

A woman with long, wavy red hair and blue eyes is leaning against a drum set. She is wearing a dark, strapless top. The background is a blurred drum set with various cymbals and drums. The lighting is soft and focused on the woman.

DUNMORE ROAD CONCERT

North American Tour

J BENNINGTON

The Dunmore Road Concert

J Bennington

© Copyright 2016 J Bennington

This is an authorized free edition from www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form, translated, or rewritten. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author and Obooko.

Cover Image designed by:

Diane Costanza

<http://www.selfpubbookcovers.com/dianecostanzastudio>

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

Chapter 1

The last number for the final show in Alberta, Canada, ended. Maureen Lannon, the band leader, her manager and producer, Patrice Westfield, and several band members stood in front of the audience of 19,000 plus. She bowed at the applause and clamor for more. First, Maureen dropped to her knees, wearing faded denim jeans and a yellow plaid cotton shirt with the cuffs rolled up two turns. It was the outfit fans chose, requested, and begged for her to wear after her third concert in Ireland. She ignored the sweaty raven hair tied back in a ponytail, held both hands to her mouth, flung a huge kiss to them, keyed her public microphone, and yelled to be heard, "I love you. I love you. You're the greatest! Wahoo!"

The rest of the band joined her and then they stood to chants and demands of "Vanessa! Vanessa!"

Maureen shook her head and bowed again as she waved to her drummer, Vanessa Charles. "Come on, honey. They want to give you a special thanks!"

Vanessa took her drumsticks with her and jogged across the stage to stand with Maureen, thrilled with the cat calls, whistles and stomping feet.

Maureen patted her shoulders as she moved her to the front. "You got quite a following, honey. Please give them a huge kiss like I did. Then you might consider an autograph session tonight."

Vanessa beamed and knelt to do just that. Then she held up her drumsticks and semi-quiet returned. She winked, stuck the tips in her mouth, pulled them out, and jumped to her feet as she flung them into the bleachers. She laughed and enjoyed the fight that broke out to see who would catch one.

Finally, two men stood holding them over their heads and grinning like champions.

Maureen put a hand across her forehead and stared at the stage floor. "Fling her ass off the stage and be done with her."

Patrice rested a hand on her shoulder for support. "Easy. Don't do it."

"I won't, but I'll damned sure think it. Wench!"

Vanessa did not see the stress she caused. Instead, she blew another kiss, removed her blouse, knotted it among more chaotic shouting, and flung it into the bleachers, causing a massive fight as cameras flashed to get pictures of her in her bra.

The sound system shut down, and the audience began to spew from the bleachers. Patrice patted Maureen's shoulder.

"That girl is going to cause serious trouble."

"I know!"

"Why don't you let her go?"

Maureen gritted her teeth and suppressed a scream. "You know already! Because she has such a huge fan base. Pisses me off that the last estimate of this show was 65% just to see her perform! How can I justify letting someone like that, with that pull, go and begin from nothing? That's a big dilemma for me. That's why she's still here but acts like tonight are grating on my nerves."

"Want me to talk with her or fire her?"

Maureen sighed and swiped her face as the band broke down their equipment. It was the ninth show of the tour, with the final show being in Dallas, Texas, and then home to Ireland for a much-needed break.

"Maybe. I'll think of something. I have to soon."

With that comment voiced Vanessa danced across the stage and stood beside them. “Wasn’t that thrilling? I simply love it! What an audience! What a fan club!”

Maureen snorted. “What a slut performance.”

“What? What do you mean by that?”

“What I mean is, there was no need for you to French Kiss the drumsticks and toss them into the stands like that. And even if it was necessary, tossing your blouse second was more unnecessary. You want to have a sex tart following, do it on your own time, not on mine.”

“Hey, you know how many people come to these shows to see me?”

Her jaw muscles tightened considerably, and so did her fists, but she restrained herself. “I’m aware of that, Vanessa Charles! And you need to be aware that this is a Celtic Band. We provide Celtic music entertainment to our fans and audiences! We don’t provide sexual entertainment or sexual antics like you did tonight! Every member is here for the whole band, not for themselves! And if you keep this sex-tart attitude and show going for yourself, you’ll find yourself doing it for yourself! I’m fed up with that side of you and I’m not going to tolerate it too much longer! I’ll replace you and restore the image that we started with! When you get the urge to do your own performance the next time, remember who signs your paycheck! You’re the Payee, not the Authorized Signature, which is me!”

“Phew. Sorry to have upset you. I’ll go now,” Vanessa said and left the stage hastily.

Several band members paraded behind her when she was out of hearing range and congratulated Maureen.

“Grand show, boss. It’s about time you brought the hammer down. She’s needed an ass-kicking for a while. She’s good, but she’s not the whole Dunmore Road. She needs to remember that. Thanks for the reminder, kick in the butt. We’re proud of you, mamma.”

The praise brought a blush and a rush of joy to her. “Okay, guys. Keep moving. Get some rest. Morning won’t back up for anyone. We have 16 more shows before Dallas and a vacation I can’t wait for.”

Patrice strolled with her to their current office and sat a spell until security called, telling them the audience had cleared the grounds.

“She’s going to cause you trouble.”

“Patrice, I know that, but right now, my hands are tied. I can’t advertise and audition for a new drummer right now. That would screw us up royally. You know that. I hope that she’ll straighten out and do well for the rest of this fantastic unimaginable tour you arranged. I swear you have angels helping you sometimes.”

“Only a rumor. It’s all who you know and massive luck.”

“Anyway, that’s four months from now. Then we’ve got what, six months before the next studio album release? If she refuses to change, we can replace her in that time.”

“Six months? You’re cutting it close for that deal. This is album twenty, and it’s crucial to your longevity.”

“Gah!” She propped up her feet on the desktop. “I know! Can’t you be positive about anything?”

“I’m trying, but I can’t control the fan base or the investors.”

“Screw the investors!” She snapped her fingers. “Hey, wait a darn moment. Maybe we could get Vanessa to do that. Keep them interested, keep her entertained while we get a replacement, and goodbye, baby.” She paused and frowned. “Wait a moment. We don’t have investors.”

Patrice laughed. “Good thought. Increase what we don’t want. Why not pray for a lightning bolt to zap her and then press on.”

“Brilliant idea! Artists get busted for lip-syncing in public shows, we could drum-synch her performances from past albums and let a monkey sit in her chair and smack pillows.”

Patrice stood on that comment. “Keep dreaming. Keep praying for lightning. Think hard and come up with a good plan.”

*

The threat of a thunderstorm or lightning strike did not bother Betsy Riley in Lost Creek, West Virginia. After a rotten deal with satellite television and internet service, she was back on wired cable. Service was not dropped due to clouds, rain, snow, or electronic PMS. The only disruption was a tree snapping the line. Storms thrilled her immensely, but the broadcast show of Dunmore Road from Canada annoyed her beyond greatly.

She stuck her Bluetooth in her right ear, picked up her cell phone to deliver a harsh rebuke to Vanessa, and lightning struck nearby. She yelped and heard a tree tear from the strike and then heard it fall right before a thunder vibrated the windows and shook the ground. The lights blinked out on her way to the living room window to see what happened, and she felt the last few feet to the sofa. She saw the elm tree split with a good two-thirds dangling toward the road during the next flash.

She turned to sit on the sofa and checked her cell phone. “No bars? Bummer. Only bad thing about cell phones. Need external electricity to have service. Bummer.” She closed it and laid it aside. “Bummer for the elm tree, but I guess like all good things, some of them must end, with or without reason. Spent many hours enjoying its shade. Now I’ll enjoy its heat next winter in the fireplace.”

She sighed, grabbed a cushion, and, with a scream, threw it across the room to collide with the wet bar. She leaned her head back and stared at the ceiling. “I’ve lost so much. Everything I love, I lose. How much more can I lose before I lose my life? I can. A rope in the barn and an unforgivable drop from the loft and goodbye, Betsy. Who would care? If you’re listening, Lord, send me one person who can return a teensy bit of love. If not, that’s next. I can’t deal with this loneliness much more. Only the animals would miss me.”

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “Yeah, the animals would miss me. They’d die without me, ‘because no one would check on me until they were all gone to sleep with me. Is that why I’m still alive? To care for them? Maybe I should start eating them one at a time. Then, when I’m done with them, it will be my turn. Are you listening? I’m lonely here. Please help me.”

Following another lightning flash and thunder roll, the lights came back on.

She checked and had four bars of signal strength. “Good. Thanks.” She prepared to open her phone list when it rang, and she recognized the number.

“Hey, Cole buddy. What’s up?”

“Hey, Betsy. You sound down and out even if you’re trying to be cheerful. What’s wrong?”

“You’re there. I’m here. The show was broadcast. Need you ask?”

“No. Don’t know what to say. There was no need for that action. It’s her worst yet.

However, Maureen put her on notice, and it was in public, while the band started breaking down. She was not quiet about it and from what we could see of the audience, some of them even heard it. And can I tell you the rest of us cheered her. The bitch had it coming. Sorry.”

“No need for apologies. It’s not you. It’s totally her.”

“What’s up her ass anyway?”

“That’s Vanessa. Must be the center of attention, no matter what. So, since she’s had so many requests for autographed photos, it’s gone to her head. She’s THE woman that every man in the world must have. And in the last six shows, she’s given them a thrill and keeps getting worse in her actions. That’s Vanessa, and she sees nothing wrong with it.”

“Well, since she’s on notice, I hope she wakes up. If not, she’s gone, and we’ll fare better without her.”

“That could hurt the band.”

“It might, but I’ve got the feeling that we’d bounce back and be okay. We might be even better. It’s a tough call, though. A lot of bands are wiped out when the fans turn their focus on one person, be it drums or guitars. It’s like a hostile takeover where it comes from the fans versus another band buying them out.”

“Bummer.”

“So, why else are you down?”

“Eh. Same thing. Lonely. Bored. Isolated. Misused. Abused. Lonely. Unloved. Feeling like a loser. Lost my son to an alligator. Lost my mind. Lost my husband to a 19-year-old college student. Lost my home. Now? Ever hear of anyone losing their grave site? Maybe I’ll be the first. Set a world record. Where in the universe is Betsy buried? Could be a new board game.”

“Hey, Betsy, don’t talk like that. Last time I was there, I saw no barbed wire or guard towers. All I saw was a wood fence, and one huge gate latched but not locked. You have a small truck. You have money. If you’re lonely, hit the road. Get back into life. Come and join us. Maureen will give you a job, or we will. You’ll never have anything while you sit on the galaxy’s edge, feel sorry for yourself, and wait for some airhead to return even a hundredth of the love you’ve poured out.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. Shouldn’t talk that way, but sometimes it just piles up on me.”

“You know, it’s been too long since this rowdy gang of musicians have seen you or spent any time with you. Why don’t you make plans to join us at the last stop in Dallas, Texas? We’d all love that and I know you would. What do you think?”

“I don’t know, Cole. I’ll consider it and give you a call later. That’s, what, four months away?”

“Yeah. This is a long and exhausting tour, but every show just rockets Maureen and us into higher acclaim and money. It’s giving us credibility and a shot of being number two next year, if not number one, in the Celtic Music World charts. We’re all feeling high and like we’re finally riding on a gravy train. Seriously. Only dent in our heavenly environment is Vanessa, but I think she’ll straighten out.”

“For your sake, I hope so. You guys are awesome and can only get better.”

“A visit from you would make us better. And seriously, I’d like you to visit Rasheen and me in Ireland. She’s due to deliver soon and I know she’d love some feminine help for a while. Truly, Betsy. Think hard then say yes.”

“Look, I’ll seriously consider it and call you within a week from now. Promise.”

She disconnected the call, visited the kitchen for a drink of water and the next call arrived as she neared the table and her Bluetooth answered.

“Hello, sweetie. How are you doing?”

Betsy paused and turned a chair to sit facing her kitchen door and by the window. “Doing okay, and you.”

“Missing you. You watch the show?”

“Yes.”

“Did you like it?”

“Always do. Makes me want to be on the road with you versus being here. Loved it, really, except that last part. Did you have to do that?”

“Oh, lighten up, will ya? The fans loved it. You didn’t like it?”

“Not really. You know I’m a prude. You’ve told me that often. French kissing the drumsticks? Tossing your blouse? Really? You just had to do that, huh?”

“No, I didn’t have to do that, but you know I love selling myself and boosting my image as high as I can. Recall that’s how the door opened for us, via my website and photo gallery. You liked what you saw. I liked what I heard. You better or worse now?”

“Better, but that bugs me. If you have me, you shouldn’t feel the need to sell yourself any longer. You know? But you do. Doesn’t make sense to me, however, I’ll get over it. I always do.”

“Sorry, but I love an increase in fan ratings when I act up like that. Imagine the free publicity on gossip pages. And I’m being a good girl whether it seems that way or not.”

“No worry there. Do you get a break after this tour?”

“Yes. After Dallas I’ll be home for about 4 months. We’ll enjoy some together time, sweetie. Should be about bedtime there. You headed that way?”

“Was until an awesome storm front moved through. Had to exhilarate myself, recharge my batteries.”

“I know. You nearly get off watching them come in. Any damage?”

“The elm tree couldn’t handle the lightning strike, but, oh well. I’ll call a contractor tomorrow morning. Right now, I’m fixing to have some calming tea and hit the bed. Alone.”

“Okay. I love you sweetie. Looking forward to seeing you soon.”

Betsy disconnected again and pulled aside one curtain to look at the still waving trees and driving rain visible around the porch where waving branches often turned on the security flood lights.

“Are you being a good girl? I guess in your mind you are. But in my mind, you’re not. Every hint that I’m getting fed up with your fan base and being ignored just passes through your ‘good girl’ mind when you dream up the next risqué thing to do to expose your sexuality. Well, that does not impress me.”

She made a mock gagging motion, dropped the curtains, and hit the table top. “Stop it! Just stop it, self! Don’t get yourself wound up in a frenzy tonight. You know what’s in store if you do. Just let it ride this time.”

She let it ride, but not before she finished a large cup of chamomile tea and chased it with two shots of gin. Two hours later she woke for a bathroom stop and four more shots of gin.

*

When morning shone through the windows, Betsy woke face down on the bed with her left arm numb and stiff from dangling over the side. Her right was stuck under her pillow and her head ached, and her mouth was dry and pasted. She took another bathroom break, stumbled to the kitchen for two glasses of water and snuggled on the couch to recoup and fell asleep again.

Her cell phone rang and vibrated to wake her, but she could not locate it. She pushed herself up and yawned as she started to focus. The rings quit and she flashed it an obscene gesture. “Don’t ring again until I’m awake and ready for calls. That should be a built-in function. A person is sleeping, don’t disturb them. Trolls!”

There was no message left tones, so she picked up her Bluetooth from the end table, placed it in her ear and headed for the kitchen. She checked her phone on the table but did not recognize the number or even the area code and there was no name. She shrugged and started a pot of coffee before she noted the time.

“Ten o’clock? Wow! Never slept that long in a long time or had to pee so much in a long time. What’s up with that? I know I’m pissed off right now but come on.”

She returned and prepared a cup of coffee when her Bluetooth chimed and answered.

“Hello? Who am I speaking with?” said the caller.

“You don’t know? You called me. You some weird or backward telemarketer? Thought you guys had better power equipment to tell you who you’re calling while you use a phony number.”

“I’m not one of those. Do you still need help, whoever you are? You didn’t leave a name.”

“Didn’t leave a name?” She sat on the chair by the window and hooked the curtain back to enjoy the view. It looked peaceful and slightly foggy after the storm. “Sorry, but you’ve lost me.”

“Then let’s start this over. I’m Dillon Grant. I got the number from a brochure in Daltons Family Restaurant. The note said, ‘I’m being held against my will. Please help!’ and this number. Do you need help?”

“Oh, my gosh!” She slapped her forehead. “Are you serious? Heavens, that must have been two years or more since I did that one desperate night. It was on a West Virginia tour brochure, right?”

“Yes. Then I guess I should have listened to the police. They told me it wasn’t serious. Then the more I thought about it, the more it bugged me until I at least tried the number to see who answered.”

“Wow, Dillon! I’m amazed at it still being there. I don’t need help any longer, but thanks so much for calling. You’re not from this area, are you?”

“No. Just passing through and stopped to check their fare since they advertised so much. It’s not like home cooked that my mamma would do, but very tasty and filling. So, you have a nice day and I’ll be on my way.”

“Sure thing. Goodbye.”

She disconnected and prepared a grilled cheese sandwich with a fried egg in the middle, cut it, put some tortilla chips on the side of the plate and relocated to the front porch swing to eat and enjoy the calming aftermath of the storm. She nibbled and considered the strange call and how long the brochure remained there in the plastic holder on the window sill.

“And he called now? What if that was my trap to capture and then kill an unsuspecting man or a woman who tried to help me? Then again, what if he were serious. He sounded like it. Did he say he went to the police first?”

She finished her plate and placed it on a side table and pulled her cell phone from her skirt pocket. She located and highlighted the number and paused as she viewed the chickens and geese pecking at the ground in front of the barn.

“Should feed you, but you’ll not starve on me, yet. Let’s test some water here.”

She hit the call button and five rings later he answered. “Hi, still unknown woman. Dillon here. Are we going to become phone buddies over a joke?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Just recall that you went to the police. Really?”

“Yes. Had no way to know if it was a prank or otherwise. Told them the circumstances and they handed the brochure back and told me to forget it. But then I just had to try and see if the number was valid and what happened.”

“Hmm. Interesting. So, curiosity got the better of you and you called me.” She had not stopped looking at the chickens and geese. “Are you an honest gentleman? You sound like it from what you’ve said so far. Are you? What do your friends say about you?”

“I am. My mamma raised me to be that way. I’m as honest as I can be. If I can’t handle the question, I defer the answer and change the subject or walk away. I don’t like lying. That gets you nowhere except deeper into trouble with each increasing lie. My friends tell me I’m honest to a fault and too perfect people are hated, not loved. So, sometimes I screw up on purpose so they can see it and have a laugh at my humanity.”

She felt her mood lighten and set the swing into motion. “Good deal, Dillon. That’s a nice name. My name is Betsy Riley. You left town yet?”

“Just passed the ‘Now Leaving Lost Creek’ sign headed west.”

“Could I change my mind?”

“About what?”

“Needing help. I do, but not in the way I needed help before when I did that brochure thing. Then I was so depressed I felt suicide was the only answer. Now I don’t, but I am trapped here, and I don’t like it. I just lack the proper motivation to leave and have a life change. I have four months before the end of my isolation. That’s enough time to get lost in America and let the controlling factors cuss up a storm when they find me gone. You game?”

“For what? Helping you escape?”

“Basically, yes. I need to escape this self-imposed prison and get back into life. My mind has been working overtime since you called, and I feel like this is a carpe diem opportunity. In over two years, you’re the only one who cared enough to call. Are you game for an adventure or escapade?”

After a moment of silence, he replied. “Wow! Never thought I’d ever hear that from a woman. Uh, it seems to me that there’s more to this than a simple escape, but, uh, will I be shot at or beaten by some King Kong-sized gorilla boyfriend?”

“No. No one’s here but me and some animals. Won’t be anyone else for another four months.”

“Well, then, how do I get to your castle, fair damsel? Give me directions and let down your hair.”

“Turn around. Pass Daltons and take Haywood Road. It’s a left turn. When the houses on the left stop, look for Denny’s Lane, also on your left. Drive to the end, open the gate, and drive until you reach the barn. I’ll do a hasty packing job and we’ll have some fun around and about America the beautiful.”

“I’m still uncertain about that, but I’m turning around now. See you soon, Betsy. What better way to meet people than this carpe diem opportunity?”

Chapter 2

Dillon found the place quickly and drove through a noisy flock of birds and stopped beside a small, faded, red pickup truck. He checked the two-story house and empty front porch before he got out and viewed the barn.

“Very homey and comfortable. Very nice. And she wants to leave here? Is she nuts?”

He contemplated the barn again and where he was in America. “Are you nuts? Hush and let it go. You’ve got no ties to bind you.”

He turned back to the house when the front door opened and watched her walk to the steps.

For a few moments they said nothing, just stood and stared at each other.

“Hi, Betsy. You don’t look like a damsel in distress. You look mischievous.”

Her face broke into a smile. “Really? Never heard that about me, but I sort of like it.

However, you do look handsome, honest, and trustworthy. Love those blue eyes. Coolness.”

“So, do we trust each other to go away from this place to another place yet unknown? I’m all for it now that I’ve seen you.”

“So am I. Great relief calmed me in a few moments of time. Have a seat on the swing. I’ll be back with my suitcase, then feed the fowl and then hit the road. Sound good?”

“Sounds like a great plan.”

He sat on the swing and took in all that he could see. “Very peaceful place. Something’s very wrong here, but just let it pass and go with the plan as of now. We can, either of you can change it if it’s wrong. She’s not a model, but she’s attractive and well-built. She’s beyond her teen years, but she still looks young. Nice skin and hair. Wonder why she wants to leave so badly? Let it ride, man. You nearly made the French Foreign Legion, and you fear little. One adventure on tap, ready to fill your empty glass.”

She came back with a medium-sized suitcase with wheels and a handle, a briefcase, and her purse. “This is all I need.” She glanced at the barn. “Guess I should feed them one last time. Can you wait for that?”

“I’ll try. Need help?”

“No. Just a few moments of time. Thank you. They thank you more. Be right back.”

He sat and contemplated what might lay ahead of him and enjoyed the atmosphere, wondered about the destroyed elm tree and before he returned to the delightful package that jogged to the barn, his serenity was disrupted by the arrival of two jeeps and four loud people, two males and two females.

They stirred up major mud balls and routed the fowl who were eating and stopped beside his car. They all jumped to the ground, and he noted that one of them had a gun holstered on his right hip.

“Who you?” asked the most prominent burliest man, the one packing the weapon. “What are you doing here?”

He regarded him calmly. “Name’s Dillon. I’m waiting for Betsy to finish her task and then we’re leaving.”

“Dillon? Whoa, what a sissy name. Does your mamma know where you are?”

“Whatever. Who are you?”

“Name’s Jake, and I hate to rain on your sissy parade, but you’re going nowhere with her. Get in your car and leave now!”

“You own her? She your property? I don’t think so.”

“What the hell’s your problem, asshole? You’d best get moving. She’s going nowhere with the likes of you.”

“So, who are you?”

“I’m a friend of hers and she’s not leaving here. Git gone while you can. Lots of places here to bury sissies and trespassers.”

“You own this farm?”

“No! You deaf or what? Git gone!”

“Then you’re trespassing. I was invited by Betsy. Start your friendly job by shooting yourself. I promise to bury you, somewhere around here.”

Jake’s hand moved to his weapon and a shot rang out, causing everyone to cringe.

Betsy shouted from the open barn loft door. “Jake! Keep your gun holstered! Everybody else, hold your position. You hurt him and you’re all dead. Hear me? You don’t move as of now!”

Moments later she stood between the milling group and Dillon on the steps.

“What do you all think you’re doing? Jake, I’m not your property and you don’t tell me who I can have for friends and who I can and can’t leave with! You don’t do that! I don’t own you. You do what you want, with your own life, and leave me alone!”

“She’ll kill you!”

“She won’t! All of you, get back into the jeeps and clear out. Your help and concern are no longer required. I have all the help I need.”

One of the women, Mary Beth shook her head. “Betsy, you’re making a mistake. Jake’s right, you know?”

“Then you wait here for four more months by yourself. I can’t take it any longer. No matter what you say or think, I’m gone!” She put her hands on her hips defiantly. “And since you asked, Mary Beth, stroll over to the barn and check out the hayloft. I go with him, or that. Move it, miserable woman. Go! See! Then tell me no!”

Mary Beth returned swiftly, pale, and visibly shaken. “You really did that?”

“I prepared it. I hate this isolation. I hate being a piece of property. If I can’t leave now with him, then I’ll leave that way. That’s my other friend and way out. I’m sick of it.”

Mary Beth looked suddenly burdened. “Jake, listen to her. Let’s go and stop bothering her. I don’t want to see her body dangling at the end of that rope. Come on. Let’s leave.”

Jake was determined. “She’s going to be pissed off. You’re taking the coward’s way out.”

“Not! I’ve got four months before she’s free of any commitment. I’ll tell her myself in Dallas. Then I’m going to Ireland and spend some time with Cole and his wife. Talked with Cole last night and that’s my plan unless it changes, but I doubt it. Mary Beth, will you take care of feeding the animals until she makes it back? After that, it’s her problem.”

“Yes. Just don’t go back inside the barn now. I’ll cut it down when you disappear. That’s scary.”

The lot returned to normal, and the couple were back to staring again.

“Thought you said I wouldn’t get shot or beat up?”

She shrugged. “You’re not shot. You’re not bruised. Never said you would never be scared or worried. Didn’t count on Jake and friends to show up when she’s not here. They normally don’t. Don’t know why they did. It might have been the storm that worried them and wanted to check on my welfare.”

“Well, mischievous one, since you’re right, let’s depart quickly before they change their minds. We’ll talk while putting miles between this place and us.”

“Sounds like a plan. Thanks so much. I appreciate that vote of confidence.”

They loaded his trunk with her suitcase and briefcase. She dropped her purse on the back seat floor on her side.

She was quiet until they passed the Leaving Lost Creek sign headed west and in the clear.

“Well, since you had some information presented that I hadn’t planned on revealing so soon, I guess you might have some questions.”

“Uh, a few. You’re trying to get free of a lesbian relationship.”

“Hmm. Jump right in with both feet. Yes and no. The last few years, three years, have been fast, harsh, and unbelievable for me. Brief rundown and we’ll cover all points in detail as we go. Stopped for a pee break for my son and me in a rest area in Delaware. An alligator ate him. I complained and wailed and finally slapped a female detective on the Police Force. She arrested me.

“My son was gone and later it was proven I was right. The alligator got him. I went crazy with grief, and my husband couldn’t tolerate it. He left me for a nineteen-year-old college student, and I was alone and crazier. Divorced him, met the woman I’ve lived with now on the Internet and I’ve been happy, but extremely lonely and isolated until now. She’s acting weird lately. Doesn’t call for weeks at a time. Worries about me being with another woman. Won’t take me with her. She could. She won’t. Doesn’t want me off that farm for any reason. I lived a miserable life. Until now.”

“Wow! What about the rope in the barn?”

“That was my plan out if things got too bad. Had it set and idling at the hayloft. Slip the noose around my neck, step off the edge, and goodbye Betsy. Who would care? No one until you called, and I felt stunned for a short time. Couldn’t believe it. A few more days and I’d have done it. My life really sucked there. I hated waking each morning.”

“Okay. That’s rather wild, but understandable and believable.”

“Good for you to say that. Now, how are you here and available to do this, with me, for me? You sound British by name but not by accent.”

“We blokes have a way of disguising our voices, my lady. I’m from British stock, but never been there. I’m like 4th generation born in America. And my ancestors were skilled investors and thrived in financing.

“Financing? Who did they finance or invest in?”

“The DuPont’s established their fortune in gunpowder for fighting wars. The Grants financed the DuPonts and other fine families of war, for profit, for building fortunes in America. Two of my uncles died six years ago and, in their will, stated that their fortunes, via trust funds, would go to the youngest heir at the time of death. Hence Dillon Grant became wealthy and hated by most of the family who wanted a share of the wealth. I met with both trust funds, which are still earning money, and arranged \$2000 a month from each and there will still be money left when I leave the world behind. So, I don’t work. I do help as many people as I can in life. When I do, I teach them investing skills and set them on the best road to success that I can. Your turn.”

“I’m not quite that lucky. My father worked for the State Government. His retirement package was substantial because he worked 45 years before retiring. My mother worked for your ancestry, source of income, the DuPont company. Her retirement package was quite hefty also. They both died in a traffic accident together. Both had me as the beneficiary and it was set up in a trust fund along with the life insurance remainder at my request. I’m drawing \$850 a month

and the rest of my income comes from writing free-lance articles for two major magazines and a finally national chain of political cartoons for some newspaper syndicates. I also write and sell songs to a few popular artists. Keeps me busy and off the streets.”

“Until you got depressed?”

“Yes.”

“Is life with her that bad?”

“No. She’s very loving, kind, playful, impish, a wonderful partner. She’s just not around enough to satisfy my serendipity nature. She goes, I stay home alone. She’s back a few weeks. She goes, I stay home alone.”

“She can’t take you with her?”

“Hah! Good question dude. You’re good. She could. She won’t. Don’t know why? I asked. She said I wouldn’t like it and would get bored swiftly. Bitch! Like I don’t get bored by myself on the farm, her farm where I live as her farmhand!”

“Sounds like she’s afraid for people to know what her lifestyle is and who her partner is. Very shallow.”

She stared at him a moment. “Damn, you’re good. You part woman?”

“No and don’t want to be. I’m glad there’s a difference.”

“Good for you. I think the people she works with know, but I can’t be seen with her.”

“You think she’s messing around, cheating, if you will?”

“She could and she’s sometimes very bold. I’ve asked about her being bisexual, but she keeps reassuring me that she’s being a good girl.”

“Oh, I know that one. ‘Yes, mommy, I’m being a good girl. Can I have a cookie now?’ Sounds suspicious to me.”

“Rock on, dude. I like you more now.”

“Does she own guns?”

“No. She only has the one in the barn to shoot stray dogs or foxes who like chicken and geese.”

“Then I’m cool. Where does she work that keeps her gone so long at a time?”

“Um, not now. You’ll find out eventually, but for now, not necessary.”

“Okay. Who do you sell songs to?”

“Oh, a few people. Madonna, Faith Hill, Randy Travis, Lorena McKennitt, Tim McGraw, Dunmore Road, and Celtic Thunder. A very broad spectrum of performers loves what I can do. They pay well. Sometimes I get a percentage of the royalties and we both benefit. Don’t always get credit, but that’s okay also. My name gets passed around and when a performing stranger makes an offer, I do my best to wow them and make repeat customers.”

“Dang, girl! That’s awesome! That’s a beautiful and productive way to make a living. And your mate can’t appreciate that?”

“No.”

“Then she’s a loser and your loss might be good for her. Tell her where the rope is and see if she has the insanity to do it.”

She leaned against the car door and studied him thoughtfully. “You know, for a man you’re very insightful and pull no punches. Thanks for your call to me and for your continued faith in me. Still can’t believe the brochure was still there.”

“Open the glove box.”

She did and pulled the brochure out to inspect her scribbled note. “Wow! Can I keep it? Just think of the stories I can tell my children.”

“You won’t have any if you cling to her.”

“That can still happen, but let’s not go there today. Want to enjoy some of the scenery that I can’t while driving. You mind?”

“Betsy, enjoy yourself. I’m here to help you and I will to the best of my ability.”

*

She shared the driving, but near nightfall he suggested they find a hotel to spend the night.

“Separate rooms?”

“Not a problem. I’m not here to come between you.” He watched her frown. “Well, I am but not in that manner. Just stop it, okay?”

“I never said a word other than separate rooms. You’re the one who went out on a tangent. No problem. I’ll pay for mine. You pay for yours. Unless you’re serious about not interfering with me and my plans. Then we can share a room so long as it has two beds.”

He agreed and then stopped. “What? You changing on me? I don’t want no pissed off lesbian mate after my ass, even if she hates guns and only has one to shoot dogs and foxes. No thank you.”

She blinked. “What are you talking about? She has no clue to where I am, or what I’m doing.”

“And Jake and his buddies never talk with her, right?”

“Oh, that. They’re mainly my friends, not hers. Jake surprised me today. Sounded like he wanted to keep her property around so she wouldn’t be sad. Strange. Maybe he’s tapping her goody box. But Mary Beth will leave the rope until she shows my partner. She’ll want to rub it in deep to how carelessly she loved me. That’s why I asked her to go and see what I had planned. She’ll smear it all over her face when she gets home. Bitch!”

“Girlfriend, I like you. You’re starting to bring me joy. For tonight, though, we’ll have separate rooms. Tomorrow, if you’re nice and convince me you’re safe and I’m safe from her, then we’ll do the one room, double bed option. Okay?”

“Whatever you say, dude. I’ll leave that up to you. You know I’m a lesbian and don’t want to have sex with you. And I trust you’re man enough to respect that desire. Are you?”

“Huh? What are you doing with that statement? I’ve never mentioned or thought of having sex with you. I’m talking about protection from your mate and other friends who might want to kill me to protect you.”

“Well, okay then. We’ll do it your way tonight and until you can trust me. Really, dude, I don’t want to wake up in the morning with a headache and pregnant from being knocked in the head and done Neanderthal style. Okay?”

“You’re weird. Being alone on the farm has twisted your thinking and communication skills. Pull in at the next hotel you find, and let’s sleep for tonight.”

“Sounds good to me. Do you have anyone, a partner or someone who might want to track you down and do me bodily harm?”

“No. I’m single and loving it so far.”

“Good for you, dude. Wish my life was that uncomplicated.”

“It can be.”

“How? By buying into your change a lesbian back to a normal relationship fantasy?”

“What the hell does that mean? I’m trying to help you keep what you obviously love.”

“Really? You could have fooled me, pilgrim.”

“Just shut up and find us a hotel. I’m tired, and I want to sleep.”

“Okay, but last time I remembered, you called to help me get away from the farm and away from her. Now you want to keep me where I am or was. Will you make up your mind what you’re doing for me?”

“Find a hotel SOON! I’ve made up my mind. I want to SLEEP!”

“Okay, Anger Management Candidate. I’ll do that. Golly! What a grump when you can’t have it your way all the time.”

“I can’t hear you. Find a hotel!”

Chapter 3

Dillon was angry with himself after the check-in. She signed the registration as Mr. And Mrs. Grant and told the desk clerk they were getting divorced and needed separate rooms because of non-cohabitation requirements for six months. He snatched the keys to his room and stormed out, leaving her behind.

“He’s having a hard time with this. It’s his fault, but I’m trying to be fair about it. Can I have the spare key to his room? There are medications for his diabetes and heart problem that he must take regularly or else. You know what I mean?” She winked. “And he doesn’t always pay attention, but deep down, I still love him and want him to live until SHE can care for him. Once the big D is over, it’s totally her concern. She can do whatever.”

He handed her the key with an unhappy face. “I’m sorry that life turned out this way for you. You got another man waiting?”

“Heavens, no! It’s him. He’s tired of me. He’s got a hot number. I’ve seen her. She’s gorgeous, and I can’t compete with her in anything she wears, even birthday clothes. She’d make a burlap sack look sexy and cause eunuchs to get erections. She’d look good in one, drifting down to the ocean floor a hundred miles offshore. But, while I’m his wife, I won’t be caught slacking, lest the LAW dog pile on me for something going wrong.”

“Well, hang in there. I hope it all works out well for you. Checkout is 11 o’clock in the morning. Pleasant dreams if it’s possible. I’ll pray for your survival and sanity.”

*

Dillon woke slowly and sporadically until he became conscious enough to know what was happening. The warm weight on him was genuine. It was Betsy; she smelled good and felt twice as lovely. His eyes snapped open during the kiss, and he felt hot and sweaty.

“Betsy? What’s going on?”

“You are, Dillon.”

“What are you doing here?”

“What you want. You’re the one to help me. I needed to return the favor and help you with what you want. Okay?”

“Okay? Of course, it’s okay. Whoa! What do I want? I want to help you gain freedom.”

“Then why are you here in my bed doing all these wonderful things to me?”

“Your bed. I’m not in your bed. And I’m doing nothing.”

“You’re not? You’re not enjoying what’s happening?”

“I am. I can’t help that, but I’m not doing it.”

“Then who is?”

“Stop it! I’m in my room. You’re in my room! You’re on top of me! Stop it!”

“You want me to stop it?”

“Hell no! Don’t stop. Just stop saying I’m doing it. Okay?”

“Okay. If that’s what you want. You need to learn how to decide things sooner.”

Chapter 4

When he awoke next, it was daylight, and he stretched to see the clock on the bedside stand. It said 9:13. She still lay partially on him, and he felt so great that he did not mind.

“What a hell of a girlfriend we have, mate. Problems out the ass, but solvable problems.”

She finally stirred and woke completely with a spastic jerk. “Whoa! What happened?”

“You happened. I happened. Love and trust happened. You awake now?”

She turned crimson. “Oh, boy! I’m awake now! Oh, boy! I guess there’s no way to make you think this was your violation of my rules is there?”

“Nope. How much did you pay for the second key?”

“Nothing. Told him a believable whopper story, and he laid it in my hand. Sorry.”

“Will you stop the sorry? Is life with her that bad?”

“No! It’s worse!” She grabbed him and the tears started.

“What did she do to hurt you?”

“Not once, but many times she’s hurt me!”

“And Jake did nothing? Did he know?”

“Jake is her friend, but they don’t know what she’s done! They’re not on the farm when she is. When she’s there, no one comes around. No one!”

“What did she do, Betsy? Unburden yourself.”

“When she was displeased or angry with me, she used to lock me in the Tack Room in the barn. It’s a small room, about 10 x 12 feet, where all the harnesses, halters, and saddles are stored for the horses. There used to be six, but she sold them down to only two left. One light turns on from the outside, and only one door goes in.”

“And you couldn’t resist or fight her?”

“No. Don’t think that even Jake, mean as he is, could ever resist her. Not unless she was knocked out to start with. She has a cattle prod to motivate cattle, horses, or pigs to go where you want them to go when they don’t want to go. It’s electric. It works through clothes. I learned that painfully the first time. Feels like a blow torch is lit on you. You jump around all convulsive and cooperate to not feel it again. The first time she left me there overnight.”

“Why?”

“Because I questioned her about her sexual activity while separated. She’d do it for an hour or so when she was pissed off over something she didn’t like. She left me overnight when I questioned her the second time. And when she opened the door that time, I was already awake and waiting for her. I put some welts on her with a bridle, and while she cried and nursed herself, I reminded her that I was married to a man in the past, had sex with him, and had a child. I know what sex with a man smells like when it’s finished. Very distinct. I told her so and told her she would never put me there again unless I was dead first. Never happened again. She either quit or took exceptional care to clean herself afterward. Right now, it’s a moot point.”

“Awesome, girlfriend. I’m on an escape route with Betsy Unbridled!”

“You’re silly, but I love it. Yes. And the other hurts were giving me the cold shoulder after she’s been gone two to four months at a spell. She was there, but not there. Aggravating.”

“And you think all will go well in telling her goodbye? It doesn’t sound that way to me.”

“Well, you sort of give me courage. Just your presence will make me bold.”

“I don’t know about that, but I’ll be there for you. If all else fails, I’ll hand you a bridle and turn you loose on her.”

She laughed and raised both fists over her head. “There you go, my friend. I love it.”

*

They stopped at a rest area on I-70 near Plainfield, Indiana, and he studied the map on display to see how much ground they had covered. She joined him with a hug from behind.

‘What’s up, buddy? That bubble on the map is wrong. You’re not there. You’re right here in my arms.’

‘Funny girl. Just thinking. You said something on the farm about four months until she has no commitments, and Dallas. Why is that significant?’

She frowned as he turned. ‘You pay attention to details, don’t you? Yeah, Dallas is where I want to go. And so as not to make you ask, I have two tickets to the Dunmore Road Band. It’s the final stop of their extended North American Tour before headed back to Ireland. You want to join me? Oops. You already have, in many ways.’

‘Yes, girlfriend! I’d love to do that! Where did you manage to get tickets? They’re expensive and hard to get. This mega tour sold out in five days and caused fights in Dallas.’

‘Tell me about it. The lead singer and manager gave them to me when they bought a song from me, Marshalltown Heights. Heard it?’

‘Hell, yes! I’m a fan of theirs. I love Celtic music. I’m very happy to know you, Betsy! Thanks!’

‘You’re welcome.’ She watched him and waited to see if he had made another connection.

‘Hot damn! I’m finally going to see Dunmore Road in a live performance! Awesome! You the woman, Betsy!’

She said nothing but remained still.

‘Whoa! You told Jake you’d tell her in Dallas in four months. That’s when they’ll be there. How do you know she will?’

‘Because she’s a band junkie, or groupie if you prefer. She and a group of eight other girls follow them and a few other Celtic Bands around the country. Personally, I think they hope to score with one of the members. I hope they don’t. Hope the band members have more class and morals than to bed any of them. Sluts. I think that’s why she doesn’t want me to go along. Gives her the freedom to screw anything in sight, male or female and be a puritan at home, or beat me into submission to accept her answer of being a good girl.’

‘Now that’s a possibility. And locating her?’

‘Heard of cell phones? Neat little communication devices.’

‘Duh! Let’s go before I get both feet inside my mouth.’

She looked around the area and stopped at one boy sitting alone at a picnic table. She concentrated on him and ignored the following comment from Dillon.

‘Now that’s odd. Does that look right to you, boyfriend?’ She pointed to the table under a scraggly tree.

He followed her gaze and finger and had to agree. ‘Yes. He looks very out of place and frightened. Want to check him out?’

‘We’re not on any tight schedule for four months. And lost or abandoned children are a major concern for me. Let’s go.’

They walked in his direction, and he did not move or acknowledge that they were approaching.

He looked at them in silence and they could tell that he had cried sometime recently.

Betsy spoke first. “Hey, buddy, what’s up? What’s going on here? Are you holding the table down to keep it from blowing away?”

He eyed her. “Can’t talk with strangers.”

“Oh, I understand that one.” She slipped onto the seat beside him. “So, I’m Betsy Riley. This is my friend, Dillon Grant. What’s your name?”

He stared in silence and seemed more nervous.

“We told you who we are. When you tell us your name, we are not strangers, and we can talk then. Okay?”

“Billy Squire.”

“Hey, Billy. Pleased to meet you.” She held out her hand and he laid his trembling hand in her palm.

“You get separated from your mom and dad? Get left behind?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t seen them.”

“How long have you been here? Can you tell time? I see you have a watch. It’s a nice one.”

“Don’t know.”

“Were you here last night when it was dark?”

“No. I was sleeping in the car then. When I woke, I was here on the table.”

“And no mom and dad?”

He shook his head.

“Do you know what state you’re from?”

“Michigan.”

“And the color of the car?”

“Green. Four doors, with one gray fender. Someone hit it at home at our house. Dad fixed it with a different color until he gets some more money to paint it.”

She glanced up to find Dillon headed for the parking lot to check on the cars present.

“Are you the police?” he asked.

“No. We’re on a sort of road trip and stopped for a break. You just looked out of place and felt like you needed help. So, we’ll help you if you can.”

“No one else did.”

“That’s them, but not us.”

“I’m hungry. Haven’t had anything since lunch yesterday.”

“Oh, my! That’s not good. Hold on until Dillon returns and we’ll get you some snacks. There’s no real food here in these machines.”

“Is he Marshall Dillon?”

“Huh? No. Why did you ask that? Seems like you’re too young to know that.”

“My other dad used to watch his shows on TV. I think he was my real dad. I liked him. I liked Miss Kitty also. She’d be a cool mom. You remind me of her. Tender and caring.”

“Wow! Thanks, Billy. I agree that she was a very kind person. You have more than one dad?”

He nodded. “Yes. The one who liked Marshall Dillon went away. I was little then.” His fingers worked to draw an outline of a rectangle. “He was in a box. And then the box went in a hole in the ground. Mom screamed and cried for days. Never saw him again. Don’t know what happened after that, but one day the second dad showed up. She said he would be my second dad. He didn’t like me. I didn’t like him either. He was mean.”

“Was he the man driving the car last night?”

“No. That was dad three. Dad two left after a while. Mom and he got in a huge fight, and he left with the police. Dad three wasn’t mean, but he wasn’t there. He ignored me unless I asked a specific question or if mom told him to do something for me. He was there but not there. He kept food available and fixed things when they broke. Bought my clothes. That’s about it.”

“Where were you going? Do you know?”

“Mom said Vegas to get married. Then I’d have a real dad and he’d change. I don’t think so. Once you ignore someone small, how can you change and like them and love them like they’re your own? But mom’s very happy with him so I let it pass. Wish I was older. I’d run away and not worry about either of them. They don’t worry about me.”

The anguished look on his face made her feel the same. “Well, that’s all understandable, but not good for Dillon or me. Do you remember anyone else in your Mom’s life? A brother or sister? An aunt or uncle? A grandmother or grandfather?”

“No. Just mom and me and three dads who all left me.”

“Well, Billy, I rather hoped this would be easy, but I’m not sure now.”

“You have any kids?”

“I had one, a boy about your age.”

“Where is he?”

“In a box in the ground where your first dad is. An alligator ate him.”

“I know what they are. Mean. Eat most anything.”

“Sure do.”

“Did you scream and cry?”

“Sure did. Did that so much that my husband left me. Told me I needed to get over it and left me alone. Hurt me more, but then I did get over it. I had to do that or join him in a box in the ground.”

“That’s sad. Will you take me with you? I don’t mind where you’re going so long as you love me just a little. I’m easy.”

She embraced him and cried. “Oh, Billy. If I were stable, free, and clear of all the problems that seem to multiply instead of diminishing, I’d fight to do that, but I can’t. I’m sorry, honey. Really, I am. I still miss him and want to be with him, but I can’t do that yet and I can’t take you with me either. We’ll have to come up with some other solution.”

She moved back to see his face and he wiped her tears.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“It’s quite okay. Most of the time I’m okay, but sometimes something reminds me of his lovely smile and compassion, like yours, and I get teary. It’s nothing you did.”

Dillon returned to them.

“No luck. No green cars from Michigan in the lots. No one has seen one like that. An employee called the manager but was of no use. No video surveillance anywhere. Did you make any progress?”

“Yes, Miss Kitty made a lot of progress for what it’s worth. He’s on dad three and they were headed to Vegas to get married so he could have a real dad. Believable, but unbelievable.”

“So, what do we do?”

“When all else fails, punt. They’ll never suspect it and be prepared to block it. I’m going to get him something to eat, and I’ll think of a plan before I return. I liked his idea of him joining us, but bad timing. Bad timing. Sucky timing. Why does life suck so much?”

When she returned to the picnic table, Dillon and Billy chatted like old friends. “Hey, men in my life. Good to see you relaxed now.”

She watched him devour a candy bar, a bag of chips and inhale a soda. “And he won’t gain a pound from it, lucky guy.”

“So, what’s your plan?” Dillon asked.

“Billy, I’d love to have you with me, but right now, I simply can’t. I’m going to help you all that I can and then.” She stopped and turned her back. “You’ll be okay, Billy. I just know it.”

“That’s okay. Turn around.”

“No.”

“Turn around. Please.”

She turned, and he stood on the table to wipe her tears again. “I know about homes for children like me. I was there a few days after dad two. It’s okay.”

Chapter 5

“Feel better now?” Dillon asked after three hours of silence.

“Yes. Thanks for your help. I guess you know I’d rather have him in the back seat and shut up, Dillon on my lips.”

“That’s obvious and I’m proud of you for making the correct choice. It would have involved more lying in the future and somewhere along the line the steel trap would have snapped on your butt.”

She smiled and rested a hand on his leg. “Thanks for your support. That was hard to do. But you’re right. He’s lost so much. I’ve lost so much. Why not just leave us alone, together?”

“So, what do we do tonight?”

“I stop pretending that I don’t like you and don’t want to have sex with you. We rent one room, one or two beds doesn’t matter. Only need one from now on. All I wanted was away from her, but what I got is better. What’s the saying, “One Dillon in bed is worth a whole brothel.”

“What? Never heard that?”

She turned her face to the window and felt a rush of heat. “Don’t listen to me right now. Just drive. Brothels can be hazardous to your health. And mine.”

*

She woke beside him and floated on white clouds. She enjoyed his profile, his smell, the gentle rise and fall of his chest in sound sleep.

“You rock, dude. You rock my world. You bring this weary soul peace and hope galore. Lose everything but my life and suddenly you fill it with excess of everything I ever lost and wanted in life. And I’ve done something I’m not proud of and it’s going to hurt, but I can’t keep it from you much longer. The feelings and emotions in my heart won’t let me. Please be patient and understanding when I confess my sins to you.”

He opened one eye to look at her face, surrounded by bed hair. “Morning, lovely goddess. How are you doing today? Always talk to yourself early in the morning?”

“When I need intelligent conversation, yes. What do you think?”

“Don’t know. Just heard mumbling. Want to replay it?”

“The sexual feat, yes. The soliloquy, nah. Once is good enough for me.” She blushed. “Yes, I’m getting good at that also. Used to hate it, but with you, I rather enjoy it. You like to catch me with my pants down or a foot headed to my mouth.”

He pulled back the sheets. “Wow! It doesn’t stop with your face. Neat. I like that. How about writing me a song. Oh, like, Betsy the Red Butt Riley. Can you do that?”

“Can you go away?”

“Really?”

“No. Just a rhetorical question that needs no answer or any notice at all. Don’t want to know how I’d feel right now, or ever for that matter. We’ll discuss it in oh, say 3014. That sounds like a good time frame. Until then, it’s a road trip, helping all we can, and love, and sex, and discovery of each other. Say what?”

“Say, fine with me.”

They checked out of the hotel and drove on west.

“Where to next, Betsy? Before the four-month mark, we’ll be deep in the Pacific Ocean unless a detour is planned.”

“Might solve a great deal of problems,” she muttered. She caught his hand in the air.

“Well, we’re at a point that we could turn southwest and mosey on down to St. Louis, Missouri, pick up Interstate 40 and then take a leisurely jaunt through the Grand Canyon. Does that sound like a Sprite Road Trip Plan or what?”

“Never been there. Heard it’s grand. Let’s hie us hence and give an honest report to the travel gurus.”

“Good. Just hit the next Rest Area, figuratively speaking. Got to move some water.”

“What’s up with that? You seem to do that a lot. Got a kidney problem? Or a urinary tract infection?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Because you’re a woman and that happens a lot with women. Drop that look, girlfriend. I’m being serious here. Do you need a doctor?”

“I need a rest area or a good enough pull off, clown.”

“I’m not a clown. I tried out for one spot. It was Ronald McDonald or nothing and I’m nothing. Just Dillon Grant, rescuer of women who need to pee excessively, or a lot, whichever applies.”

“Who’s about to get a golden shower to drench his fiery philosophy of life’s problems.”

“Hmm. That might cool me down, firefighter, but until then.”

He turned on the signal and pulled into a rest area, smaller than most they encountered.

He parked the car, shut off the engine, and removed the keys. “All ashore that’s going ashore who don’t wish to raise the ocean level by a pint or more.”

“Very funny, Captain Bligh.” She opened the door and walked swiftly to the women’s side of the facility.

He laughed at her and headed for the opposite side.

She exited the stall, adjusted her clothing, and evaluated a woman who did the same and joined her three sinks away. “Are you okay? You look like hell dropped on you? You need help?”

“What the fuck’s it to you, snotty bitch? Take care of yourself and mind your own business!”

“Sometimes, any hurting woman in range is my business. What’s wrong?”

The woman hurried from the restroom and Betsy followed quickly. She caught up with her vomiting in the bushes beside the sidewalk to the parking area.

She knelt beside her and grasped her shoulders. “What drugs are you using?”

“Leave me alone, bitch. It’s not your problem!”

“That’s twice. Call me a bitch once more and I’ll increase your problems to the point you’ll wish you were dead and make a 911 call to get you to ER and save your life.”

The woman wiped her mouth and stood despite Betsy wanting to hold onto her. “If that’s the case, you’d best let me leave. I call them as I see them.” She pulled from Betsy’s grasp and strode toward the parking lot to her left. Forty feet later a man approached and slapped her hard enough to put her on the ground.

“What is your problem, asinine sow! You’re not worthy of being called a bitch, which is higher on the animal chain than you. Simple task. Take a piss and get back in the car! This is not starting out very well, dumb fuck!”

Betsy watched him kick her and before she could move, she witnessed Dillon’s swift approach. He hit the man twice in three quick, fluid moves and had him on the ground with a foot on his right elbow.

“I don’t know who you think you are or what rights you think you have, but you just triggered the killer instinct in me.” He knelt beside the groaning and squirming man and replaced his foot with a knee. “Lie still, you freak worm!” He grabbed a handful of hair and moved his head backward and held his free hand before the man’s face and joined his four fingers solidly.

“Listen to me and listen well, you who are unworthy of life. No woman deserves to be called a sow and kicked like that. My mother taught me to respect women.”

“Fuck you!”

“The French Foreign Legion teaches you over a hundred ways to kill a man in combat or in his cowardice. I’ve learned two more, and I’m dying to test one of them out. You dare to move before I tell you, and I will move, and you will die where you lie. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“What is your problem?”

“Her. She and her lame ass kid is my problem.”

Betsy knelt beside the woman who puked again. “What kind of drugs are you on? I’d like to help you. Can you answer?”

“I don’t know! I just felt the needle prick of the first one and then I don’t remember anything else.”

“Oh, shit! Dillon, my man, will you do a walk or run through of the parking lot. Have a very sickening feeling about this alien meeting and situation.”

He squinted and then paled. “We’re together on the oh shit. Unbelievable!” He left the man with instructions not to move.

Betsy patted her back. “Feeling better now?”

“No. I’d feel better if I knew what happened to Billy. Been too long since I saw him. I miss him terribly.”

Betsy paled and then turned red with anger. She moved from the woman to the man on the ground. “What drugs did you use on her?”

“Fuck you!”

She moved aside, picked up a stick, and applied the large end with tremendous pressure on the crotch of his pants.

“If you don’t answer soon, you won’t be able to do that, to me or to any other woman. My boyfriend is nicer than I am! He’d kill you. I’ll rip everything I can off your sleazy body and let you whimper the rest of your life while you sit to pee! What drugs did you use?”

“Okay! Calm down, crazy bitch! I used some speed to start her. Then some marijuana and finally some cocaine. It’s not a problem, though.”

“Not a problem for who? You? Or her? Who has the drugs in their body? You? Her? Ass hole!”

“You don’t understand! Women like her don’t need kids!”

“Who the fuck are you to make that determination? Do you have any kids?”

“NO!”

“Then you have no right to judge or disable anyone else. Do you know her history?”

“Don’t need to know to determine if she’s a slut!”

She increased the pressure.

“No one died and put you in charge of life, either yours or anyone else. No one left you in charge of determining who is capable, who is a slut, who is a bastard, or who is a bitch. Someone with more intelligence and providence determines that.”

Dillon returned and halted at the scene. "Hey, lover, I found the match." He looked from the man to the woman who lay still and unconscious. "I don't believe this."

"I wouldn't either before you appeared in my life. You called 911 yet?"

"Help is on the way. Wonder if Billy will be okay in the mix of life?"

"He will. I insist."

The police showed up and arrested John Lockwood for using drugs on his fiancée and abandoning her child.

"Where did you leave him?" asked the officer in charge.

"That's for me to know and you to find out, smart officer. He's better off without her."

Betsy spoke up immediately. "I can help there, officer. Dillon and I talked with him this morning. He slept in their car and woke up on a picnic table in a rest area in Indiana on 1-70. Dad one is dead. Dad two got arrested for beating his mother. Dad three left him on the way to Vegas to get married. Only problem is, dad number three doesn't like children or want them in his life. Talk to the police in Indiana to find her son and hammer John Lockwood, not Billy's mother."

She left him and went to the woman. "Your son is fine. He's probably in an orphanage right now under police protection. He said he was there before while you were in the hospital and said it was an okay place. Take care of him. Forget replacement dads."

"Easy for you to say."

"Look, I've lost a son, my husband, my home, my job, my car, my everything. I bounced back. You can too." She handed her a business card with only her name and cell phone number.

"Call me when you get him back and I'll do all I can to help you. Don't give up hope and don't place too much faith in men who come on as family men but have only one thing on their mind. Just call me when you get at any level of satisfaction, and I'll help you. Are you listening?"

"I am now. Thanks so much for your love and support. Good luck in your life. What did he do that makes you so sad now?"

"You noticed, huh? I cried because I wanted to keep him and knew I couldn't. He wiped my tears away and apologized for hurting me. Very loving child. See you later."

"Thanks for your silent support, Dillon. That was intense and overwhelming. That was a fast and bold takedown of John. Where did you learn that?"

"Like I said before, I have a lot of time on my hands, and I've invested in self-defense classes. You never know what you'll encounter when you set about helping someone. That was the second time I used it, but I'm pleased with the results."

"Me too. Would you have done that to Jake?"

"If he made a move to hurt me, yes. This sissy boy would have whipped him to a pulp and left him hog-tied in the tack room for Vanessa to find later. Dead or alive, no problem."

"You're amazing, boyfriend. I think we're free to go."

"Grand. Where to next?"

"To wherever we go. Are we still on for the Grand Canyon?"

"You bet."

*

They sat in lawn chairs in Two Buttes and watched a magnificent sun set in progress. “So, your son got eaten by an alligator. What happened to Daniel?”

“Hmm, do you mean the dork? He happened to him. Grief tore me up. Had difficulty sleeping, eating, performing sexually, keeping the house clean. I was too quiet. The house was too quiet. I was too morose. Daniel lived with it for about a week and then started badgering me to get over it. Why not? He was. Sometimes life throws you a curve that doesn’t make sense, but you don’t stop and give up on life because of it.”

“Bad way of putting it. Did you get any counseling?”

“I did, but individual and group therapy did little for me. It was more of different Daniels telling me to get over it. I wanted him back, not to get over it and let his memory go. And I was distant from Daniel. I admit that. I did then. He tried to talk me into getting pregnant again. I didn’t want that. So, he started going outside for entertainment. He met a 19-year-old woman in a business class at college and she provided some marvelous counseling for him. He stopped complaining at home. He was kind to me after he got laid twice. Then he dropped the nuclear bomb on me and split. I mean gone. Moved into her tiny apartment. Sucked up to her like she was queen of America. We never talked again until we met in court.”

“You ever see them around Hartford?”

“Occasionally, they would pop up where I least expected it, like in a pizza restaurant or a fast-food joint. She’d feed him, kiss him, and fawn all over him while eating herself. Made me want to gag. Other people made sour faces at their behavior, but it meant nothing to them. They were in a world of their own.” She shrugged. “Must have been good everywhere in his life. So far as I know, they’re still together. Don’t know. Don’t care.”

“And you don’t want any more children?”

“I’m too old and no. If I don’t have them, I can’t lose them to an animal.”

“And you use birth control to stay that way?”

She sat silently and studied her coffee.

“Betsy?”

“Don’t go there, Dillon. Don’t want to hear it today.”

“Already went there several times.”

“Just learn to pick up and translate when I say I don’t want to hear it today. That means changing the subject to something pleasant in Betsy Riley 101.”

“Okay.”

Moments later, she had not moved. “Why are you staring at me?”

“Because you’re there and because you’re beautiful. Because you could easily replace Mona Lisa as the world’s most desirable female because I truly like looking at you. You’re a great pacifier and intrinsic art form. Because I like to make you blush. Do you want to give the other customers a full moon to show them how deep your pleasure and self-esteem go?”

She gathered her purse in a huff and stood. “Maybe I should do more interviewing before I make my choice in the Knight Templar to save me.”

“You could, but it would spoil much of carpe diem fun and adventure.”

“And redirected blood flow on compliments. Thanks, Dillon. Let’s follow the sunset a few more hours before we call it quits for the night.”

They chatted lightly, watched five different sunsets over hilltops, and saw a sign forecasting the next eight exits for Tulsa, Oklahoma. Another sign beyond it said Rest Area 5 Miles, Next Rest Area 62.

“Some choice, huh?” she said. “So, we hit it before we do Tulsa. That sounds like a comfy place to stop for the night.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He got in the right lane and turned on the signal for an exit in the rest area. He parked close to the main building and stopped the engine.

“Do try to stay out of trouble here. You’ve instigated enough rest area stops for the next three months.”

“Hey, that’s not my fault? What am I to do? Leave them alone?”

“You might try, but that would decrease my admiration for you. Might take you back a notch from Queen to Princess.”

She stuck out her tongue and opened her door. “I love you too.” She closed it and trotted to the restroom entrance.

He watched her hips jogging and sighed contentedly. “Self, I hope this turns into a forever deal. Man, what a woman she is. And she’s still inhibited? Have mercy on us; this hasn’t even got close to wild yet.”

He followed her, and the empty men’s side amazed him. “Don’t complain. Enjoy.” He did and took the time to wash his face and use the hot air dryers. It was still empty when he left, and he paused to do some stretching exercises and scanned the lot for Betsy. He did not see her and did some more searching.

“NO!”

He heard her shrill scream and snapped in her direction to see her racing across the parking lot. Her target was a small girl who seemed oblivious to the RV that backed from the spot directly in her path. And it was evident that the RV did not see either of them.

“Oh, God. This is not good. Please intervene. Don’t need death or deaths here tonight.”

She grabbed the girl, swooped her up and clear of danger, but stumbled and twisted to hit the ground on her shoulder. Her left leg lagged but was in the air and hit the RV's side with a loud bang.

Dillon cringed when he heard it, and then the grinding of metal in the brakes being applied urgently. He ran on, and the doors of the RV opened, and people hit the pavement to see what happened.

Betsy gained her feet, but the girl clung to her tightly and pulled her down again. She rolled onto her back and held the crying girl as the passenger reached them first.

“What the hell? Are you blind? You can’t see this big RV backing up or hear the beeps? Wake up or get someone to escort you, dense bitch!”

“Evelyn, calm down. Sorry, miss. What happened?”

“I saw you backing up. I heard you back up. This girl didn’t for some reason, and I had to save her if I could.”

The girl was on her feet, shaking and staring wide-eyed at Betsy.

“Are you okay, honey?”

“Yes. Am now. That scared me.”

“No doubt.”

Dillon arrived on the scene.

“Where’s your mom and dad?” Betsy asked.

She pointed. “Somewhere over there.”

“In the rest area?”

“No. Outside.”

A vigorous, mean-spirited man approached the group, roughly shoved Dillon out of the way, stepped across Betsy, and grabbed the frightened girl in a tight hug. “Got you this time, you little bitch! You’re going to jail now! You’ll learn to stay out of rest areas and everywhere else you don’t belong! Damned thieving swine!”

He turned to step over Betsy when her legs rose enough to interfere and make him stumble. He had to release the girl to prevent falling on his face, and she escaped his grasp and ran straight into Dillon’s arms.

“Whoa, girl! Easy up now. Are you okay?”

“Let me go!” She squirmed and kicked to be free.

“Nope. Just calm down. I’ve got you, and I’ll not let anyone hurt you until this is straightened out. Just hold onto me and relax.”

She swiftly realized she had no choice, so she gripped him and ceased her struggles.

“What’s your name?”

“Cindy Morgan.”

“How old are you?”

“Nine, going on ten.”

“Why are you here alone?”

“I need to be. If not, it doesn’t work.”

“What doesn’t work?”

“Begging, asking for money, and helping myself to what I can if cars aren’t locked.”

Dillon blinked and looked at Betsy’s upturned wondering eyes. “Why do you do that?”

“Because when it comes to life, I’d rather mom and I live than starve to death. She can’t work. She’s sick now, and no official wants to help. Just put me in jail for begging to keep us alive.”

He watched the man rise to his feet and stagger a moment before stabilizing.

“Who are you, sir?” Dillon requested.

“Mark Stanger. I’m the manager of this rest area. And this bitch needs to be in jail!” He pointed to Cindy.

“We’ll let the police decide that Mr. Puritan. Cindy, do you live outside the rest area?”

“Yes. Behind the fence.”

Dillon looked at Mark. “Well?”

“There’s a low-income garbage development behind the rest area and outside the State’s Right-of-Way fence. Nothing good grows there.”

Dillon glanced at Cindy’s face. “Well, I’d say that one good thing does. How do you get there?”

“You don’t. Just move on and don’t get involved. You’ll regret it.”

“But you wanted to get involved and put her in jail. That’s not nice of you. I don’t want her there. I’ll do what any honorable homo sapiens should do. I’ll help her stay out of jail; when I do, she’ll also stay out of the Rest Area. When all human needs are met, they won’t have to beg for the chance to live. It’s quite automatic except for people like you. She’s okay. You’re human genetic deficient.”

He looked at the RV owners. “Can you get up, Betsy?”

She moved and stood to lean against the RV and shook her left ankle and foot. “Yeah. I’m okay. I was shocked by what might have happened if I hadn’t made it in time. Can I move upwind?”

“Upwind?”

“From the stench of assholes.”

“Sure thing. Cindy, I’m going to put you down now. Will you go to Betsy and stay with her for a while? She’ll take care of you if you need to go to the restroom or get a snack.”

She nodded and ran to her with open arms.

Dillon turned his attention to the manager. “Mr. Stanger, how do you get to that development from here?”

“Crawl under the fence like she does. Fix it twice a week, and she still gets through.”

“How do we get there? I’m tired of repeating questions. I recommend you stop annoying me.”

“Take the next exit. Turn right, and you’ll see the entrance sign, Westover Tract. Another sign at the entrance says, “Enter at your own risk.” Heed it and keep going. Turn around and leave well enough alone.”

The driver of the RV interrupted the exchange. “Are we going to call the police here?”

Betsy shook her head. “No. No damage done, other than fear and misunderstanding.”

“Well, thanks. Would you all be so kind as to stand clear this time? I don’t need a repeat heart attack. Evelyn, climb in, and let’s get out of here.”

Chapter 6

Betsy and Dillon got Cindy situated in the car and Betsy asked, "If we get you inside the development, can you take us to your house?"

She stared a moment before answering. "Yes. That's easy. Mom won't like it, though."

"Well, right now, I'm not too worried about that. I want to get you home and safe."

The resolute face never flinched. "Then take me with you. If not, I'll be back here tomorrow night. And maybe not so lucky as to have you around."

"Is it really that bad?"

She crossed her arms firmly across her chest. "It's worse! Drive, and I'll let you see for yourself."

They drove silently and turned into the entrance, stopping briefly to read the giant red letters on a reflective white background, "WARNING! ENTER THIS AREA AT YOUR OWN RISK! YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!" The sign had bullet holes and other graffiti adorning it.

"What do you think, Dillon?"

"Think that maybe I'll get to use more of my French Foreign Legion training tonight, if necessary. I'll go for a Betsy Miracle first. We in?"

"We in, boyfriend. I got a lot of balls, or so I'm told."

"Bummer. Hoped for lots of ovaries."

He followed Cindy's direction and stopped in front of a dilapidated house and from where he stopped, he could see the chain-link fence in the distance at the end of the street.

"Betsy, maybe we should just..."

"No! I want to see it first. This is ridiculous. So is the sign outside. Can that happen in America? Really? I want to; I need to see for my own sanity. Then proceed if I subdue myself."

"Ten-four, sweetie. You sure this is your house, Cindy?"

"Lived here my whole life."

"Grand."

He opened the car door, and when it slammed closed, the lights went out in several houses around the street. He felt his alert system engage and thought, "I've got a bad feeling. Maybe we should have just overridden her one time. Wouldn't do more than piss her off and it's not like we're looking for a commitment out of this. Yeah, right. Just shut up and see what unfolds. And for our sake, be prepared for both of us."

"Betsy, this is very abnormal. Please be aware and prepared to save us. Okay?"

"I'm with you, boyfriend. However, I insist that we are okay in this mix. Should we let you open the door, Cindy?"

"Yes. She might shoot you if she doesn't know you. She's kind, but when it comes to home security, she's one mean mamma. She doesn't take no shit from anyone."

Dillon muttered under his breath. "Wonderful."

He shook his head. "Let's go. Betsy, if we leave here alive, remind me to talk with you about your condition called Subtle Insanity. It's curable."

They approached the door, and Cindy used a key from under a swing cushion to unlock it after pressing the doorbell and eliciting a screech, "Who's there?"

"It's Cindy, mamma. Who else would know unless you tell everyone where the key is?"

"Dang, child. Get your hiney in here, pronto. What ails you tonight? Been gone too long? How much did you git?"

"Nothing, mamma. I got caught."

“What? How many times I tole you don’t get caught? Can’t you listen to me?”

“Mamma, it wasn’t my fault. If it wasn’t for Betsy, I’d have been dead, and you’d never know about it. I think she’s part angel.”

“What the hell nonsense are you jabbering? Who’s Betsy? Ain’t no angels! Only demons! What did she do? Does she have money? If she did and you didn’t get any money from her, I’ll whip you so hard you can’t sit down!”

The trio had moved toward the shrewish voice, and Cindy turned the corner, but Betsy paused momentarily.

“If I’d died, you’d never know, mamma. Why you want to be angry when I almost died? What good is money from dead folk?”

Mamma groaned miserably. “I reckon so, child, but we don’t have all the time in the world. We keep losing’ and losing’ and never get our heads above water. We’re drowning,’ and there’s no one even considering saving’ us.”

Cindy disappeared, and Mamma grabbed her.

“What happened, child. I feel you shaking like a leaf.”

“I was running toward a car that had a door slightly ajar, a good sign of it being open. No one was inside. Then suddenly, a woman grabbed me and scared the crap outta me. Her foot hit the side of the RV, backing up. If not for her, I’d be with the angels right now. Sorry, mama. She saved me, and she feels so wonderful that I couldn’t steal from her, and I couldn’t say no. Sorry.”

“What you talking about?”

“She’s here. So is her awesome boyfriend. They both feel and sound heavenly.”

“What?”

Betsy and Dillon turned the corner, and Cindy broke free to turn on the lights.

“She’s very accurate on most of that. I’m not sure if my boyfriend and I are angelic. However, another thirty seconds and she’d have been finished in this world. No one in the RV knew she was behind them, and the wheels would have crushed her.”

“Well, thanks, but if you’re looking’ for a reward, you’re shit outta luck here.”

“Excuse me? Your daughter nearly died, and I risked my life to save her, and you think I’m after a reward?”

“Well, ain’t ya?”

“No!” She moved to Dillon and gazed at the mother and daughter, who were separate and staring at her like she would attack them at any moment.

“Boyfriend, hand me a bridle and turn me loose! Damn the ignorance here!”

She turned and knelt with her back to him. “Lord, restrain me and prevent my waging a personal war on this household. Something is wrong here, and if you’ve delivered me here to correct it, let me do it with minimum bloodshed. I felt desperation, despair, and poverty as we drove past boarded and sheeted windows. This is wrong. You didn’t create Homo sapiens to live this way. I know I can’t personally impact the entire world, but if you can use me as a Heavenly cattle prod to correct this one household and elevate them from misery to massive hope and self-esteem, then so be it. Open the doors, lay my correct path, and sustain me, lest I falter from the human side of myself. I promise to try until I can no longer breathe on my own accord. Amen. Amen.”

All Dillon could see was the top of her head, and he smiled at her sincere prayer. He felt with his fingers until his hands rested on her shoulders. He squeezed the tense flesh and patted her.

“Honey, at this moment, I’ve stopped liking you intensely and I’ve started to love you. It will increase, I’m sure, but what I feel when you speak is far beyond a heavy like. It’s love, festering below the soil, waiting for springtime to burst open and reach for the sky and the sun.”

“That means we’re in for a fight?”

“Duh! I told you that already when I asked you if you wanted to leave.”

“I can’t let this one go. I’ve had everything I loved eaten, ripped asunder, stripped from me, wrenched from me by the courts and banks. Then for a long spell, I thought I lived in paradise, only to learn it was a vampire’s garden. I was planted as a blood tree and served only to provide lifeblood for the next bite. Your love and my love for humanity set me free. I’ll fight like twenty tigresses and win, or I’ll die here. I’m in. You won’t see my red backside retreating from this battle.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I know that in my past, I’ve truly been a wuss. Don’t know where this association with a very aggressive and extroverted lesbian will lead me, but at this very moment, I’m fairly basking in the limelight of your male love, and it’s got me soaring with eagles! Really!”

“What silly crap are you talking, woman?”

“From the way you’re living, it’s far from silly. It’s closer to pathetic. Do you pay rent here?”

“Not your business. We got no money to reward you. Get out!”

“Do you pay rent here?”

She received no answer except a hand pointed at the door.

“Do you know, Cindy?”

“No. We don’t have enough to pay. The State pays the rent and the utilities.” She looked at her mother. “What’s wrong with you? It’s okay for me to steal and beg and you can’t even talk to help us?”

Silence.

“Her name is Nellie. I’ll answer for her until she understands you won’t leave us. I understood when you got me into your car. No one comes here unless it’s the police to arrest someone or kill someone. Usually, both happen. And you came here to help us? You’re angels, or you’re stupid.”

“Well, Nellie, thanks for the first answers. What is your source of income? Welfare? Food Stamps? What?”

“Get a shit \$475 a month from welfare. Get no food stamps. Get nothing extra for child support for Cindy being here and alive. The rest comes from what she can make. Most nights, it’s enough to truly help us.”

“That’s it? And with today’s economy, that’s a tight situation. Why no food stamps?”

“Because the government won’t let me have them?”

“Why?”

“Because they’re stupid! They tell me to sell my car for \$750, and then I can get them.”

“Why don’t you?”

“I don’t have a car, and you think they will listen or care? No. It was stolen three years ago. I don’t have it to sell. Doesn’t matter to them. The DMV still shows the title in my name, and no amount of cussing’ or begging’ makes a difference.”

Betsy took in what she could see of the house while Nellie talked and was not pleased.

“What did you do before this slide to the bottom began?”

“I was a hairstylist.”

“Married?”

“No. He ran off a long time ago. Never gave me one penny for Cindy’s help. Nothing.”

“And no one in the Child Support system has found him?”

“They can’t find their way out of a paper bag lying on its side. No. I quit asking.”

“Do you like living like this? I’ve seen homeless people in alleys with nothing but the clothes on their backs and what’s stuffed inside a shopping cart. And they do try to keep their area clean. You have this house, rent-free, with utilities paid. You tell me you can’t keep it clean?”

“You can go now.”

“You can clean out your ears now! Normally, I’m with you on help from government agencies who don’t help and don’t want to. But in your case, I’m with them. Why help you when you don’t want to help yourself? You could start a good showing right here, where you live for free! If I oversaw you staying here, I’d have evicted your sorry ass long ago! Are the other houses in this area like this?”

“I don’t know. Don’t do no socializing. No one can afford it.”

“Cindy? Do you know?”

“The ones I’ve seen are pretty much the same. When you get this far down, there’s little point in doing much to help yourself. You’re in a little box and you take what you have and just stay alive one more day.”

“That may be so, but any change at all in your life must start with yourself and how you live your life and how you look at your life. Am I right, Nellie?”

She looked at the floor and said nothing.

“Where do you sleep, Cindy?”

“Whoa!” said Nellie.

“Shut it, woman! You don’t like it; the door is open. Use it! If not, I’ll throw you through it while it’s still closed! You got my blood boiling so help or stay out of my way!”

Cindy said nothing but took her hand and led her away. She pushed the door open and turned on a light. “Here you go.” She sat on her bed and watched Betsy trail her fingers around dusty furniture and move clothing with her feet.

“Do you like living this way?”

“Not really, but I’m still alive. I like living even if it’s in filth.”

“No doubt about that. Was this always like this?”

“No. We had a different place before dad ran away. This place? It was clean when we moved in. Basically, it was not new. It was cleaner than now, but you know?”

Betsy nodded. “Okay. I get the picture.” Her eyes toured the room as Cindy studied her.

“What are you thinking?”

She stopped and watched the girl. “I was thinking of ways to help you and her. One was to spend the night with you, but I don’t think so now. I can’t justify it in my mind. I’m still going to help, but not that way. Do you have any clean clothes?”

“A few. Why?”

“Do you ever go to a laundry to wash them?”

“No. Mostly I wash them in the tub and hang them up to drip dry. Why spend the night here?”

“So, I could better acclimate myself to the environment, then wake and have a cleaning party with you and your mother. I can’t. I’ll have to do it some other way.”

“She won’t like anything like that.”

“Does it look like I’m concerned with her likes or dislikes? Other people have likes and dislikes and I think I’d be safe to say that many people in this world would dislike your mother intensely if they knew about her and this house.”

“What business is it of theirs to know or like or dislike us?”

She smiled and patted her knee. “Honey, that’s what I call humanly correct. Some things in this world and life are right and some things are wrong, no matter how the people in the spotlight think it is. Everyone could know your situation, or no one could know you even exist, and this condition would still be wrong and in the dislike camp. You look confused, so who washes the clothes?”

“Me.”

“Why? If you’re down this far, why care when no one else does?”

“Because after a few days, I don’t like the smell.”

“Very good. Not being dirty is humanly correct. You don’t like it, so you do something about it. So, why doesn’t your mother do something about it? You said she is sick? She doesn’t appear that sick to me. She still has energy to clean this place and that would have a great impact on any sickness in her, real or perceived.”

Cindy sat upright and her eyes grew intense as she frowned. “You’re making sense to me and you’re way too smart for mamma to even try any shit with you. Hmm. Are you going to kick her ass?”

“Not literally, but she’ll probably feel like I am at times. Do you want to help me with the first kick?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m going to ask you to spend the night with Dillon and me at our hotel. We don’t have one yet, but we will. Just say yes and get a set of clean clothes, no matter how much she cusses or fusses. Deal?”

She blinked a few times and smiled. “You’re lovingly evil, I think. Is that possible?”

“In my case, yes, it is.”

“Then deal.”

“Now number two?”

“You’re pushing it.”

“I know. Do you know where her marriage license is?”

“Yes, and yes, I can get it without going to the living room and she won’t know like forever. You need it?”

“To help find your dad, yes.”

Her brows nearly met at her nose. “You can do that?”

“I have failed before, but usually, I’m good at that. I like things humanly correct and that causes many good things to happen around me. Some people call it miracles. Others call it Betsy’s bombs, but whatever it is, it works. Do that first while I wait for you.”

Cindy grinned and held out her right hand. “You got it. Can we be girlfriends? I’ve never had one, but I hear they’re great things and I’m liking you more now.”

Betsy grinned like her and shook her hand. “Rock on, girlfriend. Move it.”

Back in the living room Nellie remained standing by the sofa and Dillon remained by the door and both were silent.

“What took you so long? The room’s not that big,” said Nellie.

“Just some girls talk, mamma. You know I don’t have many friends who visit me.”

“Why should we?”

“Well, Cindy, would you like to spend the night with Dillon and me?”

Nellie was instantly vocal. “What the hell? No way!”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“Then get a change of clothes and we’ll go now. We’ll spend some time making plans and come back in the morning. Thanks, girlfriend.”

“No!”

“Mamma, relax. I’m safe. I’ll be okay.”

“You’re safe here!”

“I’m safer there. I know you feel that and that’s what worries you. I’m not leaving you. I want to know what some of her plans are. I’m nine going on ten and I won’t stop growing. And I want to be prepared for life instead of just existing in it. I’ll be okay and I’ll be back in the morning. Just stop freaking out for once. It’s okay.”

She returned with her clothes in a plastic shopping bag and Nellie sat on the sofa, staring holes in the carpet. The angels were kissing and whispering at the door.

“I’m back and ready. I travel light and I’m light maintenance. See you in the morning, mamma.” She hugged her goodbye and left the house.

Chapter 7

After a bubble bath in the hotel, Cindy sat feeling like a queen on a double bed between Betsy's legs as her hair was brushed and fastened back.

"Thanks, Betsy. It feels good when that happens."

"Doesn't your mamma do that?"

She used to. She's an excellent hairstylist, but after Dad left, she stopped pretty much everything. Guess it hurt too much."

"That sounded bitter."

"Yeah. I didn't quit. I took care of myself what I could and tried to help Mamma. I got over it better than she did. For her, she's dying to see him again. She mouths that she doesn't, but she does. For me, I could give a shit if I ever see him. If he dies and never comes home, wonderful for me."

Betsy hugged her and said nothing. "Well, keep this memory of me making you feel good, if you can."

"Did your mamma brush your hair?"

"Oh, when I was small like you, she did. Then the older I got she stopped a lot of what I enjoyed with her."

"That's sad. Why do mammas stop that? You talk to her often?"

She tensed and then decided to answer. "Occasionally. I try to go at least once a year to visit her forever home."

"She's dead?"

"Yes."

"And your dad?"

"He's beside her."

"You talk to him also?"

"Not that much. We were not so close and friendly like Mom and me."

"Hmm. I felt that jerk. I think I know, girlfriend. He did things to you that made you feel bad and want to find a big hole and crawl inside and never be seen again?"

"Yes."

"So did my dad. Why do dads do that?"

Betsy said nothing, but she shook and trembled, and finally Cindy turned in her tight squeeze and returned the hug. Then she could not hold back. She opened her mouth to speak to the pained curious face and lost control of the tears.

"I don't know! Not all dads do, but when they do, it hurts so much, and they seem to care little about the pain that feels like it will split you down the middle."

"I know that feeling, too. It would really hurt, but then you'd feel no pain."

They were both helplessly lost in a crying spell and Dillon approached the bed where he could hug Betsy and kiss her forehead.

"Sorry. Didn't see that one coming," she said.

"Neither did I, sweetie. I felt a great discord and hopelessness, but not that pain."

"People learn to hide it away, so it doesn't cripple them. Then something like brushing someone's hair unleashes it all."

"Well, I'm not one of those dads."

"I know that already."

Cindy's hand patted his side. "Hey, boyfriend. Girls must cry sometimes. That's what they do. Either join us or take a walk until we wind down."

*

Dillon woke first in the morning and untangled himself from two girlfriends who finally slept sometime in the night. He stretched and sat on the edge of the bed and Betsy swiftly joined him.

"Me first?"

"Go for it, girlfriend." He gave her a shove.

She returned and kissed him. "Dillon, my like moved to love last night. You're such a wonderful man. Are you patented?"

"Don't think so."

"Good. Then there's a chance for me to do that."

"Thanks, sweetie. What's up for today? Give me something to do."

She got the marriage license from her purse. "Don't ask, just use it well. I want to see if you can find him where the Child Support Office can't."

"Are you sure you want me to find him?"

"Read my lips, honey. Yes, I want you to find him. And yes, I expect him to be unharmed, healthy, and gainfully employed when he drags his sorrowful butt home to arrange for financial support for his family. You want to vent, do it on your own time or let your two prime girlfriends hold you while you cry it out."

He laughed and kissed her. "Ten-four. I'll let the courts deal with him. I'll just locate him. What else?"

"I'll find a way to start her on the road to recovery of self-love. Not sure of that yet. It's going to make me think a lot about this one. The brain already hurts."

Cindy jumped from the bed and ran to the bathroom. She stopped in front of them and asked, "Hey, does this Love Camp include breakfast?"

Dillon frowned at Betsy. "What? Why look at me that way?"

She batted her eyes. "Because girlfriends simply love it when boyfriends do something nice for the girlfriends who love them, like we love you."

"Oh, I get it. No, really, I get it. Can't win that one, no matter what. So, I'll not try and say, let's go. Memo to self. Rename this from Love Camp to Railroad Express."

*

Sabob

Breakfast was finished, and Cindy had a to-go order for her mother.

Betsy thought aloud. "You know, in Hartford, I would know exactly where to go to find help. But here in Tulsa, I'm lost and unsure of anything."

"What are you looking for?" asked Cindy.

"People who will help me clean your home for a cash donation if possible. In Hartford I'd go to three churches and the youth would volunteer to work and I'd feed them and donate to their church groups. Here, I don't know."

"People who work for cash and shut up?"

"Yes."

“Migrant workers are the answer. There are plenty of farms around. Farms use them to plant, harvest, and ship crops. Some are salary workers, but most are cash payments and goodbye when done. And they’re good workers.”

Betsy shouted and clapped. “Fantastic! Love it when so much knowledge falls into your lap!”

Cindy fell across her legs. “Like this?”

She tickled her. “Yes. Like that.”

Dillon stopped the car where he did in the night and viewed many windows covered with what looked like bed sheets. He turned to Cindy’s house and found it the same.

“Makes sense, I guess. Can’t afford adequate food and clothing, why worry about curtains.”

He turned at Betsy’s approach.

“It will change, dude. Give it time. Let’s go inside. Cindy. Come along now.” She knocked on the door, and it opened swiftly.

“She behave?”

“Like a queen.”

“Will you leave me alone now?”

“Does it look like it? I just got started.”

Nellie sighed as if overburdened and looked up. “Lord, have mercy. She’s a dense one. Why do you keep sending them? Just leave me alone.”

“So, you do talk to Him. Good, Nellie. He answers sometimes, even if you’re not aware of it. He heard you and sent me, His favorite bulldog, to help you escape this mess. So, don’t argue with me; keep arguing with Him. We’ll both listen, but I won’t quit until we get positive results. Can you dig that?”

“We cry, we die, we plead, we talk until we’re blue in the face, we vote, we get nothing but the same. What makes you think you’ll do something different?”

“I don’t back down until I get arrested. I did in Delaware. Slapped a detective because I didn’t like the service I got. She arrested me. Then she let me go and put me on a pedestal later. Next question?”

“Never mind. What are you going to do?”

“Take your daughter again and while you have breakfast that I bought, we’re going to find some help and this house will be cleaned before sunset. Then tomorrow, I’m going to start an obnoxious campaign on the section that owns this development and apartment complexes and get the exteriors cleaned and repaired.”

“Nothing’s been done in the three years I’ve been here. Neighbors say it’s nothing in nine years.”

“Because you didn’t have Betsy Riley here to help you. I don’t scream much but loads of people tell me to shut up and get out. Sort of like you did. Did I listen? No. Will I listen to them? No. And I’ve got an ace up my sleeve just in case they want to throw me out physically.”

“Well, you are one determined little cuss. I’ll say good luck, Betsy Riley. Just remember I can’t pay your bail.”

“I wouldn’t dream of you helping there. I’ll be okay, and we’ll be back later.”

At eleven o’clock, the first vans moved into the neighborhood. Three men and one woman worked with Betsy to clean Nellie’s house and fix numerous minor problems. Six landscaping service vehicles parked behind the vans and commenced to mow lawns, trim hedges, and weed

flower beds in the neighborhood. Neighbors gathered to rant at Nellie and Betsy, and both ignored them.

“Who’s paying for all this? Are you going to make us pay?”

“This is a gift from me, Betsy Riley. Don’t want one penny from you. Use your money wisely to help yourself and get a better life. And don’t say you can’t. Watch what happens to Nellie, then scratch your head and ask her for help. If she’s in a good mood and still here, she just might. If not, oh well. You have only yourself to blame.”

The development was cleaned by sunset, and trash was waiting for pickup. Much of the significant debris was hauled away by the landscapers. Nellie’s house was cleaned, and curtains hung on clean windows instead of sheets. Betsy was interviewed by four reporters from different newspapers and one local television reporter for the ten o’clock news.

Betsy stood beside Nellie in the doorway with an arm around her shoulders. “Well, how does this look to you?”

“I’ll have to admit that it looks good. Never thought it would look like this again.”

“You know, it never had to stop looking like this. The only thing that stopped you was your mind.” She tapped her head. “George won’t come back to save you from this mess. You can die and rot here; he’ll never know or be concerned. Someday, he will assume financial support, but not anything else.”

“I guess you’re right on that. Are you really looking for him?”

“That’s one of Dillon’s tasks. That’s why he’s at the library using public computers to do that investigation. Do you want him back?”

“No. Not really.”

“Well, that’s a half-hearted positive statement. In the meantime, there are adequate cleaning supplies available for your use. All the bedding is new, and there’s no need to ignore the bathrooms that are built in. Dillon and I will back away from here tonight. I’ll find out which government sections handle the rent payments and tackle that tomorrow. Just be on call for a pickup if I need you with me for verification of information since I have no Power of Attorney to do or say or ask anything in your name.”

“Thankfully. You’d have me committed or in jail against my will.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Wrong. I said I want positives. Neither option would help you and not help Cindy. She’d be gone in a heartbeat, and you’d never find her. You don’t need that. Work hard. Think smart, not silly. I see potential.”

“You know, this sucks that I can’t repay you. I don’t like charity.”

“Charity is love. When you reject love, you open the door for all the evil in the world, human or demon to rush in and rain hell on you. Accept charity. Accept love. Accept help until you can help yourself and then even help others.”

She sighed heavily. “Okay. No way to work around you. Damn, your love is evil. Good, but evil.”

“Glad you finally figured that out. And before we part ways, I want something from you. I want a new hair style and since you’re qualified, I’ll accept that for payment. Just keep thinking positive, thinking about me, the motor mouth who won’t stop bugging you and you come up with the style. I’ll buy the products; you do the makeover and we’re even.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that? You’re too darn sneaky and resourceful for me to watch and even ask you to stop. I’ll owe you a million before it goes a week.”

Betsy smiled and patted her cheek. “Thanks. I do love compliments. But I’ve told you all that I want from you. Seriously.”

Dillon arrived and Betsy jogged to the car. “Hey, love. Your face looks pleased. Get something even semi-positive?”

“Yes. Still, I want to give the neighbors some heartburn by getting a kiss from a superstar before we depart. Come on. Pay up.”

“Oh, you clown.” She complied and he pulled from the curb. “Now, what you got?”

“Well, George Morgan is still alive. He’s living in Mulvane, Kansas about 300 miles north of us.”

“That close? Wonder why he didn’t split much farther? I mean, after what he’s done?”

“What’s he done? Were any charges filed against him? He just suddenly packed up and walked away without a shot fired, a knife wound, a divorce request. Nellie’s the one who finally filed for divorce and all the rest to help her obtain support.”

“Which has never happened. Is he employed?”

“Ten-four, sweetie. His employer is Sunfield Paving and Construction. He’s a truck driver and from the going wages, he must make a healthy salary. I want to make the trip to see where and how he lives before we load Nellie for that department.”

“And in the meantime, I work on getting her car resolved. Can’t believe the snafus that abounds in this case. Talked with her and found the car was stolen during a drug deal in the hood. She reported it. The police came, filled out a report, filed it, hopefully, and that’s the end. Called the police and talked with two different blockheads and can’t really say what the problem is. They found it, crashed, abandoned, and destroyed. Stealers set it on fire. Guess I’ll tackle the insurance company tomorrow and then go to the Welfare Office. It’s the same old story, a boondoggle happened and no one on the face of the earth can possibly take responsibility and click on one little icon on a computer file and all will work well. They want to quadruple detailed documentation that Martians landed in San Francisco on July 11, 1987 before noon before the check mark can go on the form.”

“Betsy, I hope you’re not offended by my loving gaze, but you’re awesome when you get wound up over something like this. You’re so humanly correct that you’re causing me erections galore.”

“And the problem is?”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing. There’s no check mark assigning me responsibility for your sexual problems or desires. Bureaucracy at its finest, eh? Talk to me tomorrow when you find out who is responsible for handling life’s little problems. However, I get to check her out first.”

They arrived at their hotel, and she hit the shower first. He followed her and she rolled on the bed until she found a paper on her pillow.

“Case 1234: Who is responsible for loving Dillon Grant and assisting in his sexual relief? Below were 35 squares with check marks beside Betsy Riley. “Wow! All that in about 15 minutes? That’s fast. That’s good. That’s worth this sprite playing with you tonight. Score! You rock, dude!”

Her phone beeped to notify her of a text message received.

“Hey, sweetie. Missed you recently. You, okay? Vanessa.”

She hesitated and then replied. “F U.”

The reply was nearly instant. “Hey, what’s up with that?”

“What’s always up with that. Guess you think I worship and adore isolation. Wrong! You think it’s wonderful and life fulfilling? Wrong. Try it for yourself sometime if you have the balls

to do it. You'd crack inside a month. No fan clubs. No internet viral videos of you skinny dipping after the last show. Absolutely nothing about Vanessa Charles anywhere! You'd hang yourself pronto! F U!"

There was a pause before the answer: "Where are you?"

"Where I want to be. Where I've longed to be for a long time. You've been too deaf to listen or care. I'm gone. Bye, and B T W, new cell phone tomorrow. I wasn't delivered by UPS and signed for. I came to you on my own. You left me. F U, F U, F U."

She shut the phone off before she could get a reply.

She fumed until Dillon came to bed and sat beside her.

She snapped at him when he touched her leg.

"Whoa, Betsy! What's up so abruptly, that's infuriated you?"

"Nothing! Just a small text war with a partner, worried now that I'm not in my cell for a head count! Insufferable bitch!"

"What did you tell her?"

"Told her I was where I wanted to be for a long time, gone. Then I told her FU quite a few times, and basically drop dead. Nothing too much."

He ventured to touch her leg again and she smiled. "Sorry. I was so wrapped up in that delicious angry feeling that I never heard you of felt you come to bed until you touched me. I was quite busy strangling her, drowning her, using a French Foreign Legion move to relocate her vagina to inside her left ear."

"Why there?"

"So, when she gets laid by the next man, she can hear it coming."

He chuckled until he moved the hand to her face. "Betsy, I love you. You're one very bold and entertaining lady with a great slap down, in-your-face comeback for every gerbil asshole on the planet. Proud of you. Think you pissed her off?"

"If not, I'll be sadly disappointed. She sent the initial text because she missed me. Been three months and three days. Just keep missing me, bitch!"

He moved the hand back to stroke her leg.

"You can proceed with anything now, lover. She hit me at the wrong time since I was upset about the snafu here over Nellie. I probably should have waited before I replied, but it felt good to unload my stress and she was handy, like begging for it. You know?"

"I do now, tiger. What you think she's doing right now?"

"Probably phoning everyone she knows in West Virginia to find out what happened to her property, her little sugar plum, apple dumpling, Xanadu cupcake treat who's no longer there."

"Did she use those names with you?"

"Yes. All of them. And no, you don't need to avoid them to avoid my anger. You care. You can call me any of those, or something different like, sweetie, and I'll be happy. She does it and I'll sew her lips shut with 100-pound test fishing line. What do you say, honey? Mm mph, mm mph, mm mph. Oh, that. Catch you later. I've got a nail appointment that I can't miss."

"Remind me never, ever, never ever, to piss you off."

"You'd have a difficult time doing that, because I love and respect you. And I'd give you a million or more chances to back up and change course or at least negotiate to prevent a heartache."

"Excellent. Thanks. So, tomorrow?"

“Do I look like Little Orphan Annie? Tomorrow I’m getting a new cell phone and I’m also putting Nellie and Cindy on the plan with me for a few months. She really should have a landline or an active cell phone. Just one more thing I must teach her.”

“Will you teach my magic dragon to find a wonderful home to put out its fire?”

“Oh, you’re so cute. Loved all those checked boxes showing who was responsible for your delight. Light a candle or two and bring it on.”

Chapter 8

Vanessa thought she was alone, but Coleman Friel and nine other band members overheard her tirade after the texting ended. The first thing she did was scream about losing love. She followed it up by slamming her phone at her feet and kicking it across the stage. She stomped to where it stopped spinning and picked it up to check its status. All appeared normal, and she stuck it in her skirt pocket.

“This is not going well. This was a bad tour for me. No! Back up, Vanessa. Giving in to the come-on from Betsy was a bad thing. STOP IT! You could have said no. You should have said no. YOU didn’t! You lusted and wanted her so greatly! You fucked yourself in this deal. No one drove you to do it! You’re an ignorant bitch, self! Gah! Why, when we’re on tour and can’t leave? Or can we?”

The ten band members stood like statues or vultures waiting for her to drop until she gained the stage office door, which closed behind her.

“Bummer,” said Sandra Clausen. I’d eat the bitch alive and enjoy it. So, what’s a cannibalistic act among friends and band members? Eh.”

Inside, Vanessa slowed her pace and casually knocked on the door before opening it. “Maureen, can we talk?”

“If it’s necessary and it will save the band, come on inside and close the door. Otherwise, leave a letter of resignation in your dressing room and hit the road.”

She entered and sat in a chair before the desk. “I’m sorry, but I need to take an emergency leave of absence. I can’t stand this any longer.”

Maureen was dumbfounded. “What? This late in the tour? Where am I to find another drummer to finish the last nine shows? Can you shit one tonight? Can I? What is wrong with you?”

“I need to go. I’m not sure I can wait until the last show and the break afterward.”

“Really?” Maureen glanced at Patrice, who shrugged and looked blank. “Why?”

“Because Betsy is gone! Don’t know where, and her phone’s out of service.”

“Betsy? Who’s Betsy? Your mother? Your sister? A cousin? Who or what?”

“She’s, my partner.”

“Your partner? If she’s that, why isn’t she here with you? I have no problem with that so long as she behaves. You know that already. What I have a problem with is the stigma of a Celtic Band with loose morals, with a flair for pornography and obscenity! That’s what’s going on in the Celtic Music World, and that’s all because of you! No other woman or man in this band does what you do, and I’ve told you before, what you do affects every member of this band, because it’s a unit, not a bunch of individual bands hanging out! No, you may not have a leave of absence! You’ll finish the tour, and then I’ll replace you! You’re doing nothing to help the band but drag it down, and I’ve given you more than enough chances to change. And you don’t.”

“Maureen, I really need to go!”

She leaned forward and raised her voice. “Then go! But, when you do, don’t ever bother to show up here again, or even have the courage to use me as a reference! You’re hurting this band, and you don’t care! It’s lewd acts after each performance for your own personal attention. Do you have problems? Cole’s wife is eight months pregnant. She’ll most likely deliver before he gets back to Dublin. Where is he? Here, performing because the band, the whole band, needs him. You can’t hang until the last show, then go, but don’t come back.”

“You’ll fire me?”

“Bet your sweet ass I will. I’ll send a severance check to your address on file and C’est la vie, baby. I’d love to sue you for all the silliness you’ve done and the degradation you’ve attached to this band’s name and credibility, but I won’t. You can be a humanist wanton slut, but I’ll be the epitome of the human kindness employer. You’ll get a final check, and we’re done. Got that?”

“Yes.”

“Does anything else need to be clarified tonight? Do you need a douche for your tiny brain to understand?”

“No. Good night. Sorry to have bothered you.”

The door closed, and Maureen stared at the ceiling. “Dense. Nothing reached her piss-ant brain! Do you believe that?”

“I’d love to say no, but I can’t. I heard it. I believe.”

“Do you think she’ll go?”

“Don’t know this time. She’s upset, but then so are a lot of the band members this time and it’s mostly due to her and her behavior. I’ve overheard some of them threaten to beat the crap out of her if she doesn’t straighten up.”

“Does her contract have any breach clauses?”

“Yes, and one is what she suggested tonight. If she disappears, you can file a breach of contract and remain clear. It will just hurt all the years of struggling to get what you deserve, the number one spot in Celtic Music. And you did it through performance and showmanship, not lustful behavior like her. And trust me, Maureen, the audiences, and fans know. They know you’ve rejected modeling offers, turned down men’s magazines to the tune of millions of dollars, refused to even show cleavage. You refuse to answer any intimate questions. You dress conservatively, but attractively on and off stage, and when you kneel before them and tell them you love them, it’s sincere and not at a slut level. It will hurt you, but truly, I don’t think it will destroy you. It will only delay the inevitable for the magic of this band unit. You’ll fall. You’ll rise again. You’ll come back stronger and better, and your fans and followers will respect you more for it. They’ll idolize you for it.”

“Thanks, Patrice. Bless you for being around and keeping me straight. Did you know about Betsy?”

“Nope. She whipped that one out of thin air. Don’t even recall her with anyone. Didn’t know she had a partner. Betsy? Sorry, don’t know that one.”

“Wonder if anyone else knows?”

“If there is, it would be Cole the Mole. He’s the band’s resident psychologist without the extra pay for professional status.”

“Gotcha. Goodnight. Think I could swing an emergency leave of absence?”

“Don’t even try to fire yourself, girl. Go to bed soon.”

Maureen walked through the gradually silencing parking lot and to where the last of the audience cleared a huge asphalt spot.

“Looks good to me.” She stopped, got her bearings, leaned against a lamp post, and called Cole.

“Hey, guru. I’m in strong need of counseling. Can you do me?”

“Hey, be careful with open terms like ‘do you.’ That can be interpreted in more than one way.”

“Sure can, but if you make the wrong choice, Rasheen will be disappointed with getting a gelding home versus what left her pregnant.”

“Ouch! Where are you? The office?”

“Away from the crowd and too large ears. I’m in the nearly empty audience parking lot. I’m near marker sign E 41. Very isolated except me and soon you.”

“Be right there.”

It took eight minutes for him to reach her. “Hey, Mother Leader. What’s up?”

“Nowhere to sit but on the ground. You got a problem with that?”

He sat and waited.

“Got a problem. Can you tell me what?”

“Easy one there. Vanessa the Slut. Want me to take a contract out on her? I can have her gone before midnight and never seen again.”

“No. We’ll do it the hard way. She might even help this time. Need some ammo from you, the inner band nerve center. Who’s Betsy? Learned tonight she’s her partner, and I want some information.”

“Oh, damn! What the fuck!” He stared at the black sky with clenched fists.

“Sorry if it hurts. I take it you know her?”

“Damn it, Maureen! I hate you right now. Promise that you’ll not ever fuck with her, and I’ll talk. Otherwise, get a lawyer. That’s what it will take! Fuck me to tears! Never should have answered the phone tonight!”

“Hey! Whoa! Please, whoa! I never knew Betsy existed until a few moments ago. I’ve nothing to do with her. I’m asking because Vanessa wants to leave and find her. Are we okay now, or do I call 911?”

“What? Are you drunk, or is this early dementia? You KNOW Betsy Riley, woman! You bought Marshalltown Heights from her. It’s sold; how many 20 working on 30 million singles, and you don’t remember it or her?”

“What? That song? That sweet girl was Betsy. What’s she doing with the likes of Vanessa. Relax, Cole. I never saw them together, and it never registered before. I recall now that I’ve bought like nineteen others from her. She’s good. Can’t praise her taste in women, but wow!”

He relaxed his fists. “Okay. We both know her. She’s of Irish descent, but born in Hartford, Connecticut. A few years back, she lost her son in Delaware. Guinness Book of Records for freak accident. Alligator ate her son in a rest area. She got arrested for a false 911 call. Got sedated. Later the alligator was found. Between her and the arresting detective, she killed it. The husband left her. She grew infatuated with Vanessa’s web site. Vanessa talked with her. Wham! Love affair that’s still going on. She, Betsy, lives on a farm in West Virginia that Vanessa owns through some family member’s death. She has a national syndicate of political cartoons, and she writes songs for many singers and bands. Personally, I think she’s like a forced slave there. Just don’t know what Vanessa holds over her. Any normal woman would have split before now.”

“What the hell? You know I wish I could ask these questions when I hire band members. So, basically what I have is an extreme bondage and domination situation and it’s about to explode on me? Or it will soon?”

“Sorry, but if Vanessa said she’s missing, that’s probably a very true statement.”

“Have you talked with her?”

“Betsy? Yes. A few weeks or so ago. She was planning to escape from her ‘isolation prison’ as she called it. Don’t know who Vanessa communicated with tonight. It was all text until she got violent and kicked her phone across the stage while cursing up a storm.”

“Really? Any witnesses other than you?”

“Nine other band members saw it.”

“Good. Not good, but good.”

“She wants to go?”

“Yes. That would give me much leverage to fire her and take the hit it would cause us. We’d bounce back, but it would hurt for a while.”

Cole watched her pain and then decided to press on and give her a positive tidbit. “Not necessarily, Ms. Lannon. I do invoke patient confidentiality because of how I am, but if it comes to my livelihood and the salvation of this wonderful performance unit called Dunmore Road, I can, without remorse, violate my privacy concerns and lay a supercharged answer right into your delicate, do me, hands. Just tuck that into the back of your mind and don’t press her. Let her stay until Dallas or let her take herself out. That will put all the focus and pressure on her and leave you looking like a victim who doesn’t deserve to be victimized. Fans will lift you to the top of glamorous pedestals and bury her beneath them, forever. Trust me. Been waiting, longing, lusting for the day you fire her, no matter where, when, or why. That’s how much I care for and love this band, except for Vanessa Charles.”

“And you won’t tell me ahead of time?”

“No. A little stress and drama is good for building character.”

“You know, you’re a man, but right now you sound like a bitch.”

“Thanks for the compliment. But, trust me, I know what I’m talking about and trust me to never knowingly disappoint you. And I shouldn’t have to tell you why.”

She hugged him and patted his back. “Thanks, Cole. I’m happy to have hired you and I’m happy that you have my back. We’ll see what transpires, but I sort of hope she lasts until Dallas. That’s the lesser of the evils and the avenue of less stress on Patrice and I.”

*

Betsy rolled out of bed before Dillon, and she was dressed before she woke him.

“Should be a law against early risers.”

“Make that later sleepers and I’ll vote for it.”

“What’s on the menu today?”

“You do recon on George Morgan. I got some leads on Nellie’s expensive car. Going to nail that one next while I wait for your wheels to turn. If they turn like you sleep, it could be Christmas before we mosey along our way.”

“Ha, ha, ha. You still think it’s a bad idea for me to rent a car for you?”

“Nope. Took only one hour for me to understand Dillon Wisdom. See ya tonight, but I might chat with you before that.”

After 1 hour and 50 minutes, Betsy’s patience neared an end at a Tulsa police station where she finally got to talk with Sgt. Walker, who was immediately negative.

“Good morning, Ms. Riley. I’ve been asked to help you with this straightforward case. Don’t understand why you’re interested. The vehicle does not and never did belong to you.”

“I don’t expect anyone to understand me or my intent when we first meet, but you will soon. There’s a movement in America for all citizens to be Humanly Correct. Forget politics. Forget sexuality. Forget racial issues. The final curve of everything is that it is Humanly Correct. Absolute truths that transcend all other barriers because they were in your genes at birth.”

“Like an example, please?”

“Like food should not ever be a commodity to be bought or sold for profit, controlled by governments for political and financial superiority. Food is a human need, from the moment of conception in the female womb until the moment of death. Deny any billionaire, multi-millionaire, city mayor, state governor, nation president, dictator, and their family’s food and water and in a matter of weeks, all will die of starvation. Food is a NEED, not a whim, not when you feel it’s necessary to give out. It’s a NEED, a humanly correct need that should be the primary goal of every government on the face of the earth, no matter the country or who leads it. It’s a Human Universal Truth.”

He cleared his throat. “I understand that and somewhat agree. Now, why you and this case?”

“Because I befriended a nine-year-old girl and her mother. The mother has applied for food stamps because she has no source of income, her ex-husband refuses child support payments, and she lives in Section 8 housing. The Food Stamp Section refuses food stamps because the DMV shows she owns a car that’s worth \$750 and it must be sold, and food purchased before food stamps can be issued. The car was stolen. She doesn’t have it. The police were notified. They filed a report with the insurance company. The DMV still shows it belonging to her. Do we see a cycle here? No one wishes to place an electronic check mark on a computer system form to show she has no car and is not likely to ever have a car. Once that is done, food stamps will flow to her and her daughter and help relieve some of the Inhumanly Applied Stress and let her get on with her life. One step at a time from having her house cleaned yesterday to this, to finding her ex-husband and procuring child support from him, to getting her a job and being able to graphically tell all the government affiliated people what they can do with their debilitating welfare programs. You disbelieve? It will take a few months, but I’ll get her there.”

“Good luck. I know where she lives. Did you see the sign?”

“You don’t learn too quickly do you? I saw the sign. I flipped it off as I drove by this morning. If I were the governor, the police would patrol that development every other hour, 24-7, until the GOVERNMENT INVESTED housing was free of all crimes and the neighborhood safe. The GOVERNMENT is paying the rent there. The GOVERNMENT paid for the houses and apartments to be built, to minimum standards, and now could care less. Spend taxpayers’ money to construct them, and then blatantly ignore their upkeep. The government’s Humanly Incorrect actions would be in the media so much that their foolishness would drive them insane to correct the problems and shut the media up.”

She clasped her hands on her lap. “Now, what’s been done by the Police Department to locate Nellie’s vehicle or take action to declare it totally missing and relieve her of any responsibility? Recall that she just wants to live and have some government stress removed to help her think and act properly like any normal human should. Like you.”

“Wow! Do you have any information?”

She removed a paper from her purse. “Be humanly prepared. Girl Scout tenet number one. Here’s all the pertinent info.”

He took the paper and his fingers clacked on the keyboard a few moments and then he stopped. “Hmm. The car was reported stolen by Nellie Morgan. The police investigated and found the theft to be related to a drug crime in that development, but not at or even near her house. The car was located two days later by hikers along the Tulsa River Walkway. The police impounded it as a part of the investigation, all evidence was removed, tagged, and stored in the Evidence Room. The vehicle was removed by J. W. Standard Towing to their Lakeview Storage Lot. I rather assume it’s still there.”

“Nothing else? Like can it be driven? Can it be sold? Is it worth \$750 Blue Book Price?”

“No to all the above. Just a moment.” He turned his monitor to let her view the destroyed mass of metal.

“We, well the crime scene section got what they could for evidence and that’s how it is today.”

“Wonderful. Would it get you fired, or would it be illegal for you to print me a copy of that? I’m not Nellie Morgan, and I don’t have a Power of Attorney, but I can see that will probably be necessary soon. This is truly childish and ridiculous in the public’s mind. Most likely 12 people have been involved with this, and no one is interested in checking a tiny box for justice to happen. The whole force of the government has most likely been, nail the drug dealers who stole it and forget the rest. The dealers are still free, spending their cash transaction, and Nellie is still prisoner of a system that she did not create. Lovely Humanly Incorrect position to be in, huh? This ever happen to you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Too bad. What a learning curve you’d experience. It would make you grow up and accept responsibility quickly.”

Sabob He printed the file for her and stapled it in the corner. “Here you go.”

“Any fee? For the printing or the staple?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Well, have a wonderful, checked box day, Sergeant Walker. Hope every day of your life is perfect and you never have to rely on anyone in the Government to help you.” She stopped at the dispatch desk to obtain directions to the Food Stamp Office and the Lakeview Storage Lot. She pondered calling Dillon, chose not to and headed to Lakeview as her next stop.

*

She pulled into the lot and was greeted by a noisy dog and a noisier owner yelling at the dog and drooling precisely like the dog over her presence and body.

“Can I help you, Miss?”

“I hope so, and I hope it can be before the dog has me for lunch. Hate it when that happens.”

He caught the collar, jerked upward and back. He slapped the choking dog on the head and told him to shut up. He released the collar and the dog retreated, looking defeated and sorrowful.

“So, miss, who are you?”

“Betsy Riley, sir. Do I call you J. W. Or is there another handle you prefer?”

“You can call me John. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking for a car, a favor, a paid job for you, and a justice correction. I guess we could start with that. Are you interested, John?”

His brow wrinkled and he leaned back. “Were you on the news yesterday about cleaning up the garbage dump called Westover Tract?”

“Didn’t know I was on the news, but if I was, I hope I got my point about government ineptness across to the listeners.”

He chuckled and spat on the ground. “Danged sure did. Hasn’t been that much excitement around here for years. You can get out. Boxer is safe now and will ignore you unless you return after dark and jump the fence. Come on. Out with you. Want a soda, tea, or water? We’ll chat sitting on my office steps and then take it from there. Will it be as wild as yesterday?”

“It could get wilder than that, John. This could cause a few heart attacks from knotted underwear or steel-chewing anger.”

“All right! I love it! Your choice to wet your whistle?”

“Tea, please.” She sat on the steps and surveyed the piles and rows of mangled vehicles and wondered what stories each one could tell. Was it a death chamber? Was it a survival capsule? Was it a miracle? Was it a horrid lingering death? Suddenly he sat beside her.

“Here you go. Talk now.”

“Rock on. A few years ago, the police hired you to tow a car that was stolen from Nellie Morgan. The drug deal went bad, and they took her car to escape. They crashed it, burned it to hide the evidence. The police finished their job, and you towed it here. Is it still here?”

“It’s still here. Every other year I get motivated to do some spring cleaning and take a bunch of them to West Chester for chipping into scrap metal for a handsome profit. Haven’t touched that one yet. You want to buy it?”

“No. I want you to give me a figure to tow it for me. When we hit a reasonable fee, I’ll pay you in cash, and you tow it and drop it where and when I tell you.”

He shook his head and took a drink of soda. “You know, Miss Riley, you have about you, this angelic look, like a sweet little grandmother in the making. But inside that gentle shell, you are a package of compressed dynamite that you turn loose to get attention and force wrongs to be righted. You come on as an angel, but you kick butt like a legion of demons who can’t be stopped or controlled. Humanly correct, no doubt, but damn you’re silently evil. I love it! Does \$300 sound good? In its mangled state, it’s not easy to tow around. Billed the police \$550, can’t do that to you, not for this. Where’s it going?”

“The Food Stamp office in their Newton Campus Building. Want you to drop it off on their grand promenade that greets the State’s poor and humble, right in front of their \$16000 water fountain.”

“That’s going to piss them off.”

“Does it look like I’m worried? How many people have they pissed off and never lost a night’s sleep or a penny from their paychecks? Miserable robot puppets! Will you charge them \$500 or more to tow it away two or three days after they whine about it enough to make the public puke over their whining?”

“With pleasure, Evil Betsy. When you want it there?”

“Oh, about 10:30 tomorrow morning. I plan on being there about that time. I love the sound when poop first hits the fan blades. Ping. Ping. Ping, ping, ping. Then it really gets going and I sit back and watch it all happen, upwind of course, and then listen to whining until they do what they should have done long ago. You know, sometimes they must smell their own yuck before they hit the shower.”

“And if I get shot in the deal?”

“You won’t. You’re fulfilling your part of a valid contract with Betsy Riley. You pick up car x and move it from point a to point b. Job done. Go to your next job and don’t worry about it.”

“Still, that’s government property.”

“And therefore, accessible by all citizens. It won’t fit through metal detectors. Just drop it off and if anyone questions it, hold your hands together, bow slightly and say, ‘Sabob,’ finish your task and go.”

“What language is that from? What’s it mean?”

“It’s a word from my Girl Scout clique. The definition is Suck A Big One, Buddy, or Bitch, whichever sex is annoying you.”

“Lord, have mercy. I feel trouble coming for John Wheeler, but you know what? You’re just too sweet to turn down and I don’t want some other company coming here to do that when I can. I need the money and the free advertising. And if you promise to come back and tell me how they reacted, I’ll drop it to \$250. It’s worth it.”

She held out her right hand. “Deal. Now, let’s go inside and write up the Work Order to make it legal.”

“Or not. Been a long time since I’ve done anything exciting. So, what else is swimming around in that beautiful little rebel mind? Need any more help in the future?”

“Aren’t you worried about getting shot over my work order?”

“Nah.”

“Know anyone who has a backhoe and a trailer for hire?”

“Sure do. What’s that for?”

“Slow down, John. It will be a couple of weeks or more for that and I’ll need it for a small midnight task. That way, when the sun rises on a new day, we’ll be back to Jaw Drop City, Butt Pucker Town, and Oh Shit Village, when it’s quite too late to stop the flow of life.”

“And if you get arrested?”

She held her right hand before him until he held it. “Then I have bail sitting beside me, I hope. I know my boyfriend and I hope you two will not leave me to the wolves on my own.”

He squeezed her hand gently. “You got it, Betsy. We love wolves, so we’ll get you out quickly, for their sake.”

Chapter 9

Dillon located George Morgan's work place and sat across from the entrance to a stone quarry and scrutinized each truck and driver who left, loaded or empty. He made a note on his pad, #19 for George's truck and sat as six more left and the gates closed. Before he started his car, two men ran across the road. One stood in front of his vehicle and one at his door, indicating that he lower his window.

"What's your problem, buddy?" asked the hostile man. "Who are you spying for? What company?"

"I'm working for Nellie and her daughter Cindy. They don't own a company, only the clothes in their closets. Who are you spying for?"

"What they want?"

"Child support. You want to fill in as daddy? I doubt they'll care where the money comes from. You want to open your wallet and help them stay alive?"

"No. Just don't like people spying on my company or my people."

"I'm not after you. Only the irresponsible daddy. When I adjust his attitude, you might get a request for a deduction from his wages. That's about all."

"I'll fire him."

"That won't help matters. It will help him hide and shirk his responsibility."

"I do my own accounting and payroll! Crap like that is a hassle for me! Extra work for no profit or gain!"

"What about the hassle for his child who receives nothing but nothing because the rest of the world has to care about themselves? Would it really bother you that much?"

"Yes. Hate court orders and interference. It's out of state also, huh?"

"Sure is. Are you too angry to talk like the gentleman you are?"

He stood straight and keyed a button on his collar microphone. "Chuck. Open the gates and forget the 911 call for now. Want to hear what this gentleman has to say."

The gates rolled apart.

"Park beside the red truck and I'll be right with you."

They settled in his office and Dillon sat before Mr. Hank's desk, and Jack stood with folded arms on the right side.

"Who are you?" demanded Hank.

"Dillon Grant. You really Hank?"

"The first name. Last is Miller. Who is your target for squeezing money from?"

"I don't want to squeeze money from him. I want him to pay for his daughter's support until she reaches the age of 18. It's really that simple. Getting him to do it, willingly, is another and not your concern. After I meet him, and talk with him, man-to-man, his 'fuck it' attitude will most likely soften a tad and he'll want to help."

"Really?"

"Really. I'm very persuasive when I have the need or desire, or both. In this case, the man has annoyed me to near a rage. So, if you fire him, it will only help him. He married the woman. He created a child in the marriage. He walked out after reprehensible acts against his child. He hides well from every state government agency. It's his misfortune or maybe salvation that I don't work for or act like government agencies. I work like Dillon Grant."

Hank made a chuckling noise and sat back in his chair. “You crack me up, dude. You look like a sissy, a very soft gentleman, and you’re going to take on one of these truck drivers and make him pay for a kid that he abandoned? Seriously? Why should I listen to you and your plan? You’re wasting my time.”

Dillon shrugged casually. “I say it like I mean it.” He sat under the amused scrutinizing stare and studied his environment. He made his choice of objects and action. Before Hank could reply, he moved from his chair, picked up a metal pen holder, took a pen from his desk name tag, and jammed the pen through the metal holder a few inches in front of Hank’s face.

Hank jerked back in a wild move. “What the hell?”

“The way you look at me, and the way I really am, is off by a few million miles and perceptions. I could have jammed the pen through your nose or cheeks, and blood would be everywhere, or through your dense ears and you’d be slumped on the floor in a forever sleep.”

“OH, FUCK, MAN! Sorry. Guess I shouldn’t be too hasty. If I were your target, I’d adjust my attitude to make you happy. Want a blow job?”

“No. All I want is your help and in return, I’ll help you. I’ll take away some of your heartache and let you live a healthier life. We cool now?”

“We’re cool, very cool, nearly ice now. Man! I never saw you move until I heard the pen slam into the holder. Phew, what a rush! Where did you learn that?”

“French Foreign Legion training. Wanted to join them. I was too slow to pass the time limit on seventeen crucial moves. Got rejected but keep myself in shape.”

“I see you do. Who are we talking about here?”

“George Morgan.”

“That dick weed. I’d rather fire him. He’s trouble looking for a place to explode.”

“Don’t. I’d rather keep him employed and after we talk, he’ll be a better employee. Trust me.”

“After that demonstration, I’ll trust you.”

“Now, for you. Do you spend more than \$400 a month in time, work, tracking and filing forms to take care of your payroll?”

“Hell yes. Closer to \$600 and it’s a pain in the ass when something like child support, back taxes, and garnishing wages come into play. I must deal with the requester’s validity and the whining, figure the percentage, deduct more tax, and endure ranting of the employee when their check is short. Pain in the ass!”

“You online right now?”

“Yes.”

“Open your web browser and go to kellyanderson.com. Tell me when you’re there.”

He waited and watched Hanks’ eyes until he noticed a jerk.

“I’m there. Who’s this? Is she legitimate?”

“She’s a certified CPA. She’s a single home mom who’s receiving child support for her two children. She hopes to be free from that someday. She wants nothing from him, even that court ordered money. She has 32 clients and is looking for one more. Last time I talked to her, she said 33 is a good number. That’s how old she is. So, do you think paying her \$500 a month to take your payroll problems, your tax filing problems away from you is worth it? She thrives on it. It caused a nasty divorce, but she refused to back down. She loves accounting and she loves working with people and helping so they can have a life also. And she doesn’t mind garnishing wages for child support. Does it and never bats an eye. Give your heartache to her for \$500 a month, keep George Mason gainfully employed, and happiness will rule in three diverse lives.”

“Dillon, my apologies to you. Guess I need to think before I speak or before I even judge inside my mind who and what people are. Thanks. But you sound a tad bitter, even though you want to keep him employed. What’s up with that? I do pay attention, even if I run off at the mouth too freely.”

“Would I like to see you fire him? Yes. Would I like to see him rot in jail or be killed by inmates for the evil he is? Yes. Would any of that, satisfaction with my personal feelings, help Cindy Morgan’s life? No. So, I sacrifice my wishes for her meager life and hope for the chance to correct all that life and government has heaped on her because of him. To do that, I need to step back and be a man and forgive what I cannot correct. If I don’t, then I’m less than George Morgan and unworthy of living.”

“Wow! What a statement! I’ll keep silent. I’ll keep him employed. Before you’re off the property, I’ll be in contact with Kelly. Who is she in your life? May I ask?”

“You may ask. She’s a woman who made an error in judgment early in life and to help her boyfriend’s drug problem the wrong way. She embezzled some money from the company she worked for. She got caught. She went to jail. When she got out, she fell into me. I picked her up. I educated her. I loved her. She flipped out over someone else and walked away from me. I still care for her. I’ve sent her 32 clients, now 33, for her age. You can check with the others. They’re listed on her website. She keeps them squeaky clean regarding IRS and any financial question that arises. You give her your payroll, then slip in all the rest for her to be your contract CPA and she’ll have your back and go to court for you if ever there’s a question about your money flow or financial integrity. A slight against you is a slight against her and she’s not a wuss. It took all I had to forgive her and do it completely. But instead of continual anger, I picked her up, set her feet on a golden path, and set her free. Still hurts, but I let it go. And each year she only gets better. Damn the luck.”

“Sold, Dillon. You’re awesome. Glad you woke me up versus putting me into a forever sleeping clump on the floor. I’ll keep this pencil holder as a reminder of my human weakness and as my good luck charm. Thanks. Thanks sincerely, my man.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Are you really doing all this for an ex-wife and a daughter?”

“Yes. My girlfriend saved the daughter’s life. From there it escalated to this and who knows what else before the situation is resolved.”

“Your girlfriend? You tried again after that obvious painful fiasco?”

“Yes. Went on vacation. Found a brochure with a number and a plea for help. Made the call and she’s like a dream come true for me. And so far, that’s what I feel coming from her. It’s like some angels were watching and guiding us until we met. We don’t need their efforts for us to remain together forever, but to help us out of bad situations, yes. The ex and daughter live in a neighborhood with a sign warning all to enter at their own risk. Got my attention, but I don’t mind walking on the wild side for a good cause. His daughter, Cindy, melted my anger with a ‘help me’ hug and a few tears.”

“I believe, Dillon.” He handed him a business card. “If you get stumped and need help, need bail, need some man to talk to versus your girlfriend, call me. I do make political donations as a private citizen. And I have lots of favors out there that I normally ignore and keep adding to the pile because I’m blessed and self-sufficient. For assisting you, I’ll use them. I want you on my good side.”

“That’s not my intention, but thanks, Hank. Glad to have met you.”

“Any further questions now?”

“Yes. What bars does George frequent, or where does he spend much of his time?”

Hank turned to Jack. “Do you know?”

“The Today and Tomorrow Bar is his favorite dive. Usually by himself, but sometimes he will take a woman there with him. Mostly he goes looking for the one who will turn him on. Don’t know who would after he’s had six drinks, but that’s their problem, not mine.”

“Good enough for me.”

Jack felt less than favorable. “You seriously think you can change his mind? I saw what you did here for Hank. You walk into a bar where drunks are shooting pool, men are feeling up hookers, or would be hookers, and you’ll get his attention? You might have to kill him to do that.”

“No death is required. When death happens, all learning, all cooperation, all love, all living ceases. I want all positives in what I do. Got that?”

“Ten-four, Dillon. Good luck in your adventure. I’ll stop fighting against you and fight for you instead. You need another helping hand? You’ve got me now.” He laid his card beside Hank’s.

“You guys are great. No, I mean really great.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Hank.

“Because all I do is based on love. Love of life. Love of spouse. Love of partner. Love of environment. You were both ready to kill me when you approached my car. From there on until now, it’s learning that I’m not here to destroy you, I want your help, I gave you a source of help, you want to be my friend. That’s what I call greatness. I’ll be in touch with you in the future.”

*

Betsy entered the Food Stamp Office at 9:30 and finally ended in Diane Welch’s office at nearly 10 o’clock. Once again, she laid out her story for Nellie and Cindy and Diane was sympathetic, but could not help her because, one she was not Nellie or, Nellie’s legal representative, and two, because she had a car that was worth \$750, and State Law forbid food stamps until she sold the car.

“Do you know that the car was stolen? How does one sell a car that is not in one’s possession? Instead of spitting out stupid laws and forbids, tell me how she can do it and she will do it before noon today.”

“I don’t know. That’s not my job.”

“Do you also know that the car was crashed by the drug dealers who stole it, and then set it on fire?”

“No, I didn’t know that. I can’t know that. I know that it’s still registered in her name at the DMV, and it must be sold before she can be approved for food stamps. Why are you making it difficult for me and yourself?”

“Oh, it could be that I want you to do your job and I want you to care about the people who walk through that door and seek help. You’re hired by the State Government to help people with this program, not to make a miserable life more miserable, maybe to the point of suicide to stop the pain and hopelessness. You want to tell me the Food Stamp Program is not in place to help people like Nellie Morgan?”

“No ma’am. I won’t tell you that, but there are rules and policies, and they need to be followed.”

“Do you know the people who live at 192 Gossamer Lane in Woodcrest?”

“I’m not familiar with all clients or customers. Why?”

“Because five members of the same family who live in that house receive Social Security Checks. Two live off monthly stipends from life insurance annuity allotments. Two more are on Disability income from SSA for long term illness that prevents work. Three draw payments from Workman’s Comp for the 5th year. One of them, God bless her soul, works a part time job to help the household operate They receive State Welfare checks, yes, all eight and they all receive food stamps, from this office.

“In the driveway and on the streets, there are three vans, four SUVs, one pickup truck, and three passenger cars. Now, compare them to Nellie and Cindy Morgan who have no source of income, a meager welfare check, free housing from the State and can’t get food stamps because she has no car to sell, and no one will listen or care enough to solve the problem. They just keep passing responsibilities in circles while injustice builds a mountain to crush them someday.”

“Wow! And you expect me to be the one who changes all that? Usurp authority and do someone else’s job to help Nellie and Cindy?”

“That would be nice, but I seriously doubt it will happen very easily. But, in the end, I feel strongly that if you don’t, you’ll wish you had done that. When a double suicide, or a murder/suicide due to hunger in State Housing hits the wires, a scapegoat will be necessary to save all the heads above yours. Pretty picture, huh?”

Diane sat back in her chair and coughed. “Why do you keep looking at your watch?”

“Because class begins at 10:40 and you’re my first student. I’m a teacher at heart. I love seeing students learn new skills, like thinking, like accepting responsibility, like learning who applies the check mark or removes the check mark and who does what in the system. Hiding behind a policy while others flagrantly violate the policy and work the system for maximum nontaxable income is okay. However, nothing is okay for people who desperately need it is not humanly correct in my mind.”

“So, what are you going to teach me? Or try to teach me? Personally, I think it’s quite stupid.”

“What I just said. But let’s not get ahead of the steps in the lesson plan.”

“It’s not my job. I can’t do what I’m forbidden to do. Really.”

Betsy’s phone rang and she answered. “Hey, John. Did you complete your task?”

“Just did and can I tell you how many worms slithered out of the building and accosted me? I was told to tow it away. I was told it was a mistake. I was told I’d be sued. They wanted a figure to move it. I told them \$650, and I couldn’t move it for at least a week because I had that many jobs lined up. They didn’t like that, but I did your bow and said SABOB. Made me feel good for a change. I’m in the cab and ready to roll. Thanks for the job and the pleasure, honey. Please keep in touch. I love it!”

“Ten-four.” She closed the phone. “Ready for your first assignment?”

“Who was that?”

“Someone. Might be the governor, the mayor, or the Welfare Department director. Might be your mother checking to see how you grew up with her training.”

She stood and walked to the window and without asking raised the blinds. As soon as she could see the twisted pile of burnt metal she laughed and leaned her forehead against the pane to watch people milling around and men in suits stomp the ground and wave hands in the air and could only imagine the screams and curses being flung to the stratosphere.

“Would you join me for a moment. You really need to see this. Visual lesson one. Come on. Don’t be afraid. It takes a while to fill in all the check boxes before you can be terminated. Relax and come on. Enjoy this lesson.”

Diane inched nervously to stand beside her and view the hunk of metal in front of the water fountain spraying up 24 jets of water in a continuous arc.

“Oh, my gosh! You didn’t?”

“You got that one right. Amazing. First gold star for Diane. J W Salvage and Towing did that. It was a job, really. Money was paid. A work order written and signed. The salvage company picked up vehicle at point a and dropped it at point b. Job done. Go on and see what the day will bring in other jobs, accidents, etcetera.”

“This is stupid.”

“No. What’s been going on in the State Government is stupid. Now, get your checkbook and write out a check for \$750. Make it out to Nellie M. Morgan. In the memo block write purchase vehicle for Nellie’s freedom.”

“I’m not buying a car that I can’t possibly use. That’s totaled. No one can drive it or fix it ever again!”

“But you expect that of Nellie Morgan! You don’t want to buy it. You say no one will ever buy or fix or drive it again, but she can’t have food stamps until she does what is impossible? What the hell crazy policy is that? That’s insane to expect a welfare income only woman to sell that and buy food and come back when the food’s gone and you’ll help them? Seriously?”

“You suck!”

“And I’m trying to quit. I quit with my female partner. I sucked all over her body and she screwed me, and I finally learned that I wasted my time. I don’t want to stop with my boyfriend. I suck his lips, his ears, and his chin and it seems like there are ten penises working overtime. Wow! Won’t stop sucking with him. Won’t stop sucking for you. Not until you exhaust all your options in the case of Nellie Morgan not being helped and the Castersons bragging on how they’re fucking the government to support them all without working.”

“You’re evil!”

“And I’m about to get a check for \$750 from you before I can wind up into my next level of evil? Hmm? Talk to me, Diane. What do you seriously think of me?”

“I think you’re evil, a seriously nuclear-grade evil! Maybe some, well, a lot of people in the Welfare Department need to be fired, terminated, prosecuted for what stupid shit goes on sometimes, but walking away is an option for you!”

“And also, for you! But you don’t. Why? Why is it so important to screw Nellie Morgan out of her RIGHT to have them and turn your back on the Castersons who abuse the system to get them, and everyone says, ‘No problem. Here you go.’ The whole family needs to be snatched up, prosecuted, and put in jail, but it’s okay for them to continue life as is?”

“You still suck! Just shut up and let me think a moment.”

“No problem. I’ll stop sucking for a while.” She alternately looked at her watch, the crowd inspecting the torched vehicle, and the bundle of dynamite with a lit fuse behind the desk in a spinning chair.

“Well, Self. We’re reaching critical mass rather rapidly. When will it explode into all Hades called out for a rescue?” she thought.

Diane’s hands slapped the desk. “What are you doing to me?”

“Nothing, except for showing weak spots and irregularities that need corrected. Why?”

“Never mind. Can you stop?”

“Stop what?”

“What you’re doing! Stop being ignorant!”

“What are you asking me? Define it, please!”

“What do you know? You act all innocent, but I know you’re not. What?”

“You’re advancing rapidly to the head of the class, girlfriend. What do I know that has upset you to the point of figuring out ways to kill me before I leave this office and make it look like an accident? However, I was smarter than that before I ever approached the Welfare Office on Nellie’s behalf. I let Nellie educate me, and I got sick. I talked with her neighbors and got sicker still. Then, I did some Internet research and wanted to puke a few times. And everyone in the Government treadmill thinks it’s perfectly okay for all the discrepancies to happen so long as they, the Government Employees, receive a paycheck and all associated benefits.”

“Look! I know what you’re saying, but I also know that you’re not listening to me! There are things that I can do and things that I can’t. And things I can’t do will get documented if I do them! Why won’t you stop?”

“Because I want Cindy Morgan to have a life. She had no choice but to be born. She had no choice in her father abusing her. She had no choice in her father leaving her and her mother for life with another woman. She’s done nothing wrong, and the whole State Welfare System is working to crush her and keep her from living if they can, and all is well with that goal. And this calm-natured sprite says, ‘Bullshit!’ Heads will roll. Butts will pucker. Porcelain bowls will receive vomit and keep doing what they’re designed for. Cindy had no choice anywhere in her life for what she received, kind, unkind, caring, or non-caring, good, or evil. I want her to live to the point that she can finally choose for herself what she wants. I’m for that with any child living in such a life-depressing environment as long as Cindy.”

Diane paled and she looked dizzy in her chair. “Oh, my gosh! Never considered that until right now. What do you have on me that makes you talk so boldly?”

She paused and rested her hands on the front of the desk. “I’m not sure, but when I passed the Casterson residence, I recall this bright red sporty car with a ‘MY-EYES’ custom tag parked on the sidewalk. And a woman looking mighty like you, lip-locked with a man on the front lawn. The same car is in the employee lot right now. Is that how they get so much? Is that why they brag and boast about screwing the government? Is that nice hunk doing that?”

Chapter 10

The twist in the conversation thread confused Betsy from the question, ‘What do you have on me?’ to the current look of shock on her face, like a child with his hand in the cookie jar and staring at the parent who caught them.

“And you think they need to be prosecuted and jailed? Oh, gracious! Woe is me! Woe is me!” She rose from the chair and moved around the desk on a course toward Betsy.

Betsy tensed and considered whether to flee or wait, and she could see only great distress in her face, so she chose to wait to see what happened but prepared for plan B to disable her enough to get away.

A few feet from her, Diane hit her knees with a miserable wail; her face hit her feet, and her hands gripped her ankles like a vice.

“Please! Please don’t do that to me! It wasn’t my fault. It happened long ago, and I had nothing to do with it. We’re scrutinized intensely here. Just let it be known that I visited them to see Damien, and I’d be gone. And if they could, they’d prosecute me and thoroughly fuck me up. I’m sorry. Please don’t do that to me!”

Betsy looked at the groveling mass and suddenly hurt from her pain. Punishment was far from her mind. Justice for Nellie was paramount in her actions and goals. Confusion about the bizarre reaction caused her to back up and take care of the mess on the floor, crying into her shoes and choking on her tears and snot.

She bent, grasped the material of her blouse at her armpits, and pulled until she had the blubbering woman on her knees where she could see and talk to her.

“Calm down, Diane. I’m not here to rip you to shreds, cause you pain, or get you fired and prosecuted. Please take a few deep breaths, and let’s reverse roles. You educate me on what caused this meltdown I never intended or expected. Is that okay?”

She nodded vigorously.

Betsy patted her shoulders and moved to her desk to get the tissue box and put it in her hands.

“I didn’t have anything to do with that except to establish food stamps for Damien’s brother, Robert, who was unemployed, and I just fell for his physical looks and his solidarity with life. Damien was upfront about being on food stamps, making a living, finding a job, etc.

“That’s pretty much a standard story, but I liked him. So, a couple of weeks after the fact, I paid him a visit, hoping to find him there alone. Lucked out and got what I wanted, but before I left, the rest of the family came home, and I was like, Oh, shit, but silently.

“I’ve heard of people, families like them, working the system with all the sympathy they can. He never came across that way. He was just handsome and had sex appeal to the max. Robert recognized me, and so did a few others from seeing me at the office. It was a very intense moment, and then I said, ‘None of you need worry. I’m blind and deaf most of the time. It’s a requirement for being employed by the government.’ Everyone relaxed, and I was pretty much accepted.

“Even though it’s not a good situation, I can understand. They all did it at separate times, and nothing in the system flagged them at the given moment, and the computer program just worked as designed, and oh, well. That’s about it.”

“Then why the anxiety now?”

“Because of the possibility of being prosecuted. I’m not, no one is permitted to get personally involved with the customers, the clients if you wish. I did. Never considered that events outside my life would drop this stress on me right now.”

“Which is? A few years in prison is not a life-ending event.”

“Normally I’d agree you except you’re talking about Oklahoma, a very backward state. If I’m convicted, the first test, since I’m a woman, will be for pregnancy. If I am, which I am, the second step is a forced abortion. There is no choice in the matter. You’re pregnant, it’s terminated.”

“What? Why?”

“Because a few years, maybe ten years ago, a governor figured that babies born in a prison system were wrong, and he decided that no ‘criminal babies’ would be born in prison. The pregnant woman, once convicted, would receive an abortion. The same would happen if she got pregnant inside the prison from a guard.”

“That’s damned archaic. And no organization or group has fought it?”

“They have and it’s still the law.”

“Unbelievable. Whoa! What am I not seeing here? What happens if the appeal process overturns your conviction? What then?”

“I’m two months pregnant. Let me get a conviction. I was in the courtroom, already handcuffed. The next stop is the hospital for the abortion. The system could give a damn about appeals, overturned convictions, exoneration. That might take two or three years, so the baby is gone immediately to prevent a ‘criminal baby’ being born into the world.”

“Oh, crap and damnation! And, of course, it’s just a program, a process, and it means nothing except helping to keep America strong. Fucking callous idiots!”

“Yes. And that’s my grave concern with you pressing on with your mission. If I hadn’t loved Damien and got pregnant, I might join your cause, but a forced abortion would kill me. They might not think so, but they’d better have me on a forever suicide watch. I’d do it and advertise why I did it.”

“Well, Diane, you’ve convinced me to stop the next plan, to expose that boondoggle. I don’t want you to be bitter with me for hating you or your unborn child. I don’t. I only want food stamps to flow to Nellie and Cindy Morgan so they can live.”

“Will it really help?”

“Yes. You do that, and within nine months, enough time for a baby to be created and born, she’ll have a business established that will counter all the welfare and food stamps she’s getting. She’ll be in here, giving you blatant directions of what you can do with your welfare. Give her two years, maybe sooner, and she’ll be out of Section 8 housing and in a much better place.”

“You’re amazing. And what about the abandoning father?”

“This pathetic government can’t find him in three years, but my boyfriend did. He’s in Kansas checking on him, his job, his income status, and his employer. Once he’s finished, George Morgan will initiate the paperwork to be filed with Child Support Services here to send a monthly stipend to Cindy via Nellie until she reaches age eighteen. Love is everywhere. You have to look for it and then accept it when it’s sitting in your lap or on your table.”

“Are you in Mother Theresa’s lineage?”

“No. Stupidity, preventable stupidity, makes me want to declare war anywhere, anytime my stinkitude meter pegs to the max. So, please give me something positive to help Nellie and Cindy with food stamps that will sustain them for a brief period. Give me hope for that, and I’ll ignore the part that makes me gag. Is that fair, girlfriend?”

“Most fair because it gives me and my child an out. And I do have a plan c for the poop to hit the fan eventually in that family. We may or may not be implicated, but I have an out for my child.”

“That’s wonderful, but why do that if you’re in love with Damien?”

“Because of Sniffer. It’s a computer upgrade to highlight families like that. When activated about eighteen months from now, it will search the system for multiple applications from the same address. Then, it will search for families using the same surname, and the records are flagged wherever a duplicate is detected. Then, it will go out of the Federal welfare system to find duplicates or overlapping services at local addresses. It will notify the FBI for investigation or prosecution if it finds them.

“And in real time, if a second person tries to use the same address, it will be flagged immediately and the police will deal with them first, not us.”

Betsy grinned. “So, eventually, Sniffer will highlight them and flag them for abnormalities, and neither you nor I will have to do anything.”

“Correct. I know it will happen, but I’m silent, like my baby, and they’ll not know until the knock on the door.”

“I like you more, Diane. And in all this, I still hear nothing to help Nellie and Cindy. What’s up with that?”

“I have to go pee. Then I’ll bring my supervisor, Wanda Jensen, with me, and I’m sure she can do or know something that can be done to help her.”

“Good deal. Can I join you?”

She frowned and hesitated. “Why?”

“Because my boyfriend doesn’t know that I’ve missed a period and I’m approaching the time for my second one. Like you, I have to go, and I figure we’re both about two months along to delivering a baby. You’re sexually safe with me. Okay? You blush like I frequently do since I fell in love with him. Shall we hasten to said restroom to spare you a cleaning expense for your chairs?”

Betsy sat in the same chair while Wanda shredded her with razor sharp looks while they waited for Diane to return with a cell phone photo of the mangled car with the license plate intact and clearly displaying the number.

She accepted the phone after it was connected to the computer, and she made a final cut with the razor. “I hope you can live with what happens here.”

“Can do easy when justice is nearby. Right is right. Wrong is wrong. Right can sometimes be wrong. So, you must weigh each outcome of a critical situation and accept the consequences.”

*

Betsy felt wonderful as she drove away from the Welfare Office and turned on the radio to listen to music or news or talk radio, anything to end her stress. She desperately needed a distraction from all the accumulated pain. She hit the SCAN button and waited.

The search stopped on a talk radio show, and the moderator laughed, choked, and slapped his desk as he tried to relate the story.

“I’m sorry. I will probably be unemployed in the morning and forever banned from public radio, but this is too rich!” He laughed and slapped the desk again. “So, bear with me. Here goes. A man from West Virginia, one Jake Summers, who should have known better but didn’t,” he

laughed and regained control, “had an unexpected visit to an Emergency Room in Mulvane, Kansas, to have a white cue ball, a pool table ball, removed from his rectum.”

He laughed some more before he could continue. “Lord have mercy. Justice, have mercy. Sponsors and FCC watchdogs have mercy. Jake stopped at a bar to drink when he encountered a man he knew. That was where he should have stopped, but he didn’t.

“Clientele in the bar said he, Jake, knew the stranger who was there for a totally different purpose. The stranger advised Jake several times to get out of his face and leave him alone. Jake didn’t. He kept insisting that his property, a woman named Betsy be returned to West Virginia.

“Jake refused to be dissuaded and repeatedly called the stranger a sissy boy. After about fifteen minutes and several insults, Jake swung at the stranger, and that’s where things went wild. Witnesses said the stranger hit, slapped, shoved, and kicked Jake at least fifteen times before he could even fall or attempt to flee. Falling was a bad thing for Jake, but he did. The stranger had told him that he would shove a cue ball up his butt if he didn’t leave him alone. The stranger went so far as to con a small tube of hand lotion from a barmaid, and after Jake’s swing, he whipped his ass soundly and did, gleefully as some reported, shove the white cue ball up Jake’s rectum amidst squeals of pain, and continual requests for mercy.”

He laughed again and blew his nose. “And to further humiliate and defeat the Bad Ass, Jake Summers, his assailant drove him to the Emergency Room and dropped him off at the entrance.”

He laughed and slapped the desk again. “Police interrogated the clientele at Today and Tomorrow Bar and Restaurant and they received descriptions of a Pigmy wearing a loin cloth and carrying a commercial dart gun to a seven-foot-tall California Basketball Player to a hairy Big Foot twin brother.”

He laughed and got control again. “I know this will sound evil, but I must say it at all costs. Jake, you should have stayed in West Virginia and not followed this man across the continent to experience what you did. There comes a time in every man’s life when he must make a choice. Either quit or have a trip to the ER to remove a cue ball from his rectum.

“I’m quite sure you could have found someone there in West Virginia to do that for you. That must be a rather shitty as well as a humiliating experience, but oh well. Hope to hear about your next adventures soon.”

Betsy gave a thumbs up and patted the steering wheel.

“Dillon, that had to be you. You, the man! And Jake, what are you doing following us around the country? Why are you trying so hard to impress Vanessa? Sometimes, you make no sense. You’re not stroking her, are you? You wanted to keep me prisoner there for her sake and benefit. So, does she give you a fling on occasion? Well, I hope you got the message from Dillon. I think it means stay away from us, asshole. Wonder if you’ll be all jumpy now when someone says that around you?”

She wanted to call Dillon right away, but chose to wait and when her Bluetooth chimed, she hit the answer call button. “Hey, is this Dillon?”

“Not quite. It’s your favorite girlfriend, Cindy. I’m practicing using a mobile phone, and I guess I succeeded. How’s it going?”

“Hey, it’s good to hear your voice. I love it.”

“Mom doesn’t want me to ask, but have you found my dad yet?”

“As a matter of fact, Dillon did find him. He’s in Kansas to deal with him. It’s amazing what he can do once he sets his mind to something. Won’t be long before you start getting money from him.”

“Wow! Why can’t the government do that?”

“Because with them, it’s a job. With Dillon and me, it’s personal, and we put a lot of love into what we do for people. Like when I saw you in the RV’s path, I had to save you. I could have been seriously hurt or even killed, but you looked too innocent and lost, and I had to try.”

“Well, thanks, girlfriend. Are you going to stop by tonight on your way to the hotel?”

“I’d like to, but I need to wind down, shower, and sleep early. I hope Dillon comes home tonight. I’m waiting for him to call.”

“Well, okay. Take care of yourself and be good as you can. You’re one cool woman, and I love you. Goodnight.”

The earpiece chimed a disconnect and Betsy eased off the gas momentarily.

“She loves me. Where’d that come from?” She glanced at the sky. “I’m not trying to do that. I’m just being me and loving everyone I meet. I’m not out to become the mother of the whole world. That might be cool, but that’s not my mission. Getting free, completely free from Vanessa is my primary goal here. It’s something I should never have started and don’t know why I did. Well, I know why. I was lonely and entertaining thoughts of suicide, and her intrigue and love sucked me in and helped to put that pain into remission. Then she got me to her farm, and I was okay for a while, but the loneliness and isolation set in again and I went so far as to fashion and place a noose in the hayloft where I could set myself free. Now I’m back to free and loving life, but I must tell her and walk away versus spending the rest of my life on the run and watching my back. Thanks for listening.”

She pulled into her hotel and did all she told Cindy. Dillon’s call at 9:30 woke her and she listened to hello without rising.

“The hotel I’m in right now sucks,” he said.

“Why?”

“It’s missing the one amenity that I love, you.”

“Aw, that’s sweet. You’re missing me?”

“Yes. Never thought I would, but the last few weeks have been exciting and fun, and you’ve been there, even against your own rules and I miss you.”

“Well, hurry with your tasks and come on down. I’m here and much in the same situation. Didn’t know that would become part of the deal, but it’s alright with me. You find George?”

“Yes. And had a small visitation from a friend of yours, Jake Summers.”

She laughed and stretched out her legs. “I know. I heard it on the news. The announcer could hardly tell the story for laughing, but he didn’t know your name. In fact, no one in the bar could adequately describe you. You were a pigmy or Big Foot’s twin brother. However, I knew it had to be you. Bet you were kind and gave him many chances to get out of your face before you put a hurting on him?”

“Six times I ignored him or shoved him away. He kept coming back with his sissy boy comments and then the seventh time he swung at me, and I did what I promised to do. Then I was back to kind me and I drove him to the Emergency Room and dropped him off at the entrance.”

“Wonderful. You crack me up, boyfriend. Is George going to see the world from your perspective now?”

“He is. He was in the bar, and we were talking over that situation when Jake Silly showed up. After I took care of him, George agreed to see things my way. We’ll meet at the Mulvane Police Station where all the necessary paperwork will be handled, and I’ll bring it back with me to the tired ass Welfare Office. He even gave me a \$1000 bonus check for Nellie to start making arrears.”

“That was after Jake?”

“Yes. I should thank Jake for showing up. That helped state my case much stronger. Nah. Scratch that. I’ll stick to my own restraining order and leave him alone.”

“You crack me up, boyfriend. You tired?”

“Eh. What’s on your mind? Phone sex?”

“Oh, brother! No, it’s just that when this land cruise tour is over, have you even slightly considered, uh, well, like hanging out together? Like we find a place we like and have a few children and road trip when we like, with them. Had any thoughts like that?”

“Oh, sister! As a memo to Betsy, I have. I considered that after I gave another client to Kelly Anderson, and that action opened the doors and that’s when I started missing you. I don’t think either of us will want to see the other one walk away at the end of the tour. Our hearts will scream squatter rights, and that’s that. Hey, are you crying?”

“Yes. I do that sometimes when emotions flip me around and press all my love buttons at once. Today, Diane in the Food Stamp section confessed to being pregnant from a very complicated family and begged me for help. Then Cindy called me, checking out her new cell phone and told me she loved me. Then I got here inside our room, alone, and my mind got in tune with my heart, and I started thinking of me being pregnant with a you and me baby. You know? Then I wouldn’t have to hear I love you and have to leave them.”

“Well, love, if you keep violating your rules, that will happen sometime and we’ll both have what we want.”

Chapter 11

Betsy woke to Diane's call in the morning. "Nine o'clock? Who wakes up at that hour?"

"I do. Many State Workers wake earlier to be at work on time. You awake enough to talk now?"

"Yes."

"How soon can you get to my office?"

"Why? So, you can arrest me for wanting justice?"

"No. I'd not want that now. The why is I've discussed this specific case with Wanda Jenson, my supervisor, again, and we've initiated a plan to get the problem resolved and for food stamps to start flowing in the next cycle. And Wanda has set it in motion, but she wants to ask you some questions. That's all."

"Well, okay. I can make myself presentable and be there in less than an hour. Is that fine?"

"Certainly. Just come to my office. The Reception Desk will have a pass ready for you."

She made it in 45 minutes and listened to a fastidious Wanda.

"We've had people take a picture of the mess by our fountain and with the police report, we convinced the DMV to release Nellie Morgan of all responsibility for that vehicle. Then we, here at the Food Stamp Section, corrected the block and approved the paperwork for Nellie and Cindy to receive their Food Stamps next month. Sorry, I can't override it for this month."

"That's fair."

"It's not fair enough. So, I've contacted the Food Bank, and they will drop off ten bags of groceries to help them until that time."

"You did that? Wow! I'm pleased, but surprised."

"Yes. I'm sorry that I sometimes get bogged down with the quantity of souls that filter in and out of this office and people like Nellie get overlooked. I've heard about you on the news. I visited Nellie yesterday and drove through the neighborhood. I saw what you did and learned that you did it without any thought of compensation. Couldn't believe it, but when people in that development heard your name, it was like mentioning Mother Theresa, the American version. And are you serious about wanting no compensation?"

"Yes. Not one penny. When she or Cindy calls and tells me they have the first round of Food Stamps, then that's compensation. Then I'll visit the section that is supposed to maintain the outside of the facilities. That's a disgrace and it is taxpayer funded."

"One up on you there. I went through the development the second time this morning and when Walter Preston from that section saw the condition of the place and what you'd done, he shat a brick, or maybe two. He has both building and street inspectors going through the development and making a list of problems and prioritizing them. Then he'll find the money to make repairs."

"Good. I love it when State Employees do their job as concerned citizens and human beings also."

"I'm sure you do. Uh, Cindy mentioned you're also looking for her father. The State hasn't found him."

"I know. They've been looking for about three years. Took my boyfriend about two days to find him and he called last night. Day after tomorrow, he'll be delivering all the necessary paperwork for his wages to be garnished for child support, voluntarily. After a small discussion,

he was most agreeable to do that. And no, I don't want a job solving all the problems that you handle every day."

Wanda offered a sly grin and snapped her fingers. "Darn. What's next on your list?"

"Here, nothing after Nellie and Cindy are checked off. Next stop for us is the Grand Canyon and then, don't know. The fun tour will end in Dallas at the Dunmore Road concert. After that, we sort of plan on settling down to keep me barefoot and pregnant. Can't wait for that part. By that I mean I'm seriously trying to start that now. You should see the way I wake him up." She blushed and cleared her throat. "On second thought, no, you shouldn't see that."

Diane chuckled and Wanda shook her head.

Betsy snapped her fingers. "Hey, will child support interfere with the welfare check and food stamps? Just thought of that."

"In Nellie's case, no."

"Would her having a business do that? Stop or lower anything?"

"After a certain point, yes. You think she will?"

"I'd love to see that. She'd be very happy to walk in here and tell you to stop everything because she could take care of herself."

"Well, good luck and thanks for helping us with that one problem. But how much did you pay J. W. Salvage to bring that lawn ornament to its current location?"

"That was a \$250 cash transaction. Why?"

"Little prick is charging us \$650 to tow it away due to the difficulty."

"And what's wrong with that? It's the going rate for most of the State's contracting, isn't it?"

"Yes, but why \$250 for you? How did you manage that?"

Betsy unbuttoned two buttons on her blouse and pulled her shoulders back. "It's all in the cleavage, Wanda. Works for most men and some women. If I'd taken it off, he'd probably have done it for free. Me also."

Wanda sighed and closed her eyes. "If I can't handle the answer, I shouldn't ask the question, should I?"

Betsy smiled and tugged at another button. "Nope. Want me to go farther?"

"No. You're done now. Fried on both sides. Goodbye and good luck. No, really, I wish you good luck. I hope all your plans come together. You deserve compensation in that manner, peace, and happiness."

*

Dillon called her as she watched Nellie's former automobile being loaded amidst a gaggle of employees who wanted to watch.

"Hey, loving man. What's up?"

"Me. Sort of been that way since I met you."

"Funny."

"No, serious. Finished everything with George Morgan and man, what a hassle of paperwork to get that done. Kelly Anderson will take less time and zero hassle to take a cut of his check and send it to Nellie. Anyway, I'm getting anxious and ready to get back to you. I plan to hit the one rest area between us and then be home before dinnertime."

"I'm hungry now, but not for food."

"Sorry about that. You'll have to wait until after dinner."

“What? You’re sounding married now. Wait? What’s up with that?”

Dillon smiled at her promises, pulled off the highway to the rest area, and exited the Men’s room to hear a lot of shouting. A young child avoided a capture by a man dressed in black jeans and tee shirt with a fringed leather vest. Several times the boy would change course and the man would stumble and fall trying to do the same. Then the child ran past Dillon. He timed the kick to cause a hard fall.

“Damn it all! Nearly had the bastard!”

“Didn’t look that way to me.”

“What’s it to you?”

“What’s with adults trying to grab children for fun or profit or for spending anger on them?”

“What?”

“Why did you want to catch him?”

“Bastard stole a sub from me! I opened my saddle bag to get water and never saw the bastard until he zipped in, grabbed the sub, and hauled ass!”

“Didn’t look like he had a sub with him.”

“It’s in his shirt. I saw him put it there so he could run faster!”

“Faster than you, anyway.”

“Damn it all!”

Dillon turned to locate the boy in question and found him sitting beside a guardrail at the northern end of the rest area. He smiled as the sub appeared and the boy began to devour it ferociously.

“Well, from the way he’s cramming it in, I’d say he probably hasn’t eaten in three or four days. Did you fast that long before, willingly, or unwillingly?”

“No. Hope he chokes.”

“That’s not nice. Do you think he’d want that if the tables were turned? Children have a natural sharing that adults sometimes beat out of themselves. If he had food and saw you hungry, he’d share what he had with you.”

“I’d like to share a kick in the ass with him! Dammit! That was my dinner.”

“Not any longer.”

“Just shut up! I think you helped him anyway.”

“I think you’re just plain mean and hate children for no reason. You can do a lot that they can’t, and it can go the other way around also. Still, adults should set examples for children to follow. So, hungry child, Dillon’s going to show you what you should have done so you’ll know how to handle the situation in the future instead of falling all over the place.”

He took a \$20 bill from his wallet and handed it to the man. “Here you go. Enjoy another sub on me. Climb onto your \$30,000 motorcycle and roll on out of here. And when the sub is finished, try going for four days without eating. Then steal a sub from a fellow biker and see if you make out the same as he did.”

His mouth worked but he said nothing.

“Is that the way your father raised you?”

“What the hell crazy kind of question is that? He stole my sub!”

“I asked if your father beat you, chased you from the table, every time you were hungry? You seem to be having a problem in providing that answer. Did he?”

“No! And that’s got nothing to do with now!”

“Are you sure? He didn’t do that because he wanted to take care of you and help you to live and grow. Something is wrong with that boy. Maybe his father beat him or kept him hungry because he was mean spirited. If your father did that, you’d be like he is, stealing food so you don’t starve to death. He probably did that with his father also. Steal food just to stay alive and spite him. You can go now. You’ve answered the question. Your father loved you, but you never learned his lessons of love. Have a good day.”

He watched and listened until the bike was gone and headed south before, he whistled and waved to the boy to join him. He waited for the understandably slow approach. “Was it good?”

“The sub damned sure was. Fat ass didn’t need it. I think I might have saved his life.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“You tripped him?”

“Yes. Wanted to give you an extra edge. You’d have won anyway, but I wanted to talk with him while you ate in peace.”

“Won’t do him no good. He’ll be the same next month as he is now.”

“Maybe, maybe not. All depends on how well he listens and his life situation. Did your dad do this to you?”

“Yeah. He had fun with me that way. If he saw me looking at a leftover, he’d eat fast and grab it before I was finished. Sometimes he’d laugh at me or slap me for looking defeated.”

“And mom didn’t try to stop it?”

“She died before I knew her. Dad told me I killed her. Didn’t understand that for a while. Now I know that some moms die giving birth, but it wasn’t my fault. He did beat her a lot. My friends told me that. Anyway, thanks for the help. That was three days break.”

“You hang in this area?”

“Mostly. It seems like a good place to get food or a five-spot or so.”

“So, within walking distance are there any delis?”

“Yes. Two miles that way, across the fields. Probably longer to drive by car.”

“Which one’s your favorite?”

“Bob and Minnie’s. Like the steak logs they make.”

“Then I’ll stop and give them some money. Sort of a prepaid tab. Don’t argue. Just keep yourself alive to spite your dad. It’s okay for me if you live this way. I’d like to change you, to take you with me, but I know I can’t.” He handed him a business card. “But, if you ever do want to change, call me, or to tell me your tab is empty, and I’ll help you any way I can. Fair enough?”

He took it and held it solidly in the fingers and thumbs of both hands. “Fair enough for me. I’ll treat this like gold. You’re the first person who hasn’t wanted to kill me or throw me in jail. Thanks, Dillon Grant.”

“You’re welcome. Just give them a day or two and you can start using them. They say no, call me. I’ll change their minds.”

Eighteen miles later he stood beside the deli and looked east. “Perfect. Only about two miles as the crow flies or Thomas walks.”

Twenty-five minutes later he left with the agreement he wanted. What it took was Minnie to remind Bob, who wore the essential pants in the marriage and shook hands on the deal.

*

He meandered back to the interstate and headed south to Betsy. The following day, she woke him the way they both liked, and she was happy. “We’re about finished here. Today with the welfare, Section of Government and we will be on our merry way to the Grand Canyon.”

“Then Dallas and then we can get on with our life.”

“Ooh. Our life? I like that. Say it again with passion.”

“Our life. We need one. We can still do mini road trips and help people all around us. Pain and suffering and injustice are not in a confined area. It’s all over the place.”

“Ten-four, good buddy.”

*

Vanessa took a break from the band on a long lunch break and returned the 7th call that Jake had made. “Hey, Jake. What’s up, my man? You find Betsy?”

“No, I didn’t find Betsy! And right now, I don’t give a flying fuck if I ever see her again, unless it’s on her deathbed and I’ll grin when I unplug her life support machine! Bitch! Bastard! I hate them and right now I hate you!”

“Me? I’ve done nothing to you.”

“You didn’t listen! I told you to forget that psycho and love what you had! You had ME! But no, not the proud and greedy Vanessa Charles! Must have what you WANT, never what you NEED!”

“Hey, Jake. That was uncalled for. I love Betsy.”

“Bullshit. You love her sex. You love the way she can’t get you pregnant! Neither can I! Remember? I had the operation to keep your pristine tummy that men want to orgasm over. Did you care or pay attention? Nope. Just couldn’t wait to lick Betsy and see what wild orgasm you could have there. I told you! You had her thighs wrapped around your ears in your mind and never listened.”

“I’m sorry, Jake. Didn’t mean for you to be so upset. What happened?”

“Guess it wasn’t on the news where you are. But I met up with the man she left with, the sissy boy who sprung her from the ranch. He beat the shit out of me. Hit, slapped, punched, and kicked me sixteen times before I could get far enough away to fall. Then he borrowed some lotion from a barmaid, tore my jeans up and shoved a cue ball up my ass! For real! That’s what happened! I was trying to help you keep what you like and all I did was get hurt! Uncaring bitch that you are!”

“Whoa! He did that for real. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay now, but I’m out of commission for a few days. Doctors said I’d heal completely in about fourteen days or so. Just eat light liquid foods and relax. I’m doing that. And I don’t care how misguided you are, you don’t need or want Betsy. She’s easy to control and manipulate. You get her to make a promise and she’ll die fulfilling it. But, only to a point. She had a noose ready in the barn. She was that miserable. Mary Beth was white as a ghost when she came from the barn. You know her constitutional toughness. She got us off the farm that day so Betsy and her private army could go in peace. Knowing what I do now, it was probably a lifesaver that she did. He’s an awesome killing machine if he ever set his mind to it.”

“I’m sorry, Jake. I never meant for you to suffer in this deal.”

“I know. And that’s the second part of Betsy. She’s very sensual, maybe more than you are, and she loved all you did for her. But she needs more than you’re able to give. You’re gone way too much for her to remain in her love bubble and commitment. You never meant for me to do

anything other than be an occasional relief man when you wanted it. It's my fault for loving you. And I know you flaunt your sexuality every chance you get, and I don't mind. All I mind is that you totally shut me out of your life except to be your guard dog. That's not nice to do to your friends who adore you, Vanessa."

"I'm beginning to realize that now. Any idea where they're headed?"

"All over the place until Dunmore Road reaches Dallas. Then she plans on showing up there to tell you she's gone, face-to-face."

"She's stupid to do that, but I guess that's her. Okay. Can you, will you, follow them and just that. Follow them from a distance and send me a text when they get there and where they are. Will you do that for me? We'll have four months after Dallas, and we can talk about us and what we can salvage of us. Really didn't mean to hurt you. I'm too oversexed and we'll see what I can do to tame me. Okay, Jake, my man?"

"Well, so long as I don't have to interact with him, I'll do that. I look forward to seeing you in person versus on an Internet Viral Video. Goodbye for now."

Jake disconnected and laid the phone on a night stand. "Talk about us? Good. Hope it's not another bullshit scheme. Leave them alone. Him, I'll kill from a distance. Her, I'll leave alone completely unless I find her drunk and disabled. Then I'll kick her ass also. Until she came along my life with Vanessa was sporadic, but enough to keep me satisfied. After she arrived, my life went to shit fast. Oops!"

*

Wheels once set into motion worked to bring about justice for Nellie and Cindy Morgan.

Dillon arranged for her neighbors who benefitted from living in Nellie's neighborhood to help her on shopping trips. Guarantees were in place for food stamps. Nellie fainted when she got the \$1000 check from George. She felt ecstatic from the promise of both child support and food stamps that she gave Betsy another perm and had scheduled for Diane, Wanda, and John's wife, Nancy. Suddenly light shown in where perpetual darkness had her crippled and kept her under an invisible foot. Real income and the possibility of supporting herself danced in her dreams and visions and life was good.

*

Betsy and Dillon departed after a great hoopla of goodbyes, thanks, and number and address exchanges and promises for future visits, pregnant or not. They drove west toward the Grand Canyon and surrounding area attractions and stopped at a Rest Area on Interstate 40.

"This is the only thing I don't like about this tour. If we ever do this again, we'll plan our route through campgrounds and invest in a tent and sleeping bags and etcetera."

"And what do we do if we need a nature stop along the way and no campground is available?"

"Leave it to a male companion to bring up something negative. Let me work on that. I'll draw upon my Girl Scout training and overwhelm you with brilliance in time. Meanwhile, back at the current Rest Area, Betsy sprints a 10 second 400-meter dash to win. Bye."

She came out before he did and marveled at the vacancy on the women's side. She did some stretching moves and did some squats and paused when she felt her heart skip a beat and her

stomach do a weird dance. She glanced up to see Daniel, her ex, and to his left his new flame, married or not.

“What the flip?” she said and stood after nearly falling. “What are you doing here?”

“I guess the same as you, Betsy. It’s good to see you.”

“Really? Well, the feeling isn’t mutual. I could live forever and never see you again and be wonderfully happy.”

“Whatever. You’re looking very well. Thought you owned a farm in West Virginia?”

She held up her left hand. “Speak to the hand, dude! You gave me up! You left me! How dare you condescend to tell me I look good and it’s good to see me when you have a new lady hanging onto your left arm? Are you that dense?”

Dillon was swiftly beside her. “Betsy, is there a problem here? Do you need help? Do you know these people? Are they bothering you?”

“No, lover. Just did a few squats to relieve tight muscles and here is my ex and from the rings on her left hand, this is the new Mrs. Riley, though I don’t know her name.”

“Betsy, you don’t need to be this way. Behave yourself,” said Daniel.

“Excuse me! Who or what authority gives you the right to lecture me or give me instructions? You left me! You left me in the middle of a huge grief! Our son died! Two weeks was enough for you to recover!”

“Betsy, stop it!”

“No, dork! Grand for you! It wasn’t that way for me! I carried him. I raised him. I fed him with a breast, a bottle and then a spoon while you were somewhere else! Excuse the fuck out of me because I needed more time to heal from the pain of losing him! I had strep throat! I had a fever of 102 and you left me, because you were healed and couldn’t help me!”

“Betsy, you need to calm down and stop this atrocious display in public!”

Dillon interfered in his planned move and gripped the hand solidly.

“You, Sir, Daniel Riley, Betsy’s ex-husband, you need to stop the atrocious display. You gave her up. You chose a new woman to help you and be your mate. You need to leave! And you need to do so before the situation escalates, and your new love experiences the real you. Look at me instead of Betsy.”

“What I’ll do is jerk this arm completely out of its socket and your body, and I’ll knock you unconscious with the bleeding end. Then I’ll let your new love call 911 if she can or cares to do so. We clear on that?”

“We’re clear on that. Shannon let’s go. We don’t need to be here any longer.”

She looked at Dillon and Betsy with furrowed brow, wanting to ask questions, but she hurried to catch up with her departing mate.

“Hey, honey, sweetheart,” Dillon said.

“What, lover who stopped a whole bunch of bloodshed. I was ready to tear his ass up!”

“I know. You seriously need to practice some simple exercises that you can do anywhere. Breathe in all the anger you can muster and breathe out massive love for all of mankind. Try it. It works for me, and everyone likes me. It will work for you. Love. Not hate. Love is the easier of the ways, even if it’s not free. Okay?”

“Okay? Wow! For a dime store philosopher and world-renowned guru, you sure make sense to me. I’ll work on my delivery soon.”

Chapter 12

For all outward appearances, Vanessa Charles behaved herself like a lady band member should. She never resorted to her prior antics that had resulted in her being on notice of dismissal. Her fan base grew and anything she did, she did on her own time, through her own website and without reference to Dunmore Road. In private she mourned for her missing Betsy and the complicated, but satisfactory Jake if all else failed. Maureen and Patrice met for their usual nightcap and pondered the obvious changes in Vanessa. The unknown factor, Betsy, wove in and out of their memory and discussion topic.

“Do you believe the change in Vanessa?” asked Patrice with a clink of glass for a toast.

“No. When she goes quiet like she is now, she’s about to explode. Why are there laws preventing me from asking these bombshell questions ahead of time? Why? Gah! I should have stayed on the farm planting, digging, and selling potatoes. I’ve slapped myself so many times, Patrice. Gah!”

“Then please stop. It’s not within your control. Things are working toward critical mass. Don’t know yet what will set it off, but it’s coming. Got this gut feeling it will encase us in a pretty holiday wrapping and then slam dunk us into a car shredder the day before Christmas.”

“You wouldn’t be too far wrong on that. And might I suggest we leave that page alone? Let anyone query. No problem. Let all be blocked from our website that we want blocked.”

“Rock on, my friend. It will be difficult, I’m sure, but I’ll do my part. I’ll just end up with wrinkled forehead. Got Botox?”

Patrice hugged her. “Relax, please!”

“You relax and don’t set me off again. I don’t need this stress. She’s doing nothing actively to hurt us, but behind the scenes she is helping herself to high acclaim. Are you certain that a simple broken neck is not the way to go?”

“Yes, I’m, sure, darling Maureen. She’ll hang herself and no fingers will point at you unless it’s in adoration. Just do what you can to relax and let it happen on its own accord. This is the tough part of loving, but the miracles wrought will be worth it. Trust me.”

“Broken necks are sure and trust me things. Happens to all deserving folks when necessary. Right?”

“Wrong.”

“Change of subject here. I’ve had many requests for a photo of myself, alone, not with the rest of the band as a group. Think I should consider doing that? I’ve thought about having Coleman take one with me sitting on my favorite moss-covered rock, gazing out over the Irish Sea outside my home in Dunmore? It would be fully clothed, but it would be a happy, sprite style me. Would that mess me up?”

“Now that’s a good plan. It wouldn’t hurt you unless you drop your morals and do it in a micro bikini or skinny dipping in the water. We could use it as an insert in the next CD. Now, go to bed. See you in the morning.”

*

Vanessa made a call before shutting off the light. “Hey, Jake. How are you doing? Getting any better?”

“Yes. Not much pain today when I do have to go.”

“Sorry, dude. I didn’t want that to happen to you. Just back off from them and let them come on to Dallas. I’ll deal with them. Uh, the guy she escaped with, is he handsome?”

“Yes, he is, but that doesn’t stop the mean streak he has. What will you do?”

“I’ll kick her ass and then let her go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Don’t know why I was such a dominatrix with her.”

“Oh, come on now. You enjoyed the sex with her when you did visit her. I know you did.”

“Well, yes, I did, but I think her constant whining about being with me finally set me off and started turning me off. I couldn’t have her around me on tour or in the studio.”

“She’d inhibit your exposition needs, huh?”

“Wow! Are you turning philosopher on me? I guess she would. She doesn’t like that. And how about you? Do you like it? Does it bother you?”

“I’m mixed on liking it. It doesn’t bother me much. I know you’re not out there fulfilling what they want to do with you. You can’t lay every man in the world, even if you did lay a thousand a day. You’d never live that long to reach that goal.”

“You’re goofy right now, but you’re right. I couldn’t, and I don’t want to. I just love the feedback I get when I show some skin or hint that I’m available for sex. They go crazy and it turns me on. After a while that builds up and then Betsy enjoys the releasing of pressure. Or you. Now she’s gone, I think you’ll be getting back in the saddle much more.”

“Until the next time?”

“I think this is my last fling with a woman. They’re wonderful, but after a while, they can be worse than men. The only difference is their inability to ever get you pregnant, even by accident. Men can do that.”

“And ruin your image?”

“I’m always concerned with that, but I don’t know any more. It shouldn’t bother me. Other women do it and never lose a fan. Maybe I’m too worried over it, but I’m trying to quit. Overall, men are better for me. There was just something about Betsy that thrilled the piss out of me, and I just had to have her. But I can equally let her go. We’ll see when she shows up.”

“We definitely will.”

“What are your plans now? How about meeting up in Denver and I’ll take care of your erectile dysfunction. Sound good?”

“I have no problem with that. The only problem is you’re not around.”

“Didn’t I just invite you to meet up with me at Denver and I’ll be there when it happens?”

“Okay, funny girl. I’ll check my calendar and give you a call tomorrow night. So, until the next time, sleep tight tonight.”

“That’s a good mantra for you, dear. Sleep tight.”

*

Mary Beth opened all the doors she could, to let sunshine into the dark barn. “Morning, you all. How are you all feeling today?”

She got a few moos and a couple of baas from the occupants and that pleased her.

“Yes, I’m the noisy one, but I am feeding you, so get over it.”

She climbed into the loft and dropped three pitchforks of hay to the feeding troughs and when she scraped from the edge of the wall and lifted that last one, she heard a clunk. She paused and swiped the hay with a foot and discovered a flash drive. She dropped the hay to its

resting place, stowed the pitchfork, picked up the flash drive and bounced it in her hand a few times.

“Wonder what this is doing here in a very odd place? Is it Betsy’s? She’s the one who uses this space to feed the cows, sheep, and horses. Does she know it’s here? Is she missing it? With the handsome hunk on the porch that morning, I doubt she’ll ever think of this place again. I know I wouldn’t.”

She blew the hay dust from the drive, dropped it into her flannel shirt pocket and climbed down to feed the fowl before going home.

*

She turned on her computer to warm up while she filled a bowl with handmade potato salad and poured a glass of tea. She returned to the ready computer and inserted the flash drive in a port.

She ate while the computer scanned the alien drive, told her it was ready, and asked what program to use for viewing the video. She made her choice and the video started. The opening screen was a slow blending of two pink hearts with Betsy and Vanessa into one big red one that was labeled LOVE. That screen faded and Vanessa appeared on a stage, and she did a slow strip show that held her attention until it reached the end, and she did a lewd and very open dance with both hands on her pelvis and moving up and down. She moved both hands to her mouth and blew a kiss to the camera and without sound voiced, “I love you, Betsy. Love you so much.”

“Wow!” She moved the mouse cursor to the stop icon, but before she did, the opening screen appeared again and faded to a couple of women in bed. They kissed. They hugged. They copped feels, changed to a 69 position and then they ended with Vanessa visible and the woman working for her and every time the camera moved from Vanessa’s pelvis to her face, Mary Beth felt herself reading the woman’s mind. “It’s okay. It’s fun. Come on. You’ll like it. It’s okay. It’s fun. Come on. You’ll love it. It’s not evil. It’s not nasty. It’s a wonderful and fun thing to do. Come on. You’ll love it.”

Mary Beth watched until the sex scenes stopped, and I love you, Betsy, bounced around the screen and then faded to nothing. She closed the viewer program and sat back in her chair.

She glanced at her breasts and saw as well as felt her nipples rubbing her blouse. “You liked that, didn’t you? The other party did also. Man, what a turn on! And it’s okay. I know Vanessa’s a hottie, but I’d never consider that. Or would I? Maybe it is fun. But it’s not okay. Or is it?”

She squirmed, patted herself and sighed. “Well, girlfriend, if you still feel this way when we get home, we’ll treat ourselves to some fun. We haven’t for a while, but we will now. Wait! We are home and we feel this way. Good. Don’t have to go anywhere for the treat. Except for a short walk down the hallway. Wonder who that woman was? Vanessa, I know. That wasn’t Betsy’s face and tongue working at the Y. But I bet Betsy liked it, probably more than I did. Wonder if Vanessa squeals and moans like that when she gets off or was that an act? Or does she just tense and grunt a few times? We could ask her. And we could just keep our mouths shut. If we ask, we’ll have to admit to seeing this video and I get the feeling it was made for Betsy only. Maybe Betsy had some misgivings and maybe second thoughts about taking the plunge, but this would wipe all that out. It’s okay. It’s fun. Come on. Hurry on down. I love you. It’s okay.”

She shut off the computer and stood as she glanced down at herself. “Just stop. Let it go. I know we could, and it would be easy but calm down and go to bed.”

She woke at 2:15 holding her spare pillow and kissing it. “Oh, yes, I feel good, Van. Can’t you tell? Just a slight touch should tell you without words.” She moved one hand from the pillow to her panties and pulled out the waistband. “Come on. Just a slight brush will show you how much I love it. I’m that hot. I’m that wet, honey.” She kissed the pillow again as her hand followed instructions.

She moved her hand, released the pillow, and jerked upright on the bed. “What the hell? Where did that come from? Just go to Vanessa’s and it will be fun. Fun? I’ll bet it would be. Like wow. I’m loving it and what a dream. I’m loving it and in real life I’m wet, like I was there. Why did you wake up, dummy? We’d have got off there and maybe here wouldn’t bother us like it is now. Dummy. Next time stay asleep. Next time? Won’t be no next time. We aren’t doing that again. We will NOT work at the Y to help her or anyone else. No.”

She woke again at 3:30 in the computer room with her tight cutoff jeans on, happy with her state of relaxation, but angry with her obvious lack of willpower. She groaned as she unzipped her sticky shorts and flung the now silent gel bumble bee across the room. She got up gently and shut her computer down and once more went to bed.

She woke at 7:50 feeling like she had a hangover, but still wonderful. “Self, this is serious. That damned flash drive is going in the trash this morning.” She looked at the time again. “Oh, just effing great! Already twenty minutes late for work and want to see your condition? Didn’t think so. Guess we will lose some money, or vacation time today. Luckily, we haven’t done this, like forever in nine years. Hope they can cut me some slack.”

She rolled over and winced from the pain. “Girlfriend, I know. Ran the batteries down last night after I crashed from watching it twice more and getting off with her on the second one. What a delightful woman. Too bad, but I’m lucky she wasn’t here last night. Score! Oh, yeah, and you wouldn’t be so sore now. You’ll get over it in a few days’ time. Meanwhile, let’s get ready and call the office, which probably has a pool going as to who got lucky with me.”

She prepared herself with a loose-fitting skirt and blouse combo and called McMillan Publishing and Binding and took a half day off. They assured her it was no problem, due to her being an exemplary employee. She wondered what they would think if they knew the real reason. She dropped the flash drive in her purse and called Gary Mitchell before she left the house.

“Hey, Gary. What up? Yes, it’s me. Got a favor to ask. I know I don’t ask often, but I’ve got a flash drive with a video on it, and I wonder if you’d look at it and do some analysis for me. Like a frame-by-frame job? Do you have the time to do that?”

“Like how soon?”

“This morning I’ll drop it by your place, and can you let me know before the end of the day?”

“What are you looking for?”

“Subliminal imaging or something along that line.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about a lesbian whose face you see and one you don’t. But the turn on factor is very powerful.”

“Did it turn you on?”

“Until I got off with the woman in the video after watching it three times.”

“Who’s the woman?”

“Someone who should know better, Vanessa Charles. You know her?”

“What? Really? From Dunmore Road fame, who owns Honeysuckle Farm in our neighborhood! Damn, we could make some money from that if it’s authentic!”

“Calm down, Gary. Are you listening? I watched it three times. Am I Lesbian? No. I got off with her the third time. Hello? You know me and I don’t want to be a part of that world. However, I did last night. Something’s wrong and we don’t need the video duplicated and spread around the Internet. If it were a normal video, I’d have stopped it and dropped it in the trash. I couldn’t stop and after the second time, I believed that it was really, truly okay and I wanted to find her and enjoy her. That’s why I called you. I want to know if something abnormal is in the video that I can’t see, but my vulva feels. Are you awake now?”

“Ten-four, sweetheart. Bring it on and I’ll do a backup and dissect it for you.”

*

She stopped at Gary’s home, and he opened the door for her.

“Wow, Mary Beth! You look in bad shape!”

“Tell me about it. Today I won’t get on your case for the truthful insult.”

“What didn’t you tell me on the phone? Come on. Inside before you fall. Why are you walking funny?”

“What I didn’t say was, when I got my big O, it was with the aid of my honey bee. You know?”

“Oh, no! I remember that one long ago conversation. You poor woman.”

“Yes. Conked out afterward and woke about two hours later when the batteries were barely alive. It was like pasted to me and it hurts a lot, even now. That’s why I don’t want this on the Internet. Don’t need unsuspecting women getting caught in that web of ‘Lick me. You’ll love it. It’s okay.’ NOT!”

“Okay. I promise. I’ll do a backup on a separate flash disk and then burn them both in my fire pit. Sound Kosher?”

“Sounds great. I know her, Vanessa. You know her. Many people in this sleepy little county know her. Many of us would make a buck from her if we could, but trust me, not this way. I figured and guessed she was bisexual because of Jake. But, if you want to go way out there in left field, I’d almost say this fit under the definition of Human Trafficking and Bondage regarding Betsy Riley. I’ll get your opinion later. Got to go now. First time late in nine years. See you on the way home tonight.”

*

Mary Beth worked and was the brunt of getting too old to handle liquor and younger men jokes and feeling better after a good lunch at the girls’ expense. She shared nothing with them, but they loved her anyway. Three times during the afternoon she remembered the rope with the noose, and she tried to call Betsy Riley three times only to get a message telling her the number was not in service.

She considered many scenarios and did not like any of them before she finally left for the day with a promise to leave the young men alone and be on time the next morning.

At Gary’s house, she found him both excited and angry. “You were right, girlfriend. Had Amy Carlisle and John Sanders here for my dissecting and analysis. They took it to a lower level

of hell than you. It's a very sophisticated lesbian introduction. It's spaced repetition, using visual imaging, every twenty to thirty frames. Enough for your brain to pick up and act on, but not at a totally conscious level. Amy got caught like you did. Most of it is geared toward Betsy, but there's enough non-associated suggestions and innuendos to let it work on every female at a good level. Amy squirmed and licked her lips and her nipple thermometers popped out. She made several passes at John and me before she got herself under control. Then we took a break and ran it through our sieve. Let Betsy, who might detest the entire lesbian world watch that, a few times, and she'd be hooked. Let it go a week or so and if she ever met Vanessa, even by chance, it would drive her crazy to profess her attraction and beg for the chance to see if it was okay."

"That's pretty much what happened. To all concerned, Vanessa never knew of Betsy's existence, and then suddenly Betsy was in her life, any way she could be until score, and then she was a love slave at the Honeysuckle Farm."

She sighed, studied his profile, and patted his shoulder. "I can feel the wheels turning, friend. What you got in mind? Lay it out for me."

"We need to get in touch with Betsy. Have you tried?"

"Three times. The number is not in service. She must have smartened up more than we all thought and got a new phone and new service. Makes sense to me. If you're going to run, do it right and make it difficult for anyone to track you down."

"Damn the luck."

"And to add to it, I've checked with the others who were there that day, except for Jake, and none can remember what he looks like or what kind of car he drove. Her truck is still there. All we can remember is the license plate was from New York. And that's it."

"So, they could be anywhere?"

"Yes. Why the concern?"

"Because if this is deeply rooted manipulation, and if it goes against the will or desire at the normal level, suicidal tendencies can surface. Conflicts will agitate you to the point of suicide. If you don't know what you're doing or every little facet of the programmed toy, you can end up with a death on your hands and oops, jail time for murder."

She held her right hand up and both looked at the tiny hairs standing stiff. "In Vanessa's barn, Betsy made a real hangman's noose from a heavy grade rope and hung it from the ceiling. All she had to do was put it around her neck and step from the loft and say goodbye Betsy. Fuck!"

"Not good. What about Jake?"

"Haven't seen him since that day. I made a call today, but he never answered the phone. It said outside of calling area. He's Vanessa's friend and I thought he was Betsy's friend. I really don't know now." She looked apologetic and asked, "So, what is your recommendation? I see that it's not making a buck from selling the video."

"What I'd like to do is turn the original over to the police to possibly upgrade to the FBI. Don't know if there's enough evidence to let them run with it, but I'd like to try. If Vanessa did it, the video, and she used it to sucker punch Betsy into her life, Betsy will be a target for death if she gets near her. Also, since that is Vanessa in the lesbian video, who did the filming and then added the frames to brainwash Betsy? It had to be someone close to Vanessa and to Betsy both. In addition to the visuals, there are whispers on the video, which are just below the registering threshold that encourage her to taste the love waiting at the Y. It must be someone who knew

them both. That's my feelings and I'd feel safer having it inside that police or FBI authority. There's little we can do except keep trying to contact them."

Chapter 13

Dillon sat on yet another hotel bed with Betsy facing him and holding his hands.

“How deep is your love going to go?”

“As deep as you let me. Ready?”

“Go for it. I know how to breathe.”

“Not my way. Take a deep breath, fill your lungs, mind, and heart with Daniel’s short temper and his demands for you to end your grief early. Hold it. Savor the anger. Now, breathe it out slowly and let your lungs, heart, and mind be filled with love as you witness his joy at the birth of their new baby. Your anger hid the fact that she’s about three months pregnant. You, as a wonderful loving human being should celebrate all life, yours, or someone else’s. Do you agree?”

“She was? I only saw him, and I saw red, and I wanted to hurt and demean him in her presence.”

“I know. That’s why I intervened quickly. Shannon has done nothing to you. It was he who took himself and everything you loved away from you. It was not her. She was there and that’s the case for many marriage separations in the world. The male world can condemn the woman on the outside, but bottom line is, both made the choice. It was not all Daniel. It was not all Shannon. It was a mutual choice and your grief pushed them together. So, you should rejoice in her pregnancy. It was not created by you, but it is still life, human life, and created by love. Not yours, but your love should know no limits, and should be immune to all scorn.”

She sighed and hung her head. “Why can’t you just be a typical man who wants to get laid as much as possible, and skip all this high-level philosophy crap? It pisses me off sometimes that you hit me with something like this and I can find no arguments at all to even debate you over it. My love? No limits? My love? No scorn? Wow, Dillon! Will you ever say, ‘Yo, Betsy, go kill, cripple or maim’? Any hope there?”

“No, my lovely, restrained warrior. Love thy enemy. It’s the worst punishment you can ever heap upon them. He or she will writhe in agony trying to get you to hate him enough to kill, and you’ll blow a kiss of love, give them a drink of water, wipe the sweat from their brow to comfort them and increase their pain. And they’ll hurt so much more trying unsuccessfully to drag you down to their level in life. That’s the only way they can win, and you’ll never allow that.”

“Wow, that makes sense. Can we go back and just screw our brains out until we reach seven children?”

“Nope.”

“Darn the luck. Well, I’ll not try to send you back for a refund. I’ll just keep you and let you grow on me.”

“Good choice.”

“She’s really pregnant?”

“About three to four months. Her pregnancy mask was just starting to show and the pants she had on looked tight around the waist. And the clincher was four wear marks on her belt. She was on the last hole before making a new purchase or switching to elastic waist pants.”

“You’re too much, but I’m glad you were concerned with my welfare and disregarded the police to contact me. Wow, what a life-changing event that was.”

“So how did you meet your partner?”

“I don’t rightly know other than it was on the Internet. Someone forwarded me her photograph, and I fell in love with her. I mean, her face just blew me away. I emailed her and

told her she was beautiful, and it just escalated from there. We emailed, talked on the phone, then met in person and ka-Ching! It was hitting the mega lottery and mega jackpot in all the world casinos at once. It was like I had known her all my life. After that, I never left her alone until we got sexual, and then I was in West Virginia, where she owned the farm, I existed on until you set me free. The rest, you know.”

“I’m sure there’s more, but okay for now. No name or occupation other than she’s a roadie?”

“Nope. She remains a mystery until you figure it out, at or before Dallas. You want it, work for it. You worked hard until you got me to go sexual.”

She blushed. “Darn, this heat. Disregard. That was incorrect. I threw myself into your loving life. But if you want to know her, figure it out on your own, smart butt. You have enough information. You just need to hone your detective skills. Okay, dude?”

“Okay, girlfriend.”

“Good. You ready for a wake-up?”

“It’s nighttime, and we’re ready for bed.”

She let go an exaggerated groan and opened her briefcase. “I spent a few hours today fulfilling my political cartoon work. I’ll get them in the mail tomorrow.” She held a postcard piece of paper up for him to see. “See this woman? See this man? The man is on his back, and the woman is on top of him. Neither of them has clothes in the way to prevent sexual activities. You’ve seriously got to work on understanding what I say and what I mean. I want to be on top and the aggressive partner tonight. Yo! You need to clean your ears? Got cotton swabs?”

“No. I need to learn. Show me what you want.”

“I hate drawing pictures, but for you, I’ll use this flash card and say, ‘this is the wake up. Prepare to enjoy it,’ until I no longer have to. Might die before then, but oh well.”

*

Mary Beth gave her consent for Gary to proceed as he deemed necessary and kept trying to get in touch with Betsy and received the same message. She tried finding her on a nationwide service but was empty of information.

“Darn the luck. Why did you have to do that right now? Couldn’t you have waited for a few months? I want to help you. So does Gary. Come on, girl. Cooperate.”

Amid her worries about Betsy’s location, she recalled the association with the band. “What was the name? It was a man. A handsome and sexy man. Should we bother? We’re not the police. But we have total access, keys, everything since we’re Betsy’s backup, and we must take care of the animals until Vanessa returns if she returns.”

She turned around a mile past the gate and went to satisfy her crew, and it was easier than she thought. She opened the first drawer in Vanessa’s desk with a few stacks of papers and lists of phone numbers.

“Coleman Friel! That’s it. Handsome little Irish male gnome that you are. Wonder how many women you got stashed around the globe for melting when you want?” She called the number and closed the drawer.

“Hello, no name. Hope you’re not a charity organization looking for money. I’ll donate my hand, through the phone lines, in the form of a fist alongside your jaw.”

“Uh, that’s not me. I’m Mary Beth Gentry. I’m not sure if you remember me. I was on Vanessa’s farm when you and a few other people stopped by. It’s been a few years ago.”

“Hmm. Mary Beth. She is a good-looking woman. Chestnut hair with blonde streaks. Mid-back length. Gorgeous blue eyes. Good combination of body and personality to want to take on a long camping trip, miles from pesky civilization so we could enjoy uninhibited life.”

“Wow! Yeah, that’s me. Wow! Didn’t think you noticed me.”

“I notice beauty all around the world. I never cross the line because I love my wife and children and want to continue in that life. What can I do for you? Who gave you, my number?”

“Uh, took the liberty of snooping without asking, and suddenly, your name jumped from the stack, and I tried my luck. I wasn’t looking for you, per se, but I’m trying to find Betsy Riley. You know her, I hope?”

“I know of her. She’s Vanessa Charles’ partner. Where did you snoop to find me?”

“Vanessa’s computer room and office combo. Do you know where she is?”

“Vanessa?”

“No, dammit! I don’t care where Vanessa is. I want to find Betsy Riley! Stop trying to sidetrack me!”

“Okay. Why do you want to find her?”

“Because she prepared a noose in the barn to give herself a way out. But this stranger, Dillon something, got her out instead. What worries me is I found a flash drive in the barn, where the noose was, and it should be in FBI hands by tomorrow. Don’t know all the gory details yet, but it’s mind control, and one police psychologist said excellent and deep behavior modification. I watched it three times, and it hooked me, longing to find Vanessa and make her an offer she’d be stupid to refuse.”

“Great Goblins! You think that was used to lure Betsy into that trap that I never could figure out?”

“Good possibility. But the psychologist said if she went far enough to fashion a professional hangman’s noose, even for comfort, she might try it again if what she doesn’t know about the video snaps out to the front of her mind. Or worse. He mentioned self-destruction along with anyone in range if she loses control. Didn’t want clarification on that. Just want to find Betsy or even Dillon.”

“Say no more. I’ll program your number, and I’ll try to contact Betsy. You say the guy was Dillon?”

“Yes. Nothing more about him other than that he was from New York. No car make, model, or even plate number. We were shocked that she’d ever think of leaving a woman who at least a billion men would love to bed. But after I saw the noose, I backed her up, and she left with Dillon. Sorry. Never even remotely considered anything like this happening, or I might have done further intervention.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of what’s on the video that doesn’t register in your normal mind. And you want to combine that with a small comment that I didn’t remember until last night, and you’ve got a potentially serious problem on your hands. Jake told her she was a pussy for leaving like she did. She told him she would tell her face-to-face at the Dallas Concert and go to Ireland with you.”

“Now it’s Great Fucking Goblins! That’s the last concert performance on this mega tour. It’s sold a record 50,000 tickets, and the host is adding extra bleachers to accommodate the cut they’ll get from all this. And security, theirs and ours are dogging us to cease and calling us crazy to present them with an impossible safety situation they’ll have hell to protect against. Let’s hope they never meet in the crowd or mix there.”

“Cell phones work to arrange a meeting, Coleman. I’m sure Betsy has her number memorized, and she’ll use it.”

“Look, Mary Beth. I really must go now. You’re stored, and I’ll answer any time you call. Can you afford me the same?”

“Definitely.”

*

Coleman swore at the silly plight of humans and the twists and turns of their sexual paths and trials. He mumbled, ignoring everyone in the band until he found Maureen and Patrice together in lawn chairs, staring at the sky. He sat on the ground between them with a huge sigh.

“Evening, girls. Do you know that you two are my favorite women in the world? Right behind Rasheen, of course.”

“Oh, brother. Coleman, you are so full of it. If I didn’t sign your next paycheck, I’d hear for years what evil I command in the world. The b word would be multiplied to a billion, exponentially, and heaped on me. You’d do that, if pushed to the extreme and against your will. Right now, you’re acting dramatic, and you’ve got something to tell us that will either make us puke or just quit and go home.”

“There’s another possibility, so we’ll see what happens. Just finished a phone call with one of Vanessa’s and Betsy’s friends in West Virginia. Betsy split the isolated farm, with a man, and plans on meeting Vanessa face-to-face to tell her it’s over at the Dallas performance.”

“Oh damn!” shouted Maureen. “That’s a sold-out 50,000 fan event. Security on both ends have already ranted, whined, and fussed to me about that. Made threats and wanted me to cancel. Even tried to get Dallas and Texas governments to declare the stadium unsafe for that figure and close it down. And Betsy’s on the way to meet her and say goodbye? Is she nuts? That’s going to be nearly impossible to prevent. Damn, damn, damn!”

“That’s not all the news. The rest is that no one can contact Betsy or her knight in shining armor. They know he’s Dillon, from New York and that’s all.”

“Great!”

“Not yet. Last tidbit, Betsy created a hangman’s noose and had it in the barn where she spent a lot of time. The woman I spoke with found a video on a flash disk and it’s in police hands right now. She didn’t know all the facts, but from what she said, the video was like expertly created and very useful tool for a psychotic serial killer. And it was created by Vanessa to lure Betsy Riley into her life and keep her there.”

“Great!”

Patrice held up a hand. “No. Don’t even voice it. Don’t even think of it. You can’t cancel that show. Pray for a tornado or earthquake, but it must go on. If you cancel, you’re dead in the music world. We’d never survive the hits that would bury us alive.”

“I know that! What about the hits on humanity if it gets violent? We’ve seen Vanessa’s penchant for that, and we’ve witnessed her possessiveness. She doesn’t like to lose her fan ratings, or worship, or anything. And Betsy left her? Karma have mercy! We need it. And I understand we’d be slaughtered if we cancelled. So, tomorrow morning we will talk to security. Get them a photo of Betsy and we’ll have extra men, in uniform and undercover to be around Vanessa during the set up to the airport and her plane has left the tarmac. We’ll do our best to stem the encounter before it happens. And no prayer for a natural disaster. I want a win there. I want a switch-the-earth’s-poles win, and I trust my guardian angel will not let me down. I’ll

probably age twenty years overnight, but lucky for the Celtic world, which doesn't matter much to fans, only to me. Gah! Why me?"

"This will definitely help build character and endurance," said Coleman.

"You're not funny! Wish you were a propane lantern right now, I'd shut you off and up and pack your ass away until I needed you, little prick!"

"I love you, Maureen."

"Not mutual."

"You'll look great sitting on your rock by the Irish Sea. Fans will go berserk over that and forget Vanessa."

"Won't happen. I'll break it over your thick little prick head!" She shoved herself up.

"Goodnight, Patrice. Make sure you're on hand to open the purse for pacifying security. Goodnight, prick. I'll restore you to humanity when you have some good news."

He whistled as she walked away. "Rock on, mama. Make one of when you're angry with pricks like me. Enhances your beauty to an awesome level."

She flipped up both middle fingers and made no reply.

Patrice stopped chuckling when he sat in Maureen's chair. "You two would make a great couple."

"Hey, don't even joke about that. Rasheen might hear you and I love that woman to death. I know what you mean, but don't voice it again, ever, lest big ears be trained on us."

"Okay, sir. What else is weighing on your mind? You know, what you didn't want to drop on Maureen."

"That if Betsy entertained the thought of suicide to go that far, she might just try to do it again but not necessarily that way. No one knows how deeply the behavior modification went inside her mind. Only Betsy might know but probably doesn't."

"The West Virginia woman tell you that?"

"Yes. She said after watching it three times, she wanted to find Vanessa and make her an offer she couldn't refuse."

"Thanks for keeping that back. That might have provoked a slap of legs and a kick of table and chairs. I'll not call you that. That's her and I love it when her anger spikes like that and she lets it fly. And you're so kind hearted that you let it pass with a grin and fling another barb to get it again."

"Comes from having broad shoulders, me lassie. And I do love her, but just not love her love her. You know?"

"Goodnight, Coleman. Be on hand in the morning with us, please. See if your raw Irish humor can help defuse the seething rage that security will dish out, abundantly."

"They're already upset with the numbers, I know. And the band members are getting tired. This was a long tour, and it will only help us, but with what might happen in Dallas is not going to sit well with them. Perform when tired. Want to be airborne for Ireland. Have to watch Vanessa."

"They will, though. And with that final notice to her, I think she'll be replaced before the studio album. Hoping for a miracle there. Got any extra's stashed away?"

"Oh, that's an easy one. Already told Maureen I have it covered. I pay attention to much that goes on around this band, even if it's not my business. She fires Vanessa in the middle of a show, we'll go on and never miss a beat. Care to bet on that one?"

“Wow! That gave me chills. I’ll never bet with you if you talk like that. Never miss a beat. Hmm. Interesting. Maybe I should stop managing sometimes and pay attention to the individuals in the band. Come on, Cole. Tell me so I don’t have to call you a prick.”

“Nope. I won’t open my mouth on that one unless it’s for the benefit of the band. That love’s a little above Rasheen, but don’t tell her that. No. That miracle is waiting, chomping at the bits to leap into the spotlight. And this heavy demonic crap that’s headed our way just might open the doors of opportunity.”

“So, it is someone in the band.”

“Goodnight, Patrice. Sweet dreams.”

Chapter 14

Betsy woke with a violent body jerk, hard enough to disturb Dillon's sleep. He lay still since she exited the bed swiftly and ran to the bathroom.

She turned on one light and closed the door partially and dragged her bags and purse to the shaft of light and searched through them all, mumbling as she cast each one aside.

"Lose something, Betsy?"

"Yes! Just go to sleep and leave me alone!"

"Let me help you. I'm getting good at that. What did you lose?"

"Nothing except my mind! It's not your concern!"

She returned to clutching her purse and mumbling. "Where is it? Why didn't I pay attention? Where have you been since you left the farm, where you should be right now? You've been so many places, where you shouldn't, and it could be anywhere. It's small. It's light. It's a lifeline and you let it go. Serves you right. Where is your hangman's noose? Where is your hand basket with your name engraved on the handle?"

She grabbed up the purse, screamed and flung it across the room to hit the curtains and fall to the floor.

"Idiot! Idiot! You loser! Feels good to lose and know what awaits you, doesn't it?"

Dillon moved to sit behind her and wrap her in his arms and legs. "Hey, Betsy, sweetie, my darling love, what's going on here? What did you lose? What's ripped your heart out?"

"The flash disk! I promised I'd never lose it and if I ever doubted her love, all I had to do was watch her message and all would be well with the world. And I lost it! And I lost my noose which would also love me forever. All gone! All gone! Woe is me!"

"I'm here. You haven't lost me."

She jerked her arms down to loosen his hold. "Leave me alone! Can't you listen to plain English sometimes and just leave me alone? I don't need your love every second of the day, demonstrated to this level. You've not reached the level of intimacy that she did. Without you doing that, you can only help me by leaving me alone."

"Okay." He surrendered and kissed the back of her neck. "I'll buy that for now but look for a competitor's coupon and be back to claim it at a better price soon. Trust me."

"I will. Good luck. Some things just never change or were meant to change."

He returned to the bed but lay on his side to watch her go through all the bags, dump everything on the floor and put it back one item at a time until she sat and hugged her knees staring at the bathroom door.

He never heard her come to bed, but when he woke again, it was in the past tense, like her first wake-up. He felt her moving around the bed and kept silent and as slack as possible until it became apparent what she had planned. And he forced himself to stop it.

She slapped his hands and kept them away. "Relax, Vanessa. You're okay. You're fine in this. You wanted me for so long, you're crazy for trying to stop me now. Relax, sugar. We'll both be okay in a few moments."

"Betsy, please stop this."

"I can't. Just relax. I'm taking the biggest risk here. I've left everything I ever loved and needed in life for this moment. I can't believe you're the one who's so timid and scared now. After all the conversations, the kisses, the hugs, the rubs, the messages to display your love for me and now you say quit. Just hush, my darling. This is our destiny."

There was a sudden shift of the mattress and light flooded the room once again. Betsy stared at the patch of white shorts and felt her arms wrapped around Dillon's hairy legs that she had learned to love for the first time.

"Betsy, please stop, sweetie. I know this is hard for you, but these nightmares will end. I promise you that. I'll love them out of your mind. Just stop for now and lay beside me. Let me cuddle you like you enjoy and relax. Okay, sweetie?"

She pushed herself up and finally moved her eyes from his legs to his face. "What are you doing to me?"

"Nothing. What happened to you, happened before I met you. I must deal with it now, but all I did, all I'm doing is loving you."

"Loving me? I'm not worthy of love! Just stop. You'll only hurt yourself! And if you do, don't blame me! Where is it?"

She cast sharp glances all around the room.

"What are you looking for?"

The noose! I need it! It will put me to sleep forever! No pain! No isolation! No love! Love sucks! Just peace! Where is it? I lost it also. Woe is me!"

"Betsy. Wake up now. This is a dream."

"I've got to find the noose. I need it. Really, I need it."

She jumped from the bed and onto the other bed after slapping his hands again. "Leave me alone! Why don't you listen? Vanessa! Where are you? Help me!"

Her leap caused her to bounce, then stumble, and before she could recover or compensate for it, she fell to the floor in front of the table and chairs.

He caught up with her and trapped her arms and legs and held her until she ceased struggling and then cried herself to sleep. He picked her up and laid her on the bed and washed her sweaty teary face.

"This is more than just a nightmare. What did they do to you, my sweet darling? Want me to show them their heart before they die? No problem. For you, for your pain, for your never-ending love, I will."

He touched her face, kissed her lips, gathered her purse, and went outside to sit on the trunk of his car and violate her privacy. He turned her cell phone on, listed her contacts, and called a number.

"Don't let me down. I know it's late, but I hope you are being so you. Please?"

A sleepy voice answered, small and barely understandable.

"Hey, girlfriend. How are you? Sorry to call so late, but I have a really serious problem and I need your help?"

"Huh? I'm awake now. You're not Betsy. What's up with that?"

"I know I'm not. This is my first bad with her, but I'm loving her too much to sit idle and do nothing. Will you help me?"

"Sure thing, boyfriend. You're the first man who's called me. That's a thrill for me. Doesn't matter that you're with someone else. I don't have to tell my friends that. Just, my boyfriend called me last night for pillow talk. Awesome sauce! I'll have them begging for more. Sorry. What you need?"

"You're wonderful, Cindy. I'm hoping against all odds that you're still you and haven't changed all your ways and habits overnight. Betsy has some problems. She woke from a nightmare, called me other people's names, went crazy, slapped me, cried herself to sleep. I

don't know how to help her, so I need to talk with someone in her past. Don't know who. So, I'm hoping you have her old cell phone."

"You sneaky little man. You think I'd do that?"

"I hoped so."

"Well, you're right. She shut it off and dropped it in the trash can on the curb before she left. When her car was gone, I went and got it out. Not to sell this time. She touched it. It belonged to her. Now it's mine. Don't tell her, please?"

"Never, girlfriend. And I'm so happy that you're still you I'll dance at your wedding someday."

"Hah! Fat chance of that! I'm going to stay single."

"Okay. And she told me before that she had established auto pay so it will still work unless it's shut off and disabled."

"What do you need? Speak up, rover."

"I need you to charge it and look through her contacts and find one or two people who she called or who called her frequently. Then call me and give the numbers to me."

"We could lose our heads together in this mystery, partner. You know that?"

"I do, but she's worth it."

"Dang sure is. You need a posse, call me."

"Who's your posse?"

"My Brownie Pack of fourteen girls. You're safe. Any enemy would look at us and say, 'You're shitting me?' They would laugh, but after ten minutes or less, they'd be screaming 'Oh, shit! Get this alien creature off me!' Then after five more they'd be screaming uncle and calling for their mamas to heal thousands of boo boos. We look frail, but we can kick some serious butt. And we will for anyone who's bugging you or Betsy. She's an angel and she needs a guardian angel. She's got it, boyfriend."

"Dang, I love my solid girlfriends. Thanks for your help. Just let me give you my number so when I call using my phone, you'll know who it is."

"Ten-four. Done. I'll have to let it charge a few hours before I violate her trust, but I will do it to save her. I love you, Dillon. I love her also. You're two good people that fit together perfectly. When you escape all your problems, paradise awaits both of you. Enjoy and I'll get up with you soon. Hope some girls are around when I do. I'll sell the rights for all the juicy gossip I can dream up. Night."

He closed her cell phone and kissed it. "Cindy, you the bomb. I can imagine you meeting your life mate sometime in the future. What a ride he's in for. Like I am right now. Hope he holds on tight and waits for the paradise that's his at the end of his awesome road trip."

He finally stood and stretched. "Waiting sucks. Guess I should be used to it, but not really. I'll have to when the babies are delivered. Or we might work around that to be present. Hear that's the norm these days. You play with it. You go there a lot. So, why not watch it spit out a screaming squirming mass? Self, shut up and go to bed. Hope she sleeps the rest of the night."

*

Chester Moats shut off his computer and crushed his cigarette butt in a filled ashtray. It was a "Smoke Free" facility, but he considered himself grandfathered in the deal and no one dared to complain.

“Damn the luck. Why can’t I ever get an easy task? Go to Wal-Mart and arrest a detained shoplifter. Arrest some bozo for walking across the street where there is no light assisted crosswalk? Fine someone for feeding ducks in a retention pond? No. Get the weirdos who leave a bloody trail and end when they change cell phones. Bastards! A pox on you all! Hear me? If it were up to me, the cell phone would be integrated into your forehead and palm of your hand. You’d have the same number from birth to death so you could answer when I call you.”

He stood and did his wind down stretches and put on his coat and picked up his briefcase that sat unopened by his desk each day. It was never open. Had not been opened in over 4 years. He carried it to look significant and maintain his image of Super-Agent 001. He assigned the number to make himself meaningful. Agent 001 had been given by a few supervisors in the past. They thought it was the briefcase that helped him. He did not wish to squash his image by telling them his success rate lay within his twisted and non-ordinary mind. It would lead him down paths that any sane or devout agent would avoid like the plague. And he loved it. But things like a disappearing Betsy Riley, who had not used her credit card for over eight months, and now had a new cell phone, an unknown number, and a new carrier really annoyed him.

He removed his coat, replaced the briefcase, and turned on his computer again. He sat with his fingers poised to attack the keyboard and query the Internet on a different path and considered what he did. “We’re not trying to find her to arrest her, and slam dunk her into prison. We’re trying to find her to possibly save her life. What a difference that makes. Damn, I love thinking! I just dislike having to do it faster than I like. A gentle arousal, followed by slow excruciating intercourse, forcing them to enjoy it all to the last second. Yeah. That’s what I like. So, do the women I do that with. They don’t understand how I can have that finite self-control to not let them fake an orgasm. But I do. Now I must find Betsy Riley, somewhere out there in America, maybe, and do it before a maniac snuffs her. This one might make my weird brain explode. Bang!”

*

Cindy got off the bus and ran to the house, excited that she could finally help someone she loved.

Nellie was excited about receiving her first child support check and had trouble with Cindy’s shrug and dart to her bedroom response for an answer.

With the door closed, she retrieved the cell phone from her sock drawer and unplugged the wire. She pressed the start button and watched it go through several stages of setup before she had a ready screen with four network bars and a picture of a beautiful woman.

“Is she your sister? Never mind that. Do what Dillon wants and then let it go.”

She listed the recent calls and highlighted the first two to write them down. “Who are you? That’s a lot of calls. Are you for or against her? Cindy Morgan! Just do what you’re told for once and let it go. Yes, conscience.”

She wrote them down and pressed the off button. It said to wait for service to end.

“What service? You’re done.” She turned the phone over and used a nail file to open the cover and pop the battery out. “When I say whoa, you will whoa. Don’t be difficult. Just whoa when told to whoa.”

*

At Clarksburg, West Virginia, Chester slammed the desk with fists. “Dammit! What’s wrong with you? I want to save you! He stared at the message in a red box on his computer screen. “Cell phone inoperative.”

“So, you have removed the battery this time. Brilliant, you dumb target! Thanks for helping me NOT help you. Don’t complain to anyone when you’re attacked and killed. Just accept it as the price to pay for not letting me help you. Gronk!”

He checked the tracing program only to be informed that, “Insufficient service connect time. Power disconnected. Last range of commitment, Boulder, Colorado.”

“Okay, okay already.”

He shut his computer down again.

“Failure, my man?” asked his cubicle mate.

“Failure? Hate that word. The snake slithered back into a different hole. I’ll find the right one soon enough.”

*

Betsy insisted she was wonderfully fine and insisted on buying breakfast from the restaurant next door to their hotel.

He grudgingly let her go and when his phone rang, he checked the name and was glad to be alone.

“Hey, girlfriend. You got an audience?”

“At the bus stop, waiting for the school bus. Just wanted to see if you were awake and thinking of me. You were. Aw, you’re so sweet. Got some numbers for you. Had to work a lot to get them. Hope they help us get deeper in love.”

“Cindy, you’re so wonderful. You’re laying it on thick.”

“Yeah. Thick. I love thick. You ready to stop the phone sex and get down to business?”

“Yes, girlfriend. Lay it on me.”

“Lay it on you? If you were here, I would have already. You ready to write? Mary Beth Gentry called 23 times. Never left a message. Coleman called her 20 times. Never left a message. No one left messages. No signal or indicator of waiting messages. There is no indicator for text messages either. Then the only other one of importance is Vanessa and that was 14 incoming calls. All those calls and no messages? Sounds strange to me. Won’t talk unless she answers the phone? Weird.”

“You got that right. That will do for now. I’ll work with the first two that called so often and see if I can get to the root of her problem.”

“The root of the problem is you’re not paying attention. You’ll be back on Thursday night. By Friday morning, I’ll draw you a picture of the root problem. It’s not planted properly, and you’ll practice until you get it right. Hear me, boyfriend?”

“You’re an imp, but I love you.”

“You’d better love me. I’m worth it. Bye now.” She kissed the phone and sighed luxuriously. “Men. They’re difficult, but so worth it.”

Dillon considered the conversation from her end. “Ka-Ching! Ka-Ching! No doubt you’ll get some coins from all that fluff. Love you, Cindy.”

He contemplated his calls and dialed the number for Mary Beth Gentry first. “Yes, I’ll leave a message. I spent a great deal of money and time helping the same person you seem to be trying

to contact. That's Betsy Riley. Up front, I remember you from the farm. Don't know which side you're on, but if you're not on her side, like wanting her to live free, then you've just made an enemy by asking for a message. If you're pro-Betsy, call me back. If not, watch your back. Bye."

"Deposit one. Now the male sounding name." He dialed and Coleman answered.

"Don't know why people in America, the land of the free don't want to let people know who's calling them. Talk to me, No Name, John Doe, or whoever you are."

"I'm Dillon. Don't know who you are, but you've made several phone calls to Betsy Riley's phone recently. Why?"

"Dillon? Damn, man. Are you with her? With Betsy? All kinds of heavy shit is breaking loose because of her or over her, and she disappears! Are you with her?"

"Nearly 24-7. What's wrong?"

"She's a walking time bomb, man! That's what's wrong! When she self-destructs, she's probably going to hurt a lot of people, whether she knows them or not. Where are you?"

"Back the fuck off, Coleman! I'm not a pre-kinder garden toddler. I'll work with you, but back up before you think I'll set off a flare and suddenly find myself having to fight my way out of a SWAT team."

"Whoa! Sorry, my man, but that's not my intent. A lot of shit is being uncovered as we speak. Mary Beth Gentry from West Virginia found a flash disk that's hell-on-mpg. The video was dissected by a specialist and then elevated to the FBI. It contains very sophisticated behavioral modification techniques in addition to mind control, subliminal imaging, and oral messaging."

"Damn! She spent a good two hours looking for a flash disk last night. What's up there? Any info?"

"It was apparently used to seduce Betsy the first time. It was made specifically for her, but it will seduce other females who watch it. It's very powerful and intense subliminal programming and without knowing it, the viewer is hooked that being a lesbian is fun, is erotic, is something to enjoy. Mary Beth and another woman watched it and they both had a couple of rough days afterward. They're okay right now but wanting to kick some Vanessa butt."

"Vanessa who? She woke the second time calling me Vanessa and slapping my hands as I stopped her lesbian moves on me."

"I'm talking, Vanessa Charles, the drummer in Dunmore Road Celtic Band."

"Oh, fuck me to tears! I knew she had a woman partner, but I never dreamed of that. Oh, that does create a problem."

"Yes, since she's planning to meet her face-to-face in Dallas to say goodbye."

"Not good."

"You got it, Dillon. Any way you can talk her out of it?"

"Slim to none. Anyway, I wouldn't try now. If I did, I may as well put a bullet in her brain or give her the noose she made. She's struggling to overcome that bondage situation. If I lead her a different way, she's done. Spent a lot of time last night looking for her noose, her friend to set her free from prison."

"I was afraid of that."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Coleman Friel. I'm the first chair cello player in the band. I'm also the unofficial resident psychiatrist."

"So, you're aware that I won't try to stop her from that meeting. I'm hoping that it won't break her. Betsy, that is. I'm going to do my best to not let it hurt her."

“Well, Vanessa does have a violent streak.”

“I know. She said she controlled her by using cattle prods and locking her in a tack room overnight several times.”

“But never said that she was a band member?”

“No. She wanted me to figure it out on my own. And now I guess I have. And honestly, Coleman, I’d rather see her dead than watch her die slowly through this last defeat. I’ve no doubt that she’s suicidal. If not, there would be no noose. And if it snaps out and she’s in a crowd, I can see what they’re worried about.

“However, I’ve grown to love her, and I’ve seen her in loving and stressful situations, and she was dead set on violence to solve her problems. That probably stems from rebelling against Vanessa with a horse bridle one morning. I would not discount her losing. She’s lost enough. So, I say, let Dallas happen, keep a strong eye on Vanessa, and I will do the same for Betsy and I think we’ll all be fine in the mix. Do it some other way and you’ll kill Betsy.”

“That’s what I was afraid of hearing, but I agree. Problem is, there’s 50,000 sold tickets for that event. It’s the last performance before a four-month break and then a 20th studio album release. The security people wanted to flat cancel the show. They say it’s impossible to provide the required security since we’re talking about two people in a huge crowd of people. One is a band member, and one is an unpaid guest.”

“She told me she had tickets.”

“She doesn’t, but she has an open attendance pass anytime and I encouraged her to come on down and spend some time with us and go to visit my family in Ireland. Just didn’t know what a fiasco that would initiate. Didn’t know the level of evil in that relationship. Sorry, Dillon. Didn’t know.”

“Let neither of us say sorry until the last card is played in this intense hand, Coleman. Most people would condemn me for bringing her on to Dallas knowing what I did. I just can’t stand the thought of her committing suicide over gaining her freedom without a public show of defiance.”

“My heart goes out to you, dude. We’ll let it play out and see what happens.”

“What about the band leader and the manager?”

“They’re tight as two hips in the same pair of jean shorts. They say they’re paid to perform; they’ve sold 50,000 tickets; the show will go on as scheduled and let what happens happen, hopefully for the betterment of all. You got my number, call me. Stay in touch. Increased security on Vanessa is all we can do. Many of us know Betsy, but we don’t know her that well. The rest of it is up to them, and now them and you. See ya, Dillon.”

Chapter 15

Vanessa tried the same number six times before she screamed in anger and stopped.

“Where are you? I know you left. I know you’re on the run, with a man, but come on! Talk to me! You’re mine! Don’t you know that? Answer the phone, we’ll talk it out and we’ll make things better. Maybe I’ll just surrender and take you with me from now on. I’ll make the adjustments and keep us both happy.”

Coleman approached her at that moment. “Morning, Vanessa. How’s it going? You seem very loud and angry lately. Do you need someone to talk with? I’m available.”

“Maybe, but not with you. I don’t trust you. Move along.”

He feigned dramatic hurt. “Don’t trust me? You wound me. I offer the same privacy and confidentiality as certified psychiatrists.”

“Bullshit. Move along. I’m not buying that one.”

“Okay. Hope you feel better soon. One sour mood could bring down the whole band.”

“Maybe that’s what it needs. Don’t deny it the right to die with dignity.”

“Toodles.” He walked away from her.

*

Dillon recognized a West Virginia number and moved away from Betsy to take the call.

“Hope this is Mary Beth Gentry. Do I win?”

“You do, Dillon. And right now, as much as I disliked you then, I’m happy that you’re with her. Talked with Cole a few moments ago. You sure about going to Dallas with her? Whenever it’s possible, I’d rather prevent death versus applying some philosophy to situations.”

“Hmm. I like that. And probably under normal circumstances, I would turn her and her problem over to the FBI and hit the road. I fell in love with her. Been there a couple times in my life. This time is different. She’s the perfect woman in my life, and I want her freedom the way she wants it. I don’t want her on a 24-7 suicide watch for the rest of our lives.”

“I’m with you there. The FBI psyche inspected the rope and its positioning. He said she had to do a lot of research on preparing it with love. It was perfect and there would be no possibility of error if she ever put it to use. He said she’ll probably have nightmares from not being around to gaze at it with love.”

“I can verify that she did. She also searched all her bags twice for a flash disk.”

“No doubt she did. Right now, she needs some reinforcement from her honey bunch. The devotion that’s instilled is mind boggling. It’s not like the normal dominatrix lifestyle, it’s like total possession. Betsy belongs to Vanessa and now she’s not available. Coleman said Vanessa is throwing tantrums and being an abnormal pain-in-the-ass.”

“Interesting.”

“Where are you? The FBI is looking for her.”

“I gathered that, but it’s better if they don’t find her right now.”

“Do you know what you’re facing?”

“Have you seen Jake Summers recently?”

“He came back and he’s rather recluse. Won’t socialize and be a bad ass like before.”

“Well, call him and ask him what it’s like to shit a cue ball. That might prove an interesting and informative conversation.”

*

Chester Moats swiped his face again and tried a different approach. He checked for arrest warrants open or closed on Betsy Riley nationwide. He hit the enter key and sat back. “Work, baby. Bring me another jaw-dropping miracle find. Raise me to 001+.”

Twenty minutes later, he received “NEGATIVE WARRANTS for Betsy Riley.”

“Okay. Let’s try an unethical approach. He opened his email and used a seldom-used function to email every office and agent in selected areas. He chose all sections east of the Mississippi River and composed the short message: “Does any agent recall any arrests or any incidents or any information on Betsy Riley from Hartford, Connecticut?”

He clicked the send key and prepared for flak from his supervision. He encouraged the message to appear in some angelic region of the Internet and provide him with needed information and went to get a cup of coffee.

He returned to his desk and had two phone messages waiting and two replies to his email. He listened to the messages first.

“Chester, haven’t we had this discussion before? This ALL AGENTS is for emergency only and for use by the Washington Headquarters? Do I have to make that a part of the Weekly Briefing, so you don’t forget? Yes, I had a complaint, and no, I don’t like it. Don’t do that again or your next case job will be unemployment.” He hit the delete key with a grin.

“Chester Moats, Martin Reynolds here. I do recall Betsy Riley. An arrest was threatened for falsifying a 911 call from Delaware. She said an alligator ate her son. The Police Detective who worked the case never arrested her, but they did find the alligator with a piece of his shirt stuck in its teeth. Together, they killed the alligator. Anyway, the detective, now the agent, is a contract employee for the FBI, and I’ve enclosed her number in the email I returned. If you need her, let me know. I’ll rearrange her cases if it will be helpful to you. She loves challenging cases. Regards. Martin Reynolds.”

“Hot damn! Martin, you rock! Boss, you suck. If I find Betsy and save her life, sue me and dock me a day’s pay. No sweat.”

He located the email and dialed the number.

*

“Hello, unknown 800 number junkie. If you are looking for money, tough tits. So am I. If you want to send money, don’t be a wuss. Send lots. Answer or disconnect.”

“Uh, sorry, but this phone system grabs one of the 35 lines to dial out. You’re Sarah Johns, I hope?”

“Yes. And now you?”

“Chester Moats, working a different case on Betsy Riley from West Virginia. Your boss, Martin Reynolds said you worked a case on her a few years back?”

“Betsy? Sure did. The first woman I handcuffed and sedated because she was so hysterical that she slapped me. Thought she was crazy. Found she wasn’t. What did she do? It seems out of character for her to be wanted by the FBI.”

“You’re right. We want to save her from a maniac that we can’t locate. We have no clue who they are. We can’t locate Betsy, and I’m grasping at straws. Can you give me any help at all?”

“If I can, I will. What you want?”

“Well, let me give you what we have so far. She’s divorced from her husband. She became a lesbian. Her partner is Vanessa Charles from the Dunmore Road Band. Betsy’s been programmed very deeply with mind control and subliminal training. She’s more than a slave, she’s a piece of property belonging to Vanessa. Now she’s split her limited prison in West Virginia and on the run with a man named Dillon from New York, somewhere. We’re trying to find Betsy to possibly save her life, either from suicide or death when she confronts Vanessa. If she does, we don’t know what the hell will happen. We’re not through with the analysis of what all the crap was put in the video to program her. Can I tell you, it’s not easy? And the result will be far from pretty.”

“No doubt. Wow! Wonder what happened to her? She was happy when I let her blow up the alligator with a grenade. Hugged and kissed me several times. And she’s a lesbian.”

“Yes. The training video we have was made by Vanessa. She used the name Betsy many times, and I’m waiting for you. You’ll love it. You’re mine. I’ll take care of you. And other messages that you never really see, but your mind does.”

“Wow! Another one, I know. So, what do you need?”

“Any idea where we might find her?”

“Well, I’d assume you’ve tried her home?”

“Closed or vacated long ago when she married.”

“Oh, yes! Yes! Who was it, Daniel Riley? He was her husband when I knew her.”

“Any idea on his location?”

“No. He was a loser. I mean I could not see what she ever saw in him to want to join his life. I’d have loved to arrest him for something. Anything.”

“You know his number? Would you possibly have that? We’ve come up blank on that also. Very strange case. I’m not looking to arrest her, but to save her life from an enraged lesbian lover or someone external to them.”

“Do I look like an archive? Don’t answer that. I used her phone to contact him. Then I used my phone twice to call him and he called me once from Connecticut to tell me they were home safe. I’ll check my records in the archives and see if I can find his number. You want me to contact him or defer to you?”

Martin said in his voice mail that if you want to work the case with me, let him know so he could shuffle you my way and take care of funding.”

“Hell, yes. She’s a charming woman. Very distraught over her son’s being a lunch item, but very sweet. I’ll do what I can. Can you give up your number so I can let you know what transpires? I’m not in the regular FBI listings.”

*

Aponi gazed at Sarah and knew without questioning that she was enthused about some mystery. “Hey, lover. I can tell from the gleam in your eyes, that you’re about to toss us into the abyss into a deadly case, that we probably should decline. Am I right? Do I win?”

“You win a fat lip. Remember Betsy Riley? She’s the case I worked that dropped me into your life. Her son got lunched by an alligator.”

“Roger that. It was because of the Rest Area in Smyrna, Delaware being built on an Indian Burial Ground. Rough way to meet, but I like the ending. She in a repeat of the same mess? Same demon alligator comes back for more pain?”

“No. She’s missing. She’s a lesbian now. Do you believe that?”

“No. I remember you talking a great deal about her. She had no reason for doing that. You did. You met it head on, dealt with it. I don’t possess you. I don’t own you.”

“Right. But she is owned and from what Chester told me she’s in grave danger of death by suicide or at her lover’s hands. Martin told him he could use me if he wanted. What about you? You in?”

“Duh. As if you ever had to ask.”

“I had to. Love that snippy face and voice. Duh.”

“So, where are we going?”

“West Virginia, after I send my phone company into orbit with a demand or two or three. Need to, well, I must find Daniel’s phone number if it’s possible. Didn’t like him the three or four times I had to see him. He’s a douchebag supreme in my book.”

“Good. So, we use him once and throw him away in the nearest garbage receptacle with the used tampons and other stinky sundries.”

After seven phone calls and as many redirects, Sarah made the contact she craved. “Hello, Mark, human being, human male, the only man in my phone company who can respond with human kindness and willingness to work with authorities in their line of duty. Gah! You ready?”

“I was a few sentences ago, ma’am. What do you need?”

“I made a few phone calls to Daniel Riley a few years ago. They were made on my state cell phone from Delaware. I need to find that number. I’m trying to find his wife; whose phone number is inactive and the new number not available.”

“That might not be true, but only what you’ve been told. First, I need to know a time frame. Get me as close as you can and then give me your Delaware State phone number. I’ll track it down. How many times did you call him?”

“I called twice from my phone. He called me twice from his phone in Delaware. A week later he called me to let me know all was well and he was back in Hartford, Connecticut.”

She left him to his task and enjoyed some fresh cornbread and potato soup with Aponi and her two-year-old son, Jeremy.

She wiped some excess soup from his mouth with a napkin. “Jeremy, do you know how blessed and lucky you are to be here in this world? I love you so much. Hope you never forget it. Ever.”

He nodded vigorously and pointed. “You Mommy. You Mommy. I’m lucky to have two mommies. Not many people do.”

“You sure are,” said Sarah. “You ready to visit with Grandma for a few days?”

“Yep. Love that woman. She smells good and feeds me great food.”

*

Maureen sat far away from the band, from security, from every human she might possibly know or see. She remained silent in her yoga position to bring peace and harmony to her mind, body, and spirit. She longed for it. She sought it. She coaxed it to imbue her total being with its love and it ignored her. That disappointed her and she felt crushed, and moments later additional pain and suffering heaped on her without invitation or need.

“Why wasn’t I a still birth? Why? Why be born and suffer endlessly? Why do anything right and then be crushed into powder finer than dirt? Why? Why are you here bothering me in my misery? Let me suffer alone, please? You of all people on this earth should understand and respect me and leave me alone!”

“I can’t. There are universal rights, universal wrongs, universal truths, and universal lies. And no matter how you fight it, one of them will whomp you eventually without outside assistance.”

“Go away and take your philosophy with you! Just shut up and go away! I don’t want to do this anymore! I don’t want bloodshed on my hands or my name! Get away from me, Satan!”

“Nope.” Patrice rested an arm across the trembling shoulders. “We’re wearing the same yoke, put on us by the same woman. I’m not budging one inch. I won’t. I can’t. I don’t have it in me to leave you alone in life, in this situation, in any matter. To do so would kill us both.”

“I hate you sometimes.”

“I know that, and I know it’s only in passing and I accept it as a universal truth. Mamma knew us well. She knew our personality, our character, our drive, our spirits, everything. Didn’t matter that I was born first. She told me that I was born to serve you. She knew before we could speak or walk that we must be this way, or we will share a hole in the ground before our time is up.”

Maureen groaned and stopped looking at her.

“You sang before you could walk. Couldn’t understand it, but you sang. You sang all the time and you entertained, all the time. You were ham supreme, all the time. And you were praised and applauded, all the time. She told me that I had to help you, and I listened to her as you did. I don’t regret even a moment of sharing your greatness, your power to command a performance that wows millions. My behind-the-scenes, loving you is joy enough. Sometimes it’s overwhelming and I feel small, but happy.”

“I don’t want to do this, Patrice! Please?”

“I know, darling sister, but if you stop now, you’ll stop forever. Doesn’t matter why you did. The stopping does. Life or death is not your choice; it’s not your will; it’s not within your control. It’s God’s will and will work to his satisfaction.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel good?”

“I don’t know. It’s just one of the universal truths. A person jumps off a bridge and dies in the water below. A person puts a gun barrel in his mouth and pulls the trigger. A band leader cancels a show. Where in any of these situations do you see what happens in the world the next day? All the world sees is a senseless death. The deceased never sees the wife or husband come home, the son or daughter return, the job offer they wanted, the first welfare check or food stamp delivery. They’re dead. I don’t want to see you dead because you want to be a good mommy and she doesn’t care.”

“It’s not that!”

“Wrong! It is that! You’ve begged; you’ve pleaded; you’ve disciplined her as much as you can, and she’s still an unruly child! And I don’t want to see my younger sister defeated because she rejects your love. She doesn’t see it or feel it. Everyone else does.”

“I don’t care! I don’t want to do it!”

“Come on, Maureen. Our momma knew what was right and since you were in junior high school, being here or anywhere on a stage, performing what’s in your heart, has been your driving force, your life, your love. Men try to woo you. You reject them. The band is your husband, quite a few of them. It’s your children, quite a few of them. One is acting up. Let her go and let one of Cole’s miracles happen for you. You can’t stop now, sis. It’s suicide if you do. You really want to force me to sit through your funeral? You know how much it would hurt and suck dropping dirt on your casket? Spare me. Spare yourself.”

She sighed and caved in. “No. Never want to see that, but I don’t want to see anyone hurt when I could have prevented it. You know?”

“I know, but no matter what, even if you suicide and have nine other bands rejoice at Dunmore Road’s demise, what happens between them will still happen. You will come out of this dilemma smelling like the queen’s flower garden and never have a finger point to you in shame or disgrace or disgust. I’m your blood sister, older, subservient, but I still love you to the max. I insist that you rise to victory in this matter. Your actions will shame the rest of the Celtic World because they’d never dream of responding like you, and Maureen Lannon will be up there in the world beside all the saints the Vatican has ever canonized. Hear me?”

She sighed and leaned against her loving mass. “I hear you. All the dead in Ireland probably heard you, loud mouth. Thanks. Sorry for melting down like that. Just piles up on me occasionally. So, with that all said and behind us, will you take my picture, sitting on the rock that I won’t break on Coleman’s head? I’ve denied the fans enough. Time to give them a fully dressed thrill, huh?”

“You got it, sis. I love these private encounters where I can call you that. I’ve always got your back, always.”

“If push comes to shove and I have to exercise my motherly power and authority, will you still have my back?”

“I’m certain what you’ll do in any situation, darling sister. Just do it and leave the result to me. I’ll fix nearly any damn problem you can create, and you’ll still smell like the queen’s flower garden. Just let it flow and enjoy the results. You’ll get maximum publicity and maximum rave reviews no matter what way the hunk of meat falls.”

“Okay, big sister. Let’s put back on our business persona and get some sleep. This stress is killing me. Since you know me too well, can I?”

“Three shots of gin max and then babble until you can’t.”

Maureen kissed her cheek. “What do you think of this radical thought? What do you say in planning an event and using it to make a coming out-of-the-closet statement? Can you imagine the jaws that will hit the floor when we say we want to make a statement to clarify our relationship in life? Then we produce birth certificates and tell them we’re sisters, not lesbians. Then we stick out our tongues, like momma doesn’t like, and laugh ourselves silly at their shock.”

“Are you out of your mind? You’d best do that with me present! I love it. That would be so cool and make our life easier and shut up a bunch of slut rumors that abound hither, thither, and yon. It seems sometimes that they want that, versus condemning Vanessa.”

“An idiom from Mamma. I remember that. Yes. Let’s do that. We’ll plan it for some time soon after we survive Dallas.”

Chapter 16

Sarah made the call to Chester. “Yo, we got lucky. I have Daniel Riley’s phone number. You want me to try and make contact? What do we need from him?”

“You can do it. We’re trying to find his ex-wife, Betsy. We discovered a possible death threat to her, and we’re trying to save her if we can. We have little to work on, but in this case, it’s positive enough that we can’t call it a hoax and quit.”

“That sounds a little odd. When I knew her, she didn’t appear to be a political target.”

“I think it’s odd also, but I was tasked, and the deeper I get, and the more I learn, I think it will end with her dead, and her killer will take a huge hit if she doesn’t take herself out afterward. You and your partner joining me?”

“Have GPS map and info prepared. Should check into a hotel around Clarksburg sometime tomorrow morning. That good?”

“Great. You’re flexible and can be my long-arm team. See you then. Let me know what he says.”

“Ten-four.” She disconnected and gave Aponi a swat. “Are you done yet?”

“Yes, Sahib. All is ready. Getting a break from Rest Area Drama for a while will be good.”

“Cute. Now, pipe down a tad while I make a business call.”

“Hello. How may I help you?”

“First of all, is this Daniel Riley I’m speaking with?”

“Yes. You sound vaguely familiar.”

“I’m Sarah Johns, a former detective from Delaware. We met when your son got eaten by an alligator in the Rest Area.”

“Oh, yes. And you’ve saved my number? Why?”

“It took the phone company a few days to track it down. I’m looking for your wife, Betsy. Do you have her phone number or know where she is located?”

“No. She must have got a new one. The last time I tried to call, it was out of service. Why do you want her?”

“You’re so full of questions. I’m trying to find her to possibly save her life. Do you know where she is? Can you help me?”

“Don’t know or care where she is. Last time I saw her was in a Rest Area southwest of Saint Louis on Interstate 44 a few weeks ago. We met briefly, maybe two minutes by total puking accident. Save her life? Why? Some people are better off if they fade away, disappear into obscurity, or die early. Leave her alone and let fate deal with her. That’s what I’m doing.”

“You’re no longer married?”

“No. Got a better woman in my life. Are we done now?”

“Yes. You have a happy life, Mr. Riley. Write a book about it someday.”

She disconnected and looked sourly at Aponi’s neutral gaze. “Wow! That went well. Charming as a snake. Says we shouldn’t help Betsy. Just let her meet her fate and press on with life.”

“Maybe he knows best. Want to go home? Are we done yet?”

“That needs no answer. It’s too early for a sweat lodge, but I feel one coming. Let’s load up and hie hence for the hills of West Virginia. And while we’re driving, chat with your buddy, Chad, and see if he can find a physical address for Mr. Mean Daniel Riley. He’s just a wee bit

snotty for my gentle nature, and I think we'll meet again. Hopefully, his fate will end with handcuffs."

*

Sarah and Aponi checked in with Chester, and Sarah told him about her conversation with Daniel.

"Mr. Congenial, huh?"

"Right," said Aponi. "And I have a physical address of 122 Simmons Lane, Rantoul, Illinois. Long relocation after leaving Hartford and Betsy. That's where his phone bill goes. I've got someone working on a physical scan of the building at that location. I want to see if it's legit."

Sarah pondered all she knew of the case and turned in her chair to face Chester. "You like looking at life and case information and running the opposite way of the service, don't you?"

"That's a very pointed statement, but yes. I tell myself I have a twisted mind, which often produces amazing results."

"So do I. Love kindred spirits. Would you attack one twisted thing bugging me now that I've reviewed all the data? My logic ahead of time: Betsy's grieving, Daniel divorces her, she suddenly jumps into a lesbian relationship, Betsy goes from Daniel to Vanessa, and all is well. On the surface, it is, but is it? Daniel condemns Betsy but not the partner. Could you attack that and see if there's any connection between Daniel and Vanessa before the swap. It just rubs my fur the wrong way."

He grinned and slapped the desk. "Brilliant and dastardly. I'll do that. What do you want to do first since you're on board with me and basically consulting?"

"See the video and then investigate the farm where the flash disk was discovered."

"Sounds good." He wrote down the directions to the farm. "Just be careful of the video. It's powerful. It might make you want to get it on with your partner."

Sarah suppressed the evil side as she eyed Aponi, whose face was twisted in tight control to prevent an outburst. "Don't think so. That would be like robbing the cradle. Can you take us to the video room?"

"That was a strong video," said Sarah on the way to the farm. "Didn't it just make you want to find a hotel, pronto?"

"Matter of fact, it did. That woman and I use the term lightly, is evil."

"I disagree. Vanessa is clear and focused on what she wants and who she wants to do it with. Her performance was good. The extras were added by the editor. That whole package was well-planned and executed. And if they did that without Betsy's knowledge, there had to be a plan to coerce her to watch it once or twice to get her hooked. The guilty parties will reveal themselves, like the alligator, the evil lawn tractor, the ravens, and all else."

"You mean Vanessa wasn't paid to do that? She faked it and paid also?"

"You're pushing it girl."

"Not yet. It's only in your mind."

"She paid to have it made. I'm certain that will also jump out of this Screw Betsy Campaign."

“While you're yelling and driving, you might want to turn left. If not, you'll have to make a U-turn, then a right turn, to get us going the right way. Just calm down and get it right the first time, honey. I'm always here to help you.”

“You're always here to help me?” mocked Sarah. “Woe is me.”

“Right. Whoa, that is your option. Slow down and make the turn so I can't laugh at you.”

Sarah laughed and made the turn, but it pressed Aponi hard against the door. She enjoyed the long lane and pulled to a stop in the barnyard. Before she could open the door, a pickup truck suddenly stopped beside them with a cloud of dust, and the driver exited with a rifle in her hands.

“Turn around and leave! No one is here! It's private property, and trespassers will be prosecuted. Read the sign by the gate as you're leaving!”

Aponi looked at the rifle and then the woman's face. “Mighty nice rifle you have. Semi-automatic, decent range, excellent hunting weapon. Who or what are you hunting?”

“You. Leave! Now!”

“I hope your efforts in this matter are beneficial to you. We're FBI agents, working for Chester Moats on the Betsy Riley case. In my keen mind, you must be Mary Beth Gentry, who discovered this growing fiasco. So. I'm going to move slowly, get my ID from the glove box, and let you verify it. Then you'll put the rifle back in the truck and behave. If not, then I'll have to do something you don't like.”

“Like what?”

“Like beat you up and arrest you for interfering with a Federal Investigation. Does that suit you?”

Mary Beth lowered the rifle, turned, and put it in the cab of her truck on the rack. “I'll check the ID without threatening you. I'm the unfortunate caretaker here until Vanessa comes back. Sorry. I must watch my back when I'm here alone.”

Aponi handed her the ID wallet. “Why? If it's just you and animals, what do you fear?”

“Not sure any longer. I just don't like it. I used to love it. Vanessa would throw some great parties here. Then she brought Betsy. Then it grew mysterious. Then it grew into a prison. Now it's grown into Watch yourself. Finish your task and go. Just go!”

“You don't like that, do you?”

“No. Like I said, I used to love it. Now it sucks just driving through the gate. Don't know what settled on this little slice of heaven, but it doesn't like me, and I don't like it. So there.” She stuck out her tongue.

Aponi smiled. “What do you say, Sarah? Did you hear all that?”

“Sounds like a Rest Area special coming up, just a tad off course.” She handed her ID to Aponi. “Show her mine so we can trust each other. She's going to be beneficial here. Hey, Mary Beth.”

“Hey yourself, Sarah Johns. Come on out now. I'm cool with you.”

They soon stood beside her, and Aponi rubbed her arms. “This is not good, Sarah. She's 100% right.” She dropped to her knees and glanced at Sarah. “Watch me, girlfriend. There's too much strength not to take a stab at me.”

She rested a hand on the dirt, wiggled it a few times, and pressed it downward. “You hated him. Another woman hated him. A large man, a very mean and hateful man, hated him. Why was so much anger and hatred launched to destroy him? What did he do that was so human or so evil to cause you to wish him dead and yourselves rewarded?”

“What are you? I think you'd better leave and come back with local police. You're too weird for me.”

Sarah smiled at her distress and rubbed her arm. “Mary Beth, you were here, weren’t you? Answer the question if you can. It’s quite okay.”

“He was going to take Betsy Riley away from this farm. That was not right. She belonged here. She was a part of this place. It hurt and agitated us to where we might have killed him.”

“What stopped you?”

“She did. She told us she wanted to go or to die. She asked me to go to the barn to see her friend. It was a noose hanging beside the hayloft. We thought she was happy here. We thought she loved Vanessa so much. We were wrong. Now we see what a really twisted woman Vanessa was and how much she hurt Betsy in this prison farm. She’s gone. He took her away. Now I watch my back, because what wanted her to stay here, is still around and it’s not kind and loving. Call it spirit or whatever, I hate it, but can’t fight it. Therefore, I feed the animals and leave quickly.”

“Sarah, she’s correct. She’s not in tune 100%, but wow, such a correct statement. Tell me, Mary Beth, do you hate him now?”

“No. He called me. He’s very much in love with Betsy. He’s going to be at her side when she tells Vanessa goodbye. Bad move if you ask me, but that’s their problem.”

“Really? Is it only their problem? What else has been dissected and analyzed by the educated gurus? Huh, Mary Beth? What about the sentences and pleas that they can’t figure out? Huh, Mary Beth? You can wash your hands of it. You were here. You hated him. You found the flash drive. You sounded the alarm. And it’s their problem now? Only Betsy will get hurt in the matter? Really?”

“I know they’ve not figured it all out, yet. But it must be known that Betsy should never have left this farm without telling Vanessa.”

“Why? Because Vanessa had a Bill of Sale for Betsy? She was a piece of property like livestock. Would you like to live here like Betsy did?”

“No. We all liked Vanessa. Then when Betsy showed up, we nearly all stopped coming here. We couldn’t stand the place for too long a time. We all thought it was Betsy. Now we learned that it was Vanessa who screwed up herself, Betsy, and the kick ass farm. I mean it was a paradise, Aponi! She could have, people begged her to establish a Bed and Breakfast here, in a separate small farmhouse and she’d have made a fortune. But no. She had to enthrone her queen and keep her here by force.”

“What force?”

“Most likely the video on the flash disk she had and either hid or lost in the hayloft.”

“Okay. For now, I agree with most of what you said. Is the house open, like unlocked?”

“It is. Neighbors in this area rarely lock doors. I guess we will now.”

“Then is it okay, with your permission, letting us have access to her house without any heartburn from you? You’re worried about Betsy and Dillon. We’re worried about 50,000 people who will be in Dallas, Texas when they meet.”

“Since you put it that way, have at it. I’ll help you all I can. I’m just, well, kind of feeling put out because I’d allowed myself to be jerked around to ignore and overlook the truth of the matter. Sorry. I’m not upset with you. I’m upset with me. Help yourself to anything you want to do in the house. I will feed the livestock like I promised Betsy to do until Vanessa comes back. Think the livestock, and I will be very bonded before that happens. Go. The house is open.”

Aponi frowned at the retreating woman. “Think we have an ally if all else fails? I have questions about Chester Moats. He’s too by the book, and he wants to use us as a flexible long

arm? He wants to use us as a scapegoat if his task goes to hell and he can't find or stop Betsy from dying."

Sarah patted her shoulders and fluffed her hair. "Sweet Aponi, that's one of the things that I love about you. You get riled up over something spiritual and universal truths just spew from your delicious lips and nuclear grade promises are made and look out if it's not believed. Love it, girlfriend. I'm with you. He'll do everything by the book, like he's done forever, because when he does, he'll have to be successful. But this time he won't. The evil that's playing this game hasn't read the FBI manual. It will eat him alive and never lose any sleep over his whining, groaning, or begging. Until we usurp his power and authority, or a sudden angel in jeans, cowboy boots, and a yellow plaid shirt wants to work with us and does it first."

"We've got a live one, girl. Let's go. Start digging. Start feeling. Start snoops where other agents would gag and never go. Wahoo!" She smacked her butt and ran for the porch.

Sarah sifted through the paperwork on the office desk and found several interesting transactions. She laid them aside and continued. She had accumulated a 2-inch stack when Mary Beth stood at the door.

"Find something?"

"Yes. Did you know Vanessa made regular payments to Daniel Riley? That's Betsy's ex-husband. Why would she do that? Hush money? Bribes? Lot of possibilities lurking there. If they're divorced, why not live with the object of your affection, and let the former spouse drop dead or whatever?"

"I agree."

"But every month for a year, she sent him a check for \$850. Why? Does that arouse any mystery and conspiracy matters in your mind?"

"I see your point, but for what? What could Daniel have over Vanessa, Betsy's gala, rich bitch lover." She closed her eyes and waved her hands through the air. "Or was she? Was Betsy rich or wealthy?"

"No."

"Oh, hot damn, woman!" Mary Beth clasped her hands and sat hard on the floor. "I just had a wonderfully evil thought! Oh, a puke kind of evil thought! Can I share it?"

"Uh, yes. Spit it out, girlfriend!"

"Vanessa wants to hook up with Betsy. She knows her some way. Betsy's married, with a child, and won't give her the time of day. Vanessa knows both parties, Betsy, and Daniel. She also knows parties who she can use when she wishes and none of them know either of the Riley's. Whoa! No! They all know the Riley's. Good, so far?"

"Excellent. Press on."

"Vanessa wishes to connect with Betsy. She knows that if she gets there one time, all resistance will be moot, and she's got a veritable love slave without the physical bonding. She'll set her up on her isolated farm in West Virginia, condition her to the point of never wanting to leave, convince her she can't leave, coax her to stay at all costs, and she's got what she wants when she comes home. She also has what she wants in the rest of the world and her life. Oh, damn! This was a good idea at the start, but it turned into a surrender or suicide prison."

"Bingo! And Betsy still loves her. Even though she was cruel, even though she was extremely controlling, Vanessa is the only true love she's known for several years. Now Dillon is on the scene and when the two met, Betsy and he had a mutual meltdown and at the speed of light, plan an escape, and activate it. And now she's longing, yearning to be totally free, but she

wants to hear it from Vanessa and wants Vanessa to hear it from her lips.” She covered her eyes with a hand. “Oh, this is not good. Won’t matter what she says or does. When she even tries, Vanessa will strike like the snake she is, and Betsy is dead.”

“Damn and more damn. I might be able to get in touch Dillon, but should I? If he loves her and has an individual plan to save her, too much interference with him could blow it.”

“I like you, Mary Beth. Will you get me an envelope to keep all this one place for when the drama really starts.”

“Rock on. Like I bonded with you two. You’re making more sense in correcting the problem than anyone else in America.”

“Want the other thing I found? Jake Summers has a credit card tied to Vanessa’s account. He’s making purchases all over America right now.”

“Jake has a credit card from her. Weird.”

“What is his life? What does he do? How can he be gone so long?”

“He’s a motorcycle mechanic and he’s a good one. He has clients from all over the east coast. He has his own shop. Sets his own hours. He has a lot of money in his life from that profession. And he has a credit card from Vanessa? Weird.”

With what she had stored, Sarah and Aponi followed Mary Beth upstairs. Sarah stopped the other two from entering. “Aponi, and Mary Beth, closely scrutinize that bed and tell me what I see. Am I blind or stupid or should I seek a different occupation?”

They looked at each other, at the bed, and Mary Beth smacked her hands, and her fingers pointed with significant accusation. “Yes! You’re right! This is the bed she laid on when she made the video! Yes, I watched her, who couldn’t, but I remember the dresser and the edge of the barn painting. Why do that? Who was the woman since she did this to entrap Betsy?”

“Don’t know that, probably immaterial, but why here? So that when Betsy saw the bed, it would remove a load of anxiety. She’s about to be loved on Vanessa’s bed, by the woman who has told her it’s okay and she can’t wait to enjoy it. It would make her feel familiar, instill belonging, and induce less stress. Awesome.”

“Which side was Betsy’s?” asked Sarah.

Aponi huffed. “I can figure that out easily, as you already know. Think I should?”

“You’re in safe company. Go for it.”

Aponi pulled back one side of the sheets and lay down after smelling the pillow. “This is Betsy’s side. She loved it here. She felt safe here. She....” She jerked up and stared at bed between her legs.

“She made the noose here. Right where I’m sitting. She studied the methodology and fashioned it here, coil after coil. She tested it many times. Slid the coil above her knees and jerked it tight. Wanted no mishap when the real thing went down.” Her hands moved in the air, and she tilted her head back and let the imaginary knot hang on her left side. “She modeled it like this. She felt good and tested it on her legs frequently. She knew that there would be no escape when she took the step from the loft. She just wanted to play with it and love it. She lay with it coiled on Vanessa’s pillow some nights. She kissed it goodnight and good morning.”

She turned and put her feet on the floor. “Sarah, she hurt a lot. I’m hurting. I feel so sorry for her. She was a bundle of love and affection and crushed at every turn with only enough to keep her anticipating the next visit. Bear with me.”

She opened a drawer in the night stand and pulled out a portable DVD player with a USB Port. She turned it on and pulled out a plastic sandwich bag of thumb-sized flash disks with a tiny circle of yellow containing a date. She stuck one inside and hit play.

Vanessa's face appeared with a wink and a kiss. 'Hey, sweet thing. Here's loving' ya. Wish you could be right here with me. Oh, I miss you so much. Canada's over now and we're on the way to America. Four more months and then we'll have four months of paradise. Can't wait to get back to West Virginia and romp with you in the hayloft. What a beautiful combo of odors, hay, you, and me. Can't wait. Love ya, sweet thing. Take care of yourself and I'll have you in my arms soon enough.'

That video letter was followed by the closing comments and Vanessa threw the drumsticks and her blouse to start a fight in the audience.

"Wow! What a video letter. I can't wait for her to get here either," said Aponi.

Mary Beth stomped the floor. "I wonder? Think these should be analyzed?"

"Wouldn't hurt," said Sarah. "Where's her room?"

"Whose room?"

"Vanessa's room. She's a drummer, isn't she? Where's her practice room?"

"Oh that. Follow me. It's in the basement."

Mary Beth opened the door and turned on the lights. Drums and sets nearly filled the room with three different chairs. The walls held pictures of Ringo Starr from the Beatles, Sandy Nelson, some Native American Indians, and some Korean drummers in colorful clothes beating vertical drums.

Sarah sat in a chair in front of one set and spun it. "Comfortable. I guess if you're going to do this in a band, you most likely need it. Probably carry your own with the instruments. This is peaceful. This must be the one place that she can go and isolate herself from the world and be completely at peace. Too bad she didn't do that and leave other people alone."

She inspected the photography and the picture posters of single artists and bands.

"Awesome. If I were her, this is where I'd want to be when not on the road. This farm. This room. Betsy waits above me. Aponi, what am I missing? There's a huge hole here. Well, maybe not huge. It could be small. Everyone, wealthy, poor, mansion dweller, homeless, man, woman, child, has something to cling to, to show the world, one stranger, or one confused agent, this is me. This is my mansion. This is my commandeered shopping cart with everything I own. Where is the me that defines Vanessa Charles. It's not these drum sets. Not the posters. Where is she? She's not a journal person. She doesn't want a private or hidden trail. She wants maximum display of sexuality.

"Aponi, how about checking through her magazine collection for the hidden Vanessa that I want to see."

The collection rested on the bottom shelf that looked like a very old desk with three shelves above that with two small drawers. Aponi failed to follow Sarah's path and began pulling out stacks of magazines. They were all music, band, and drum magazines, mixed in with fashion and model, and shopping catalogs. Then she found two yearbooks sitting sideways against the wall, behind the main stack.

"Hey, girlfriend, I think this might be what you're talking about. Why hide these away?"

"She might have looked dorky when she was younger," said Mary Beth. "That's reason enough to hide or burn them. Add to that the stupid and sick things people really wrote in them. Like get a life, but in high school, who would even think ten years into the future. Just let it hang out there."

"Well, we'll soon find out."

Mary Beth sat beside Sarah and watched her flipping through one of them. “Whoa! Back up a page.”

Sarah flipped it back and a male face on the right page had a huge X drawn across his face. Along the outside edge of the page was scribbled, “Can’t trust anyone. Not family. Not friends. Not blood. Not bought. Suck ass! Why me? Why trust? All is shit!”

“Who experienced her wrath? That X looks recent, like as not years old as well as the writing on the margins,” said Mary Beth.

Sarah’s hand had already moved along the left side and stopped. “Well, well. Daniel Riley.”

“Betsy’s ex?”

“The same.”

“Wonder if she’s in here also?”

“Mary Beth, you’re getting into this, aren’t you?” Sarah asked along with a pat on her shoulder.

“I guess I am, since I really got into that video.” She looked at the shoulder where the hand had moved. She shifted her body until her left shoulder rested against Sarah.

Aponi noted the move and asked a question. “Mary Beth, in the barnyard I touched the ground, and I mentioned a man who was very hateful. Who was he? His name?”

“Oh, Jake Summers. He’s an asshole. I sometimes thought he was Betsy’s friend, but mostly I felt he was way too close and possibly intimate with Vanessa. I never caught them in the act, but there were many overly flirtatious jokes, glances, and innuendos between them at times. And once I mentioned that he had that just-got-laid look and all hell piled up on me, from Vanessa and from him. I was told no way and to mind my own business unless I would enjoy an ass whipping. Oh, touchy people. I dropped all mention after that.”

“Jake Summers? What was it?” Aponi frowned with wrinkled brow. “Yes! I remember it now. It was on Yahoo. There was a video on the Odd and Strange News about Jake. He was somewhere out west and encountered a man he knew and annoyed him until the man shoved a cue ball up his butt. Then to add to the pain, he drove him to the emergency room. The announcer laughed so hard he could barely speak. His bottom line was, ‘Jake, I’m sure you could have found someone in West Virginia to do that instead of driving half way across the continent.’ I wonder.”

“If he encountered Dillon? Yes. Quite possibly. I’ll send him a bouquet of flowers if he did that. Jake was what I said, a rude asshole that thought only of himself and keeping Betsy on the farm so Vanessa would be happy. Personally, I can’t believe she would ever let him between her legs, but there’s no accounting for some women’s tastes.”

“You got that right,” said Sarah and patted her shoulder again.

She turned her face and looked up at Sarah. “I’m not looking at you with upturned wondering eyes, but are you trying to annoy me? Or are you trying to annoy your partner who’s a partner in more than the FBI?”

“You should include both of you.” She drummed her fingers and then squeezed her. “I wanted a response; I got it and now I’m happy. I lived with a man for several years, until an alligator case dropped us into each other, and I gave up a lot for her. I’d not give her up for you. Or Jake. Or Vanessa. Just test people on occasion to know who I can trust if my life is on the line.” She squeezed her again and kissed her cheek. “You’re cool. But question? I’ve seen the Dunmore Road Band on television, and you wear the same outfit Maureen does. Is that heroine worship or what?”

“It’s or what. I’ve worn this outfit for years. I have different tops; this is just the one I chose today. Usually, it’s red or green. I just never made that connection. Haven’t studied Maureen Lannon that intensely to want to be like her. I’d rather be like me.”

“Cool. I’m very glad I got to meet and get to know you. Want to call Jake and see if his butt hurts?”

“Are you lovebirds done now? If you are, and care, I found him here. I didn’t find Betsy Riley, but I went through all the women, and I have one Betsy Anderson. Never met either one, so do you want to check and see if we have another bingo?”

Mary Beth moved to her chair arm and laid an arm around her shoulders as she looked at the much younger Betsy with a red heart drawn around her. “What’s that on the edge of the page in red?”

“You can’t ignore me forever. Sometime you’ll hear a clink, and your walls will shatter, and we’ll be together. You’re already mine.”

Sabob “Yes, that’s a younger model, but that’s her. And Vanessa loved and coveted her back then? What about Vanessa?”

Aponi turned to that page and Mary Beth picked her out. Here she is. Looked like a sex queen even back that far.”

“She was probably every queen that the school could produce.”

“All this is good, but that doesn’t help us find her and protect her,” said Sarah. “Wish I knew what’s planned on that end, with the band or with Dillon. I can’t believe they’re just waiting until it blows up before they do anything.”

Mary Beth snapped her fingers. “Coleman. I can call Coleman and see what’s going on. He was upset about the video as well as the rope. And if that fails, we can call Dillon. He left me a message. He obviously got my number from Betsy’s old phone, so I’ve got his stored, in case.”

Chapter 17

The FBI made the match of Vanessa, Betsy, Daniel, and Jake at the same high school in Hartford, Connecticut, and a team of agents worked at getting any information from living and available classmates about the foursome. They also located and arrested the man who pieced the video together with the mind and behavior modification messages. He was Henry Peterson, also from Hartford High School. He confessed to frequently following the band because he liked them and made many videos which he put on thumb flash disks for Vanessa to mail to Betsy.

Sarah was pleased that Daniel had accepted money from Vanessa for his part in getting Betsy to watch the video so Vanessa could have her as she wanted for years. Daniel also attached Jake Summers to be the only male in her circle to ever have sexual relations with Vanessa because he had a vasectomy. The only character she could not figure out was Dillon.

“This sucks, Chester. We have Henry in custody and the other parties located for pick up when the final act goes down. The only sore spot for me is this Dillon character. Who the hell is he?”

Fingers tapped her back and when she turned, Mary Beth dropped both hands to the top of her shoulders. “Look, I know you’re bothered, worried, annoyed, and frustrated. So, it’s time to help you focus with a small distraction.” She pulled her close and kissed her on the mouth.

Sarah blinked and frowned when she was moved back.

“You paying attention now? I’m trying to help, and you walk over me, around me, and ignore me, and that pisses me off. That’s okay, sweetheart. Go through as many facial expressions you wish to figure this out, but while you do, listen to my words. I have told you twice that I have his number programmed and all I must do is press a button and you can get whatever info you want from him. He has the same goal as you, keep Betsy alive, except he wants to spend eternity with her.”

“Um, okay. Why don’t you just do that.” She blushed and sucked in her lips as she turned to see Aponi shaking her head with a ‘why is my woman so dense,’ look.

“Hello, Dillon. I got your message, but I’ve been rather busy here working with the FBI. We have one guilty party in custody and more arrests pending. Only unclear and unfocused factors are you and Betsy. Would it distress you greatly to answer a few ulcer creating questions? Hmm?”

“I’m all for that. I’ve talked with Coleman and though I don’t like it, I like his alternative less than mine. I know we don’t have much time left and Betsy’s not showing any signs of changing her mind. Whatever they did to her has really disrupted her mentally and she’s an agitated mess looking for the only closure that will satisfy her need for freedom and then get on with life.”

“Adequate statement and understanding, Dillon. To help the FBI here who’s working overtime to help her, your last name?”

“Dillon Grant. You can find me easily enough. I’m not hiding. I refuse. I handle problems, mine, or someone else’s the same, head on and with overwhelming force the first time so I don’t have to repeat it. Next?”

“Do you know the possible outcome of them meeting?”

“I do. I’ve discussed it with Coleman. Their band security along with the Dallas host facility have shit enough bricks to rebuild the Great Wall of China twice. They want me to talk her out of it. I won’t even try. I know I could probably do that, but if I do, she’s dead. Whatever they did to

her will kill her. Surviving an attack from Vanessa? She can live with that. That's closure. She'll hurt. She'll live. She'll experience paradise."

"What's the big deal with that? Doesn't she want to live?"

"Of course, she does. And when her son was eaten by an alligator, she was punished and shut up because what she said was crazy and impossible! Everyone's telling her that now! Vanessa will kill you. You're her property. Go back to your prison in West Virginia and wait for your punishment and reconciliation. She made one noose to love her, to death. What will you do for her? Lock her in an institution to keep her away from ropes?"

"I've worried about that myself after I saw it."

"Ready for my suggestion?"

"Lay it on me, my man. I'm putting you on speaker phone now so we can all hear what you say. You cool with that?"

"Definitely."

She pressed the keys and laid the phone on Chester's desktop. "We're listening carefully here. It's Sarah Johns, Aponi, Chester Moats, and Sarah's liaison, Crystal Dameon, and me, Mary Beth Gentry. Proceed, Dillon."

"Hello, you all. I realize your concerns, but none of your book methods will work here. If anything interferes with this ill-fated meeting, Betsy loses. And I probably realize from history and experience, she's looked at like a wuss. She's far from that. She lives for the moment of closure from her extraordinary pain. She's lost, she's lost, she's lost, she's lost again. No matter what happens to her, she loses. You want her dead or alive?"

"Alive. We didn't know all that until right now."

"I rather figured that, because many things have floated to the surface and surprised me in this road trip from Honeysuckle Farm in West Virginia."

"So, your plan is to go onward and whatever happens, you can live with?"

"Yes, but I'm going to be by her side during the concert and the confrontation and I love her, and I insist that she survives. She might reach the point where she wishes she were dead, but that's all it will be, a wish that disappears and she keeps on living and loving me. I'm fighting to keep her alive until she can give me a few children. That's what I use to reel her back from the brink when she nears the point of no return and cries for her noose or flash disk. We straight on that? If I stop her, she's dead. Vanessa will curse up a storm, try to regain her and lose."

"Well, who could argue with that?"

"The FBI. Tell them my name. Let them check me out. Please do. I've nothing to hide. Then tell them to send a stipend, from their personal paycheck to my children on every birthday until they're 10-years-old. I'm by her side to win this pearl. She's mine, not theirs, and she's mine because she trusts me and wants to be at my side until we are no more in death."

"Wow! They heard and all of them gave thumbs up. God bless and good luck, Dillon Grant."

*

Coleman greeted his two favorite women and joined them without the usual joking.

"Hey, Cole. What's going on? Anything good or positive?"

"Got to be truthful. The FBI would love to shut the operation down, but they can't figure out how to stop the meeting anyway. And after their last conference call with this Dillon guy, he pretty much told them that he's following her goal to be free after talking with her. They,

whoever they are, have really done a number on Betsy's mind and nearly everybody agrees on this: if you stop her, if you stop the show, she'll suicide. She told Dillon that. She's told a few other people that. If she can't walk away from Vanessa and be clear, she'll die and damn the consequences."

"Fuck!" said Maureen.

"Yes," said Coleman.

"Can I have an input and a say in this matter since this band is my life and livelihood also?" asked Patrice.

"Go for it, honey," said Maureen.

"I've listened to all the conversations on and about this matter of Vanessa Charles. And I might join the crowd to be condemned if something goes wrong, but I say we follow Dillon's plan. We increase security on Vanessa. We pray for a miracle, or maybe more, and we let this drama play out, on our stage, on our last show of this awesome mega tour. I've contemplated ten different outcomes for this unprecedented event of lesbian lovers melting down on our final set of raising Dunmore Road to ecstasy heights. I insist, and I'll only accept the one that will make Maureen Lannon and the Dunmore Road Band the most humane, benevolent, and saint-worthy of any musical band, anytime in history and the present. Got that, Maureen?"

Maureen patted her cheeks. "I got that, big sister. And no matter what happens, before we release the audience, we come out. Please? Don't say no. It won't matter. They'll love it all."

"Yes, ham. Give it your all. Entertain and keep building the fan base until it blows you away."

*

"Hey, my sexy man, my love, my all. What's wrong? You seem tense. You seem aloof. You get too many private phone calls that I don't need to know about. You know I'm not stupid. They're about me and Dallas. People all over the world are worried about poor little Betsy and not about their families and their lives."

"It's more than that, sweetie."

She assumed a fighting stance and raised her voice. "No, it's not! If I live and walk away, goody, goody, gumdrops for me. If I leave the concert in a black body bag, then goody, goody, gumdrops for me. I can't lose either way. Either way, it releases me from a life of slavery. I won. So, it is that simple. However, I do know that some parties in this event will do what they can to complicate matters. And in the end, I'll win either way. I must."

"You keep forgetting to mention me in any situation you want to share with me! Do you understand I love you and want you to live for many years!"

"I'm sorry it's so difficult to love me freely. I'll do what I can to help you soon. But before that painful event happens, there's a lot of happiness and great news for us to share and enjoy. Trust me, my man. We're going to be okay in this mix and much greater than you can imagine."

*

Chester grew more excited with each passing day and hour. The countdown began for Dallas, and he silently marshaled his forces and his long-arm-slap-down team and sat with Crystal, a terse and tense woman who decried all whining and crying agents for any reason.

"Chester, has your wife ever been pregnant?"

“Twice, and each delivery was rough. Why?”

“Because you’re acting like a pregnant father right now. You’ve done all you can do up until now. All you can do now is pray and have faith in a hotshot crew that is sorely lacking in the American Government. Betsy might die. That’s a risk, and it’s unavoidable. But I’m counting on Dillon’s love to have a great positive impact on that. They have both lost enough. It’s time for them to start winning and winning big.”

“Sorry. I’m not taking or handling this well. This craziness never happens here or on my watch. Much of my daily affairs are routine and handled by my low-level staff. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to say sorry or apologize for doing what’s right and worrying about your people and your target to save in this case. You’re okay. You’ve just been too programmed to overreact and look stupid and be thrown to the wolves because they like goat meat. Chill. I got your back.”

“Alright. I’ll settle down now. Will you explain not apprehending Jake Summers? That’s the goofiest damned move that I’ve ever heard.”

“Elementary, my good Chester. We need him to be in Dallas to impress his Vanessa one more time. Without that final act in his free life, a lot will not come undone, and we’ll look like dorks, again. I don’t want that. He knows what we want to happen. To save face, he can’t let that happen. He wants Betsy dead, so he can escape prison time. It won’t work this time. Dillon and I have set him up by leaving him alone. Henry will burn. So will a lot of others. Jake will hang himself, but he’ll shit a ton of bricks before he can do that.”

“How can you be so nonplussed about it?”

“How can you be so uptight about it? What can you do? Roll into Dallas Stadium with an armored caravan and start shooting when you don’t know who to shoot or shoot at? Hello Chester. You’ve done a profile on Dillon. He’s a one-man Army, a one-man Marines, a one-man French Foreign Legion, a one-man Navy Seal Team. And you can do better with extreme numbers? You need counseling if you consider that truthful. Look around you. How many people from the outside are with you and assisting you? Wake up, my man!”

“Okay! I’ll just sit down and shut my mouth now. Crystal, or Mary Beth, which, of you wish to assume command until we have closure?”

Crystal frowned. “What? Why? You don’t want to do your job?”

“I do, but I’m tired and I’d rather relax and observe instead of calling the shots this once.”

“But I’m not even a member of the FBI,” said Mary Beth.

“Neither is Dillon, but many are counting on him ending this nightmare, accomplishing all we want, and keeping Betsy alive.”

Crystal snapped her fingers. “We’ll do it this way then. Mary Beth, you’re up and on top of everything so far, and you understand the methodology of this operation. You proceed as you will. I’ll only interfere if I can see that what you’re about to do is a major screw-up. Is that fair?”

“You’re asking me? I guess that’s agreeable. Just feel like a virus on a slide right now. I don’t thrive being the focus.”

The phone rang, and Chester’s secretary glanced at him and transferred the call to Mary Beth.

“So quickly? Hello? Who’s speaking? Sarah! Yes, it’s me. Still dizzy from being chosen to be in charge with Crystal backing me up. Yes. Did Jake board a flight to Dallas? Wonderful. Are you and Aponi on the same flight? Oh, grandition thinking. No, I’ve not contacted Coleman. I’ll do that after you deplane at the airport. Just call me. Don’t want to have too much out of the ordinary until Vanessa gets down and dirty. Thanks. Love you back.”

*

“Feeling better?” Dillon asked.

“Yes, and thanks for your love. Now for a pleasant and intimate surprise. Ready?”

“With that impish smile I’m not sure I want to answer without more information and a security guard.”

She giggled and stood. “Oh, get over it and let’s go to the bathroom, together. I hear that something magical happens when a boy and girl do that here in Lubbock, Texas. Come on.”

She took his hand, led him through the door and closed it behind them.

She pointed to the tub. “Have a seat on the edge. The commode is mine.” She unzipped her shorts and pulled an EPT tester from a pocket on their way down. “Know what this is?”

He nodded. “I...”

“Hush. No, I told you so or anything negative.”

She followed the procedure for the test and held it in her hands as she watched the LED display flip through the nonsense and prayed for a positive.

“You’ve missed about two periods, haven’t you?”

“Yes. But exactly two. First one I was eh. All the stress that had built to the destruction point. Then the second one hid and my mind wouldn’t let it go until I checked, and now I have, and a green + sign says possibility is excellent. Congratulations, Dillon. Thanks so much, my man! I love it!”

She leaned sideways until he caught her and cradled her for a kiss.

“You’re welcome. I know you wanted that, but it could have waited until after Dallas. Now I got more to worry about.”

“No, you have only one thing to worry about, your child inside me. Everything else is a moot point. You will ensure that he/she is born. No other options.”

“Okay, angelic dreamer, beautiful mistress, soon to be mamma. We’ll be happy now and rejoice in wild abandon after Dallas is behind us.”

“Thanks for not being angry. Now, remain where you are. I’m not done yet.”

She flushed and adjusted her clothes and knelt on the floor before him. “I’m happy about the baby, possibly more than you can know. However, I’ve sort of lied about a couple of things and I need to unburden myself before we leave this room.”

She twisted her back and groaned before sitting on her heels. “My partner, Vanessa, is not a roadie. She’s a member of Dunmore Road. She’s the wild, sexual expressionist, wonderfully adored, drummer. She’s Vanessa Charles.”

“Wow, you sure picked a gorgeous woman for your lesbian fling!”

“I didn’t pick her. She picked me. Something happened that caused that. Don’t know what. Never considered that before I saw something about her and then I could not, could NOT keep myself away from her. There’s like many blank spots and weird voices and nightmares that wake me, like you’ve experienced. But all that aside, when we’re together, I love her sincerely. No matter how angry or frustrated I am over her long absence and her stupid antics, her sight, her scent, her kiss, her touch will melt it away before I can ever open my mouth.”

She grabbed him tightly. “I’m afraid, Dillon! Don’t understand the power she has over me, but since I heard your voice, all that’s in me wants to fight and leave her. That’s why I must see her face-to-face. I want to feel the security of the bridle in my hand and put some more welts on her.”

“That was difficult for you to get out, but you feel better, don’t you?”

“Oh, hell yeah.”

“You worried about the meeting?”

“Yes. But like I said in West Virginia, so long as you’re with me, I’ll be okay in the mix, any mix really. Hey, why that smile? Wait, did you know?”

“Some of it I learned in bits and pieces. A few things have happened that I’ve not shared with you. Like I talked to my other girlfriend, Cindy, and together we violated your trust. She turned on your cell phone and gave me a couple of frequent called/received numbers and I talked with two of them, Coleman, and Mary Beth.

“Mary Beth found a flash disk in the hayloft of the barn, beside your friend and turned it over to the FBI, after investigation. She and one other woman wanted to track down Vanessa and get it on with her. Don’t know how she tricked you to watch it, but that’s what started your addiction to her.”

“Which is still in me. You did all that?”

“For you. That nightmare and the lesbian move told me it was more than just a bad dream, so I went where I had to go. They programmed you. It wasn’t only Vanessa. There are other players, and the FBI is analyzing videos and lining up some major and minor players. And many agents are waiting to pounce and arrest them once Dallas is arranged. You still got the tickets?”

She blushed and rolled her eyes. “Smart ass. You know all that and talked with Coleman, you know I don’t. All I must do is show up. Security knows me and I have access and you’re in like flint because you’re with me. Maureen loves my songs. Coleman and many of the others love me and keep inviting me to visit. They pamper me when I do so. It’s a lovely family. So, you’ve been a busy little man in the background, you wonderful Knight Templar. She’ll hurt me if she can. I don’t think physically, but if she tries any of her what? Mind control over me, just hold me up and hold onto me, and I’ll be good to go.

Chapter 18

Jake deplaned and took a taxi to the Marshall Tucker Stadium and located the one Security Man he knew who would let him in for a \$100 bill. He worked his way into the bleachers and in the top row where there was one empty seat on the north side. Ignoring the other attendees, he prepared his high-power binoculars and began a slow but steady scan of all the bleachers to the east, the west, and the south. He received a reward when he located Betsy and beside her the man he hated and wanted dead.

“Okay. Don’t know how I’ll take you out just yet, but I will.” He checked the song list and recalled four songs in a row that would concentrate on the fiddle player and not require Vanessa. He sent her a text message. “South bleachers. Section 21, row 34, seats 1 and 2. Your property is there, with a man.”

*

“This is great, regardless of the situation,” Dillon said and kissed her cheek. “Thanks for all your tiny unspoken power.”

“You’re welcome.”

Vanessa slipped to the step beside Betsy and leaned into her. “Hey, sweet thing. You look good. You smell good, but you’re a long way from the farm.”

“Huh?” Betsy had never heard or felt the woman approach.

“Guess you need a refresher to enhance your dwindling memory. Glad to help you.”

She had her right arm twisted to the left as far as possible and she gripped the smallest drumstick she had. She swung it hard and stabbed Betsy in her left side.

Betsy had started to stand when the drumstick hit her back and she imagined being hit with a baseball bat from a powerful hitter. She stumbled into Dillon and started tilting toward the people in front of her.

Dillon realized what had happened and grabbed her with one arm and Vanessa’s arm with the other. He held both and nudged the man in front of them with a foot. “Yo! Help me here! Lay this woman on the bleachers and call 911!”

The man paled and enlisted people on both sides to help him do that.

As soon as Betsy was clear of his arm, he turned to the struggling Vanessa and broke her arm.

“OH, fuck, fuck, fuck!” she screamed and stumbled to the aisle as she rolled down seven steps.

Maureen was busy entertaining and high on adrenaline and love when she reviewed the audience as was her habit. The fans swaying, singing with her, and clapping added to the rush.

She slowed her eyes on a section where there was a great deal of shifting and people standing up with covered mouths and unheard screams. She paused and stopped the band with her internal signals.

“Patrice! What the hell is going on up there?”

“Trying to focus a camera already. Hold on. Oh, shit! Get off the stage and get up there! This is not good!”

Maureen scanned her band members who stared at her blankly, all but Vanessa, whose set was clearly empty. Her mind leapt to reality. “Patrice! Is that Betsy?”

“Yes. And Vanessa. Both are down and both hurt.”

“Shit! Security, I’m leaving the stage. Help me.”

“Don’t do it, Miss Lannon. Let us handle it. Please stay on the stage.”

“No way I’m staying on the stage when one of my band members is involved. Just deal with it. I’ll be okay. Has there been 911 calls?”

“Yes, ma’am, six so far, but I strongly advise you to remain on the stage. You never know what might happen there.”

“Thanks for your advice. Band, stand down until you’re told otherwise.”

She hurried to the edge of the stage, gauged the distance over and down and jumped. She landed on her feet, and she saw one security agent rushing to catch up with her. She ignored him and walked to the steps and started up where people had collected to look upward at the event in the stands, not the now silent stage.

“Excuse me! Pardon me! Please clear the steps and then keep them clear for the medical teams! Come on, fans! People have been hurt and need help, not more witnesses or further accidents. Clear the steps and keep them clear! Thank you.”

She strode easier as the path cleared when fans knew who walked in their midst. She reached and stepped over Vanessa and knelt beside Betsy, who lay on her right side with blood dripping from the tip of the drumstick on the front. She winced at that, and the blood mixed with vomit, the drooling and trembling in her hands and feet. She knelt beside her and rubbed her head and shoulders like a child.

“Hey, sweet thing. You’re Betsy Riley, aren’t you? I’ve seen you before.”

“Yes! God, I hurt! I think I’m dying! All I do is love. Why?”

“Hey, you’re not dying. Don’t talk like that. I love you. I love your beautiful mind and the love and the thought processes that create such lovely and harmonious songs. You can’t die on me. I want some more from you so the competition can wail and gnash their teeth over their inevitable demise because you’re alive and in my employment. Okay? Will you do that for me?”

“Yes. I hurt.”

“I know. I wish I could do something for the pain, but teams are on the way to help and save you. Just do what you can to stay alive. I’m serious about the songs. You’re the greatest. I love you.”

“Thanks. What happened to Vanessa? Is she okay?”

Dillon answered. “She’s alive. She has a broken arm, and she doesn’t like it, but she’s going to be okay.”

“Good. I don’t hate her. I just feel so abused for no reason. All she had to do was love freely and we’d have been okay, like we are. Thanks for not killing her.”

Maureen patted her again. “Hey, Betsy, you’re my employee now. Remember?”

“What?”

“You’re my employee now. Are you? I’ve hired you to write songs for me and you said okay.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Good. I’ll take care of you, and I’ll do all I can to help you stay alive and in love with Dillon. You’re pregnant, aren’t you?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I’ve been around and had in-your-face contact with pregnant women in the past. There’s a nearly angelic aura surrounding you. You’re early, but you’re there. Relax as much as you can

and think only of healing, of holding your baby, of making money from selling number one hits to me, from your marvelous mind. Okay?”

“Yes. Sorry for the disruption. Didn’t know it would happen that way.”

“Never mind. I’ll survive it and come out smelling like the Queen’s Flower Gardens. Got to go now. I have many things that must be done, for you and for other folks. Rest assured I’ll see you again. I insist. Don’t make me chase you down in death. You’ll really hurt then. Okay?”

“You got it, boss.” She screamed and vomited again as Maureen moved and Dillon took her place.

Maureen moved to Vanessa. “Does it hurt?”

“Of course, it does! Why you got to be so evil?”

She paused and glanced at a relatively silent audience surrounding her before answering.

“Because I am the mother figure to the band. I try to teach my children well and have them grow in love and wonderment. I try to teach them to love powerfully and with eternal commitment in mind. But sometimes it just doesn’t work. It hasn’t worked for you. You refuse to listen to or accept any help with your personal problems that won’t stop destroying you until you deal with them or die. So, as a good mother, you’re fired. When you’re out of the hospital, you’ll have the severance package already in your bank. You’re done. I refuse to help you when you don’t want to be helped in any matter to save yourself or the band. Good luck. I’d suggest never using me as a reference. I’ll have to be brutally honest, and you’ll be so fucked from my letter, even the homeless will reject you. Goodbye from your loving family that you rejected.”

She stood and keyed her internal microphone. “Charles Weston from Security! I saw you coming to help me. Where are you?”

“On the way up the steps, ma’am. I’m close.”

“Good. I want you in the ambulance with Betsy. When all the questions are finished, you make sure that I’m the responsible party for all payments after insurance. Got that?”

“Yes, ma’am.” A moment later he stood beside her and frowned at Vanessa. “How about her?”

“Same goes for her. She was my employee when she got hurt. I’m responsible there also. Won’t leave any nooses to hang me later.”

“Yes, ma’am. It will be done.”

She gazed at the crowd of silent people. “What? What is it with you? Have you never seen me before? Am I an alien? Return to your seats, please.”

Heads shook and the steps cleared before her all the way down to the stage area. People returned to their seats and took pictures of her as she descended to return to the stage.

“Coleman! I’m tired of this mystery. I need your miracle. Patrice! Sorry that this is going to upset you, but this stupidity must end, and it must end with me.”

“Know pretty much what you’re going to do, so do it and I’ll fix all that’s necessary. Just don’t go too hog-wild. You promise too much, and you’ll be looking for work next week. Hear me?”

“Baby sister hears you. Sorry it took this to get my dander up!”

“I’m not sorry in the least. I’m proud of you. Just put the brakes on before you start talking and dealing. Love you.”

Coleman cut in after the last comment. “When you’re on stage, I’ll give you all you want and probably will orgasm over before we’re finished here.”

“Oh, gag! Just fired Vanessa, the sensual overloaded wench, and you want me to have a public orgasm? I mean public orgasm. Just tell me, dammit!”

“Are you on stage? I don’t see your smiling face or butt.”

“No comment. I’m on the way.”

“Did Betsy make it?”

“She’s a hurting mess, but I think she’ll live. Vanessa has a broken arm and if she’s not in custody after she leaves the hospital, I’ll handle it myself and order a coroner for her.”

“Good, killer. When you’re on stage and have dealt with the audience like I know you will, then talk to me and I’ll tickle your fancy. Trust me, superstar. You’ve not hit your shining brilliance yet. Hope to live to see it when you do. I can see the headlines now. ‘Superstar Celtic Band Leader, Maureen Lannon went nova last night at the close of her 100th concert. 50,000 fans witnessed the event live. Many swear that she was sucked into the air to join Elvis in his paradise mega spaceship, and they immediately launched themselves into another musical galaxy.’”

“You seriously trying to make me gag, aren’t you?” She reached the stage with many handshakes, compliments, requests for songs, for autographs and security assisted her to put her back into her environment. The first person she saw was Patrice, waiting for her.

“How’s it going? I heard about Vanessa and Betsy.”

“Betsy’s a mess. Drumstick used as a knife to stab her in the back. I think she’ll make it, but she’ll be hurting for a long time.”

“I heard who’ll pay for the medical expenses. Really?”

“Yes, big sister. I won’t have fingers pointing to the bitch who can’t defend herself.”

“Adequate. I still love you. Just wanting to keep a running tally of what I need to shuffle and/or rearrange our lives and the band’s lives to compensate for your love. Just chill and do it.”

“Roger that. Stay put for now.” She reached her side and looked to the stand where she saw Betsy being moved downward to the staging area. She stood immobile until Vanessa was on the way also and then she addressed the audience.

“Hello, Dunmore Road Fans. Sorry for the unexpected disruption of our show. Some things are simply beyond our control. However, since I formed this band ten years ago, I have never expected you to pay for something less than promised. So, now that the accidents have been cleared, I must say this: the show will go on until it’s finished. I realize that some of you have traveled a long distance to see us. And you’re tired and wanting to be home. Dunmore Road will finish this show! If you can’t hang with us through this emergency, then leave your name and contact information with the exit staff and you’ll receive 50% discount tickets to any event on our next tour. If you stay, you’ll see our final events, because we will finish our show.”

She paused and Patrice stood beside her. She raised two fingers of her right hand before her eyes. “Are we here, fans! Will you hang with us or abandon us in our hour of need?”

The applause and roar gave her the answer.

“Before we continue after a short break, I never considered doing this at all. Not until you all fell in love with me and kept asking questions and wondering about why Patrice and I are so close. Like, are we? Like, are they?”

She put an arm around Patrice’s shoulders, hugged her and kissed her cheek. “Well, in a moment you’ll no longer wonder.”

A huge hush fell over the audience and Maureen shook her head. With a sweep of her hand in their direction, she said, “Patrice, is that the sound of 50,000 fans being silent?”

“Yes. Quite an amazing noise.”

“Fans, this is Patrice Westfield. You may or may not know that her husband died in Desert Storm conflict. He gave his life for freedom, and she chose to keep the last name. I’m Maureen

Lannon. And we're coming out, right here, right now. We're tight. We're close. We're inseparable. We're sisters. We have been all our lives. We never said anything about it because we didn't know that there was such a huge interest in our personal lives. But she's my older sister. I'm the baby of the family."

She had to stop because she cried. "She's had my back ever since I was born. In my mind, she's the greatest woman, sister, and friend anyone could have. I love you, Patrice. Sorry. Didn't think I'd get emotional about it."

As Patrice dried her face the audience went crazy, and cameras flashed like fireworks in the sky.

She cleared her nose and waved them to silence again. "Coleman, I really need that miracle now. Please? Stop the drama and conceit. We need to finish this concert."

"Sure thing, honey. You're the greatest, and you deserve the greatest. Turn to your left and motion for Amber Knight to join you. Ask her to fill in for Vanessa and enjoy the reaction. She'll piss herself, do cartwheels, and give you a stellar performance that will secure her position with the band as drummer supreme."

"She'll do all that. How?"

"She idolized Vanessa. Told her where to get off when Vanessa tried to make it sexual. But she's studied with Vanessa and learned well. She auditioned for Erin's Diamonds, and she came in second. Give her and yourself the chance to fall in love and enthrall the audience. They'll forget Vanessa after tonight."

"Okay. I'll trust you on that and deduct from your next check if you're wrong."

She turned to her backup vocalists and beckoned to Amber. "Come front and center, now."

Amber stood before her and waited.

"You know I fired Vanessa tonight?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please don't fire me. I've done nothing wrong. Whatever she did, I wasn't a part of it."

"This has nothing to do with you being fired. I want to finish this concert for the fans who stayed. Will you fill in for her so we can do what we're paid to do?"

She pointed to herself. "Me? You want me to be the drummer? Are you serious, or are you just joking?"

"I'm serious. Can you, will you do that for me?"

She shouted and jumped up and down, embraced Maureen until she stopped her.

"Fans, this is Amber Knight. She's going to replace Vanessa. When we're finished, let her know if she's good and whether we should make her permanent." She released Amber. "Go on now."

She started to jog, shouted, did a few cartwheels, and settled into the chair surrounded by drums and symbols. She picked up a set of sticks and watched Maureen's amused countenance.

"Well, let's get on with it. I'm dying over here. Wanna play." She did a drum roll and smacked the big symbol set. "Wahoo! Come on!"

*

Vanessa lay in a hospital bed, her arm set and cast on to above the elbow, bandages on a few cuts she got from rolling on the stairs, and being held in observance due to possible concussion, dreading the morning when the FBI would arrest her when released, and watched the televised and announced last show for the current world tour of Dunmore Road. She watched Amber pick

up where she left off and never miss a beat or rhythm. She cried when Maureen called the exuberant woman to stand before her and watched the crowd go wild over her performance.

She copied Maureen's moves and went further to lie prostrate and put her forehead on the stage floor. Then she did cartwheels and blew them kisses as "Amber!" screams drowned out the announcer.

A floor above her, the nurses finally rolled Betsy into a private room in the ICU to recover. The doctors told Dillon the baby was okay, and she would be fine after physical therapy and time to heal completely. The tip was blunt, not sharp, and only skimmed her kidney as it separated muscles and intestines on its path. Overall, she was lucky and only needed one pint of blood until the vein damage was repaired.

Jake lay on a similar bed three doors from her, with 27 stitches in his face and forehead from Dillon's lightning fists. He attempted to cause Betsy more pain while the EMT specialists tried to load her into an ambulance. He screamed and slapped her and called her a stupid bitch. He stumbled across work barriers and repeatedly ran into a chain link fence until he lost consciousness. He tried to tell the FBI agents that Dillon did it, but the agents and workers at the site swore that Dillon never touched the man. He did all the damage to himself, trying to escape an invisible assailant until they tased him to stop his self-torture.

*

Betsy woke and though she was healthy enough to leave, the hospital physicians kept her one night longer.

"Dillon, we'll have to find a spot to stay for a while, until I can manage to take care of myself."

"Well, we could mosey on back to Troy, New York, and you can stay with me until we decide where we want to settle down."

"Settle down? That sounds serious. Women do have babies and raise them alone."

"You're not funny, and I didn't hear that. I already told you I don't want my child weirded out."

"Okay. Loving admonishment stored with others. Could I suggest a plan? Why don't we return to Honeysuckle Farm, where this all started in Lost Creek, West Virginia? The livestock, small as it is, needs attention, and it's truly peaceful there. And Vanessa won't be coming home for quite a spell. And I have the keys, and she really won't mind. Say what?"

"Are you sure that wouldn't bother you? A lot of bad happened to you there."

"She's gone and I have my mainspring named Dillon to keep me wound up, calm, and on top of the world, all the time. The first thing we'd do is cut down the rope, empty the house of anything that was used to hurt me and end it on a bonfire. Flash disks, everything."

"Last time that Mary Beth talked with me she told me all the damning evidence has been removed by the FBI. And Mary Beth cut and burned the noose after the FBI cleared her to do that."

"Good for them. Is Vanessa here?"

"She is. Don't worry about her anymore."

"Bring her to me. Or is she hurt too bad?"

"She's mobile. She got a broken arm, gratis of me, and she got a few cuts on her legs when she fell on the stairs, but you need to forget about her."

“Look, darling Dillon, you need to stop giving me instructions on how to live and what to do and who I can talk to or a no-no list of who I can’t. She’s done. I was out of it last night, but I’ve heard about the concert on the news. That had to put a final crush on her already horrid dilemma. Just bring her and let me do what I must to help me, Betsy, get over all my problems.”

At that moment, Maureen entered the room. “Hey, Betsy! Great to see you looking better. Is the baby, okay?”

“Yes. Didn’t come close to the womb. Heard you’re paying for my bills? You don’t have to.”

“I know, but that’s the way I am and the way I love. I’m just happy you’re alive. Patrice and I have been talking about this for a long time. I know I’m adored all over the world, but I’ve chosen to remain secretive about my private life. And now I’m going to change that. During the pain at the Marshall Tucker Stadium last night, while we recovered for a finish, I had security, and the stadium staff distribute note cards and collected 50,000 names, addresses, and phone numbers. So, here’s my plan. You ready?”

“Me. This is the first time I’ve been to any of your concerts. Any concert really. What about me?”

“When you and Dillon decide to marry, I want to open my home for you. We’ll have film crews on hand for the fan base to see where I spend my quiet hours between albums and tours. I want to host the wedding, to include airfare both ways for you and Dillon and you’ll stay with me at my home until it’s over. And 100 of the attendees in Dallas will be guests in Dunmore, Ireland, close to where I live. And 1000 of them will receive a copy of my next CD. And you will receive a signed set of all the CD’s I’ve made so far and ever will make. Some of your songs are on there and from now on, you’ll get a cut of the royalties for any of your songs. That’s what it’s got to do with you. What do you think of that plan, Betsy Riley?”

“I say yes, and I wish I could do cartwheels like Amber did last night. It looked like she was going to faint from hyperactivity. Wow, what a show!”

“She did faint when we finally got her off stage. The rush overwhelmed her. She got some treatment from an EMT team and went to bed around three.”

“Great. Will you go with Dillon and bring Vanessa here? I want to see her. Just tell the agent to get over it. I want to see her.”

Maureen touched her face and stood straight. “Dillon. Let’s go.”

“I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to like it. You just need to respect her wishes and let it happen. You brought her here from a prison farm and now she can’t see Vanessa? It will be okay.”

Soon the door opened, and Vanessa entered with Maureen, Dillon, and Sarah Johns.

Betsy hurt from looking at her. “Sarah, take the cuffs off. That’s stupid for someone with a broken arm.”

“She tried to kill you.”

“Get over it. I got over an alligator snacking my son. You can get over this. She’s not going to run, to attack anyone, to cause more trouble for herself. Right, Vanessa?”

Vanessa stared bleakly at Betsy’s hands and barely whispered. “No. I’m done.”

Sarah shook her head, but she removed the cuffs.

Betsy held up a hand and Vanessa moved to the bed to hold it.

“I’m sorry, Betsy. Most of what I did was stupid at best. I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Hey, I’ve forgiven you already. I’m not going to add more pain to what you feel now. That’s not Betsy’s way. You take care of yourself, heal, and know that I hold no anger or ill will toward you. And when you’re free, you’ll have one friend if you still want that. Just don’t abuse the next person you love. It would have worked forever with me if you hadn’t ignored me and left me alone for so many long months at a time. Hope your next love lasts.”

She asked Sarah for a pen and signed her name on the cast with a set of hearts, nearly touching. She printed “ALMOST” beneath them.

“When I can have freedom again, I’m going back where I started, to Jake. He’s probably where I should have stayed, and I’d not be in this mess right now. Don’t know what possessed me to have you intimately in my life. And Jake felt obligated to help me. He got Daniel to help him with his plan and it went wild after that. I’m sorry I hurt you the way I did. I won’t anymore.” She kissed her goodbye and left with Sarah.

“Still think I’m wrong?”

“No. I overreacted and opened my mouth without thinking properly. You were right.”

His phone rang and he smiled when he answered. “Hey, girlfriend. What’s up? Jack Express Contractors are looking for Betsy? Of course, I know. She’s right here with me. Talk with her? Here she is.”

“Hey, girlfriend. How are you?”

“I’m fine and dandy, but someone from Jack Express Contracting keeps calling your old phone. He wants to know when he can work to earn the money you paid him.”

“Oh, forgot that in my present peril. I got hurt here in Dallas and I just finished planning my wedding. Anyway, call him and tell him to go to Just So Signs and collect the two signs they have for him. One goes to replace the sign outside your development. It will now read, ‘Enter with love and leave with more.’ The other one says ‘Government lives here. Enter at your own risk.’ That one goes where John dropped Nellie’s car, in front of the water fountain and twelve feet from the edge of the road.”

“Why that specific? What nasty are you pulling here?”

“Nothing. The specific measurement is where that building was built and the deed, not recorded properly when they condemned the property to take it from the Brand family. That strip of road between the State property and the edge of the highway is private property, not State. It now belongs to Betsy Riley and is properly recorded. Tell him to see Susan Ward in the Right-Of-Way department and she has all the necessary permits and prepaid fees to put it up. It’s legal. And please tell him to have the news media available when he does that. Long distance slap down!”

“You’re just plain evil, but I truly love you. You take care and heal. Can I come to your wedding? Will you hook up your girlfriend?”

“Yes, when we’re married, you’ll be there as my bride’s maid. Just stay out of trouble until then. Love you too.” She disconnected with a sigh.

“You know, I can’t recall anywhere along this road trip where I proposed to you? Why do all these people keep talking about it? Is it a delusion disease? If I don’t propose and you don’t say yes, think of all Maureen’s fans who will be disappointed. And it will be all because of you, and you can’t deny it. I won’t let you.”

She scowled and blew him a kiss. “Won’t work, Dillon. You might confuse me a tad, every now and then, but my song writing mind snaps back swifter than you can run away. I proposed to you during your third wakeup call, and you readily agreed. No. No. Don’t even try to wiggle out of it like happens sometimes. I proposed. You said yes. You told me to set the date and where.

Maureen did the where today. The date is two months after delivery. Case closed. Where's my ring?"

He took one from his pocket. "Do you mean this one?"

"When did you do that?"

"When I had a break from you while you were on a crusade to save Nellie. This is very unusual, you know? You proposed and I said yes, and then you waited for me to buy the ring. Are sunspots bothering your thought process?"

"Is that a genetic disease or an environmental mishap for people who are born in Troy, New York?"

"I love you, Smart ass."

"You'd better." She held out her hand for him to put the ring on her. "Lovely. Thanks, Dillon. You the man. Now, tell me, why was this your job?"

"Because you don't want to do everything in the relationship. You did all that and that was enough. The rest, the small matters, the details that show the world are up to me. You've been through the slave situation once too often and you know I'll never put you there."

"Close enough for government work, my darling Dillon. Maureen, stay in touch. We'll do it your way. Thanks a million, or more if it helps. The world needs many more women like you. You're awesome."

###