to go on a hike tomorrow?" She nodded. "With all those people?"

Her brow furrowed. "I was planning on just going with Willa. But I made a mistake in mentioning it downstairs and so, yes, I guess I will be going on a hike with the lot of them. Or whoever can fit in my car." She paused, remembering a conversation she'd had earlier in the week. "Maybe I should text Angelo and Gerhard as well. They were both telling me how much they like hiking."

Lucian shook his head. "Angelo, Cencio, and Jean will go to Mass tomorrow. All three are deeply religious. Not sure about Gerhard, though."

At Lucian's words, Nora's mind flashed to the medal taken from Michael Kelly. She needed to find out if something was taken from the other victims as well. If so, it might give her a lead. Or at the very least, if mementos were later found among the killer's things, it would help with any prosecution.

She held back a sigh. One more thing for her to look into before trying to get some sleep.

She refocused her attention on Lucian. She was about to ask him if he wanted to join them on the hike, but when her eyes met his, the words wouldn't come. The intensity of his expression held her immobile. She wanted to look away. And yet she didn't. He didn't move, not so much as an inch. But something shifted between them. The air, the energy, something. She inhaled, and the silk of her pajamas brushed against her bare skin and the softness of the pillows behind her beckoned her to lean back.

Lucian swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing with the movement.

What was happening? If she didn't know better, she'd think an attraction had sprung up between them. But that wasn't possible, was it? They'd known each other for years and while, yes, they'd had that time in Capri, that had been two decades ago. So much had happened since then that they were almost two different people now.

She wanted a family and a partner in her life. Lucian didn't have a clue what he wanted in his. She wanted someone kind and gentle. Lucian didn't seem to want anyone at all.

And yet, there was still *something*.

"Lucian?" she asked, her voice sounding as confused as she felt. There was no reason for something that felt an awful lot like chemistry to bubble up between them. She wanted more from a man than he was willing to give, and they both knew she wouldn't settle. But if that was the case, why was he looking at her as though he wanted to pull her to him and not let go? Why was she thinking she'd like it if he did?

Under his intense attention, her skin started to prickle. Grasping on to that discomfort, she tore her gaze from his only to realize that her heart was beating as if she'd just run up the three flights of stairs.

"Nora."

She didn't want to look at him, but she was no coward. She might not understand what had just happened—or why—but Lucian wasn't someone she needed to fear or run from. When her gaze met his again, she saw his hand twitch, as if he wanted to reach out and touch her. But he shoved it into his pocket and took a step back.

"You will let me know if I can help?" he asked. She nodded, not trusting her voice. "And you'll lock up after I leave?" That brought a smile to her lips as she nodded again. His eyes searched her face, then he took a step, then another. "Be careful tomorrow."

"Of course."

"Will you come talk to me after you return?"

"Yes. If there's time." She needed to run the well-checks in the morning. Between those and the hike, she didn't know if there'd be a free moment.

He hesitated, then nodded. "Lock the door," he said again.

"As soon as it closes," she answered.

His lips thinned, then he took the last step before leaving her line of sight. "Sweet dreams, Nora."

She didn't have anything to say to that.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

LUCIAN WAS NOT HAPPY.

Staring at the mirror in front of his treadmill, he watched the reflection of Nora chatting with Angelo and Jean. She'd been up late the night before, then gone on the hike that morning, which was followed by well-checks. Now, in the few free hours before dinner, she was at the gym with Angelo, Jean, and Marie. And him. He hadn't wanted to visit the gym, but he hadn't had a chance to talk to Nora all day. They weren't talking now, either, but at least he could keep his eye on her.

And she looked exhausted.

It was a wonder no one else had noticed. Then again, they were probably distracted by her effortless smile and gentle voice. It was much easier to see what was right in front of them than to look any deeper. If any of them did bother to look, they'd see the circles under her eyes, the slight hesitation in her responses, and the effort she put into appearing as if nothing were wrong.

"How did you get into this line of work, Angelo?" she asked as she sumo squatted with a forty-pound cowbell.

Angelo shrugged. "It's not a pretty story."

In the mirror on the other side of the gym, Nora's eyes flickered to his, then returned to Angelo. "Life often isn't," she said, leaving it up to Angelo to decide if he wanted to elaborate. And of course, he did. Nora was difficult to resist. She didn't bully or push, but she was kind and patient and let people make their own decisions.

"My parents died when I was eleven and I had no other family so was put into a group home. I got into my fair share of trouble. I regret to say, I was not always a good person."

“You were young and had lost your family. I’m sure they understood,” she said, setting down the cowbell and reaching for her water.

“In some ways, yes. In others, no. I wasn’t the only boy in the home. Their patience could only go so far. But then, when I was seventeen, I came across a lost puppy. I’d never had any animals before and this puppy, Gabriel I named him, well, I suppose he reminded me of me. He was young and had been abandoned. He was scared and alone. I wasn’t convinced the people who ran the home would let me keep him, but I also knew I had to try. So I scooped him up and brought him home with me.”

Nora smiled at the image. Lucian did not. It wasn’t that he didn’t applaud Angelo’s efforts to save the puppy, but it was a story he’d heard more than once. And each time, it shifted in subtle ways. Not that he thought Angelo was lying. He knew he wasn’t, because he’d read the man’s CV and recommendations before accepting him into the program. But with Nora listening, he embellished some of the details. Likening the puppy to himself was a new one.

“I suppose the people at the house thought the puppy might keep me out of trouble and surprisingly, they let me keep him. I started training him, then, when he got older, I joined the local search-and-rescue team. I was eighteen when we went on our first rescue, and Gabriel and I found the missing little girl. The head of the team was a former military officer and knew I had little time left in the home because of my age. He suggested I go into the military and apply to work with the dogs. And nine years later, here I am.”

Nora smiled and picked up a twenty-pound dumbbell. “That story may have started with difficulty, but it’s a good story, Angelo. I’m sure once you joined the army, it wasn’t all smooth sailing. But the odds were stacked against you, and look what you’ve accomplished.”

Angelo ducked his head and gave an abashed smile. “The dogs have always been my saving grace. Until I met my wife, of course. And now I have my son.”

Nora smiled again as she started a set of tricep curls. “And what about you, Jean? How did you end up in this program?”

Lucian was grateful for the mirror that let him watch the group behind him without appearing too interested. To be fair, he wasn’t that interested in Marie’s, Jean’s, and Angelo’s stories. But he was interested in Nora. Wait. He frowned. He wasn’t *interested* in Nora. He just wanted to look out for her. She didn’t seem to look out for herself very well, so obviously he needed to

do it on her behalf.

“My story is not so dramatic,” the Frenchman started. “My older sister was a vet for the French military. I came to visit her and decided I liked the idea of joining the army. My sister was well known among the K9 groups. I think they hoped a little of her magic had rubbed off on me, because they invited me into the program. That was nine years ago.”

Nora smiled through her last set, then put the weight down. “That’s a very sweet story, and I’m sure they saw more in you than just someone who might be like your sister. Do you get to work with her much?”

Jean shook his head. “She died two years ago. A drunk driver hit her as she was out on an early-morning run.”

Lucian all but groaned. He knew exactly what would happen next.

“Oh, Jean,” Nora said, placing a hand on his arm. “I am so very sorry to hear that. I know it’s no consolation, but I’m sure she’d be very proud of you.”

Unless, of course, Jean was their murderer. But Nora wouldn’t let a little thing like that get in the way of her empathy.

Jean offered her a sad smile. “Perhaps. I do like to think so. She was a remarkable woman. Not unlike you,” he added.

Lucian stopped his treadmill and stepped off. Grabbing a hand towel, he wiped his face and neck. “Nora?” She looked over, her hands hovering over another dumbbell. “My cousin just texted. She says she has something she wants to talk to us about.” He pointed to his smartwatch. Violetta hadn’t texted him, but he had to get Nora out of the gym. He shouldn’t be interfering with how she was conducting her investigation, but she was exhausted and needed to rest. If only for a little while.

She frowned.

“Everything okay?” Marie asked.

Nora flashed her a smile. “I’m sure it’s fine. My friends and I have an annual big birthday blowout each year, and it’s next weekend. I’m sure that’s what her text was about.”

Lucian didn’t know if that was true or something she’d just made up, but he inclined his head. “She was a bit mysterious, but you know Violetta. She likes her drama.”

“Be nice,” Nora said, grabbing a towel of her own. At least she was walking toward him, though. “Thanks for letting me join you all this afternoon. The hike this morning was lovely, but I’ve been needing to get

some time in with the weights.”

The three participants all invited her to join them again. Pausing in the vestibule on their way out, they donned their winter gear, then stepped into the cold. When they were on the path back to the residence hall, she turned and looked up at him.

“Six didn’t text you.” It wasn’t a question, but he shook his head.

“You need to rest. How late were you up last night?”

She didn’t answer his question. “I have an investigation to run, Lucian. If I can figure this thing out, people stop dying. If I don’t, two more people will die. The cost of missing a little sleep is negligible.”

“How late?” he repeated.

They walked in silence for a minute, then finally she huffed in annoyance. “If you really must know—”

“I must.” She glared up at him. It was a new look for her. He kind of liked it.

“I had about two hours of sleep last night.”

He looked down at her and raised a brow.

Her eyes narrowed. “Fine, it was more like an hour. I had a lot to research and analyze.”

He bit back his own huff. That was the crux of the matter. She *did* have a lot to do. And she had a lot on her shoulders. He understood her point about the lack of sleep being unimportant if it meant she could stop this killer. But if she didn’t take care of herself, then her chances of finding the killer dropped. Fatigue made people sloppy. He didn’t think Nora was there yet, but she was most definitely headed there.

“Why don’t we grab showers and then you can share with me what you found? It might help to have another perspective.” She had Cyn, Violetta, and Devil as well, and he half expected her to point this out and turn him down. Instead, she slowed her walk, then stopped altogether.

A pensive energy flowed off her, and he waited for her to tell him what was on her mind. Finally, she shoved her hands into her pockets and looked up at him. “I’m worried, Lucian. We’re whittling down the suspect list, but it’s still four, maybe five people. The clock starts ticking again tomorrow, and I’m no closer to stopping whoever is doing this.” She pulled her hands from her pockets and crossed her arms. Turning her head, she looked off toward the training ground, barely visible in the late-evening light. “There will be another murder, and I know I won’t be able to stop it. Maybe I’ll



figure it out before the third one, but I don't think I have enough to stop what will happen sometime next week." She paused. Her cheeks were pink with the cold, and the tip of her nose was turning red. "When I'm on a mission, a real one," she clarified, "there's this sort of distance to it. It's easy to forget that what I do can have life-and-death consequences. But this is different. Someone we know, someone we've had dinner with, laughed with, and had a glass of wine with, is killing people in cold blood. It's uncomfortably intimate, and I can't figure out how to stop him."

She was still looking off into the distance, lost in her own thoughts. He didn't take his eyes off her, though. Her frustration, fear, and even pain had arced between them with every word she'd spoken. He wanted to fix this for her. He wanted to tell her everything would be fine. But he couldn't. This wasn't something he could just fix, nor did he know that everything would, in fact, be fine. He did know one thing, though.

"I don't mean to sound trite, but if another murder happens, it's not your fault. You aren't the one out there killing people. You have to remember that. Yes, I know you want to stop him. As do I. But no one is better positioned to stop the next killing than the killer himself. All we can do is follow the leads and do the best we can."

She continued to stare into the encroaching darkness. Finally, she turned and met his gaze. "I know you're right, but that doesn't make it any easier," she said softly.

His jaw tensed, but he managed a nod. "I know. It doesn't. I don't have a way to make this better for you, but I *can* get you a glass of wine." It was a ridiculous leap, but it made her smile.

"I now see the family resemblance. You'd make Six proud," she said.

"I'm older. I think it's the other way around. So what do you think?"

She eyed him for another beat, then let out a soft laugh. "Shower first, then wine. Meet in my room in twenty minutes? That will give us an hour before dinner."

He wasn't sure of the wisdom of drinking wine in her room with her. His mind tended to go places it shouldn't whenever he was there. But he'd do it. For her.

In fact, he was finding there was a lot he'd do for her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

NORA WAS on a call when Lucian knocked at her door. Opening it, she started to gesture to her phone, then she saw what he had in his hands and froze.

“Hold on,” she said to her friends. Putting her phone on Mute, she stared at Lucian.

“May I come in?” he asked.

She moved aside, still staring. “Did you bring me dinner?”

It was a dumb question; obviously he had, and he set the tray down on her desk alongside the bottle of wine he’d brought. “You looked exhausted. If you don’t want to go down to dinner, now you don’t have to. But if you do, you still can. I can take this back down.”

She eyed what looked like vegetable stew along with a couple of soft rolls and a salad. She hadn’t even realized how much she wanted to stay in for the night until presented with the option.

“Thank you, Lucian, this is amazing.” She took a seat and set her phone down beside her. “The club,” she said, gesturing to the device. “They just called. I’ll put it on speaker.” He nodded, and she unmuted the phone.

“Everything okay, Nora?” Devil asked. Nora considered mentioning the wine and dinner Lucian brought but held back. She didn’t want to distract them—mostly Cyn and Six—from the conversation they’d just started. She also had the sense that Lucian might not want his cousin to know that he’d been so thoughtful.

“Everything is fine, I just needed to let Lucian in,” she said. After pouring two glasses of wine, she handed one to Lucian and motioned him to the other chair in the room, an upholstered wingback near the window.

“Are you being good?” Six demanded.

Lucian opened his mouth, but Nora cut him off. “He’s being helpful, Six. Leave him alone.” The man in question arched a brow but she shook her head, telling him to let it drop.

Six let out a harrumph but continued with the conversation they’d started minutes ago. “So James and Craig, Cyn?” she asked.

“Craig is out, unless there are two killers involved. I know you considered that early on, Nora, but I don’t think it fits. The killings are too methodical and precise to be committed by two people,” Cyn said.

“I agree,” Nora replied. “When Franklin first summarized the suspect pool, the thought crossed my mind. But each of the killings has the same detached and systematic feel to it. We wouldn’t get that if two different personalities were involved.”

“What do you mean by detached?” Lucian asked before taking a sip of his wine. Sprawled on the chair, newly showered, and glass in hand, he looked leonine. Once again, she was caught off guard by the unwanted—and growing—chemistry between them. Unable to do anything but stare at him, she remained silent. Thankfully, Cyn answered and drew her back into the conversation.

“The kills are personal but precise,” Cyn said. “He doesn’t toy with the victims at all as many serial killers do. He’s in and out, like it’s a job. But he’s not a hitman, not with the patterns and methods he’s using. They have meaning to him. What that is, I don’t know, but he does.”

“Even the ones he’s burned?” Lucian asked. “That doesn’t exactly seem like a crime where someone can be in and out.”

“He incapacitates them first, then burns them alive,” Nora said. She’d finally received detailed findings on those murders from the medical examiners. One had been inconclusive, but the other two had been drugged, then burned.

“Ah,” Lucian said, as if that explained everything. In a way, it did, but it was no less disturbing than if the killer was less organized.

“Okay, so we agree. There’s one killer and it’s not Craig,” Devil said.

“What about James the trainer?” Six asked.

“I haven’t been able to pin down when his hemophobia started,” Cyn said. “They wouldn’t have let him in the army if he had it, but it’s not in his charts.”

“It happened when he was hit with the IED,” Lucian said. Nora had been eating her soup and rolls while the others talked, but she paused, spoon mid-

air. She hadn't thought to ask Lucian if he knew. He was generally so averse to talking to anyone that it never occurred to her that he might know a few things about their suspects.

He smiled, as if he could read her mind, then of all things, winked. But the playfulness fell from his face when he continued with the story. "It was a big attack. More than one IED was involved. Tore a caravan apart. When James came to, his ears were bleeding, and he was covered in the blood and body parts of several of his teammates. There were fifteen people out that day. Only six made it back. Hemophobia, which he is open about having, is one of his PTSD symptoms."

The room was silent for a moment. Nora's heart went out to the man she hadn't spent much time with but who always seemed so cheerful.

"Well, I think we can rule him out then," Cyn said softly. "There's no blood in strangulation, but there is in stabbing. I also can't imagine a man who saw his teammates blown up and burned would be able to burn another. I know it's possible, but if he has a problem with blood, he'd probably have a problem with that as well."

"I agree," Devil said. Six chimed in with the same.

"So that leaves Angelo, Jean, Collin, and Jurgen," Nora said. She'd finished with her soup and had moved on to her salad. "I spoke with Angelo and Jean in the gym today. I know a little of their stories."

"What did they tell you?" Six asked. Nora relayed the conversation and when she finished, Six made a nondescript humming noise.

"Is someone not telling the truth?" Nora asked.

"No, they both told you the truth, just not the entire truth. Angelo was more than a little troubled. He stole things from the local shops and at one point, lashed out at one of the younger kids in the home. He didn't do any lasting damage, but he pushed the boy and gave him a concussion."

Nora considered that. Angelo was a quiet man, and she couldn't see him with that kind of temper. But he'd also been a boy who'd lost his parents, and she said as much.

"Possibly. The event did happen about a year after he joined the home," Six said.

"Anything else raise a red flag?" Lucian asked.

"Not really. He did have a puppy and he did train it. And the part about working with the SARs team is true. He just glossed over some of the stuff in his younger years," Six answered.

“And Jean?” Nora asked.

“His sister was tough as nails. And while she was well respected for the work she did, she wasn’t particularly well-liked,” Six responded.

“Because she wasn’t super friendly and chatty the way people think women should be, or because she really was a difficult person?” Devil asked.

“Probably a little of both,” Six said. “Based on my research, she was an abrasive person, but it was probably exaggerated because of her gender. Everyone agreed that she was a damn fine vet.”

“Jean indicated he was close with his sister,” Nora said.

“By all accounts, she raised him. Their parents were in the picture, but not much in the picture,” Six said.

“So we have Angelo and his troubled youth and Jean being raised by a potentially overbearing female. Sounds like someone is drumming up textbook serial killer indicators. What about Jurgen and Collin?” Cyn asked.

“Jurgen is an interesting guy,” Devil started. Nora’s ears pricked up. Of all the participants, he was the one she’d spoken to the least. “He was raised in a devoutly religious household. The kind of religious that doesn’t drink, dance, sing, or do anything of that sort.”

“Which makes it interesting that he joined the military,” Nora said. Finished with her full dinner, she sat back in her chair and rolled her wineglass between her fingers.

“Like Angelo, he had a few run-ins with the law at a young age. Most likely lashing out at his parents’ strict upbringing, but nothing too serious. A little shoplifting and graffiti, those sorts of things. But when he joined the military, he swung so far in the opposite direction of his upbringing that he was almost kicked out. Dishonorably, of course.”

“In what ways?” Lucian asked.

“Drank to excess, would wake up in the morning still drunk. He started a few fights and even dabbled with the politics of the neo-nazis. Which is shitty enough, but also very illegal in Germany.”

“I don’t get that sense from him now,” Nora said, pondering this new information. She didn’t know him well, but the man Devil was describing didn’t fit with what she did know.

“Like Ingrid, the trainer, the military gave him an ultimatum. He could take his dishonorable discharge, or he could take a post in a small town that was little more than a few farms and a monastery. He took the latter and during the time he was there, he befriended the abbot. I don’t know what

conversations happened, but over the three years he was there, he mellowed. Four years ago, the army offered him an opportunity to move back into more active duty. He embraced the challenge and has been on the rise ever since.”

“What do we know about the abbot?” Cyn asked.

“Oxford-educated philosopher of all things,” Devil said. “In addition to his PhD, he also has a master’s in psychology.”

“So all in all, a good man for someone with childhood issues to spend time with,” Nora suggested.

“Without talking to the abbot himself, I can’t confirm,” Devil said. “But it does appear as if Jurgen’s three years there were like one big extended therapy session that helped him work his shit out.”

Nora wanted to mull that information over a little more. “And Collin?”

Devil chuckled. “Again, an interesting guy. Did you know he was an internationally ranked chess player at the age of ten?”

Nora looked to Lucian in surprise. He shook his head and shrugged. The image of a young Collin playing chess wasn’t one that sat easily with the man he was now.

“I did not,” Nora replied.

“Well, he was. Both his parents are academics. His father is a mathematician, and his mother is a historian. He started playing chess in tournaments when he was six.”

Nora frowned. “That’s...young. Isn’t it?” She didn’t really know anything about the chess world. It just seemed young.

“It is. He’s a bit of a prodigy. Or was. He stopped playing when he was thirteen,” Devil said.

“Why?” Lucian asked.

“There was an incident at school. He was bullied and beaten quite badly,” Devil said. “It may have impacted his mental capacity. Or he may have stopped playing in an effort not to be a target again. Either way, he never played a match after that.”

Nora glanced at Lucian, who seemed to be pondering this new information. She noticed his glass was empty, so she rose, grabbed the bottle, and refilled his before topping hers off.

“What then?” she asked.

“He changed schools and started getting into sports. He wasn’t particularly good at most of them, but he spent a lot of time in the gym and got strong. After a few years, he started to play positions that required more

brute strength than any specific skill. I suspect he still had enough of a chess player's brain to understand strategy and plays and all that. His last year of school, he was recruited to play rugby at a university south of London."

"And being a university athlete is probably what started him on his path to mansplaining and womanizing," Nora said. Lucian's lips tipped into a smile, but he said nothing. "I know that not all athletes are like that. If he was bullied as a kid, though, and then worked his way into the in-crowd, it would explain his ego."

"But at heart, he's probably still that young, bullied boy?" Cyn suggested.

Lucian frowned, but Nora nodded. "I think so, yes. I've met men like him before—we all have. They may appear to be alpha men, and that's the image they project, but that's all it is, an image."

"Is there anything that would indicate either man is capable of murder?" Lucian asked.

Devil paused. "No more so than with Angelo and Jean. I'm less inclined to think Jurgen capable. I truly think his three years with the abbot were a kind of therapy, and from what I found in my research, he seems a stand-up guy now. Collin, I'm not so sure about. If someone tapped into his dormant fears of becoming that bullied boy again, I could see him lashing out."

Nora could, too. She didn't *want* to see that, but she could. "You raise a good question, Devil."

"I did?"

Nora chuckled. "Yes, you did. *Did* someone tap into Collin's biggest fear? Did something happen that would lead to what's going on now?"

"Ah," Cyn said. "Was there a triggering event for any of the four men? Something that would have them starting to kill *now*?"

"I didn't find anything obvious, but I'll go back and have a look," Six said. Devil and Cyn concurred.

"What about the memento?" Lucian asked.

"Memento?" Devil echoed.

"Serial killer, Devil," Cyn said.

"Ah, of course. We just hadn't talked about it before."

"Jewelry," Nora answered.

"The medal?" Lucian confirmed. Nora nodded.

"Wait, what medal?" Six asked.

Nora took a moment to explain the medal she and Lucian had found the day after the murder of Michael Kelly. Once she finished, she proceeded to

tell them what she discovered the night before. “It’s always some sort of jewelry,” she said. “Of the ten victims, including Michael Kelly, he took six necklaces, two bracelets, a pair of earrings, and a ring.”

“You said Michael Kelly’s was a medal,” Six pointed out.

“It was. But it was the kind that should be on a chain, and the abbot confirmed Kelly regularly wore such a necklace. Detective Miller thinks the killer grabbed it during the attack, but then the medal fell off when he fled the scene,” Nora explained.

“I have to ask,” Cyn started. “There’s no chance he’s killing them *for* the jewelry, is there?”

Nora shook her head, then spoke. “I doubt it. Most were small items. Meaningful to the wearer, but none worth more than a couple hundred dollars. Except the ring. The ring had a decent-sized ruby in it. The report described it as a bishop’s ring. I don’t know if that’s because of the style or if it was, at one point, actually a bishop’s ring.”

“Who did that belong to?” Lucian asked.

“The burned victim in Louisiana,” Nora answered. “Because of its French roots, the state is traditionally Catholic, so it’s possible it’s a real bishop’s ring. I haven’t had a chance to dig into that yet, though.”

“I can look into it,” Lucian offered. Then he frowned. As if unsure of what he’d said.

Nora’s brow dipped. “How will you do that? You don’t have contacts anymore.” That probably wasn’t true, but he didn’t have the contacts she and the club did.

“You don’t need to be a spy to know how to navigate the internet,” he replied.

Nora studied him. After a beat, she realized her friends were suspiciously quiet. “That would be great, thank you,” she said quickly, not wanting to give them any time to stew over Lucian’s offer. She had no idea how he’d do it or how effective he’d be, but she could also look into it herself later, if needed.

“There was nothing on the cameras in the residence hall,” she continued. “Well, nothing unexpected,” she amended.

“No one sneaking around or into each other’s rooms at night?” Cyn asked, a teasing tone in her voice.

Nora chuckled and glanced at Lucian before answering. He’d spent far more time with the participants than she had. It was possible he knew them far better than she did...or, maybe not. He wasn’t the most social of



creatures. It was quite possible that in her six days with them, she might know them better. He didn't quite raise an eyebrow, but it was close.

"I'm pretty sure Sophie and Jurgen are sleeping together. At least occasionally," Nora said. Lucian's face went blank, then a ghost of a smile teased his expression.

"I was not expecting that one," he said. "Marie, maybe. But not Sophie."

Nora couldn't fault his logic. She'd had to watch the video three times to believe it. But sure enough, Sophie had slipped into Jurgen's room Friday night and left again two hours later. It was possible they weren't sleeping together. But Sophie exited the room carrying her bra in her hand, so Nora was pretty sure her first guess was right.

"Anything else?" Lucian asked.

"No," Nora said. "I know I don't need to say it—or say it again," she added, flashing Lucian a look. "But the clock starts tomorrow for the next murder. I don't know if the next victim will be strangled or burned, but there will be another victim."

"And so we better hop to," Six said.

"But to what?" Nora asked. This wasn't the kind of investigation she was used to. She literally didn't know what to do as their next step. Sabina had texted earlier that she'd have new intel tomorrow. But as for everything else...they'd gone through all they had.

"We keep digging," Cyn said. "Maybe it will be futile, but what else do we have to do? There's no additional evidence we can review. Sabina is looking into the victims—"

"I want to look at the crime scene photos," Devil said.

"I'll send you what I have," Nora said. She wasn't sure what Devil might be looking for, but it couldn't hurt to have another set of eyes on them.

"We all agree that both Craig and James are out," Cyn continued. "That leaves Collin, Jean, Angelo, and Jurgen. Although it also sounds as if Jurgen isn't likely."

"Still, it's better to be sure," Six said. "Hold on." Nora could hear a muffled conversation in the background before Six rejoined the call. "Gavin said he'll call some friends in the UK and ask around about Collin. They might not have anything new to offer, but it can't hurt."

"And Darius spent some time at the base for reserve units in Louisiana. I assume that's where the program took place? If so, he can ask around about the murders in that area," Devil offered.

Nora looked at Lucian, who nodded. “That would be great, thank you, Devil. And please, thank Darius and Gavin for me,” she said.

“Well, crud. Now Joe is going to feel all left out,” Cyn muttered, making Nora smile.

“Tell him he can deep dive into Angelo. That way each of you only has one person to look into,” Nora said.

“And what will you be doing?” Devil asked. The question could have been snarky, but it wasn’t. There was genuine concern in her friend’s voice. Devil knew the burden Nora carried. They all did. And while she wouldn’t wish her anxiety on anyone, it helped to know they understood.

“I’ll be talking to Angelo, Jurgen, Collin, and Jean,” she said. “It’s not as though one of them will suddenly confess to me, but if I’m lucky—”

“Or ask the right question,” Lucian interjected.

“Or ask the right question,” Nora agreed, “maybe someone will slip up.”

“I will keep my fingers crossed,” Six said.

“So will I,” Devil added. “Talk tomorrow? Same time?”

The crew all agreed, then ended the call. No sooner had she hung up, though, than a text came in from Six. Nora read it. Then read it again.

“What’s that?” Lucian asked.

Nora glanced at her phone, then to Lucian. “I don’t know if you’re going to like it.”

“Try me.”

“Our big birthday celebration is on Saturday night. Six wants me to invite you.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“ANYONE FOR A GAME OF PINOCHLE?” Angelo asked the room in general. Nora, Jurgen, Jean, Sophie, and Angelo had all opted to stay in for the night and were relaxing in the lounge. The others had decided to cram another outing into their schedules before a big storm hit Friday night. Even Lucian and Ingrid had gone out. Although she suspected the reason Lucian had joined in was so he could spend time with Collin. She wasn’t sure how she felt about him being part of the investigation. She appreciated the help, but this wasn’t his cross to bear.

“Nora?” Angelo asked, reminding her he’d asked a question. She really didn’t want to play a card game. But with each day that passed, they were closer and closer to another murder. Getting to know the suspects was all a part of the process. Probably the biggest part.

“Of course. Can we play here, though?” She indicated the side table to her left. “I’m awfully cozy in front of the fire.” And she was. She had her feet curled under her and a blanket draped over her lap.

“May I join?” Jean asked, leaving Sophie and Jurgen to a quiet game of pool.

“So long as you don’t make me move,” Nora responded with a smile. She wasn’t *that* tired, but she was exceedingly comfortable. The only thing that would make it better was if it were her own fireplace at home and she had her dogs surrounding her. Oh, and she’d stopped the murderer.

Angelo moved the side table, then Jean shifted a couple of chairs. Once they were seated, Jean shuffled, then dealt the cards.

“I’m surprised Lucian went out with the group tonight,” Jean said.

It didn’t take an intelligence agent to know he was fishing.

Angelo smiled. “He does like to stick close to you, Nora.”

Nora shrugged and played a card. “It’s been fun catching up. He’ll be coming to the birthday bash this weekend, too, and will get to see his cousin, who is one of my best friends. He’s never been to Six’s home, and she’s looking forward to seeing him.”

She didn’t miss the look the two men gave each other. It was possible one of them was a murderer, so she didn’t put too much stock in their opinions. “I meant to ask you, where did you go to Mass on Sunday?” she asked as Angelo took his turn.

“There’s an old monastery not far from here. They do one Mass that is open to the public. We went there,” Jean answered.

“Is that the place...” She pointed vaguely in the direction of the monastery Michael Kelly had lived at. Both Jean and Angelo nodded. “I’ve heard it’s beautiful with some very unique stained glass.”

Jean smiled. “Yes. Not quite so good as in France—but nothing ever is. Still, it was beautiful,” he said with a teasing laugh.

“Is that the monastery that recently lost one of their brothers?” she asked. “I read something in the news. I figure there can’t be too many monasteries around here.”

Angelo sighed and Jean bowed his head before answering. “Yes, it is very sad. The Mass was in his name.” Nora was curious to hear more, but neither man elaborated. Not wanting to sound prurient, she changed the subject.

“What do you think about the upcoming storm?” As the question formed, she realized that the next murder would most likely be the burning. It was hard to burn something—or someone—while the ground was covered in snow. And although the storm was only predicted to last no more than thirty-six hours, everyone believed it would be the official start of winter. Whatever fell this weekend wouldn’t just melt away as the dusting had done the prior week.

Jean smiled. “My mother is Swedish. We used to visit her parents during Christmas in Sweden. I admit, I feel like a small child at the prospect of so much snow.”

Nora smiled at the image of Jean as a young boy frolicking in the Swedish winter. “And you, Angelo?”

He gave a dramatic shiver. “I like to see it from inside, but I am not looking forward to training in it. Although I heard James and Ingrid discussing whether to call off the Sunday session. We can work in the snow,

but a day off after nearly fourteen days of work or travel is not a bad thing for us or the dogs.”

“All work and no play...” Nora said. She actually agreed with Angelo. The dogs adored working, but it was the handlers’—and trainers’—responsibility to ensure they didn’t work too hard. Dogs, especially these dogs, would wear themselves to the bone before stopping. “I can’t say I’ll be disappointed if they do. I’ll get to stay in Cos Cob and sleep in my own bed.” The party was at Cyn’s, and she’d probably stay there because Six tended to bring more tequila than she should. But it was nice to think about her own bed. Speaking of bed...

“I know we just started this game, but I’m feeling very tired. I think I’ll retire for the night.” As she spoke, she set her cards down and slid the blanket off her lap. “I don’t know how that group does it,” she said, gesturing toward the front door. “I could *not* stay up so late so many nights in a row.” It was only ten o’clock, but she was an early-to-bed-early-to-rise kind of person.

“In Italy, we are up late, but not so much at the bars. Especially not now with my son. It’s not the hour, but the activity that does not appeal to me,” Angelo said.

Jean grinned. “I will tell you a little secret, despite the *bon vivant* reputation of the French, I much prefer an early night as well. I know,” he said with a Gallic shrug. “It is not very exciting. But I have enough excitement in my life during the day. I do not also need it at night. The mind needs its rest, no?”

Nora smiled. “I couldn’t agree more.” Although she wished her mind would figure out who the killer was. Only then would she truly be able to rest. Rising from her seat, she said good night to her four companions, then took the stairs to the third floor. Entering her room, she slipped her shoes off, then changed out of her jeans and sweater and into a pair of leggings, wool socks, and fleece sweatshirt.

Pulling her hair into a bun, she took a seat at her desk, then opened her computer. She wasn’t expecting any new intel, especially not from Sabina, who’d been called away on another case. But the first email message that popped up was from her asking Nora to call when she had a chance.

It was odd for Sabina to email and not text, and that piqued her curiosity. It was a little late, but Nora reached for her phone then noticed it had run out of power. Which explained the email. Sure enough, when she plugged it in, there were two texts from Sabina and one from Six.

She responded to Six first, assuring her that both she and Lucian would be at the party on Saturday. Six was acting as if Lucian would back out and she needed to keep confirming his attendance. Nora knew he wouldn't. If he hadn't wanted to go, he would have said as much. She still didn't know why his family was so worried about him, but she did know that if he said he wanted to go, then he'd go.

Once she had Six calmed down about Saturday, she texted Sabina. *"Sorry, phone lost charge. Is it too late to talk now?"*

Her phone rang almost as soon as she hit Send. "I'm guessing it's not too late, then," Nora said.

Sabina let out a huff. "I'm still at work. Had to wrap up some stuff from the last case, so I decided to get it all done while I finished your project."

Nora straightened. "You're done?"

"I am. I'm packaging up the reports and was going to send them to you, but I can walk you through it, too?"

"Please." A frisson of excitement grabbed hold of her.

"There are a lot of random similarities between the ten victims, but only two that are consistent across every victim."

"And?"

"Religion and age."

Nora hesitated. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but it wasn't that. "Age?" The ages seemed fairly diverse to her when she'd reviewed the files.

"Every victim is between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-five. It's an unusual range for a serial killer to target. I know, because I looked at that, too, when I saw the results."

"What did you find?" Nora asked. Serial killers were not high on the list of people intelligence agents targeted. Most of what she knew about them came from the psychology courses she'd taken in college. More years ago than she wanted to admit.

"I know you already noticed that this killer is indiscriminate about ethnicity and gender, which is unusual. But most serial killers also tend to target the young—it's something like half of all serial killer victims are under the age of thirty. That's not always the case, of course. However, if a killer targets a different age range, they usually have something else—like gender or job or ethnicity—that pulls them to those targets. Because your killer doesn't appear to be tied to any of those, the age parameters are unusual."

Nora wondered if it was something about the age that triggered the killer. Maybe parental issues? Maybe someone carrying a grudge from childhood related to a teacher?

Deciding to let that intel percolate for a little while, she asked, “What else?”

“Religion,” Sabina said.

“As in...?”

“They are all religious, or if not religious, connected to the Church. The Catholic Church, to be specific.”

Nora frowned. Mentally sorting through the intel, she recalled that Loretta Campion was listed as the local parish secretary. And Michael Kelly was a monk. Other than those two victims, she didn’t remember any mention of the Church, or religion, in the other files. Then again, that’s why she’d asked Sabina to help.

“All of them?” she asked.

“All of them. I sent you the file, but their roles ranged from choir director to bell ringer to a major donor. All appear to have been devout, although looks can be deceiving. At the very least, they were all involved with the Church—whether they were true believers or not, I can’t say.”

“I wonder what that means,” Nora pondered out loud.

“Someone with a grudge against the Church would be my first guest,” Sabina answered.

“But is that grudge because of the Church itself or because of the role the Church played in the killer’s life? Like maybe one of his parents was über devout and made his life miserable. Or the killer’s sister became a nun and she was treated badly. I know I’m kind of going off the rails, but there are a lot of options.” Then realizing how that might have come out, she added, “It’s still more than we had before. So, thank you. I’ll start probing the suspects’ relationships with the Church and see if any have a bad reaction.”

“You’ve narrowed the pool, though, haven’t you? I’ve been in touch with Cyn, and she mentioned you’re down to four?”

“We are. Of those, I know that two go to church regularly. In fact, I was just talking to Jean and Angelo about Mass on Sunday. They went to the service at the monastery where Michael Kelly lived.”

“If they have a good relationship with the Church, do you think they’d kill people associated with it?”

“Hard to know,” Nora responded. “Like you said, they appear devout. But

serial killers tend to be excellent liars, so who knows what's really going on in their minds."

"What about the other two suspects?" Sabina asked. Nora had sent her the files Franklin provided so she knew all the players.

"Jurgen and Collin," she said. "I don't know much about Jurgen. He tended to hang out with Jonah—the player of the group—and Collin—the resident misogynist. But that seems to have changed a little this session. He's been spending time with Sophie. They aren't being overt about it, but I've seen them sneaking into each other's rooms. They are a bit of an odd couple. Jurgen is pretty easygoing, but Sophie isn't the most pleasant of people. Although to be fair, I haven't spent as much time with the women because we ruled them out early on. Maybe she's a nicer person if I got to know her."

"Or maybe Jurgen clicks with her in ways we can't and won't understand," Sabina said. That was true, too. What and who people were attracted to was very specific to an individual.

"That is possible, too," Nora agreed.

A beat passed, then Sabina asked, "What now?"

Nora huffed a laugh. "Honestly, I don't know. Working for the Directorate and investigating murder is so different. I know how to talk to people and how to gather and analyze intel. I'm just not sure what to do with it after that. Or if there is something else I should be doing."

"Talk to Chad. Or Joe, for that matter. They've both investigated murders."

"Joe's been working a bit with Cyn, but he's been caught up in all sorts of police chief stuff—trainings and that sort of thing. I'll see him this weekend, though, so will ask. I hadn't thought to ask Chad."

"He finished an assignment yesterday. I saw him in the office today debriefing Stella and Hunter. Call him tomorrow if you're still stumped."

It wasn't a bad idea. Prior to joining the security firm he and Sabina worked at, Chad Warwick had been an FBI agent. "I may do that," she said. They chatted for a few minutes about inconsequential things, then ended the call. Nora eyed the electronic file Sabina had sent. Before opening it, she decided to check on the whereabouts of Jurgen, Sophie, Angelo, and Jean.

Clicking on the app that allowed her to see the camera feeds on the first floor, she saw Sophie and Jurgen still playing pool. Without anyone else around, they weren't shy with their affection, and she had to admit, they looked kind of sweet together. Angelo and Jean were nowhere to be seen, and



she rewound the footage to locate them. Not long after she'd left, they finished their game of pinochle and headed to bed. There'd been no other movement in the hall since.

Picking up her phone again, she texted the club a quick update on Sabina's findings. She also asked them to focus on Church connections as they dug into Collin, Jurgen, Angelo, and Jean's lives. Each sent a reply confirming the new direction. She started to put her phone down, then, on impulse, texted Lucian.

*"How are things going?"*

*"Why, are you okay?"*

She stared at the message. *"I'm fine. In my room. Was just wondering how your watch is going?"*

Several seconds passed before she saw the little bubbles pop up. *"I'm much too old to do this more than one night a week,"* he wrote, making her smile.

*"You're not that old."*

*"Maybe not chronologically. But four folks are out dancing, Willa is playing darts with Cencio and it's a heated game. Jonah walked a woman to her car and hasn't come back. No need to guess what's probably happening in the back seat. Yet another thing I'm too old for. The back seat location, not the sex,"* he clarified after a beat.

She laughed but didn't touch that comment. *"And Collin?"*

*"Chatting up the waitress. It won't do him any good, though. She flirts because it leads to tips, not because he's anything special. He won't be able to fathom that reality."* No, he wouldn't. Collin didn't have that much self-awareness.

*"Any chance he has any issues or connections to the church? The Catholic Church?"* As soon as she hit Send she regretted the text. Who knew who might be looking over his shoulder?

*"I don't know. Want me to find out?"*

With a shake of her head, she wrote back. *"No, the club will look into it. I was just wondering if you'd heard anything casually."*

When he didn't respond right away, she let her attention drift back to her computer. Sophie and Jurgen were headed to bed. Though to separate rooms. A few minutes later, they met back in the hallway with their dogs and headed out the side door. A last bathroom run for Dieter and Abel before retiring for the night.

*“I have some files to review. Have a good rest of your evening and I’ll see you in the morning,”* she wrote. It was an awkward way to end the conversation. But since Lucian hadn’t responded to her prior message, she figured she’d just end the string.

*“I’ll text you when I get back. If you’re still awake I’ll stop by, and you can tell me about your church question.”*

She wasn’t sure about the wisdom of meeting in her room again. Something happened when they were in this space together, and she hadn’t processed quite what it was—or what, if anything, it meant—yet. Lucian recognized it as well. What he thought of it, she hadn’t a clue. Nor did she even know what “it” was. Attraction, yes. But it had felt more primal than that. Despite their rocky start, she found that she liked being with him. Maybe a little too much. And while Lucian *wasn’t* Emil—not even close—his life was still in Italy, while hers was in the US. Even if she’d been inclined to explore the attraction with Lucian—which she wasn’t sure she was—whatever it was between them was doomed from the start. It wasn’t quite that dramatic. But there was no getting around the fact that they lived thousands of miles apart.

Still, he was helping her, and it was nice to have a sounding board. She could ignore the interest unfurling inside her and focus on work. *“Sounds good,”* she wrote. *“I’ll probably be up for another couple of hours.”*

*“Be safe,”* he wrote back.

She paused before responding, unsure if his sign-off was a generic comment or an admonition. Rather than think too hard about it, she sent a quick response saying she would. Then, setting her phone down, she clicked on Sabina’s file and dived feet first into the lives of the victims.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NORA SAT BACK in her chair and rubbed her eyes. She'd been going through Sabina's notes for nearly three hours. Sabina's summary had been accurate, but there were a few other interesting findings. Many of the victims worked with children—a retired teacher, a Sunday school volunteer, a coach. And many held a position of power—a principal, a retired mayor, a former police chief. She wasn't a profiler, but she was leaning toward thinking the killer had a grudge against the Church. A grudge based on something that had happened when he was a child—at a point in his life when someone in a position of authority should have stepped in.

She stared at her screen for a moment longer, then closed the device down. Having turned off the lights earlier, the room was lit only by the dancing glow of the flames from the fireplace. Eyeing her phone, she debated calling Lucian but then decided not to. The group hadn't returned yet, but likely would soon. If she was still up, she could talk with him then.

Rising, she switched the fireplace off as she walked to the window and pulled the heavy curtain back. The night was clear and the temperature so cold that she could feel it radiating through the double-pane windows.

She was about to drop the curtain back into place when a flickering shadow caught her attention. She stilled and watched. For several seconds she saw nothing. Acknowledging that she might be jumping at shadows, she considered climbing into bed. She couldn't quite get herself to step away, though, and she remained standing. Looking.

There it was again!

Her eyes adjusted to both the night and the shadows as she watched. When she caught sight of movement again, she recognized the form. It was

definitely human. Dressed all in black, it blended well into the darkness.

Without conscious thought, Nora reached for her heavy winter boots. Keeping her eye on the person, she pulled them on. The shadowy form slipped across the edges of a pathway, using shrubs and trees to hide his movements. It was possible it was a woman, but Nora was certain it wasn't. In fact, she was certain she was watching the killer, and she was nearly as certain about where he was headed.

Not wanting to waste any more time, she dropped the curtain back into place and grabbed her scarf, hat, and jacket. Sliding her key into her pocket, she reached for her phone and paused. She had a pact with the club to not go alone. The only problem was, her friends all had people to go with them. Nora had no one. Not with Lucian gone.

Making a snap decision, she called Lucian as she donned her winter gear and checked her weapon.

"What's wrong?" he answered.

"Someone left the residence hall. I'm going after him. I'll share my location with you. I'm pretty sure I know the direction he's going, but not the exact spot. When you get here, find me. Not sure if you will need my car, but I'll leave you my key just in case." As she spoke, she opened her door and checked the hallway. She wished she had time to look at the video feeds and see who her quarry was, but that wasn't in the cards.

"Wait," he said. "I'm ten minutes away."

"I can't, Lucian. You know I can't." Her door shut behind her, and she crossed the hall to his. Dropping to her haunches, she shoved her key fob through the small gap between the carpet and the solid wood. "I think he's headed to the hole in the fence on the southwest side. If you look at the perimeter fence from above, it's the one at about ten o'clock." She'd reached the side stairwell, the one that would open up right near the main door, and she hurried down. "If he keeps heading southwest, he'll hit a small town. The kind of place where most of the houses are far enough apart that if something happens in one, no one will know."

"Wait. Nora, please," Lucian said.

"Can't, Lucian. Please understand. I'm going to hang up now because I'm stepping outside, and I don't want my voice to carry. Can you see my location?" She quickly enabled the app and a few seconds later, he confirmed. "Find me, Lucian. I know you will." And with that, she hung up and took off.

Jogging toward the perimeter path, Nora was grateful she'd started running with Andrew and his team. If she hadn't been on the trails almost every day, there was no way she'd be as familiar, or as comfortable, with where she was headed.

Despite the weight of her winter boots, she made good time. Slowing to a stop about a hundred yards from the break in the fence, she cocked her head and listened.

An icy breeze ruffled the bare trees, and Nora lifted her shoulders to keep the tendrils of air from snaking under her scarf and down her back. An owl hooted in the distance, a sound she hadn't expected this time of year. And then she heard it. A loud crack of a branch from the forest on the other side of the fence.

Both relief and trepidation flowed through her. She'd been right, but now she was on the trail of a killer. On her own.

The way sound carried on nights like these, she estimated—hoped—he was at least a half-mile away. Even so, she wasn't going to take any chances and text Lucian as she wanted to. Pushing that pipe dream down, she made her way to the break in the fence.

This gap was a little bigger than the other, and she easily ducked beneath it. Picturing the map from her room, she mentally traced the trails visible in the satellite image. There were two that were more or less direct routes to the small town she'd mentioned to Lucian. The others tended to wander around. If the killer needed to get the job done quickly, and make it back to the residence hall without being gone for too long, one of the two direct ones was the best option.

But which one?

Nora made her way into the woods, keeping her footfalls light on the frozen ground. When she reached the first fork, she turned left. At the second fork, she paused. If she stayed to the right, she'd end up on the west side of the small community. If she took the left branch, she'd end up on the east. She slowed her breathing and listened again. Unfortunately, this time she wasn't so lucky. The man she pursued didn't oblige her by tripping or stepping on a broken branch.

With a sigh, she mentally flipped a coin, then headed left. Picking her way along the poorly maintained path, she kept an ear out for any sound that would let her know she'd chosen the right trail. But as the minutes ticked by, the only sounds she heard were her own footsteps. And the occasional rustle

in the woods of an animal. At least she hoped it was an animal, and not the human kind.

Thirty minutes later, she estimated she'd covered three miles and was near the town she'd mentioned to Lucian. A few minutes after that, she reached the edge of the woods, where she paused.

The small town was centered on a large triangular-shaped green. To her left was a post office, country store, and café. A couple of houses were clustered on decent-sized lots on the far side. But on the side where she stood, there were only two homes, both large and, like the others, historic. In fact, she'd place the whole village as being built sometime in the mid to late 1700s.

Dismissing the houses clustered together, she turned her attention to the two closest to her. Hoping none of the owners had perimeter security alarms, she stayed in the shadows as she edged her way through the woods and along the back of the first property. She didn't pause until she was halfway between the two homes and could surveil both.

The distant sound of cars traveling on the nearby highway filtered over the hill. Somewhere in the distance, a cow called out. Nothing obvious struck her as being out of place at either house, and she decided it was time for a closer look. Moving toward the first residence, her eyes skimmed the rambling white farmhouse. It gleamed in the night, but with no lights on at all, the dark windows appeared ominous. As if they were watching her.

She approached slowly, keeping her eyes and ears open. Rather than head toward the French doors and patio, she kept to the side and made her way toward a series of windows. Reaching the house, she pressed her back to the siding and took a deep breath. No motion-sensing lights had popped on, and if they had an alarm, it was a silent one. That thought should have slowed her but didn't. She didn't particularly want to get caught skulking about someone's home, but if the killer was nearby, having the police summoned wouldn't be the worst thing.

Rolling to her right, she peered through a window. She could make out the outline of a couch, a few small tables, and a couple of chairs. But nothing to indicate an intruder was inside looking to harm an inhabitant.

She started to move toward the patio when movement to her left snagged her attention. She froze in the shadows as a form fled the second house and disappeared into the woods.

Nora's heart rate leaped, and in the next second, she was on the move.

She had a choice. Go after the man who'd disappeared into the woods or go to the house he'd just fled from. To the victim he'd likely just left. The decision was agonizing. But if there was even the smallest chance the victim was still alive, that was where her duty was. Even if it meant letting the killer get away.

Still, she wasn't reckless. Knowing the killer might be in the woods watching his handiwork, she circled toward the street, then darted in the direction of the second home. If the killer had stuck around, the foliage and gardens of both homes would keep her from view.

She'd reached the edge of the property when headlights rounded a corner and came barreling toward her. For a moment, her eyes fixed on the beams, then she hastily looked away. As she turned, she caught sight of something that had her bolting the remaining fifty feet.

An orange glow was flickering from one of the ground-floor windows.

"Nora!"

She didn't pause, but she did look over her shoulder at Lucian's hushed entreaty. "Flames, Lucian," she said, pointing to the window. In a flash, he was beside her, and seconds later they were at the front door.

"Call the police," Lucian ordered as he tried the door. Not surprisingly, it was locked. But as she dialed, he managed to kick it in.

"Wait," she said as the phone rang. "The killer, he went into the woods. I'll handle this. Go after him."

She knew the request went against everything he believed. He wouldn't want to leave her. He wouldn't want her walking into a crime scene alone. He wouldn't want the uncertainty that came with splitting up.

He hesitated, then asked, "Are you sure?"

She nodded as the 911 dispatch answered the phone.

"Go!" she mouthed as she moved into the house and started talking to the woman taking her call. She didn't look around to see if Lucian had done as asked; she had other things on her mind. Like finding the room she was certain was on fire.

She passed through the kitchen on her way toward the fire, then quickly doubled back and looked under the sink. Sure enough, a small fire extinguisher was there. Nora answered the dispatcher's questions as she grabbed it. Then, hurrying toward the rear of the house, she asked the woman to alert Detective Ben Miller.

When she reached the back of the house, a single door off the large living

space was closed. Smoke poured out from under the bottom, and she could see a dim orange glow. Ignoring the dispatcher's order to stay on the line, Nora ended the call and slipped her phone into her pocket.

Running to the door, she wrapped her hand around the knob. The metal burned through her thin gloves, and she jerked her hand back. It hurt, but it was more a surprise than anything, so she bit her lip and reached for the knob a second time. Turning it quickly, she flung the door open. Aware that she'd probably given herself a decent burn, she ignored the pain and scanned the space as best she could.

Smoke flowed out of the room, and the fire alarm suddenly shrilled. Adrenaline spiked through her system, but she remained focused. Through the smoke, she could barely make out the flames. They were oddly subdued. Like the fire was already burning out. But there was enough fuel in the room that Nora knew that couldn't be the case.

Pulling her scarf over her nose and mouth, she entered and went straight to the source of the smoke. Even knowing what to expect, Nora recoiled at the sight that greeted her. A form, curled into a fetal position, lay smoldering in the middle of a king-size bed. There was nothing Nora or the fire extinguisher could do for her—a gender Nora assumed from the feminine decor of the room. In the distance, she heard sirens. The fire truck would be the first to arrive, and then the police. Hopefully, Ben Miller would show up soon as well.

The stench slipped through the cashmere of her scarf and crawled into her nostrils. Inching out of the room, Nora desperately sought clean air, though she didn't move too far away in case the fire decided to spread beyond the victim. She didn't understand why it hadn't. In fact, as she stood there, she realized that the fire pattern wasn't the only unusual thing about this killing. All the other burnings had taken place outside. This was the first to be inside.

Why?

Her eyes skated around the room, the details of which were much clearer now that the smoke had dispersed. The room looked like any other bedroom—a king-size bed with a frame that looked original to the house, two side tables, a dresser, and a closet. A cross hung above the bed. But nothing about the room gave her any idea as to what made this victim different.

Firefighters suddenly filled the room, and she turned at their arrival. Their masks and equipment cast eerie silhouettes in the remaining smoke, and she was glad she'd known they were coming.



“Ma’am,” one called, approaching her.

“I’m fine,” Nora said.

“You need to get out, we’ll escort you,” he said.

She glanced back over her shoulder. “There’s a body in there. Please be careful to preserve the scene as much as you can.”

“Is there anyone else in the house?”

She doubted it. Not with the racket the alarm and the firefighters were making. But she didn’t know for certain and said as much.

“You need to leave,” the firefighter repeated. She didn’t want to. Not that she wanted to spend time with the victim, but it didn’t feel right to leave.

“Ma’am,” he repeated. In a tone she recognized.

She nodded. “Please try to preserve the scene.”

Another firefighter took her arm and led her out. She wasn’t sure if they were worried about her or if they thought she might be involved and wanted to keep an eye on her. Probably the latter, but she’d deal with that later.

The freezing night air hit her like a brick wall, and she started coughing. Her escort called for oxygen, and she soon found herself sitting on the back of a fire truck with a mask over her nose and mouth.

Pulling out her phone, she tapped the screen and brought up Lucian’s information. Thankfully, he’d turned on his location sharing as well. Based on the little blue dot, he was only a few minutes away and heading in her direction. When she’d asked him to go after the killer, she hadn’t thought twice about it. Lucian was capable and smart and despite having been out of AISE for ten years, some training never faded. But as she watched the firefighters move in and out of the building, she started to second-guess her decision.

He was obviously okay and coming back to her, but what kind of danger had she put him in? And what kind of danger had he stepped into because she’d asked it of him? It wasn’t like her to put someone else at risk. And she couldn’t decide if her decision that night was a sign of how much she trusted Lucian or a sign of her own selfishness, wanting what she wanted without thought for his safety.

“Nora!”

She whipped her head around to see Lucian running toward her. A firefighter stepped into his path, but Nora was up and scooting around him in a flash.

“Are you okay?” Lucian asked, wrapping his arms around her. She didn’t

think about anything other than being near him. Burrowing against him, she wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her cheek on his chest.

“Talk to me, Nora. Are you okay?” he asked again, keeping his hold on her, but pulling back enough to look her in the eye. She wasn’t having any of that, and she hugged him tighter.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

He was silent for a beat. “For what, *amore*?” he asked, his voice quiet in the night.

“For sending you out there. I didn’t think, I just asked you to go. And you went. He could have come after you. I don’t know what he was armed with—if anything—but I shouldn’t have asked.”

Again, he was quiet, but she felt his chin rest against the top of her head. Finally, he pulled back and raised a hand to her cheek. His fingertips traced a line along her jaw, and he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead.

“I’m fine, *amore*,” he said, his lips brushing her skin as he spoke. “You, are you all right? Please, Nora. Tell me you are fine.” He stepped back enough to see her and as her arms fell away from his body, he reached for her hands.

She sucked in a breath and yanked her right hand back. With the adrenaline in her system, she’d all but forgotten about the burn. Lucian’s gaze darkened, and he reached for her wrist. Pulling her hand into the light of the fire engine, he tugged her damaged glove off.

“Nora,” he said, his voice just a whisper. “She needs a paramedic,” he suddenly barked.

The same woman who’d given her the oxygen walked over, and Lucian held Nora’s hand out for her to examine. The EMT gave her a look, letting Nora know she should have mentioned the burn earlier, but she said nothing as she led them to the ambulance.

By the time Ben arrived, the EMT was putting the last of the gauze around her hand. Several neighbors had left their houses and gathered around the emergency vehicles. All of them were being polite and remaining a respectful distance away. But as the lights flashed across their faces, Nora could see their concern.

Ben’s eyes scanned the small crowd, and he motioned to one of his deputies. The young woman hurried off, no doubt to gather names.

“Are you ready to tell me what’s going on here?” Ben asked, coming to a

stop in front of her. He was a man who could use his height to intimidate. And although she could tell he was pissed off, she respected that he kept his distance.

Nora glanced at the EMT, who told her she was free to go but that she needed to watch her breathing for the next few days. Lucian assured the woman he'd be keeping an eye on her, then together, the three of them walked toward the house.

"Is it clear, George?" Ben asked one of the firefighters.

"Yes. One body. She's in a bedroom on the southeast side of the house. Although she can show you where," he answered with a jerk of his head in Nora's direction. George's eyes bounced between her, Ben, and Lucian, but he said no more before continuing to the truck.

In silence, they walked through the house and into the bedroom. The firefighters had left the scene mostly intact, although they'd sprayed retardant on the walls and floor around the bed. The body was a blackened form; the places where her eyes, nose, and mouth had been were nothing but small, gaping holes.

"Do you know who she is?" Nora asked. "Or even if it's a woman? I just assumed." She gestured to the floral wallpaper and the doilies on the dresser. Lucian's hand came to rest on her lower back. She wasn't sure why he felt the need to offer his support or touch her, but she wasn't going to complain.

"We'll have to confirm with dentals, but if it's the owner, her name is Jessalyn Anderson. Her family has been in the area for as long as anyone can remember. Her ancestors built this place," Ben answered.

"How old was she?"

Ben pulled out a notebook and flipped through a couple of pages. "Sixty-one," he answered.

"And what is her tie to the Catholic Church?" Nora asked.

Ben drew back, then narrowed his eyes at her. "Why would you ask such a thing?"

"Can you answer?"

He looked about to argue, but after a beat, he answered. "Her family owned huge swaths of land around here. I don't know if she was particularly religious, although I'd wager she was at least nominally so," he added, gesturing to the cross. "Generations ago, her family donated the land the monastery was built on, as well as the land for the Catholic cemetery. Now, do you want to tell me what's going on?"

She wasn't required to share anything with him, but she wanted to. His superiors might have ordered him to cooperate, but he seemed like a good guy and a decent detective. She felt she owed him the professional courtesy. Franklin and NATO might not be happy with her, but if they didn't trust her, then they shouldn't have asked her to step in.

"It's a long story. Is there somewhere we can go?" she asked. It was now past two in the morning, and she doubted either she or Lucian were going to get any sleep. It wouldn't be the first all-nighter she'd pulled, but hopefully, they could find some coffee to help her through.

Slowly, Ben nodded. "We can go to the station, or we can go to my place. I live about fifteen minutes away."

"Your place, if you don't mind?"

He shook his head. "My kids are with their grandparents tonight; the house is empty."

She nodded and together, they exited the house and walked to the cars. Ben rattled off his address to Lucian, and a few minutes later they were on their way.

"Talk to me, Nora," Lucian said.

"There's not much to say, Lucian. One more person is dead. I didn't stop it. And I sent you out to catch a killer on your own. All in all, I've made some pretty crappy decisions tonight."

"You sent me because you trusted me to do the job. That wasn't a crappy decision. That's the most faith anyone has put in me in a long time."

She looked at him, unsure what to say to that.

He gave a half shrug and a rueful smile. "I've pushed my family away more than I intended to in the last few years. It started with small things—missing an anniversary celebration, then a family dinner at my grandmother's. It grew to bigger things over time—not answering calls or talking to them. It was never about them. It was me. I just didn't want to talk to anyone. I didn't want to answer any questions or have to pretend I cared about things that I should care about but didn't. I..." He paused, maybe looking for the right words or maybe deciding if he should be saying anything at all. Then on an exhale, he continued. "I think I was depressed," he said. She held her silence, waiting for him to say more. After a minute, he did. "I don't think it was—is—clinical depression, but I suppose there are probably gradients of it? I feel different now than I did three weeks ago, and I think that's because of you."

Her eyebrows went up at that.

“I don’t know what that means, it’s just that, for the first time in a long time, I want to talk to someone. I want to talk to you. Even spending time with the participants feels a lot easier now. I’m not magically going to turn back into that carefree kid you knew. But something in the last few weeks has broken loose and I’m *interested* in life again. Knowing you trusted me to go after the man in the woods...it felt...good. Like I was a whole person again. Someone people could count on. You might see it as a bad decision, but I definitely do not,” he finished, his voice a low rumble over the hum of the engine.

“I didn’t know,” Nora replied. “Is that why you were so upset when I showed up? You thought your family didn’t trust you enough to...what? Get through the session? Be human enough to work in a group of people?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “The thought did cross my mind, yes. Although in hindsight, it was probably my own guilt, my own insecurities coming through. I don’t really believe my family thinks I’m a lost cause—”

“They would *never* think that!” she interrupted, making him smile.

“I know,” he said, softly. “But it’s easier to be mad at other people than to look at your own behavior. I was already feeling guilty because I knew, in the parts of my mind I didn’t want to acknowledge, that I had turned into a man I didn’t much like. Don’t get me wrong,” he said with a smile, “I’m still not a huge fan of most people. But that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the good ones. Or the good things in life, like a beautiful sunset or a nice glass of wine. So, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry I was such an asshole. It was all about me and nothing to do with you. And thank you. Like I said, you might believe it wasn’t a good decision, but I’m glad you made it. I’m glad you didn’t hesitate to trust me. Even though I didn’t end up catching him.”

She had questions about what, if anything, had happened in the woods, but she’d wait until they were with Ben. In the meantime, she reached over and took his hand. It was an intimate gesture. She wasn’t sure if she should cross that bridge, but a part of her wouldn’t let her do anything else. She wanted that connection to him. When his fingers curled over hers and his shoulders relaxed, she knew he wanted it, too. Any consequences that might follow, she would deal with later.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IT WAS four o'clock in the morning when she and Lucian stumbled back into the residence hall. The session wouldn't start until nine; if she fell asleep right away, she might be able to eke out four hours of sleep. Which sounded heavenly. Especially after the grilling Ben Miller put her and Lucian through. She didn't blame him. He was going to have one more murder on his hands if they didn't stop the killer, and no one wanted that. She probably should have ignored Franklin's edict earlier on and told him everything. After all, like Joe, he was trained in these kinds of investigations.

"Stop second-guessing yourself," Lucian said, keeping his voice low so as not to wake Ingrid or James as they walked to their rooms. They were on the opposite end of the building, but they might be light sleepers.

"I'm not," she said, pulling out her key.

"You are," he said.

She huffed. "Fine, I am," she conceded. "And I will likely continue doing so until this thing is over. If I'd talked to Ben earlier, could we have prevented tonight's murder? Would he have had some idea or some lead that could have helped?"

"Stop," Lucian said.

She shook her head. "I can't."

She leaned back, her hands pressed against the door behind her. Lucian had stopped beside her rather than at his own door. His whiskey-colored eyes bored into her. "Do it for me," he said, reaching out and running the back of his finger along her cheek. Goosebumps raced across her body at his touch. In a flash, the fatigue that weighed on her turned to something altogether different.

Lucian's pupils dilated, and she knew that if she asked, he'd join her in her room. In her bed. But could she do it? She cared about him. Probably more than she should. And in dozens of ways, he'd shown her that he cared about her, too. But nothing had really changed since she'd first acknowledged her attraction to him. Her life was still here in the US, and his was in Italy. What good would it do to fall for a man with whom she couldn't have a relationship? And she would fall for him. She probably already had. True, either one of them could move, but that wasn't what she really wanted.

"Nora? What are you thinking?"

She blinked at the question and very nearly gave an answer that brushed over the truth. But hadn't she just been telling herself that she should have been more honest with Ben? That maybe, if she had, they could have made different—better—decisions? Maybe she needed to learn from her mistakes.

"I'm debating whether to invite you into my room," she answered. His fingers twitched against her skin, and he turned his hand, cupping her jaw.

"What is the debate?" His voice was low, and a hint of the growl she hadn't heard in over a week came through.

"I'm not really one for flings and one-night stands," she said. "I don't know what, if anything, you want from me—and I don't expect you to know either—but I could fall for you. So very easily."

"And you live here, and I live in Italy," he said, finishing her thought. She nodded. His eyes continued to search hers. As they stood in the quiet hall, she became more and more aware of her heart racing at his touch.

"I don't know what to do, Lucian," she said. And she didn't. She wanted him; her body—and her heart—were unequivocal in that. But her mind wasn't convinced.

He tipped her face up with his hand, then slowly lowered his lips to hers. It was a gentle kiss, nothing like what they'd shared twenty years ago. He pulled back, looked at her, then dipped his head again. Only this time, he moved his lips to her ear. "Invite me in. Please, Nora."

Nora's alarm went off at eight. She snaked an arm out from under her warm covers and reached for it. Mumbled Italian curses came from behind her, and Lucian's arm tightened around her waist, anchoring her back against his

front. His very naked and willing front.

Last night, she'd promised herself that she wouldn't regret her decision. She'd promised herself that maybe, for once, she could live in the moment. It was entirely possible that she'd get attached to Lucian in the days they had remaining. But she'd reminded herself that she was strong, and if she did get attached, she'd survive when they parted. She wasn't looking forward to that, but she also wasn't willing to give up whatever time they had together. She'd take what they had and be glad of it.

"Shower," she mumbled.

His answer was to slide his hand up her torso and cup her breast as he placed a kiss on her shoulder. She reveled in the heat coming off his body and the way he touched her. She hadn't meant to encourage him—they really did need to get ready for the day. But the next thing she knew, he was sliding inside her, and her focus shifted to the feel of him possessing her body. He rested his forehead against hers, his eyes closed, as if savoring every second of their slow and gentle joining.

She slid her hands down his back and arched up to him. "*Amore*," he whispered, over and over. And when her body began to climb toward an orgasm, she raised her hands and ran her fingers through his hair, tipping his head up to look at her. To watch.

He held her gaze even as her eyelids fluttered with the pleasure. "Lucian," she said, unable to speak above a whisper. He dipped his head and brushed his lips over hers, but then pulled back.

"Come for me, Nora. I want to see you." He angled his next thrust in such a way that she was unable to deny him. Her body bowed, and she was dimly aware of her fingertips digging into his scalp as her pleasure washed over her.

"More, Lucian," she managed to say.

He chuckled "As you wish, *amore*," he said, then pressed into her one more time, sending her spiraling over the edge, every part of her gripping onto him. She felt him respond as her own body pulsed, and soon his head was thrown back and he called her name.

Nora loosened her grip on his head and let a lazy smile touch her lips. Her eyes had fluttered closed, and she was enjoying the feel of Lucian's body on top of hers, of him still inside her. He shifted, and his lips touched her again.

"Good morning, *amore*," he said. She smiled but didn't yet open her eyes.

"Good morning, Lucian."

He feathered kisses down her throat before dropping one more on her lips



and withdrawing. “Now, I think it is shower time.”

She opened her eyes and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. They had thirty minutes before he needed to be on the training grounds. She could be a little late, but even so, she didn’t want to be too late.

“You first. If we shower together, you’ll never make it.”

He grinned. “It might be worth it.”

She shoved him playfully from the bed. “Go to your own room, where you have clean clothes and don’t have me distracting you.”

He looked about to protest, but he surprised her by leaning down and kissing her one more time. This time more deeply, more intimately, than before. “So you know, I don’t care if they know about this, about us. But I suspect you do. Not because you’re embarrassed by me,” he said, talking over the objection she’d been about to issue. “But because you are a private person.” She snapped her mouth shut. He was right. She was. She didn’t care to have her private life bandied about as she knew it would be if Collin or Jonah deduced what had happened.

“Thank you,” she said. The look he gave was intense. She thought he might say more, but instead, he leaned down and gave her one last kiss. Then, rising, he pulled on enough clothing to be decent and slipped across the hall to his own room.

Once alone, Nora lay in bed, cataloging how her body felt. A little sore, a lot relaxed, and very well sated. She smiled at the thought. Then that smile faded. She didn’t—and wouldn’t—regret whatever this was between her and Lucian, but how would she explain it to her friends? There was no way she’d be able to hide it from them. The participants, people she barely knew, wouldn’t be a problem. But her friends were a whole different story. Truth be told, it wasn’t Cyn and Devil she was worried about. Six was the issue. It wasn’t hard to imagine Six going after her cousin. Nora could all but see her accusing him of all sorts of things, from taking advantage of her to being an asshole for starting something he’d walk away from. None of that was true, but she doubted she’d be able to get Six to listen to reason. At least for a little while. And the last thing Nora wanted was for Lucian to feel even more judged by his family.

She was pondering whether to tell Six ahead of the party on Saturday to give her a few days to calm down when her phone dinged with a text.

Reaching over, she grabbed the device, then smiled as she read Lucian’s message. “*I know you’re over there fretting about what to say to Violetta*

*about us. Stop. We'll be fine."*

She wasn't so sure of that, but Lucian was using words like *us* and *we*. At least she wouldn't be alone in facing her best friend.

*"I'll bring you a breakfast sandwich,"* he added. And that, right there, was one of the reasons she was falling for him. He might be gruff, but once he'd realized his family *hadn't* sent her, he'd shown her he cared in all sorts of ways. Including bringing her breakfast so she could have a few extra minutes to lie in bed. And a few extra minutes to wrangle her hair. He'd made a rat's nest of it with his fingers during the night.

*"Thank you and yes, I'm glad you aren't going to abandon me to the she-wolf who is your cousin. Six is my sister in every way but blood, but she does tend to get het up about things."*

*"She's Italian. She almost has to. I'll be there in eight minutes with your sandwich."*

She groaned. She needed to get out of bed. It wasn't that she took long to get ready, but it was her hair. Maybe she'd just throw it up into a bun and be done with it. It would be in horrendous shape come nighttime. Then again, the idea of sitting in front of her fire later tonight letting it dry—with a glass of wine and Lucian—was appealing.

Decision made, she slipped from bed. Tying her hair up with an elastic she'd left on her bedside table, she hurried into the bathroom and jumped into a quick shower. She was toweling off when Lucian knocked. Donning her robe, she rushed to open the door.

The second she had the knob turned, he pushed the door open and walked inside. He took one look at her, pressed her against the wall, and leaned down for a deep kiss. The door closed, but Nora was more occupied with the kiss, and how good he smelled, to notice anything more than the distinctive click.

Too soon, he pulled his head back, but kept his body pressed to hers. "Food?" he asked, holding up a bag. "Egg and cheese croissant with one of those soy sausage things they make for you. And a cup of fruit. Although where they are getting fruit this time of year is questionable, and it's sort of anemic."

She smiled up at him and traced the line of his jaw with her finger. "Thank you," she said. "As much as I'm enjoying this, you need to go." Two lines appeared between his eyebrows. "If you don't, not only will you be late, but I will be even later than I already am."

He let out a dramatic sigh, reminding her he really was Six's cousin, and

stepped away. Handing her the bag, he placed one more kiss on her forehead, then reached for the door. “I told people I spoke with you before breakfast, and you were running late because you hadn’t slept well.”

“Again, thank you.”

His gaze held hers, then he tore it away and walked out the door. She remained leaning against the wall, holding her breakfast sandwich bag, catching her breath. Not that she hadn’t wanted to stop the killer before, but now she was even more motivated. Spending the rest of the session with Lucian—and *not* having to chase a murderer—was now her priority.

And if she wanted to have her way, she had a few things she needed to get done today.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LUCIAN WAS WALKING toward the woods with Anne, Jean, Jonah, Cencio, and Collin when he caught sight of Nora hurrying toward the portable clinic. Under the pretense of checking his boots, he squatted, keeping his eye on her until she was safely inside. Not that he thought anything would happen to her, as all their suspects were currently occupied. But he let out a sigh of relief when the clinic door closed behind her and he knew she was inside, warm, and alone.

Turning, he trailed the group to the ropes and trust course they'd modified to train both the dogs and the handlers. The mile walk gave him plenty of time to think, although he wasn't so sure thinking was such a good idea. His mind didn't seem to want to let go of that moment when Nora had texted him and told him she was going after the killer. During his career with AISE, he'd been in any number of hairy situations. But none of them had had his heart racing as fast as Nora's text.

Everything he'd said to her later that night, about starting to feel again, was true. When he was with her, he felt as though he was waking up from a long, dark slumber. He'd gotten used to being numb and shutting people out, and these new feelings weren't always comfortable. But he wasn't going to shy away from it. Over the past few years, he'd let all the little and not-so-little injustices in his life take him to a place in his mind that wasn't healthy. Why it started so many years after Alessandra's death and the debacle with AISE, he didn't know. But the more time he spent with Nora, the more clearly he could see that he'd allowed himself to grow into a man he didn't much care for. Nora wasn't his salvation. Only he could save himself. But her presence, her consistent kindness, helped.

He smiled to himself as he walked. Nora was intrinsically kind. But that was not to be confused with being a pushover, because she was anything but that. Her gentleness and her empathy extended to herself. And she had a quiet strength that was easy to overlook unless you ran up against it. And he had. When he'd been less than welcoming, she'd never lost her temper with him, but she also hadn't let him treat her poorly. It shamed him to think about how quickly he'd lashed out at her and how easily he'd made her out to be the bad guy—or gal.

He exhaled into the frigid morning air. Yes, he could, should, and wanted to, be a better person. For himself. For her.

When she'd asked him to go after the killer, something inside him had roared to life. She trusted him—trusted that not only *could* he do the job, but also that she could ask it of him. It had been a long time since anyone other than his employees had requested—or expected—anything of him. That was his own doing, of course. Yet she'd asked. And without a speck of doubt in her eyes that he'd do this for her. A sense of power had washed through him in that moment. Not over her or the situation, but within himself. He *could* be a man she depended on without question. And that was a heady thought.

She might think this was a momentary thing between them—a brief affair during the session—but that wasn't okay with him. He wasn't thinking forever or planning weddings, but he'd been given this opportunity. It was a gift he wasn't going to squander. His business was his own to do with as he pleased. And after his dinner with the couple in Boston on Saturday night, he had even more options. He didn't have any specific ideas yet, but he had the beginnings of a few percolating in his mind.

Now, if they could just catch their killer.

He eyed the people walking in front of him. Collin was out of the suspect pool—he'd been with Lucian when Nora had seen the killer scurrying from the hall. That left Jean, Jurgen, and Angelo. Angelo and Jean were built similarly, both a couple of inches below six feet and, though fit, on the stockier side. Whereas Jurgen was taller and leaner, closer to six foot one. He hadn't caught a glimpse of the man the night before, but Nora had.

He was still a half-mile from the start of the course, so he pulled out his phone and texted her. “*Who was the person built like?*” he asked.

Her reply was instant, letting him know she'd been thinking about it, too. “*I don't know. It was dark, and he was far away. Definitely not lean, but he was wearing a bulky coat, so hard to know if it was the person or the puffer.*”

*Also, the cameras showed nothing.”*

*“Nothing?”*

*“They showed Jurgen going to Sophie’s room around midnight, but he came out an hour later and went back to his own room. And no, I have no idea what is up with that.”* He could almost hear her smile as she wrote that. It was odd...if they really were lovers, and they appeared to be, why not stay at least most of the night? He had zero plans to leave Nora’s bed before he absolutely had to.

*“How did he get out?”*

*“All the rooms have big egress windows, and all are on the ground floor. I took a look around the outside of the building, and it wouldn’t be hard to use those. The ground is too frozen for footprints right now. I guess that’s the good news about the storm. Once snow is on the ground, it will be harder to hide any tracks.”*

He wasn’t looking forward to the big storm, but if it helped them capture a killer, he’d overlook the inconvenience. And the cold.

*“I suppose it’s good that it’s coming before week three starts, then. Will we have any problems getting back here from Cos Cob?”*

*“It will be slow going, but so long as it doesn’t turn into an ice storm, we’ll be fine.”* He had to trust her on this. It snowed in Italy, especially up north. But where he lived, it was never more than a dusting, if that.

*“I’ve got Jean and Jurgen in my group this morning. I’ll talk to both,”* he wrote.

The bubbles appeared, then disappeared, then reappeared again. She was hesitating, although he didn’t know why. Finally, a message came through. *“I know you know how to get information from people subtly, but please be careful.”*

Once again, there it was. He’d bet his best breeding dog that she’d started to type out a message telling him he didn’t need to help her. Something about her being the one assigned to this investigation and that he should just focus on the dogs. But instead, she’d leaned into the idea of his help, into him.

*“I have a lot to look forward to these days. I don’t plan on doing anything that will jeopardize that,”* he wrote back.

She sent an eye-roll emoji, but then followed it up with a message. *“I certainly hope not. Because if you do, it will definitely make my nights less fun, too.”*

Heat shot through him. He glanced up to see the ropes course coming into

view. Taking a deep breath of the icy air, he willed his body to stand down. Cencio and Jurgen were already eyeing the structure, and Anne and Jonah were chatting. Jean was alone, his hand on his dog's head, talking to his K9 companion. None of the skills they'd practice today were new, but the sequence of them was. Jean looked to be giving either himself or Adela, his dog, a pep talk.

*"Hold that thought for tonight. I'm off to make the participants walk the plank."* And with that, he ended the conversation and slipped his phone back into his pocket.

"All right, everyone," he called. When all five people had their eyes on him, he gestured to the extensive course. One that would have them traipsing narrow bridges, climbing ropes (with the dogs attached by harness to their handlers), and rappelling down trees. He smiled at the group. "Who's first?"

"So Collin is out," Cyn said. Nora was in a conference call with Six, Devil, and Cyn. She'd updated them on the events of the night before, and now they were discussing possible next steps.

"Given that he was with Lucian when I followed the killer, yes, Collin is out," Nora said. Then instantly felt bad. "I didn't mean that to come out the way it did, Cyn, sorry."

Cyn made a *"pfft"* sound. "You had almost no sleep last night. You're entitled to be testy." She'd had even less sleep than Cyn imagined, but she wasn't going to go into that.

"Still, it was uncalled for," she said.

"What about Jurgen?" Devil asked. Nora repeated what she'd told Lucian about him visiting Sophie's room but not staying.

"So if the killer is using a window to get out, it could still be Jurgen," Devil said.

"Or Jean or Angelo," Six added.

"I can call the abbot that Jurgen befriended. Might be interesting to hear his thoughts on the soldier," Cyn suggested. "Angelo and Jean are both religious, but he's the only one we know of with a specific connection to someone in the Church."

Nora considered the offer for a moment. "Thanks, that's a good idea. I

think these murders are motivated by something that happened years ago. It would be interesting to hear if the abbot truly believes that Jurgen has moved on from the difficulties he faced with his strict upbringing.”

“Why don’t I put a call in to the home Angelo was placed in after his parents died?” Six offered. “Maybe something happened in those years that might give us new insight?”

“Actually, Devil, can you call the abbot?” Nora asked. “Cyn, you were working on the social media stuff for those running and hiking sites. Has anything come of it? If not, can you keep working on that?”

“I can’t believe I didn’t bring this up sooner,” Cyn said. “And to answer your question, yes, something has come of it and yes, I should keep working on it. I identified someone last night on a Norwegian day-trekking site that I believe is the killer. He has a different handle than the other sites, but it still references Bingo. He’s subtly leading the conversation to treks that are around or lead to churches. I suspect it’s his way of identifying someone religious. He’ll have a harder time finding a connection in Norway. The Catholic population isn’t big in the country, but he is trying.”

“Can you pose as a potential victim?” she asked.

“Already done,” Cyn replied. “I created an account that lists me as a retired priest taking a sabbatical for a year in Norway. He thinks I live in the next town over from where the training is taking place and that I’m spending my time reading ecumenical texts and hiking. I made vague references to timing so that it appears I will still be there when that session starts.”

“You all are the most brilliant friends a woman could have,” Nora said, not for the first time grateful for all of them. “Any luck on chasing down where the posts are coming from?”

“I asked Sabina to look into the posts on the older sites since those are cold and she has better skills than I do. I’m looking into the posts on the Norway site. I don’t have IP addresses yet, but the messages are appearing between the hours of eleven at night and one in the afternoon.”

“So between five in the evening and seven in the morning here. Right when the participants have their free time,” Nora said. Then a thought occurred to her.

“Is there a device that could break a password?” she asked.

“Why?” Devil and Six both asked, warily.

“Of course,” Cyn answered.

“Could you get your hands on one and I can pick it up when I’m in Cos



Cob for the party?” she asked.

“Nora,” Devil admonished. “You can’t go sneaking into their rooms to fish around their computers.” She’d obviously caught on to Nora’s new plan.

“I’m not sure why not,” Nora countered. “They are on a NATO program. All assumptions around privacy are suspended as this is considered a military-run event. Franklin might want to know, but I don’t need a warrant.”

Her friends were silent for a moment, then Devil huffed. “Okay, you have me there. You *could* do that. But is it safe?”

“As safe as it can be if I do it during a training session,” Nora replied. “I’m sure Lucian can arrange to have all three men in his group. He can keep an eye on them while I search the rooms and computers.”

“I like it,” Cyn said.

“I don’t,” Six shot back. “Lucian has had some issues the past few years. I’m not saying he’d intentionally do anything to put Nora at risk, but I’m not sure I’d trust him with something like this. I know I said he’d have your back, but I wasn’t thinking about you walking into the lair of a killer.”

Nora held her tongue while Cyn and Six bickered over involving Lucian even more. To her relief, Cyn defended him, arguing that he might have distanced himself from the family but that he’d never do anything to harm Nora. Six, on the other hand, kept pointing out all the times he’d turned away from his own family in the past few years. Nora didn’t know what had caused Six to change her opinion about her cousin, but she did know Six couldn’t be more wrong.

Finally, Devil interrupted. “Stop, you two. You are overlooking the most important question. Nora, do *you* feel comfortable and confident asking Lucian for help?”

The question shut both Six and Cyn up, and an expectant silence fell over the line. “Yes, without question,” Nora answered with zero hesitation.

Six started to grumble, but Devil quieted her down. When the grousing stopped, Nora spoke again. “If you can get the device for me, I can get into their rooms on Monday. I’ll ask Lucian tonight if he can arrange the schedule so that he has all three in his group.”

Six groaned but didn’t say anything. Cyn and Devil concurred that it was a good idea.

After a few more minutes of planning, she hung up and stared at her computer. She’d make a terrible detective, she decided. She was much too impatient. When she was on a mission, they were usually short and intense

and there was never a question of what to do next. Not that she didn't make decisions every minute of every op, but she was trained to make those decisions. Now she was floundering in the dark. Or so it felt.

With a huff of annoyance, she did the only thing she could think of to do. She opened the email from Cyn, found the day-trekking site from Norway, and started scanning the comments. Maybe, if she was lucky, she'd find some phrasing or word usage that would give her a clue as to which of the three men was their killer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“JURGEN IS OUT,” Nora said to Lucian when he joined her in her room after the training sessions ended for the day. They had two hours to kill before dinner, and he had a few things he wanted to do before they talked murder.

“Lucian,” she said. Obviously reading his intent, she cocked her head to the side and put her hand up to stop him. He grinned.

“Will we catch the killer if you tell me now versus thirty minutes from now?” he asked.

She arched an eyebrow. She might not be amused by his question, but her non-answer gave him his answer. Reaching for her hand, he pulled her to him. “I’ve been standing in the freezing cold all day,” he said, nuzzling her hair. She had it up in a bun, no doubt because he’d mussed it up the night before. Something he planned to do again.

“Are you telling me I should take pity on you?” she asked, looping her arms around his neck.

He backed her toward her bed, then they both fell on it. He wanted to slide a hand under her sweater, but he hadn’t warmed up yet and didn’t want to shock her. Instead, he leaned over her and took her lips in a deep kiss. By the time he pulled back, there was *nothing* cold about his body. “Pity isn’t exactly what I’m looking for from you,” he said. Then he spent the next thirty minutes showing her what he wanted and giving as good as he got.

Sated and content, they remained in bed, under the warm covers, as they talked. Nora’s body was curled up against his, and he was gently running his fingers through her hair. She complained it would make it even more of a rat’s nest, but she also sighed and nestled into him.

“Jurgen?” he asked. The light from the fireplace flickered in shadows

against the walls and ceiling, but the room was otherwise dark.

“Cyn tracked down a social media site in Norway that we think the killer is using to identify his first victim. I checked out the messages, and two of them were sent when Jurgen was with Sophie in her room. I know it’s possible he was using her computer, but I don’t think it’s probable. I still don’t understand why he only spent an hour in her room last night, but I saw the kiss goodbye in the hallway. They are definitely lovers, and he didn’t leave on a bad note.”

He continued stroking her hair as he mulled over this new possibility. “I agree that if they are lovers, he probably wasn’t in her room to use her computer. But I’m not sure if it’s enough to take him out of the picture altogether. Maybe we should lead the dinner conversation around to the next session and see if he gives anything away.”

Nora was quiet for a moment, then nodded against his chest. “That’s a good idea. It will be easy for me to introduce the topic since I won’t be there. I can ask if he’s excited about it and then follow up with questions about any plans he might be making. If he is the killer, we might surprise him if we ask about hiking or trekking. Nothing obvious, but it will be interesting to see if we get a reaction.”

“You’re probably right that it isn’t him. Honestly, I hope you are because that means we’re down to Jean and Angelo. But let’s see what happens tonight before we make a final decision,” he said. Again, she nodded, her hair brushing his chin. They drifted into a comfortable silence, and after a few minutes, Nora’s breathing evened out and she fell asleep. He’d have to wake her in an hour or so, in time to get ready for dinner, but in the meantime, he was going to enjoy holding her. And even though they still had a killer to catch, for just a little while, he was going to pretend that wasn’t the case.

“Are you all looking forward to being in Norway?” Nora asked. They were seated at the largest table in the dining room. Sophie sat on the other side with Jurgen on her left and Angelo on her right. Jean sat on the other side of Lucian, who was to Nora’s right.

“At least we’re there in April and not now,” Jurgen replied with an easy smile. “It’s a beautiful country, but being in Norway in the winter isn’t my

favorite.” He paused, then made a face and added, “I know we’re getting a big storm *here* this weekend, but it’s not quite the same.”

Sophie gave a dramatic shiver. “It will still be cold in April, but yes, at least we’re not there now.”

“It sounds like you both have been before. Have either of you?” Nora asked, looking at Angelo and Jean, inviting them to enter the conversation.

Jean shrugged. “Once when I was a child. As I said, Sweden to visit family was where we usually went when I was young.”

Nora looked to Angelo. He shook his head. “I have not been. In Europe, everything is so close that it seems like we should all know these places. But we just get caught up in what we know and what is comfortable. As a child, I didn’t vacation, for obvious reasons. But now, well, my wife prefers to go to Croatia or Spain.”

Nora smiled, hoping she looked encouraging. “Both those places are gorgeous; I can see why she’d want to return. Still, maybe that will make Norway more interesting? You don’t have too much free time while you’re training, but we did manage to fit in at least one hike here. Perhaps you’ll have a chance to do something like that there. Although from what I’ve heard, you might have a hard time deciding which one, as there are so many. But I suppose that’s what the internet is for.”

Jurgen shifted in his chair, drawing Nora’s attention, but he was smiling and nodding. She glanced back just in time to see Jean’s head tip to the side, as if in thought. But it was Angelo’s eyes that caught her attention. For a moment that was so brief she almost doubted she’d seen it, he looked angry. It wasn’t a look she expected—not even if he was the killer—and it took her aback.

“I hope so,” Jurgen said, drawing her gaze. Under the table, Lucian nudged her with his knee. He either noticed, too, or he was warning her that he’d noticed *her* reaction. And if he’d noticed her slip, others might have as well.

“I’ve heard the hiking is great, but so are the boats,” Nora said, shifting the topic. She didn’t want to be *too* obvious. “When I was a kid, we spent a month sailing down the archipelago. It was one of the most stunning trips I’ve been on. Will you be near the coast?”

“We are,” Lucian said. “We’ll be at the NATO base near Trondheim.”

“Fun!” Nora exclaimed, hoping she didn’t sound too insincere. “Hiking is great, but archipelagos like Norway’s and Sweden’s aren’t quite as common.

I hope you get a chance to explore it.” After that, the conversation turned to boating and the islands, then to more mundane topics. Angelo asked her a few questions about his dog. Jurgen and Lucian discussed what was in store for the next day. Jean remained silent, although he didn’t appear uncomfortable, just thoughtful. Or perhaps just tired.

She’d spread the word that she hadn’t slept well the night before, so no one blinked twice when she said she was retiring to bed early. A few folks agreed to head out to a bar that they’d heard played good live music. To her surprise, both Angelo and Jean were part of that group. Maybe Jean wasn’t so tired after all.

Twenty minutes after she watched the small party leave via the camera feeds, Lucian knocked on her door. As if he’d read her mind earlier, he’d brought a bottle of wine. Curling up on the upholstered chair, she draped her hair, wet from a hasty shower, over her shoulder and let the heat from the fireplace dry it.

They sat together comfortably, sometimes chatting, other times silent. Lucian had noticed both Jean’s and Angelo’s reactions to the hiking suggestion, too. Neither of them had any insight into the reason, though. They did both agree that it was looking more and more as if Jurgen could be removed from the suspect pool. It was possible he was fooling them. But there was a kind of peace about him that had Nora believing his three years with the abbot truly had dispelled his demons.

When the night wore on, and the bottle ran empty, they both crawled into her bed. Whatever it was between them was new, and yet it somehow felt like it had always been. Nora wasn’t much of a believer in fate, but she couldn’t deny her feelings. Didn’t want to deny them, either. What was between her and Lucian was right and real. It might not last very long, but while it did, she was going to savor every moment.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SATURDAY AFTERNOON ROLLED AROUND FASTER than Nora would have liked. Not because she didn't want to see her friends, but because it meant they were closer to Monday, when the clock for murder number three would start ticking. For the moment, though, she was trying to push that reality to the back of her mind and focus on the next two days. She and Lucian were on their way to Cos Cob for the party, and she was looking forward to seeing her friends. The only hiccup was that she'd be lying if she said she wasn't nervous about Six's reaction to her and Lucian. But that was something else she was trying not to think too much about.

The storm had started that morning—twelve hours later than predicted. The roads were still clear, but a light layer of snow blanketed the ground and trees, and Lucian kept his eyes on the scenery as they drove. She and her friends had lived in Massachusetts for twenty years, and yet Lucian had only ever visited once. He was seeing everything about her home state with more or less fresh eyes, and she wondered if he saw the same things she did. The gentle rolling hills that soothed more than awed. The old farmhouses that dotted the fields, smoke rising from their chimneys as it had for centuries. The colonial settlements in the state weren't nearly as old as some of the cities and buildings in Italy, but they still had a history. A history that was almost easier to appreciate because it was only hundreds, rather than thousands, of years old.

As they drove, he asked a few questions about the area. She also told him about Cyn's outrageous house, where they'd be celebrating, and Cos Cob, her hometown. Like all her friends, she adored the small seaside town. Shop owners, teachers, public servants, and millionaires commingled regularly.

They all took pride in the place they called home and worked together to keep it the town they wanted it to be—safe, prosperous, accessible, and historic.

Eventually, they came up to the town limits, and she navigated her way to her house. “I won’t be long, but I need to pick up everyone’s gifts,” she explained.

He looked at her. “You still get each other gifts?”

She laughed. “Yes, but we have a limit on it, nothing over a hundred dollars. The goal is to make them more meaningful than grandiose. Especially after the great music system debacle of eight years ago.” He arched a brow, and she smiled and continued. “Cyn decided that Six’s boat needed a better sound system, so while it was in dry dock over the winter, she had a new one installed. Top of the line, every bell and whistle you can imagine. She told Six her present was a surprise and she’d know it when she saw it. Well, months later, Six had her boat brought out from dry dock for the summer. When she turned it on, the system blared Bruce Springsteen. It scared the shit out of her and then, because it was a new system, she didn’t know how to turn it off.”

Lucian chuckled. “I take it she didn’t just shut the boat off?”

Nora laughed again. “She did not. She beat the thing to a pulp with her boat hook.”

Lucian’s chuckle turned into a laugh, and she realized how little she heard him laugh.

“I do not find that a difficult thing to imagine,” he said.

It wasn’t, which was also one of the reasons Nora was worried about Six’s reaction to her and Lucian. Not that Six would take a boat hook to them, but she was, well, impetuous. And a bit mercurial.

“So now we give each other small things. Our families always send gifts, too, so it’s almost like Christmas. At least for the four of us. You, Joe, Gavin, and Darius will likely be walking away empty-handed.”

Lucian shrugged. “I’ve already received more than I could have imagined,” he said.

She considered asking him about that statement but decided to let it be. Sometimes wonder was better than knowledge. Besides, she was less than a minute from turning into her drive, and he said, “Tell me about your house.”

She *loved* her home. The house, the barn, the land, everything. It was an easy thing to talk about and as she turned onto the drive, she answered. “I



have a little over a hundred and eighty acres. The original house was built in the late 1700s. It's been added on to and updated over the years, and I did the last major renovation. Mostly to shore up the foundation, modernize the internal systems, and create some usable space in the walk-out basement. Although calling it a basement isn't really accurate, it's more like the lower level of the house. It's big for just me, but..." She paused, hesitant to say what she'd been about to say now that she and Lucian were sharing a bed. Then she reminded herself that she shouldn't hide or change who she was and what she wanted from life. She didn't want to, nor would Lucian appreciate it.

"You know I want a family. I hope I will get to raise one here someday," she said as they pulled up the drive and her home came into view. The barn was to their left, and a hill sloped away to a large pond. When the property had been a working farm, the cows had used the pond as a source of water. Now, though, she and her friends swam in it during the summer. During the winter, she let several of the local kids play ice hockey on it. It wasn't quite ready to take the weight of kids and skates yet, but come January, she'd see a few out there almost every day.

"It's beautiful," Lucian said, leaning forward to peer out the windshield. "What do you use the barn for?"

"Right now, nothing," she answered, pulling to a stop in front of her garage. They were just going to run in; there was no point in parking inside. "I take in a lot of strays, so it's not uncommon to find horses or donkeys or even llamas and chickens in there. But it's been a remarkably quiet winter, and the only strays I have right now are a feral cat and her litter of kittens. We should visit them before we head over to Cyn's."

He nodded in agreement, and they both exited the car. A couple of inches of snow covered the ground, but it wasn't hard to navigate their way to the front door. It was odd opening it to the sounds of silence. Usually, her dogs would be running to greet her.

As if reading her mind, he asked, "You must have dogs."

She smiled and held the door for him as he entered. "I do. Four of them. I have a woman who takes them when I'm traveling, though."

As she spoke, she walked into her room, where she'd left the gifts. Lucian followed then hovered at the door. It was kind of sweet that he wasn't assuming he was invited into her inner sanctum. She let him continue to hover as she gathered the three gift bags.

“What’s the layout?” Lucian asked.

“Three bedrooms, two baths upstairs. Along with the family room, kitchen, dining room, office, sunroom, and screen porch. Downstairs are two more en suite bedrooms, a media room, and my gym. Like I said, definitely bigger than one person needs, but I still love it.”

She passed by him on her way out of her room, and he reached down and took the bags from her. “It’s big, but it doesn’t feel overwhelming,” he said. “It’s cozy. Welcoming,” he added.

She smiled. “I hope so. It’s home. It’s me. I like to think it reflects what I really care about—communal spaces, a large kitchen, and, for the winter, a big fireplace. I’ll decorate it for Christmas when I’m back home. Christmas isn’t really my holiday, but I love the decorations, the lights, and the smell of the tree.”

He offered her a hint of a smile. She hadn’t a clue what he was thinking, and she wasn’t going to try to dissect it. Maybe he hated it, maybe he loved it. Either way, it didn’t matter. He was headed back to Italy in a week’s time.

Forgoing a visit to the kittens, they hustled back out to her car, which had grown icy in just the few minutes they’d been inside. Jumping in, she cranked the heat up. Less than a minute later, her defrosters had her windows clear of snow, and they started off to Cyn’s.

What was normally a ten-minute drive took twenty with the snow coming down in earnest. Nora glanced at the clock and knew they’d be the last to arrive, but there was nothing to be done about it. Sure enough, as she and Lucian walked into Cyn’s foyer twenty-three minutes later, Devil, Darius, Cyn, Joe, Gavin, and Six walked out of the living room to greet them.

“Happy birthday!!” Cyn exclaimed, coming forward for a hug and cheek kiss. Confronted with all her friends at once, she hesitated. Lucian put a hand on her lower back. A move that took Six approximately half a second to notice. Nora was barely mid-hug with Cyn when Six gasped.

Nora pulled back and cast Lucian a look. The one he leveled back told her he’d take care of it. “She’s my cousin,” he said quietly. “Her issue is with me, not you.”

Nora wasn’t so sure about that, but she respected Lucian’s wish to handle the situation, and so she remained silent. Six, however, did not. Heedless of the fact that everyone except Joe would understand her every word, she launched into a tirade in Italian.

“I told you to leave her alone!” Six said, stalking toward her cousin.

“You did no such thing,” he countered. “You told me not to be an asshole, and I’m not being an asshole,” he countered. Nora slid him a look that let him know he wasn’t helping the situation. He winked at her, and she realized he was enjoying the confrontation. Why he was enjoying it, she hadn’t a clue. She hated confrontation. She wouldn’t shy away from it if needed, but she’d never engage in it for *fun*.

Six’s head just about exploded with his response, and her lecture took on a whole new level. And speed. Even Gavin raised his eyebrows a time or two. Nora glanced at Devil, who was watching her. The expression on Devil’s face let Nora know there was no judgment, only that Devil wanted to make sure she was okay. Nora gave a small nod and Devil relaxed, leaning into Darius, who stood behind her.

As Six and Lucian continued to spar, Nora’s gaze drifted to Cyn. She was frowning. But not at her or Lucian, at Six. Turning her attention back to the ongoing diatribe, she heard Six accuse Lucian of taking advantage of Nora. Lucian very calmly replied that he would never. His quiet confidence settled something inside Nora, but even so, she didn’t like to see her friend so upset. Nor did she like how brutally Six was judging Lucian.

“Stop!” Nora said. She didn’t quite yell, but she did need to raise her voice to get the attention of the cousins. Cyn’s eyebrows went up and Devil’s dropped. She almost never raised her voice. It wasn’t a surprise that it surprised them.

Lucian turned toward her, and his eyes searched hers. Then, with a deep breath, he reached for her hand. She gave it to him without hesitation, and he pulled her to his side.

“Enough, Violetta,” he said to his cousin. “You are making Nora uncomfortable. If you continue, I’m more than happy to take her back to her place for a quiet night.”

Six opened her mouth to say something, but Gavin stepped up and set his hand on her lower back. A silent communication passed between the two, and Six’s expression shifted to one of concern.

Her gaze flittered to Nora. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

The distress she saw in Six’s eyes almost made Nora lie and tell her everything was fine. Then Lucian squeezed her hand, reminding her that her thoughts and feelings mattered. Not that her friends ever treated her as if they didn’t, but he knew her well enough to know that she was more likely than not to try to smooth over any disputes.

“A little, yes,” she answered.

Six’s expression crumpled, and Gavin’s arm slipped around her waist. “I don’t want him to hurt you. That’s all,” she said. “I love him, he’s family, but so are you, and I don’t want him to hurt you.”

Six was telling the unvarnished truth, as she usually did. Nora owed her the same. “I can tell you, Six, that there is no doubt in my mind that Lucian would never hurt me. Our situation might not be the best and the *situation* might hurt me, but that’s hardly his fault, is it?”

Six’s eyes searched hers. “You are happy?”

Nora half nodded. “I wish I could catch the killer I was sent to catch, but if your question is whether I am happy with Lucian, I am.” She hesitated, then added, “I know he leaves in a week, Six. That’s always been the case, and there hasn’t been any false talk or hollow promises. He cares about me just as I care about him. Whatever the future holds or doesn’t, I’ll deal with it.” And she would.

Six’s eyes drifted to Lucian. His hand tightened on hers. “I care, Violetta. So does she. Nora isn’t one to make decisions lightly. You may not trust me, and I won’t deny you have reason to doubt, but *she* trusts me. And you need to trust her.”

Six didn’t look convinced, but she had a choice to make. She glanced first at Devil, then at Cyn, both of whom nodded. Then she turned back to Lucian. “You’re still an asshole. You’re also still my favorite cousin when you’re not being an asshole.”

Lucian grinned. “You’re my favorite cousin, too, when I’m not being an asshole.” Then he dropped Nora’s hand and opened his arms. Nora let out a sigh of relief when Six didn’t hesitate to step into them. She did chuckle, though, when she heard Six issue a quiet threat as she hugged him. Lucian responded by telling her to mind her own business, and then they parted.

Six turned to her. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Nora lifted a shoulder. “Like Lucian said, you have reason to doubt him, but don’t doubt me—”

“Never,” Six interjected.

“Good,” Nora smiled. “Now, can we start the birthday celebrations? I could really use a drink right about now.”

And celebrate they did. Dan, Cyn’s chef, had prepared a Mexican-inspired feast that went so far beyond tacos and fajitas, half the time Nora had no idea what she was eating, only that it tasted amazing. And of course,

dinner was accompanied by Six's favorite tequila. Over the course of the night, they finished more than one bottle, but Nora was careful not to drink too much. Being tipsy was fun, but they had to drive back to Western Massachusetts the next day *and* catch a killer. She had no desire to be hungover while doing either of those things.

When it came time for gifts, the friends had complied with the dollar limits, but their families had not. They did, however, stick with the Mexico theme. Nora's father sent them each a piece of rare fire opal jewelry. A chunky ring for Cyn, a delicate bracelet for Devil, a pair of earrings for Six, and a full set, including a necklace, bracelet, and earrings, for his daughter. Cyn's parents had gone more quirky, which was not a surprise. Each of the women received an antique of some sort, ranging from a ceremonial mask to an ancient bowl. Six's parents were perhaps the most subdued. They'd sent gorgeous works of art from up-and-coming Mexican artists. While Devil's parents had gone the most overboard—they'd rented out an entire luxury resort in Tulum for two weeks in early March. No one knew if they'd all be able to get away during that time, but Nora hoped they could make something work. Having the resort to themselves was overkill, but March was always a tough month when it came to the weather, and some time away would do them all good.

It was late at night—or more precisely the very early hours of the morning—when they retired. Cyn must have spoken to Dan, because when she went upstairs to the room she tended to stay in, both her and Lucian's things were at the foot of the bed. Exhausted from the preceding weeks, and full of food and drink and the company of her friends, they both rushed through the bedtime routine, then sank into the not-too-soft mattress. Then, wrapped in each other's arms, they fell into a deep and comfortable sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

LUCIAN WASN'T HAPPY.

"I'll stay here or in the lounge," Nora said. "And you'll find me here when you get back," she added, referring to her room. Where he'd spent every night since they'd found the second victim. It was Tuesday night now, and there were only three days remaining for the killer to strike for the third time. And Nora was insisting they split up for the evening. She might have good reason, but he still didn't like it.

They'd removed Jurgen from the suspect list after Devil spoke with the abbot. The men had stayed in touch over the years, and Jurgen visited often. The abbot was convinced that his friend had forgiven his parents—and himself—for the events in his childhood. The conversation tipped the balance in Jurgen's favor, and now they were down to two. Angelo and Jean.

And it was the two men who were now at the center of what was maybe his and Nora's first disagreement. Angelo was staying in for the night, but Jean was headed out with the group to visit a winter market. Nora wanted to stay with Angelo and send him out with Jean, but he wasn't keen on the plan. He didn't have a better one, but that didn't mean there wasn't one.

"It's the only way to keep an eye on both of them. I'll spend some time in the lounge, but will come up to bed early and watch the camera feeds," she said. Once they realized a window was being used as egress, she'd had cameras installed under the upper eaves.

"What if you see him leave? You can't go rushing off again," he said, voicing his biggest fear. It wasn't so much splitting up that had him worried, it was what might happen if the killer decided tonight was the night to strike. "I wish we had more intel from Violetta," he added. His cousin had been

trying to reach the home where Angelo had been placed after his parents' death. It had closed five years earlier, and she was in the process of tracking down the group that ran it, but she hadn't been able to reach anyone yet.

"She does, too. She was about ready to fly over there today. She didn't care for the runaround she was getting," Nora said.

Lucian smiled. He almost wished his cousin would fly to Italy and give someone the what for.

Nora was curled up on her bed, leaning against the headboard, watching him. He wanted nothing more than to stay in this room—with the fire going and with Nora—for the rest of the night.

Something must have shifted in his expression, because Nora gave him an amused look as she spoke. "*That* can happen later. Now we need to keep an eye on our two suspects and try to stop him from killing his last victim."

He let out a deep sigh. He didn't like it, but she was right. "You won't leave the building?"

"Not unless I have to," she replied. Making him even less happy.

"You'll share your location?"

"I never turned it off after the night we found the second victim," she replied. "What about you? What if Jean runs off?"

"I don't think he'll strangle someone at the Christmas market. But perhaps he'll use the opportunity to identify his next victim. I expect I'm in for a not-so-exciting night of trailing a suspect. Kind of like the not-so-good old days." He gave her a wry smile. He'd never looked back after leaving AISE, never had an urge to try to reclaim his role. But right now, he was glad he had their training.

"But what if he does?"

"Unless he singles out a victim right away, he won't have time to take someone too far from the site. That is, if he even plans to take anyone tonight at all. If he does, I'll follow him, but there will be people nearby. Others who I could call for help, if needed."

What he didn't say was that the same wasn't true for her staying here with Angelo. If Angelo decided to sneak out tonight, the only two people not going to the market were Ingrid and James. Ingrid wasn't exactly in the best shape to go haring off through the snow and into the woods. And James, well, he'd be able to keep up, but with his hemophobia and general issues with violence since the IED attack, he probably wasn't the best choice to accompany Nora. He was a good man and would do it without question, but

whether he'd be a help or a liability was a risk he wasn't sure Nora would take.

"I'll stay here, then. In the room. I'll go down and say goodbye to everyone, then plead a headache or something." She paused and made a face. "That sounds so very Victorian, doesn't it?"

"And you'll come up to your room right after we've left?"

She hesitated, but nodded. He knew he had no right to ask what he had. And he knew that if something came up, if Angelo left the building, she'd have to follow him. At least St. Josue and the Directorate ensured she had the skills to protect herself if needed. Anyone could get caught off guard. But Nora was trained in all sorts of combat as well as, if not better than, Angelo. He'd have to put some faith in that.

He moved forward and when he reached her, he knelt beside the bed and took her hand. "Thank you," he said, placing a kiss on her palm, then bringing it to his cheek. "I know I'm asking a lot, and I know I have no right, but thank you for humoring me anyway."

She brushed her thumb along his evening scruff. "Neither of us can predict what might happen, but we can be smart. It's just as easy for me to stay up here and watch the goings-on through the camera feeds. But you're welcome," she added with a smile.

He looked up and into her big green eyes. She'd always been a beautiful woman. But the years since Capri had brought a sort of wisdom and grace into her way of being. It came through in her expression, in her movements, and in the considered and thoughtful way she interacted with those around her. She'd taken her years of experience and used them to turn into something—someone—even more beautiful. He'd taken his and slowly turned into a bitter recluse. But not anymore. He wasn't ever going to be a sunshine-and-roses kind of guy, but he vowed to never again be the man he'd been in the past few years.

"You know I'm nowhere near good enough for you, don't you?" he asked.

Her eyes softened, and a smile touched her lips. "I get to be the judge of that, and you're a better man than you think you are." He wasn't so sure about that, but if she wanted to think so, then he was happy to let her.

She leaned down and kissed him. "I'll be here when you get back," she said after pulling away. He nodded, but something slithered down his spine as he did. He'd go. He'd watch over Jean. But he had a bad feeling about



tonight.

Nora waved to the group as they exited the residence hall. Lucian was taking her car and four passengers. Two rideshares were waiting in the driveway to take everyone else. Once the taillights disappeared from view, she returned to the lounge, where James and Angelo were racking balls for a game of pool.

“Want to play teams?” Angelo asked.

She glanced at Ingrid, who had her feet up in front of the fire and a book in her hand. Nora shook her head. “I’m going to head upstairs. I have a little bit of a headache, and I could use an early night.” Both Angelo and James bid her good night, and Ingrid raised a hand in her general direction.

A few minutes later, she was propped up in bed, her computer on her lap, surveilling the camera feeds. She watched James and Angelo play a few games of pool. Two games in, Ingrid rose and walked to the elevator. A few seconds later, Nora heard her step out on the third floor and make her way to her room.

Three more games of pool in, James and Angelo called it a night as well. Again, Nora listened as the elevator climbed and James exited on their floor. A few seconds later, his door closed behind him. Angelo walked straight to his room.

Splitting her screen, she kept the feeds from the hallway and outdoor cameras displayed on either side. About thirty minutes later, Angelo appeared in the hallway, dressed in winter gear. Nora’s heart rate kicked up for a second, then she noticed he held a leash. Sure enough, Cesare followed his handler out for a last bathroom stop before bed.

She watched Angelo and Cesare through the feeds. Despite the cold, Angelo wasn’t hurrying his dog along, and the two walked leisurely through the snow. She lost sight of them as they circled behind the building near her room, but they came back into view a few minutes later. Eventually, the two made their way inside and into their room.

She remained dressed as she continued watching. It had been close to one in the morning the last time the killer had struck. It wasn’t even ten yet.

Reaching for her phone, she texted Lucian to check in. In response, he sent her a picture of Jean buying an ornament from one of the vendors. In

turn, she updated him on her exciting evening. After ending the conversation, she sent her friends a quick note letting them know she was in for the night and that Lucian was watching over Jean.

After saying goodnight to Cyn, Six, and Devil, she pondered the two men they had their sights on. The question of a triggering incident had been nagging her. Two years ago, Jean's sister had died, and two years ago Angelo's wife had delivered their son. Those two events were the only ones they'd come up with so far. Were either of those enough?

Not for the first time did she wish she knew a behavioral psychologist.

She was mentally combing through her contacts when Angelo suddenly burst through his door and into the hallway. The movement startled Nora, and she nearly dropped her computer. Grabbing it and setting it to rights, she watched Angelo throw open the stairwell door and run through. She didn't have cameras in that area, nor on the third floor, but as the stairwell door flew open, she prepared for what might come next.

Closing her computer, she unfurled from bed just as a frantic knock landed on her door. Grabbing a robe so it appeared as if she'd been in bed as she'd said, she called out as she approached the door, "Yes?" She knew who it was, but she wasn't about to open the door to him without some indication of his state of mind.

"Nora, Dr. Amiri. It's Cesare," Angelo said. She frowned; she'd just watched Cesare take a relaxed stroll around the building and he'd been fine.

She was well aware that Angelo could be using Cesare as means to get her out of her room. But unless he was the killer—which was possible—and he'd figured out who she was—which wasn't likely—he had no reason to harm her.

"I took him for a walk, and I didn't see him eat anything, but he's vomiting all over. He can't seem to stop." Angelo's voice was frantic on the other side of the door. If there really was something wrong with Cesare, she did need to examine him.

She opened the door partway to find Angelo pacing in a small circle. He stopped and spun when she poked her head out.

"Please, you must come," he said. Nora had always judged women in horror movies who traipsed off in the dark on their own. And she knew if she were in one now, she'd be shouting at herself to not go. But she didn't know for certain if Angelo was the killer, and if Cesare really was sick...

There was a middle ground. "Let me get dressed and I'll be right down,"

she said.

“He needs you *now!*” Angelo said.

“I’m not going to do much good if I don’t have my supplies. Give me two minutes and I’ll be right there.” She didn’t wait for him to reply before shutting the door. Quickly, she dropped her robe and grabbed her coat, hat, and scarf. If Cesare was truly ill, they’d need to get him to the clinic, and the night was bitterly cold. She also grabbed her gun, her vet bag, and her phone. Before stepping into the hall, she sent a quick text to Lucian updating him on the situation and promising to let him know if they left for the clinic.

“Thank you,” Angelo said on a hurried exhale when she stepped from the room. “Come.” He didn’t say anymore, and she followed him down the stairs and to his room. Ten feet from his door, she could smell the vomit. Cesare was definitely sick.

Without hesitation, Angelo threw his door open. Nora’s gaze was drawn to the dog, who lay on the floor panting, his tongue hanging out and his eyes closed. He thumped his tail once at Angelo’s greeting but didn’t otherwise move. The acrid-sweet stench of sick wafted from the room, and Nora knew she couldn’t ignore what was happening. It did not escape her attention that it was possible Angelo had given his dog something to make him so ill. She hoped not, but even if he had, it didn’t change the fact that Cesare still needed her care.

“Can you carry him to the clinic?” she asked.

Angelo nodded and strode over to his dog. Cesare tried to raise his head, but when he saw it was his handler, he laid it back down again. With barely a protest from Cesare, Angelo lifted the dog, and the pair hurried in front of Nora toward the door and the path to the clinic.

Following behind, she pulled her phone out. Unsurprisingly, Lucian had texted to tell her not to go alone if she went to the portable. He had a point. Hoping Ingrid hadn’t turned her ringer off, she sent a quick text to the trainer requesting she join them. Once that was done, she responded to Lucian, telling him Cesare was quite ill and that she’d asked Ingrid to join her.

“It’s late to be texting, no?” Angelo said. His question was a reminder that being out in rural Massachusetts with a man who might be a killer—even if she was on army land—wasn’t the best decision she’d ever made. But she’d hedged her bets as best she could; both Ingrid and Lucian knew where she was and who she was with.

“Lucian,” she replied, wanting him to know she’d been in touch with

someone else. “He texted just before you arrived to ask if I wanted him to bring anything back for me.”

He looked at her over his shoulder but didn’t slow his pace. The clinic came into view, and she began mentally preparing her diagnoses and treatment plan. Fluids first, then blood work, and then she’d go from there. So focused on making her plan, she almost missed Angelo’s next question. “You two are close?”

Nora thought it an odd time to ask such a question, but she answered. “As we’ve said, we’ve known each other a long time, and I’m a friend of the family. Yes, we’re close.”

When they reached the stairs, she bounded ahead of Angelo and unlocked the door. Pushing it open, she directed him to the exam room to their left as she turned the heat on. By the time she joined him a few seconds later, Cesare was lying on the cold metal table.

“I’m going to start him with some light fluids. After that, I’ll draw some blood and we’ll see if we can figure out what we’re dealing with,” she said. As she spoke, she pulled a bag of saline and a line from one of the cabinets. A few minutes later, Cesare was hooked up. A few minutes after that, she had the blood drawn.

“The equipment is back there,” she said, gesturing with her head to the far end of the building. “Let me get it started and then I’ll be back to check his vitals and we can talk.”

Angelo rested his hand on Cesare’s head and nodded, looking every bit as distraught as Nora would expect. Still, she wasn’t going to trust him. The door to the room with the equipment didn’t have a lock, but she shut it behind her. It took her a few minutes to get the machine going, and she stayed a few more to make sure the sample was running properly. While she waited, she texted Lucian to give him another update and also let him know she hadn’t heard from Ingrid yet.

He didn’t respond right away, and when she walked out of the room, Angelo was standing where she’d left him. Setting her phone down at the end of the table, she reached for her stethoscope. Slipping it on, she listened to Cesare’s heart.

“His heart rate is depressed. Did you see him eat anything on your walk? Or could he have gotten into anything in your room?” Either would surprise her. K9s trained the way Cesare was trained wouldn’t eat just anything.

Angelo shook his head. “I have some medications, but I checked those,

and he didn't get into them."

Gently lifting Cesare's lids with her fingers, Nora used an ophthalmoscope to look in his eyes. They both responded too slowly for her comfort. She'd seen these symptoms before with both viruses and bacterial infections, but she'd never seen them come on so quickly. The blood work would show her if either of those was the case. But given the timeline, something he'd ingested, or perhaps a concussion, was the most likely culprit.

"I'm going to take his temperature and then we'll go from there," she said. "I don't want to treat him with anything other than fluids until we know what the issue is, and it will be forty minutes before we have the blood work results. In the meantime, we can put him into the X-ray."

Just as she started to turn toward the drawer that held the thermometer, her phone buzzed with a text. Six's name popped up, along with the first line of her text, "*Spoke to the home Angelo lived in...*"

She grabbed her phone, hoping Angelo hadn't seen it, and turned her back to him to read the message. "*It wasn't good,*" Six's message continued. "*Call me as soon as you get this.*"

"I guess I was right about you," Angelo said. Adrenaline spiked through her body, but she calmly slipped her phone into her pocket. Then, with no way to pull her weapon without alerting Angelo, she pulled a thermometer from the drawer and faced him again.

Only he was no longer on the other side of the table. He was less than six inches away. She took a step back. Finding him in her space had been a surprise, but more to the point, she wanted room to maneuver should she need to. Angelo would be trained in hand-to-hand combat, but so was she.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, taking another step away.

He followed her, stepping forward and into her space again.

"You're not just a vet, are you?"

"You poisoned your dog," she countered, the time for subterfuge gone. He'd said nothing, but the only reason for his odd and aggressive behavior was if he was the killer.

Angelo's gaze darted to Cesare, still lying on the table, breathing but unresponsive. Regret flashed in Angelo's eyes, but she didn't allow herself time to consider it. He was distracted, and she used the opportunity.

With the thermometer in her hand, she raised her arm and brought it down toward Angelo's face. She wasn't fast enough, though, and he caught

her movement, deflecting the blow with his forearm. The glass thermometer fell from her hand and shattered on the floor. He took another step forward, forcing her against the cabinet and reducing any leverage she had.

Setting her hands on the counter, she lifted up and kicked out with her feet. She connected with Angelo's stomach, and he stumbled back. But as he did, he reached for her and caught one foot in his hand. Staggering back, he pulled her with him. Needing to free her foot before she tumbled to the ground, she pulled her captured leg toward her, then kicked out again.

Angelo's grip didn't let up and even distracted by trying to stay on his own feet, he managed to keep hold of her. Desperate to get out of the precarious position, she launched herself toward him. Dropping her leg, he raised his hands to stop her trajectory. But she had even more momentum than anticipated, and they both tumbled to the ground.

They hit the cold, industrial floor and Angelo spun them until he was on top of her. It wasn't ideal, but it was better than having her foot in a footlock. She reared up, but he was ready for her, and a solid headbutt sent her back to the floor. He missed her nose, but still the hit to her head shook her. In the second it took her to recover, a piece of cloth descended over her face. She jerked her head from side to side, hoping it would slide off. When that failed, she bucked her body to dislodge Angelo. But with her arms and body pinned, and now her vision impaired, neither the cloth nor the man shifted.

Her movements became more labored. Then, despite her best efforts, she found herself unable to move at all. She wanted to fight. She was trying to fight. But her body was succumbing to a deep and dark fatigue. It was then that she recognized a familiar scent. Something she hadn't smelled in ages. Something that had been hidden by the stench of Cesare's illness when she'd been in Angelo's room.

The cloying sweetness of chloroform.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LUCIAN LOOKED at his phone one more time. He'd texted Nora that the group was going to leave the market in thirty minutes and that he'd come to her when he returned. Only that was ten minutes ago, and she hadn't answered.

The premonition he'd had earlier returned, and ice slithered down his spine. He tried calling her then. No answer. He called Ingrid and James, too, but neither answered. Panic started clawing at his chest.

"Are you okay?" Jean asked, approaching him with a cup of mulled wine. Lucian didn't know how to explain it to Jean without letting the man know he was a murder suspect. Although Lucian's gut was telling him it was Angelo he needed to worry about. Not the Frenchman standing in front of him carrying a bag filled with Christmas ornaments and a cup with a printed picture of Saint Nick on it.

"I...no, I'm not," he said, opting for the truth. If he was wrong, he'd royally fuck up Nora's investigation. But if he was right, she could be in danger, and every second counted. "I need to get back to the grounds, and I need everyone to come with me. Can you help gather the group while I call a couple of cars?"

Jean eyed him with a frown, then nodded. "Of course. Anything else I can do?"

Lucian shook his head and already had his finger on the rideshare app. "Just gather everyone and meet me at the entrance."

Jean nodded again and walked off to start finding people. Given it was a Tuesday night, the crowd wasn't too thick, and Lucian hoped it wouldn't take Jean long. As he walked to the entrance, he ordered two cars, then dialed Ingrid and James again. Still no answer.

Pulling up Nora's number, he tried one more time, even knowing that it likely wouldn't do any good. Sure enough, after four rings, it went to voice mail. Staring at her name, he suddenly remembered he could get a lock on her location. Opening the app, he discovered she was at the clinic. Or at least her phone was.

Drumming his phone on his thigh, he considered one more option. Scrolling through his contacts, he pulled up the number for their army liaison. If nothing else, she might know who was on guard duty and could send someone to check on the clinic.

By the time the group wandered out of the market, Staff Sergeant Markley had promised to send someone out to the clinic. Lucian made sure she had his number before he hung up and faced the group.

"What's going on?" Collin asked.

"It's a long story that I'll tell you all later. But for now, what you need to know is that Nora may be in danger. If she is, I'm going to need your help—and your dogs—to find her." Everyone straightened to attention, the cheery, relaxing evening activities already forgotten.

"Of course," Willa said. "Just tell us what we need to do."

The two rideshares pulled up, and Lucian gestured the group to pick a car and climb in. The remaining three stuck close to him. "I'll tell you when we get in the car," he said, before striding away toward Nora's Land Cruiser.

As soon as they were on the road, Lucian called Violetta via Nora's Bluetooth.

"Where's Nora?" his cousin asked as she answered. "I texted her more than twenty minutes ago and haven't heard back. I know she's not asleep. Where is she, Lucian?"

Lucian grimaced. "I don't know, but I'm going to find her. *We're* going to find her," he said. There was no way he could search the entire training grounds without help from the participants and their dogs. "Do you have any way to track her other than her phone?"

"I...no, I don't," Violetta said. The frustration and fear in his cousin's voice drove the knife of despair deeper. "I might be able to get Franklin to get a satellite in the area."

Depending on whether one was nearby or not, it might be helpful. There was the slimmest chance he was overreacting, though, and Angelo wasn't their killer and Nora was fine. He needed perspective, and Violetta would give it to him. "I think it's Angelo," he said.



Surprising him, she answered without hesitation. “I agree. And I texted her that same message earlier tonight. The home he was in? It wasn’t good, Lucian. It was run by the Church, as many orphanages are, but this one was also run by a pedophile. There’s no hard evidence, but I believe Angelo was abused by at least one priest while he was there.”

The pieces clicked into place. “Which explains why he goes after people connected to the Church,” he said.

“As well as those in a position of authority who could have helped, but didn’t,” Violetta added. The only thing that didn’t fit was Angelo’s ongoing faith in a religion that had so let him down. But that was something Lucian would ponder another day. Because now, he was *certain* Nora was in danger.

“She’s with him.” The words were torn from someplace deep inside him, and he heard Violetta gasp.

“Her phone is on the grounds—”

“I have someone checking on it now,” he said.

“Lucian...”

“I know,” he said. “I’m not going to let anything happen to her.” It was a stupid promise. One he shouldn’t make, but it was more for himself than for his cousin.

“I’ll call Franklin, and then we’ll all head out. If we leave in ten minutes, we should be there in a few hours.” The drive was longer than that, but Violetta and her friends had extensive training in both defensive and offensive driving. They probably also had radar detectors.

“I will keep you posted,” he said, then ended the call with nothing more said.

“Care to tell us what’s going on and what Angelo has to do with it?” Jonah asked. Lucian considered waiting, but realized that if he told this group, then they could tell the others. Leaving him to start looking as soon as they returned to the grounds.

“Nora isn’t just a vet. She is an exceptional one, but she also has...certain government responsibilities.” Everyone in the car except Willa was military, and he was grateful that they didn’t ask him to elaborate on that statement. “Last month, it came to the attention of NATO that several murders had taken place during our training sessions. All within a fifteen-mile radius of our location.”

“Holy fuck, Angelo is a *killer*,” Craig asked.

Lucian’s lips tightened, but he nodded. “We weren’t certain. But as of

fifteen minutes ago, yes, it's safe to say Angelo is the killer Nora was sent to find."

The silence that fell over the car at his statement was interrupted by a call. "Sergeant Markley," Lucian answered. "What can you tell me?"

"There's no one there, sir," she replied. Cold dread curled inside him. "There's a dog. He was awake, but he looked sick, and the private who checked didn't want to do anything that might harm him, so he let him be."

Lucian managed to say thank you and tell the sergeant they'd be back shortly. She offered to help, but he turned it down. Between the dogs and their handlers, he'd have all the help he needed.

"How many people?" Willa asked after he'd ended to call.

"Eleven total. Three at each spot where we've been and two since we arrived here," he answered.

"And you think Nora is his next victim?" Jonah asked.

"She doesn't fit the profile," he said. "But if he discovered her true purpose in joining the session, then yes, it's possible he'd want to...to kill her." From behind him, Willa's hand came up and rested on his shoulder.

"What happened to make you think it might be happening *now*?" Craig asked. Lucian told them about the texts from Nora letting him know where she was going and with whom. And the fact that he hadn't been able to reach her since. Nor, apparently, had his cousin. Or Markley.

"You had someone on base check the clinic?" Willa asked. "That was that call?"

Lucian gave a jerky nod. Fear coursed through him, but he refused to let his mind consider anything except finding Nora safe and alive. And he'd need help to do that.

"I want Willa and Hagen and Craig and Miles with me," Lucian ordered. Hagen was the best search-and-rescue dog they had, and Miles adored Nora and wouldn't give up until he found her. "Jonah, I want you to organize the rest of the team. Willa and Craig, are you up for this?" Their response was immediate, and it took a small weight off his shoulders. The three of them could start off straightaway while Jonah organized everyone else.

"I haven't been able to reach Ingrid or James, either. I don't know if that's because something has happened to them or because they've both turned their ringers off," he said as they pulled onto the base.

"I'll take care of it," Jonah said, and again, a little weight lifted.

Five minutes after passing through the gates of the grounds, he was

headed toward the clinic with Willa, Craig, and their dogs. They jogged the distance and made it in no time. When they reached the door, Lucian paused and listened. Nothing...but then there was something. He leaned closer. A whine. Cesare.

He knew no one was inside, but he remained cautious as he opened the door, then stepped in, his small team following. The room didn't look disrupted, but Cesare stared at them from his position on the exam table. He'd risen and blood dripped from his leg, where he looked to have dislodged an IV. His eyes were dull and confused, but he didn't look otherwise ill or hurt.

Scanning the room for any sign of what might have happened to Nora, he paused when he saw her phone and gun sitting on the table. No way would she just leave either there. He started toward them, then stopped. He didn't need to touch either. Whatever information they might hold wouldn't help him now.

He turned a full circle, hoping to find some clue. But other than Cesare and what appeared to be a broken thermometer, nothing looked out of place. Wait—he stopped and focused on a shadow under the counter. Rushing over, he knelt and reached underneath. His fingers closed around something soft, and he pulled Nora's hat out. He stared at it for a moment, then tossed it to Craig. "Have Miles scent that," he said. Craig snagged the hat midair and instantly held it out for his dog.

"Is that Angelo's?" Willa asked, pointing to a scarf hanging on the back of a chair.

"It is," Craig confirmed. "He told me his wife knit it for him."

The image of Angelo as a family man clashed with that of Angelo as a killer, but Lucian shoved the contradiction into the recesses of his mind. Right now, he was only a killer. A killer who had Nora.

"What's that?" Craig said, pointing to what looked like a tissue lying under the table. Gently, Lucian picked it up with two fingers. Then, smelling something familiar, he brought it closer to his nose to confirm. His stomach plummeted.

"Chloroform," he said.

"Hagen is scented on Angelo, I say we go," Willa said. Craig nodded. For just the tiniest of moments, Lucian hesitated. He *needed* to find Nora alive. It was a different situation, but it wasn't lost on him that he'd failed to save his wife. And now it was possible he'd fail Nora, too.

“There’s no time for doubts,” Craig said. “Let’s move.”

The confident command was what Lucian needed, and he nodded as he moved past them. “I’ll call Jonah and have someone come get Cesare,” he said, shutting the door behind them. The three paused at the bottom of the stairs. There were four pathways that converged ten feet to their left. They were cleared, and it was impossible to tell which path Angelo might have taken. Well, it was impossible for the humans. Lucian turned to Willa and Craig and nodded. Both reached down and touched their dogs’ heads. Then simultaneously, they issued the order, “Find!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

NORA CAME TO SLOWLY, more angry at letting herself get into this position than worried. Angelo had drugged her and brought her to...where? She forced her eyelids open a hair and glanced around. She was in a cave somewhere, propped up against a boulder with her back to cold, hard rock.

She tested her hands and feet and found both were bound tightly. Whatever held her wasn't scratchy or rough, though. In fact, the more she moved her wrists, the more certain she was that he'd used leashes.

"You are awake?" Angelo said, stepping out from the shadows at the back of the cave.

She didn't bother to answer.

With the moon nearly full, it was easy to make out the opening twenty feet to her left. How far back it went, she didn't know.

"I'm sorry it's come to this," he said. She forced herself to look at him. Oddly, she found she believed him. He did sound genuinely regretful, although not enough to change his plans to kill her. And there was no doubt in her mind he intended to kill her. She understood his drive—she was a threat not just to him, but to the life he'd built. Killing her didn't further his agenda, though. Whatever that agenda was.

"You do realize that eleven of the best scenting dogs in the world are going to be looking for me," she said. If there was one thing she knew, it was that Lucian wouldn't hesitate to kick off a search-and-rescue operation using every method at his disposal.

Angelo shrugged. "I tried to mislead them, but we shall see."

Nora's gaze stayed fixed on him as he stepped closer, but her fingers moved over the knots at her wrist. There wasn't much she could do about her

feet—which were indeed bound with a leash—until her hands were free. But if she could get her hands loose, that was all she needed to defend herself.

“I don’t think you want to kill me,” she said, adjusting her position as she spoke. Sitting straighter against the wall shifted her arms, giving her the tiniest bit of slack in the bindings.

“You’re right, I don’t,” he said. He now stood less than ten feet in front of her, but he didn’t appear to want to move closer. “But I have to,” he added.

“Why?” she asked as she picked at the bindings around her wrist.

“Because you know what I’ve done.”

“After tonight, everyone will know,” she pointed out. “If you let me go, it will be one less death on your conscience.”

“Perhaps,” he conceded. “But yet I feel I cannot.”

“Why?” she asked again. She *was* interested in the answer, but she was also buying time.

“Because if you stop me, you are like one of them,” he answered. Then, to her surprise, he squatted, as if settling in for a long conversation. Angelo wasn’t a dumb man; he had to know his time with her was limited. He may be saying he needed to kill her—a part of him might even believe that—but his actions were telling her otherwise. If triggered, he’d do it, but she didn’t think he truly wanted to. Whatever rage he felt toward his prior victims wasn’t driving him now.

“One of who?” she asked.

“The men. The priests. Those who masquerade as men of the cloth who are everything but.” She studied him, keeping her shoulders steady as she continued to work on the knots. “Someone should have stopped them,” he said. His voice was taking on a sort of dreamy quality—as if he were traveling back in time.

“Who should have been stopped, Angelo?” she asked as her finger managed to wedge itself under a part of the binding enough so that she could start to loosen it.

His expression darkened. “I was eleven when my parents died in the car accident. I had no one, and so they put me in a home.” She knew all this, but she nodded, encouraging him to continue. She wanted him distracted enough for her to keep making progress. “It was run by the Church,” he said. “They should have been good men. They should have loved as Jesus did. They should have protected the weak and the poor.” He paused and looked out toward the opening. Nora strained to listen. Had he heard something?

“They didn’t, did they?” she asked, bringing his attention back to her.

Angelo’s jaw tightened. “They did not. They preyed on us. At night. In class. Anytime they pleased. The boys, we were all vulnerable and many of us hurting. I wasn’t the only orphan. And instead of loving us as they should have, instead of caring for us the way their god would want, they violated us. So many of us...”

Nora’s heart broke for the man when the import of his words sank in. What he must have suffered as a child she couldn’t imagine. He’d lost his parents, the two people who probably cared most for him in the world. Then he’d been turned over to men who abused their position of trust and authority in the worst imaginable way. His childhood didn’t excuse the murders he’d committed. But she could empathize for the boy he’d been while still holding the man he was accountable.

“And still, no one does anything to repent,” Angelo continued. The binding loosened enough that she was moments away from being able to free a hand. “I don’t...I don’t understand how so many people could know and yet no one did anything to stop it.” He paused and glanced toward the back of the cave. Nora had no idea what was back there, and if she had her way, she wouldn’t find out. “And they still do nothing,” he said, bringing his attention back to her. “Those men, they want power and money and titles. They don’t want to serve god. And those they *serve under* are even worse. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, as they say. There is no better example than the men of the cloth.”

Nora let out a slow breath as one of her hands slipped from the binding. Once it was free, the other easily followed suit. Wanting to keep the element of surprise, she left her hands behind her but surreptitiously rolled her shoulders.

“And yet you still attend Mass,” she pointed out.

“It’s not the teachings I take issue with. I find them comforting,” he said. “It’s man who is the problem. Not the divine.”

She couldn’t argue with him on that. If there was such a thing as god, then she did believe it was a good and loving force. *Man* was the corrupter and the seeker of power—god would have no need for either of those.

A tree branch snapped in the distance, and both she and Angelo turned to look at the opening of the cave.

“Where are we?” she asked.

Angelo gave her a sad smile. “In the mountain under the monastery. Not

far from where Michael Kelly died.”

“Not far from where you killed him,” she corrected.

She wasn’t sure what kind of reaction she expected, although she’d been prepared for rage or, at the least, some excuse. However, all she got was a small shrug before he dropped his eyes and looked away from both her and the cave opening.

“You know they are coming,” she said. Again, he lifted a shoulder. “If you’re going to kill me, you don’t have much time.”

“You want to die?” he asked.

She studied his expression. Once again she was struck by the feeling that he wasn’t the kind of killer who *liked* killing. He might, for a moment, feel like he was avenging the wrongs of his past when he killed. But she’d wager that when the high was over, he was as repentant as a man could be.

She shook her head. “I don’t. I love the life I have. I do good work, spend a lot of time with animals, and have great friends. I’m a quiet person by nature, but there are still parts of this crazy, beautiful world that I want to see. I’d even like to have a family one day.”

Angelo had been looking at the ground, but his eyes lifted at her comment. “You want a family?”

She inclined her head. “I do. I always have.”

“Perhaps with Lucian?”

Her heart stuttered at Lucian’s name. Not at the idea of having a family with him, but at the thought of what he’d go through if something happened to her. He might not love her the way he loved his wife, but she wasn’t about to let him lose another woman he cared for. She wasn’t about to sentence him to another lifetime of what-ifs if she didn’t make it out.

“Perhaps,” she said, then moved her feet as a sound outside the cave caught her attention. It was subtle and quiet, but she would swear it was the snuffle of a dog. Slowly, she brought her hands out from behind her back. She didn’t bother reaching for her gun as she could tell she no longer had it. Angelo watched her every move but didn’t say a thing.

“You don’t want to kill me, Angelo. I know you don’t.”

Pain and confusion flashed across his face before he spoke. “But I must.”

“Why? I’m not one of those men, Angelo. Nor am I even a part of your church. I know you want to rid the world of those who abuse children and those who stand by and let it happen. I even understand why you want that vengeance. No one was there to help you, and so you had to help yourself.”



In no way did she believe what had happened to him as a child justified killing eleven people. Not even if it had been eleven people directly involved in the abuse he'd suffered. But she did understand his anger, his hurt, and his sense of betrayal.

"I no longer need protecting, but others do. Still, to this day, they do," he said. "Boys mostly. Boys like my son."

And that explained it all. Well, not all, but it explained why, after so many years, Angelo started seeking his vengeance. His son had been born two years ago. As a father, he'd do anything to protect him. Ridding the world of people he perceived were either like the men who'd abused him, or like those who'd protected those men, was one way of doing that. His reasoning was deeply flawed, but Nora could see the thread that tied it all together in Angelo's mind.

Suddenly Angelo rose and, startled at the movement, Nora pressed back against the wall of the cave. Her feet weren't free yet, but unless Angelo had a weapon that could reach her from a distance, she was confident she'd be able to defend herself. It was possible he had her gun, but shooting people wasn't his style and she doubted he'd kept hers with him.

He took two steps toward her and refusing to look away, she held his gaze. "You love him, don't you?" she asked. "Your son."

Angelo's brow dipped. "Yes, he and my wife are my life." He took another step toward her, and she considered her options even as she kept talking.

"Then stay alive to tell them your story," she said. He raised a foot to take another step, then set it down.

"I don't understand."

"I tried to cover the noise, but I know you heard it. You know that Lucian and at least one other person and their dog is right outside that cave opening." The curious but not surprised way he peeked a look told her he had, in fact, heard the same noise. "If you make a move toward me, the dog will be on you in an instant. Or worse, if it's Jonah or Craig out there, they both have permits to carry weapons. I think it's safe to assume they would have brought them to Massachusetts."

Angelo's gaze lingered on the cave opening.

"If you come after me, you could die tonight, Angelo. And if you do, what are the stories your son will hear about you? That you were nothing but a serial killer who went after innocent people? Is that what you want him to

know about his father?”

He turned his attention back to her. “I want him to know the truth,” he said.

Nora remained seated but held her hand out to the man. It was a risk, but she had faith that whoever was outside the cave would be prepared to step in.

“Come, Angelo. I’m not going to pretend to know the pain you suffered as a child. But if you come sit with me, if you let them take you without hurting me, you will live to tell people. You will live to tell them about your pain, about your abuse, about your desire to protect your child. What would you rather your son know? Stories spoken about you by people who only read the news? Or your own words? Your own love?” Nora didn’t fool herself that it would be so easy. Or that his son would grow up understanding the depth of his father’s suffering and the strength of his desire to protect him. But unless she wanted a well-trained attack dog in the cave in less time than it took to blink, she needed to reason with Angelo in a way that he understood.

Angelo sank to his knees. “I don’t want to die,” he whispered.

Once again, Nora’s heart broke. It broke for the child he’d been, for Angelo’s wife and their son. For the families of those he’d killed.

Holding her arms out to him, she spoke, “You don’t have to, Angelo. Not today.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

“YOU WANT A FAMILY?” Lucian heard Angelo ask. He, Craig, and Miles stood with their backs against the mountainside, a cave opening to their right. A cave the two men would have missed if it hadn’t been for Miles nosing the foliage that hung over the entrance. Willa had followed Hagen off on another trail. Lucian assumed that after bringing Nora here, Angelo must have doubled back and created a second or maybe even a third track.

“I do,” she answered. “I always have.”

“Perhaps with Lucian?” Angelo asked. Lucian felt Craig’s attention turn to him, but he tuned the man out. He wanted to know the answer, but more importantly, he wanted Nora safe and far away from the murderer. He doubted Angelo was armed with a gun, but he’d proven himself adept with a knife and his hands.

“Perhaps,” Nora said.

It wasn’t the time or the place, but the image of him and Nora coddling a newborn filled his mind.

“Do we go in?” Craig asked. Miles was sitting obediently beside him, waiting for his next order. Snow had started falling in fits and spurts, and any tracks were quickly being obscured. He wasn’t worried about the others finding them. And it wasn’t their lack of backup that had him hesitating. It was the conversation happening inside the cave. They hadn’t heard everything, but what he *had* heard painted a grim picture of what Angelo’s life must have been like after his parents died. It was no wonder the boy had acted out.

“Not yet,” he said. Those two words were some of the hardest he’d ever spoken. But Nora was talking Angelo down, and he needed to give her the

opportunity to do just that. He'd protect her with his life, but he also knew that she wouldn't want that. She wouldn't want violence or death—either Angelo's or his—if there was another way.

His phone vibrated in his pocket with a message from Ben Miller that he was at the parking lot with four deputies. Jonah had texted earlier to let Lucian know that Ingrid and James had just turned their ringers off. In response, Lucian had shared his location and requested that Jonah call the detective and fill him in. Lucian texted the detective back letting him know that Nora was talking Angelo down. He also requested that he and his deputies come in quiet. He didn't know much about American law enforcement, but he hoped like hell the real ones weren't anything like the ones on TV.

*“Roger, ten minutes out,”* Miller replied.

He turned back to the conversation in time to hear Nora say, “If you come after me, you could die tonight, Angelo. And if you do, what are the stories your son will hear about you? That you were nothing but a serial killer who went after innocent people? Is that what you want him to know about his father?”

Lucian gestured toward the cave opening, and they inched closer, Miles glued to Craig's side. The snow wasn't usually Lucian's friend, but tonight it muffled their movements, and he was grateful for it.

“I want him to know the truth,” Angelo answered.

Nora didn't respond right away, then she spoke again, her voice gentle. “Come, Angelo. I'm not going to pretend to know the pain you suffered as a child. But if you come sit with me, if you let them take you without hurting me, you will live to tell people. You will live to tell them about your pain, about your abuse, about your desire to protect your child. What would you rather your son know? Stories spoken about you by people who only read the news? Or your own words? Your own love?”

There was a shuffle and everyone, including Miles, tensed.

“I don't want to die,” Angelo whispered so quietly that it was hard to hear the words.

“You don't have to, Angelo,” Nora said. “Not today.”

There was more shuffling, but no sounds of a struggle or fight. Still, Lucian decided he'd give her one more minute. The problem—one of many—was that they didn't know what was going on in the cave. Was Nora bound? Did Angelo have his knife? Were they twenty feet inside the cave or

fifty? The last thing he wanted to do was walk in, startle Angelo, and then have him go after Nora. Especially if she was too far away for him to help.

Lucian nodded to the edge of the cave opening and Craig took a step closer, putting him and Miles right at the edge. Taking a chance, Lucian darted across the entrance, then pressed his back against the rock on the other side.

Both he and Craig craned their heads to see inside. He knew Craig wouldn't see anything other than darkness and shadows. But from where Lucian now stood, he caught a glimpse of Angelo's foot sliding along the cave floor. As if he'd been kneeling and was now crawling? Lucian couldn't imagine why the man would be on his knees, but that's how it appeared. Then again, he thought with a smile, it was so like Nora to bring a man—even a murderer—to his knees.

"I'm so sorry for everything you suffered, Angelo," she said.

Lucian heard what he thought was a muffled sob. Was it possible Nora truly had talked the man down? If anyone could do it, she could. But did he trust that? Did he have a choice other than to trust it?

He decided he didn't. Based on what he'd heard, Nora knew they were out there and that she could call for help at any time. She hadn't done that, though. She wanted to do this her way, and he didn't have the right to second-guess her. The best he could do was stand at the ready and wait for her direction.

Craig was watching him, waiting for an order. Lucian raised a hand and started to give a "stand down" gesture when Angelo spoke again. Only this time, his words hit Lucian like a knife to the gut.

"I'm sorry, too, Nora."

Without hesitation, Lucian shifted gears. Before the order was out of his mouth, Craig was following it. "Miles, attack," he barked.

The shepherd shot off into the cave, Lucian and Craig following. Angelo screamed and Nora gasped, but the shadows made it hard to see anything other than their forms against a far wall. Only Angelo wasn't beside Nora anymore, because Miles had him by the shoulder. His jaws were locked on the joint, and the man was being dragged back and away from the wall.

"Nora!" Lucian called.

"I'm here," she replied. Pulling a penlight from his pocket, he flicked it on. Turning it in the direction of her voice, he saw her sitting against the wall, untying a leash knotted around her ankles.

“Craig?” he called as he moved toward Nora.

“I got this. Miles, guard!” The dog emitted a low growl and backed a foot away from where Angelo now lay on the ground clutching his shoulder.

“There’s a knife,” Nora said as Lucian reached her. He shoved her hands aside and started working on the knots.

“I see it,” Craig answered. “It’s far enough away he won’t get to it. I’m going to leave it until the police arrive.”

Lucian was aware of the conversation, but his entire focus was on Nora. Finally, the last of the knots slid free. He wrapped his hands around her ankles and started massaging them.

“Are you all right?” he asked. She was awake and breathing and looking at him with her big green eyes, but he wasn’t going to take anything for granted.

She nodded. “A little bit of a headache. My face got scratched somewhere, maybe the fence he would have dragged me under. And my shoulders and legs are a little sore. But otherwise, I’m okay.”

He turned her face to get a better look at the scratch. “The knife?” He was almost afraid to ask.

She brought her hands up and cupped his cheeks, forcing him to look at her. “I’m okay, please remember that. But yes, he was going to use it. When Miles came in, he had it against my throat.” He swallowed and willed his body to stop shaking. “I had it under control, but still, I’m grateful for Miles’s intervention, and we should all call him the hero of the day.”

The dog hadn’t taken his attention off Angelo, but his tail thumped once. It did not surprise Lucian in the least that he was so attuned to Nora. From day one, those two shared a unique bond.

He raised a hand and gently drew his fingers down her cheek, her skin impossibly soft and familiar. He’d almost been too late. He’d almost lost her. Yes, she could have managed on her own. But the point was, she didn’t need to.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he reached for it. A message from Ben flashed on the screen, asking where they were, specifically.

“It’s Detective Miller,” he said to Nora, before calling out “In here!” Then, taking her hands in his, he rose, pulling her up with him.

“Are we clear?” Ben called from the entrance of the cave, his gun at the ready.

“We’re clear,” Lucian said, then he turned to Nora to fill the man in. She

shifted to speak to the detective as he approached, and it was then he noticed the blood.

Before he could stop himself, he was tearing at her scarf and calling for a paramedic. Miller rushed to join him as he directed his deputies to deal with the man on the ground.

“What is it? The paramedics will be at the parking lot in ten minutes,” Ben said.

“I don’t need the paramedics,” Nora said, the gentle tone of her voice irritating Lucian in a way it never had before.

“He cut you, Nora!” he all but barked. Nora drew back but didn’t otherwise react. Slowly, she lifted her hand, then touched her neck. When she pulled her fingers back, they stared at the blood coating them.

She frowned. “It’s strange, I don’t really feel it.”

“Shock,” Ben said, handing over a small first aid kit one of his deputies had pulled from her vest.

“It can’t be that bad,” Nora said, then winced when she touched it again. “Okay, I guess I’m feeling it now.”

Lucian pushed her hand away and pressed a clean square of gauze to the three-inch slice. It wasn’t life-threatening, and no artery had been hit, but it was worse than she thought. Blood had soaked through her scarf that now lay on the ground, and it was still flowing.

“Sit,” Lucian ordered. Released from his guard duties, Miles trotted over and sat. Nora smiled. Lucian did not.

“I’m fine,” Nora said, crouching to give Miles some love. As if sensing her injury, the dog remained seated and let her rub his ears without head butting her as he usually did.

“Detective, that’s Angelo Rossi,” she said, looking up as she remained with Miles. “I’m sure you’ve figured out by now, he’s the one who killed the eleven people—including the two in your jurisdiction. I’ll let my contact know the situation has been resolved, but if you could please Mirandize him and hold him, someone will be in touch.”

Ben nodded and gestured for his deputies to take the man in. Angelo hadn’t fought back, and Lucian spared him one look before the deputies led him away in handcuffs. Tears tracked down the man’s face, but he looked resigned to his fate. In some ways, he reminded Lucian of a martyr.

“Paramedics?” Lucian asked, dismissing Angelo from his thoughts and his life and refocusing on Nora.

“Five minutes out. We should get her to the parking lot if she can walk,” Ben answered.

“I’ll carry her,” Lucian said, reaching for Nora’s hand. The look she gave told him that he’d regret it if he even tried. But once on her feet, she swayed and blinked.

“Must be the aftereffects of the chloroform,” she said.

Lucian didn’t care what it was, nor did he care if she protested, and in the next beat, she was up and in his arms.

“Craig, fill Detective Miller in on the events of the evening as best you can,” Lucian said. Craig nodded and Miles, apparently satisfied that Nora was in good hands, rose and trotted to his handler. Then, turning to Miller, he added. “I’ll get Nora to the paramedics and, if needed, the hospital. I’ll let you know which, as I’m sure you’ll want to talk with her tonight.”

Ben nodded. “I will. We’ll also want to search his room.”

“The grounds are still army property. I’m not sure if you’ll be able to do that without their permission. But Nora’s people will be in touch,” Lucian answered.

“Nora would like to be put down,” she said.

Lucian ignored her. “We’ll speak soon,” he said with a nod to the detective. He started to stride out, then paused at the opening and turned to Craig. “Thank you,” he said. “To both of you.”

Craig nodded, and Miles’s tail swept across the dirt floor. Without another word, he walked out of the cave and into the moonlit night. Scattered clouds were still releasing large, fluffy snowflakes. It was a beautiful night, but not one he’d ever want to relive.

“I’m fine, Lucian. I can walk. I was just woozy for a second.”

He ignored her and tightened his grip.

“Are you going to give me the silent treatment now?” she asked. He knew she was goading him, but even knowing that didn’t stop the rush of emotion that exploded out of him.

Dropping her legs to the ground, he pulled her roughly against him and slammed his mouth down over hers. He should be giving her pretty words. He should be telling her that she’d scared him. That the thought of something happening to her wasn’t acceptable. He should be telling her that he’d heard her talking about children and that he wanted that, too. He should be telling her he loved her.

But he couldn’t. The only thing he could do was kiss her, hold her, and



try to keep a leash on all the emotions battling inside him. He wanted more. There was a reason sex and violence were portrayed together. He wanted nothing more than to back her against a tree and take her. Nothing more than to release the fear, the aggression, the anxiety. And judging by the way she met his assault, he didn't think she'd resist.

And that one thought had him drawing back. He would not use her in that way. Even if she was willing. He wasn't ready to talk. Not yet. But he had to let her know how he felt about her. Leaning back in, he very gently, almost reverently, brushed his lips across hers, then pulled her into a hug. With their arms wrapped around each other, he rested his cheek on the top of her head and breathed in. Her scent filled his nostrils, and through their winter jackets, he felt her heart beating strong and steady.

When he felt more grounded, less explosive, he pulled back. Placing another kiss on her upturned mouth, he held her gaze. She gave him a small smile. One that quickly turned to an expression of surprise when he again swung her up into his arms.

He looked down at her as he continued to the parking lot, daring her to complain. She smiled again, this time a full Nora smile. Without a word, she tightened her arms around his neck and snuggled into him.

## EPILOGUE

TULAH, Paddy, Luna, and Oscar lay sprawled in various spots around her family room floor, each ignoring their dog bed. The fire was roaring, and she'd even gotten a Christmas tree up. Well, she and Lucian had. The program had ended abruptly when Angelo was arrested, but Lucian hadn't gone back to Italy. He hadn't said how long he planned to stay; in fact, he hadn't said much of anything about them as a couple. He'd just thrown his bags into her car, driven back to Cos Cob with her, and stayed.

"Franklin is here," Lucian said, bringing her a cup of tea. After handing it over, he walked to the front door and let the man in before joining her on the couch.

"The evidence has all been processed," Franklin said, taking a seat in a leather chair near the fire. "We have your statement and his confession, but we also found the blood of the four stabbing victims on his knife. He tried to clean it but had missed some of the nooks."

"What about the other victims?" Lucian asked, taking her hand and entwining his fingers with hers.

"We found the bag of salt he used to suppress the fire that killed Jessalyn Anderson, and we found his mementos."

"Of all eleven of the victims?" Lucian asked.

Franklin's gaze lingered on Lucian before he reached into his pocket and pulled out a clear plastic bag. He held it, hesitating, then handed it over to Lucian.

Lucian leaned forward and took it.

"There were twelve victims," Franklin said.

Nora's stomach pitched, and she stilled as the meaning of the words sank

in. Lucian held Franklin's gaze, then dropped it back down to the small gold pendant in the bag. The fire crackled in the background as Lucian stared at the piece of jewelry.

"Saint Roch," he finally said, his voice raspy with emotion. "Patron saint of dogs." He turned the bag around to look at the back. "And the Salvitto coat of arms." He ran his thumb over the plastic, over the ridges and impressions of the medal. "I gave this to Alessandra on our first anniversary. It was one of the few pieces of jewelry she wore consistently." He paused, then looked at Franklin. "Tell me."

Sympathy flashed in Franklin's eyes, but he didn't hesitate. "You know what he experienced as a boy in that home. To cope, he would often spend hours wandering the countryside. He said he found her on one of his longer adventures. He'd run away and had walked more than forty miles from the home. He watched her with the dogs, and although he didn't say, I suspect the adoration of the animals appealed to him. He probably started to wonder what it would feel like to have that kind of love focused on him.

"He said he approached her and asked if she had any work for him. She... she wasn't particularly open to it."

Lucian's lips thinned. Nora wanted to reach out and touch him, to comfort him, but she sensed he wouldn't appreciate it yet. Instead, she wrapped both hands around her mug.

"I can imagine. She was a bit of a termagant. She could be like that when it came to her dogs," Lucian said.

Franklin's expression acknowledged the truth of Lucian's statement, but he didn't pursue the topic further. "He got angry. Very angry. He..."

"Just tell us, Franklin," Nora said. Lucian wouldn't appreciate Franklin's hesitation. He'd just want to know the facts.

"He beat her to death with a shovel and stole one of the puppies. He buried the shovel somewhere on his way back to the home. When he returned, he threatened the priests. He told them that he and some of the other boys would tell the world what was happening at the home if they didn't let him keep the puppy. He was seventeen. Beyond the age that was...appealing to the pedophiles. He was also big enough to defend himself if they tried. They let him keep the puppy. He only had a year left at the home, and I assume they figured the puppy was a small price to pay to keep him from rocking the boat."

Again, Lucian's thumb ran over the medal. A few more seconds passed,

then he leaned forward and handed it back.

“Thank you,” he said. “I had come to accept that her murder would never be solved. Like many, I assumed it had something to do with my role at AISE. It doesn’t...I don’t feel any different, it doesn’t bring any closure or whatever it is the Americans say—she’s still gone. And her life was still taken too early. But I’m glad I know. Her family will be as well.”

Franklin eyed them both for a moment, then nodded and rose. “If there is anything I can do, please let me know.”

Neither Nora nor Lucian joined him, and he walked to the door and let himself out. The sound of his car faded into the night, and a few minutes passed before Lucian spoke.

“I truly never thought I’d know,” he said, meeting her gaze for the first time since Franklin had delivered the news.

“I’m glad you do. As you said, it doesn’t change anything, but now you know.”

He held her gaze, then nodded. “I want to stay here. With you.”

His words were such an abrupt change, Nora blinked. “Okay,” she drew out the word.

He smiled. “Not for this week or this month, but for as long as you will have me.”

Nora frowned. “What about your business?”

He bobbed his head to the side. “Your barn is huge. It would make an excellent kennel. Your property would be good training grounds. And the couple I met with in Boston?” She nodded. “They want to work with me to start breeding and training medical dogs. Dogs that sniff disease and help epileptics and diabetics. I’ve been considering moving into that field for a while. I can do my best to learn that kind of training—and I have—but they have an expertise I don’t. I can learn a lot from them, and my dogs, many of them, would be well suited to the job.”

She studied him for a long moment, long enough to see the pulse at his throat beating faster than normal. He was nervous. Although he had no reason to be. Lucian might not be the gentle, kind man she’d envisioned for herself, but he *was* gentle and kind with her. He also seemed content being a homebody. Since returning to Cos Cob, they’d spent most nights in front of the fire. Sometimes they read, sometimes they played board games, occasionally they watched TV. He hadn’t holed up entirely, though. He’d had lunch once with Joe, Gavin, and Darius, and he and Six had gone on a couple

of walks.

He'd slid into her life the same way he'd slid into her heart—easily. Though perhaps not without a little grumbling on his part.

“You've been thinking about this for a while, haven't you? *A while* being relative since we've only been reacquainted for a few weeks.”

“Possibly,” he said. Then he smiled. He might have tried playing it cool, but that smile gave it away. He'd *definitely* been thinking about this for more than a few days.

She smiled back. “You know what I want in a relationship, Lucian. I know there are certain promises we can't make and be assured of keeping them. But if we do this, you know exactly what I want. Kids, dogs, family, the whole works. I have to believe you are on board with that or you wouldn't have said what you said, but I need to hear it.”

She'd set her mug down and turned to him as she'd spoken. He reached for her and pulled her onto his lap. Lowering his head, he kissed her. When he pulled back, he was smiling. “How about we start practicing for those kids now?”

## SERIES EPILOGUE

Franklin and Joe Harris—“Old Joe”—sat in Adirondack chairs in the shade of Nora’s barn and watched “the kids” play croquet.

“Not bad, Franklin,” Joe said.

Franklin smiled and took a sip of his Pimm’s cup. “I agree, old friend.”

“No!” shouted “new” Joe as he hooked Cyn around the waist with one arm, while holding his mallet in the other. Cyn jerked back and as Joe scooped her up, he deftly avoided the handle end of his partner’s mallet.

“Joe, put me down,” Cyn said.

“That is the old well that Lucian and Nora uncovered when they started building the training ground for the dogs,” he said, pointing to a piece of plywood. “I’m sorry your ball came to rest on top of the temporary cover, but I am not going to let you run out and play it from there. It’s too dangerous.”

Franklin shot his friend a smile. If his niece really wanted Joe to let go of her, she’d be on her feet already.

“It’s plywood, Joe. I weigh like a hundred pounds. It will hold.”

Joe said nothing, just held on to Cyn, who was pretty much dangling over his forearm, her feet about five inches from the ground.

Finally, she huffed out a breath. “Fine! I’ll play a new ball.”

“Let me hear the rest of the phrase, Steele,” Joe said.

Cyn flipped in his arm with the grace and precision of a gymnast. Now facing her partner with her legs wrapped around his waist, she draped her arms around his neck. Joe dropped his mallet and held her. “I promise,” she said, before placing a kiss on his lips. Joe didn’t let her get away with such a paltry show of affection and laid his own kiss on her. Franklin looked away. He liked his niece’s partner—he’d picked Joe himself—but he did not need

to see that.

Beside him, Old Joe chuckled as Franklin's gaze landed on Six. She was having a miserable game. In fact, croquet was one of the few activities she truly hadn't ever mastered. The problem was she tended to forget how terrible she was, and her temper came out every game. Right now, Gavin was standing behind her as she was swearing at her ball. The Italian curses floated over the bucolic scene. The contrast should have been jarring but wasn't.

It was a good thing she had her back to Gavin, because he wasn't succeeding in keeping a smile from his face. If she had any hint that he was laughing at her—although to be fair, he was probably laughing at her rather inventive curses—his life expectancy would drop by a few decades. Finally, she turned around, seeking support from the man who'd managed to win a place in her life.

Her hands landed on her hips. "Are you laughing at me?" she demanded.

"I'm appreciating your blend of urban slang and Shakespeare. You have a rare talent, love," Gavin said, managing to mostly not smile.

Six's eyes narrowed. Then in a move that must happen frequently because it didn't take Gavin by surprise in the least, she dropped her mallet and leaped into his arms. He caught her as she started raining kisses down on his face. "I love you," Franklin heard her say through the lip smacking. Gavin, smart man that he was, stood there and enjoyed it.

"Another good one," Old Joe said.

Again, Franklin inclined his head. They were all good. All four of the men he'd picked for his favorite family members. Cyn might be the only blood relative, but one thing she'd taught him over the years was that family was not blood alone.

The front door slammed shut, drawing Franklin's attention. Nora led the way, carrying a large tray loaded with food. Devil followed her out with several wine bottles and wine glasses in hand. Not that either woman would be drinking today. Or for several more months.

"*Amore*, stop," Lucian said, dropping his mallet and rushing up to Nora. Taking the tray from her, he admonished, "I've told you, you need to stop doing these things. I'm here. Use me."

Nora went up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "I'm pregnant, Lucian, not injured." Franklin had to concede she had a point. On the other hand, she was six months pregnant with twins. Lucian had a point, too.

"I tried," Devil said, casting Lucian an apologetic look.

“As if you are any better,” Darius said, taking the bottles of wine from her and brushing a kiss across her temple.

Devil opened her mouth to protest, then gave up. She wasn’t six months pregnant with twins, but she was four months pregnant and had had an extremely rough, debilitating first trimester.

Franklin smiled at the two couples. It hadn’t surprised him in the least that Nora and Lucian had decided on kids right away. Nora had always been clear she wanted a family. Even when she was twelve. Lucian wanted one, too, but he’d needed Nora in his life for him to see that. Devil and Darius, well, they’d proven that there were some things that could still surprise him. He was thrilled for them both and knew that despite Devil’s own upbringing, she’d be a phenomenal parent. It also helped that Darius’s family adored her and had brought her into their fold without the slightest blink of an eye. Which said a lot about the Washington clan. As much as Franklin loved Devil, she wasn’t always the easiest to love on first impressions.

Cyn, Joe, Six, and Gavin joined the other two couples at the large table Lucian had set out for food and drinks. It was a bit beastly to be outside this time of year—August, like January, in New England was not for the faint of heart, but the couples chatted animatedly as Gavin poured wine, champagne, and sparkling water, then passed the glasses around.

“Another Pimm’s?” Cyn called.

Franklin glanced at Old Joe, and both rose to join the group.

“Please,” he said, handing his cup over.

“Beer, Joe?” Cyn’s Joe offered, already handing his uncle a fresh bottle.

When everyone had their drinks, Cyn raised hers up. Everyone else followed. “Happy Massachusetts Day!” she exclaimed. Everyone echoed her toast and clinked glasses. It was an odd holiday, although calling it a holiday was a bit of a misnomer. Cyn had assured him it was a real thing, but no shops or banks were closed. And it certainly didn’t show up on his calendar.

Regardless, he looked at his four favorite people, and the men they’d invited into their lives. Whatever they called the day didn’t matter.

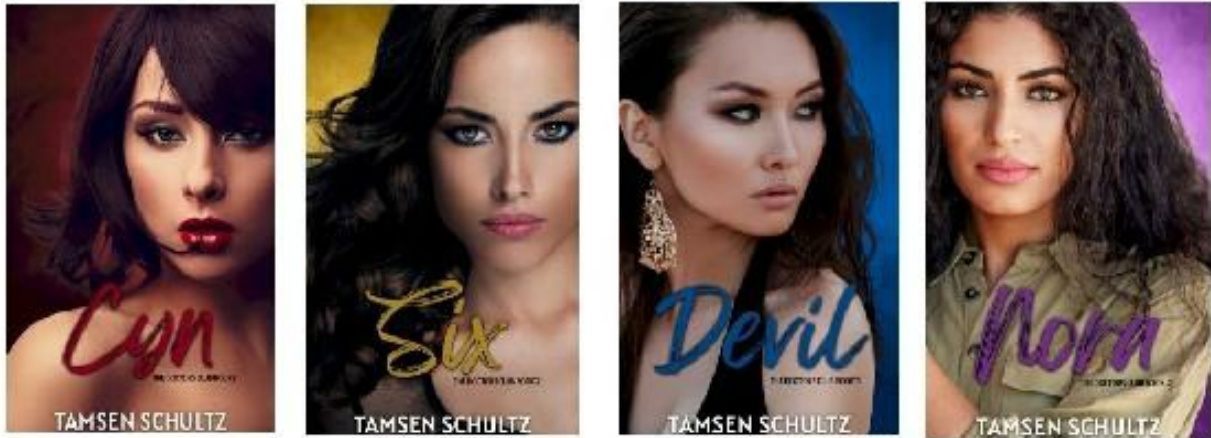
They all had a lot to celebrate.

THE END

Thank you for reading *Nora*!



Have you read the other 3 installments of the **Doctors Club Series**? Cyn, Six, and Devil?



Also, did you know that we first meet Cyn and Nora in the final installment of my **Tildas Island Series**?

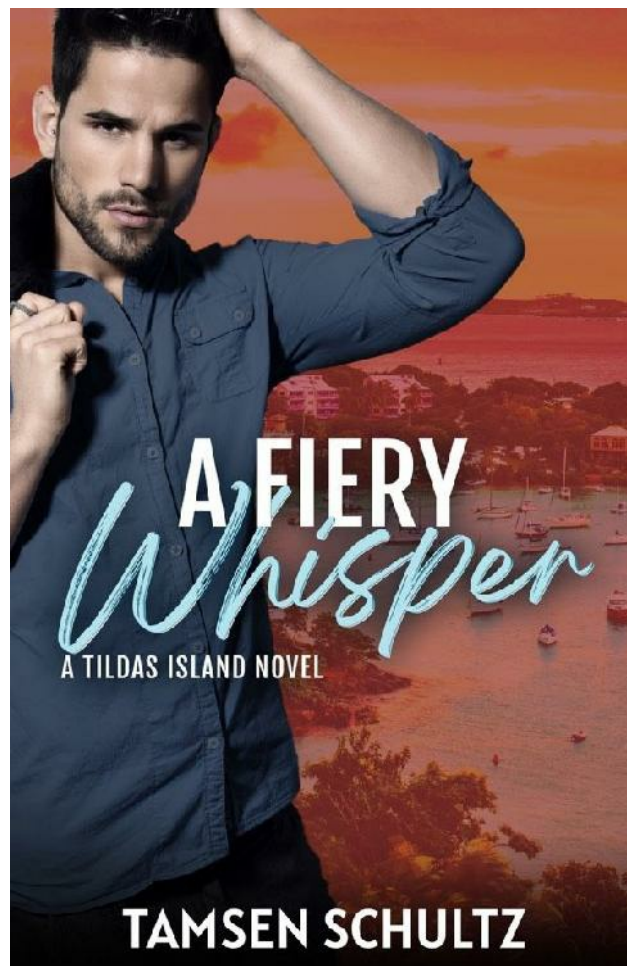
Five page-turning stories that follow the lives, and loves, of the Tildas Island Special FBI Task Force.

Read on for a sneak peek of book 1, **A Fiery Whisper!**

EXTRACT OF

A FIERY WHISPER

#1 Tildas Island Series



## **When murder is just the beginning**

FBI agent Damian Rodriguez never thought he'd see his former lover, Charlotte Lareaux, again—they'd gone down in flames over a year ago and now lived oceans apart. But when she shows up on his doorstep on Tildas Island in the Caribbean, bleeding and nearly dead, the distance between them suddenly feels trivial.

Charlotte has no idea why anyone would want to kill her or her friends, and relying on Damian and his teammates to find those answers is the right thing to do—even if it isn't easy. But when they discover that a single, simple question set off the events that left her and a friend fighting for their lives, no one believes that's the end of the story.

In fact, they all know it's just a whisper of things to come.

## EXCERPT

DR. SUNITA SHAH sat in a sunken leather chair across the desk from where FBI Special Agent in Charge, Ronald Lawler, looked down on her. She was quite certain he'd swapped out furniture before her arrival for just that purpose. Passive-aggressive tantrums were his specialty, and Ron Lawler was not a man to miss an opportunity to put her in her place. But the other thing Ron Lawler was not, was a man worth spending any time thinking about.

“So, Tildas Island?” he asked. He was drumming his fingers on the top of the five files she'd handed him. “Nice gig if you can get it.” The scent of stale coffee and bad breath wafted toward her.

“It's a task force, not a holiday,” she responded, nodding to the files. He regarded her for a moment, then picked up the first.

Tildas Island, a US Territory in the Caribbean, had recently been selected by the governing body of the Organization of World Leaders as the location for their first-ever World Summit. In eighteen months, presidents, prime ministers, shahs, kings, queens, and other world leaders would be gathering on the island approximately half the size of Omaha, Nebraska.

With the sudden spotlight on the region, just about every alphabet agency in DC had realized their intelligence on the area—and hence the government's ability to protect against any threats—was woefully lacking. So, two weeks ago, she'd been tapped to lead the task force that would spend the next eighteen months in the region gathering every bit of intel possible so that by the time of the conference, security would be locked down tighter than a nurse swaddling a newborn babe.

“You want Damian Rodriguez?” Ron asked, looking up from the file he held in his hands. “He just ran an unsanctioned investigation that included all

but deputizing a journalist.”

Sunita shifted her gaze from the window that she'd been staring out of to Ron. She smiled but remained silent. She didn't have to justify her decisions to him, or to anyone for that matter. A condition of her taking the role as the supervisory director of the task force had been complete control over the team and how it functioned. Lawler's sign-off was nothing but red-tape.

Of course, another reason behind her smile was because she knew, at this moment, that Agent Rodriguez was talking to the very same journalist Lawler referred to about the very same unsanctioned investigation. The young agent was no doubt sinking his career on a matter of principle—having promised the journalist the story in exchange for her help—and Sunita admired the hell out of him for it. That he'd also been an Army Ranger and a top field agent, before his recent activities, didn't hurt.

Lawler picked up another file and held it up as he fixed his gaze on her. “Dominic Burel has been on probation three times since he joined the Bureau two years ago.” Ron was too seasoned of an agent to think she'd simply made a bad choice. But he wasn't smart enough to figure out why she'd chosen whom she'd chosen. She'd give him a little leeway on Burel, though because his record was a little sketchy. But, she had access to files on the former pararescuer that only a handful of people even knew existed.

“And Alexis Wright? Seriously, Sunita? FBI Barbie?” he said, slapping Burel's file down and picking up the third.

Sunita cocked her head. “Making derogatory comments on people's looks, Ron? You know what they say, glasshouses and all.”

His eyes narrowed on her.

She didn't mind letting him question an agent's ability, but she'd damn well draw the line when he crossed it. It was true, Alexis Wright was stunning. The daughter of a famous R&B singer and a Swedish supermodel, Alexis wasn't just gorgeous, she was loaded, too. A fact that seemed to get more attention than her stellar scores at the academy and her impeccable record in the field. The only legitimate complaint had come from her supervisor who'd said the agent had been distracted a bit lately. Sunita gave that observation little weight, though, as she knew that Wright had just defended her Ph.D. four days ago, having completed her course of study without ever mentioning it to any of her colleagues. To say Agent Wright had a penchant for extreme privacy would be an understatement.

“Jake McMullen is a cowboy, and you want to take him to the land of fun

and sun?” Lawler asked, holding up the fourth file. Tildas Island was famous for being a getaway for the rich and famous with all the trappings of luxury that came with that.

“I’ll sign off on him, but he’s not allowed to drive any government vehicles,” Lawler said, setting the file down. In her mind, Sunita rolled her eyes. It was a childish response, but then again, so was Ron’s illusion that he had any control over whom she picked or how she ran her task force.

Jake McMullen was a cowboy, but he was a cowboy who had been a professional surfer before an injury had ended his career at age twenty-four. He brought that same daring streak that drove him to ride twenty-plus-foot waves to his job with the FBI. And no one in the Bureau knew the ocean like Agent McMullen—a handy trait to have when they’d be surrounded by water.

“And Benita Ricca? Really? That woman has a chip on her shoulder the size of Long Island,” Lawler said, holding the fifth and last file.

At least he hadn’t commented on her appearance. And again, to be fair, Ricci did have a bit of a chip on her shoulder. But unlike Ron’s negative impression, Sunita believed Beni—as she was known to her colleagues—to be tough as nails and one of the best no-nonsense agents she’d seen in recent years. Ricci wasn’t nice, but she was damn good at her job. In fact, while Sunita was planning to let the dynamics play themselves out, she fully anticipated Rodriguez and Ricci would become the de facto leaders of the team. All five members were strong agents, and each had a little extra something she knew would contribute to the success of the task force, but Ricci and Rodriguez also had that elusive, unnamable quality that made people want to follow them.

“I don’t know where you pulled these names from, Sunita, but it’s like you looked for every misfit in the Bureau. Are you sure you don’t want to take Agent Webster or Agent Kapinski?” Ron asked.

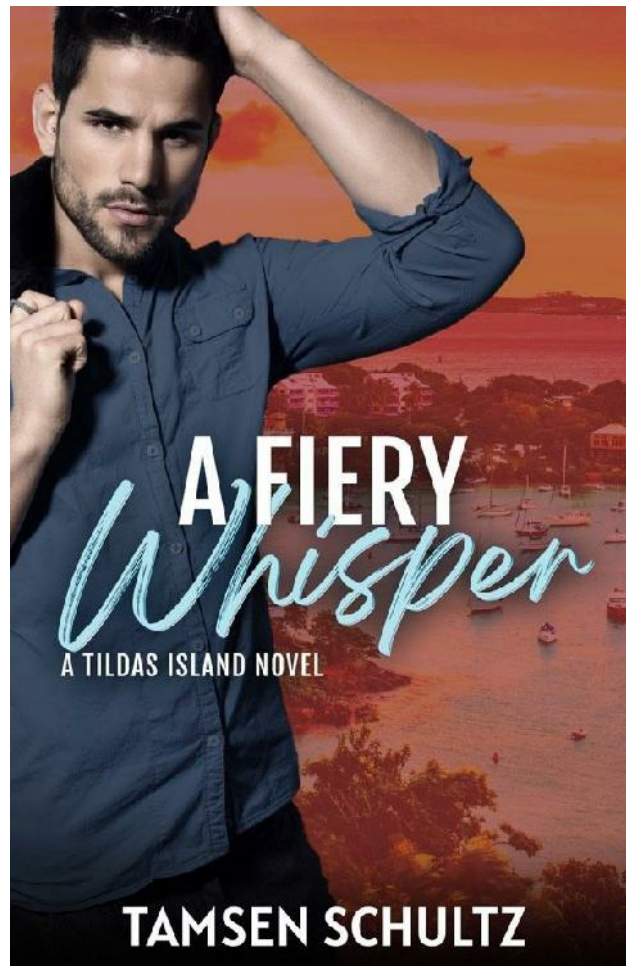
“Sarah Webster and Stanley Kapinski were two of Ron’s pet agents. Loyalty in the Bureau was important if an agent was interested in playing the politics game, and no one was more loyal to Ron than Webster and Kapinski. Which was exactly why she hadn’t even thought of considering the two.

Instead of answering, Sunita rose from her seat to her full height of five feet, one and three-quarters inches, swiped a pen from Lawler’s desk, and handed it to him.

“Sign the transfer papers, Ron. I have agents I need to round up and a task

force to get off the ground.

[Read on!](#)





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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I went to Catholic school and know full well that there are some wonderful people who have dedicated their lives to that religion. However, their kindness, intelligence, empathy, and acceptance does not negate the horrors that have been committed over the centuries or the corrupt power structure that allowed it to happen. I'll be honest, I'm not much of a religious person but I, like Nora, believe that if there is some sort of life force—or god, if that's the term you prefer—it's good. *People* make decisions, *people* commit evil, *people* perpetrate and perpetuate corruption. For everyone who has suffered at the hands of a religion, be it Catholicism or any of the others, my heart goes out to you, and I hope you find peace and justice (the legal kind) in your life.