

*SHATTERED
MIRROR*

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CHAPTER

1

The lights in the lake cottage sent out a cozy glow that lit the banks of the lake and made that house of death appear welcoming. Everything about the place and property spoke of beauty and a deceptive invitation that made one think that all was well with this world.

Because *she* was there, Rory Norwalk thought, as he moved a few steps closer, his gaze on the cottage. She was the heart of the house, the one who destroyed the balance, who had ruined everything when she could have saved. She claimed that she was a mender, a fixer, but Norwalk knew that was all lies.

He was the one who would fix what was broken. Eve Duncan only interfered and made a mockery of what was true and right. But that was going to stop; he couldn't permit it any longer.

Laughter . . .

He stepped back in the shadow of the trees as a Jeep drove up into the driveway.

It was the father and the son. It was the little boy who had laughed. He laughed a lot; careless, joyous laughter that was as deceptive as this house. How could he be joyous when he lived with that woman who was so evil? Because he was evil, too? Norwalk had suspected

it and was almost certain that the boy, Michael, would have to be fixed.

“Stay here,” Joe Quinn told his son as he got out of the car and started up the porch steps. “I’ll do it, but you’ll owe me, Michael. She told you not to do it again.”

“He wouldn’t listen,” Michael protested. “I tried, Dad. Just explain so that she won’t get upset. Okay?”

“No, it’s not okay. But I’ll call you in after I break it to her.” He’d reached the porch, and he looked back down at the little boy in the car. “You sit there and think about what you’re going to say to your mother. And you start off with telling her that you’re not going to do it again.”

“But I may have to do it again,” the little boy said quietly. “I can’t lie to her.”

Joe Quinn sighed. “No, you can’t. We’ll think of something.” He disappeared into the house.

Leaving the little boy alone in the car.

The boy was not often left alone, Norwalk knew. He was only six, and his mother was very careful since they lived on the lake. And Joe Quinn was a police detective, and he was wary of everything and everyone.

Was this moment of abandonment meant to be a sign to Norwalk? It was not why he was here, though he’d mentally already accepted that down the road it must be done. He was very quick, and children were so gullible. It would only take a few moments. He instinctively moved faster through the trees, his gaze on the boy in the Jeep.

But the boy was no longer in the Jeep.

He’d gotten out of the vehicle and was standing on the last porch step. He was dressed in jeans and a navy-blue sweatshirt and his legs were slightly parted. The light from the porch light was burnishing his red-brown hair as if it were a copper helmet.

Helmet? Why had that word occurred to him, Norwalk won-

dered. It was because the boy's bearing looked almost military, he realized. He looked like a soldier guarding a fortress. Ridiculous.

As ridiculous as the idea that the boy was looking directly to where Norwalk was standing under the trees and could see him. It was pitch-dark, there was no way he could be seen.

But that little boy *knew* he was there.

And he was not afraid.

Norwalk instinctively faded farther back in the trees.

Oh, he had been right to judge that Michael Quinn would also have to be taken out before that cozy house would be cleansed of all that was broken.

But not right now.

Just a little longer, Sean. I'm just as eager as you, but we have to keep to the plan, don't we?

And all good things came to he who was willing to wait.

“Lord, you smell good.” Joe slid his hands around Eve's waist from behind. “Fried onions and bacon. Is there any scent more appetizing?”

“It depends if you're hungry.” She turned around and went into his arms. “Not exactly an alluring perfume if the aim is seduction.”

“Is that the aim? If it is, you must have gotten the reconstruction off today.”

She nodded. “This afternoon.” She chuckled. “But since when did work stop us?” She leaned back, and her gaze narrowed on his face. “And since when did you decide to pussyfoot around instead of coming out with what you're thinking?”

He sighed. “I was trying for mellow and soothing. I promised Michael I'd do my best.”

She went still. “Do your best to do what?”

“Break it to you gently.”

“Joe.”

“He has a few bruises and a swollen lip.”

“What?” She pushed him away. “Who?”

“Same kid.”

She swore beneath her breath. “Same reason?”

He nodded. “He did what you told him to do. The kid wouldn’t listen. Boys aren’t usually receptive to persuasion or reason at that age.”

“He’s a bully.”

“And a head taller than Michael. I saw this Gary Walden when I picked Michael up from soccer practice tonight.”

“That’s the third time that he’s come home with bruises. The soccer coach should have stepped in and stopped it.”

“Probably didn’t know about it. Michael wouldn’t complain. You know that.”

Yes, she knew very well that Michael would keep his silence. Her son would quietly take whatever came his way and try to work his way through to a solution. That had been the way he handled problems from the time he was a toddler. Only this time the punishment he was taking was because of *her*, dammit. “Maybe I should talk to this Gary’s mother.”

“Which might make it worse for Michael.”

And that was why she had been avoiding doing that. “Kids can be savages.”

“Absolutely,” Joe said. “And TV and pop culture have led them to think that to latch onto something out of the ordinary and make fun of it is the way to go. But Michael will get bigger and stronger.” His lips tightened. “I’ve signed him up for a karate class. And a few more lessons in karate from me will even out the odds in the meantime. The problem will go away.”

Her lips twisted. “And this Gary will no longer tell Michael his mother is some kind of a ghoulish collector of skulls for a hobby?”

“Not where Michael can hear him.” He smiled. “Come on, you’re the foremost forensic sculptor in the world. What difference does it make what that kid says?”

“It matters if it hurts Michael.”

“It doesn’t hurt Michael,” Joe said. “You know that, Eve. He’s only worried that it will upset you.” His hand reached out and touched her cheek. “That’s why he wanted me to break those damn bruises to you. He only wants to make certain that nothing ever hurts you.” He leaned forward, kissed her gently, and drew her close. “That’s what we all want. You know how smart Michael is. So give him a little time to work this out for himself.”

“He’s only six, Joe.” Her words were muffled against his chest.

“Going on thirty. You’ve always known he’s not like other kids.”

Yes, she’d known from the time Michael had been conceived that he was wonderful and special and he had never disappointed her. He was superintelligent and had the sweetest nature on the planet. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t her job to keep on protecting him. She had lost her daughter, Bonnie, who was only seven when she had died after being taken. It had nearly broken her heart. Michael was almost that age now, and whenever she thought about it, the fear returned. Block it. It wasn’t fair to Michael to live anything but a full and joyous life. “Yeah, I know. But maybe I’m not quite as grown up. I need a little bolstering on occasion.” She pushed him away. “Okay, I suppose you left him outside until you paved the way for him?”

Joe nodded. “In the Jeep. I told him I’d give him a call when you were ready for him.”

“I’m always ready for him.” She headed for the front door. “Watch the potatoes for me, Joe?”

“Sure.” He turned back to the stove. “Tell him, I did my best.”

“He knows that you would.” She smiled back at him. “And you’d better be quick about getting him very good at that karate. I don’t know how many of these sessions I can take.”

“An eternity,” he said softly. “I know you, Eve.”

He was right, she thought. There were no limits for her where Michael was concerned.

She went out on the porch. “Okay, Michael. Come out and face

the music. Your father has given me the lowdown and he tried to—” She stopped. Michael was not in the Jeep, and there was something about the way he was standing on that bottom step that was . . . odd. “Michael?”

He turned and gave her a radiant smile that lit his entire face. “I’m coming, Mama.” He turned and ran up the stairs. “I was just looking out at the lake. It’s pretty tonight, isn’t it?” He hugged her. “I’m hungry. Can we eat before you yell at me about Gary?”

She held him close for an instant. “That might be possible.” She released him and opened the front door. “I thought you might want to stay out here on the porch and have it out first.”

“Nah.” His smile took on a hint of mischief. “I know Dad made sure that you wouldn’t be too mad at me. He’s a guy, too. He knows about these things.” He glanced at the lake and woods, then turned and headed for the door. “I don’t want to stay out here. I’d rather go in with you and eat supper . . .”

“Okay, talk to me,” Eve said as she cuddled Michael closer to her on the couch after supper. “I told you that if you couldn’t handle Gary yourself, you were to go to your teacher. Why didn’t you do it?”

“He would have got in trouble.”

“Exactly.”

“And he didn’t hurt me that bad. He was just scared.”

“He didn’t act very scared,” she said dryly as she touched his bruised cheek. “And your dad said he’s much bigger than you.”

He nodded. “But he’s still scared.”

She looked down at him with narrowed eyes. “Why?”

“Because I’m not afraid of what you do, and he is,” he said simply.

She stiffened. “That ghoul name he called me?”

“His dad was killed in a car wreck last year. Gary’s all confused, and he doesn’t like to think about it. I make him think about it. All those skulls that you work on bother him.”

“No, *I* make him think about it.” Her arm tightened around him. “I was wondering if it was my fault. I didn’t know about his father. Maybe I should go talk to his mother.”

He shook his head. “It would only make her feel bad. Sometime, Gary will let me talk to him about you. Then it will be okay.”

“But it’s not okay now. And what can you say to him that will make it okay then?”

“I’ll tell him that you work on those skulls to bring those people home. That they’re lost, and you have to help them.” He looked up at her. “That’s what you told me that first time I asked you. Remember?”

“I don’t remember you asking me.” She smiled. “But maybe you did. You always seemed to understand my work and why I was doing it.” She did remember Michael coming close to her worktable when he was only a couple years old and touching the skull of a young girl she was reconstructing. There had been such gentleness, such intensity of thought in his expression that she had been stunned. Then, after a moment, he had smiled and gone back to his toys across the room. “I don’t like the idea of waiting around until this Gary comes to his senses on his own. I may have to take action if you won’t.”

He nodded. “I know. But I think it’s going to be okay. He doesn’t like what he’s doing to me. It scares him almost as much as the stuff he won’t ask me about your skulls and the people who are dead like his dad.”

And how had Michael realized that? Eve just had to accept that he did. She had stopped trying to understand where those flashes of deep understanding came from. Even before the moment of his birth she had known that Michael possessed a kind of psychic connection with her, and who knew what other depths he might have? She didn’t believe he wanted her to know, or maybe he didn’t know himself. Either way, most of the time Michael appeared to be just a bright, happy six-year-old who was perfectly content in his life. It

was only with her and Joe that he let his guard down and was totally honest.

She hoped. There were moments when she wasn't certain that Michael was entirely open even with them. It didn't matter as long as she knew that Michael loved them both, they could work on everything else. "It's bad for Gary to think he can hurt you. I don't want him to turn into a bully or you a victim. So you'll try one more time, then I'll have a talk with him." She held up her hand. "Not his mother. Okay?"

Michael nodded. "He's close to it, Mama. It's the death thing. He's missing his dad. It scares him."

"Then we'll try to explain and make the fear go away." She gave him a kiss on the forehead and got to her feet. "Now go take your shower and get to bed."

He grinned as he jumped to his feet. "Soon as I say good night to Dad." He headed toward the back of the house. "And tell him that you didn't yell too much at me. He'll want to know." He turned back. "Did Cara send me that CD of her last concert that she promised me last week?"

She nodded. "Morning mail. It's on your nightstand. You can play it through once. Just once. Then you turn it off and go to sleep."

"Once is enough. After that, it will play in my head until I fall asleep. It does that to you, too, doesn't it, Mama?"

"Yes." Cara Delaney was Eve and Joe's ward and one of the most magnificent violinists Eve had ever heard. She was only eighteen and a student at Carnegie Tech in New York, but she had already been a guest artist at several venues, and this CD was the one from a benefit concert at the university in Phoenix. She had been with them since before Michael was born, and Eve could not have wanted a more devoted or loving sister for her son. The two talked every week on the phone, and when Cara managed to come home, they were practically inseparable. "She texted me and said she might have a break next week or the week after."

“She’s coming home?” His face lit up. “That would be great. When will she know?”

Eve shrugged. “Soon. She’s trying to arrange things. We’ll know when she does. She asked if Jane was going to be able to get away at the same time. She might be trying to coordinate her time with Jane’s.” But Jane MacGuire, her adopted daughter, had a schedule that was almost tighter than Cara’s. She was an artist and her agent had her constantly making public appearances at gallery exhibits in London. “I don’t think she has a chance. Jane’s supposed to be in Paris all this month.”

Michael looked disappointed. “Maybe.”

Eve nodded. “Maybe. But at least we’ll have Cara. You know Jane gets here whenever she can.”

“Yes. I just miss her.” He turned and started back down the hall. “It would be nice . . .”

More than nice, Eve thought. She believed in family and having Jane and Cara out in the world and not being able to see them as much as she’d like brought a constant ache. But she was being selfish, she couldn’t have everything. Life was so incredibly good these days with Joe and Michael, and the occasional visits from Cara and Jane were like additional jewels in the crown. So she would accept what she was given with thanks and enjoy every single minute.

She flipped open her computer on the coffee table and checked for recent requests from police departments around the country. She usually did that on the day she sent the latest reconstruction back to its originator. She had a tremendous backlog of requests, but if anything appeared urgent that couldn’t—

“Be back in ten minutes or so.” Joe had come out of the bedroom and was slipping on his jacket. “Just want to check on something.”

“Check on what?”

“A bear.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Michael thought he saw a bear earlier tonight in the woods on that west bank.”

“He never mentioned it to me.”

“But you were too busy giving him a lecture. He probably didn’t have time.” He headed for the door. “And it’s probably nothing. It was pretty dark out there. I don’t know how he could see anything.”

“But you’re checking it anyway.”

“He hit me where I live.” He smiled at her. “He asked if maybe I should tell you that you shouldn’t go around the lake until I was sure.” He opened the door. “What could I say? Be right back.”

Eve watched the door shut behind him.

A bear?

Strange. Yet there had been that moment when she had first seen Michael on that bottom step, and she had been aware of a tense . . . alertness.

A bear? There had been no bear sightings in this area for the last couple years.

Michael had thought something was wrong and had not spoken to her but gone to his father and told him he should protect her.

She could hear Michael’s shower running now.

He had finished with what he had wanted to do with Joe and was going about his life.

Yet he had thought something was wrong . . .

She instinctively moved toward the front door.

And that wrong must not touch Joe.

Whenever Joe went into the woods, he was always armed, but she didn’t like him to be alone out there.

She stood on the porch, her eyes straining toward the west bank.

The beam of a flashlight.

Joe.

It was moving over the trees, down to the ground, around the bank.

“Joe,” she called.

He froze. "Go back inside, Eve," he called. "I'll be right there." He paused. "Lock the door."

She stiffened. That last order was scaring her. Joe never took action without reason. She was tempted to go to him.

No, Michael was in this house. Someone had to be here to protect him. That was the unwritten rule she and Joe lived by. One of them must always be there for Michael. Tonight that was her job. She went inside and locked the door.

Come on, Joe . . .

She went to the window beside the door and looked out on the porch and the woods beyond.

She could still see the beam of Joe's flashlight bouncing, moving through the trees.

And now Joe was coming back toward the house, she realized with relief. But the flashlight wasn't aimed straight before him, it was focused on the ground.

He was tracking.

And whatever he was tracking was heading straight toward this house.

She opened the door again as he reached the driveway. "What is it, Joe?"

"Well, it's not a bear, unless it wears size twelve tennis shoes," he said grimly. He was moving across the driveway, the beam focused on the soft earth bordering the gravel. Then he stopped, his gaze on the ground beside the passenger door of the Jeep. He flashed the beam inside the Jeep and slowly, carefully opened the car door. "What the hell," he muttered. "Weird."

"Tell me," Eve said.

"It's a box on this passenger seat." He carefully examined the box before he took it out of the Jeep and placed it on the porch step. "It's wrapped in some kind of gold foil. Like I said, weird."

She started across the porch. "I want to see—"

"Stay where you are. I want to check it out first." He strode toward

the Toyota. "I'll get that portable bomb-detector kit that I keep in my trunk and see if that box is giving out a reading."

Joe had been trained in bomb disposal when he was in the SEALs, and Eve knew he still made a habit of carrying a portable unit with him as a detective with the Atlanta PD. He had used it more than once in past years.

She shivered as she looked at the glittering gold-foil box. Beautiful and glittering, and Joe thought it might be deadly.

But now he had the small mobile unit and was listening with the stethoscope to hear if there was anything that signaled a timer switch. "Nothing." He looked at the edge of the box. "It's not fastened." He was placing the end of the water hose under the edge of the box and backing across the driveway to the water spigot. "Get back inside. I'll turn on the water full force and blow this lid off as soon as I'm a safe distance."

"And how do you know that it's safe?"

"Inside," he said curtly. "Michael."

She went inside and slammed the door. Michael, the one unsailable argument. No matter what happened to either of them, Michael must survive. Her hands clenched on the drapes at the window as she watched Joe unwind the hose as he headed for the spigot.

She held her breath as she saw him connecting it to the spigot.

Then he turned on the water full force.

The lid of the box blew a foot in the air and then fell back onto the container.

No explosion. Just water pouring in a wild fountain over the gold box.

Joe jerked the hose aside and came back toward the box. "No C4." He was looking down at the contents of the box. "I don't know what the hell it is."

"Maybe some kid's idea of a practical joke?" She was coming down the porch steps now. "I feel a little foolish cowering inside."

"I don't," he said. "Whoever was out there in the woods was there

for a while, and he wasn't a kid. That's called stalking. And there are other people besides that kid, Gary, who think what you do is kind of scary." He was examining the interior. "Or, what's worse, that they don't think it's scary at all." His fingers were carefully exploring something. "There's a flat surface on the top that's glittering in the light . . ." He leaned closer and muttered a curse. "It's a mirror."

"What?" She came down the rest of the stairs and looked inside the box. It was a mirror that occupied the entire upper diameter of the interior of the box. It was glittering, framed in gold and perfectly reflected her face.

And that reflection mirrored both her bewilderment and fear. Fear. It was only because this entire episode was so unexpected and bizarre that she was feeling this shaken, she told herself. It would probably turn out to be the practical joke that had been her first thought.

"That's only the top layer, Joe." She moistened her lips. "What else is in the box?"

"I'm working on it." He was gently prying the frame of the mirror away from the sides of the box. "I'll have it in a minute . . ." Then it came free and he lifted it out.

Glittering mirrored shards fell down into the box.

"Double mirror," Joe said. "This side seems to be broken. It must have been cracked and, when I lifted, it broke entirely." He reached down to pick up one of the broken shards. "It fell on this black—" He inhaled sharply. "Holy shit."

Eve saw it too. The black velvet cloth had shifted to one side, uncovering something else equally black and very familiar to Eve. "It's a skull." She pulled the cloth completely away. Blackened. All flesh gone. "Burned. Someone burned this skull."

"It's the real thing?" Joe asked quietly. "Not just a good replica from a party store?"

"It's the real thing." She turned away as she saw the bullet hole in the temple. "And there's nothing that even hints at a party. Bring it inside. I need to look at it."

Joe didn't move. "I could take it down to the precinct. It's not really your problem. You don't have to be involved. Forensics will have to go over it anyway."

"I *am* involved." She looked back at him, and added fiercely, "How could I not be? He delivered this skull to *me*. He went to a great deal of trouble on this presentation. He brought it to my home." She gestured to the woods. "He stood there where my son could see him. Do you think that doesn't make it my problem?"

"It makes it *my* problem," Joe said. "I was hoping that I could keep you out of it." He picked up the box and carried it up the porch steps. "Not going to happen."

She nodded and held the door for him. "Put the box on my worktable and call Forensics and get them out here for testing right away."

"I'll do it while I take a look around the property." He placed the gold-wrapped box on her worktable in the studio area. "Lock the door behind me." He headed back toward the door. "I don't have to tell you not to touch anything until Forensics gets through with the initial investigation."

"Just get them here soon." She followed him to the door. "Be careful." She kissed him quickly. "And I'm not about to do anything with that skull until I make sure Michael is okay and safely in bed. I don't like the fact that he was the one who sent you out there."

"A bear," he reminded her.

"Maybe." She closed the door and locked it. Then she headed across the living room toward the bedrooms. She carefully averted her eyes from the gold box on her worktable as she passed by her studio. Beautiful gold paper covering a horror of blackened skull.

But skulls were never a horror to her, the horror was when monsters reached out to make them that way.

Michael's nightstand lamp was on, and she paused a moment in his doorway gazing at him. His eyes were shut, but she knew he was

not asleep. Clean and shining and beautiful, wonderful and yet also full of wonder.

She saw Cara's latest CD on top of the CD player on his nightstand. His photo of Cara was beside it. It was a picture he had snapped of her with his phone camera down at the lake. Cara was dressed in shorts and a white shirt and sitting cross-legged with her violin in her hands. She was smiling, her long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail and her brown eyes were shining with affection and humor. Eve had always loved that photo and searched out a frame for Michael when he had brought the picture to her. It showed more than the Cara who had a certain dark exotic beauty inherited from her Mexican father and Russian mother. It showed the depth, the spirit, the clean intensity of the young girl. And the heart, she thought, definitely the heart . . .

"Mama?" Michael opened his eyes that were so like the rich, tea color of his father's. "You came to say good night?"

"Among other things." She crossed the room and sat down on the bed beside him. "Don't worry, I'm not about to lecture you anymore. That's over." She took his hand. "Bear, Michael? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You would have gone out to see for yourself."

"I guarantee I wouldn't have confronted a bear without protection."

"But Dad *is* protection, isn't he? No need for you to have to do it."

She shook her head. "And you think we all have our places and duties? Sometimes it doesn't work like that. So come to me and tell me if you see a bear."

He smiled. "I'll tell you."

But he didn't say when he would do that, she thought ruefully. And anyone would think she was crazy to suspect him of avoiding that commitment. He was only a child.

“I want you to do that,” she said quietly. “It will make me unhappy if you don’t.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Then I have to do it.” He burrowed close to her. “Good night, Mama.”

“Oh, I’m dismissed?” She smiled down at him. “Okay, I’ll accept it, Michael. But there’s another thing I wanted to tell you. A few of the people your dad works with are coming over soon. They may make noise. I’ll close your door, but I didn’t want them to startle you. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I won’t be afraid of them.” His face was muffled against her. “Don’t you be afraid, Mama.”

She stiffened. “I won’t. Everything’s okay, Michael.”

“No. Not now.” He rolled back onto his pillow and pulled up his blanket. “Maybe soon . . .”

She sat there, gazing at him. “Soon?”

He smiled. “Cara’s coming. That should make it better.”

“She always makes things better. Did you play her CD when you got to bed?”

“No, I’ll do it tomorrow.”

But he’d been so eager to play it Eve knew. Though she knew she would not be playing it tonight either. “Tomorrow will be good, too.” She kissed him on the cheek and stood up. “You can look forward to it.” She headed for the door. “Remember, if you wake up, it’s only the people from your dad’s work.”

“I’ll remember.”

She stopped at the door. “A bear. It was so dark out tonight. Clouds. No moon. Why did you think it was a bear?”

“I only told Dad it *might* be a bear.”

“Why?”

He was silent. “Big, still, hungry, full of darkness. A bear could be like that, too, couldn’t it?”

Too?

She could feel a chill go through her. “I suppose it could. Good

night, Michael.” She closed his door behind her. She stood there a moment while she recovered from that sudden icy fear.

Full of darkness.

Whatever Michael had seen or sensed out there had been full of darkness. In that moment, darkness had reached out and touched him. All his life she had been trying to see that he was only surrounded by joy and sunlight. That he would never be drawn down into the darkness that would mean he would leave her as Bonnie had done.

No!

She would not *have* it. Never again.

Yet that darkness had come, wrapped in gold and mirrors, and it had called Michael toward it.

But she would fight it with all her strength.

And she would not let it come near him.

“They want to take the skull back to the lab,” Joe told Eve in a low voice. “In case they decide to do some more tests.”

“No.” She glanced at the four techs who were gathered around the skull. “They’ve taken DNA, tooth impressions, X-rays, made an impression of the skull itself. Taken samples around that bullet hole, done a dozen other forensic tests. They’re done, Joe. The skull is *mine* now. I’m going to do the reconstruction.”

“A reconstruction may not be necessary if they can get another form of ID.”

“It’s necessary for me.” She added jerkily, “It was necessary for him, or he wouldn’t have delivered her to me.”

“Her?”

“Female Caucasian from what I can tell. Forensics hasn’t let me get close enough to determine anything positively. I certainly can’t judge age or if this skull suffered additional trauma other than that bullet wound in the temple before he burned her.”

“You might run into a fight trying to keep her,” Joe said. “Forensics will want to be in control.”

“They can have control of the box. They can have the mirrors. They don’t get the skull. I’m ready for a fight.”

“I can see that.” His eyes were searching her face. “Would you care to elaborate?”

“I’ve been sitting here watching all those experts working on that skull, and I’ve been thinking of that man standing out there in the woods with that box in his hands. You said he must have stood there a long time.” She met his eyes. “That means he was there when you and Michael drove up.”

“Yes.”

“And you left Michael in the car.”

He went still. “Are you blaming me?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. Michael was within calling distance. The property is usually safe. How could you know . . . that . . . he was out there.” Her voice lowered. “What I’m saying is that he saw Michael. And when he brought that skull to the house, he didn’t put it on the porch or in front of the door. He put it on the passenger seat of the Jeep where Michael was sitting when you drove up.”

“Son of a *bitch*.” Joe was swearing softly. “Why didn’t I put that together?”

“You’ve had a few other things on your mind,” Eve said. “I’ve just been sitting here looking at that skull.”

“And thinking that putting that skull on Michael’s seat was a warning.”

“Or a prediction. Either way, I’m not letting that skull leave the house until I know who she is, maybe not then. He wanted me to have it, and he took a lot of trouble to do it. Perhaps it means something to him. Maybe he’ll come back for it.”

“That’s the last thing I want to happen,” Joe said. “I’ve already started to think about how to keep you and Michael safe.”

“I’m not worried. Like Michael says, *you* are the protection. You’ll just take extra precautions.”

“Damn right I will.”

“Then go and tell those forensic people they can’t have my skull. As you said, it may be a fight.”

“Screw it.” Joe turned away from her and headed back to her worktable. “Possession is nine-tenths. In this case, it’s a big number ten.”

CHAPTER

2

Eve took the black velvet cloth off the skull and started to set it up on the dais. “I’m surprised they left the cloth. It’s evidence,” she told Joe over her shoulder. “Those forensic techs weren’t pleased when they stomped out of here.”

“They took a sample. I’ll call and ask them if they want me to bring it to the precinct in the morning.” He checked his watch. “Which is only about six hours away.” He watched her work on the skull placement. “I know you’re eager, but you’re not going to start it tonight?”

She shook her head. “Tomorrow morning.” She stood back and wiped her hands on her towel. “Maybe after Michael goes to school. He takes my reconstructions as a matter of course, but he’s never seen me work on one that’s been burned and blackened like this. It might shake even him a bit.”

“I doubt it.” He put his arm around her waist. “But use your own judgment. Now come to bed. You need your rest.”

She let him lead her back to their room. She had to ask it. “You think *he’s* gone?”

“I know he’s gone. No footprints after they disappeared when they reached the main road. He probably had a car hidden there. And

when I sent Forensics on their way, I took another look around.” He opened the bedroom door. “No one outside. The alarm is on, and you have me to watch your back.” He smiled. “And all your other exceptional physical attributes. Now get undressed and let me hold you.”

“I’m on it.” She was already undressing. A moment later, she was in bed and cuddling close to him. He felt so good, so safe.

No darkness here . . .

“Your breakfast is on the bar. It’s eggs and sausage,” Eve told Michael as he came into the living room. “Then you need to hurry a little. You’re not taking the bus from down the road. Your dad is going to take you to school today, and we don’t want to make him late for work. Okay?”

“Okay.” He’d crawled up on the stool and was eating his breakfast. “Why?”

“Just a change from the school bus. Everyone needs a change.” She gave him his orange juice. “He’ll be picking you up, too. Or I will if I’m not busy.”

“But maybe you will be busy.” His gaze had wandered to her studio worktable across the room to the black-draped skull. “I didn’t see that yesterday. You have a new one?”

“Yes.”

“A kid?”

“Not this time. I think it’s a young woman.”

“You don’t do many of those.” He finished his eggs. “Why?”

Because children were so much more vulnerable than grown-ups. But she didn’t want to say those sad words. She modified them. “When you’re grown-up, you can take better care of yourself.”

“But she couldn’t. Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’ll try to find out. Done? Go brush your teeth.”

He nodded and jumped off the stool, his gaze still on the black velvet cover on the skull. “May I see her?”

Caught. Eve gazed at him in a quandary. She'd wanted to avoid this. "You may want to wait until I get a little farther along. She was in a fire, and it's a bit—it's not like some others you've seen."

"I want to see her. May I?"

She nodded. She had never tried to hide what she did and couldn't start now. She went over to the worktable. "Sure. Come and meet her. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"I won't." He followed her and rested his arms on her worktable. "Are you going to give her a name like you usually do?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't given her a name yet?"

"Not yet." She pulled off the black velvet cloth, her gaze narrowed on his face to gauge his reaction. "I haven't had time to think about it."

She breathed a sigh of relief. No fear. No horror. Only intense interest and something else . . . "I told you that it wasn't the same."

"None of them are the same." He was reaching out to gently touch that blackened cheekbone. "She never wanted to be the same . . ." His finger went to the gaping hole in the back of the skull. "It's gone, Mama. Why?"

How to delicately explain that her brain had exploded and blown away the skull? No delicate way. Don't explain. Generalize.

"It was the fire, Michael. This kind of thing happens very often when there's a fire."

"But you'll fix it?"

"Yes, I'll fix it."

"You'll fix everything." His gaze shifted from the skull to Eve's face. "I think she'll be beautiful, Mama."

"So do I." She gave him a swat. "Now go brush your teeth. You have to be out of here in five minutes."

"Okay." He was hurrying across the room, but he stopped as he started down the hall. "Sylvie."

She halted in the act of replacing the cloth. "What?"

“You should call her Sylvie.”

He disappeared into the bathroom.

Eve’s phone rang when she had barely started the initial measuring on the reconstruction.

Cara.

“Don’t you dare tell me you’re going to have to delay coming,” she said when she answered. “Michael was over the moon when I told him.”

“No, I still haven’t got the exact date, but I think it will be next week, if that’s okay,” Cara said. “But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.” She hesitated, then burst out, “Have you heard from Jock?”

Jock Gavin. Cara hadn’t spoken about him the last few times she’d called, but Eve had known he was always on her mind. Cara’s bond with Jock had started when she was only eleven, and he had saved her life. They had both led tortured lives filled with fear and loneliness and somehow when they’d come together, the child and the young man had become best friends, almost soul mates. But that did not mean that the relationship had been without friction. “No, not since last Christmas when he came here for that one day. Why? Haven’t you heard from him?”

“No.” Then she said in a rush, “Three months. Not for three months. He doesn’t answer my calls or my emails. What does he think he’s doing? Doesn’t he know I worry about him?”

“I can see how you’d be concerned. But you know that no one can take care of himself better than Jock.”

“How am I supposed to know that? Whenever MacDuff doesn’t need him, he’s climbing mountains or going off on round-the-world cruises or trekking off with one of his CIA buddies and trying to get himself shot.”

“He’s restless,” Eve said soothingly. “MacDuff may be his best friend, but they have separate lives. MacDuff is Laird of MacDuff’s

Run and is becoming occupied with all that goes with it. Jock will always be there for him, but he's exploring other avenues."

"Away from me," Cara said jerkily. "He won't talk to me."

Eve could sense the hurt, but she felt helpless to heal it. "That's not like Jock, and you know it." She paused, then probed. "Something's behind it?"

Cara was silent. "He's angry with me."

There it was. "Why?"

"I told him that I'd cleared all of July to spend the month with my grandfather in New Orleans."

No wonder he'd gone ballistic. Eve was upset herself. "And you didn't tell me?"

"I was going to do it next week. I knew you wouldn't like it, and I wanted to tell you face-to-face."

"No, I *don't* like it. Imagine that. Sergai Kaskov is head of one of the most powerful Mafia families in Moscow. I don't want you anywhere *near* him whether or not he's your grandfather. Just being around him is dangerous for you."

"I made him a promise, Eve," she said quietly. "He didn't ask much considering what he gave me in return. He didn't have to save you when you were carrying Michael and fighting that poison. But he did it, and you both lived. I barely knew him, but when I asked, he gave that to me."

It was hard to argue with her when she brought up that terrifying period in both their lives. Eve had been given a deadly poison by Kaskov's daughter, and he'd given her the antidote that had saved both her life and Michael's. "In exchange for one month with you every single year. That's not all that generous."

"Yes, it is," she said softly. "We have Michael. I have you, Eve. What's one month?"

"Ask Jock," Eve said grimly. "He thinks you could be the target of rival Mafia families, or that Kaskov might hurt you himself. When you started these damn visits four years ago, he asked me to stop you."

Jock never asks anything of anyone. Do you think it didn't mean something to him?"

"He shouldn't have done that."

"It didn't do any good anyway. You wouldn't listen to me. You've visited with Kaskov for the last three years. And now you have another one coming up? How long is this supposed to go on?"

"I don't know. I thought he'd get bored with me. It's not as if we interact very much. He conducts his business, and we eat meals together. I play for him in the evening. That's all that goes on."

"Evidently he's not bored if he continues to set up these visits."

"No." She paused. "It's the music. He loves my music. And he likes the idea that someone from his family is able to play well."

"Play well? You know that you're extraordinary, and I don't like the idea of Kaskov basking in your glory."

"Glory? It's all about the music, Eve."

"Maybe not to him," she said. "And it can't go on. Jock isn't going to permit it. You do know that during every visit, Jock was nearby monitoring what was going on?"

"He told me that he'd be there. I told him not to do it."

"You were afraid that one of your grandfather's goons might decide to take Jock out? Does that tell you anything?"

"You know I wouldn't have let that happen."

"It's Jock who wouldn't have let it happen," Eve said dryly. "No one has much of a chance against Jock Gavin. But he may be through with that holding pattern if he's that angry with you, Cara."

"If he'd just let me talk to him, I can make it right."

"Maybe not this. Perhaps he's taking a step back to make a statement."

"You mean to punish me? I can't believe he'd do that," she said unevenly. "He knows how much he can hurt me. He's my best friend. He's everything."

"Then think about how much these visits have been hurting him, where he has to stand by and do nothing."

“I have to keep my promise.”

Stubborn, and so damn honorable that Eve wanted to shake her. “Then you should be prepared for an explosion in the near future.”

“Not if I can talk to him. I *will* talk to him. I called Jane and asked her to tell him to call me. If that doesn’t work, I’ll call MacDuff. He loves MacDuff. He listens to him.”

“And you called me. You’re pulling out all the stops.” She knew how determined Cara could be. If something was important to her, then she would keep on fighting until she got her way. And there was no one more important to her than Jock Gavin. “Think about it, Cara. There’s such a thing as compromise.”

“I did compromise. Only one month, Eve. And Michael is alive, and so are you.” She drew a deep breath. “You and Joe took me into your home and your lives, then Michael came along, and he was . . . magic. Do you know what that means to me? Maybe you could have found another way to save yourself and Michael, but I only saw one way. Don’t be mad at me because I took it.”

“I was never angry with you.” Eve was unbearably touched. “Joe and I love you. You’re a member of our family now. I just want you to stop trying to take care of all of us and start living a good life. You worry about Kaskov and Jock and Michael, Joe, and me. And you work so hard on your music at that school. Do you even have any friends there?”

“Not much time. Lessons and practice. They keep us pretty busy.”

“That’s what you’ve been telling me for years.”

“It’s true.” She added, “But you’ll be glad to know I’ve made one friend this quarter. Housing Admin gave me a roommate because the residence halls were overcrowded. They’ve even been sending us around to different events together.”

“What instrument?”

“No instrument. She’s a soprano. Wonderful range.”

“Encouraging. Now tell me you do something together that doesn’t involve music.”

“We went ice-skating two weeks ago.”

“That’s a start. What’s her name?”

“Darcy Nichols. She’s a couple years older and she’s nothing like me. Blond, blue-eyed, so gorgeous that people stop on the street and look at her. Way more sophisticated than I’ll probably ever be. She’s smart, funny, and she used to be on some Disney show when she was a kid. It ran for years. *Golden Days*. Did you ever see it?”

“No, but then I was a little too busy for Disney.”

“Me, too. But I think she was pretty famous while the show was running. Anyway, she never acts as if it was a big deal. She kind of pokes fun at herself. Let’s see, what else can I tell you about her . . . Oh, she likes swimming and movies and rock stars. Is that good enough for you, Eve?”

“If it’s good enough for you. Do you like her?”

“I do like her. She works hard, she’s honest.” She paused, then said slowly, “At first, I wasn’t sure about her. She kind of took my breath away. She takes everyone’s breath away. She kind of . . . sparkles. She operates at top speed, and she’s curious about everything around her. I guess I was a little intimidated.”

“Not you.”

“She was different. But, as I got to know her, I realized she might not be all that different. I think she may be a lot like me.”

“In what way?”

She was silent. “She has nightmares, too.”

Eve didn’t speak for an instant. Cara hadn’t mentioned those nightmares for a long time. When a small child she had been hunted by a cartel enforcer who had killed her sister and the woman who had raised her. It was no wonder that she’d been plagued by nightmares. Eve had hoped that their frequency had lessened after Cara had come to them. “Not something I’d want to have in common. Do you still have them?”

“Sometimes. Not often.” She added, “I’m fine, Eve. I get better all the time. Now who’s worrying?”

“I just want you to have all the things you missed while you were on the run.”

“You’ve given me everything. I have the music. I have people who care about me. What else is there?” She changed the subject. “And everyone probably has nightmares. I just didn’t know because I never had a roommate before. But I woke up several times in the past couple months when I heard her crying out.”

“Did you ever talk to her about them?”

“No, that would have been an intrusion. She has a right to her privacy.”

“But you’re tempted.”

“I had my friend, Elena, to help me through my nightmares while I was on the run. Darcy seems to have no one. I think she’s . . . hurting. Sometimes it hurts me to see her . . .”

That’s all Cara needed, Eve thought, a roommate with emotional problems that she’d struggle to solve. But didn’t everyone try to solve the problems of the people they cared about? It was part of life. “Then you’ll do whatever you have to do. You have great instincts.”

“Do I? You and Jock don’t always seem to agree with them.” She chuckled. “But even when you shoot me down, you do it with infinite kindness.” She changed the subject. “So it’s okay if I come home next week? If it’s more convenient, I might be able to change my classes and come this week instead.”

Eve’s glance shifted to the skull in front of her. Talking to Cara had brought home to her that life was difficult and filled with problems, but with effort they had a chance of being solved. The ugliness that had been done to this young woman and the silent threat of her being deposited on Eve’s doorstep might not be as easy to resolve. She was once more feeling that sudden sense of urgency again. “No, next week is just fine, Cara. No hurry.”

After she had hung up the phone, she sat there an instant, looking at the ruin of that scorched and blackened face. What had driven this monster to try to destroy whatever beauty of form and soul this

woman had possessed? “It doesn’t matter,” she whispered. “He couldn’t do what he intended to do. We won’t let him win.” Then she picked up her measuring device again. “I’ll try to get through this boring stuff quickly, but it has to be done. Then we can get down to bringing you back to the way you should be, Sylvie . . .”

CARNEGIE RESIDENCE HALL
NEW YORK CITY

“You’re going to be late,” Darcy Nichols said over her shoulder as she ran past Cara on the way to the stairs. “The bus for that Wounded Warrior Concert in Connecticut leaves in ten minutes. You know Madam Gallono will *kill* us if we don’t show up there on time.”

“I won’t be late.” Cara was hurrying after her. “And if I am, all I’ll have to do is slip in behind you and no one will even notice me.” She chuckled. “You know how to grab and hold the spotlight.”

“True.” Darcy glanced over her shoulder with a brilliant smile that had a hint of mischief. “Only a few months together, and you’ve learned how to make use of me. Everyone thinks that I’m the lightweight, and you’re so serious and dedicated, but you’ve got them all fooled.”

“Yeah, I’m clearly a master manipulator,” Cara said as she followed Darcy down the stairs. “I wouldn’t have been late, but that call just took longer than I thought it—”

She stopped short.

She’d reached the turn of the stairs and come in view of the reception area below and saw the man who stood there by the desk.

“Jock?” she whispered.

Darcy had stopped, too, her eyes widening. “Who on earth is that?” she murmured. “My God, he’s fantastic.”

That’s what everyone thought when they first saw Jock, Cara thought. Fair hair, tan, perfect, almost Grecian features, shimmering

gray eyes. Strength and grace and that quiet stillness that hid so much. When she had first seen him when she was much younger, she had thought he looked like the prince from a fairy tale. These days she hardly noticed what he looked like on the outside because there was so much inside. But this was Darcy's first sight of him, and she was getting the full impact.

"That's my friend, Jock Gavin," Cara said.

"And you never told me about him? Introduce me. I believe I may be in lust."

"You don't have time." Cara was meeting Jock's eyes as she finished walking slowly down the stairs. Her heart was plunging. Fear. She was so afraid of what was to come. No smile. And those gray eyes were cold. "You have a bus to catch, Darcy."

"So do you."

"I'll get there some other way."

"And you want me out of here," Darcy said shrewdly. "I would, too, if I were you. I should have known. You're such a workaholic, it would take someone like that to get you to sit up and take notice." She smiled and gave Cara's arm a quick squeeze. "Don't worry. I'll cover for you. You were joking, but I really can make black look white or gold or whatever. Just make sure you get there. See you in Connecticut." Then she was dashing across the reception area and out the front door.

Cara braced herself, then was walking to the reception desk toward Jock. "You didn't have to come to see me. A phone call would have done the trick. Or even an email. All I wanted to know was that you were alive and well. Would that have been too much?"

"Aye," he said coldly, his slight Scottish accent making the word even more clipped. "The way I was feeling, I had to block you out entirely. I couldn't take any more, Cara."

"You can take anything. I know how strong you are." Even to herself her voice sounded uneven. She paused, then forced herself to say the words she'd been preparing. "If you don't want to see me any-

more, then that's different. But you shouldn't have just walked away from me. You're important to me. You're my best friend. You should have known I'd come after you. That's all I wanted to say to you if you'd answered my calls." His face was so hard, but she forced herself to go on. "But you didn't, and that's an answer in itself, isn't it?" She couldn't take this any longer. She was hurting too much. She walked past him toward the front door. "All you had to do was make me understand. Evidently, that's what you came to do. Thanks for making it clear. Good-bye, Jock."

His hand was on her arm. "You're not going anywhere. I came here to talk to you. I'm going to do it."

She shook her head. "I have to get to Connecticut. I have a concert. It's an obligation."

His lips twisted. "And I know how you feel about obligations." He took her violin case. "I hired a limo for the day. I knew this wasn't going to be a quick fix, and your place here in this residency is like a nunnery. I'll drive you to your 'obligation.'" He nudged her toward the gray limo at the curb. "Just give the driver the address, then lean back and stop looking at me like that. I've had enough for right now."

She hesitated and got into the limo. She gave the uniformed driver behind the plastic divider the address of the auditorium in Fairfield, Connecticut. "Quick fix?" She didn't look at him. "Is it going to be a fix at all? I thought maybe you'd decided I was getting in your way. I know how busy you've been lately."

"And that's why you've been bombarding me with calls and emails? Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to ignore them? You never give up."

"No, I don't. I had to be sure. Did you expect me to let pride get in my way after all we've been through together? I had to make you tell me." She still wasn't looking at him, her eyes fastened on the plastic shield separating them from the driver. "So tell me, Jock. You decided that I wasn't worth the trouble? That I'm just a kid who wandered into your life and brought you nothing but headaches and now

you want out? Because that's what I've been thinking for the last three months."

"Look at me."

"You told me not to look at you."

"Look at me."

She looked at him.

The hardness and cold was gone. There was only weariness. "You're the one who should want out. How many times have I told you that I interfere with your life? You have your music, you have Eve and Joe and Michael. You're only eighteen. You have your whole life in front of you. I just get in your way."

"How could you get in my way when I hardly ever see you?"

"I seem to manage," he said dryly. "There's no one in the world as loyal and steadfast as you, Cara. I saved your life, so you think it belongs to me? It belongs to *you*. Only to you, Cara."

"You bet it does. So I should do what I want to do with it." She made an impatient gesture. "And you know that's only the tip of the iceberg. You became my *friend*, and there's no one who knows me like you do. Everyone I loved had been killed, and I felt so alone inside. And then you were there, and I wasn't alone anymore. I can't even talk to Eve the way I talk to you." She paused. "Even though you don't feel you can talk to me."

He went still. "I talk to you all the time, Cara."

"About me, always about me, never about you."

His lips twisted. "I'm quite sure Jane and Eve have filled you in on my background. It would be their duty to warn you against me."

"Of course they told me. But not because they thought there was any chance of your hurting me. They know you, Jock. It wasn't your fault. You were younger than me when that terrorist, Reilly, brain-washed you and tried to make you into an assassin."

"He didn't try, he succeeded," Jock corrected without expression. "I was the ultimate assassin."

"And you ended up in a mental hospital where MacDuff found

you after you tried to commit suicide.” She repeated, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“There could be endless philosophic discussions about that statement. MacDuff prefers that I don’t explore them. Let’s just say that I am what I am.”

“And that’s good and shining inside,” she said fiercely. “I’ve always known that.”

“You can’t know. And you’ve never asked me anything about that time.”

“I was waiting for you to tell me.”

“You would have waited a long time. I’ll never take you down to that particular hell, Cara.”

“Then that’s okay. As long as you know I’d go with you if you asked me.”

He nodded slowly as he reached out and took her hand. “Oh, I know that, Cara. That’s what this is all about. I thought I’d take another shot at stepping away, so you wouldn’t be tempted to follow me.”

She could feel the painful knot inside her loosen and begin to dissolve. It was going to be all right. This was the Jock she knew. Her hand tightened on his. “I thought you might be angry about my going to New Orleans with my grandfather.”

“That was part of it. I had to go and check something out anyway, so I decided I’d take the opportunity to see whether if I expressed my displeasure in the cruelest possible form, you might change your mind.”

“I made my grandfather a promise.”

“And I’m tired of hearing that,” he said tersely. “But evidently I’ll have to try to give you a reason other than the fact that the entire situation makes me crazy. So I’ll tell you what I’ve been doing for the last three months.”

“Besides avoiding me.”

He smiled faintly. “I’m not going to be forgiven for that, am I?”

“No. It hurt too much.”

“So did the idea that you were going into the mouth of the lion again.” He made a motion as she opened her mouth to speak. “Let me get this over with. You know I’ve never liked the idea of your being in New York alone while you were going to school? I’ve told you often enough.”

“Yes you have. But it’s not as if the school isn’t safe. Juilliard was superstrict, and when I transferred to Carnegie Tech, it was the same. Carnegie Tech is the best music academy in the country, and you said yourself the living quarters are like a nunnery. Eve and Joe believe I’m safe there.”

He shrugged. “Maybe if you were anyone else, you would be safe. But you’re the granddaughter of a Mafia kingpin who wields a hell of a lot of power both in Russia and Europe. He’s a criminal, and there’s nothing stable about criminals. Because of his power, he’s made enemies galore in the other crime families and of the people he’s victimized. Any one of them would be delighted to get their hands on you so they could hurt Kaskov in the most personal way possible.”

“You’ve said that before, but I’ve gone to this school for years, and no one has made any move on me yet.”

“No, they haven’t.” He paused. “Not yet.”

She stiffened. “That sounded menacing.” She tried to smile. “Is there supposed to be some dramatic John Williams music playing in the background?”

“It’s like you to connect everything to music. This *is* menacing.” He grimaced. “And you’re probably not going to like it. I’ve had someone keeping an eye on you since you’ve been here.”

“What?”

“I told you that you wouldn’t like it. Jim Stanton is very good, unobtrusive, and he never takes chances with his clients. It made me feel better.”

“And a waste of your money.”

He grinned. “I have lots of that commodity these days. I didn’t

consider it a waste if it made me happier about your situation.” He looked at her warily. “It’s not as if Stanton interfered with you in any way. You didn’t even know he was around. He was just there in the background.”

“And not necessary.” She shook her head. “You act as if I should be angry with you. Am I supposed to bristle because you’ve attacked my independence? I know how easy it is to kill people. You turn your head, and someone you love is dead. If I thought that someone was trying to hurt you, I’d hire a Stanton to watch you if I could afford him.”

He flinched. “Please don’t do that. I have a tendency to act instead of ask questions.”

“I just hate that you wasted your money.”

His smile faded. “You’ve forgotten that ‘yet’ accompanied by your John Williams music. About the time you were blowing my mind about going to New Orleans to visit Kaskov, Stanton was giving me a report. He said that you were being shadowed. At first, he wasn’t certain. Whoever was doing it was very good. And even after he caught a glimpse of the tail and confirmed, he couldn’t be certain how long the surveillance had been going on. But he must have realized pretty quickly that Stanton had made him, and the surveillance stopped.”

Cara was feeling her heart pounding. Someone watching. Someone waiting. All through her childhood, she’d been on the run, changing cities, changing schools because there might be a threat behind her. Now it was suddenly here again. “And nothing since then?”

“Not that he’s been aware of. He watched and waited, but he didn’t see anyone following you.”

“Then it could have been anyone. Maybe some pervert who likes schoolgirls.”

“Except that Stanton said he was exceptionally good at what he was doing.” He made a face. “And prepare for another John Williams

moment. Stanton got uneasy after a week or so and decided to check something else. He managed to get into your quarters to have a look around.”

She frowned. “Now that’s not cool, Jock.”

“No, it wasn’t. Because he found out that the room had been bugged.”

She stared at him, stunned. “Why? For goodness sake, I play the violin, and I talk to Eve and Michael. Why would anyone want to listen to me do either of those things?”

“You’ve forgotten. You also harass me,” he said dryly. “Though I haven’t given you the opportunity recently. And listening to you play is a treasure in itself, but I’m not sure that’s why he’d bug your room. I’m going with the idea that since he no longer had direct access to you, he wanted to know everything he could find out by other means.” He looked down at her violin. “Like this concert. How were you going to get there?”

“There’s a special bus from the school.”

“Easy to watch. Easy to access.”

She moistened her lips. “Maybe. But there are other performers almost everywhere I go.”

“Almost.” He muttered a curse. “I’m scaring you. I don’t want to do that. Or maybe I do. Because I’ve spent the last few months in Moscow trying to tap every contact I have to see if there are any rumblings about Kaskov. Or if there’s any talk about any of the Mafia families who have been particularly vocal about what kind of mayhem they’d like to practice on him.”

“And what did you find out?”

“Nothing conclusive. Which made me frustrated and mad as hell and sent me back here to see if I could find out anything more from Stanton.”

“And to let me know that I was harassing you.” She looked down at their joined hands. “You did scare me. It brought back too many memories.”

“I know it did. But you’re not alone now. I’ll never let anything happen to you.” He added grimly. “Just stay away from Kaskov. Don’t go to New Orleans.”

“You said you didn’t find out anything in Moscow. Maybe it doesn’t matter if I go to New Orleans or not.”

“And maybe it does.” His lips tightened. “You said you were frightened, but you’re still not saying that you’re not going to go.”

“I have to think about it. I’m a little . . . shook right now,” she said. “So stop trying to bully me into doing what you want.”

“Cara.”

“I have to think.” She leaned forward. “There’s the auditorium up ahead. Are you going to stay and listen to me?”

He didn’t answer.

“Don’t shut me out again,” she whispered. “It didn’t work, and it hurt both of us.”

He hesitated, then he lifted her hand up to his lips and kissed her palm. “I wouldn’t miss listening to you play. You’re right, it didn’t work.” He released her hand as they drew up to the curb. “That sign says it’s sold-out. Can you smuggle me in the stage door?”

“Yes.” She looked out the window. “There’s Darcy, she’ll help. She just smiles, and everyone bends over backward.”

“That’s your new roommate?” His gaze followed Cara’s. “I can see how that might happen. She’s absolutely lovely. Wonderful features.”

Cara nodded. “The complete package.” Darcy’s long blond hair framed high cheekbones, square jaw, and wide-set blue eyes that were riveting. In her white, tea-length gown, she had definite star quality. “And she has a superb voice. Though the reviews almost always mention her face and figure as much as her voice. It’s not fair. I guess I’m lucky.”

“I guess you are.” His eyes were twinkling as he got out of the car and held out his hand to help her. “It’s wonderful that you’re so ugly that it doesn’t interfere with the music.”

“Well, it’s true. Oh, I’m not bad-looking, but it’s difficult for—” She saw his face and she slapped his hand away. “Stop smiling. And you’d have just as bad a time as Darcy does. You’re just as beautiful and you’d see how—”

He made a face. “Beautiful?”

“You know you are. There’s no other word for you. You’re above and beyond. You just smile and women go into a tailspin. Now come on and I’ll introduce you to Darcy. She thinks you’re hot. You dazzled her when she saw you in reception. I have to make it right for not introducing you then. It wasn’t the time.”

“No, it wasn’t the time,” he said quietly. “That seems to be our mantra, doesn’t it?” He didn’t wait for an answer but stepped forward as he reached Darcy and held out his hand. “Hi, I’m Jock.” His smile was totally charming and lit his face with warmth that was close to radiance. “Cara tells me if anyone can sneak me into this concert, it will be you. What can I do to persuade you to do it?”

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