

# TODAY AND Forever

*Book 3 of the Sammy/ Streiker Salmagundi*

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Today and Forever:  
Book 3 of the Sammy/Streiker Salmagundi

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## Chapter 1

He'd brought this on himself, and he knew it. So Sammy just swallowed his impatience in order to walk with Abby one halting step at a time. He did not hold her arm, as her skin was still too tender in places. He let her hold on to him while she exercised muscles that had atrophied during her two months' recuperation from the burning-man stunt.

Her injuries—third-degree burns over much of her arms and legs—had almost killed her. Sammy credited himself with saving her life by smuggling Fletcher Streiker in to see her. Streiker, of course, was the one who actually saved her.

He was a reclusive billionaire philanthropist whom few people had ever seen. While a lot of people were wildly curious to see him, they really just wanted to know if he was as gorgeous as the rumors hinted. (He was, to everyone's eyes but Sammy's. Having grown accustomed to women swooning over his black hair and blue eyes all his life, Sammy couldn't see that Streiker was all that better looking than himself. He just looked vaguely Polynesian, a little exotic, maybe, and that was about it.)

Other than that, the public was mostly interested in the monetary rewards that the news media kept offering for photos of Streiker.

About a year and a half after Streiker had arranged for Sammy to win a \$35-million Texas lottery, Sammy, and then the other two ex-cops at MK & Associates, had become Streiker employees. One of the assignments Streiker had given Sammy was to prevent the guest on Abby's reality show from attempting the stunt that had critically injured her. And Sammy, in warning both of them away from it, had told her, flippantly and untruthfully, "I love you."

As Sammy's employer, Streiker took a dim view of his careless use of such powerful words. So Streiker gave Sammy another assignment, and along with it, the opportunity to inject some truth into those words: Sammy was to spend three hours a week assisting Abby in her rehabilitation until further notice.

True, he went grudgingly, until he saw how much it meant to her. A TV star who has lost her star capacity will find herself very much alone. Her fans deserted her for new stars; her hangers-on deserted her for more lucrative positions, and her studio deserted her for shows that people would watch.

Moreover, Sammy was incensed to see that attorneys for her assistant producer, who had been accused of tampering with the safety equipment for the stunt, skillfully stonewalled the investigation so that Abby might heal enough to look somewhat normal in giving testimony, if a trial ever came about. Their subliminal message would be: *See? It wasn't so bad. Just an accident.*

And the one time Sammy had taken her to her parents' home to visit her 8-year-old autistic son, the boy shunned her as a stranger. No one seemed to exist for him except his grandparents, his tutor, and Sammy, who had given him the medal Sammy had won by beating Abby in an obstacle-course race for her show. (It never aired, except as video uploads that the studio kept trying to take down.)

Sammy himself had suffered second-degree burns on his inner arms in rescuing her guest competitor during the burning-man stunt, but had been unable to reach Abby. Because his wife Marni had been so diligent in cleaning and medicating his arms, he had healed with very little scarring.

Today he walked with Abby in the quadrangle of the downtown Dallas rehabilitation center. Being early February, it was clear but chilly, so Abby wore a stocking cap over her healing scalp. (The cap, as well as matching mittens, had been knitted by Sarah Hawkins, generally loved by everybody.) Abby's beautiful blonde hair, her best feature, was growing back randomly around irreparably burned follicles.

"Got a letter from my insurance company today," she muttered. "They're dropping me at the end of this month."

Sammy nodded, unsurprised. "You want to go home? You don't need full-time care anymore."

"House is on the market. I can't afford it anymore, either," she said as a dispassionate observation of fact. She owned a \$2-million house in Irving, near the studios where her show (now canceled) had been filmed.

"Abby," Sammy said, glancing up at the bare tree branches above them, "it's time to shed some pride and talk to your dad. I happen to know him personally; he's a great guy, and they want you home."

She sighed, looking down, and he regarded her working her misshapen fingers. She had been very determined in her therapy sessions. "I scare Ripley."

"Ripley will get used to it. This is a real opportunity for him to grow. Won't he be nine soon?" Sammy asked.

"March twenty-second," she murmured. "I always sent him a gift every year, no matter where I was."

Sammy said, "Well, give him the gift of his mom coming home. Let him show you his room and his garden."

"Eh. Some gift," she muttered, lifting a deformed hand.

"Abby." Sammy stopped walking and turned to her in aggravation. "I liked how you were powering through this without self-pity. Don't start on it now."

She demonstrated the one asset she retained: a charming smile. "You said you loved me."

Wilting, Sammy reflected, *Streiker was right, then. He said she took me seriously; I didn't believe it.* "Hey, would I keep showing up here if I didn't?"

"Meh," she said skeptically, but then patted his arm with clawed fingers. Smiling, he took her lumpy hand. She had to look down to see that, because most of the nerve endings in her fingers had been destroyed. That also made it hard to grip anything.

Wryly, she reflected on the fact that she would have beaten him in that o-course challenge if she hadn't glanced back to see how he was doing on the Tires. Yeah, losing to him probably made her that much more reckless in choosing the next challenge—the fire stunt.

They walked until she tired, then he returned her to her room. Sitting her in the recliner that elevated her feet, he said, "Whenever your house sells, I'll get some friends to come move out the stuff you want to keep."

"I'm selling it all," she grunted, settling into place. "Don't want to keep any of it."

He paused, then leaned over to kiss her forehead. "I'll be back Thursday, usual time."

She pulled off the cap, touching the tufts of the hair that remained. In her heyday, she'd done a hair-conditioner commercial. That had been less than a year ago. "You don't have to keep coming," she told him, her standard parting line.

"Might as well, when my wife locks me out," he shrugged. She smiled and waved him out.

As he walked to his 1966 lime-green Mustang in the parking lot, he suddenly changed course to head for a wooden bench under an oak tree. There was a lone figure sitting on that bench whom he recognized at a glance.

In fact, Sammy had learned to canvas his surroundings at all times, because Streiker might be anywhere, and Sammy had once overlooked him until he, Sammy, had driven off to sit at a red light. When he looked over and saw Streiker getting up from a fountain seat to walk away, Sammy had to U-turn at the light to catch him. And Streiker wouldn't do a thing about the resultant traffic ticket.

Today, Sammy plopped down on the bench beside him, not too close. Streiker was just relaxing, his arms stretched out over the seat back, his right ankle resting on his left knee. "Have a good visit?" he asked idly.

Sammy nodded, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands. "She's doing great, especially for someone who had been scheduled for organ donation surgery. Can you believe it? They had penciled her in to have her organs removed the day that you and I came that first time."

Streiker smiled slightly. "I think they had to change their scheduling protocol after that. It was a little awkward when they started prepping her without noticing that she wasn't on life support. And wasn't dead."

Sammy snorted, then was silent for a minute. "I keep thinking about the—how last-minute your assignments are. I sit around waiting for a couple or three days for a job from you, then when you give me one, I get out there and find I'm just barely in time," Sammy complained.

"You're best when pressed," Streiker observed.

He was right. Sammy always performed best when he didn't have a chance to overthink things. Also, he liked the rush. He glanced at Streiker from under his brows. It was a little disconcerting to be so thoroughly known.

He continued to sit, hands clasped, waiting. After a few minutes of silence, he cast a puckered frown at his boss. "Er, you wouldn't show up here if there wasn't something you wanted me to do, but I'm not hearing you tell me what that is."

Streiker shifted. "I'm thinking about it."

Sammy sat up, bracing a hand on his knee in surprise. "You have to think about it? This is new?"

"This is something I don't normally do," Streiker admitted.

"You do some things normally?" Sammy asked.

"Okay, we'll approach it this way," Streiker decided. "When was the last time you talked to your mom?"

Sammy cringed. "Well, I think... Marni took Sam [their 3-year-old son] to see her once, but she's been kind of busy with him and Clay [their 8-month-old son], so...."

Streiker observed, "I can talk to Marni about what she does. I asked about you."

Hanging his head, Sammy admitted, “The last time I talked to her was after my dad’s funeral a year ago.”

Streiker nodded. “Perhaps you need to, now.”

“We don’t have her new number,” Sammy argued. “Last time Marni tried to call, she said her number had been disconnected.”

“Do you remember where she lives?” Streiker asked.

“Well, yeah, but—it’s kinda crass to just show up, and, her son—her *legitimate* son, Samuel Clint, hates my guts, and—”

“You’ve got a lot of excuses over such an easy assignment,” Streiker coolly observed. “Would it help if I made you run through fire to see her?”

“Is this an assignment?” Sammy asked uncomfortably.

Streiker replied, “It shouldn’t have to be, but if that’s the only way to get you out there to see her, then yes, it is.”

“Ow,” Sammy said quietly. “Okay then.” He got up and paused as though waiting for a dismissal.

Streiker nodded. “Go ahead. I think Abby needs to talk to me.”

“Okay.” Sammy turned toward his Mustang. When he glanced back, the bench was empty.

Before leaving the rehabilitation center, Sammy paused to locate his mom’s house on his mental map of Dallas in relation to his present position. She was in a nice, stable, solidly middle-income area just a few miles away. Sighing, he started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot.

Less than fifteen minutes later, he was pulling up to the curb in front of her house. As it looked completely unchanged from the last time he was here a year ago, he closed his eyes at the memory of dropping his dad off here.

Sammy’s parents Carla and Sam had never married each other, and only got around to talking about it after Carla’s husband had died and Sam was married to a wealthy socialite while seeing a girlfriend on the side. “No reason at all why I should be reluctant to dredge all that up,” he groaned.

Sighing, he climbed out of the Mustang. Just while he was driving here, the sky had clouded over and the wind began gusting. The temperature dropped ten degrees in a matter of minutes. Sammy was wearing one of his favorite sports coats because it wasn’t cold when he had left the house this morning. He trotted up the front walk to press the doorbell. Then he stood back and waited.

When the door was opened, he looked through the glass storm door at a youngish woman with chin-length brown hair. She was dressed in a nice track suit and wore no makeup, only a mildly suspicious expression. “Yes?”

“Excuse me,” he said levelly. “My name is Sammy Kidman. Last I knew, my mother Carla Bowers lived here. Is she here?”

The woman narrowed her eyes at him, then her face cleared. “Oh, now I remember. You’re the—”

She broke off, and Sammy smiled slightly. So, she couldn’t say the word *bastard* to his face? “That’s correct. May I come in?” he asked.

She got a little flustered. “Carla’s not here right now. She went with my husband and our children to get decorations for a Valentine’s Day party.”

Sammy cocked his head. “So, would you be her daughter-in-law? I’m sorry; I don’t know your name,” he said, still standing on the porch. Since he didn’t feel like oozing charm, he settled for courtesy instead.

“Yes,” she said. And that was all.

Sammy glanced aside, irritated that she couldn’t find some scrap of kindness to let him come in from the cold. Then he forced himself to smile. If the deployment of charm was called for, so be it. “I don’t want to intrude, but I don’t know when I might be able to get out this way again. I don’t have her phone number. May I come in and wait?”

He continued to smile while she hesitated. Then she exhaled, “All right.” She pushed open the storm door for him to enter.

“Thank you,” he said, shaking off the cold as he glanced around. It looked just the same as he remembered. Sitting on the couch in the front room, he said, “So, are they having the party here or at school? Yeah, I’ve met Jeremy and Brittany several times. He’s—what? About ten now?” he asked cordially.

She stood open-mouthed in the middle of the room. “When did you see my children?” she demanded.

As if her question wasn’t an accusation, he replied, “Well, the last time was at Santa’s Village a few years ago. I was Scrooge in jail. My son was Tiny Tim.”

“Oh,” she said, relaxing a little. “Yes, my mother-in-law takes them there every year. I didn’t realize she brought them to see you.”

“She had no idea I was there,” Sammy replied.

“Oh,” she said again. After a pause, she sat in an armchair next to the couch.

There was an awkward silence. Sammy leaned back, clasping his hands lightly in his lap. He looked at the photos of his half-brother’s family on the side table and reflected that Marni had sent Carla pictures of both their sons after Clay’s birth. Marni had been a little too busy to follow up in the succeeding weeks when she heard nothing back.

He glanced around to confirm that those photos were not on display in the front room, then dropped his eyes. *C’mon, Mr. Streiker, why should I make any effort at all to see a woman who considers my entire existence a mistake?*

He and Clint’s wife continued to sit in silence. Sammy looked at the photo grouping again, then picked up the framed photo of the children. “Yeah, the first thing I noticed about Brittany was her eyes. They look just like Carla’s. Beautiful eyes. She was a beautiful girl.”

Brittany’s mother nodded slightly. After a moment, she cleared her throat and said, “What... happened between your father and Carla?”

He glanced at her as he replaced the photograph on the table. “I’m happy to tell you, but I don’t even know your name.”

She blushed slightly. “Hollie. Hollie Bowers.”



“Okay, Hollie. My dad and Carla were teenage lovers. She got pregnant with me when she was seventeen and he was nineteen. Her parents were so mad about it, they had him charged with rape. He pleaded guilty to avoid putting her through a trial and was sent away for ten years.” He was utterly bland, even blasé, relating all this.

She considered this. “How do you know,” she asked quietly, “that it wasn’t rape?”

He calmly answered, “I have a stack of letters he wrote her from prison. She never answered them, but she kept them. We were able to obtain a pardon for my dad on the basis of those letters. And,” he smiled, relating the clincher, “she named me after him.”

“Kidman?” she asked, frowning.

“No,” he laughed. “That’s her family name. ‘Samuel James.’ She named me ‘Samuel James’ after him.”

She considered that for a moment, then observed, “Those are common names.”

He leaned forward, smiling. “But they also happened to be the names of someone she knew well.”

She cocked her head. “Did she know his name at the time of the rape?”

His smile faded. “There was no rape. Even she says so.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Hollie asserted.

Anger flashed in front of his eyes, but, keeping in mind who gave him this assignment, Sammy shut his emotions down. He evaluated her for a minute, trying to decide how blunt he wanted to be. The question on his lips (without the pejorative) was, *If you knew all there was to know about it already, why did you ask me?*

As it turned out, he did not ask, because they heard a car pull into the driveway at the side of the house. They waited silently, listening to car doors open and slam, and feet racing up the front sidewalk. Sammy stood as the front door opened; a moment later, Hollie did, too.

The two children ran in first, bearing plastic bags full of red, white and silver goodies to show their mother. They barely took note of the strange man.

Carla entered then, and started when she saw Sammy. He opened his mouth to greet her when Clint, entering behind her, said, “What are you doing here?”

Sammy regarded him. He had light brown hair and a square face. Not a big man, he was obviously a few years younger than his 36-year-old illegitimate half-brother. Sammy replied, “I came to see my mother.”

“That must be your Mustang out front. You could have picked a better time,” Clint grouched. He flashed a look at his wife that asked, *Are you okay?*

*Barely*, she replied with a downward glance.

Seeing all this, Sammy turned back to his mother. “You know, that’s a great idea. Could I have your number? I’ll call you to set up another time to come over.”

To his utter shock, she stood there without replying. The children, paying no attention, took their party supplies into the kitchen. With a glance at Clint, Hollie followed. Sammy’s half-brother continued to stand over their mother in the front room.

“Uh, Mom?” Sammy said. “Can I have your phone number?”

When she still had no answer, Clint turned to him darkly. “I think you had better leave and not come back.” Sammy continued to look at his mother, who did not move. Clint straightened aggressively. “I said—”

“All right.” Sammy nodded. He pulled a business card out of his jacket pocket that had only his name and phone number on it. “In case you need to get hold of me for some reason,” he murmured, dropping the card on the coffee table. Then he let himself out the front door and went to his car.

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## Chapter 2

Sammy drove down the block to a nearby church, where he could park and think for a minute. His first thought was that sometimes Streiker liked to jerk him around a little, just for grins.

His next, more rational thought was that Streiker knew there was some kind of problem taking hold with his mother that maybe needed Sammy's attention. The most obvious issue was that Carla had apparently allowed her son Clint to take the place of her dead authoritarian father. If her father/son said that Sam was a rapist, then he was.

This warping of the truth must have triggered Streiker's concern. And in what way was this a deviation from the "normal" way he did things? Sammy decided he couldn't know that until he got a little further along.

Here was a problem, however: if she wouldn't have anything to do with her shameful son, there was very little he could do to help her. Streiker himself would not butt in where he was not wanted.

Shifting the car into gear, Sammy turned back out of the parking lot, muttering, "Okay, Clint will throw away my card, and we'll be done with that assignment." From there, he headed home.

As it happened, Clint had just picked up Sammy's card from the coffee table and glanced at it, snorting. He ripped it in two, stuffing the pieces in the waste-paper basket under the little writing table by the front window. "Clint, come give us a hand!" Hollie called from the kitchen.

"What, are you helpless?" he called back. Starting out of the room, he ordered, "C'mon, Mom."

"Oh, let me just put these pictures back in place," she said fussily, advancing to the disarranged grouping on the side table. He grunted, proceeding to the kitchen.

Hastily, she turned instead to the waste-paper basket to retrieve the pieces of business card. These she gently smoothed out, then placed in her pants pocket with a little pat.

Sammy pulled up to the back-entry garage of his modest north Dallas home. When the garage door went up, he regarded the Jeep Liberty in satisfaction. As he and Marni had discussed weeks ago, they bought this rental from Ed's Body Shop and gave her Prius to Sarah Hawkins, who was thrilled. Marni was thrilled.

And since it had been a mild winter (following the usual freakish late November snow storm), Sammy and Marni had argued none at all about his appropriating her 4-wheel-drive vehicle because he didn't need it.

He preferred not to analyze why it was so important to him to see her car in the garage whenever he might show up at home. He certainly didn't expect her to stay home all day, especially with two rowdy boys and a dog. He just liked to know that they were all safe.

Entering from the garage into the kitchen, he had an instant to brace himself before the onslaught of bodies, specifically, a small boy and large dog: "Dadadada!" Sam, Jr., hit his target at approximately the same moment as Bubba. Knocked into the back of a sturdy swivel chair, Sammy managed to sit on the floor instead of fall down to it.

And that's where Marni found him when she came in holding Clay, who expressed a strong desire to join the pile-up on the floor. "Hello," she said.

“Mghum,” he replied. Sam had a death grip on his neck while Bubba held him still with two front paws to wash down his face. Sammy set Sam on one arm while fending off Bubba with the other, thus managing to raise himself by degrees. “Hi. Down, Bubba.”

“How is Abby?” she asked.

“Doing better all the time,” he said, attaining an upright position by means of the chair. “But her insurance lapses at the end of the month, so I’ve got barely three weeks to talk her into moving in with her parents.” He looked at his wife in mild grief.

She exhaled, seeing his look and understanding it. “If I had known it was going to traumatize you for me to go back to my natural brown, I would have just kept touching up dark roots.”

“Traumatized?” he repeated, almost in tears. “That’s ridiculous.”

She shook her head, eyeing him. “What is it about men and blondes?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he insisted, sniffing. “Hey, Sam. Have you been good for Mom?” he asked, carrying him back to the family room so they could all sit down on furniture.

When Marni sat and scooted up next to him on the couch, Clay fell off her onto Sam on Sammy. The elder brother began pushing back, and there followed several minutes of enforced peace negotiations before the parents could communicate between themselves again.

“Anyway,” Marni resumed, “Mom says that once my hair gets over the color shock, I can have a wash applied to give it red highlights.”

“Red?” he asked, interested.

“Yeah, just highlights. It’s very pretty and natural looking.”

“Red,” he mused, looking off. The most prominent redhead he knew, Linda Threlkeld-Rains, was overtly sexual and dangerous. “Yeah, I could live with that.”

“I’m so glad,” Marni said, rolling her eyes. “So, did you give Abby some extra time today?”

“Extra time?” he asked. “Oh. No. I met Streiker afterward, and he gave me another assignment. Would you like to know what that was?”

“Sure,” she said tentatively, hoisting Clay back from baiting Sam.

“He made me go talk to my mother,” Sammy announced.

Her eyes widened. “As a job?”

“Yes.”

“Why couldn’t you do that on your own, Sammy?” she asked, pained.

“You want to know why? I will tell you why. Because her *real* son’s family was there, and his wife doesn’t believe that Carla and Sam had consensual sex, and so I got invited to leave, whereupon my mother refused to give me her phone number,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Oh!” Marni exhaled, closing her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Sammy.”

“Hey, as far as I’m concerned, it’s good news. If she won’t talk to me, I can’t do a thing for her. So Streiker can send me back to easier jobs, like throwing myself on people who are on fire,” he said cheerily.

She looked at him in dismay, and he said, “Hey, have you guys eaten yet? Let’s go to Streiker’s barbecue place for a late lunch and then walk around the Arboretum for a while.”

Marni glanced out the back window. “It’s getting kind of cold out, isn’t it?”

“So? Bundle the guys up. If it’s too chilly, we’ll go back inside and eat peach cobbler. You want some cobbler, Sam?”

“Yeah,” said Sam.

“Gah,” said Clay.

“Okay, it’s unanimous,” Sammy said, getting up with Sam. “Come potty, guy.”

While the Kidmans were getting ready for their outing, the Bowers family was returning home from theirs. Clint drove silently, thinking, while eight-year-old Brittany teased her older brother about the girl he wanted to gift with a secret Valentine. He denied it, but the argument was a quiet one, to not draw their parents’ attention.

“What an ass, to show up at her house like that,” Clint uttered. Hollie looked out the side window, saying nothing. “I ought to have him arrested.”

“He wasn’t breaking and entering, Clint. I let him in,” she said.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he snapped.

She regarded him. “I think she wanted to talk to him.”

“She did not say one word while he was there,” he objected.

“She didn’t have a chance, with you hanging over her,” Hollie said.

“What?” he said, turning to her in irritation. “Like I had my hand over her mouth?”

“Just about,” she murmured, looking away again.

He grunted. “Well, we won’t have that problem any more.”

“Fine,” she shrugged. “But you stay out of it.”

“Stay out of it?” he shouted. “That’s my mother!” His children quieted fearfully in the back seat.

“It’s his mother, too,” Hollie pointed out.

“From rape,” he scoffed.

“How would that be your brother’s fault?” she asked.

“Well—”

She interrupted, “Do you know what I keep thinking about? I keep thinking about how she *made* you take her to that man’s funeral when her car was in the shop. She wanted to go so badly that all your foot-dragging and pouting didn’t put her off, even though you made her late.”

“She was glad to see him dead,” he muttered.

“That’s why she dressed in black and cried and cried after she came home,” Hollie said scornfully. “She acted like his widow. She was not raped, Clint.”

“Watch your language in front of the children,” he snapped. She pursed her lips, looking back out of the window.

As the Kidman family pulled up to the entrance of Streiker’s Barbecue Place in the Jeep, Sammy said, “Oh, yay! Pruett’s here.”

Marni scanned the parking lot. “Where? I don’t see his Firebird.”

“They probably came in Kerry’s Audi. Watch them get a minivan now,” he smirked.

While he parked and set the brake, Marni was frowning. “I don’t see—”

Bubba suddenly lunged from the back cargo area in between the guys’ car seats to land in Marni’s lap barking and whining at the front windshield. “Bubba!” she exclaimed.

“GET DOWN!” Sammy roared at him, which sent the guys behind them into screaming fits of laughter. Bubba, whining, crouched down on Marni’s lap.

“What is he looking at? I can’t see a thing,” she said, trapped behind muscle and fur.

“Aha. Here it is: Dave and Kerry finally broke down and got Chris what he’s been asking for years. He was just really bummed after those hoods that attacked him in the alley got off with probation and community service, so his folks decided to cheer him up with a beautiful German Shepherd. Her name’s Daisy; she’s got papers and everything. And that’s her in the kennel yard beside the restaurant,” Sammy said, pointing in glee.

“Oh, poor Bubba,” she said. He had been neutered.

“He can still flirt,” Sammy noted. “Let me put him in the yard, then I’ll come back and help you with the guys,” he added, opening the driver’s door.

Bubba bounded across the seats to the open door, but Sammy held his harness until Marni could hand the leash across to him. With Bubba secured, Sammy restrained him to walk forty feet to the yard gate. Daisy, the only one in the yard right now, came to attention as Sammy leaned over to unhook Bubba’s leash from the harness.

Chris, 14, came to the glass door between the restaurant and the yard. “Sammy! Wait! Don’t unleash him until —”

But it was too late; Sammy had already unhooked Bubba’s leash. Dave quickly joined Chris at the door; Sammy, perceiving his error, stepped into the yard to get between the dogs if they started fighting (obviously a brilliant plan).

Bubba crept up to the elegant, poised Daisy and rolled onto his back in submission. Dave leaned against the

door, laughing. Sammy put his hands on his hips, muttering, “That’s not Kidman technique, Bubba.”

Daisy circled her supine admirer to sniff him, then graciously made the play bow, tail rotating. Bubba leaped up to sniff her, and they were soon chasing each other all over the small yard.

Shaking his head, Sammy turned back toward the Jeep. Marni came up, holding Clay and leading Sam by the hand. Hoisting Sam in his arms, Sammy muttered, “Pruett has to outdo me in the *dog* he gets, even.”

Marni glanced dubiously at the gangly beast gallivanting after the beautiful German Shepherd. “Well, to be fair, that’s not hard, Sammy. Eight out of ten rescue mutts would be prettier than Bubba.”

“Pfffft,” he said eloquently.

They entered the restaurant to get the guys settled at a table before helping themselves from the buffet line. Sammy located Jaime, the manager, to make sure he saw them; Jaime smiled and nodded. Striker employees were entitled to free meals here. Sammy didn’t want to abuse the privilege, considering their financial status, but—the food was always great.

Marni shed her coat and relieved the guys of theirs. (Sammy had left his in the Jeep.) As she sat Sam in a booster seat and Clay in a high chair, Dave came over. “We were just about to leave when you drove up.”

Sammy looked in concern toward the side yard. “And break Bubba’s heart?”

“He can’t do anything about anything, so—” Pruett shrugged.

After greeting Dave with a pat on his arm, Marni went to get toddler plates for the guys while Sammy stood over them to purportedly enforce restaurant-compliant behavior.

“What were you working on yesterday that you couldn’t talk about?” he asked Pruett curiously.

Pruett expelled a short laugh. He composed himself, then said, “Do I have to tell you?”

“Now you do, yeah,” Sammy said. “Was it an assignment? Why couldn’t you talk?”

“Ah,” Pruett looked off, hand on the back of Clay’s high chair. Clay turned to attempt to peel the fingers off. “Yes, it was an assignment. I... had been... having discussions with my east-side neighbor about fixing the fence. It’s his turn to pay for repairs, especially since his freaking dog is the one that chewed through it. And now that we have Daisy, and all... Well, anyway, Striker’s assignment to me was to, ah, fix the fence myself. So I had to go get fence slats and hardware, and such...” He trailed off in embarrassment.

“Mine tops that,” Sammy said.

“Yeah? So who did you save from a fiery death this time?” Pruett asked uneasily.

“Nobody. Striker made me go visit my mother,” Sammy said.

Pruett laughed, “What?”

“Yeah. And she wouldn’t even speak to me.”

“Ow,” Dave said sympathetically.

“So... it looks like we’re cleaning up garbage from the inside out,” Sammy said, looking off.

Dave thought about that. “Huh.”

At that time, Chris stuck his head in the door and said, “Daisy’s in the car, Dad. See you later, Sammy.”

“Bye, Chris.” Sammy raised a hand, and Dave nodded on his way out.

Marni came over with plates for herself and her guys. “Here. You want to get them started while I get our drinks?” she asked, placing one plastic plate in front of Sam and another on Clay’s tray.

In mild alarm, Sammy asked, “‘Get them started’? What does that consist of?”

She snorted, “Make Sam use a fork. Clay gets to use his fingers. Don’t let them throw food.”

“Hurry back,” he said, sitting gingerly.

She did return within minutes, which aborted Sam’s launching cooked carrots at his brother while their dad stared off into space. When she sat, he woke up and went to fetch his own lunch.

Returning with plate and drink, he noted, “Bubba is out there crying.”

She glanced back over her shoulder in pity. “Maybe someone will go play with him.”

“Or throw heavy objects at him,” Sammy offered. She smiled, watching Clay smash banana slices between his fingers in satisfaction. “So, how was your morning?” Sammy asked, just to make conversation.

“Interesting,” she admitted.

“Yeah?” he asked in disinterest, leaning over his plate of ribs, which were excellent.

“Yes. Mr. Striker called,” she said.

“He did?” Sammy asked in mild surprise.

“Yes, he—” She glanced around and lowered her voice. “He has a special black ops team he needed me to locate to give them their assignment. I had to call around eight or ten places, but finally got hold of one of the members. You’ll be reading about a Sudanese Christian family that disappeared from a holding facility in Khartoum today. They’ll show up in Rome tomorrow. Oh, and, I authorized a two-hundred-thousand-dollar wire transfer from our account. Jet fuel is expensive.”

He listened, open-mouthed. “How could you find this team just by calling around?”

“The guys were napping,” she explained, which didn’t answer his question. Realizing that, she added, “Mr. Striker gave me a list of code words and places they use as contact points. I was looking for a party planner. There was nothing to it; they’d already discussed this operation with him and just needed some details of time and place.”

He continued to stare at her, and she read his face accurately. “Sammy, are you going to resent me for doing what little I can to help?”

“No, of course not,” he breathed, admitting, “I’m impressed”—especially considering his and Dave’s current assignments.



“It was nothing,” she reiterated. “He just needed a nobody with a phone, a few minutes, and access to a large bank account.”

He nodded, smiling. “Good. I’m proud of you.”

“It was fun,” she said.

“He’s fun to work for,” he said, then amended, “Most of the time.”

They had a nice, leisurely lunch; Sam ate some of his carrots and Clay discovered he liked bananas. As they were finishing up, Sammy cleaned off his hands with the moist towelettes the restaurant provided. “Okay! Let’s —” His phone in his pocket warbled.

Sammy pulled it out, glancing at the unfamiliar number. “Hello.”

“Hello, Sammy! I was so glad to see you today!”

His eyes shot up to his wife’s face in shock. “Mom?”

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## Chapter 3

“Yes, of course,” Sammy’s mother said. “Clint has taken his family home. I wish you would come back so that we can visit.”

“Well,” he said hesitantly, as Marni was watching in great curiosity. “I have my family with me—”

Carla exclaimed, “Oh, please bring them by! I do so want to see them!”

“All right,” he said slowly. “Except I also have my dog with me.”

“Well, bring your dog, too! As long as it’s house broken,” she clarified.

“Oh, yes, your house will get broken,” he promised.

To his great surprise, she laughed gaily at his joke. “I’ll be expecting you, dear.”

“All right,” he heard himself say, and put away his phone. Marni arched an eyebrow and he said, “Her real son left, so she wants us to come see her.”

“That’s what we’ll do, then,” Marni said.

He looked at her in muted despair, groaning, “Sometimes I wish you weren’t so gosh-darn good.”

“Wait till I’m a redhead,” she purred.

“Whoa, baby,” he murmured, smiling.

So they cleaned up the guys, leaving a very large tip to compensate for the very large mess. Marni put everyone’s coat back on, and they retrieved Bubba from the kennel yard. He looked around listlessly, then lowered his head and walked with tail dragging back to the Jeep. “I don’t believe this,” Sammy muttered.

“He’s in love,” she said sympathetically.

“You stupid dog, you can’t do anything about it!” Sammy railed. He opened the Jeep door.

“Don’t be mean. You’ll hurt his feelings,” Marni chastised, strapping Clay into his seat. Bubba went back to the cargo area and lay down.

“Hurt his—! Now I’ve heard everything,” Sammy vented. He strapped Sam in without noticing the boy’s thoughtful face.

With an air of profound resignation, Sammy started the Jeep and turned out of the restaurant parking lot. “This will not end well,” he predicted gloomily.

“Sure, it will,” Marni said. “After some drama, it will be okay.”

He sighed.

Minutes later, they pulled up to the curb in front of Carla’s house. Behind the house was a neat back yard enclosed by a chain-link fence, four feet high. Sammy and Marni quietly unlatched the guys from their car seats, though Clay was sound asleep and Bubba required some coaxing to come out of the vehicle.

Just to be proper, Sammy put him on the leash to walk him to the front door. The Complete Kidman Cohort filled the front porch and Sammy rang the doorbell.

Carla opened the door with a big smile. "Hello, everyone! Oh, do come in!"

They did so. "Hi, Mom," Sammy said grimly. "You remember my wife Marni. This is Clayton Gregory, eight months old." He indicated the fat, drooling baby on Marni's shoulder.

"Oh, how sweet you are!" Carla cooed, patting his back.

"I think you already met Samuel, Junior." Sammy indicated the wary three-year-old holding on to his leg.

"Oh, my goodness! How much you've grown since your second birthday!" Carla exclaimed, bending to look at him up close.

"Whoa, baby," Sam said, backing away.

Marni gasped and Sammy gaped at his toddler. "Uhhh—"

At that moment Bubba decided to express his opinion about life in general, and lifted a rear leg to begin issuing a stream on the corner of the wall. "Bubba!" exclaimed Sammy.

"You stupid dog!" Sam cried.

Sammy immediately led Bubba to the back door off the kitchen and released him from the leash into the yard.

Marni turned to her mother-in-law. "Carla, if you'll please hold Clay on the couch, I'd like to clean up that wall before it stains." They were all still wearing their coats, even though the house was warm.

Carla weakly opened her mouth, but Marni had already handed her the sleeping child. He was so heavy that Carla sat at once. Then Marni firmly sat her eldest son on the couch beside his grandmother.

Sammy reentered the kitchen while Marni was pouring dishwashing soap on a handful of paper towels. "How can I help?" he whispered.

She glanced at him in alarm. "Go talk to your mom. And keep an eye on Sam," she whispered back.

It took more courage for Sammy to walk into that front room than it did for him to advance on three thugs in an alley. Wiping the sweat from his upper lip, he sat beside his mother and placed Sam on his lap. "I'm sorry about that. He's never done that before," he said, and she might have wondered whether he was talking about his son or his dog.

Marni entered to cheerily kneel at the wall and begin scrubbing. It was an old beige paint that came off freely on her paper towels, so she immediately lightened up. She gulped, looking at the dark wet patch. But she made sure to clean up all the urine.

When she had done all she could with soapy paper towels, she rose and went to the kitchen to throw them away. Then she returned to the front room to sit near her abashed family.

"He, uh," Sammy began, "he made a new friend today that he seems to be missing."

"Stupid dog," said Sam.

Sammy turned to pat his leg. “Yeah, Sam, your old dad was wrong to call him that. I think I did hurt his feelings. So let’s make a deal: I won’t say ‘stupid’ if you don’t. It’s not a nice word.” Sam leaned back on the couch to swing his legs without reply.

Marni started to take her coat off, looking around a room that was dominated by photos of Carla’s son Clint and his family. Marni was looking for something, anything, to talk about, but other than those family photos, there seemed to be nothing personal in the room.

She turned around to look at Sammy, who was staring at his hands in his lap. Then she looked at his mother, who was staring off into space. Knowing that those two had not talked since she had cried on his shoulder at Sam’s memorial service a year ago, Marni suddenly knew that’s what they needed.

She rebuttoned her coat and stood to lift Clay, still asleep, off Carla’s lap. “Come on, Sam; let’s go check out the back yard.” Sammy glanced at her apprehensively, but Sam willingly climbed down from the couch to follow his mother to the back kitchen door.

Opening it, she looked out into a small, rather barren back yard, even allowing for mid-winter doldrums. There were some overgrown bushes next to the house and one small tree. Despite its current desolate state, the yard contained echoes of the past, including mounds and a few row markers from a long-ago garden. There were even stems of dead zinnias that stubbornly sprouted in a corner year after year.

There was a lonely old umbrella-style clothes dryer, long unused. Sam swung on the vertical pole a while, but could not reach the lines far above his head. Then he discovered a curious 5-foot square of hardwood in another corner, very old and almost rotted through.

Kicking up blackened chunks of wood, he uncovered two small Army men and a dull old sheriff’s star. These finds he relocated to his coat pockets with great excitement, not knowing that his father had once played with them here. But that’s all Sam found.

While Marni bounced Clay, Sam explored the rest of the square yard, looking for anything else of interest. Finally, he settled for climbing the chain-link fence. She let him, because she did not think he could get over it. She just hoped to keep him entertained long enough for Sammy and his mother to have an overdue talk.

Inside the quiet house, Sammy’s eyes roamed restlessly around the front room before returning to his hands. “I’m kind of wondering why you called, Mom.”

“Why, I wanted to see you,” she protested.

“You wouldn’t give me your number when I asked for it,” he observed.

“Oh, I didn’t want to upset Clint. He doesn’t like you,” she said regretfully.

“That’s... true,” he noted.

She observed, “You look well.”

He briefly shook his head. “Marni is the greatest thing that could happen to me, except—” He had started to mention Streiker, then suddenly wondered whether Streiker had anything to do with that cute girl moving into the apartment next to his almost six years ago.

“I’m glad you’re happy, Sammy. I look at you and think that... in a way, that could have been me and Sam. We never had that family, but you do, and your little boy looks just like you,” she said.

He listened, then nodded. "I think I understand you."

"I like to see you happy," she said earnestly. "That means that... the mistakes I made, and the wrong things I did, didn't ruin your life," she added in a low voice.

He smiled, then. "You got nothing to regret, Mom." He reached over to hug her, and she gripped him tightly. "Do one thing for me, though," he said, pulling back.

She wiped her eyes and asked, "What's that?"

"Don't make new regrets," he said.

Her face grew fearful. "What do you mean?"

"Don't let Clint be your dad. Don't let him tell you what you can do or what you can't do. You're his mom; make him respect that," Sammy said.

"Oh, dear," she breathed.

He stood. "Just a friendly suggestion, if you want to see me more than once a year."

She stood, too. "I do."

"Okay," he said. Evaluating her, he doubted it. She was a little old to change this ingrained submission to authority.

"Okay," he repeated, glancing around. This was not a welcoming place; he didn't see anything to talk about right now but past hurts; and he didn't want to leave Marni and the guys out in the cold.

"I'm going to take my family back home now. You call me when you want to see me again. Listen—I'll come pick you up to take you out to our house. Or better, to the Streiker Arboretum. Have you ever been out there? It's great, even in the winter. You'd love it. Hey, let's set up a time to go. Get your calendar, and let's circle a day to go out to the Arboretum. We'll make it a lunch date. What do you say?"

She stood there, saying nothing. He watched her, then said, "So Clint is in your head telling you that you can't do that." She frowned, looking away.

"Okay, that's cool." He reached over to kiss her cheek, and she held his shoulder. "You call me when you want me." He pulled gently out of her grip to go to the back door and look out into the yard.

There, he saw Marni holding Clay on one arm while trying to prevent Sam's climbing over the short fence. He went out to calmly pluck his son off the fence. "Okay, guys. We're done here; time to pack up for home." He glanced around the small yard and then paused. "Where's Bubba?"

"Bubba!" Marni gasped, wheeling to look. "I didn't see him when we came out!"

"Stupid dog!" cried Sam.

They could see the entire yard from where they stood, and Bubba was not in it. Sammy walked to the other side, whistling sharply and calling, "Bubba! Bubba!" Sam struggled down from his arms to peer through the chain link at various places around the yard and call the dog.

After a few minutes had elapsed with no sign of him, Sammy gestured to his family. "Okay, he's wearing his

tags with our home phone number—” Sam threw himself to the ground in a crying fit.

Sammy picked him up. “We’ll drive around a little to see if we can find him, okay?” Sniffing and wiping his nose on his coat sleeve, Sam nodded.

On their way back through the house, Sammy told his mother, “Ah, our dog jumped the fence. If he happens to show up again, give me a call and I’ll come get him.”

“All right,” she said.

“It’s good to see you again, Carla.” Marni smiled as best she could, then glanced at the obvious water stain on the corner of the wall.

The Kidman family trudged out to the Jeep, Clay still sleeping and Sam still weeping. After everyone had been strapped in, Sammy started the engine and turned back to his eldest son. “Okay, Sam, I’m going to drive around the area while you look out for Bubba. How’s that?” Sam stopped crying and looked intently out the side window.

For the next twenty minutes, Sammy drove down one street and up another in a widening sweep around Carla’s house, but there was no sign of Bubba. Finally giving up, Sammy turned the Jeep homeward, and Sam turned his head away from the window and closed his eyes.

When they arrived home, Marni removed the coats from her guys, as they were starting to sweat. She put on Looney Tunes© for Sam, then sat with Clay to nurse him.

Sammy sat with her to say quietly, “Well, that visit was just so special.” She said nothing, waiting. He reiterated, mostly to himself, “Yes, it was.”

He passed a hand over his face, then vacantly watched the anvil flatten Wile E. Coyote into a walking pancake. “She wants to know that I’m happy so she won’t feel guilty about what her family did to me. I... asked her not to make Clint into a reincarnation of her dad; she wasn’t sure about that. I asked her to pick a date that we could come take her to the Arboretum, but she couldn’t even do that because Clint wouldn’t like it.”

Marni thought about that, then asked, “What are you going to do?”

“Ah, nothing, until she calls me. I can’t do a thing until she’s ready to let go of the security of somebody telling her what to do,” Sammy said. It made him think about Abby’s monsters, and he wondered: is there a demon of Cowardice?

They had a light dinner, because no one was hungry, then were faced with the impossibility of getting Sam to bed without his buddy of the last nine months—a lifetime to a toddler. They kept him up late, past nine o’clock, to make him sleepy. Then they laid him in bed, and—

Nothing doing. He sat right up again. “Stupid dog!”

Sammy sighed. “Yeah, let’s not hurt his feelings anymore, calling him ‘stupid,’ okay, Sam? We’ll drive around tomorrow to look for him.”

Whereupon Sam began to kick and scream, waking his brother, who also began to cry. Marni got Clay out of his crib to hold him and calm him down.

Sammy sat on the bed beside his thrashing son. “Okay, Sam, look. You can come to our bed just for tonight,” he offered with a sinking heart.

This option his son also rejected. “Bubba! I want the Bubba!” He continued to emphasize the point by kicking the bed until the mattress bounced. His parents just looked at each other; neither had the faintest clue how to make him stop crying. Sammy was never tempted to hit his son for any reason—the memory of the whippings his Uncle Ralph had administered were evergreen.

Sammy’s phone went off. Standing, he took it out of his pocket to look at the display. “It’s Pruett,” he muttered.

Marni jerked her head toward the doorway. “Go on out to talk; I’ll stay with him.” There was certainly no chance of having a phone conversation in the same room as a screaming toddler.

Nodding, Sammy put the phone to his ear and left the room. Marni continued to stand beside the crib holding Clay while Sam pitched a fit on his bed.

Barely twenty seconds later, Sammy reentered the room and Marni looked at him in surprise. He sat on the bed and said quietly, “Sam, do you want to go with me to pick up Bubba?”

He had to repeat it once or twice until Sam calmed down enough to listen to him. “Get the Bubba?” he asked tearily.

Sammy looked back up at his wife. “Pruett called to inform me that he let Daisy out into the back yard to do her business, and when he looked out again, Bubba was back there keeping her company.”

Marni’s jaw dropped. “He found Daisy! How far is it from Carla’s house to Dave’s?”

Sammy shrugged. “Four miles, driving; a lot less if you’re cutting through yards and alleys following a scent.”

“That’s unbelievable,” she whispered.

“Go get the Bubba?” Sam pleaded.

Sammy regarded him. “Yeah, you can go with me, if you’ll go potty first. I’m not going to stop and change your diaper.”

Sam slid off the bed and ran to his toddler potty. Sammy continued to sit on the bed; Clay had settled back down sleepily on his mom’s shoulder.

“Tinkle! Tinkle!” Sam called.

“All right, c’mon back in here so we can get you dressed,” Sammy called, whereupon bare-bottomed Sam came running back in. Reaching for the pull-up diapers, Sammy glanced up at his wife. “You want to come?”

“No, thanks,” she said dryly. “I’ve had all the drama I can stand for one day.”

“I am very nearly there myself,” he admitted.

He got his son dressed, then they two went out to the Jeep in the garage. Sam wanted to sit up front, but Sammy firmly put him in his seat, thinking that he’d probably fall asleep on the way. It was already 9:30.

Fifteen minutes later, when Sammy pulled up to the curb at the Pruetts’ house, Sam was still awake. He gazed critically at the lighted house. “Bubba?”

“Let’s go see,” Sammy said, cutting the engine and taking up the leash.

He released his son from the car seat to carry him up the walk to the front door. Before he could ring the bell, Chris opened the door. He was laughing, “You gotta see this.”

Apprehensively, Sammy carried Sam to the back picture window overlooking the patio and yard. Kerry was standing at the window, chortling. “Hi, Sammy. Oh, hello, Sam. Your dog is being very funny.”

“Stupid dog,” said Sam, at which Kerry and Chris started laughing all over again. Sammy sighed; their reaction pretty well guaranteed that Sam would be saying it till the end of time. Then Sammy and Sam looked out upon the drama unfolding in the back yard.

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## Chapter 4

Dave was standing over both dogs, talking authoritatively. Daisy was sitting in a relaxed, friendly posture. Bubba was lying crossways in front of her, practically across her front paws. His tail was waving and his hackles were down. But every time Dave tried to get around him to Daisy, Bubba growled.

Sammy's shoulders drooped. "Stupid dog." He bit his tongue, then opened the back door, saying, "You stay here, Sam, till I—"

Sam was having none of that. He bolted between Sammy's legs and then flattened himself on his belly to slide off the elevated patio feet first, so as to not lose time going down steps. Then he ran to Bubba, crying, "Stupid dog Bubba!"

The dog received him happily, holding him down with his front paws to lick his head thoroughly in welcome. Sammy came up behind him to fasten the leash onto his harness.

Then he looked around at the 7-foot wood privacy fence. "Do you know how he got in?" he idly asked Pruett.

"Helicopter," Pruett shrugged. "We tore down Chris' lean-to and moved the trash can months ago. I'm not done with the fencing, but the hole's been patched. What interests me more is how he found his way here from your house. Or did he jump the kennel fence at the Arboretum?"

"Neither," Sammy said, watching Sam cuddle his buddy. "He jumped the four-foot fence around my mom's back yard on Clear Haven Drive."

"You're kidding," Pruett laughed.

"Nope," Sammy confirmed. "Well, thanks for your call. Everybody oughta sleep tonight, if I can get him home." Remembering Bubba's transgression in his mother's house, Sammy led him to the side gate of the yard, which Pruett unlocked. Sam walked right along with a hand on Bubba's harness.

The dog went with happily waving tail, jumping right up into the Jeep. Sammy darkly suspected that was because, having ascertained the location of his lady friend, Bubba was confident of finding his way to her again.

After Sammy had fastened Sam in his seat, Bubba wedged himself in between the guys' car seats so that he could sit right next to him. And by the time Sammy got them home, both were asleep.

The Kidmans slept late the next morning—all but Sammy. He was so used to waking up around five AM for his early-morning workout that he did today, too. Eyes mostly closed, he pulled on his sweats, socks and shoes, then snagged the front-door key that he kept on a lanyard hanging by the door.

At the gentle pressure on his leg, he looked down at Bubba, tail waving in the murky darkness. "Oh, you think you're going with me, are you? Well..." Considering, Sammy went to the Jeep in the garage to bring out the leash. Prior to yesterday, he had often run with Bubba untethered in the mornings. But that was before yesterday.

He hooked up Bubba and let them both out the front door, locking it behind him. (This was a safe neighborhood, but still Dallas.) He stretched in the predawn chill, breathing in cold air and enjoying it. When he felt sufficiently limber, he set off down the street, Bubba at his side. He settled into his stride for the long haul, watching the frosty haze that surrounded the streetlights.

A silver sedan passed him slowly. Grudgingly, Sammy relocated himself and Bubba to the sidewalk. He usually preferred running in the street because the sidewalk tended to have unexpected obstructions: cracked or uneven blocks, toys, curbs, or infringing landscape plants. That was another benefit of running early in the morning: he could run in the middle of the street, if he wanted, without endangering himself.

A few minutes later, the sedan passed him again. Sammy noticed, but did not alter his stride. However, at the next corner, he turned abruptly, leading Bubba to the alley halfway down the block. He turned in here to run through the alley the length of the block; emerging at the end, he cut across the street to the next corner to run normally down the through street.

Ten minutes later, as he turned a corner to begin on the homeward leg of his run, the silver sedan turned into his path from a corner thirty feet in front of him. Bubba's hackles rose at the sudden high beams, and Sammy pulled him onto the sidewalk. Here he stopped, watching the sedan slowly approach.

The driver stopped the car and opened his door. Shading his eyes with a hand, Sammy still couldn't see who it was. "Sammy Kidman?" a vaguely familiar male voice asked.

"Who is it?" Sammy asked. Bubba was alert but still.

"Quinn Reilly," he said, stepping out of the car. This was Abby's guest competitor for the burning-man stunt. He had suffered only first- and second-degree burns because Sammy had pulled him down to the sand to smother his flames.

"Oh." Sammy lowered his hand and walked toward him. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I got a call from Fletcher Streiker telling me you'd be running this morning. I want to get in to see Abby. Can you get me in to see her?"

Sammy hesitated. "I don't know. I'd have to ask her. Why didn't you just call me?"

"Eh, I lost your number," Reilly said.

Sammy studied him. Something did not feel right about this. "Why do you want to see her?"

"Just want to see how she's doing," Reilly said earnestly. "And, ask her about her show—if they're going to resume filming any time."

Sammy nodded. "Have you seen the film of your stunt?"

"Oh, yeah," Reilly breathed. "They showed it during deposition. Yeah, there was something obviously wrong from the beginning, but the assistant producer—Nash—swears he had nothing to do with it, and so far it's just the girl's word against his. They haven't located anybody he supposedly hired."

Abby's personal assistant Meadow had accused Nash of hiring someone to tamper with the stunt equipment in order to get rid of Abby. Quinn had been collateral damage—or would have been, had Sammy not intervened on instructions from Streiker.

Sammy looked off, thinking. Bubba stirred restlessly, but when Sammy pulled back on the leash, he sat. "Have they arrested Nash for his assault on Meadow and me?"

"I don't think so," Reilly said. "I guess they're concentrating on the most serious accusation. I don't know."

Neither did Sammy. He hadn't been interviewed by detectives about Nash's shoving Meadow, and attempting to

shove him, out of a second-floor window. Pruett had caught her. Sammy had not trusted Pruett to catch him.

“How did you know that I was going to see Abby?” Sammy asked.

“Well, it’s—general knowledge around the rehab center,” Reilly faltered.

“Okay, I’ll talk to her. I still have your number; if she’s agreeable, I’ll let you know,” Sammy said, moving off. Bubba sprang up, ready to run again.

He and Bubba finished their run without further incident, though he wasn’t sure of miles covered because of the unplanned change in his route. Mulling everything over, he returned to the house before it was light.

While Bubba went back to Sam’s bed, Sammy shut himself in the third bedroom to work out with his free weights. He pumped, still thinking. Then he positioned himself head down on the decline bench with a dumbbell in each hand to do situps. He hated situps, which was a good reason to do them. Pausing in between them enabled him to articulate these questions to himself:

*If Reilly saw the video of the burning stunt, why am I not hearing “thank you”?* Sammy wasn’t looking for praise or adulation; it just seemed strange that Reilly was not in the least curious about why Sammy just happened to be there. If Streiker had told him why, then Sammy would be hearing the above missing words. Something was askew here.

*Why would Streiker tell him to come find me on my run?* Sammy couldn’t explain why this struck him as odd, but it did. Oh, he didn’t doubt that Streiker knew where he was and what he was doing, but, always before when Streiker wanted Sammy to talk to someone, he told him personally. Of course Streiker talked to other people, but having Reilly approach him in such a questionable manner created too many opportunities for mishap. Streiker seemed a lot more deliberate than that.

*What does Reilly want from Abby?* This bothered Sammy the most. Yeah, he felt a little protective of her; she was very vulnerable right now. Surely Reilly knew that her show had been canceled. Did he think she still had the connections to get him on another show? That would be crass use of a badly injured woman. If that wasn’t his rationale, Sammy didn’t know what else it could be. No, he didn’t believe that Reilly “just wanted” to see her—if that were true, he’d be camping at the rehabilitation center until somebody let him in.

Sammy finished his repetitions and then went looking for his phone. Since he didn’t remember where he had left it, he went to the most likely place: the clothes hamper in the master bedroom dressing area.

Sammy quietly closed himself in the dressing area to not wake Marni, then rifled the hamper for the slacks he had worn yesterday. Pulling them out, he dug through the pockets until he found his phone. Shaking his head, he scrolled to Streiker’s name and put the phone to his ear.

“Hello.”

“Mr. Streiker—I’m sorry to call so early,” Sammy said, suddenly wondering what time it was. “All I wanted to know was if you sent Quinn Reilly to me this morning.”

“No,” Streiker replied.

“You didn’t tell him I was out running in my neighborhood?” Sammy asked, startled at being right.

“No,” Streiker said.

“Well—who did?” Sammy asked, perplexed.

Streiker paused. “Sammy, it would be more profitable to you to research that yourself, so that’s what I’m going to let you do.”

“Ah ha,” Sammy breathed. “All right. Is there anything else you can tell me? I’m kind of concerned about Abby here.”

“You have good instincts, Sammy. You should trust them,” Streiker said.

“Okay. Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome, Sammy.”

Without thinking, Sammy put the phone back in the pocket of the pants that he dropped back into the hamper. He then showered and shaved. After dressing in his standard uniform of slacks, long-sleeved shirt, and sports coat (regardless of the weather), he checked his watch—7:40—and then looked out to see Marni barely coming awake.

He leaned over her to kiss her neck and whisper, “I’m running some errands in my car. Call me if you need me. I want to come home to a redhead.”

“D’you have your phone?” she murmured.

His shoulders slumped. “Almost.” He returned to the laundry hamper to secure his phone in the pocket of his current pants, then kissed her again on his way out.

First, he drove out to the Hawkinses’ old house, where Abby’s mother, father, and autistic son were staying. Frank Catriona, Abby’s father, was in the process of buying the house out of foreclosure. As Sammy pulled up in his classic 1966 lime-green Mustang (with the top up because of the cold), he saw Ripley come look through the front storm door.

Sammy paused in concern. When he had brought Abby out here some weeks ago, he had been in the Jeep because of the slushy ice on the road. This was the first time Rip would have seen the Mustang since their harrowing ride out of the Catrionas’ old gang-infested neighborhood. The ride had scared the boy pretty badly.

“Hi, Rip,” Sammy called, climbing out of the car. The boy disappeared from the doorway.

Heart sinking, Sammy began trotting up the sidewalk. When he was almost to the door, Ripley appeared again, this time wearing the medallion Sammy had given him. Rip opened the door himself as his grandfather, Frank, appeared behind him.

“Well, Sammy! Hello!” Frank said, reaching out a hand. “It’s good to see you.”

“Hello, Frank.” Sammy shook his hand warmly. “It’s good to see you, too, though I’m still sore at how badly you roasted me in Truth or Dare.”

Frank threw back his head to laugh. “You were a good sport, Sammy.” He looked out wistfully to the Mustang. “Is Abby with you?”

“Not today,” Sammy said, bending to look the boy in the eye. “I’m about to go see her,” he added, and it was unclear whether he was talking to Ripley or Frank. “She needs to come home. She needs to live here while she gets better. But she’s afraid that the most important person here doesn’t want her to come.”

Frank wisely said nothing while Ripley rocked slightly. Still eye to eye with the boy, Sammy said, “Abby needs a hero.”

“I am a hero,” Ripley said, fingering the medallion. His grandmother Helena came up behind him, covering her mouth, and Frank patted her shoulder.

“I see that,” Sammy noted. “Can you be a hero to your mom?” Ripley looked at him dubiously. Sammy added, “Will you come with me to tell your mom to come home? If you tell her to, she will.”

Ripley looked at his grandfather, who said, “I think that is a good idea, Rip. I will go with you.”

“All right,” Ripley said.

“Thank you,” Sammy said, extending his hand gravely to Ripley, who shook it gravely.

Helena brought up their coats, although the sun had come out to warm the air a few degrees. After hugging her good-bye, Ripley and his grandfather accompanied Sammy out to his car. “I hope you don’t mind sitting in back, Frank,” Sammy said in the boy’s hearing. “I would like for Ripley to sit up front with me.”

“That’s fine with me,” Frank said heartily. “How about you, Rip?”

He didn’t reply, but didn’t object when Sammy pushed the seat forward for lanky Frank to climb in back. Coat in hand, Frank compressed himself into the seat behind Sammy so that Ripley could easily see him.

After righting the seat, Sammy knelt at the door, inviting Ripley, “Hop in, Copilot.” With an eye on his granddad, Ripley sat and allowed himself to be buckled in. He was still wearing the medallion.

Sammy quickly rounded the car to the driver’s side. Sitting, he moved the seat forward as much as he could to give Frank a little more leg room. As he started the engine, he said, “All systems go. Looks like a nice, quiet ride ahead of us, Rip.” And the pulled into the street.

After answering Sammy’s call that morning, Streiker put his phone down on the table in front of him and looked at the people sitting around it: Charles Whinnet, Yvonne Fay, and Adair. They were in a small conference room in Streiker’s barbecue place. Adair, to his right, asked, “Does he know yet?”

“No, but he’s about to find out,” he said, leaning back in the rattan swivel rocker. He rocked thoughtfully for a moment, then said, “He’s taking Frank and Ripley to see Abby.”

“Oh, my,” Yvonne breathed. She was sitting across from him.

“Yeah,” Streiker exhaled.

Charles, Streiker’s longtime friend and president of The Rivers Bank, was sitting to his left. A handsome man with silver-gray hair, he looked mildly disconcerted. “What is the problem?”

Contemplatively, Streiker said, “Just that Darren Loggia has managed to slip out of Beaconville.”

“What?” Charles said in shock, then asked, “To get revenge on you?” Streiker nodded. Charles asked, “How does he think he’s going to do that all by himself? You demolished the Warfield Group.”

Streiker considered that, gazing out the large window at the private lake. Every room of this restaurant seemed to have a lake view. “First thing, he has to start building influence and gain a following again—he needs

accomplices. Along the way, he'll be looking to exact some revenge on our friends with Great Deal Life Insurance." This was the fictitious company name that MK & Associates had somehow appropriated as their current identity, though they never had anything to do with life insurance.

"Where exactly is he now?" Yvonne asked.

"Good question. Apparently he went straight into hiding to work under cover. You won't be able to spot him until he chooses to make himself known. When he does, it will be to lash out at whichever employee of mine is closest," Streiker said.

"What do you want us to do?" Charles asked.

Streiker considered that, leaning back in his chair. "Our best bet would be to provoke him into exposing himself early so that he can be contained before he has a chance to act. That's going to involve our friends. So, Chuck, I'd like for you to take charge of the Masterson family."

(Mike Masterson had been sergeant in charge of the Dallas Police Department's Targeted Activity Section where Dave and Sammy both worked a lifetime ago, before Sammy had won the lottery. Mike and his wife Charisse were close friends of the Kidmans and Pruetts, while Mike's teenage children Lacie and Todd were past masters at Truth or Dare.) Streiker continued, "Yvonne, you have the Pruetts. Adair has already claimed the Kidmans." He smiled at her, and she smirked back at him.

He elaborated, "Answer their questions and give them direction when they need it, but don't intervene unless the situation is critical. Protect them at all costs. You can check with me on specifics. All right?"

They nodded or otherwise indicated assent. "You may go," Streiker said. Yvonne and Charles rose and walked out, talking. Adair half rose; seeing her husband's hazy smile, she sank back to her chair.

He reached out to take her hand. "You chose the hardest job," he observed.

"So I could be close to you. It's so much fun to watch you work," she smiled.

"I'm nothing if not fun," he admitted.

"Especially when popping monsters," she chortled. "Will you take him out now, finally?"

He regarded her. "We're getting there. We're getting close."

He shifted in his seat, and she watched him. Finally, he observed, "You... had asked to see Daniel." This was his adopted son whom she had cared for in Streiker's absence.

"Yes!" she said eagerly. "Can I, now?"

He hesitated. "Do you remember Daniel's asking if you would love him when he had a different face?"

She thought back for a moment, then said, "Yes! I had no idea what he was talking about. I still don't."

"Well, I'm about to show you Daniel with a different face," he said.

"What?" she blinked.

He stood. "Come with me. He won't see you—or if he does, he won't know who you are. But you're going to see Daniel with a different face."

At Chris Pruett's Dallas high school, the freshman class—to which he belonged—was given early release from school today, Wednesday, as a reward for their performance on the last round of state-mandated tests. There was much griping among the students and their parents that this gesture was not granted on a Friday, when it could have been put to better use. Also, the midweek disruption of the normal schedule created problems for working parents in getting their children home.

Thus Chris was still standing outside the front entrance of his school long after the dispersal of most of his classmates. (The upper grades were still in class.) He was on his phone to his mom, Kerry, who was venting, "Where is your father?"

Chris laughed, "If I knew that, I wouldn't 'a' called you. I knew you were working today." As he talked, he regarded the only other student also waiting. This was a new kid who had enrolled just a few weeks ago. He hadn't made any friends because he was taciturn and surly.

Right now he was leaning on the bike rack, smoking a cigarette. He looked to be waiting for a ride without any expectation that anyone would show up. Since he wore only a faded jean jacket over a tee shirt, he was shivering slightly. Chris was considerably more comfortable in his suede coat. Both he and the other kid glanced at a man and woman passing by on the front sidewalk, but they were strangers, so the boy lowered his head again.

Still on the phone to her son, Kerry exhaled, "Well, I can't leave yet. Is there any place you can wait until I reach him?"

"I'll just walk, Mom. I've got my key," Chris said, still eyeing the new kid, trying to remember his name.

"No, Chris—it's almost three miles in heavy traffic," Kerry said anxiously.

"Mom, if Dad's out on a job for Mr. Streiker, I might still be standing here when you get off at four-thirty," he complained. "Come on, he might need somebody at home."

Kerry hesitated, then sighed, "All right. Be careful. Call me the minute you get home."

"Sure," Chris said. Putting his phone away, he went right over to the new kid and extended his hand like a man. "Hey. I'm Chris Pruett."

The boy raised up in surprise. He had dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a deep tan—in February. Transferring his cigarette to his left hand, he lightly brushed Chris' hand with his right. "Daniel Kanani."

Chris nodded to the empty street. "Looks like we're both waiting on boneheaded dads."

Daniel snorted, tossing his cigarette to the dirt and grinding it out with a frayed sneaker heel. "My dad disappeared years ago so I ain't lookin' for him today."

"Well, if you feel like dodging traffic for three miles, we've got the new GameRager system and a honey-baked ham in the fridge that nobody's using," Chris said.

Daniel looked at him in quick interest. Slowly picking up his backpack from the ground, he said, "You sure your dad won't mind?"

"Nah," Chris waved. "He's in too much trouble with my mom. Let's go." Daniel half-smiled as they trotted down the front walk and crossed the street.

A woman sitting in a sedan parked down the block from the school watched them, then put her phone to her ear. “Fletcher? Daniel missed his bus to get home, just as you said he would. No one has come to pick up Chris, either. Both boys are leaving on foot.”

“Ah. Good, Yvonne. Can you follow them and make sure they get to the Pruetts’ house okay?”

“Yes. I’ll be the crazy driver circling blocks all the way,” she said, starting the engine.

“Thanks. Call me when they get there.”

Looking up and down the street, Yvonne replied, “All righty. I saw you and Adair walk by. Did she recognize him?”

“No. But she’ll see him again,” he replied.

“I can’t wait.” She put down the phone and checked her rearview mirror to pull into the street.

At that moment, Dave Pruett had just stepped out of the shower. Toweling off, he looked out the bedroom window to the back yard with its stately new fence sections and newly installed evergreen shrubbery. He felt great satisfaction in going above and beyond Streiker’s instructions to fix the fence himself.

Not only was the repair and restoration of professional appearance, but it was secure: the neighbor’s mongrel would *not* reach Daisy, who was now lounging in front of her own little house. Every now and then she lifted her head to look at a certain low point in the old part of the fence.

Yes, the job had taken him a lot longer than he had anticipated, and yes, he had left his phone here on the bedside table, as he hadn’t wanted to risk getting it wet or dirty—and it suddenly went off.

Securing the towel around his waist, he walked over to pick it up, glancing at the unknown number. “Hello.”

“Dave, I have a personal favor to ask,” said Streiker.

“A personal—! Certainly, whatever,” Dave said.

“Chris is going to walk in the door in about thirty minutes with a boy named Daniel. I’d like for you to just—tolerate his presence; show him some hospitality. He needs Chris’ friendship right now.”

Dave’s brows gathered. “Absolutely, Mr. Streiker.”

“Great. And let them have the ham,” Streiker said.

“Sure,” Dave said, mystified.

Streiker terminated the call, whereupon Dave looked in mild alarm at the number of messages on his phone. Wisely, he decided to get dressed before tackling them, and turned to the bureau.

In Sammy’s Mustang en route to the rehabilitation center, the occupants were quiet. Sammy was thinking ahead as to the best way to get Abby and Ripley seeing eye to eye. Suddenly the boy said, “Truth or dare, Sammy?”

Surprised, Sammy opened his mouth, but then Ripley said, “Ah, better make it a Truth. I don’t want to get myself banned from the restaurant.”



Sammy slowed the car to stare at him. He had just quoted verbatim Sammy's reply to Frank's question when they had played this game several months ago.

Ripley went on: "All right, Sammy. What is the one thing people keep saying about you that you wish they wouldn't talk about? And your coworkers here are going to be the judge as to whether you're telling the truth or not."

Sammy looked in the rearview mirror to see Frank nodding. Apparently Ripley had acute recall relating to his autism. (The name for it, which Sammy did not know at the time, is "savant syndrome.")

Ripley continued his recital, taking up Sammy's part: "Aw, you had to ask that." Ripley even reproduced the introductory groan accurately. He let a few minutes pass in silence, to reflect Sammy's thinking time.

After what must have been the same length of silence to the second, Ripley gave Sammy's answer: "I guess that would be how I keep leaving my phone somewhere else besides in my pocket." Sammy put a hand quickly to feel for his phone in his pocket. As it was there, he downshifted to turn a corner.

Ripley then supplied Mike Masterson's response: "That's it." Then Ripley added Dave's rejoinder: "For once, he's telling the truth. Congratulations, Mr. Catriona."

Sammy pulled into a parking space at the rehabilitation center. Cutting the engine, he remarked, "That's pretty good, Rip"—although Sammy knew that it wasn't a performance. It's just something he did for his own reasons.

They got out of the car, Frank stretching his legs while Sammy looked around. "You know what?" Sammy decided. "Frank, I think you and Rip might want to wait for us in the quadrangle here. It's not too cold, and you both have your coats. I'll bring Abby out to you. She's sick of that little room."

Thrusting his arm into a coat sleeve, Frank said, "That's a good idea, Sammy. Yes, I've walked her out here a number of times myself. C'mon, Rip; there's a bird feeder. Let's go sit and keep an eye on it."

While those two went into the open quadrangle, Sammy trotted up the steps to the front entrance of the center. Passing through the lobby, he failed to notice that the security guy wasn't in place at the moment, and thus did not see the visitor. Sammy was supposed to stop at the front desk for his visitor's tag every time he was here, but had stopped doing so after the second visit.

He went to Abby's door and knocked as a courtesy. There was no private security around her any more; she was no longer valuable. Hearing her affirmative grunt, he entered.

Despite the puffiness of her face, he saw her surprise. "What are you doing back?"

"I have a surprise for you in the quad," he said, going to her wardrobe. "C'mon and get dressed." Technically, she was dressed, as she wore a loose top and stretch pants. Sammy pulled out her coat, hat, mittens, and outdoor shoes.

"Wait. I gotta go to the john," she said. He helped her out of bed, but she waved him away in order to shuffle to the attached half bath and shut the door.

He listened to her flush, but it took her a long time to wash her hands, so that he got impatient. "Can I give you a hand in there?"

"Shut up," she said.

"Well, get a move on. It's cold out there," he said.

The bathroom door opened. “Why should that matter?” Everything she said came out in a mutter.

“Because of the surprise. Sit.” He pushed her gently down to the chair and knelt to remove her slippers. He put her socks on, then strapped on her orthopedic shoes and lifted her to a stand. He held her steady with one hand while grabbing her coat.

When he threw it on her, she said irritably, “I can do that.”

“I know,” he replied. “But I’m penalizing you for taking your sweet time in the bathroom.”

He put on her knitted cap and her mittens, then led her out as quickly as she could walk. “With this much build-up, it had better be a press conference to announce my new show,” she quipped.

“Ha ha. It’s better than that,” he replied, pushing open the door to the quadrangle.

He walked her down the smooth, even sidewalk until they reached the garden area. Frank turned on the bench and stood, but Ripley was already standing, watching her come down the path. She saw him, then, wearing the medallion that Sammy had won competing against her when she was strong and healthy.

“I am a hero,” Ripley said.

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## Chapter 5

Abby covered her mouth with a mittened lump of hand while tears poured down her face. “You were always a hero, Rip,” she whispered.

He came up to awkwardly put his arms around her, and she bent over him. “Abby,” Frank said. “We want you to come home. Don’t you think it’s time for you to come home?”

“That’s up to Rip,” she whispered.

“Well, Rip? Don’t you think Abby needs to come home so that we can take care of her?” Frank asked, man to man.

“I am your hero,” Ripley said.

“Well, then, let’s jet,” she said, wiping her wet face, but the mitten was not very absorbent.

“Okay!” Sammy said. “We’ll get you signed out—” As he turned, he saw Quinn Reilly walking from the parking lot to the front door of the center. Reilly did not see the group in the quadrangle.

Sammy bent to pick Abby up and begin carrying her rapidly to his car. He said over his shoulder, “Come on, Hero. Frank.”

“Sammy—?” Abby said, holding his neck between her arms.

“Quinn Reilly just went in and I’m not sure what he wants,” he murmured in her ear.

Arriving at his car, he set her down so he could open the passenger door and shove up the seat. “Hustle, friends,” he said, watching the rehab entrance in case Reilly should suddenly exit.

Frank, bemused, nonetheless urged Ripley into the back seat and plopped beside him. Sammy got Abby strapped into the front seat and quickly walked to the driver’s side. As he sat and started the engine, Ripley began swaying. “Charlie, Charlie, Charlie.”

“We’re all good, Rip,” Sammy assured him, watching the rearview mirror as he sedately exited the lot into the street. After a few minutes of normal riding, Ripley stopped calling for Charlie. Sammy was chatting to Abby about the new house, the yard, and the garden.

“I hear that Helena is showing Rip how to get the garden all cleaned up for spring planting. Is that right, Rip? I’m not sure what he’s going to plant. But, another couple of weeks, you should start planting. Is that about right?” Sammy asked him, glancing in the rearview mirror. He drove normally and correctly. Ripley did not answer, but he didn’t look frightened, either.

In a few minutes, Sammy pulled up in front of the Catrionas’ house. He assisted Abby out, then moved the seat up for Frank and Ripley to climb out of the back. Sammy turned Abby over to her dad so that he could help her up the front walk. Sammy paused, thinking, then followed them to the front door where Helena stood waiting, teary-eyed.

He entered the house after them, stepping around Abby in the arms of her mother, who was rocking her like a child. Sammy drew Frank aside to tell him, “Okay, here’s what happened: I saw somebody coming into the rehab center that I’m not sure oughta be there. I’m going back to talk with him all friendly-like. Ah, can I borrow a

large trash bag? I'll bring Abby's things back here."

"Good." Frank darted to the kitchen, where he reached under the sink for a black trash bag, which he brought back to Sammy.

On the way out, Sammy stopped beside Abby, still resting in her mother's arms, to tell her, "I'm going back to pick up your stuff."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "Especially the skin cream in the medicine cabinet."

"Gotcha," he said. Then he paused to add, "Good job, Rip. You're a hero." Ripley touched the medallion on his chest, then leaned against his mother.

Sammy, thinking hard, went out to his car, folding the trash bag to lie flat in his back pocket. He drove back to the rehab center, still thinking. Having been here often, he knew their routines and their lax security, which he intended to exploit today.

He parked in the same spot near the quadrangle, glancing around. On a midweek morning, there weren't many visitors. He entered the quadrangle, surreptitiously looking around, then went in the exit door that he and Abby always used. He casually strolled down the hallway to her room, going in only when no one else was in view.

Then he whipped out the trash bag and rapidly looted her room. He took only her clothes, her few personal belongings, and the contents of her medicine cabinet, including the scar-minimizing skin cream. This pilfering required about three minutes.

He stuck his head out of her door before exiting with the trash bag, then casually hauled the trash out the quadrangle door to his car. Here, he deposited it in his trunk, then drove to a conspicuous parking place right in front of the entrance. He got out, cheerfully trotting up the steps to the double doors.

In the lobby, he stopped at the desk for his visitor's tag. "I'm Sammy Kidman, here to see Abby Catriona," he announced.

The clerk, who knew him well, said, "Hi, Sammy! Thank you for remembering to pick up your tag. You've been very bad about that. You're late today." Glancing at the clock, she scanned his tag and handed it over.

"I sure am," he said regretfully, taking his tag. "I'll try to be better about remembering it."

As he turned, clipping the tag on to his lapel, he almost ran into Quinn Reilly coming up behind him. Sammy started, and Quinn said, "Hey, Sammy. Have you come to see Abby? She's not here."

"Not here?" Sammy scowled, turning down the hallway. "Of course she's here. Where would she go?"

"I don't know," Quinn said, following him. "But I just checked her room. She's gone."

"Huh," Sammy said. On his way to her room, he briefly wondered what would have happened had Reilly decided to wait in her room. But he didn't.

As Sammy turned to her door, he glanced up at the security camera in the hallway. If it was being properly utilized, it should record all three of his visits today. Calculating the odds of whether it *was* being properly used, he decided to risk that it wasn't.

He opened her door, then made a show of stopping to look around. "You didn't tell me that she had cleared out!" he said accusingly.

Reilly stared into the room. “She—all of her stuff is gone! In just the few minutes I’ve been waiting, somebody took out all of her things!”

Sammy looked at him dubiously. Reilly protested, “What? Why would I take her stuff?”

“I don’t know,” Sammy said coolly. “But, strange thing. Mr. Streiker said he didn’t tell you where I was this morning.”

Reilly stared at him. “What?”

“I just talked to Fletcher Streiker, and he said he didn’t tell you to come find me on my run this morning,” Sammy repeated.

Reilly shook his head. “Someone calling himself ‘Streiker’ called me. How would I know where you were otherwise?”

Sammy thought about that. “Good point. Well,” he sighed, looking around, “I guess Abby just checked out without telling anybody.” In disappointment, he turned out of the room.

Reilly caught up with him as he relinquished his ID to the desk clerk and told her, “Abby’s gone.”

“Gone?” she blinked.

Sammy nodded sadly. “I wish you had told me she had checked out. Oh, well. Later, Reilly,” he said, turning to the door.

Reilly looked after him, but chose to watch the clerk sit to check her computer logs. Sammy knew that if they found the right security-camera footage, he could expect a visit from the cops. At that point, he’d explain himself. Not before.

Watching for tails, he drove a roundabout way to the Catrionas’ house, and arrived without seeing anything suspicious. He retrieved the trash bag full of Abby’s personal effects and took it with him to the front door.

Frank answered the door. “Sammy! Oh, thanks,” he said, receiving the trash bag. “Come in.”

“Not now, Frank, thanks. Is Abby getting settled in okay?” Sammy asked, distracted.

Frank exhaled. “It’s strange, in a way, but it’s as if this was meant to be. She’s been wandering for thirteen years, and has finally come full circle back home.”

Sammy nodded. “Good, Frank. Listen... something’s going on, and I don’t know what that is. So, if someone you don’t know calls or comes here asking about Abby, don’t tell them anything. You got my number?” He patted his pocket for his phone, which happened to still be there.

“Yes, you gave it to me after Truth or Dare,” Frank reminded him.

“That’s right. Good. Okay, if anything strange happens, give me a call.”

“I will, Sammy. Thank you.” Frank reached out his hand, and Sammy shook it.

He went down the walk and stood beside his car for a moment, then got in and drove to the corner market. He did not want anyone seeing his car in front of that house. As long as he was at the market, he picked up a coffee

and sandwich for lunch. This he took to a stool at the counter.

Glancing around to see that no one was within earshot, he called home. “Hey, baby. What’s up? I can say that because Sam’s not listening, is he?” he asked peevishly.

“Not right now. I put The Three Stooges on when Mr. Striker called,” she said.

“What did he say?” Sammy asked, taking a large bite.

“Not much. He wanted me to send his black ops team to Belize to get some kids out of the hands of child smugglers,” she said.

He stopped chewing. “Wha—? Again? Why isn’t he calling them himself?” he said around a mouthful.

“I asked him about that! Turns out he’s having a problem with someone impersonating him right now. Also, his black ops contact likes my voice—”

“I bet he does,” the jealous husband said.

“—because I sound like his mother!” the 25-year-old laughed.

Sammy snorted, “Wait till you’re a redhead.” Then he looked at his phone when it beeped notice of an incoming call. “Okay, that’s Mom. I’d better answer that. Will call you right back.”

“Okay, Sammy.”

He cleared his mouth, then answered, “Hi, Mom.”

“Oh, you knew it was me,” she said, pleased.

“Sure. I stored your number from your last call,” he said.

“Oh, good. Would you like to come over today?” she asked hopefully.

He didn’t, not at all, but could just imagine how saying so would sound. Then he thought, *What’s a family for if not to suffer with you?* So he said, “Well, I’m tying up some loose ends at work, but, sure, I’ll swing out your way. How about I get Marni and the guys to come on out, too, then we can take you to the Arboretum?” he asked.

“Well, all right, if your dog stays home,” she said hesitantly.

“We won’t bring him into your house,” he assured her, as promising that Marni could get Sam to leave Bubba behind was impossible.

“All right, then,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll call Marni, then finish up here and come,” he said.

“Oh, wonderful, Sammy! See you, dear!” she said excitedly.

He ended the call, musing over her rather sudden change of attitude. She had never expressed much desire to see him at all, and now she was all happy about it. Pensively, he dialed his wife back.

When she answered, he asked, “Are you and the guys up for a visit with Mom? I promised her we’d take her to the Arboretum, and we need the Jeep for that.”

“Sure, Sammy. It’s not too cold, and the guys would enjoy the field trip,” she replied.

“Okay. I’m going to finish this sandwich that I’ve been trying to eat for the last fifteen minutes, then I’ll meet you at her house. Do you remember where she lives?”

“Yes. Not far from the Pruetts’,” she said.

He groaned, “That’s right. Okay, see you shortly.”

“I love you, Sammy.”

“I love you too, baby.”

He finished his lunch and wiped his hands, then went on out to the Mustang. Starting the engine, he thought to swing back by the Catrionas’, because he was so close already. So he drove down the block and turned on to their street in time to see a car pull up to the curb in front of their house.

He veered to that side of the street, pulling up nose to nose as Quinn Reilly stepped out of his car. Reilly looked in surprised irritation at the Mustang, then his face cleared as Sammy got out, smiling.

“Hey, Quinn! What’s up?” Sammy asked, all most friendly.

“This is so strange,” Reilly admitted. “I got another call from Streiker. He gave me this address and told me that Abby is here.”

Sammy grew serious. “Yeah, let me tell you about that, Quinn. You’re being played. Some joker is impersonating Streiker, sending you on all these wild goose chases. I don’t know who’s doing it, but when Streiker finds out, there’s gonna be hell to pay.”

“Oh, man.” Reilly drooped in disappointment. “Then she’s not here? It doesn’t look like the kind of place she’d go to recuperate,” he admitted.

“Why do you want to see her?” Sammy asked, hands in his pockets. “Maybe I can help.”

Quinn hesitated as Sammy looked on in friendly concern. Then Reilly admitted, “I was hoping to get on her new show.”

Sammy controlled the urge to scowl as best he could. “What new show, Quinn?”

“‘Life as a Cripple,’ or something like that. They’d show clips from her previous shows, then video of how she’s doing now,” he explained.

Sammy blinked at him. The cruelty of the suggestion, and the presumed audience for such an atrocity, were considerations he just had to set aside in order to get at important information: “Who’s floating this concept?”

Reilly shrugged, but Sammy was relentless in waiting. So Quinn admitted, “Blaine suggested it to another producer, a friend of his.”

“Blaine Nash?” Sammy asked in disbelief. “Her former assistant producer who’s been accused of trying to kill her? And *you*?”

Reilly protested, “Oh, no, man. Nash is the one who saved me.”

“What?” Sammy gasped.

“Nash pulled me off the bars and down to the sand. He saved my life,” Reilly said.

Again, Sammy constrained himself, but it was harder this time. “No, Quinn, I’m the one who pulled you down. Didn’t you see the video?”

“Yeah, but—what about it?” Reilly said distractedly.

“Couldn’t you see that it was me on the video? Why do you think I tried to warn both you and Abby away from doing it? Why do you think Streiker had me call you? He’s the one who told me to get you out of it!”

“Wow,” Quinn said, distressed. “The video wasn’t all that clear, and Blaine said—well, I don’t know. I guess the only way I’ll know for sure is to ask Abby.”

Sammy opened his mouth again, then shut it. No, that wasn’t the only way to find out. If Reilly really wanted to know, and none of the video shot that day was conclusive, he could talk to the fire and police personnel who worked the scene. But if he wanted access to Abby, he could provoke Sammy into giving up her location to salvage his own pride.

Sammy bowed his head, then looked up. “Okay, I see your point. I’ll take you. Get in your car and follow me.”

As Sammy turned to his Mustang, Reilly asked, “Where are we going?”

“The Fletcher Streiker Arboretum,” Sammy said, opening his car door.

Chris and Daniel bounded up the steps to the Pruetts’ front door. “Is that crazy lady still following us?” Chris panted, digging in his pocket for his house key.

Daniel leaned back to peer up the street. “No, I don’t see her.”

“But you recognized her?” Chris asked, glancing back.

“I... don’t know,” Daniel said. “But, bummer. We coulda had some fun on the way—”

“Nah, it’s probably for the best. My folks would take me apart if I didn’t come straight home,” Chris said, turning the key in the lock.

Daniel began, “But if they’re not here—”

Chris opened the door. “Hey, Dad! You are here.” Winded, Chris entered the foyer, holding the door open for Daniel behind him.

As Dave, six-foot-two, advanced, Daniel shrank back. He might have even darted out again had Chris not already closed the door. “Dad, this is a friend of mine from school—Daniel Kanani.”

“How do you do,” Dave said briskly, shaking the boy’s limp hand as if he were a new professional acquaintance. Characteristically, Dave did not explain his failure to pick up his son.



Chris relaxed at his father's friendly manner, and broached, "Uh, we were just going to get a bite to eat, and then break out the GameRager—"

Dave was shaking his head. "Not till after you get all your homework done for tomorrow. So, if you gentlemen will have a seat at the table and get cracking on it, I will assemble the greatest honey ham sandwiches you ever experienced in your life."

"That'd be awesome, Dad." Chris grinned back at Daniel, who unwillingly half-smiled.

So while Dave took ham and condiments from the refrigerator, the boys brought their backpacks to the kitchen table. When Dave summoned Chris to inspect various side dishes, Daniel reached into his backpack and frowned at an unexpected find.

Slowly, he brought out an orchid spike from atop his books. In confusion and wonder, he touched the deep red petals, unwilted and uncrushed. He experienced the brief, flashing memory of a beautiful lady dancing on a rickety porch surrounded by rain, and five smooth pebbles in the hand of a compassionate man....

Years later, that man had faded from his life. Daniel found his mother again, whom he thought had died. And he came back with her to this gray, ugly city that ground him down until he had almost forgotten the beauty of his island home—

"Daniel, do you want potato salad or chips with your sandwich?" Chris asked.

Thrusting the stem back into the backpack, Daniel quickly blinked tears from his eyes. "Either."

"That means 'both,' Dad," Chris said, returning to the table, and the boys sat to open their math books.

Charisse Masterson finished off the *pave au chocolat* and placed her napkin beside the dessert plate with a sigh. Leaning toward the coworker on her left at the elegant round table, she muttered, "All right, Bette, I'll admit that was a great lunch. But it's not going to make up for having to sit through another boring presentation."

"I know," groaned Bette. "But this is about business scams in the Dallas area, and Phil wanted detailed notes to pass on to his clients."

"I'll set my phone to record, aim it right, and then no one will care that I shut my eyes for a minute," Charisse said.

Politely, the women attended the introduction of the keynote speaker for the Greater Dallas Business Association luncheon: Charles Whinnet, president of The Rivers Bank. As Mr. Whinnet took the podium, thanked his hosts, and began speaking about the scourge of business scams that plagued opportunity-seekers in the area, Charisse felt her eyes grow heavy.

Stubbornly, she blinked, took a sip of water, and even drew out a paper notepad from her purse to take notes. But as he continued to talk, her eyelids closed again.

When Whinnet said, "And one of our worst repeat offenders is Bantybridge Business Brokers," Charisse's eyes sprang open. "The range of their offenses is long and tedious, but it might be well to take the time to document it, as they've been a festering sore in the Dallas business community for years," he said with a lingering glance toward Charisse's table.

Eyes riveted on him, she flipped open her notebook and wielded a pen. For the next twenty minutes, she wrote nonstop as Whinnet described Bantybridge's sins in graphic, horrifying detail. Their shenanigans had left their

associates nothing but debt, foreclosures, bankruptcies—and suicides.

When the session finally ended, Charisse and her coworker exited to the parking level, Bette searching her purse for her keys. “You... seemed to find the bank president’s talk pretty interesting after all,” Bette observed.

Grimly, Charisse admitted, “Yes, I’m afraid it was relevant.”

As Bette unlocked her car doors, Charisse’s phone went off. When she answered, her husband Mike said, “Hi, honey. Listen, I’ve been thinking... Mr. Streiker hasn’t had much work for me, and Jeff at Bantybridge called again—”

“Not a chance, babe,” Charisse snapped.

Mike argued, “But, I’ve seen the financials, and—”

“Well, wait’ll you have a look at all the numbers in my little notebook, courtesy of Charles Whinnet,” she growled, settling into the passenger seat.

“Charles Whinnet? Of The Rivers Bank?” Mike asked.

“The same,” Charisse said. “I know you’re not particularly happy with the work Mr. Streiker has given you, but subbing at Todd’s school is a step up from what Dave and Sammy are doing, from what I hear. Besides, the kids think you rock.”

“Yeah,” Mike admitted.

“I think you just need to wait on him for better assignments. We’ll... talk tonight.”

“Okay, honey,” Mike conceded. She put her phone away and Bette raised her eyebrows, turning the ignition.

At that time, Marni was parking the Jeep at the curb in front of Carla’s house. She unstrapped the guys while restraining Bubba from jumping out. Holding Clay on her shoulder, she instructed, “Sam, help me put Bubba in Grandma’s backyard.”

He slid down beside her legs and they both held on to Bubba’s harness to walk him around the house. Sam opened the back gate while she pushed Bubba into the yard. Even before she had latched the gate again, Bubba scrambled up and over the fence to disappear in the direction of the Puetts’ house.

“Bye, Bubba!” Sam called, waving. Now that he knew where to pick up the stupid dog, he was willing to allow him unsupervised visits with friends.

Marni shook her head in resignation. But she trooped the remainder of her crew back to the front door to ring the doorbell.

Carla answered with a welcoming smile that faded when she saw who was not on her porch. Unaware, Marni said, “Hi, Carla!” as she reached out to hug her with one arm.

“Where’s Sammy?” Carla asked, looking around.

“He was coming straight here after a job,” Marni said.

“Oh, I see. Well, please, come in.” Carla stood back for Marni and the guys to enter.

Sam did so sullenly. “Go to Pruett’s?”

Marni looked down on him sympathetically. “You and Daddy will have to pick him up tonight.”

“Tonight? WAHHH!” Sam stretched himself out on the floor to throw a screaming tantrum.

Marni drooped, then looked at the stain Bubba had left on Carla’s wall. Sammy’s mother stood back watching Sam as if he were a wild animal—which, considering what she was seeing, was not an unreasonable reaction.

“Well—maybe Sammy—” Marni began, digging for her phone.

To her great surprise, it went off in her hand, signaling a call from her husband. When she answered, he said, “Uh oh. Sounds like you got to Carla’s and Bubba jumped the fence.” She could barely hear him over Sam’s fit, so moved away to sit on the couch, as Clay was heavy. He looked unperturbed by his brother’s disquiet.

“You are exactly correct,” she said into the phone.

“Okay, well, just load everybody up and come on out to the Arboretum. I’m on my way there now—will explain stuff when you get here,” he said.

“Sounds like a plan,” she said in relief.

“Bye now,” he said.

Putting her phone away, Marni said, “Okay, he’s on his way there.” She got up to stand over Sam and say, “Sam, Daddy is going to the Arboretum. Mr. Pruett may come too, and bring Daisy and Bubba. Do you want to go see if he’s already there?”

As if by a miracle, he stopped thrashing around and got up to head for the front door. “Wait there, Sam,” Marni instructed. Turning to Carla, she repeated, “That was Sammy. He’s on his way to the Arboretum now and wants us to meet him there.”

“He’s on his way there? I thought he was coming here, first,” Carla said, ruffled.

“Apparently, something happened. Sometimes Mr. Streiker will call, and when he does, Sammy has to take care of what he asks right away. Anyway, he wants us to come on out there.” Marni shifted heavy Clay, ready to get him back into his car seat.

Carla still looked disappointed. “Oh, well, all right. If that’s what he said.”

“Where’s your coat?” Marni asked, smiling. “It’s pretty chilly outside.”

“Then why are we going to the Arboretum?” Carla asked peevishly, unmoving.

“Oh, they have some beautiful indoor exhibits. And Sammy probably wants us to meet him at the barbecue place,” Marni said. Her arms and shoulders were beginning to ache. “I’ll get the guys loaded up while you get your coat.”

She reached out for the front door handle, and was very surprised when it retreated from her grip. Then she was looking directly at a surprised Clint Bowers. “Who are you?” he bristled.

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## Chapter 6

All Clint had to do was look at Sam, Jr., to know who the strange people in his mother's house were. His face cleared. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi! We're taking Carla to the Fletcher Streiker Arboretum. Would you like to come?" she asked cheerfully.

He stared at her momentarily. "No and no."

She shrugged, then turned. "Carla, do you want to get your coat now?"

"No, thank you!" Carla answered, as if Marni had suggested something obscene.

This was not a surprise. "Well, I hope you can come another time," Marni said regretfully. She turned to the door, which Clint was blocking. "Excuse me," she said as brightly as possible through clenched teeth.

Without moving, he said, "You tell your sorry-ass husband that he and his rats are not welcome here. You come again and I'll toss you out on your rear end." He was ignoring Sam's efforts to get out around him, which involved pushing and pounding on the obstructing leg.

Marni's almond eyes turned to slits. "We were invited."

Clint turned on his mother. "Did you invite this trailer trash?"

"No!" she said fearfully.

He turned back on Marni. "Get out!" He shoved her probably a little harder than he intended. With a heavy infant on her shoulder, she fell against the door and trod on Sam's foot, who began crying.

"Clint!" Carla cried.

He stepped back, muttering an apology. Although Marni was shaking in rage, she kept her head and carried Clay out to the Jeep. Sam was running ahead of them with a noticeable limp.

After getting them strapped in, she had to stop and calm herself a moment. With a deep breath and a prayer for composure in traffic, she started the engine and looked in the rearview mirror to pull into the street.

Back in the house, Carla stared at her son. "Clint, how could you push her like that? A woman with a baby in her arms? How could you do that?"

He looked remorseful. "I apologized, didn't I? Besides, you said they weren't invited."

"Why does she need an invitation to bring my grandchildren to see me? They are my grandchildren as much as yours are!" she said.

"I said I was sorry! What more do you want?" he shouted.

"I think you should leave now," she said stiffly. "This is *my* house."

Perturbed, he left. Carla locked the door behind him, then sat on the couch and cried. "Oh, dear. Why did that have to happen? I so wanted to see him today."

Sammy pulled into the parking lot of Streiker's Barbecue Place, closely followed by Quinn in his car. After parking near the entrance, Sammy got out and paused by his car while Reilly parked and climbed out reluctantly, looking at the restaurant. There was a fair number of lunchtime patrons inside.

"Is she here? I wouldn't think she'd be ready to go public," Quinn said dubiously.

"No? When you're talking about a reality show about her?" Sammy asked with a disturbing smile. "Come on in." He himself turned to the entrance. Reilly followed.

Inside, Sammy helped himself to coffee and dessert. Reilly followed him to the buffet line, still looking unsure about all this. Sammy assured him, "The ribs are great. The sausage links are, too. The potato salad is a little spicy, but I like it that way. The beans have jalapeños in them. Actually, it's all great." So saying, he took his coffee and desert to a table and sat down.

Reilly filled his plate, then brought it to Sammy's table. "So why aren't you eating?"

Sammy said disgustedly, "I had lunch before I knew I'd be out this way. Wish I had waited. Still, the cobbler's good."

Reilly began eating, looking around. "Where is she?"

Sammy glanced up over his coffee cup. "Not in the main dining area, that's for sure. I'm really wanting you to talk to Mr. Streiker before you see Abby."

Reilly paused in mild alarm. "Is he here?"

"Probably," Sammy allowed. Reilly looked dubious, but ate his lunch.

About the time he had finished eating, someone approached the table. "May I join you?"

Sammy stood. "Sure! Have a seat. Here he is, Quinn. This is Fletcher Streiker."

Reilly merely arched a brow; Streiker sat as a busboy came around to remove the plate that Reilly had pushed to the side. Glancing at the empty plate, Streiker asked him, "Did you enjoy your lunch?"

"Sure, it was okay," Reilly said.

"Good."

There was a period of silence. Reilly glanced peevishly at Sammy a couple of times, but Sammy contentedly sipped his coffee. Then Sammy broached, "Quinn here wants to know if you called him to tell him where Abby was."

Streiker turned to Reilly. "Is that right?"

Reilly frowned. "Sure. Wasn't that you?"

"No," Streiker answered genially.

"Oh." Reilly looked puzzled.

Sammy leaned toward Streiker. “He also wants to know who, in fact, rescued him while he was burning, and on whose instructions.”

Again Streiker asked Reilly, “Is this what you want to know?”

Reilly protested, “This is bizarre. But, sure, tell me what you think.”

“Sammy pulled you down because I had told him you would die if you attempted the stunt. Have you seen his arms?” Streiker asked.

“What? His arms? No,” Reilly said.

“Oh, this is good.” Sammy stood to whip off his sports coat, then sat to push up his sleeves and exhibit the mild but plain scarring on the insides of his forearms. “Hey, what do Nash’s arms look like, after he pulled you down while you were all ablaze?” Sammy asked.

“I don’t know,” Reilly said, glancing between them, “but this is beside the point. Is Abby here?” he demanded of Streiker.

“Not at this moment,” Streiker replied.

“Well—” Reilly stood in annoyance. “Thanks for nothing, pal.” He threw a twenty-dollar bill down beside his plate, turned and walked to the front doors.

Sammy watched him, then looked back at Streiker. “You warned me they wouldn’t all be grateful, but that’s gotta be—”

When the front doors opened for Reilly to exit, a small body rushed in. Sam perceived his dad at the table at once and ran up to him, still limping. “Dadadada! He pushed my mommy!”

Sammy’s brows came down as he regarded his son, then he looked up at Marni entering with Clay. Recognizing the set of her mouth as suppressed anger, he slowly stood. Samuel, Jr., repeated, “He pushed Mommy!”

Marni avoided her husband’s eyes as she sank into the chair across from Streiker. “Hello, Mr. Streiker. It’s good to see you.”

“I’m glad to see you, too, Marni,” he said.

Sammy sank back to the edge of his seat, holding Sam. “Where’s Carla?”

Marni swallowed. “She decided not to come.”

“Was Clint there?” he asked levelly.

She hesitated, still not meeting his eyes. Sam insisted, “He pushed her!”

Sammy breathed, “Did he put his hands on you?”

She sagged, then admitted, “It was no big deal. Yes, he kind of pushed me toward the door, and I stepped on Sam. We’re okay.”

His face rigid, Sammy gently put Sam off his knee to stand. Streiker said, “Let me deal with Clint, Sammy. I can hurt him better than you can.”

Sammy just looked at him, then calmly turned and walked out of the restaurant. Marni gasped, “He’ll kill him. Mr. Streiker—!”

He smiled, waving her down. “No problem. I’ll watch the guys while you get a plate. The potato salad is not as spicy today.”

She stared at him, but he jerked his head in the direction of the buffet line. “Go on. I’ll get a high chair for Clay.” She hesitantly rose from the chair with a glance at the closing doors.

Sammy exited the restaurant to approach his car. He was calm and purposeful, with a strange, exhilarating sense of clarity. It felt good. He didn’t really care what happened after he got through with Clint because that exercise in itself would be highly satisfying.

Coming to his car straight on, he glanced at his reflection in the windshield. And he saw the Monster rise up over his head, bony mandibles dripping blood, smiling. Sammy froze, watching Hatred massage Sammy’s own heart with long, sharp talons.

In terror, Sammy ran back into the restaurant where Streiker was sitting with Sam on his knee, contentedly munching crackers, and Clay in a high chair next to him. Sammy threw himself into the chair opposite him, gasping, “Help. Help me. It’s got me.”

“Let go of it and push it away, Sammy,” Streiker reminded him.

Sammy closed his eyes, bracing his forehead on the heels of his palms. A moment later he asked, “Is it gone?”

“Yes,” Streiker replied.

Sammy sat up, wiping his face. Sam slipped down off Streiker’s knee to come sit on his dad’s lap and pat his shoulder in reassurance. “What...” Sammy began, then asked, “will you hurt him really really bad?”

“I will hurt him profitably, Sammy,” Streiker replied, and Sammy groaned.

Marni came up with two plates. Seeing him, she almost collapsed in relief. “Oh, Sammy. I’m so glad. Thank you, Mr. Streiker.”

“You’re welcome, Marni. Sit down; he’s okay,” Streiker said, standing to pull out her chair.

“Thanks,” she breathed. She shoved a toddler plate toward Sammy, along with a hand wipe to clean Sam’s hands before he started eating. She took a long look at her husband’s face, then murmured, “Wow, what did he do to you?”

Sammy waved it off. “I want to hear what happened when you got to Carla’s.” He ripped open the towelette package with his teeth while Sam obediently extended his hands.

“Well...” She put a few peas and slices of cooked carrot on Clay’s tray which he began studiously smashing. “Carla was disappointed that you didn’t make it to her house before coming here, but she agreed to come on out with us. Her son showed up then—he didn’t ring the doorbell or anything; just walked right on in.”

She stopped to eat a bite or two. “Oh, you’re right,” she said to Streiker. “The potato salad is a little tamer today. Thanks.” He smiled.

“We’re so glad that the kitchen got the potato salad situation straightened out,” Sammy said. “But you were

saying?”

“Her son got ugly right away, asking what we were doing there. I told him we were taking Carla to the Arboretum, so he asked her, ‘Is that right?’ and she denied it. That made him madder, and he shoved me toward the door. I stumbled into Sam. How’s your foot, Sweetheart?” she asked him.

“It’s okay,” he mumbled around a soft roll.

“So we left,” she shrugged.

Sammy thought about that, chewing a nail. Then he glanced at the silent figure opposite him. “What can I do about him, Mr. Striker? I’m, ah, pretty ticked.”

“Sammy, you already know what you need to do. I expect you to comport yourself with kindness and restraint, and not interfere in what I’m doing with both Carla and Clint,” Striker said, glancing at someone across the room.

“I understand that,” Sammy said quickly, as Striker appeared ready to leave. “But—why didn’t you say anything more to Quinn while he was here?”

Rising, Striker looked down at him. “Because he wasn’t listening. You’re doing fine with him, Sammy.” Then he left the table.

Sammy did not turn around to see where he was going, but Marni watched him walk to the arms of his wife, Adair. She clasped him about the neck to whisper something interesting in his ear, then she looked at Marni to wink. Marni smiled reflexively, feeling that she had been let in on a secret, although she didn’t know what that was. Yet. She continued to watch as they strolled out to the parking lot.

Still in thought, Marni put a little potato salad in the midst of Clay’s smorgasbord. Sammy exhaled, running a hand through his hair. Sam was still perched on his knee. “Well,” he said, “at least *you* can tell me how you’re reading the situation with my mom.”

Marni nodded, thinking. “She’s cowed by her son—when he’s there. Over the phone, she was happy to come here with us, but she really wanted to see you at her house. She just doesn’t seem to be able to say that in front of her other son.”

Sammy studied her. “You think she really wants to see me?”

“Oh, yes. I’m sure of that,” she said.

“Huh,” he said.

Something in their conversation made Sam look up toward the kennel yard at the side of the restaurant. “Where’s Stupid Dog Bubba?”

A glance through the window to the yard told Sammy that it was empty. “Oh, yeah. You had to take Bubba, didn’t you? And he jumped the fence again, didn’t he?”

“Before we had even closed the gate,” she acknowledged.

“Okay. Let me call Pruett,” Sammy said, bringing out his phone. “We’ll head over there and pick him up.”

While he was occupied with his phone, Sam slid down from his lap and began running toward the front doors.



“Sammy!” Marni cried.

He swiftly looked, then bolted from his seat to pursue the toddler, who had run out the doors into the parking lot. A sedan that had entered the lot at almost 20 miles an hour was bearing down on a point ten feet in front of the boy, who would meet it shortly. Sammy, seeing the likely point of impact ahead, leaped across the front walk to get there first, even while knowing that he wouldn’t make it in time.

In his duress, Time became irrelevant. He was moving in some parallel universe of ether, unable to reach his son, who was frozen ahead of him far out of reach. Midstride, Sammy looked up to see Adair talking to her husband in the parking lot. Streiker’s back was to him, but Adair looked over at Sammy.

*“Oh, hi, Adair. Haven’t seen you for a while. How are you?”* he asked while his airborne leg lifted a few millimeters.

*“Doing fine, Sammy. I see that you’re running. Is something wrong?”* she asked.

His heart exploding with his exertion, he said, *“Actually, my son is about to get hit by a car.”*

*“Oh, no. May I help?”* she inquired.

*“Yes, that’d be great; thanks,”* he said.

She murmured something to her husband. He glanced at the oncoming vehicle, and Sammy saw a wall of light descend between it and Sam.

With that action, Time resumed its normal pace. The driver slammed on the brakes. The car hit the invisible wall, throwing the occupants forward and activating at least one air bag. Sam sat abruptly on the pavement in front of the car and Sammy hit the right front fender. His speed at impact was such that the momentum carried him over the hood of the car to throw him to the ground on the other side.

As he staggered to his feet beside the left front fender, he was surrounded by a group of people who assumed that the car had hit him instead of the other way around.

Sammy looked down at the white Audi under his hands, then up in surprise at Dave Pruett behind the wheel, knocking aside the deflated air bag and holding a handkerchief over his bloody nose.

Chris opened the passenger door. “Sammy! Sh—! Are you all right?” His airbag had not deployed, but there was a new dent in the right front fender.

Sammy opened his mouth to answer when Sam got up to run to the rear door behind Chris, crying, “Stupid Dog!” Another boy had just emerged from the back seat, holding Daisy by her collar.

But the sudden advent of Sam caused the other dog in the car to leap forward, knocking the teenage boy to a sprawl on the pavement beside Sam.

Whereupon Daisy and Bubba crowded out of the car to lope across the narrow stretch of pavement to the gate of the kennel yard. Sam ran after them to open the gate, let them in, and latch it behind himself and them. Then he fell on Stupid Dog, who licked him generously in return. The new kid regained his feet to shut the car door as Chris came over, laughing.

Sammy was still standing beside the car, watching all this open-mouthed. He blinked, replying, “No, thank you. Thanks, I’m fine. No, I’m okay,” to those concerned bystanders who clustered around him.

“But I saw you fly into the air. It must have hurt,” one woman protested.

“No, really, he’s hurt worse,” he replied, gesturing to Pruett with his bloody handkerchief. He still sat behind the wheel with the driver’s-side door open.

“What. The. Freak. Happened,” Pruett stated, muffled. Chris and his friend had trotted over to the kennel yard, where a number of people, Marni and Clay among them, had come out from the restaurant. Sam looked to be gravely receiving a major bawling-out from his mom. Since he had Bubba, however, he was taking it with aplomb. Chris’ friend was regarding the restaurant, the kennel yard, and the small lake with interest.

Sammy turned to scan the parking lot, but the Streikers were nowhere in sight. “Adair and the Big Guy,” he murmured in reply to Pruett, who lowered the handkerchief to stare at him. “And it would be really great,” Sammy hissed, “if you would not rip through parking lots like you were piloting a Raptor.”

Pruett groaned, “I was calling you to come pick up your dog. By the time I looked up again, there the kid was right in front of me.”

Having been careless behind the wheel himself, and often, Sammy could hardly castigate him. Cars began lining up behind the Audi, beeping their horns, so Pruett shut the door and shoved away the limp air bag to restart the car. He parked in a space, then continued to sit for a minute with his head back.

Meanwhile, Sammy went over to let himself into the kennel yard. Marni had sat Clay on the brown grass, where he clapped and chortled over Daisy and Bubba’s chasing each other and Sam. Marni held her husband’s neck tightly. “I don’t know how you did that, but I will love you forever,” she whispered.

“You have to love me forever anyway when I tell you that Adair got Streiker to do that,” he whispered back.

“What?” she said, pulling away. But she suddenly remembered Adair’s wink in the restaurant.

He opened his mouth and his phone went off. Exhaling, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the phone to look at the number display. He closed his eyes, pressing the phone to his chest in a wordless prayer for composure, then answered, “Hello, Mom.”

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## Chapter 7

“Hello, dear,” Carla said brightly. “I’m sorry I missed you earlier, but I’m free now. Would you like to come over?” She meant to sound welcoming, but Sammy detected the undertones of slight desperation.

He thought about that. He didn’t have to tell Marni what his mom had said, because she knew without having to hear it. So she moved away from him to go sit on a bench near Clay, who began creeping toward her. Chris brought his friend over to meet her, and they began talking about the near-accident. Sammy dimly heard her say, “Streiker,” and the boy with Chris looked around.

Sammy made up his mind. “All right, Mom. I’ll come over. But if Clint shows up while I’m there, and bullies you into making me leave, I won’t ever come again. If you really want to see me, you’re going to have to tell Clint that it’s okay for me to be there. Are we all clear on that?” he said, relapsing into his detective verbiage.

“Yes, of course,” she said faintly.

“Okay, I’ll be over in about twenty minutes,” he said, looking at his watch.

“Wonderful, Sammy! See you then!” she sang.

He put his phone away, making sure that it went securely into his pocket, then he went over to sit beside Marni on the bench. (Chris and his friend had gone into the restaurant by this time.)

When she turned her almond eyes toward him, they expressed not the irritation he expected, but sympathy. “I’m starting to think that Carla wants you to stand up to her son for her.”

His eyebrows went up. “Interesting thought. I will, if she lets me.”

“Good, because I’m not taking the guys over there again,” she said.

“Yeah. No,” he agreed.

Then he exhaled, sitting back. “Can you get them home okay?”

“Sure. Dave will help me get Bubba into the Jeep,” she said.

He started to gesture his intention to do that himself, but she shook her head. “No, I’m going to stay a while and let them all play. They’ve earned it.”

“You’re a great mom,” he said, settling back again.

“I know,” she grinned.

“You’ll make a great redhead, too,” he said, appraising her, and she shook her head, smiling.

They sat there for a few more minutes while he worked up the resolve to keep his word, since his inclination was to let his mom enjoy her real son’s company tonight. Idly, he wondered what the Petty Resentment monster looked like—probably slimy, whiny and double-headed, he thought. Whatever its appearance, he didn’t want it inside him.

So he stood in reluctance. “I thought Streiker was giving me rubber-gun duty because I’d screwed up

somewhere. But now I'm thinking this assignment with Mom is harder than driving a dead body to Fort Worth. It's as if the body woke up, started talking to you, and then keeled over dead again. Several times. While you're trying to drive."

She bit her lip in empathy or amusement, saying nothing.

On his way to the parking lot, he looked around for Adair or Streiker, but saw neither. He sat behind the wheel of the Mustang. Turning the ignition, he whispered, "Thank you, Mr. Streiker. Adair. Again." Then he threw an arm over the seat to look behind him while backing out.

Inside the restaurant, Chris had spotted a girl from school seated at a table with her family, so was talking to her. He looked around for his new friend, but Daniel melted back toward the kitchen, not wanting to meet anybody else today. Mr. Pruett was in the restroom, washing his face.

Leaning against the back wall, Daniel was idly canvassing the place, but his eyes kept stopping on one thing or another that stirred a sense of recognition in him—a potted plant here, a painting of a bird there. Then he saw a beautiful blue-eyed lady who was watching him with a faint, affectionate smile. Her face recalled to him the orchid in his backpack, and his heart began thumping.

Abruptly, Daniel walked out to sit in the back seat of the Pruetts' car, to wait for them there.

Ten minutes later, Sammy was pulling to the curb in front of Carla's house. As he got out of the Mustang, he saw a curtain move in a front window of the house across the street.

Sammy studied that house a moment, then looked at the houses on either side of it, as well as those on either side of Carla's house. Yeah, if Clint had an accomplice watching his mom's house, it would have to be from the house directly across from hers.

He looked in Carla's driveway, where her sedan, and only her sedan, was parked. Then he went up the walk to the front porch and rang the doorbell.

Carla answered with a bright smile. "Hello, Sammy! Come in."

"Hi, Mom." He bent to let her kiss his cheek and pat his shoulder. Conversationally, he asked, "Who lives in the house across the street? The one with the dark green door?"

She glanced back at him in surprise as she closed the door. "That's Sheila May. She's a widow, too. Come sit down."

Nodding, Sammy turned to sit on the edge of the nubby brown couch. "Is she friends with Clint?"

Carla sat beside him. "I believe she knows him. Why?"

"Well, that's how he manages to keep showing up when we're here. Doesn't he have a job?"

"He's a consultant of some kind," she replied vaguely. In brushing lint from her pants, her hand moved to pat his knee. "Would you like some hot tea? Or fruit-nut bread? I just made it."

He wasn't hungry in the slightest, but receiving her hospitality would buttress his claim of having been invited when Clint stormed in, as he surely would. "Yes, thank you."

"Oh! Well, come to the kitchen," she said in pleased surprise.

So they stood again, and he followed her to sit at the small kitchen table while she busily put on water to boil and unwrapped the bread. He made a show of feeling the pocket where his phone rested, then stood. "Excuse me. I'm going to see if I left my phone in the front room. Be right back."

She glanced up, nodding, and he went to the front door, out of her sight. Noting that it was unlocked, he locked it.

Then he looked around to see that, no, he had not left his phone in this room; it was still in his pocket. So he reentered the kitchen. "I found it," he announced, sitting again.

"Good." She put a large slice of fruit-nut bread on a small plate and set it before him, then asked, "Now, do you prefer a traditional tea like Earl Grey or an herbal tea?"

He looked up blankly, then said, "You know, I think I'd prefer just a glass of water. Thanks."

"Oh." She drew the water to place that before him as well.

He took a bite of bread, then paused. "This is actually very good."

"Thank you, dear," she beamed.

He ate another bite, then casually asked, "Does Clint have a key to your house?"

"No," she said studiously.

He glanced up in disapproval. "He should. If anything happens here, he might need to get in to check on you."

"Oh, well—" She glanced away. "He may have. I'm not sure."

Sammy nodded to himself. It depressed him to see how quick she was to lie about it. He ate the whole slice of bread while she brewed tea for herself and sat opposite him.

"Thanks. That was great." He pushed the plate away and she rose as if to take it, but he gestured her to sit. "Mom, we need to talk about what happened when Clint came over while Marni was here."

"Oh!" she exhaled angrily. "I told Clint that was a terrible thing to do, and he did apologize to her."

He grimaced. "You know, Mom, a verbal apology is really not sufficient for assault."

"Assault! He didn't hurt her!" she exclaimed.

Sammy's jaw tensed at her defense of Clint. "He put his hands on her, and he did injure Sam when he shoved her into him. If Clint has any history of abuse, he could face jail time for it, especially as Marni can prove she was not trespassing."

"Are you going to report it?" she asked breathlessly.

He studied her. "No, Mom, but that's not the issue. The problem is that Marni does not feel safe here. And I will not continue to come to a place where my wife and children are not safe."

"Oh, dear," she said, distressed.

He leaned forward. “Mom, you’ve got to make some choices here. I’m glad you want to see me, but I won’t be the boyfriend you’re hiding from your family. You have to draw a line with Clint. If he’s going to barge in every time I visit you, you have to take away his key.”

She began protesting, “But I don’t—” Then they heard the front door open.

Sammy sat back and looked at her. “You don’t what?”

Clint stalked into the kitchen. “I knew it. You can just get out of here right now.”

Sammy did not raise his eyes, but continued to look at his mother. She had her head down, biting her lip. Clint shouted, “I said get out!”

Sammy slowly got up from the chair. Clint was standing so close that it was hard to maneuver without brushing up against him, so Sammy pushed the chair out of the way to stand. He looked down at his mother one last time.

She had raised her face, but not to look at him. She was staring off into space, distancing herself completely from the scene at hand. So, hard as it was, Sammy backed away from a fight he wanted very much. He turned to walk out.

“And don’t come back!” Clint shoved him from behind into the kitchen door jamb.

Sammy felt Hatred rear up with the fierce urge to knock Clint’s teeth down his throat, but willed himself to be still and not react. After the moment required to gain control of himself, he stepped away from the door jamb and walked to the front door. He let himself out.

Halfway down the front walk, he stopped cold. All at once, he knew why his dad Sam had pleaded guilty to a false rape charge rather than go to trial. It wasn’t to shield her, but to protect himself.

Sam knew that Carla, compelled to testify, would agree to whatever her dad told her to say. She would testify that Sam had raped her, and any jury would have convicted him.

A plea bargain, even for 20 years (with time off for good behavior) would conceivably be less than what a jury would set after watching this poor, lovely, 17-year-old girl’s tearful testimony. The warden’s personal notes on Sam amply buttressed Sammy’s suspicions that the crooked judge on the case would have sent Sam to prison for life had Carla been forced to take the stand.

And now, for whatever reason, she was replaying this dramatic scenario with Sam’s son, without the sexual aspect (from his perspective, anyway). But since Sammy had declined to knock Clint through the kitchen wall, he wouldn’t be going to prison.

He also thought about that first visit to Abby’s hospital room, where Streiker had shown Sammy the monster Hatred. By exposing its true form and effects, Streiker had begun to inoculate Sammy from its influence. This confrontation with Clint, this role-playing of Carla’s, had to happen some time; Streiker decided that the time was ripe. And it was because of him that Sammy was not sucked into a ruinous rage.

Considering all this, Sammy watched the curtains across the street shiver, and he continued on to his car.

Pulling into the garage of his home 20 minutes later, Sammy parked next to the Jeep and let himself into the laundry room. From the kitchen, he heard Moe say, “Why, you—” and Curly respond, “Woo woo woo woo woo!”

Hands on hips, he entered the family room where Sam and Clay sat in brotherly companionship at the feet of the

venerated Masters while Bubba slept pressed against their backs. Marni was at the computer in the front room. She was studying a web page while talking on her phone. “Oh, gosh, I wish Sammy were here. He’d know.”

“Your wish is granted,” Sammy said.

She jumped, wheeling. “Ack! Sammy, don’t do that to me!” Over the phone, she said, “Yes, he just appeared out of thin air. I’ll let you talk to him.”

Extending her phone to him, she said, “This is Amit. He works for Mr. Streiker, and he needs to know what weapons Dallas Tactical uses.”

Sammy took the phone. “Amit?”

“Yes,” a slightly accented voice said. “Am I speaking to Sammy?”

“Yes, Amit. Okay, you need to know about Dallas Tactical weaponry? They all carry as a sidearm the 9 millimeter Sig Sauer, although a lot also use a Glock or Beretta. On assignment they’ll use carbines like the M4a1, CQBR, or Colt Commando. Sig Sauer 551 or 552 is also a popular choice. Sub machine guns in vogue are the H and K MP5 and Colt....”

While he continued running down a checklist of names and numbers, Marni drifted back to the family room to look in on the guys. They remained mesmerized by maneuvers they would soon perform on each other.

When she reentered the front room, she heard Sammy say, “Could I ask why you’re asking?” He listened, distress crossing his face. “What weapons?” he asked. His eyes widened. “Rocket launchers? Oh, no. No way. Not unless a lot has changed in the year and a half since I left the department. Okay. You’re welcome.”

He clicked off the phone and handed it back to her. She eyed him, and he said, “Yeah, the IDF has been intercepting weapons smuggled into Gaza. Indications are that they came from this country, and Amit is checking around with the large urban task forces to see what’s in use.”

“Oh, no,” she breathed.

“So now you’re the clearinghouse for information on smuggled weapons,” he remarked.

She shook her head. “Mr. Streiker must have given Amit my number knowing you’d be walking in the door right about then. I had just answered. Well—what happened at your mom’s?”

“Oh, man,” he said. “Come sit down and we’ll talk.”

When they came into the family room and sat down, Sam looked around. “Dada.” He got up to crawl onto Sammy’s knee. Clay then lit out for Marni’s lap, and Bubba picked himself up to move a few feet to plop across all the feet that were on the floor.

Marni picked up the remote to turn off the TV and then opened her shirt to nurse Clay, who curled up contentedly on her arm. Meanwhile, Sammy told her in detail about his conversation with Carla and his encounter with Clint.

She breathed, “He pushed you, too! What is his issue with pushing people? Oh, thank you for not killing him!”—and she was not exaggerating at all.

“You’re welcome,” he said dryly.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“Oh, she hasn’t left me any wiggle room to do anything but what I told her: I’m not going over there again,” he vowed.

“Do you think she’ll call and ask you to?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Well, what are you going to tell her?”

He thought about that while Sam laid a sleepy head on his shoulder. “If she wants to see me again, she’s going to have to get in her car and come here, or meet us at the Arboretum, which is closer to her house anyway.”

“Then if Clint wants to push you around for stalking your mother, he has to climb in his car and follow her,” she snorted.

He grinned briefly, then puckered in displeasure at the sleet coming down outside. “Meh. I don’t want to sit around the house tonight, but you’re going to get all maternal about taking the guys out in this weather.”

She also looked out the broad window into the back yard. “We could go sit around my parents’ house, since we’ve been invited. They’re having a six-month birthday party for baby Adair.” This was a neglected infant that Marni’s parents had adopted and named after Streiker’s wife.

“A party for her turning six months old?” he asked with a laugh.

“Yes, although technically, that was Monday. No gifts,” she clarified.

“I guess we’d better go, then. Pam always has a great spread in the kitchen. When do we eat?”

“Shortly after you get there, probably,” she noted.

So they loaded up the guys in the Jeep to make the six-block journey to the Taylors’ house. Before leaving, Marni made her husband take his dog out to the back yard to do his business. After his transgression at Carla’s house, she did not much trust him anymore (the dog, that is).

When they finally arrived at their destination house, Sammy set the brake, noting, “Hey! That’s Mike’s Corolla at the curb!”

Marni said, “Oh, I forgot to tell you: when Charisse saw some of the portraits Mom has done, she asked her to do one of Lacie and Todd. So they’ve been over for several sittings.”

“Hmmm. How can I inject a little fun and mayhem into this endeavor?” he muttered.

“Sammy!” Marni laughed. “Why? They’re your favorite people, except for maybe the Pruetts.”

“That’s why,” he said.

They unloaded the guys and went to the front door. Sarah Hawkins answered the doorbell with baby Adair in her arms. “Oh, hello, everyone! Hello, Bubba,” she said a little nervously, as the great graying muzzle was stretched up to the infant in her arms.

“Hello, Sarah.” Marni leaned forward to hug her. “My goodness! She changes by the day!”



“I know! Isn’t it amazing?” Sarah said proudly. Her attitude was justified, in that she helped take care of the baby.

“I don’t think I’ve seen her in the same outfit twice,” Marni murmured, fingering the soft footed onesie the baby wore. It was a sweet fleece print of Valentine hearts over soft pink and purple flowers.

“Where’s Mike?” Sammy asked. “Hi, Sarah,” he added.

“Oh, he’s in the gameroom watching basketball with Mr. Taylor,” Sarah said.

Marni looked pained. “‘Clayton,’ Sarah. He’s going to get so depressed if you call him ‘Mr. Taylor.’”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I keep forgetting,” Sarah fretted.

Meanwhile, Sammy slipped past her to head into the kitchen, where something smelled good. Surprised and irritated to not find his mother-in-law cooking, he realized that he was checking the wrong room. So he went to her painting studio in the back of the house.

There, he grinned to see her at her easel, sketching. Her subjects, 13-year-old Todd and 17-year-old Lacie, sat side by side in high stools close together. Charisse sat in a comfortable armchair near the large window overlooking the back yard. Upon Sammy’s stealthy entrance, she pursed her lips knowingly. Lacie shrieked and Todd lost his serious demeanor.

Pam paused in her sketching to turn around. “Hello, Sammy. I think the snack mix is ready. Will you pull it out of the oven, put it in a bowl, and take it to the gameroom for me? Thank you.”

“Sure,” he said in disappointment at her outmaneuvering him. The Masterson teens settled down as he turned away. Before leaving, he glanced in satisfaction at the painting she did of him with the orchid sprig across his chest. It was a very special painting that he wouldn’t allow her to show publicly. Then he looked at the orchid sections that she had successfully rooted and potted.

He was so irked at the reminder of the loss of the orchids given to him by Adair Streiker that he paused to say, “It’s all good. You look fine, Lacie. Don’t change a thing till I get back.”

While he walked out, Lacie scrambled down from the stool to rifle her purse for a compact mirror. Todd snorted; Pam glanced back at Sammy in resignation: he would not leave a room without eliciting a reaction.

In the kitchen, he donned an oven mitt to pull the pan from the oven. The snack mix looked done, he thought, but he didn’t know what it would look like if it wasn’t done. So he dumped it in the ceramic bowl on the counter and took that to the gameroom.

“Hey, Mike. Clayton. I’ll be your server today,” he said, setting the bowl on the coffee table in front of Mike.

“Good to see you useful,” Mike said. “How about my own special bowl for this?”

“One over here, too, Sammy,” Clayton said from his lounge with its own snack table beside it. Sam was in his lap awaiting snacks as well. Marni, still talking to Sarah in the foyer, was holding Clay. Judging from her frequent shifts, she was about to go sit down.

“Oh. Bowls,” Sammy said. So he returned to the kitchen to procure the small red plastic bowls he’d seen Pam use for the snack mix.

He brought those in, handing one to Mike, then filling a second to take to Clayton. Upon receiving it, Clayton said, “The iced tea is on the counter ready to pour. Better ask Marni what she wants Sam to have. In the sippy cup.”

“A beer here,” Mike added. “No cup, sippy or otherwise.”

Sammy, exhaling, returned to the kitchen to pour Clayton’s tea and procure Mike’s beer, which he served up. Then he glanced at the large-screen television to note that the UC Santa Barbara Gauchos were playing the Hawaii Warriors.

He stood there watching for so long that Sam made a grab for Grandpa’s tea. “Sammy, he needs his cup,” Clayton reminded him.

“Yeah,” he exhaled in his martyrdom.

He reentered the kitchen, where Marni and Sarah had relocated their conversation. Sammy paused beside his wife’s chair, and she looked up to say, “Sam only gets water in the gameroom, Sammy. His cups are in the cabinet to the left of the sink.”

“Oh, right,” he said.

He was departing with the filled cup when Marni said, “Would you bring Clay’s playpen in here, Sammy?” The beefy baby was asleep on her lap.

“Sure,” he sighed.

After delivering Sam’s water to Clayton, Sammy was in the process of hauling out the playpen when Mike said, “Uh, it’d be great to have some napkins in here, Sambo.” His tone of forced patience was the same that he always used when correcting his oft-errant detective in front of superior officers.

“Gah!” Sammy said, which caused Sam to throw his sippy cup in glee. And since Sammy had not adequately secured the top, it deposited a stream of water from his shoulder to his knee before landing in pieces at his feet.

Mike snorted; Clayton shook his head. Sam was still laughing. “Sammy?” Marni called a gentle reminder from the kitchen.

At this moment his phone warbled. Taking it from his pocket, Sammy looked at the caller display: “Mom.”

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## Chapter 8

Strangely, Sammy's irritation vanished. He sensed a set-up: there was something going on here pertinent to the assignment Streiker had given him. Sammy picked up the pieces of the sippy cup with one hand while he put the phone to his ear with the other. "Hello."

"Hello, Sammy," his mother said brightly. "I'm sorry about the interruption, but Clint is gone now. You're welcome to come back over."

"Um, Mom," Sammy began cautiously. He knew that he needed to speak carefully because he no longer knew what he was dealing with. Holding the cup pieces with two fingers, he grasped the rim of the playpen with the rest of his hand to drag it into the kitchen.

He left the playpen beside the table while Marni watched him in concern. Cradling the phone on his shoulder, he refilled Sam's cup with water and screwed the top on tight. He took up a stack of paper napkins from the counter and returned to the game room.

Here, he left a sizable stack of napkins on the coffee table in front of Mike before depositing the rest on Clayton's side table, along with the refilled cup. Clayton and Mike both watched as he turned out of the room, saying, "Well, Mom, I can't really come out that way right now."

She pouted, "Oh, dear, are you sure? I was so looking forward to talking with you."

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm very sorry about that." He made his way to the little-used clutter room on the first floor. He let himself in without turning on the light, but opened the blinds to the late afternoon winter sun. "I do have a minute to talk on the phone, though. Mom... why does Clint get to say who comes to your house or not?" He was just looking for a conversation starter here; by now he knew that Clint wasn't the real problem.

"Oh, he's just being overprotective," she said.

"But you let him. You don't contradict him at all, even with me sitting right there. All you have to do is say, 'I'm okay, Clint; go home.' Why can't you tell him that when I'm there?" he asked, restrained.

"Oh, he'd get angry," she said fretfully.

"So?" he asked. "Do you think I'd let him touch you? If he got angry at *you*, don't you know I'd take him apart?" Sammy asked.

"I wish you would!" she said.

"But I can't because you won't let me," he said patiently. "I can't touch him without your permission. All I can do is leave."

She said peevishly, "I don't know why you need me to say anything."

"It's a legal issue, Mom. Unless he's overtly threatening you, which I've never seen him do, I have to have your permission to evict him. Whatever I do for you requires your consent."

"Why?" she whined.

"To keep me out of jail when someone calls the cops," Sammy said. He intently studied the bare branches of the

tree outside nodding in the wind.

“So you won’t be with me because you’re afraid of going to jail,” she taunted.

Sammy stopped breathing to work through this amazing accusation. He heard reverberations of Meadow, his dad’s last girlfriend, who seemed to think for a while that Sammy was a reincarnation of Sam because they looked so much alike. Is that what his mother thought on some unconscious level?

Sammy decided to test this premise. “If I go to jail, what will happen to you and the baby?”

“I’m getting an abortion,” she flung at him.

Sammy did not realize what he was doing when he quietly terminated the call and put the phone away in his pocket. He left the clutter room to return to the kitchen. Marni turned in her chair, but he did not look her in the eye as he said, “I have to go check something at home. Will be right back.” He didn’t know if she had responded when he turned away.

He opened the door into the cold, gusty afternoon to trot down the front walk and begin running toward his home. It had stopped sleeting, but there was still a fine mist in the air. He took shortcuts through alleys and neighbors’ yards to arrive at his own front door in minutes.

Sammy let himself in and turned immediately to the desk in the front room. Here is where he and Marni stuffed all information that had been important at one time, and might be important again at some point in the future. He dug patiently through scraps of paper and abandoned Rolodex cards until he found a phone number. He took out his phone and keyed in the number. Then he sat back and waited.

An old woman’s voice croaked, “Hello.”

“Hello, Aunt Patsy. This is Sammy. How are you?”

“Oh, Sammy,” she sighed. “I’m... glad to hear from you. I hear you’ve been visiting Carla.”

“Yes. Do you talk to her?” he asked.

“Yes, every now and then. Sammy, your mother is not well,” she said brokenly.

He cleared his throat. “I wondered about that. Patsy, why didn’t she abort me like she intended to?”

She began crying. “Oh, Sammy, I wish you hadn’t found out about that. The first time, it just tore us up so much, that when she became pregnant with you—”

“Wait, what? The first time what?” Sammy asked.

“The first abortion,” Patsy groaned.

“What?” he gasped. “The first—She was only seventeen when she got pregnant with me!”

“She had her first abortion when she was sixteen,” Patsy whispered.

Sammy gasped, “By my dad? Was she pregnant by Sam then, too?”

“No, it was another boy. She just ran wild. Daddy couldn’t keep her in the house at night. She was so pretty, and all the boys were crazy for her. She got pregnant, and Daddy arranged for the abortion. I don’t know how they

kept it quiet from everybody, but they did.

“But it—did something to her. She went right out and got pregnant again, only that time Daddy said she had to deal with it. But since everybody knew this time that she was expecting, he made sure that your father went to jail for rape.” Suddenly, Sammy knew what the exculpatory evidence was that had been suppressed in his father’s trial.

Patsy went on, “Carla wasn’t in any condition to take care of a baby, so I agreed to take you. But Ralph, you know how Ralph resented it. He resented so much how Daddy ran every part of our lives....”

She trailed off, and Sammy was still too shocked to speak. Then she said, “Sammy, Ralph is in the hospital with a heart attack. He—it doesn’t look good. Will you go see him, Sammy?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he breathed. “Ralph hates me. He’s not going to want to see me at the hospital.”

“No, Sammy, he needs your forgiveness. Will you please go tell him you forgive him?” she pleaded.

He sat back, groaning. Then he turned to see Marni standing in the foyer, watching him steadfastly. She also looked damp and winded. He waved her forward; when she came up to him, he pulled her down to his lap. “Where is he?” he asked.

“Baylor Hamilton, on Hall, room two oh two,” Patsy said.

Sammy sighed, “Okay, tomorrow I’ll—”

“Sammy, tomorrow may be too late. Please go tonight,” Patsy said.

“When are visiting hours?” he asked dubiously.

“I’m on my way back up there right now, and I’ll tell them to let you in. I just came home to bathe and change. I can’t believe you happened to call just when I happened to be home. That’s got to be a sign, isn’t it?” she pleaded.

He closed his eyes. “I guess so, Patsy. Okay, if Marni’s parents can watch the guys, we’ll go ahead and come.”

“Thank you, Sammy,” she said.

“Here—let me give you my number. You got my number? Let me give it to you.” Only when he was sure she had it did he terminate the call.

He put his phone down. Marni continued to watch him silently, her arms around his neck. He asked, “You got your phone?” She pulled it out of her pocket. “Okay,” he said. “See if your folks can watch the guys while we go see Uncle Ralph in the hospital. His wife doesn’t expect him to make it through the night. We won’t be there long.”

She started to place the call, but he added, “I’ll tell you everything on the way down.” She nodded.

Clayton indicated that the guys were welcome to stay and watch the game, so Sammy and Marni took off in his Mustang.

After a 15-minute trip down North Central Expressway to downtown Dallas during which Sammy talked the whole way, he pulled into the lighted parking lot of Baylor Hamilton Heart and Vascular Hospital with Marni fully apprised of the latest developments.

He walked her into the lobby to the front desk, where he told the receptionist, "I am Ralph Carey's nephew Sammy Kidman. My aunt Patsy asked me to come tonight to see him—"

"Yes, I just got off the phone with her. She's been delayed by a flat tire, but her neighbor is changing it and she'll get here as soon as she can. She asked that you go on to his room, two oh two," the receptionist replied, pointing to the elevators behind him.

"All right." With a hand at Marni's back, he turned to the elevators. Feeling the shaking of his hand, she looked back in alarm at his green face.

Eyeing her look, he whispered, "You have no idea how much he hates me." He was trying to buck himself up to face that grinning monster Hatred, but found his courage so lacking that he could not even step out of the elevator when the doors opened.

Holding his arm, Marni led him out to room 202. She knocked lightly. Hearing nothing, she opened the door and stepped inside. Since Sammy was not about to let her shield him from that monster, he quickly walked in front of her.

There was no one in the room but a shrunken, gray figure in bed that Sammy hardly recognized as his robust Uncle Ralph. He was outfitted with a nasal cannula, IV, and various monitors. As Sammy approached the bed, Ralph's eyes barely opened. "Hey, Uncle Ralph. How you doing?" Sammy said, his voice cracking.

Marni stared at her husband, having never heard him sound like this. He sounded like a scared teenager affecting a casual air.

"Sammy," whispered Ralph.

Sammy cleared his throat to bring his voice under control. Speaking more normally, he said, "I talked to Patsy just a few minutes ago. She asked me to come. I'm sorry you're not feeling well."

Ralph lifted a feeble hand. In a halting whisper, he said, "Sammy... I'm so sorry. You're the only child I ever had, and I could never bring myself... to be kind to you. I was angry with you for... something that was never your fault. I regret it so much, so much. I asked God not to let me die till I told you to your face how much I regret... not being good to you."

Sammy dropped his head, moving closer to the bed. "Ralph—"

"I never hated you, Sammy. I was selfish and spiteful and mean, but I was proud of the man you became. Patsy will show you... the clipping I kept about your Medal of Honor," he said weakly.

Marni grabbed a fistful of tissues from a box on a wall shelf and pressed the whole wad to her eyes. Sammy exhaled, then came up to take the veined, clawed hand. "It's okay, Ralph. I drive most people crazy."

The old man's hand closed over the young man's hand. "Will you forgive me, Sammy?"

"Sure, Ralph. Bygones," Sammy said, waving.

"Thank you, son," Ralph sighed. "I'm ready." He closed his eyes, then looked toward the foot of the bed. "Oh, hello. Sammy, this is... Fletcher Striker."

Sammy and Marni whirled toward the door. Seated in a chair beside the door was indeed Striker, watching placidly. Except, he was not really seated; he was tilting the chair back so that the front legs were raised off the

floor. It gave the impression of someone just killing time until he was needed.

Sammy was attempting to articulate the fact that he was already acquainted with this fellow when Streiker lowered the chair with a thump and stood. “Sammy works for me, Ralph. And Marni. How are you, Marni?” he asked. In response, she nodded fiercely, waving her wad of tissues.

Streiker went to the other side of the bed. Ralph’s faded, watery eyes followed him all the way. “Okay, we’re done here. Let’s go, Ralph.”

As Streiker reached down to take his hand, Sammy exclaimed, “No—cleaning out monsters and stuff?”

Streiker looked back at him, amused. “I’ve been working with Ralph for years, Sammy. All he needed tonight was to receive your forgiveness. Oh, I would have taken him without it, but it was one service he could perform for you.”

“Service! What service?” Sammy sputtered.

“To receive your forgiveness,” Streiker repeated. “You’re not aware of the monster that left you tonight, are you? If you think Hatred is bad, you should see Unforgiveness.”

Sammy gaped at him, then looked down at his uncle, cradled in gratitude—not to Sammy, but to the man standing at his side. Sammy grasped the bristly gray head and planted a firm kiss on it. “Thanks, Ralph. I owe you, old man.”

Ralph chuckled and closed his eyes, patting Sammy’s hand. Then he reached out to Streiker, who pulled him up from the bed.

It was the strangest transaction Sammy had ever seen. He watched it and still didn’t understand it. But when Streiker pulled Ralph up, the man who got up from the bed was young, strong, and handsome. Glowing with health, radiant with joy, he looked back at Sammy to say, “Whatever you owe me, pay it to him”—nodding at Streiker.

Sammy could only stare at him. The young, clear-eyed Ralph raised a hand to Marni, who was gripping her fistful of tissues in the corner, and said, “We’ll see you soon as well, my dear.”

Streiker smiled at her, then gestured to Ralph, “Let’s go.” They turned away from the bed and disappeared. Sammy was left gazing into empty space. Then he looked down at the discarded shell on the bed.

Marni came to the bedside to stare at the old man’s body, his face smiling in death. Sammy turned to gather her up, and she held him tightly.

The door opened; Patsy hurried in with a nurse at her side. Taking in Sammy, Marni, and the still form on the bed, she cried, “I’m too late!”

Sammy strode over to embrace her. “Patsy, it’s okay. I forgave him, and he helped me. He’s in heaven, Patsy. I’m sure of it.”

“Oh, Sammy! Thank you!” she cried, hugging him. He patted her arm, and she fell weeping beside the bed. The nurse rushed over to put a consoling hand on her shoulder.

Sammy, inhaling, took Marni’s hand to lead her from the room. He was trembling all the way out to the parking lot. As they got into the Mustang, she asked, “Sammy, do you want me to drive?” With the evening had come a renewed mixture of sleet and snow.

“No,” he breathed, leaning back on the headrest for a moment. “You ride the clutch.”

When he had sufficiently collected himself, he started the engine and drove tentatively out of the parking lot. While the precipitation looked bad, it had not begun to stick, so Sammy got them back to their neighborhood without difficulty.

“Okay,” he said, “I’m going to let you off at your parents’ house, then I’m going to go park the Mustang at home and run back....”

She was shaking her head. “You go ahead and park this car at our house. I’m running to my parents’ house with you.”

He stopped the car and looked at her. “There you go again, sticking with me through fire and ice.”

“I just don’t want to miss anything interesting,” she said.

He snorted, throwing up his hands. “Way to ruin the moment, girl.” She grinned.

After he had parked the Mustang, she got a coat from her closet to cover the sweatshirt she wore, but Sammy chose to tough it out in his infallible sports coat. Then, laughing like kids, they ran through the icy snowfall to the Taylors’ house. Some neighbors’ lights came on at their trespassing through yards, but the two were gone by the time anyone came to look out of a window.

Winded, they arrived on the front porch to ring the doorbell, and Pam immediately opened the door to them. “What—good heavens, did you walk here?”

“No, we ran,” Sammy said, hugging her.

“Sammy, take your coat off and hang it in the laundry room to dry,” she said, brushing ice off her sweater in exasperation.

“Dadadada!” Sam came running up, and Sammy clapped his hands. Sam jumped; Sammy caught him to toss him up in the air while the toddler screamed in delight. Clay called from the gameroom, so Marni hung up her coat quickly to attend him.

Dangling Sam, Sammy came into the gameroom where Clayton was still seated in the lounge watching the post-game show. “Who won?” Sammy asked.

“Hawaii, by three points,” Clayton replied. “Good game. I’m sorry you missed it.”

Sammy glanced around, dropping Sam onto the couch. “Where’s Mike?”

“They left just a few minutes ago,” Clayton replied.

Pam entered the room. “Sammy, did you ever eat?”

He blinked at her. “I don’t think so. Did I?”

“I don’t know. How is your uncle?” she asked.

“He died,” Sammy said thoughtfully.



“Oh! I’m so sorry,” Pam said, as Clayton nodded gravely.

“He did me a favor: He let me forgive him,” Sammy said. She studied him, then glanced at Marni, who silently signaled that a more complete account would be forthcoming. At present she was nursing a sleepy baby. “Right now I need to call Clint,” Sammy mused.

Pam took up the empty snack tray and Clayton considerately muted the large-screen TV. He didn’t require the input of the sports analysts to enjoy the game highlights, and he was a little curious to hear Sammy’s end of this call.

Sammy took out his phone and plopped onto the couch. Sam climbed into his lap, and Sammy let him. “Number, number,” Sammy muttered, scrolling through his phone.

Finally, he shook his head and pressed a contact entry. “Hi, Mom,” he said, and Marni quickly looked at him.

“Mom, I’m sorry we got cut off. It occurred to me that maybe it would be helpful for me to talk to Clint. If you’d give me his number, I think we could get some things straightened out.... Yeah. Okay, hold on.”

He took the phone away from his ear and keyed in an entry. “Okay, go ahead.” He keyed in numbers, then listened again. “Five zero two one? Five zero one two. Okay.”

He finished entering the number, then said, “Okay, Mom, thanks. Bye.” He terminated the call and shifted Sam, who had fallen asleep on his shoulder. “Here goes nothin’.” He pressed *call* and put the phone to his ear again.

“Hello, Clint? This is Sammy.”

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## Chapter 9

“How did you get this number? What do you want?” Clint demanded.

Sammy replied calmly, “Carla gave me your number. I... think I’m beginning to understand why you’re trying to protect her the way you are. I talked to Patsy for a little while today, and if my understanding of the situation is correct, then I probably do need to leave her alone.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, Sammy,” Clint said, reluctantly surprised.

“I need to get a little more background information from you, so, I’d like to come talk to you with my wife tomorrow, wherever you’d like to meet. I may touch on family situations that are probably not healthy for your kids to overhear,” Sammy explained.

“Oh. Right.... What?” he said to someone away from the phone. “Sammy, Hollie is talking at me here, so, let me talk to her and then I’ll call you back.”

“Okay, Clint. Thanks,” Sammy said, and put his phone away. “He’s going to check with his wife and call me back,” he told Marni.

She stirred, hoisting Clay. “We need to get the guys home”—both of whom were asleep.

“Yeah,” he agreed.

They said good night to Pam and Clayton (as Sarah was upstairs with baby Adair), and Marni promised to call her mom with an update after they got the guys in bed. Then they loaded everybody up in the Jeep.

Bubba, having been disallowed a fun run with both Marni and Sammy earlier, insisted on lingering out in the sleet to do his business in the Taylors’ front yard, Sammy’s threats notwithstanding. After an invigorating game of chase, Sammy finally got him corralled in the vehicle. Then he transported everyone home.

By the time Marni had the guys in fresh diapers, Clint called Sammy back. “Sammy? All right, I talked to Hollie. Are you free in the afternoon?”

“I can be,” Sammy said.

“All right, then. Why don’t you and your wife come to our house about two o’clock? I think that will give us plenty of time before Hollie has to pick the kids up from school.”

“Sure,” Sammy said. “Where do you live?”

Clint gave him the address, which was only about a half mile from Carla’s house. He added, “I hope we can work this out. It’s making me a nervous wreck.”

“I think I understand. Marni and I will be out to your house tomorrow at two. Thanks, Clint.”

“All right, Sammy.”

When Sammy fell into bed fifteen minutes later, Marni curled up beside him and called her mom to update her, and to see if they could keep the guys while she and Sammy met up with the Bowers.

To their great surprise, when Sammy and Marni woke the following morning, the guys did not. The adults lay in bed, afraid to get up, afraid to move, lest sharp ears hear them.

But Sammy could endure that for only so long: presently, he threw back the covers and dove into his wife. She responded just as she was supposed to, so very soon they had a thorough entanglement underway.

In the midst of this, he brushed her hair out of his face and turned his head to see a pair of studious blue eyes under tousled black hair gazing over the rumpled blankets.

“Ah, hi, Sam,” Sammy panted. The boy blinked.

Bubba then appeared at his side, tail waving, quietly whining. From somewhere underneath Daddy, Mommy said, “Sam, can you let Bubba into the back yard? I think he needs to go potty.”

Sam agreeably turned out of the bedroom, and Marni started to lift up. But Sammy pressed her down again with a good, hard kiss. “We’ve got another twenty seconds,” he breathed.

“Mmm,” she half-moaned. “Then we get to run outside in our underwear to see which one of them climbed the fence first.”

Groaning, he rolled onto his back. “We gotta do that more often.”

“I’m not arguing,” she said, reaching over for her jammie bottoms. And they dragged themselves out of bed.

They lounged around the house in their pajamas, watching snowflakes pile up on mostly frozen bushes in the back yard. With a four-wheel-drive vehicle in the garage, Sammy was not concerned about making it to Clint’s house that afternoon.

Late that morning, he got a call from Patsy. “Sammy, thank you for coming out to see Ralph last night. I’m so glad you got to talk to him.” Her voice was weak and tired.

“I’m glad too, Patsy. His apology was just—heartfelt and humbling to hear. I was very glad to make peace with him,” Sammy said.

“Will you come to the funeral, then? It’s this Saturday at ten o’clock at Lakewood Baptist Church, where we went for a long time, you remember.”

“Yeah, Patsy,” he murmured. “If you want me to come, I’ll be there.”

“Thank you, Sammy. See you then.”

When he lowered his phone, Marni regarded the green tinge that had returned around his jawline. “Ralph’s funeral?” she asked.

“Yeah, and I’m happy to go—you’re coming, too—but, you know, it’s at the church where they dragged me when I was a kid. Let us say that I did not impress the membership with my piety and whatnot,” he said, wincing. “Any of those people are going to remember me.”

“I hear you,” she murmured, having her own tainted history at church.

“Yeah,” he exhaled, hazily watching Sam trying to build with blocks that his little brother swept away, chortling. When Sam retaliated by beaming his brother on the head with a block, Sammy awoke from his contemplation to

enforce peace.

At about 20 minutes before 2:00, Sammy and Marni dropped off the guys at the Taylors' house. While handing Clay over to her dad, Marni asked whether she could impose on them again for Ralph's funeral on Saturday.

"No problem, honey," he said. "We're always willing to keep the boys if you keep us up to speed on developments."

Marni's eyes widened. "Oh, sure. Sammy's almost as nervous about going to the funeral as he was about going to the hospital. But that turned out well, so, we'll see what happens."

Sammy tapped the horn, so she said, "Thanks, Daddy!" and hurried back to the Jeep.

As she climbed in, he said, "Sorry; that was an accident. I was just drumming on the wheel and forgot where the horn was."

"That's okay. I'm a little nervous myself," she said.

He groaned, backing out of the driveway.

At the high school, Chris was hastening down the hall toward his next class when he saw Daniel by the water fountain. Daniel paused, seeing him, too, and Chris broke into a grin as he detoured to tell him, "We never got to play the game yesterday."

Daniel smiled likewise. "I forgot all about it. What a zoo. But, I mean that in a nice way. Hey, it was nice of your dad to drive me home last night."

"He's cool," Chris agreed. "Listen, Mom agreed to let me walk home today since Dad has to take her car in. Want to run a couple of miles to my house again?"

"Are you sure it's okay with your parents? They don't even know me," Daniel observed. He tossed his head to flip the long brown hair out of his eyes.

Chris paused. "You know, that's funny, because they're usually real careful about who they let me hang with. But they both told me to be sure to invite you back."

"Well then—yeah. Sure," Daniel said, trying hard to suppress the eagerness in his voice.

"Okay. When we let out, I'll meet you in front again." The bell rang for class and both boys lit out in opposite directions.

At that moment, Dave Pruett was standing at the front counter of Ed's Body Shop, having just dropped off Kerry's Audi to be outfitted with a new front fender. He was anxious to get this taken care of because she had informed him that until he did, she would be driving his precious Firebird to work. That bothered him, to be sure, but something else was troubling him more.

While Ed put the form for a rental car on the counter before him, Dave pulled out his phone to place a call. Ed began, "Now, Mr. Pruett, we have only one car available right now—"

"I don't care what it is," Dave said impatiently. Unlike the females of his acquaintance, he could drive any type of stick shift. He held the phone on his shoulder as he scrawled barely legible affirmations on the form's various blanks and thrust it back at Ed.

While the shop owner retreated with the paper, Dave turned away to peer sightlessly across the frontage room to the interstate, waiting for his call to be answered.

“Hello.”

Pruett exhaled, “Mr. Striker, I think you saw Daniel—Chris’ friend from school—at the restaurant with us yesterday.”

“Yes, Dave, I did.”

“Well, we—told Chris to invite him back, which I think he will, because they both seemed to have a good time, but... I have to tell you, I have some concerns.”

“Yes, Dave?”

Pruett began pacing the small front office in agitation. “The kid lives in a known drug house that Narcotics just raided a month ago. They don’t have records of his living there at the time, but, I just—can’t—see....” He trailed off, then observed, “You’re not helping me much here, sir.”

“What do you think needs to be done, Dave?”

“Well, Mr. Striker, he needs to come out of that environment,” Dave said firmly.

“I see. Where would he go?”

“Well—sir—you know a lot of people,” Dave argued. “Surely you have someone on your contact list that can take in one relatively bright, endangered kid.”

Striker was silent for a minute, then asked, “Do you know of anyone who’d have it in their heart to do that, Dave?”

Pruett’s mouth hung open, and he pictured Kerry standing in their bedroom doorway with almost-two-year-old Kelli on her hip. They had been arguing about this very issue last night. Her parting shot had been, “*Chris’ room is plenty big for two.*”

“Yes, sir,” he sighed into the phone. “We’ll broach it with him next time Chris brings him over.”

“Good, Dave,” Striker said, ending the call.

Pruett replaced the phone in his coat pocket as Ed re-entered the office, extending the customer’s paperwork. “We’ll make the fender replacement a priority, Mr. Pruet. Heath’s bringing the rental car around front. It has brand-new tires.”

“Thanks, Ed,” Dave said. Taking the papers, he stepped out front to wait. Almost immediately, a highly visible car—an automatic—whipped around from the back lot to lurch to a stop beside the dumbfounded shop patron. Ed’s son Heath hopped out, handing over the keys with a remarkably straight face. And Dave Pruet looked down upon a bright purple Volvo. With new tires.

Across town at the middle school, Mike Masterson looked at the four stacks of biology tests he had to grade tonight. A perfectionist, he hated grading papers—the kids’ creative spelling and improvised facts never failed to send him up the wall.

Sighing, he scooped the stacks off his cluttered desk (which also drove him crazy) to thrust into his briefcase before the last class of the day. The classroom door banged open, and a small, scrawny kid rushed in to plop into a front-row desk. “Hey, Trent. You’re always the first one to class,” Mike noted.

“You promised to tell us more about your cases, Mr. Masterson,” Trent said, pushing his too-large glasses back up to the bridge of his nose.

“Where was I?” Mike grunted, almost smiling.

“The Purifoy robbery,” Trent said eagerly.

As he was talking, the door opened again, and another student hurried to his desk. “The Purifoy robbery? Has he started?”

“Just about to,” Trent informed him.

A few more kids rushed in. “Wait, don’t start yet!” “Let me get my notebook. I’m the case stenographer.”

Mike stood, raising his hands. “Look, guys, we’re covering the life cycle of the *Musca domestica* today.”

Boos and groans. “Our regular teacher covered that before she left!” Trent insisted.

“Oh, she did?” Mike paused. “Then somebody come stand up front here and give out the facts. If you do that well enough, and everybody takes notes, we’ll spend the rest of the period on the Purifoy case.”

Trent jumped up to stand in front of the teacher’s desk. Wheeling to the classroom, he cried, “Notebooks open! Pens up! Write this down: the common house fly lives about twenty-eight days, but in that time the female can lay as many as five hundred eggs....”

Watching eager writers hunched over desks, Mike half-smiled. The Purifoy robbery was a good study in deductive reasoning and the use of evidence. Yeah, this teaching gig wasn’t all that bad, actually....

Clint and his family lived in a decent brick house in an older but stable Dallas neighborhood, much like his mother’s. Sammy parked on the street and walked Marni to the front door. He did not appear to be nervous, only pensive, as he rang the doorbell.

Clint answered almost cordially. “Hello, Sammy. Come in. I’m sorry—I don’t remember your wife’s name.” He flicked a guilty glance in her direction.

“This is Marni,” Sammy said, a hand at her back.

Clint looked at her then. “I do want to apologize for pushing you. That was really beyond the pale, and I caught hell from my mom and my wife for it.”

With Streiker’s comment about Unforgiveness uppermost in her mind, Marni smiled. “That’s all right. I understand how stressed you are about your mother.”

“Well, thank you.” Her graciousness appeared to make him even more uncomfortable. “Please come sit.”

They entered a cozy, attractive sitting room, and Hollie appeared from the kitchen. “Hello, Sammy.”

“Hi, Hollie. This is my wife Marni.”

Hollie greeted her, then asked, “Would you care for coffee? Hot cocoa or tea?”

“Nothing for me, thank you,” Sammy said, sitting on the sofa.

But Marni, knowing what an icebreaker these little rituals could be, said, “I’d love some hot cocoa. Thank you.”

Hollie went to the kitchen as Marni sat on the sofa beside her husband. Clint sat across from them in a wingback chair. Its twin sat in the fourth corner of the seating arrangement, awaiting Hollie. Clint, also awaiting her, looked down at his feet.

But Sammy was not waiting for spectators to start this ball rolling: “Clint... Carla called me after I left her house yesterday.” A look of irritation passed over Clint’s face, and Marni noticed that Sammy had started referring to her as “Carla” instead of “Mom.”

Sammy continued, “It seemed strange how she was so... inviting after saying nothing to you about the fact that she had asked me to come over. So I started talking to her, leading up to when Sam, my dad, had been sent to prison, and she let slip that she had been thinking about getting an abortion.” As Clint listened, his face sank into that of an old man’s.

Hollie entered with a cup and saucer for Marni. She flashed a smile of thanks, but did not speak. Hollie sat in the second wingback chair as Sammy continued, “I called Patsy then, and asked her why Carla had not aborted me. And she told me about the abortion Carla had when she was sixteen.” Hollie quickly looked at Clint, who did not react.

Sammy went on, “All these years later, Patsy is still torn up about it. She said that it changed Carla. She said, and I quote, ‘Your mother is not well.’”

When Clint still did not speak, Sammy asked outright, “Has she been in psychiatric care, Clint?”

Clint sighed deeply. “She’s talked to a counselor several times, but she puts up such a good front that they can’t see anything wrong. And most of the time, there isn’t anything wrong. She’s perfectly normal except when it comes to you and your dad.

“When she started seeing him last year—” He passed a hand over his face. “She regressed completely to this teenage girl seeing her boyfriend on the sly. The way she talked, and dressed, and made up her face—Once I found she’d climbed out of the window of her own house!” He waved in exasperation.

Marni lowered her head to drink her cocoa; Hollie sat frozen. Clint said, “No offense to your dad—I sure don’t like to see anybody die the way he did—but I fear to think what would have happened had they continued down that road. Mom was completely delusional about the whole thing—they were going to get married, and get a house, and have kids! Well, he died, and she grieved, and I thought that was that.

“And then you came along,” Clint said in disgust, “and the whole thing started up again. She became a teenager having a fling again. I just didn’t know what to do, because she was completely normal about everything else. Even Hollie couldn’t see the problem.” He gestured to his wife, who looked across at him sympathetically.

“When I don’t know what to do, I get physical,” Clint said, with another apologetic glance at Marni. “And when you seemed determined to feed this fantasy of hers, it just sent me to the moon.”

Sammy lowered his eyes. “I didn’t realize what was happening at first. I thought that she wanted to see me as her son, not as her... lover.” Clint cringed.

Marni drank her cocoa as the four of them sat in silence. Then Sammy turned to her and said, "I'd appreciate your take on this."

She set the cup on the saucer and put both on the coffee table. "I think you should not see her any more." Clint looked at her in surprised hope.

"That might ease the situation, but it's not going to solve the problem," Sammy observed.

"I don't think it's in your power to solve it," Marni said. "Right now, *you're* the problem."

"Not if I can get her to Mr. Streiker," he argued.

"She won't even see him if you're in the way," she countered.

He looked away. "You're right."

There was another period of silence, then Hollie asked Sammy, "Has she been calling you?"

"Yes," he said, lifting his head. "She calls and asks me to come over. I do, then Clint comes, then all hell breaks loose."

"According to script," Hollie said. "It sounds like she's trying to rewrite the past; make it to where she has a happy family instead of, well...."

Frowning, Sammy sat up. "But she did. She married your dad and had you," he said to Clint. "Didn't that count?"

"I guess not," Clint said bitterly. "He was only about five years younger than *her* dad. She married him because her parents were tired of raising her and wanted to hand over the job to somebody else. Dad was crazy about her, but I don't think she ever loved him. I don't think she loved anybody but Sam."

"She kept his letters from prison," Sammy mused, fingers at his lips. "She never answered them, but she kept them, and—"

Hollie gasped, "Letters from Sam?"

They looked at her. "Yes," Sammy said hesitantly.

"Where are they?" Hollie asked.

Sammy and Marni looked at each other. She replied, "He gave them to me after we used them to secure his pardon. As far as I know, they're in a box in the attic."

Sammy asked Hollie, "Why?"

She replied, "Last time I went over there, she was tearing up the house looking for them."

The Kidmans stared at each other again. Then Marni said, "When we went to see her about—four years ago, she gave them to Sammy as proof that she did love Sam. Sammy couldn't stand to look at them and gave them to me. And now she's wondering what happened to them?"

"It's this—delusion," Clint muttered, making a circle by his ear.



Marni turned to her husband. “When you went to ask her to help with a pardon for Sam, she wasn’t acting like she was in love with you, was she?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “She knew I was her son, and was not happy to see me. It was as if I... shouldn’t have been there.”

“Did she think she had aborted you?” Marni asked.

“No, I don’t think so.” He rubbed his face, signaling that he had heard just about all he could endure for the time being. “I think she just didn’t want to hear from me or deal with me.”

“Until she saw you, and saw how much you look like him,” Clint observed.

“Makes no difference,” Sammy said, standing. “I think Marni’s right: I’m not going to see her again. If something comes up that I have to go to her house, I’ll call you first,” he told Clint.

Clint stood, offering his hand. “Thank you, Sammy.”

“Sure.” They shook hands all around, then Sammy ushered his wife out to the Jeep in the swirling snow.

Despite the snowfall, the streets had not begun to ice up, so Sammy drove without difficulty to the Taylors’. There, he lay on the gameroom floor for the guys to crawl all over him while Marni brought her parents up to speed on what they had learned.

Listening, Pam held baby Adair, who was watching in fascination as the guys bounced on their dad. Bubba deeply desired to join in the fracas, but Sammy kept slapping him away, so he settled for chewing on his owner’s shoelaces instead.

After updating her parents on the conference with Clint and Hollie, Marni said, “So, what do you think? We—” Sammy’s phone warbled.

They all looked over as he moved Sam aside to extract it from his pocket with difficulty. Clay leaned over his loins to help. The phone went off a second time before Sammy could look at the number display. Putting the phone to his chest, he said, “I am going to throw up.” Then he answered, “Hi, Mom.”

She said, “Hello, dear. How are you? Can you come over?”

“No, Mom, I can’t. I’m sorry,” he said.

“But I need your help. Remember those letters from Sam? I was looking all over for those letters, and then I remembered that I had given them to you. I want those letters back,” she said.

Sammy slowly sat up with Sam hanging on his shoulders and Clay in his lap. Looking at Marni, he said, “I’m not sure where they are, Mom. But Marni and I will see if we can find them.” Marni’s eyes widened.

“All right. Then bring them to me,” Carla said crisply.

“If we can find them,” he repeated.

“I’ll be expecting you,” she said, then hung up.

Sammy put his phone away, still looking at his wife. “Guess what I need to burn.”

Marni breathed, “She wants the letters.”

He nodded. “All of a sudden, she remembered giving them to me. And there was no question that she was talking to her son and not her lover. She wants me to bring them to her pronto.”

“Then that’s what you have to do,” Pam said. Since she so rarely gave unsolicited advice, Sammy’s comment about burning the letters might have caught her attention. Sometimes it was hard to tell when he was joking.

Marni turned to her mom vehemently, “He can’t. It will feed her delusions of Sammy as her lover.”

“You don’t know that,” Pam said. “But the letters are a part of her past, and they are hers. You have to return them.”

Sammy objected, “She gave them to me.”

Pam shook her head as she cuddled Adair. “She may have intended it as a loan, so that you could read them. But even if she gave them to you and changed her mind, you have to give them back.”

Sammy groaned, “I can’t imagine the hay she’ll make from them.”

“But they are the truth, Sammy. You must not come between her and the truth,” Pam insisted.

Sammy was alarmed to hear echoes of Striker’s voice in her words. Looking at Clayton, he asked, “Can I have your take on this?”

“Oh, she’s right,” Clayton said. “Legally, the letters belong to Carla. You’re obligated to return her property when she asks.”

Glassy-eyed, Sammy said, “I just told Clint that I wasn’t going to go see her any more, and if I had to, I’d call him first.”

His in-laws looked back at him mercilessly. Then he brightened. “Maybe we won’t be able to find them.”

Marni shrugged to her parents, “You’d have to keep the guys while we went home to look.”

“I guess so,” Pam said dryly.

So Marni and Sammy took the Jeep home. After a cursory inspection of the desk in the front room did not produce the letters, Sammy lowered the ladder to the attic. He flicked on the light; they climbed the stairs and sat on wood planks in front of a pile of boxes.

The first box that Marni opened contained a stack of tax records. Lying on top of them was a packet of old letters, tied with a faded hair ribbon.

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## Chapter 10

Sammy stared at the bundle of old letters in his wife's hand. Still sitting in the cold attic in front of a pile of boxes, he pulled out his phone and selected a number. He put the phone to his ear, gulped, and said, "Hi, Clint. It's Sammy."

"Uh oh. What is it?" Clint asked.

"Carla just called. She finally remembered giving me the letters from Sam, and demanded that I bring them to her. We just now found them," Sammy said.

"Oh, no," Clint groaned. "She's going to pretend you're Sam giving her the letters."

"Actually, that's the one bright spot," Sammy said. "She was very precise in her knowledge that I am her son. And since I've been informed that, legally, the letters are hers, I'm going to take them to her. But I'm taking my wife too, and you're welcome to show up if you like."

"I'll be right there," Clint grunted.

"Hokay," Sammy said, and put his phone away to look at his wife. She looked down at the letters, then they both got up.

The snow had let up somewhat, but it wouldn't have mattered had a blizzard been underway; Sammy was obligated to follow through on all disagreeable aspects of the assignment Streiker had given him. So they bundled up, even Sammy, who wore his fur-lined leather jacket and a cowboy hat. Marni put on her hooded sheepskin coat, then they set out in the Jeep.

When they arrived at Carla's house, they noted Clint's car parked in the drive. Pulling up to the curb, Sammy said, "I'm actually relieved that he's already here. His storming the gates all the time was getting on my nerves." She snorted.

It was Clint who answered the door. He held out his hand. "Just give them to me."

Sammy smiled sardonically. "No, bro; I'm putting them in her hand. Then you're welcome to wrest them away from her, if you can." Clint sighed.

Carla called, "Clint? Is that Sammy?"

"Yes, Mom," he said dully, turning.

She came up beside him, smiling brightly. "Well, what are you doing on the porch? Come in! Oh, hello—Marcy." Marni smiled, but did not correct her mother-in-law.

She and Sammy stepped just inside the doorway. They did not move to take off coats or make themselves comfortable. He took the packet of letters from his wife's hand and held them out to his mother. "Here they are."

"Thank you, dear." She received the packet in gratification. "Oh, my." She ran a hand over them wistfully. "Oh, this ribbon. I remember this. I wore it the first time we—"

She paused, blushing, and Sammy groped for the door handle behind him. "Okay, there you go. Good-bye. Bye, Clint."

Sammy opened the door again and she protested, “You just got here! Stay and have some hot tea.”

“Thanks, no. You have other stuff to do,” he said, his eyes flicking up at Clint’s stony face. Sammy then grasped Marni’s hand to lead her back to the Jeep at the curb.

After they were safely away, he frowned. “What did she call you? ‘Marcy’?”

“Yes,” Marni laughed.

“She knows your name. She’s heard it several times,” he muttered.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said.

“No, it just... doesn’t make sense,” he said.

Within minutes they were back at the Taylors’ house. When Pam answered the door, she looked surprised. “Good heavens, that was fast.”

“We didn’t want you having to watch the guys any more than necessary,” Sammy said, stepping into the foyer. He took off his hat and paused. “Uhhh—can you watch them Saturday? That’s Ralph’s funeral.”

“Sure,” Pam said. “Come have some chili. The boys have snacked.”

Clayton called from the gameroom, “Hurry up, Sammy, hockey’s on—Flames versus Islanders. They’re going in to this game all tied up at twenty-two wins each.”

“Be right there!” On his way back to the kitchen, Sammy paused beside Marni, who was shrugging off her coat. “I love your parents.”

“Me, too.” She grinned at her mom.

Carla did not call all the next day, Friday, so Sammy used the opportunity to stop by the Catrionas’ house to check on Abby. The sun had come out, which warmed temperatures to the high fifties, enabling Sammy to return to his standard sports coat and slacks.

Because he was driving his conspicuous green convertible (with the top up, as it was still too cold otherwise) he parked in the church lot several blocks over and walked to the modest frame house.

Frank answered the doorbell. “Sammy! Come in.”

“Thanks, Frank.” Sammy shook his proffered hand. “I was in the area, so I just wanted to stop by and see how Abby was getting along.” He did not see her in the family room or the kitchen.

“Well, you’ll just have to wait a few minutes, then,” Frank said. “Sit down.”

Sammy did, watching expectantly for an explanation, which Frank provided: “Rip has taken charge of his mother’s rehabilitation. They’re out on a walk around the block—takes them about thirty minutes.”

From the kitchen, Helena called, “Would you like some coffee, Sammy?”

“No, thank you. Smells good in there, though,” he said, looking. She was bustling around several large boiling

pots.

“Canning pumpkin,” she said.

“Canning? Pumpkin?” Sammy repeated.

Frank laughed, “Can you believe it? Those pumpkins in the garden kept growing and growing till the vines finally froze last month. We’ve got six or seven big ol’ pie pumpkins to put up. Good heavens, it was like they were blessed or something.”

Sammy’s eyes started watering, and he knew that the garden had indeed been blessed by a crusty old cop who used to live here. “That’s great, Frank,” he said, blinking. “But, um, is Abby okay walking all that way?”

“They should be back soon. Let’s step out and look for them,” Frank suggested, gesturing to the front porch.

Sammy agreed. When Frank opened the door and they emerged onto the porch, a car that had been idling across the street suddenly accelerated to the next corner, where it sharply turned. Sammy squinted after it. He could not be sure, but he thought it was Quinn Reilly’s car.

“Frank,” said Sammy, “have you seen that car before? Or any vehicle watching the house? Has anyone come to the door asking for Abby?”

“No, Sammy,” Frank said, gazing down the street. But the car was out of sight.

“Well, if anyone does come by, you call me, okay? And be sure to get a license plate number, if you can,” Sammy said.

“All right.” Frank nodded.

Uneasy, Sammy looked around for Abby and Rip. Frank pointed, saying, “There they are,” and Sammy turned to look in the opposite direction from the departing car.

Rip was holding his mother’s arm, gravely walking her up the street. Because she was all bundled up, she looked fairly normal, though she walked like an old person. Sammy relaxed a little, watching them. If Quinn saw her on the street like this, Sammy doubted that he would recognize her.

Frank and Sammy waited on the front porch while the walkers approached. When Abby raised her face, Sammy lifted a hand. She shook her head in a manner that clearly said, “*What are you doing here?*” He grinned.

As the walkers ascended the sloping front walk to the porch, Frank opened the door and Sammy said, “Hey, Rip. Good job with the pumpkins. You’re going to have a lot of pies.”

He was not offended that Ripley ignored him to concentrate on getting his mother into the house. Then Ripley studiously began taking off her hat, mittens, and coat—as her injuries left her sensitive even to cool weather.

Studying her face, Sammy said, “Wow, you look great, Abby. I can’t believe how much you’ve improved just since yesterday.”

“I got a better therapist than you,” she said smugly.

“You’re making me look bad, kid,” Sammy said to Ripley. The boy did not reply, seating his mother in a comfortable armchair. Then he ran to the kitchen to receive a mug of something warm from his grandmother. This he brought to a side table within Abby’s reach. He watched as she curled her deformed fingers around the

mug to bring it awkwardly to her mouth.

“Wow,” Sammy muttered. “You couldn’t do that two days ago.”

She placed the mug back on the side table. It dropped from her unsteady grip, spilling a little. “I’m working out. I approached the studio with a concept for a new reality show, and I think they’re gonna bite.”

Sammy scowled. “Not with Blaine Nash, surely?”

“Nah, he’s not with the studio anymore. Their newest producer is a gal, Pippa White. I’ve talked to her over the phone,” Abby related.

Sammy was not happy to hear this. Not only did the concept sound exploitative, but it meant that Quinn might actually have a legitimate reason to talk to her. “Has Quinn Reilly contacted you? He... told me that he wanted a spot on your new show. He also told me that Nash had floated the idea to the studio.”

“Nash? No,” Abby said thoughtfully. “At least, not that I know of. Nash could have approached the studio independently, but they know he’s not affiliated with me anymore.... But, if Quinn’s that interested, maybe I can use him.”

Sammy winced. “Abby, be careful. I don’t know what he wants.”

She looked at him with slightly puffy, shrewd eyes. “He wants what we all want, Sammy. He wants to be rich and famous. I’m not gonna fault him for that.”

“Well, if you say so. I’ll be taking off, then.” Uncomfortably, Sammy stood to leave.

Helena hurried to him from the kitchen. Pressing a warm Mason jar in his hands, she said, “Here, Sammy. That’s enough for two pies.”

He accepted it. “Thanks, Helena. Yours are still the best.” She shooed him out, smiling.

The following day, Saturday, Sammy and Marni dropped the three guys off at the Taylors’ house shortly after 1:30, then Sammy drove his wife silently to the old Baptist church in an old Dallas neighborhood. They were both dressed very soberly, very correctly—she in a black midcalf dress with dark hose and he in a dark blue suit, white shirt, and gray tie with tiny pinpoints of a color that might have been blue under a microscope.

The closer they got to the church, the more memories that washed over him, until Marni saw him close up like an iron box. He parked in the farthest row of the small lot, right next to the exit, and walked her the distance to the chapel entrance. He barely looked up, and never looked around.

Entering the foyer, he paused to remove his sunglasses, and she regarded his glassy eyes. Then, careful to not make eye contact with any mourners milling about, he directed her into the chapel proper to sit on the dead last row, almost directly behind a column.

Marni accepted a program from an usher, but Sammy kept his head bowed as if in prayer. For some minutes before the service began, he was actually in prayer, but when he finished, he did not raise his head.

To not draw attention to him, Marni did not make eye contact with anyone either, but she refused to keep her head down. She was too curious.

The small chapel was almost full to overflowing—a touching testament to Ralph and Patsy’s faithful attendance

over the years. Yes, some people recognized Sammy; Marni could tell by the double-takes she caught in her peripheral vision. But as she and Sammy had arrived only minutes before the service began, no one had time to approach him.

The organist began playing a hymn, and Patsy was escorted to the front pew. Had she been looking for Sammy, she would not have been likely to find him; as it was, she never really had the chance. When the music director took the podium and gestured everyone to stand for the hymn, Marni and Sammy stood, though neither sang. No one was behind them to take offense.

The mourners sat, and the pastor came to the pulpit to make his comments about the deceased. Sammy's head remained bowed. As the pastor spoke, Marni watched the congregation without letting her gaze settle on anyone for too long. By the time the eulogy ended, she had noted eight persons who had glanced to the back row. As for what was said in remembrance of the deceased, neither she nor Sammy had any idea.

The congregation stood to sing a final hymn, then Patsy was escorted out and it was over. Sammy urged his wife toward the exit before the throng could get there, but he was not quite fast enough: An older gentleman paused at the end of their pew, blocking Marni's exit. With grave, reddened eyes, he looked past her to her husband, who finally looked up. "It's Sammy, isn't it?" the man said.

"Hello, Mr. Harkness," Sammy replied without an iota of expression.

The man paused for so long that he had to move out of the way for mourners to exit behind him, many looking curiously at Sammy. He, in turn, waited silently. At last Mr. Harkness broached, "Sammy, when you... confessed to setting fire to that outbuilding, and Ralph beat you for it..."

Sammy's expression changed minutely; he was almost smiling. But he did not interrupt, and Harkness continued with difficulty, "We found out a week later that Deacon Perry's boy was the one who had set that fire. Ralph... chose not to say anything to you, and then you upped and left for that construction camp, and, you never came home again. It ate at him for years, especially when he found out that you covered for Perry's boy other times—"

"All Ralph ever used was a belt. It hurt, but it didn't break bones. Deacon Perry almost burst Mark's kidney with that paddle—he was pissing blood for a week after his last beatdown," Sammy interrupted. "But after that fire, I told him I was done taking beatings for him, so he found that work-study camp, and off we went."

Harkness was almost writhing in guilt. "The longer you were gone, the more Ralph hurt for you, Sammy. He grieved for you. Then, when you called Patsy about getting a pardon for your dad, he tried to talk to you, but Patsy was having a bad time of it with Carla, and—"

Sammy suddenly looked around the emptying chapel. "Was she here? Carla? Did you see her?" he asked his wife, who shook her head.

"No, Sammy, she didn't come," Harkness said. "But I'm trying to tell you that Ralph deeply and sincerely repented of his harshness with you."

Sammy looked back at Harkness with some reservation. "I spoke to Ralph the day he died, and made peace with him. That's the only reason I'm here."

Harkness dropped his head, nodding, while Sammy scanned the auditorium. Then Sammy observed, "I don't see Mrs. Harkness or Valerie."

"They weren't able to make it," Harkness said, some stiffness returning to his voice.

"Well then, you'll tell Mrs. Harkness that it wasn't me who set that fire, won't you?" Sammy asked.

“Of course,” Harkness said apprehensively. Marni studied his wary face. As his wife should have been told this years ago, something else was forthcoming in this conversation, some unpleasant revelation, and Marni thought that Harkness knew what that was.

“And you’ll tell Mrs. Harkness that I didn’t steal the beer from O’Malley’s. I didn’t even get to drink any of it,” Sammy added.

“I’m sure she knows,” Harkness said, wincing.

“Does she also know that it wasn’t me with Valerie?” Sammy asked coldly.

Harkness froze. “Was it Mark?”

“No,” Sammy said.

“Well—who was it?” Harkness demanded. A crowd waiting to get out had gathered behind him by this time. Smiling, Sammy took Marni’s hand to lead her toward the other end of the pew.

Harkness trailed him behind the pew. “Sammy, who was it?” he demanded.

“Valerie never told you?” Sammy asked, making his way down the long, empty pew with Marni following.

“No,” Harkness said.

“If you think about it, you’ll figure it out,” Sammy told him.

“We’ve spent the better part of twenty years trying to figure it out,” Harkness said, keeping up with him.

At the end of the pew, out of earshot of anyone else, Sammy said, “Who was with her every Wednesday afternoon at four o’clock, rain or shine, sleet or snow, for an hour in a closed room that didn’t even have a piano—?” Harkness suddenly turned to shoot out of the closest exit. Sammy laughed.

On their way out to the Jeep, she asked, “Well? Who got Valerie pregnant?”

“Her voice coach,” he grinned, and she shook her head.

“You know,” he said, unlocking her door, “the funeral wasn’t really so bad after all.”

When he came around to the driver’s side door, she asked, “Whatever happened to Mark?”

“Last I heard, he went into church work. I don’t know if he was repeating his dad’s mistakes or repenting of them,” Sammy said.

Marni considered that while they fastened their seatbelts. Then she demanded, “Tell me about this work-study camp!”

“Ohhh,” he groaned, turning the ignition. “That was pure hell. Construction during the day; study at night and on weekends. I came close eight or ten times to crawling back to Ralph’s beatings. But somehow I lasted through the summer, and when I finished the course with a couple of grand saved up, I decided I liked being on my own. Construction convinced me to go for a professional degree, though—I did *not* want to spend another summer on a roof.”



After a moment's reflection, he added, "And the girls in town were really... fun."

Regarding his hazy smile, she began, "Tell me about the first time you..."

She trailed off dubiously, and he glanced at her, grinning. "Are you sure you want to hear about that?"

Looking out the side window, she said, "No." Then she cut her eyes back at him. "Were any of them as good as me?"

He hooted, then said, "Not even close, baby. Especially when you're a redhead."

The next few days passed so quietly that Sammy began to get nervous. He heard nothing from Carla. Abby told him to call before coming over again, and when he called, she told him she was busy. He saw nothing of Quinn. He heard nothing from Streiker. Despite everyone's avoidance of him, he felt certain that some disaster, some pending personal affront, was close at hand.

But Valentine's Day was also fast approaching, and Sammy desired to do something special for Marni this year (which, hopefully, included some private time). He tried to get a reservation for a Valentine dinner or lunch at one of Dallas' many swanky restaurants, but that proved impossible for a procrastinator.

He tried to think of what to buy her, but Marni had stopped buying stuff that the guys would just destroy. He attempted to arrange a special outing for just the two of them, but they relied on her parents so much for emergency babysitting that she flatly refused to pile extra work on them on a day that they should be celebrating themselves. (The one outside babysitter that the Kidmans had ever hired, who came with sterling references, spent the evening texting while the guys went on a rampage. Throughout the subsequent week of clean-up, Marni vowed, "Never again.")

On February 13, approaching desperation, Sammy went to a florist in whose window he had seen orchid plants a week ago. But of course they were sold out.

So on the Big Day, Sammy presented his wife with a potted plant. "Happy Valentine's Day. That's all I got."

"Oh, how sweet, Sammy! Thank you." She kissed him and set the pot on a theoretically high window sill in their bathroom. "Mom wants us to come over today."

He regarded her. "What did Clayton get her for Valentine's?"

"Oh, Daddy doesn't do Valentine's. He says it's a racket," she said.

Sammy thought about that. Hopefully, he asked, "Can I use that line?"

"Sure! When we've been married as long as they have," she said, kissing him again. He grunted.

So they hauled the guys over to the Taylors' to admire baby Adair in another sweet outfit with matching headband. Then they all sat down to ESPN and snacks.

Sammy's phone warbled, and all heads swiveled in his direction. "Here it is," he said, raising his hands. "The death and destruction I've been waiting for."

"Who is it?" Clayton asked.

Sammy took his phone out to look at it. "Pruett," he said in surprise. "Hello," he answered.

“Hey. Where are you?” Pruett asked.

“The Taylors’,” Sammy replied. “What’s up?”

“Okay, I’m on my way over. I was just at Streiker’s Barbecue Place—man, no one can touch their ribs—and Yvonne Fay gave me a newspaper to give to you.”

“A newspaper?” Sammy said in mild alarm. “Which one?”

“Ah, it’s a special Valentine’s Day issue of the North Dallas *Expositor*. Bunch of goeey love stories. I glanced at the headlines and didn’t see my name, your name, or Streiker’s name, so you’ll have to ask Yvonne why she thought you’d be interested in it,” Pruett said.

“Okay,” Sammy said warily.

“Great. Now put me on to Mrs. Taylor,” Dave said.

“What? Pam?” Sammy said, and she looked over from the rocker beside the couch.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” Pruett snarled.

“Sheesh.” Sammy leaned far over to give her his phone. It probably would have been easier to get up from the couch to hand it to her, but he didn’t think of that. “Pruett wants to talk to you.”

She took the phone. “Hello, Dave.” She listened gravely, then said, “Of course. You’re welcome. Good-bye.” She handed Sammy’s phone back to him while everyone watched.

“And...?” Sammy said.

Pam laughed, “Well, Mr. Bubba, it appears that all your hard work to make a good impression has paid off.” Stretched out the floor, Bubba thumped his tail twice.

“What?” Marni scowled, smiling.

“Dave said that their dog Daisy has been whiny and depressed for days. She was very excited to go to the barbecue place, but when no one was in the kennel to play with her, she went in the dog house and wouldn’t come out. Dave asked if he could bring her over for a play date with Bubba,” Pam reported.

Marni hooted and Sammy regarded the gangly beast. “The Kidman charisma is a powerful force,” he observed to groans.

Shortly thereafter, Dave appeared at the front door with Daisy. Pam requested that they play outside, given the mild, sunny day, so he took Daisy around to the back yard while Sammy opened the back door for Bubba.

He was sniffing around the bushes when Pam opened the back gate for Daisy to trot in, and there was a reunion for the ages. Bubba looked up; Daisy’s ears shot up, and they bounded toward each other. All that was needed was a slow-motion camera, for the dogs met in the middle of the yard, crashed into each other, and fell down, momentarily dazed.

“Stupid dog,” Sam said, watching from the back window, and no one disagreed.

While the dogs were thus getting reacquainted, Dave entered the back door with the slightly wrinkled newspaper

under arm. "Here you go," he said, thrusting it at Sammy.

He took it in disinterest, watching the dogs gambol outside a minute more, then opened the tabloid to glance at the headlines. When he saw what was on the lower half of the front page, he screamed and fell into the wicker armchair by the window.

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## Chapter 11

Marni came rushing into the room, where she gaped at her husband, collapsed over the newspaper in the armchair. “Sammy?” she gasped. “I thought that was Sam!” But Clayton had taken both boys out to the backyard to play with Bubba and Daisy.

Pruett stared at Sammy. Pam asked, “What is it?” He was frozen in horror, reading.

Finally, he lifted his white face and woodenly extended the paper to his wife. She grabbed it while the others clustered around her to look.

The lower-half headline read, “Love Lost After the Years.” The story began, “Carla Bowers of Dallas, 54, had one love of her life: Samuel James Watterson (not the actor). Their story of love lost began when 17-year-old Carla became pregnant with Sam’s baby. Her parents, outraged, had the 19-year-old sent to prison for the crime of love, and the two star-crossed lovers did not see each other for the next 35 years.”

Included in the somewhat factual but highly colored account were excerpts of the letters that Sam had written from prison, with photographs of the letters themselves. One excerpt read:

My darling Carla:

Got just a few minutes to write before lights out—new guard on duty is a real hard ass, won’t even let me write with a pen light. Am not supposed to have a pen light, but the old guard Joe gave me one, knew I was writing you.

How far along are you? Six months? Oh, Angel, I wish I could see your belly. Wish I could see your whole beautiful body. Hard to believe that one time on the couch was the cause of all this trouble. Remember the lights on the tree? Somehow, I’ll never forget that Christmas tree in the corner. Listen, did they ever find that marriage license I brought to your house? I had it in my pocket, had to have lost it while we were on the couch. If they can find that, won’t it prove we were getting married?

I wish you would write me back. I don’t even know if your getting my letters. I don’t know what our lives will be like when I get out. Please write me, Carla, tell me that you’re waiting for me. I want to be your husband and your baby’s father. I think I can be a good dad. And Joe was telling me about a construction company that hires ex-cons, and if I work hard, I can earn a real good living.

Carla, are you with me? I need to hear that your with me. Please write me.

I love you forever,

Sam

In addition, there were two photos of the unhappy couple: one from when Sam and Carla had resumed dating shortly before his death (while he was married to Dolly Threlkeld) and one from their teenage years.

“Have you ever seen either of these photos?” Marni asked him. Dave and Pam were intently reading.

He numbly shook his head. “She must have kept them hidden somewhere, from everybody—her dad, Clint,

everybody.”

Marni studied them again. “I’ve never seen photos of him young. Sammy, he—looks *just like you*. This is uncanny.”

Pruett suddenly snorted at him, “What a drama queen. This has nothing to do with you. Your name’s not even in it.”

“Neither is Dolly Threlkeld’s,” Pam murmured, but no one heard her. They were all staring at Pruett.

He continued to rant, “So she wanted to tell her story. So what? They’re her photos and her letters; why shouldn’t she? Who are you to tell her that she can’t? Her dad? Stupid. She probably got a good round figure for the publication rights, which she probably needed. How much have you given your own mom in support, Mr. Lottery Winner? And you’re going to tell her she has to keep her mouth shut so as not to embarrass you? Assho—” He started to add the standard pejorative, but, mindful of his audience, clipped the word short.

Sammy stared at him, then blinked. “You’re right,” he said, and pulled out his phone.

“Sammy, what are you doing?” Marni asked carefully.

“Calling Carla to ask what she needs,” he said.

“Sammy.” She leaned over to put a hand over his phone, and his eyes flicked up. “Why don’t you wait and let her tell you that? I imagine her other son is talking to her right about now.”

His face went slack. “Ohhh, you’re right, too. Oh, man. Is his name in there?”

“Just ‘Bowers,’” Pam murmured. “But her late husband is not mentioned, nor the fact that she married and had another child.”

“Burn,” Pruett winced.

“What did it say about me, again?” Sammy asked, and Pruett rolled his eyes.

Pam, holding the paper, replied, “Only that Carla’s baby was born while Sam was in prison, and he did not meet his son until he was grown and married himself.”

Marni added, “She didn’t even mention that you were named after him.”

“She could have,” Pam observed. “We don’t know what may have been edited out.”

Sammy leaned back, a hand on his forehead. Some color had returned to his face. “It’s not about me at all,” he repeated. “I’m not responsible for it, and it doesn’t reflect on me.” He looked at Pruett. “I never thought about providing her any support. That’s pretty cold.”

Marni said, “Sammy, we had to find out where we fit in her life, first. I’m sure you would give her whatever she needed if she, and Clint, let you.”

“Fair point,” Pruett acknowledged, because he liked Marni.

“That’s why,” Sammy said, nodding to her. “I never thought about giving her money because I wasn’t even sure she wanted to see me. As a matter of fact,” he said, sitting up, “I still don’t know. I don’t know what all that was about.”

The phone that he still held warbled. He looked at it, then took a deep breath. “Clint.”

“Oh boy,” said Pruett.

“Hello,” said Sammy.

“Sammy, this is Hollie,” she said in a strained voice. “Have you seen the *Expositor*?”

“We were just looking at it,” he said.

“Well—Clint saw it and went right out to the car. He was so angry, he left his phone behind. I knew he was going to see you or his mother.”

“He doesn’t know where I live,” Sammy observed.

“Then he’s gone to see her. Sammy, please get out there and—see that everything is all right,” she said.

“Hollie, I don’t think that I’m the best person to do that. But I will come pick you up and take you to her house —” He almost added, *if you’re afraid to go by yourself*.

She hesitated. “All right. But please hurry.”

“Be right there.” He clicked off. “Yeah,” he told his listeners, “Clint saw the paper, and lit out for Carla’s house. His wife is a little concerned, so I told her I’d take her out there.”

Marni turned to her mother. “I sure hope you can keep the guys because I’m going with him.”

Pam nodded and Pruett told Sammy, “I’ll follow you in my car.”

“Yes,” Sammy agreed. Both of them knew that the most dangerous situation a cop encountered was the domestic disturbance, where emotions eclipsed sanity. Neither Pruett nor Sammy was armed at this time, which was probably a good thing. Sammy did not even want to entertain the possibility of his shooting Clint.

On his way to the front door, Pruett turned to Pam. “Thank you, Mrs. Taylor. I’ll be right back for Daisy.”

“Pam,” she said. “All right.”

After Sammy had unbuckled one car seat and tossed it in the cargo area of the Jeep, he and Marni climbed in. As he started down the street, he checked his rearview mirror to see that Pruett was following in the Firebird. (Kerry, in one of those marriage-saving gestures, agreed to drive the Volvo while her Audi was being repaired. Of course, everyone thought she looked adorable in it.)

Arriving at Clint and Hollie’s house, Sammy started to get out, then saw Hollie emerge from the house and run up to the Jeep. While Pruett waited in his car behind them, she opened the back passenger door and scrambled in. “Have you heard anything?” Sammy asked, watching over his shoulder as she fastened the seatbelt.

“No,” she said.

“Okay,” he acknowledged, pulling out again.

Swinging down Carla’s street, Sammy saw Clint’s car parked crookedly at the curb. He pulled in front of it, then backed up. Pruett eased up to Clint’s rear bumper, effectively blocking him in.

As the four of them climbed out of their vehicles, Sammy told Hollie, “This is Dave Pruett, former Dallas Police Sergeant and always reliable backup. Dave, this is Clint’s wife Hollie. [Dave nodded to her in his professional manner.] So, Hollie, we’re just going to ascertain the situation, make sure everybody’s safe, and then stay out of the way. This is none of my business.”

“Well, all right, but please, let’s get in there. Why are we standing around talking?” she said, agitated.

Sammy led up the front walk. “Do you have a key?”

“No,” Hollie said. “Clint keeps it.”

“Does he have a gun?” Sammy asked, mounting the porch.

“Yes, but, I don’t think he brought it,” she said uneasily.

Pruett’s head swiveled to her. Sammy, hand on the storm door, asked, “Did you check?”

She admitted, “No, I was too upset.”

Sammy opened the storm door and put his ear to the wooden door behind it. “I hear them arguing,” he noted. Then he tested the door handle. “It’s unlocked. I’m going in.” He glanced at Pruett, who did what he was supposed to: he moved in front of Marni.

Sammy eased open the door and slipped inside. Hollie, Pruett and Marni followed quietly. Clint and Carla were arguing in the kitchen, which was both good and bad: the kitchen was generally a relaxing, comfortable place, but there were also a lot of potential weapons. As quietly as possible, Sammy went to the door of the kitchen, blocking Hollie with an arm until he could look things over.

Carla and her son were standing beside the table, waving arms and shouting at each other. When Sammy observed that neither was armed nor wildly out of control, he withdrew his arm, nodding Hollie to the table. She entered the kitchen and sat down. Pruett and Sammy leaned against the kitchen door jambs; Marni came up behind Sammy to put a hand on his waist. He patted it reassuringly.

Clint was shouting, “Why did you have to embarrass me like that? Can you imagine what they’re going to say at the office? I won’t be able to show my face there for a month!”

Carla cried, “I loved him! I want the world to know it! I kept quiet all these years, but now I’m free to say what is on my heart!”

“How could you love him when you’re the one who sent him to prison?” Clint shouted. “Don’t you understand that you could have set him free by testifying that it wasn’t rape?”

Carla gaped at him. “But he... wanted to spare me testifying. That’s what he said.”

“What else could he do? You wouldn’t exonerate him, Mom!” Clint pleaded. Sammy studied the tears in his eyes.

“They wouldn’t let me,” she pouted.

“Whose permission did you need to tell the truth? You—”

“Daddy’s!” she cried. “I needed Daddy’s permission but he is dead!”

Groaning, Clint turned around, then saw the observers. He looked at Hollie at the table, then Sammy and the stranger at the door. Carla saw them, too, but her eyes went straight to Sammy, and her face lit up. “Hello, dear! So good to see you! Would you like some cake?”

Sammy looked at her a moment, then asked, “Who am I?”

She laughed, “You’re Sammy, silly. But sometimes you are Sam.” Clint turned to the wall.

Sammy asked, “When am I Sam?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said gaily. “But sometimes I see him looking at me through your eyes. Sam loves me still.” She closed her eyes, hands clasped over her heart.

Contemplating truth, Sammy glanced back at Marni. How do you communicate hurtful, necessary truth to someone who is barely hanging on to reality?

He cleared his throat. “Mom, there are some things you don’t know about Sam. When you wouldn’t answer his letters, he felt divorced from you. And when he finally got out of prison, he started doing whatever he felt like.”

“So?” she said lightly.

“He also knew that you refused to sign an affidavit to secure his pardon. That was long after your dad had died. We used Sam’s letters—the letters he had written you—to get that,” Sammy went on.

Carla made a guilty little shrug, which told him she was listening. Somehow, he had her attention. So, he moistened his dry mouth and said, “When you and he finally started seeing each other after baby Sam’s birthday, Sam was married to someone else.”

“I knew that,” she said stiffly. “The rich lady. He told me he was getting a divorce.”

“And he also had a girlfriend on the side. He went to see her the night before he was killed. She was in the car with him when he died,” Sammy said.

The kitchen went deathly quiet. Carla bristled, “That’s not true.”

“I heard him talk to her,” Sammy went on mercilessly. “I’ve met her and talked to her. Whatever he was planning with you, whether he divorced his wife or not, he was going to continue to see this girl on the side.”

“That’s a lie!” she cried. “He loved me! Me!”

“You didn’t love him back,” Sammy said. “He gave up because you wouldn’t love him when it counted.”

“I hate you!” she shouted. “I wish I had aborted you when I had the chance! They took me to a clinic and I was all ready to go, but Patsy came in crying and whining, ‘Please don’t, Carla, please have the baby; I’ll take care of it and raise it. Please, Carla.’” Her tone was biting and sarcastic.

“Mom,” Clint breathed, aghast. Everyone else was stone.

Sammy half smiled. “Thank you for telling me the truth, Carla. I wish I had known that years ago, but—better late than never. Clint, Hollie—you good here? Okay, I’m gone. Pruett,” he gestured, turning out with Marni’s hand clasped in his.



The three of them walked out to the curb. Pruett eyed Sammy, but he was calm and almost cheerful. “Okay, guy, when you go back for Daisy, please give the Taylors an update. I have to go see my aunt Patsy.”

Pruett nodded in comprehension; Marni squeezed her husband’s hand. Dave went to his Firebird to back it away from Clint’s car and drive off.

Sammy and Marni climbed in the Jeep. He took out his phone and pressed an entry. Putting the phone to his ear, he listened, then said, “Patsy? It’s Sammy. Hey, do you still live on Buckingham? Okay. May I come by? Yes, now, if you’re free. Okay, thanks. See you in a minute.”

Marni was quiet as he started the ignition and pulled into the street. He drove without speaking, turning corners here, stopping at a stop sign there, and as he periodically looked at something and shook his head, she knew he was reliving years gone by.

Finally, he pulled in front of a small, woodframe house that had seen its best years a half century ago. It was not run down—yet—but the neglect was evident. Before getting out of the Jeep, Sammy put his head back and closed his eyes. Marni whispered, “Is this where you grew up?”

“Yes,” he whispered back. “It’s like stepping into a time warp.” Inhaling deeply, he climbed out. She hurried out of the passenger side to accompany him up the front walk.

Patsy met them at the front door. She looked tired and old, but smiled warmly at him. “Hello, Sammy. Oh, this is your lovely wife. Marni, is it? Come in, please.”

Once inside, Sammy bypassed her outstretched hand and gathered her up in a smothering hug. She patted his head and shoulder. Marni turned her watering eyes away, then gasped. She hurried over to look at one whole wall covered in Sammy memorabilia.

There were photos of him from all stages of his life, plus framed documents, awards and commendations. His police academy photo, faded with age, was in the prominent center, as was the framed newspaper article about his rescue of the newborn infant kidnapped from the hospital. “I’ve never seen any of these, except the article,” she whispered.

“Ralph was so proud of him,” Patsy said, wiping her eyes as Sammy turned to look at his wall.

Gesturing to it, Marni demanded, “Have you ever seen this?” He shook his head, compressing his lips. Marni turned back to study each photo and document.

“Please sit down. Can I get you something to drink?” Patsy asked. Sammy looked around blankly at old furniture and Marni didn’t even hear her.

If they wouldn’t sit, Patsy still had to get her weight off swollen feet, so she sat in an armchair in the corner. “I’m sorry I missed you at the funeral. Half a dozen people told me you were there, and I appreciate it,” she said. She reached for a cup of tea from a side table.

Sammy walked over to this table to pick up a brochure and study it. Marni turned around. “Excuse me, Patsy—what year was this ‘Straight-A Honor Roll’? It doesn’t say.”

“That was his fifth-grade year. He had a wonderful teacher that year, Mrs. Pearsall. You remember her, Sammy?”

He was still looking at the brochure, which was for a retirement community. “You want to live here?” he asked, waving the brochure.

She sighed. “Well, I’m not sure. A realtor has already offered me a good price for the house on behalf of a builder who wants to raze it and build a new home on the lot. They’re doing that all over this area, you know.”

“There’s a better complex called Northlake just about a mile from our house. It doesn’t sit on a lake, but a pond, and I could literally run over there to see you,” he said.

She smiled tearily. “That would be wonderful, Sammy. Would you really come see me?”

“As often as you like,” he said in the tone of voice he used for relaying strict facts.

“Well,” she hesitated, “Northlake. That’s a very nice place, but, it depends on what I get for this house.”

“Let’s go look at it,” he said, tossing down the brochure, and Marni went to open the door.

Once Patsy had located her purse and her coat, she found herself being ushered into the front seat of the Jeep. On the way to the retirement community, Sammy told her all about the guys—both the humans and the dog, as well as the new complications with Pruett’s dog. He turned corners with one hand to gesticulate with the other.

Then he was describing how Sam, Jr., looked just like his dad and how Clay acted just like him. “You got any pictures on you, baby?” he asked, twisting around at a stoplight.

“No, not what she’ll need for her wall. I’ll bring you some good eight-by-tens,” Marni promised, patting Patsy’s arm from the seat behind her.

“Thank you, dear,” she said, dazed.

Sammy said, “Listen, baby, will you check in with your folks? See if they’re okay with the guys? And ask Clayton if there are any red flags on Northlake Retirement Community that he knows about.”

“Gotcha.” She already had her phone out, and began a quiet but animated conversation with her mom.

By the time Sammy pulled into the Northlake parking lot, Marni had put away her phone. “Dave is still there because Bubba won’t let him take Daisy,” she snorted. “The guys are fine. Dad says that Northlake is a four-star facility, very well run. They have a waiting list.”

“Oh, do they?” he said, pulling out his phone. He pressed a number and waited. “Mr. Streiker? Hi. Hey, I want to get my mom Patsy into the Northlake Retirement Community but I hear they have a waiting list. Can you...? Okay, thanks.”

Putting his phone away, he said, “Streiker said to drop Yvonne Fay’s name to the manager and they’ll get Patsy set up.”

“Sammy, wait. You’re going too fast for me. I don’t know that I can afford this,” Patsy said faintly.

“You’re not paying for it,” he said, then looked at her seriously. “Do you mind if I call you ‘Mom’?”

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## Chapter 12

Patsy stared at him. “No,” she whispered. “I’d love for you to call me ‘Mom.’”

Satisfied, Sammy hopped out and opened her door to assist her out. Marni walked on her other side, holding her hand. Then Marni pointed to the landscaped grounds around the pond. “Oh, Sammy, look! A playground! Can you believe it? The guys will love coming to visit your mom here. And there are nice benches and tables under the trees. We can bring a picnic. Would that be okay, Patsy?”

“Yes, if you let me fix the lemonade. I have a secret recipe that uses cherry juice. Oh! I just gave away the secret, didn’t I?” she laughed. Marni laughed, holding her arm.

Sammy opened the door to the office and held it for the ladies. He then approached the receptionist’s desk. Taking no chances, he immediately deployed the charm offensive, smiling in his “I Have Business Here But Had No Idea Someone Like You Was Waiting to Make It So Pleasant” manner. The receptionist responded according to script, smiling warmly in return. “Welcome to Northlake Retirement Community! What can I do for you?”

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Sammy Kidman; this is my wife Marni and my mother Patsy Carey. Yvonne Fay says that you have an apartment reserved for her. Is that the case? I sure hope so.”

“Let me check on that, please.” She picked up her desk phone.

Sammy looked back at Patsy. “You want to sit down?” he murmured.

Looking out the broad back windows of the office, she said, “Not really. I’d rather look around the pond out there.”

Marni offered, “I’ll go with you.” Patsy accepted the gesture and he looked on approvingly while Marni walked her out.

They strolled toward the pond, Marni holding her arm. “Oh, look! There are crocuses and daffodils already coming up. In a few weeks this is going to be gorgeous. I hope you can move in quickly,” Marni said.

“Who’s paying for it?” Patsy asked uneasily.

“Sammy, of course,” Marni replied. “Though Mr. Streiker is the one who made the funds available.”

“I don’t understand... This is a little overwhelming, all of a sudden,” Patsy said.

Marni glanced dubiously back at the office, then decided that Patsy deserved an explanation. “We just came from Carla’s house. Sammy and Clint were both upset that she had given a newspaper permission to publish letters from Sam, and photos. They were pretty personal. Did you see the North Dallas *Expositor* this morning?”

“No,” Patsy said.

“Well, anyway, Hollie called Sammy after Clint saw the article and went over to his mom’s. We got there, and, Clint and Carla were arguing about it, and Carla said Sam was the only man she ever loved. That was pretty hurtful to Clint, so Sammy started telling her that Sam wasn’t this... ideal man that she had built up in her mind. That made her mad, and she told him that she wished she had aborted him.”

Patsy gasped, and Marni continued, “She told us about being in the clinic getting prepped for the abortion, and

how you cried and pleaded with her not to go through with it, and promised to raise the baby yourself. I think that... Sammy realized you were his real mother, because if she'd had her way, he would never have been born. You saved his life."

"Oh, my." Patsy passed a shaking hand across her face, sitting on a nearby bench. "I can't believe Carla told him that."

"Is it true?" Marni asked, sliding onto the bench beside her.

Patsy nodded. "Yes. But we agreed he shouldn't ever be told. He wasn't even supposed to know that she was his mother, but he found out."

"Of course he did, and I'm glad she told him," Marni objected. "Hurtful truth is better than comforting lies, because today Sammy finally realized he couldn't make her love him. You loved him, and he wants to love you back for that."

Patsy opened her purse to fumble for a lace-edged handkerchief. "I wish Ralph were here to hear that," she said, wiping her eyes.

"I think he is," Marni said.

Sammy then approached with a woman in a business suit and a set of keys. Appraising the two on the bench, he said, "Ah, Patsy? We can sign the papers today if you like the unit. You want to come look at it?"

"Yes," she said, bracing herself on the table to stand. Marni stood by to help her.

"Here we go," said the woman. She turned as an employee drove up in a six-person golf cart.

The manager sat in front with the driver; Sammy helped Patsy into the seat and sat beside her, then glanced back at Marni hopping into one of the rear-facing seats. His look was vaguely anxious, because he didn't even treat Pam with the deference that he was showing to Patsy right now, but Marni was grinning.

The driver pulled up to a unit with large windows facing the pond, then Patsy climbed down to walk through it. It was small but light, bright, and beautifully furnished.

True, the kitchenette was tiny, because the staff strongly recommended that residents eat in the dining hall. "We like to see you get out and mingle. Our residents are the nicest people; we want you to get to know them," the manager explained. "And, of course, you may replace any of these furnishings with your own, if you like."

Patsy had no objections to the unit, so Sammy paid the deposit and first-month's rent, pocketing paperwork to set up automatic payments from his account. Before they could sign the lease, however, the manager, Ms. Kurtz, apologetically explained that they had to do a credit check.

"With a recommendation from Fletcher Streiker, I'm sure that will take no time at all," she said.

Sammy's lip curled slightly. "That's fine." There were definite advantages to working for him.

On their way back to the Jeep, he told Patsy, "Okay, pending completion of the paperwork, your move-in date is March first, in two weeks. I'll call somebody to get you moved. Just let me know what all you want to take. You got my number?" he asked, patting his pocket. Obviously, he forgot about giving it to her.

Before she could reply, he took a business card from his pocket and stuck it in her purse. "Now," he said, "You have a phone?"

“The one at the house,” she said vaguely.

“Okay, we’ll go get you one,” he said, turning the wheel.

She stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Sammy, this is... overwhelming. I’d like to just go back home and lie down for a while.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He glanced back at his wife. “I’m overdoing it, aren’t I?”

Patsy said, “No, Sammy, I’m very grateful. I just need to go rest, and then I’ll call you.”

He brightened. “Okay.”

After dropping Patsy off with hugs and kisses, Sammy and Marni climbed back in the Jeep to head for the Taylors’. “Okay,” he said, gripping the wheel, “have I done right by everybody?”

When Marni hesitated, he stopped the car on a side street. “What?”

“Well,” she winced, “Bubba ruined the wall in Carla’s front room.”

He drooped. “Can I just pay her off on that?”

“Yeah, I don’t see why not,” she considered.

“Okay,” he said. “Can I just put cash in an envelope in her mailbox?”

She objected, “Oh, no. It could get stolen.”

He rumbled deep in his throat, drumming the wheel. “I don’t trust Clint to give it to her.”

“No,” she agreed.

“I have to hand it to her, don’t I?” he asked dismally.

“Probably,” she agreed.

Muttering in aggravation, he turned the wheel back out into the street and headed for the nearest ATM machine. Pulling up to it, he asked, “How much should I give her?”

She considered that. “Well, at the very least, she’ll have to hire someone to move the furniture, cover everything, prep the walls and paint. I have no idea how much that would cost, so... be generous.”

He withdrew \$2,000, then took out one of the deposit envelopes to write on it, “Carla: Sorry about Bubba ruining your wall. Hope this covers it. Sammy.” He showed it to her, and she nodded.

From there, he turned the wheel back toward Carla’s house. “Unless Mr. Streiker tells me differently, this ends my obligation to her,” he said flatly.

She nodded. “What a great blessing for Patsy, for you to find out the truth,” she murmured.

He glanced at her. “I hope so.”

At that time, she decided that he should hear about Patsy’s verification of what Carla had told him. So Marni

related her conversation with Patsy on the grounds at Northlake.

He listened grimly, then pulled up to Carla's house. They both looked: her car was in the driveway, and Clint's car was gone. Taking up the envelope with the cash inside, he murmured, "I'll only be a minute."

"Okay," she said.

He trotted up the walk and rang the doorbell. In a moment, Carla opened the door. Her face brightened to see him. "Hello, Sammy! Come in." She pushed open the storm door.

He regarded the woman who saw only a figment of her imagination when she looked at him. Extending the envelope, he said, "I'm sorry; I can't. But I wanted to compensate you for Bubba's destroying your wall there."

She took the envelope. Opening it, she gasped, "How much is here?"

"Enough to have your wall repaired, I hope," he said. "Good-bye, Carla."

She glanced up as he walked back to the Jeep. He got in and drove a few blocks to a parking lot, where he pulled in. Taking out his phone, he pressed an entry and listened. "Hello, Clint. It's Sammy."

"Sammy!" Clint said in surprise. "Hey, uh, thanks for bringing Hollie over. Ah, everybody calmed down, and Mom promised not to do anything stupid like that again."

Sammy said, "That's good. I wanted to let you know that I just stopped by her house to give her two grand in cash. We—"

"What?" Clint exploded.

"You want to listen, guy?" Sammy shouted back. "My dog took a leak on her wall, and I gave her the cash to make repairs. Now I'm done. I'm not seeing her or speaking to her again. She's your mother; you can take care of her from here on out."

There was a pause. "All right, Sammy."

"Great. Bye." Sammy dropped his phone in the direction of his pocket, and Marni picked it up off the floorboard. His hurt was palpable, and there was nothing she could say to assuage the pain. What do you say to someone whose mother considered him inconvenient fetal tissue?

Studying her feet, she held his phone for him. When he turned a corner unexpectedly, she looked up to ask, "Where are we going?"

"To Streiker's Barbecue Place. I'm going to pick up dinner for your folks as an apology for being gone so long," he grunted.

She unlocked his phone and gasped, "It's five o'clock!"

"They're probably wondering if we absconded to the Bahamas or something," he muttered.

When he pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant, she suddenly leaned forward. "They're already here."

"What?" he said. He was looking around the floorboard distractedly after discovering that he didn't have his phone.

Marni handed it to him, then pointed. “There’s Mom’s Taurus. Bubba and Daisy are in the kennel yard. There’s Pruett’s Firebird. Oh! There’s Kerry’s Audi. They must have fixed her fender; I can’t tell. Is that Mike’s car?”

“Yeah,” he said, squinting.

He and she climbed down from the Jeep. As she headed for the entrance, he paused. “You go on in. I’m gonna go say hi to Bubba.”

She went in, looking around the crowded restaurant, then hurried to a large table in the corner where Streiker sat with Dave and Kerri Pruett, their toddler Kelli, Marni’s parents, her sons, Sarah, and baby Adair. (Chris and Daniel were sitting with the Mastersons at their table nearby.)

Taking the empty seat next to Sarah, Marni held out her arms for Clayton to hand her Clay, who had begun calling the instant he saw her. Holding her son, she looked at Streiker to plead, “Sammy is so hurt.”

Streiker nodded, and she turned to explain to the others what took her and Sammy so long today.

Outside in the kennel yard, Sammy sat on the bench to stroke Bubba’s ugly head—bony and gray, with gremlin ears. Daisy came over for a pat or two, but seemed more interested in chewing on a soup bone someone had tossed into the yard. No doubt the kitchen had a good supply on hand.

Bubba half closed his eyes, smiling, as Sammy gave him a thorough rubdown. With the late afternoon, it was getting chilly, but Sammy didn’t stop to think about why he was shivering.

He didn’t look over when someone sat beside him. Only when Bubba abandoned him to go to her did Sammy turn his head to see Adair Streiker. Her blond hair fell to her shoulders, haloing her heart-shaped face, and her blue eyes were luminous. She smiled at him. “Hello, Sammy.”

He half-smiled, looking at the water beyond the kennel fence. Dallasites loved their little water holes because they made summers bearable and winters... sad. “My mother wanted to abort me. She would have, except her sister talked her out of it. I spent most of my life making Patsy sorry that she did.”

“What you do today is all that matters, Sammy,” she said, her voice flowing gently over him.

He sucked air through his teeth, looking away. “Well, today I kicked my birth mother to the curb.”

She did not reply and he looked back at her. Then she observed, “You can’t live a lie.”

He studied her. “You mean, I can’t live in her fantasy world?”

She smiled slightly, which he took as affirmation. He closed his eyes, leaning his head back. “Sometimes I wonder if Carla had the right idea after all.”

Adair reached over to lay a hand on his chest. Uncomfortable, he sat up. Something was lodged in his throat. Then he suddenly leaned forward and vomited up a great deal of blood.

He leaned between his knees, feeling more on the rise, and vomited a second, larger stream. Adair sat beside him, watching.

Gasping, he looked down at the red, viscous puddle, and saw something flailing in the midst of it, trying to hide underneath the blood. But as the puddle thinned over wider ground, the thing lost its cover. It was flaccid and pale, with spindly arms and legs. When fully exposed, it looked back at him with a contorted, whiny face. “Which monster is that?” Sammy groaned.

“Self-Pity,” she said. “You have to squash it.”

Grimly, he rose from the bench and lifted his foot, but the thing skittered nimbly away, flicking drops of blood. Sammy chased it around the kennel yard, growing astonished at how slippery it was. Twice he got a hand on it, and twice it scuttled away.

Pursuing it, Sammy lost his footing and belly-flopped on the wet grass. His phone rolled from his pocket. Ignoring it in his rage, he hopped back to his feet to resume the chase.

Finally, he trapped the monster up against the fence. He lifted his foot again, and this time the thing glommed on to his shoe to bite him on the ankle. After the initial shock of pain, he felt the sorrow well up in him.

“Better not let it take hold of you again,” Adair called from the bench.

He reached down to yank the creature off his ankle, and it promptly sank needle-sharp teeth into his wrist. This hurt very much, and he cried, “Gah!”

The word he had unconsciously chosen made him laugh, seeing how it always amused his son, whose birth was a miracle that he had conveniently forgotten. Noting how the creature in his hand shrank at his laughter, Sammy seized its legs with his other hand and began whacking it on the roof of the doghouse, laughing hysterically, “Die, die, die, you miserable zit!”

When he finally threw its limp form against the fence, it dissolved into nothingness, and he stood there panting, wiping slime off his hand onto the right side of his pants. Seeing his phone on the ground, he picked it up to drop it into his clean left-hand pocket. Bubba and Daisy looked on in mild interest, then began moving their cache of bones to a safe corner of the yard.

Sammy looked back at Adair, who came over to take his hand. “Don’t linger in the hurt, Sammy. That just feeds them. Move on to the next moment. Every moment is worthwhile.”

She reached up to kiss his cheek, which he received gratefully. But he asked in disappointment, “I’m an assignment, aren’t I?”

“The most vexing one I could imagine,” she said with feeling.

“Well, there’s that,” he said in slight consolation, turning toward the dining room. “Let’s—”

But she had already passed through the door ahead of him. Daniel, at the Mastersons’ table, turned to study her.

Sammy went into the restaurant and paused to look around. Marni half rose from the table in the corner, so he went on over. She detected at once the healing inside him, and glanced at Streiker in gratitude. He smiled.

“What’re you all doing here?” Sammy asked generally, pulling up a chair to straddle it backwards at the table beside his wife. Sam clambered down from his chair to climb up on Sammy’s chair, then his back.

Pam answered, “We got tired of waiting for you, so everybody voted to come here.”

“Good choice,” he said, scooping up a handful of onion rings from a platter. Eating them, he looked around at the silence.

Streiker was watching him. Sammy swallowed his mouthful, then wiped his hands on Marni’s napkin. Something was coming down the pike. Sam slid off Sammy’s back to forage under the table for the onion ring



that he had dropped.

Streiker said, “Well, Sammy. Are you ready for another assignment?”

“Sure,” Sammy said, taking a swig of Marni’s water.

“You’ll fail,” Streiker said.

Everyone looked at him quickly. Marni looked panicky and Sammy almost spewed his water. “Then why should I do it?” he demanded.

“Because I gave it to you,” Streiker said.

Sammy evaluated him. “What is it?”

“I want you to convince Abby that her life is worthwhile even if she’s never famous again,” Streiker said. “She is meeting right now with Quinn Reilly and Pippa White at Half Crazy Studios. You won’t need to scale the gate; the front door is open.”

Sammy looked at him for thirty seconds, then got up from the chair. He regarded Marni, who was watching him with wide eyes. Then he walked over to Pruett and extended his hand. “Marni needs the Jeep for the guys. Give me your keys.”

Pruett immediately dug in his pocket for the keys to his beloved Firebird and handed them over. Sammy gripped them and turned away.

Streiker said, “I’m bringing her family here in a little while.”

Sammy absorbed that, then walked on out.

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## Chapter 13

Sammy turned Pruett's Firebird out of the parking lot of Streiker's Barbecue Place and set off toward Half Crazy Studios in the late afternoon. He borrowed Dave's sunglasses sitting on the dash, but periodically had to flip down the visor to block the sun, as well.

As usual, he had no idea how to approach this assignment, but Streiker's assurance of his failure raised all kinds of new questions. First, was Sammy so bound to Streiker that he would embark on a doomed effort at Streiker's direction? Pulling up to a red light, Sammy sat tensely considering this.

*Yep*, he decided. There was no option of going back on a decision made several times over. The next question was, Why would Streiker assign him a futile job and then *tell him it was all for nothing?*

Sammy did not know; could not understand. The light changed; Sammy shifted and stepped on the gas, admiring the engine's response. Since he had already decided the first question and faced a stone wall with the second, he put both out of his mind to just enjoy driving Pruett's car to the studios.

As he parked near the front door and got out of the car, he looked over the few, random vehicles in the lot, one of which was Reilly's. With no plan and no hope, he trotted up the front steps to reach for the door. There, he suddenly remembered Streiker's telling him that he was at his best when he didn't have the opportunity to overthink things. Somehow, that thought encouraged him.

Entering the studio lobby, he paused to look around, hanging the sunglasses on his shirt front. There was no receptionist on duty and no one in sight. Hearing nothing, he decided to check the second floor, where most of the offices were located. He trotted up the curving chrome and glass stairway, then paused to listen again.

Aha. He heard voices coming from an open office three doors down. Cheerfully, he strode down the hallway and turned in the open door. It was a conference room. Three people who were seated at one end of a long conference table looked over at him.

"Hey, guys. What's up?" he said, swinging into the room to plop into the chair across from Quinn Reilly. Abby sat at the head of the table, wearing a steampunk-embellished top hat and matching ascot. A structured jacket made her appear straighter than she really was, and light lace gloves covered her deformed hands. She even wore a little makeup.

Right next to Sammy, eyeing him indecisively, was obviously Pippa White, the new producer. She was young, in her early thirties, with white hair and smoky eyes. He greeted her, "Hi, there. Are you Pippa? I'm Sammy Kidman."

Unimpressed, she said, "This is a closed meeting."

"Oh, I'm a close friend of Abby and Quinn. Right, guys?" he said, looking at them.

"Go home, Sammy," Abby said.

"But Mr. Streiker asked me to represent him at this meeting, so I'm here to put in the best showing I possibly can," he said, clasping his hands earnestly on the table. He was not nervous at all, knowing that the outcome was preordained, and nothing he could do would change that. In fact, something about their irritated faces spurred him on: Sammy was now free to muck things up for the sake of mucking them up.

Quinn drew in a short breath, tossing his head lightly. It was a small gesture, but it caught Sammy's attention,

being a master of the small gesture himself. It was an action of the person in charge. Abby sat at the head of the table, but she was not leading this meeting; Quinn was. And Sammy zeroed in on that as a very interesting fact.

Watching him, Sammy said, “So, Reilly, you found Abby and talked her into exposing herself to ridicule and pity in order to get your name in the credits. How much do you stand to make off her, jackass?”

Reilly snorted, “Get out.”

“Sure!” Sammy agreed. “But I’m taking Abby with me.” He looked at her to say, “Ripley doesn’t care about you being famous, or having money, or doing anything for applause. He cares about having you around.”

She blinked at him and Pippa picked up her phone. “I’ll call the cops.”

“Wait,” Abby said. “I can handle this. Sammy’s a friend.”

Sammy told her, “Your parents just want to love you. Ripley loves you, and I know you love him because you gave him birth. If you didn’t want to be bothered with him, you could’ve just scheduled that clinic appointment and be done with it. Wouldn’t that have been more convenient to your career? Hey, his birthday is next month. I bet I know what he wants. Do you?”

“Leave Rip out of this,” she said, agitated.

“I can’t; he’s already in it,” Sammy argued.

Quinn stood up. “Look, Sammy, I don’t want to get ugly, but you really do have to leave.”

“Quinn, let me ask you a question,” Sammy said in his thoughtful, philosophical tone, and Reilly half lowered himself to his chair. “What do you really want out of this? There has to be more to it than a reality show about a convalescing burn victim. How does this redound to the praise and glory of Quinn Reilly, Esquire?”

Quinn’s lower jaw jutted out, and he began breathing heavily. Sammy regarded this reaction in fascination; it meant that he had hit some kind of a nerve. So he continued in that vein: “All hail Quinn Reilly, who survived the same stunt as Abby without near the damage—”

Sammy broke off at a new thought. He toyed with it, tasting it, then decided that it was nasty enough to air. It was certainly untrue, but as long as he was going to fail here, he might as well fail spectacularly, with fireworks. Explosives, even.

“You know, I’m suddenly wondering about that,” Sammy mused, rubbing his chin. “I’m wondering why Abby was burned so much worse than you were. Yes, I got to you and pulled you down, but the only reason I could do that was because you weren’t burning as badly as Abby was. Why weren’t you on fire like she was?”

Abby and Pippa stared at Sammy, then looked at Quinn. His face went from white to deep red. “We were burning at the same rate.”

“No, you weren’t,” Sammy said thoughtfully. “Forensics already determined that the safety gear had been tampered with—except yours? Why was your protectant functioning when Abby’s gave out?”

“That’s a lie,” Quinn said.

“Is it?” Sammy asked. Turning to Pippa beside him, he said, “I think Quinn really wants to produce this show himself. He’ll need you out of the way. Don’t get yourself involved in any stunts, okay? And let me check your brake line before you leave today, all right?” Pippa’s eyes flicked toward Quinn before looking down.

“He’s lying,” Quinn said through gritted teeth.

“Am I? What lengths will somebody go to in order to be rich and famous?” Sammy asked. “Boy, you must need that affirmation, hmm? That... adoration. It’s almost like worship. People thronging after you, trying to take your photo or touch you. Thousands of people at your feet applauding, and cheering, and screaming your name: ‘Quinn! Quinn! Quinn!’”

With each reiteration, Quinn straightened until he was standing again. Then he said in a hollow voice, “Darren.”

Sammy paused, not understanding what he had said. Since Sammy didn’t understand, he stuck to the most provocative angle. “Quinn, we love you!” he said mockingly. ““Oh, Quinn, please let us kiss your feet and lick the ground you walk on. O mighty Quinn, our heart and soul—””

Quinn stood to roar, “*Darren! Darren Loggia!*” And the words blasted Sammy out of his chair into the opposite wall.

Sammy hit the wall without bouncing or falling. Pinned in place by an invisible ram, he choked as the life was being crushed out of him. He did not know how it was happening, but images flashed before his mind of Marni, Sam, and Clay; Pruett and Mike; Pam and Clayton; Bubba bounding toward him, and he knew that he was dying again.

In an agony of breathlessness, he glimpsed Quinn rising up on the other side of the table. He grew bigger and bigger until his skin split, starting at the top of his head. When the useless skin shriveled away, another face took its place, that of a man with a smiling face and dark brown, curly hair.

Then that face split open to another, and another, each larger, taller, grosser, and less human. Skin parted to reveal scales, and fingers broke open to expose talons. All the while, the noxious odor of rotten eggs pervaded the air. Sammy, losing consciousness, turned his eyes away from the sight of his spectacular failure. *I’m sorry, Mr. Streiker... Marni... Adair.*

Something descended in front of him. Then the pressure subsided so that he fell to the floor. Gasping, he focused on a dancer’s strong, supple ankles, wrapped in pink ribbon, in front of his face. The dancer’s heels were inches from his nose. Clouds of white tulle brushed his forehead, and he began to breathe normally. Slowly, he raised himself to press his back against the wall as Adair stood in front of him, facing Quinn.

Only, he was not Quinn anymore; he had changed into something entirely different. He had a vaguely human form—scaly, muscled, dripping with rot and vermin—but a head of such grotesque appearance that Sammy could not even look at it. He glimpsed Hatred’s jaws, Lust’s gangrenous color, and a sharp, evil crown that could only have come from the head of Pride. Shivering violently, Sammy turned his face away.

When he did, he saw Pippa and Abby sprawled unconscious on the floor at the end of the conference table, about six feet away. Sammy tried to go to them, but he was paralyzed with fear, unable to move away from Adair’s protection. She said, “You will not terrify my friends, Darren.”

“Darling Adair,” the King of Monsters said. Immediately it resumed the form of a man. The face was the first one that had appeared when Quinn’s was stripped away—that of the smiling man with curling dark hair. “You’re so cute, in your dancing clothes. Are you going to put on a show? I’d love to see that,” he laughed.

She said nothing, but when he moved as if to go around her, she turned slightly to block him. Sammy shifted to stay directly behind her, watching Quinn, or whoever he was, in fascination. By the look of irritation on the man’s face, she had succeeded. She had called him by name, but Sammy had not yet understood it.

The man cocked his head, smiling in a condescending way. “Adair the Second-Rate Dancer. You know what Madame Prochaska said behind your back?”

The image of a middle-aged woman in black tights with her hair pulled tightly back in a bun appeared in the room. As if talking to someone, she said in an accented voice, “Oh! She’s deluding herself, to think she can dance professionally at her age. She was never that good; she will never be *prima*, but with a rich man paying for her, I will bite my tongue and pretend with her all day long!”

Still seated on the floor behind her, Sammy looked up at Adair. It appeared that she paid no attention to the woman, but kept her eyes on her antagonist.

He leered at her. “Adair the Slut.”

Another image appeared, that of a pretty woman with long brown hair. She sneered, “Adair, you have the class of a small-town hick. I mean, sleeping with somebody just a get a *car*? USED?”

This jeering woman was joined by another woman in a business suit and glasses who vented, “Adair, you are so stupid, you can’t add single digits without a calculator! What did you do to Whinnet to get this job?”

Sammy’s protector appeared unfazed by these visions, which didn’t even rate a glance. Then a younger man in glasses appeared—this man Sammy recognized from the newscasts: He was the one who had choked her in the bank. Livid, he cried, “Can you do anything right? You idiot! Moron! You’ve made my job a living hell!” And he lunged at her with outstretched hands.

At this point, Adair did glance aside at them, her brief look being all that was necessary to make the group disappear. But while she was thus distracted, something sharp issued from Quinn’s fingers to pierce her tulle and plant itself in Sammy’s chest. He gasped, pinned to the wall by something that looked like a giant insect mounting pin. He grasped the steel head, trying to pull it out. But his hand kept slipping on the blood.

Quickly facing Quinn, Adair lowered her hand toward Sammy and the pin fell out of his chest, morphing into something else. Looking down, Sammy saw that he was grasping a pink orchid spike, and he laughed out loud. The wound, the pain, and the blood vanished.

Sammy’s impulsive laughter was a slap in the face to the creature across the table from Adair, and it burst out of its human appearance. Opening its jaws, it spewed a cannonball of liquid flame which hit her with such force that the whole building rocked. The windows behind Quinn exploded from the blowback.

Sammy squeezed his eyes shut, pressing the side of his face against the wall as the tulle of her dance skirt blew back around him. *Now, THIS is how you hide behind a woman’s skirts*, he thought, but the fact was, she was still standing in the flames.

The fireball dissipated, and Sammy canvassed himself, unharmed. Melted paint dripped down the wall behind him onto his hair and sports coat. Adair tossed her head, mimicking Quinn’s action at the conference table. She was still in charge of this meeting.

What used to be Quinn—or the Monster that he had become—gathered its lower extremities to leap upon the conference table, which cracked under the strain. Atop this perch, he ripped open his own belly. From the dark, putrid crater shot out a dozen stinging, whipping tentacles that coiled around Adair’s head and upper body. Sammy endeavored frantically to push himself with his feet farther back into the wall, now warped and listing.

The coiled tentacles appeared to freeze around her, so that when the Monster tried to pull them back, and her with them, they shattered like glass. Sammy covered his face from the falling shards. Still she had not moved, but stood her ground. Sammy thought her hair might have been a little mussed, but it was hard to tell looking up

from the floor behind her.

The Monster decided to stop messing around and just overwhelm her in one gross attack. With a roar that made the corners of the room separate, causing Sammy to wrap his head in his arms, the Monster expanded until he almost filled the space, then fell on her.

Sammy writhed, seeing the ulcerated, monstrous flesh press around him on three sides. It encased Adair completely; she had disappeared except for her feet and wisps of tulle behind them. Sammy focused on those feet for all he was worth, because they were all that stood between him and the engulfing horror.

It was evil, massed. He saw, felt, and heard evil in all its forms: bloodlust, cruelty, perversions, hopelessness. Gasping, Sammy rolled himself into a fetal ball against the hissing suggestion that he was about to die in terror.

And yet, and yet—where only one transparent layer of tulle remained between him and the encroachment, it was stayed. It could find no way around the tulle, which seemed boundless. Peering out from his arms, Sammy saw her pink slippered feet still standing in front of him.

He watched as gradually, more of the tulle was revealed, undamaged, unsoiled. She was doing something under there—something that was causing the stinking mass to recede. And the more it receded, the less he felt the crushing oppression. The visions faded; the voices dimmed. He stared as inch by inch, the tulle shook off the gory mass.

Presently, enough of her form was revealed so that Sammy could lean away from the wall to watch her. It looked like she was just touching the thing with her hand, and that was the only place where they were making contact. At the point of her touch, he seemed to be deflating like some great, farting balloon.

For the first time since the monster had attacked, she spoke to him: “Go back to where you came from, Darren. There’s nothing more you can do; Fletcher is here.”

He tried to deride her, but his taunts were high-pitched and feeble, like someone talking after inhaling helium. His shrinking began to accelerate as he drew back to the other side of the broken table. Then he fell down into the chair and burst into flames. Sammy ducked his head, but, seeing the flames confined to the figure in the chair, he scrambled to his feet. Adair was gone.

Sammy leaned over the table to look in horror on Quinn Reilly, burning. He was either unconscious or already dead, for he did not react at all to the flames engulfing him. The chair under him began smoking. Papers on the table in front of him burst into flame, igniting the finish on the table top. The room began filling with smoke, a portion of which poured out of the broken windows and gaping corner joints.

Sammy stumbled around the fiery table where the women were stirring. He lifted Pippa on one arm and Abby on the other to begin hauling them out. Reaching back into the room, Pippa protested, “My phone—” but Sammy yanked her out, tossing her into the hallway.

Still holding Abby, he reached out to try to shut the door to the conference room. It fell off the hinges with a bang and a shower of sparks. He glanced down the hallway in concern, hoping that no one else was here. If they hadn’t got a clue to get out at the first explosion, he couldn’t help them now.

He bent to hoist Pippa to her feet. Lugging each woman on an arm toward the stairs, he gasped, “Can you walk?” They were all coughing and choking. Pippa pushed off him to walk on her own, but Sammy had to carry Abby to the top of the stairway.

Pippa grasped the chrome banister to trot down the stairs and run out the front door. While smoke filled the second-floor hallway, Sammy lowered Abby to her feet at the top of the stairs. Shaken as he was, he did not trust

himself to carry her down, but she was barely conscious, unable to walk down on her own.

So he looped her arms around his neck and wrapped one arm tightly around her waist. Doggedly, he walked her down the stairway one step at a time, gripping the slippery banister with one sweaty hand. The thick, greasy smoke obscured his vision, filling his nose and mouth, and the smell of burning human flesh nauseated him. It was unlike any other odor on earth.

But with each descending step, the smoke lightened, and he breathed easier. Abby began to place her feet on her own so that they could move a little faster. Finally, they reached the foyer, and he half walked her, half carried her to the front door and down the outside steps to Pruett's car.

He glanced around for emergency vehicles; seeing none, he opened the passenger door of the Firebird to deposit Abby in the seat and strap her in. She groaned, straightening her hat. Yes: after all that, she had managed to hang on to her hat. Moreover, she clutched a pink orchid spike in one deformed hand.

Circling the car to the driver's seat, Sammy momentarily gaped at the skewed building with smoke and flames pouring from a blown-out wall. Teeth chattering, he sat behind the wheel and started up the engine.

He exited the parking lot with as much decorum as anyone could manage while fleeing the scene of a burning death—in a Firebird, yet. He drove watchfully, running a red light at five miles an hour while drivers in the cross traffic leaned out of their side windows to yell at him.

He pulled into a shopping center about a mile away with the intent of calling in the fire, but did not find his phone in his pocket. "I probably dropped it in the conference room," he muttered, failing to recall that he had last put his phone in his left-hand pocket rather than his right.

"Dropped what?" Abby asked groggily.

"My phone. You got one on you?" he asked her.

"Uh? No," she said. She looked okay, he noted, probably suffering only from a little smoke inhalation. He couldn't imagine any better treatment for that than barbecue.

And then he wondered, *How did I fail?* He must have failed, because Streiker said he would. Did he fail by not rescuing Quinn, or because Adair had to come save his hide? He turned around to ask Abby, "Hey, did you know that your life is worthwhile even if you're never famous again?" There was some bite in his voice.

She looked at him, and tears came to her eyes. "It's like a drug. You're right, in what you told Quinn, about the applause.... It's awful, awful, going back to being nobody after you were Somebody. But—what happened to him?"

"I don't know," he muttered. Before he could turn the car back onto the thoroughfare, he had to wait for the screaming fire engine to pass, headed in the direction of the studio. Then, as twilight descended, he drove her to Streiker's Barbecue Place.

By the time they arrived, she was able to open the passenger door herself and begin to climb out. Still, Sammy went around the car to help her walk to the front entrance, all lit up. There were a lot of cars here, too. He looked over to the kennel, where Bubba watched him attentively. Daisy was working on a bone.

Sammy pushed open the door to look around blankly, but the sudden rush of people made it hard to see anything. He did hear, "Dadadada!" So he bent to extend his arms in the direction of the greeting. Sam landed in them, and Sammy lifted him. Marni was at his side, and he knew she was crying, even though he couldn't see her face.

Abby's father was walking her to a seat at a long row of tables. Ripley, already seated, was watching her expectantly. Someone directed Sammy to the table, and he sat in a stupor. Looking up, he saw Streiker across from him. "I'm back," Sammy said, and Streiker nodded. Sammy asked brokenly, "How did I fail?"

"You didn't," Streiker said, passing him a basket of fresh, hot chips. "You did rather well, actually."

Sammy blinked. "But... you told me I would fail."

"You would have, had I not told you that," Streiker replied. Sammy stared at him blankly. The rest of the diners at the long table were silent.

Streiker smiled at him, leaning back in his chair. "Normally, I don't explain myself. But I think you've earned an explanation. In fact, Sammy, I was sending you up against an adversary who totally outmatched you. Had you exercised the normal caution required in such an assignment, you would have not only failed to extract Abby, but you would have been severely damaged yourself. I value you too much to allow that to happen.

"But," he paused, still smiling, "you show a pattern of defiance in the face of long odds that I find useful. Going into a hopeless situation, you throw caution to the wind and go for broke, as you did bringing Jess to me. It was just this attitude that was required to provoke my adversary into losing control and revealing himself prematurely. You could not know this going in—you had to believe it was all for nothing in order to enrage him sufficiently, because your mind was an open book to him. Do you understand?"

Sammy blinked, replying in a sharp exhalation: "Yes! Yes, I do." Then he sagged. "But... Adair could have done that by herself. When you've got somebody like her working for you, you don't need me."

Streiker was shaking his head. "He knew her; he was on his guard against her. She could not have drawn him out of concealment. A flea-brained upstart was required for that."

Sammy looked mildly encouraged amid muffled snickers. Streiker added, "Another factor in your success was the requests of others who believed that I could override anything." Here he glanced at Marni, who was still holding her husband's arm.

Streiker went on, "Of course, you never realized that you failed on your first assignment with Quinn. But that is because we can't negate someone's free choice."

"What?" Sammy asked in exasperation. He looked at his wife, cradling Clay. "Did he tell you what happened with Quinn?"

"We saw some of it," she whispered.

Sammy leaned forward to Streiker, inadvertently knocking over the chip basket. "What just *happened*?"

Streiker replied, "You want a buffet plate? Get yourself something to eat, and I'll tell you."

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## Chapter 14

Three or four people brought Sammy a smorgasbord from the buffet line. Looking at the plates in front of him, he happened to glance up at Pruett, across the table and down a few seats. Pruett knew better than to ask right away, but his anxiety over the state of his car was writ large on his face.

“Oh, yeah, the Firebird,” Sammy said, reaching in his pocket for the keys. “See, there was an explosion in the conference room that busted the windows out, and Quinn went up like a human candle, and so....” Seeing the color drain from his best friend’s face, Sammy repented.

“I can’t do that to you. Your car’s fine,” he muttered, tossing Pruett the keys. Catching them, Pruett got right up to go check on it himself.

Relocating Sam to his left knee, Sammy pulled a plate of ribs toward himself and reached around his son to begin eating. “Ure sayingh?” (Translation: “You were saying?”) He suddenly wiped his mouth and looked around. “Where is Adair? She—saved my life, you know. Did you see that?” he asked his wife.

Daniel, unnoticed by almost everyone, turned to regard Adair sitting by herself at a table in the corner, refusing the spotlight. He got up to walk over to her, and she stood to embrace him. She spoke a few words to him, stroking his hair. He kissed her quickly on her cheek, then strode back to the Mastersons’ table, red-faced.

In reply to Sammy’s question, Marni shook her head, and he regarded her white face. “We saw you taunt him, and then—” She made a gesture of deference to Streiker.

Leaning back in his chair, he said, “Here is the background, Sammy: I had left an enemy of mine confined in a location called Beaconville. He managed to escape, and—”

“Darren,” Sammy said in belated comprehension. “Darren....”

“Loggia. Yes. Well, he made his way here, intending to rebuild his network in order to challenge me. He can’t attack me straight on; he’s not powerful enough. So he looked for weaknesses in those around me—”

“Me,” Sammy said promptly. He looked up as Pruett reentered, satisfied but unsmiling. “What?” Sammy demanded. “There’s not a scratch or a dent, unlike the last car *you* borrowed.”

Pruett’s jaw tightened. “You could have put some gas in it.”

“Sorry, I was a little pressed for time,” Sammy said. “You were saying?” he asked Streiker while leaning over the plate of ribs again. Sam watched intently as his dad ate one-handed, then Sam picked up a fat, drippy rib in imitation of him.

Streiker said to Sammy, “No, not you. Quinn Reilly.” Sammy stopped eating to look at him.

Streiker explained, “Quinn knew what I could do for him, but I did not act quickly enough to suit him. His impatience made him vulnerable to Darren’s suggestions. Every time Quinn listened to him, Darren got a little bit tighter grip on him; moved a little bit more inside him—”

“That’s why you said he wouldn’t listen to you when I brought him in here a week ago,” Sammy interrupted. “He was already too tight with Darren.”

“That’s correct,” Streiker said.

“What—” Sammy began flailing. “What could this Darren person hope to accomplish with Quinn? He was nobody.”

Streiker eyed him. “By following Darren’s advice, Quinn was well on his way to becoming Somebody. He was set to produce a new streaming series that would greatly expand Darren’s reach.”

“Abby’s show?” Sammy asked, brows drawn.

“No. Her show was just a steppingstone to bigger things,” Streiker replied.

Abby lowered her head, mouthing, “I knew that.”

“But—why would Quinn listen to Darren Whatshisface?” Sammy demanded.

“Darren posed as me,” Streiker said. “When Quinn said that I had told him to go find you last Wednesday morning, he was telling the truth as he knew it: he thought that was really me.”

Sammy shook his head vehemently. “*I brought him here to see you and you told him that wasn’t you.*”

Streiker replied with a half-smile, “He didn’t believe either of us, because I did not sound like Darren. Quinn never bothered to check whether the first voice he heard was really mine. If he had, he would have learned the truth.”

“Ohhh.” Sammy warily began eating again. He picked up the napkin to wipe his mouth and asked, “So the fire stunt was Darren’s idea to get rid of Abby? What, exactly, did Darren tell Quinn to do?”

“Several things, the most damaging of which was to dilute the fire protectant so that Abby would burn to death,” Streiker said.

Sammy dropped his rib. “He really did that? How was he not affected? They were both treated with the same batch!” Abby and her family sat stonily silent. Ripley appeared not to be listening; he was trying to remove the gloves from his mother’s misshapen fingers.

Streiker replied, “Quinn arrived already covered. The techs never gave it a thought because he insisted on applying the studio’s protectant himself while they were working on her. They only checked to make sure his coverage was adequate.”

“What about the fire extinguishers?” Sammy asked.

“He had switched out the fully charged extinguishers with old ones the day before. It was easy; the studio had no security when Abby wasn’t there. He acquired the same models and even transferred the tags,” Streiker replied.

Sammy put the cleaned rib down. “Did I give him the idea by suggesting that Nash was trying to kill her?” he asked as if expecting to hear the worst.

“No,” Streiker replied, lowering his brows. “Quinn’s plan was already underway at that point.”

Sammy was not comforted. “I don’t see how I failed there.” Sam, understanding nothing but his dad’s dejection, leaned against him in solidarity.

Streiker explained, “In your original assignment involving Quinn, I told you that you had to prevent his attempting the stunt or he would die. He made elaborate preparations ahead of time, but had not actually

embarked on his plan to murder Abby until he allowed the stunt to begin. At any point up until then, he could have repented. He did not. And in agreeing to murder, he sealed his own death.”

Sammy thought hard. “You mean I saved him for nothing? He wouldn’t have died that day?”

“No and no,” replied Streiker, and numerous brows furrowed in confusion. “That is, your following through on the assignment to your own hurt imparted a great benefit that you will not fully realize for some time. And, no: Quinn would not have died *then*, only later. Your sacrifice on his behalf did shake Darren’s hold on him. Unfortunately, that was only temporary.”

“He said Nash was the one who saved him,” Sammy recalled.

“That is what Darren told him,” Streiker replied, “and that completely overrode his own memory of what happened and what he saw on the video.”

Sammy suddenly remembered, “But Meadow said that Nash was the one who hired some guys to sabotage the stunt!”

Streiker shook his head in amused pity. “She was mistaken, Sammy. She completely misinterpreted what she had overheard. Nash had talked about killing her *show*.”

“Then why did Nash try to kill us both?” Sammy cried.

“He panicked at her accusation. It was a foolish impulse he should have resisted, and you can expect him to face charges for it down the road. But as to the attempted murder of Abby, your former colleagues are doing their job right; he has not been arrested because there is no hard evidence against him,” Streiker said.

Sammy sat there, eyes glazed. Then he shifted to look around the restaurant. “Where’s Adair?” he asked forlornly. She was no longer in the room.

“You will see her later,” Streiker said, smiling.

Blinking heavily, Sammy turned back to him. “She was awesome.”

“She did well,” Streiker agreed. He turned to look down the table at Abby, who sat with her head down. Her father had his arm draped protectively over her shoulders. “Do you have any questions?” Streiker asked her.

She sighed and shook her head, tears rolling down her face. She lifted a hand to wipe her face, then quickly hid the deformity in her lap, where the orchid spike lay. Ripley turned to Streiker. “I want her hands to be right. She needs good hands to help me dig in the garden.”

Streiker raised his chin minutely. Abby suddenly froze, then brought up the orchid with both hands. They were still terribly scarred, but her fingers were whole, straight and separate. She extended them, staring.

Ripley handed her a fork, and she gripped it easily. All those around the long table grinned at each other or Streiker as she laughed in disbelief. Ripley looked gratified.

Then she looked at Streiker to ask, “Can I have my hair back?” The hope of being on another show hung over her visibly.

Streiker looked at her son. “Well, Ripley? Should she have her beautiful blonde hair back?”

The boy’s face darkened as he turned to his mother. “You don’t need it to dig in the garden.”

So that was that. Abby looked pensively at her son, then reached over to smooth his thick blond hair with agile fingers. She turned back to Streiker to say, “Heal Ripley.”

Streiker glanced at her. “Ripley’s fine. He’s doing a great job with the garden, isn’t he, Frank?” Abby’s father nodded, and Abby looked down at her hands.

Streiker returned his attention to Sammy, who was slumping in exhaustion. “Go home and get some rest, Sammy. You will have another assignment tomorrow. Call me at seven o’clock tomorrow morning. Sammy? Do you hear?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Yes, Mr. Streiker,” Marni murmured.

The party broke up. Pruett and Mike helped Marni load her inert husband, their guys and their dog in the Jeep—even Bubba was ready to call it a night.

As Chris and Daniel were heading out toward Pruett’s Firebird—their preferred ride—Daniel felt eyes on him. He looked back to see Streiker’s pensive gaze. An uprush of fear propelled the boy out of the door so quickly that he jostled Chris in the process. Streiker just watched.

Marni drove her family home. Sammy never opened his eyes while getting from the Jeep to the bedroom, and everyone accepted his bed without a murmur.

Before falling into bed herself, Marni murmured, “I’d better set the alarm... seven o’clock....”

When the restaurant was empty and dark, Adair slipped into a rattan chair in front of a lakeside window. Streiker happened to be sitting in the chair next to it. “It *is* him,” she breathed. “Daniel. He finally remembered me.” Streiker smiled at her, nodding.

“But I—don’t understand. He was four years old—*four*—when you left him and Sophie with your family in Hawaii. That couldn’t have been more than a year ago, because that’s how long I was—unconscious,” she said haltingly. “Now he’s a teenager! And estranged from you again! Fletcher, how can this be?”

He inhaled, looking over the shimmering lights on the lake. “While I had you cocooned in your coma, you were free to... step out of time. You were unconstrained by the flimsy barriers of hours, days and years in reaching out to my son. But when I healed you, you became time-bound again—except when you are given special duty, as in forcing Darren back to Beaconville.” He briefly smiled on her, and she soaked up his approval.

“As for Daniel,” he resumed, “he has a long, rough stretch to walk home. Every detour, every snag, depression and dead end will be important. The whole road is essential to his formation—”

“And he can’t skip steps,” she ended flatly.

“That is correct,” he whispered.

She looked at him in growing distress, then blurted, “Fletcher, won’t you at least get him on the right road again? I can’t stand seeing him like this!”

He smiled wryly. “It’s about time you asked.”

Hours later, Daniel, eyes wide open, listened to Chris' soft, rhythmic breathing in the twin bed across the room. Daniel quietly lifted up, looking around in the darkness. All was still.

He reached under the bed to retrieve his duffel bag, packed earlier. All of his clothes and scant possessions were in it, as well as a lot of cash belonging to Chris. Daniel intended to pay it back, but needed every penny to get a flight back to Hawaii.

When he got out from under the covers fully dressed, Daisy lifted up from her bed on the floor. He reached over to pet her reassuringly, and she lay back down. Then, hugging the duffel bag to keep it quiet, he silently trod in his sock feet to the laundry room.

Here, he flipped open the security control panel and entered the code to turn off the system. Then he went to the front door, the one farthest from the bedrooms, opened it, and slipped out. Before closing the door, he locked the door knob. He couldn't relock the deadbolt, but he didn't want to leave the house entirely open.

On the porch, he sat to pull on his shoes, then dug out his hoodie from his duffel bag. It was a lot colder than he had realized. He never could get used to the cold here.

He slipped on the hoodie, startled by the passing of a sedan down the street. The blonde woman behind the wheel—was that—? No, he decided; this driver wore glasses. Still, he had the uncomfortable feeling that he had seen her before. He briefly thought of the crazy lady who had followed him and Chris home that first day.

Shivering, he hoisted his duffel bag and set off down the street. He was regretting this already because he knew that he couldn't steal enough from the Pruetts to get back to Kailua. But returning to their house after abusing their trust was out of the question.

And he sure wasn't going back to his mother's boyfriend's flop house. But, after seeing the man in the barbecue place, he had to do something—get away somewhere—

Trudging on with chattering teeth, thinking about that guy, he glanced up at the streetlight on the corner. There was something strange about it, and Daniel paused.

The whole structure looked to be lit. From bulb to base, it appeared to be glowing—Daniel could even see the fancy scrollwork adorning the sidearm.

His eyes traveled in wonderment down the pole until they came to rest on the man leaning up against it. He alone was in shadow. When he shifted upright, breaking contact with the pole, it lapsed into ordinary darkness, but for the bulb. Daniel gasped, dropping his duffel bag, for now he could see who that was.

Daniel remained frozen in fear while the man hesitated, then came over and bent for the dropped bag. Replacing the strap on the boy's shoulder, he said, "There are better ways to get home, Daniel. This won't work."

The light washed over the boy, and he wasn't afraid anymore. But still his question came out in a croak: "Who are you?"

"I'm the one who pulled you from the irrigation ditch, Daniel," Streiker said.

In a flash, Daniel remembered the panicky sensation of almost drowning when he was just a little guy, and the strong hands that pulled him up from the water.

Daniel looked down at the man's hands in the glow of the street light. Yes, they were the same: the hands that pulled him out, and the hands that held the pebbles.

“You left me!” Daniel cried.

“No,” the man said. “When you stopped listening to me, I became invisible to you. But I never left. I’ve been waiting for you to look for me again.”

Daniel dropped his head, blinking back the tears. “I’m so tired of being scared all the time.”

“There’s no reason to be. C’mon back to bed. If you let me, I’ll come see you after school tomorrow.”

Daniel said miserably, “I can’t get back in without waking everybody. And once they see what I did, they’ll kick me back out.”

“Let’s go see if that’s a fact,” Streiker said, smiling. He put his arm around Daniel’s shoulder to walk with him back up the sidewalk to the Pruetts’ front door.

Leaning forward, Streiker opened the door noiselessly. Blinking, Daniel walked into the dark, quiet house.

Before closing the door, Streiker said, “Lock it and reset the alarm, Daniel. And put Chris’ money back.”

The boy nodded meekly. “Okay.”

“I’ll come by tomorrow afternoon. Will that be all right?” Streiker asked.

Daniel looked him in the eye. Despite the darkness, he could see the man clearly. “Sure,” he whispered. Smiling, Streiker closed the door, and Daniel sighed in relief at the warmth.

Upon awaking the following morning, Marni blinked at the sunlight peeking in under the window blinds. She closed her eyes again, then sat straight up in bed to stare at the alarm clock. “Sammy!” She shook him roughly. “It’s seven-twenty! Where’s your phone?”

His eyes popped open and he shot up as if he were spring-loaded. Grabbing yesterday’s pants from the floor, he dislodged his phone, unlocked it, and pressed a number. He held a hand to his chest, listening to it ring.

“Hello.”

“Mr. Streiker! I—we—”

“Okay, Sammy. You don’t have time to do anything but get out to Carla’s house right away.”

Sammy began, “Yes, sir—” but Streiker had already ended the call.

Sammy hopped into his slacks, inserting his phone back into the pocket, and threw on his shirt from yesterday. “I still have time to make it to Carla’s house,” he told her, and she nodded.

He grabbed up his shoes and socks to carry them out to his Mustang. Finding his keys and wallet still in his pockets as well, he turned the ignition and backed out with a lurch. The morning was clear but very cold; he flipped the heater on without looking at the controls.

Approaching the expressway, he spread his hands over the wheel in dismay. Besides the normal weekday-morning gridlock, there was either an accident or construction obstructing the southbound lanes, for traffic cops were diverting the access lane to a detour route. And Sammy was already locked in to the detour.

He had no intention of sitting in stalled traffic while something unknown was taking place at his birth mother's house. Nor was he calling Clint, because Streiker had not specified that he had to. But he was getting out of this lane.

Wait. Sammy watched ahead, where the detoured traffic was moving along at a decent clip. So he warily stayed in line, scanning side streets and anticipating traffic on the cross streets ahead. Meanwhile, he had to get used to driving barefoot for the first time in probably 20 years, since that night as a teenager when he had taken an unscheduled ride in a friend's hot car. But never mind about that.

Finally, he topped a crest and slowed, seeing the cause of the delay: A checkpoint, "voluntary," at that. While Sammy did not believe they were looking for intoxicated drivers at 7:30 in the morning, he was not interested in finding out the reason for the checkpoint. So he peeled off onto a side street.

He glanced in his rearview mirror to see a uniformed state trooper—not a Dallas cop—run out into the road to wave him back. Sammy kept going, and the next moment looked up in disbelief as a pursuing DPS vehicle with flashing lights filled his mirror.

"You really want to do this?" he muttered to the trooper in the mirror. Nonetheless, Sammy slowed, unwilling to endanger anyone else by leading a "voluntary" checkpoint trooper in a high-speed chase. With a sinking heart, he knew that he had three or four alarm clocks he could have set last night to get to Carla's house on time today.

But even as he slowed, there was one thought running deeply beneath his conscious processes: that it was never too late with Streiker. Now, had Sammy himself decided that 20 minutes late was too late and rolled over to go back to sleep, sure, it would have been too late. But as long as Sammy made his best effort, he always seemed to get there just in time.

Suddenly he saw an escape route coming up. An unmarked side street just ahead led to a subdivision under construction. While the streets were paved, many were randomly blocked for sidewalk construction, sewer line work, or simply 18-wheelers loaded with building materials.

Sammy was thoroughly familiar with the area, having brought his darling wife down here frequently to work on her gear-shifting technique so that she could safely drive the Mustang without burning out the clutch.

Watching the trooper in his rearview mirror, Sammy slowed just enough to lull him into complacency, then stepped on the gas to skid around the corner. He floored it down the stretch of vacant lots to the first orange roadblock. Without looking, Sammy could see the flashing red and blue lights in the mirror, but they were now irrelevant.

He fishtailed to the street on the left immediately before the roadblock, then spun the wheel to access a private alley behind a brick wall. He cruised down the alley at 40 miles an hour, watching intently to see that no skateboarders nor construction vehicles were transgressing on his private highway this morning. It helped that none of the houses was occupied yet, and no fences had been built.

Emerging from there, Sammy whipped down one street and up another, then exited to a thoroughfare that would take him back to the expressway. Seeing the access road clear and the traffic moving freely, he hopped on and claimed the left lane at 80 miles per hour.

His gut coiled as he exited to Carla's neighborhood. Entering her street, he saw nothing amiss. Her car was in her driveway; Clint's car was not. Sammy pulled up to the curb in front of her house with a lurch, taking his keys and slamming the car door on a dead run, barefoot, up to her door.

He rang the doorbell, wrenching open the storm door to bang on the wood at the same time. "Carla? Carla! It's

Sammy! Are you okay?"

He heard her voice say, "What is it? Oh, my goodness, such a racket."

In a moment the door opened. Carla, in a house robe, looked at him in astonishment. "What is it, Sammy?"

He pushed his way inside. "Are you all right?" he demanded, looking around.

"Yes. What *is it*?" she repeated. "You're shorter." She looked down. "Where are your shoes, for goodness' sake?" Ignoring her, he made a quick search of every room in the house, including her bedroom, bathroom, closets, and garage. There was no one else here.

Returning to the front room where his mother stood speechless, he pulled out his phone to touch a number. Marni answered at once: "Hello!"

"Hi. Everything okay there?" he asked, still looking around.

"Yes, Sammy; the guys are still asleep. Did you get there in time?"

"As far as I know. Carla's here; she's okay. I'm going to hang around until I find out why Streiker sent me here," he said.

"Okay. *Thank you* for thinking to call me," she exhaled.

"Hey, I think of you all the time," he said, going to the kitchen to look out the back door again. "This might be a good time for you to get that red wash done or whatever."

"Oh, you!" she exclaimed, and he put away his phone, grinning.

Carla was still staring at him. "Okay," he said. "My feet are cold. I'm going out to the car to get my shoes. Don't move."

He ran to his car to open the passenger door and retrieve his loafers along with yesterday's socks. Glancing around the otherwise peaceful street, he carried his footwear back into Carla's house and sat on the nubby brown sofa to start putting them on.

Carla was frowning. "Why did you rush out here this morning?"

"Mr. Streiker told me to," he said, jamming his socked feet into his shoes.

"Well—do you want some breakfast?" she said, gesturing to the kitchen.

He thought about that. Sure, he'd like to eat, but he was leery of getting too comfortable when he might have to respond quickly to something. And he could just imagine something tense going down while he happened to be in the bathroom. "Ah, maybe a little later, thanks."

"Well, I was eating my breakfast when you came barging in, so I'm going to sit down and finish it," she huffed.

"Sure," he said, getting up.

He followed her to the kitchen to look out the back door again. Remembering something, he returned to the front room to look at the stain Bubba had left on the wall. Since Sammy couldn't recall its exact location, he had to search around a bit before finding what he thought might be it. Then he decided that he'd been very generous in



recompensing Carla for it.

Before returning to the kitchen, he glanced out the front window. He was a little surprised that Clint had not shown up yet. Perturbed, he went to the kitchen to look out the back door for the fourth or fifth time. Carla put down her tablet, exclaiming, “Will you at least sit down? You’re driving me crazy.”

Reluctantly, he did sit. “Where’s Clint?”

“Hmph! I took his key and told him not ever to barge in on me again,” she sniffed. While this was something she should have done long ago, he felt a little sorry for Clint.

Sammy studied her, noting that she had also dropped the cloying, sweetheart manner toward him as either a son or a lover. Maybe he had disappointed her in both roles, or maybe the income from the publication of the letters had given her a new sense of independence. She returned to her tablet, on which she was reading something that gratified her very much.

“Oh, listen to this,” she said. “That poor woman, to never have known the love of a husband and family after her one true love died. Has anyone started a fund for her?” Oh, that’s a wonderful idea,” she mused, staring off into space.

Sammy raised an eyebrow, then took the tablet to see what she was reading. It was the online edition of the North Dallas *Expositor*. She was perusing the comments on the story of her “lost love” that they had published yesterday. Scanning the dozen comments, he found them all intensely sympathetic save one, whose writer wondered what might have been omitted from the account.

Reclaiming the tablet, she said, “I’m going to tell them that I’d be very grateful for a fundraiser. I’m tired of this pokey little house; I’ve been stuck here forever. I want to travel.” She began typing hesitantly.

Without replying—since her remarks did not seem to be directed to him, anyway—Sammy got up to check out the front window again. He saw nothing, again. He returned to the kitchen to lean on the door jamb, where he could keep an eye on the back yard through the window in the door. At the same time, the suspicion was dawning on him that what he needed to deal with was already here. So he just watched, leaning on the doorway.

She finished her breakfast leisurely, then closed the cover on the tablet and got up to put her dishes in the sink. Frowning at him, she said, “I’m going to go get ready. Don’t you need to be somewhere?”

He cautiously replied, “I’d like to stay for a little while.”

Shrugging, she said, “If you like. I don’t care.” She went to her bedroom and locked the door.

Sammy exhaled dubiously, then used the half-bathroom off the front room while keeping the door open. He came back to the kitchen to wash his hands, just to keep an eye on both doors. He got out one of her porcelain coffee cups (since that was all he could find) and poured himself the dregs of her coffee. This he drank black, standing up.

Then he got out his phone and touched Streiker’s name in the Contacts list. When his call went to voicemail, Sammy ended it without leaving a message. Had he been too late after all? What was he here for?

He put his phone away, crossed his arms, and waited in the doorway. The house was so quiet that he could hear the water running in her bathroom. His ears perked up at the sound of a car engine outside, but it passed the house and faded. He looked at an old-fashioned clock on a wall shelf that ticked away. It was now 8:45. He wasn’t sure when he had arrived, but guessed that it had been about 40 minutes ago.

Lowering his eyes to the shaft of light coming from under the front door, he briefly regarded its pale brightness before apprehending that he was seeing it because someone had just opened the door. He raised his eyes to the figure silhouetted in the doorway, and froze to see that it was his own.

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## Chapter 15

The figure in the doorway paused, then another, smaller figure ran up to embrace him. “Oh! You made it!” she whispered, kissing him. He embraced her as Sammy watched motionless from the kitchen doorway.

“You’re sure they’re gone?” the newcomer said, moving inside and closing the door behind him.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Yes.” She pulled him over to the couch. It was a different couch than the one that had been here moments ago—it was plaid, and a matching plaid armchair stood to the side.

Sammy looked at a Christmas tree in the corner of the room, and tinsel strung across a fake fireplace mantel. This also was new. The carpet was different: a dark green. The window shades were made with a large tropical leaf print whose green matched that in the carpet. For all these cosmetic differences, the room was structurally the same: the locations of the front door, window, kitchen and hallway entrance were unchanged.

The guy pulled away from the girl, laughing, “Hey now, baby. The waiting period’s up. I’ve got the license; let’s go!” His voice was jarringly familiar.

Looking at him, Sammy saw his own face and form as a teenager. But the black hair was shorter and crisper than Sammy had worn his at that age. The girl was clearly a young, very lovely Carla.

“In a minute,” she breathed, kissing him deeply.

He broke off. “We can do this all day long after we get to the county clerk’s office. C’mon, I don’t want to risk your folks walking in on us.”

“What’re you afraid of? Going to jail?” she taunted, taking off her sweater. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Sammy quickly looked away.

“Carla,” Sam breathed, falling on top of her on the couch, hiking up her skirt. Sammy looked at him long enough to see the folded document sticking out of his back pocket. When his pants got shoved down around his ankles, Sammy watched the document fall onto the floor.

He kept his eyes averted from the grunting, bouncing, thrashing circumstances of what appeared to be his own conception. But when Sam had barely finished, the front door suddenly opened. A woman screamed; a man shouted; Sam leaped up, hiking his pants, but Carla lay fully exposed in woozy satisfaction. She was the only one untroubled in the ensuing commotion.

Sammy immediately recognized the man who had just entered as her father, his grandfather—the one who had always referred to Sammy as “the little bastard.” The woman was less clear in his memory, but she had to be Carla’s mother.

The wronged father grabbed Sam and struck him solidly several times while Carla’s mother hastened to dress her daughter. Strangely, Sammy could not remember either of Carla’s parents’ names except that they were Kidmans.

Sam did not resist the beating; he only tried to explain that they were on their way to get married. And he reached to his back pocket for a document that wasn’t there.

The father shook him violently. “You’re coming to the police station right now, you animal.” He dragged Sam out the front door.

Carla's mother pushed her daughter out after them, then paused. Seeing the paper half hidden under the couch, the mother picked it up to look at it. Then she quickly lifted the center couch cushion and rammed the document beneath it. Sammy heard fabric ripping. She replaced the cushion to follow her daughter out the door and slam it.

With the slamming of the door, the room was restored to what he had always seen before. He looked at the walls, doorways, and window, which were all the same. Then he looked at the couch that he had sat on just today. It wore a different covering—that of a nubby brown—but the shape was the same as the plaid couch. The nubby brown armchair beside it was likewise the same shape as the plaid chair he had just seen.

The present-day Carla came out of her bedroom, dressed to go out. "I'm sorry, Sammy; you have to leave now."

"Was this your parents' house?" he asked.

"Yes. Don't you remember it?" she asked, frowning.

"Not really; not until today. Did they own that couch and chair?" he asked, pointing.

"Yes. I've had them recovered several times because they have good, solid frames. And they're very comfortable." She fluffed her hair, and he looked at her.

Then he went over to the couch to lift out the center cushion. The fabric that was stretched over the springs was taut and undamaged, but also relatively new.

Sammy retreated to the kitchen and returned with a knife. Carla backed away apprehensively. Placing a knee on the couch frame, he probed for the location of the springs in the center. Finding a valley, he cut the fabric between two rows of springs, then grasped the edge of the cut to make perpendicular cuts at each end to form a flap. This he pulled back to expose the springs.

Dropping the knife, he reached into the entrails of the couch. There was a folded yellow paper caught between the springs. It had probably looked like a manufacturer's label to the upholsterer who had recovered the couch; even now, it was wedged so tightly between the coils that freeing it intact required several minutes of concentrated effort, at the cost of scraped knuckles.

Finally, Sammy withdrew the tri-folded document, marred by rust stains. As he gingerly opened it, Carla came up curiously. "What is that?"

Blinking, he said, "It's a marriage license. This is the marriage license that you and Sam got."

"Oh," she said.

He swallowed. "Why didn't you go with him to the justice of the peace when he came for you?"

Open-mouthed, she regarded the license and the couch. Then she admitted, "I didn't want to get married. I just wanted to have some fun."

Considering the years of suffering that followed upon her having fun, he looked down at the knife he had dropped on the floor. When he picked it up, she backed away. He glanced at her curiously on his way to the kitchen, where he deposited the knife in the sink. Document in hand, he crossed the room and opened the front door.

With the door open, he paused, looking back. "Why did you name me Samuel James?" He knew the answer from what she had told him years ago. But in light of the past that was still present in this room, he wanted to

recheck that.

She snorted, “Oh, it made Daddy so mad. It was worth it to see him turn purple. He couldn’t change it.”

“So, it wasn’t so much that you loved Sam as it was that you hated your dad,” Sammy observed.

She pursed her lips, putting her head on one side. “Good-bye.”

Nodding, he went on out to the Mustang. He started the engine and turned on the heater. Bowing his head momentarily over the steering wheel, he whispered, “Thank you.” Then he turned the wheel toward home.

When he walked in the door to the kitchen from the garage, Marni looked up quickly from the stovetop. Sam said, “Dadadada,” but did not get up from his chair, as he was eating pancakes with Bubba in close attendance.

Clay waved from his high chair: “Gah.”

“Hey, Clay, Sam. Oh, hello there, Lady at the Stove. Why is your hair not red?” he inquired.

She put a plate of pancakes on the table. “Do you want syrup or jam?” she asked, studying his face.

“Yeah, that blackberry syrup is good, thanks. And orange juice. Get down, Bubba.”

She put the syrup and the juice in front of him, then slowly sat. “What happened?”

While starting in on the pancakes, he slid the marriage license across the table to her. She looked at it and gasped, “So they were married after all?”

“No. They never took it to a justice of the peace,” he said, shoving a forkful of pancake into his mouth.

“Why not?” she cried.

“Hang tight; I’ve got a story to tell you,” he mumbled around his mouthful. He swallowed and began to talk: “Okay, on the way down, right off the bat, I evaded a ‘voluntary’ DPS checkpoint, which put me even further behind getting to her house....”

He told her the whole story, detail by detail, while she sat staring at him, coffee cup suspended halfway to her mouth. He ended, “So I took it and left, and I’m not paying for the couch lining. Her wall didn’t look that bad to me at all.”

She sat speechless for a few minutes, then said weakly, “How did the room... revert...?” He opened his hands in reply, implying that he had not a clue. Then she wondered, “And why did you have to get down there at a certain time?”

He raised his eyes to a far corner of the ceiling. “Now that is an interesting question. I got the sense of... When the light changed and the door opened, it was almost like a... dial turning. A timed release, as if this was a... periodic replay. I’m thinking it’s important that this was the *same room* in which all that originally happened. Even the couch was the same—which is how I found the marriage license.”

“That is so strange,” Marni whispered. “I just read this article where these researchers were talking about the imprint of energy, in the form of words and actions, left on surrounding matter, like wood or walls. They had come to believe that inert matter retains expressed energy.”

“And replays it periodically?” Sammy asked. “Like a film festival?”

"I don't know, but remember that verse in Habakkuk that Jesus quotes, about the stones and wood in a house speaking out? What if it's literally true?" she breathed.

"Could be," he said, leaning back from a clean plate. "But I feel like I needed to be there at a certain time to see it, and that Carla's presence would have inhibited it. So I needed to get there while she was eating breakfast but before she went to her bedroom to get ready. Oh, and, get this: she gave Clint the heave-ho, so there was no danger that he'd be busting the door down this morning."

She winced. "You know, I feel sorry for Clint."

"After he shoved you, the jerk?" Sammy asked with curled lip.

"Yeah. I think he's been trying to protect her and doesn't know how."

He nodded. "We guys can be stupid like that." He considered the marriage license again, dented and discolored where it had been caught between rusted springs. "It's... going to take me a while to work through all this, but, right now I feel so... relieved and glad."

"He tried to do the right thing," Marni pointed out. "He was telling the truth all along: that they were in love and were going to get married."

"*He* was in love and *he* wanted to get married," Sammy corrected her. "Carla was just out for a good time."

"It exonerates him," she insisted.

"He still went to prison for ten years," Sammy observed. She nodded dismally. He looked off, then said, "After talking to Patsy, though, I'm thinking... that was preferable to the life he would have had with Carla, in that family."

"Oh, my," Marni breathed.

"Especially—you remember the warden's notes?" Sammy said, sitting up. "God protected Sam even there, and made his incarceration something ultimately beneficial to him—though of course, he couldn't see that at the time. He couldn't see that for a long time, if ever."

They sat there for a few minutes watching the guys gorge themselves on buttery, blackberry-syrupy pancakes, then Sammy said, "Okay, I'm going to shower, and then we'll—" His phone went off, so he plucked it from his pocket to look at it. A crease crossed his forehead, and he answered, "Hello."

"Mr. Kidman? This is Amity Kurtz at Northlake Retirement Community. Do you have just a minute?"

"Sure," he said.

"We have all the forms ready for Mrs. Carey's move-in on the first. We only need her and your signatures on a few of those. Could you bring her by some time today to get those signed? Then we can make sure her unit is all ready in time," she said.

"Oh, sure. What time?" he asked.

"Tell you what—I'll leave these forms with our receptionist for you to stop by any time. Obviously, the sooner the better."

Sammy nodded. “Gotcha. Okay, I’ll give her a call and get out there.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kidman. Have a nice day.”

“You, too,” he said. He glanced up at Marni as he pressed another contact entry. “Okay, Northlake needs some forms signed, so I’m going to take her out there and then bring her back here so we can all do something, okay? Maybe go shopping and help her pick out new stuff for her apartment?”

“Oh, that would be fun!” she said.

“Yeah. Hello? Hi, Patsy. It’s Sammy. Hey, Northlake needs some forms signed, so I thought I’d take you out there to do that and then take you and Marni out shopping for apartment stuff. How’s that?... Okay, I have to shower, then I’ll be out there. Okay. Bye.”

As he put his phone away, he said, “She sounded kind of tired, but said she wanted to go. We’ll just make sure not to wear her out today. We can wear her out other days.”

Marni nodded, but her smile was a little tentative.

After Sammy had showered, shaved, and changed clothes, he kissed Marni good-bye. “Okay, I’ve got my phone, and I’m—”

“Sammy, it’s thirty-eight degrees outside. Put on a coat,” she said.

He waved. “Nah, I’m okay. I’ll—” She walked off, returning in a moment with his fur-lined leather jacket and black cowboy hat.

“Okay,” he conceded, shrugging into the coat. “But that means you’d better be a redhead when I get back.”

She looked at him as if she hadn’t even heard him—as if she were suddenly distant, somehow. Slightly miffed, he kissed her, then ruffled the guys’ heads on his way to the garage.

It was cold. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was glad she had made him wear his coat. He opened the door of the Mustang, then reconsidered. Patsy would be more comfortable in the Jeep, he thought. So he closed the Mustang’s door and started to go around to the Jeep Liberty’s door, then stopped. *No, I’m supposed to take the Mustang.*

Frowning, he turned back to his first choice. He didn’t know why, but he was sure that he was supposed to take the car instead of the 4-wheel drive. Since there was no precipitation coming down and none in the forecast, he shrugged and started the Mustang’s engine, tossing his hat into the back seat. Maybe Marni would need the Jeep while he was gone or something. *Yeah, if she decides to go to her parents’, she’s not going to walk everybody in this cold.*

Feeling better about that, he drove down to Patsy’s house. It still made him queasy to see this house again, but he wouldn’t have to worry about that much longer. The Northlake complex was very nice. And he might come back just to take photos of the demolition here. That thought made him smile. Parking at the curb, he trotted up the walk and rang the doorbell. Waiting, he bounced a little. It was *cold*.

Patsy opened the door, smiling. “Sammy. Come in a minute.”

He did, giving her a good, firm hug. “Hi, Patsy. Mom. We’ll only be in and out, but you need your coat.”

“I’ve got it. Will you give me a hand?” she asked, handing him her old tweed coat.

“Sure,” he murmured. First thing, he was going to buy her a new coat. A fur, if she’d let him. Today, if he could.

“Before we go sign papers, there’s someplace else I’d like to go first,” she said, buttoning the old coat.

“Sure. Wherever you want,” he agreed.

“Here.” She handed him an engraved card. “I got this in the mail just now. An engraved invitation! Isn’t it beautiful? I want to go there.”

Heart in his throat, Sammy looked down at the invitation to visit the Fletcher Striker Arboretum today. And there was the engraved, tinted orchid on the side. “No,” he whispered, hand shaking.

“Oh, why not? Please, Sammy, it’s such a nice gesture. I’d like to see why I was invited,” she said.

He looked up with tears in his eyes. “Oh, Patsy.”

She looked dismayed. “Are you not going to take me, Sammy?”

Dropping his head, he whispered, “No, I’ll take you. C’mon.” He stuffed the invitation in his jacket pocket and took her arm to assist her out to the Mustang. He opened the passenger door for her, inwardly fulminating, *I’m a freaking angel of death.*

Once she was settled, he walked around to the driver’s side and sat heavily at the wheel. He let the engine idle while they fastened their seatbelts, then he reached over to squeeze her hand.

She squeezed back as best she could, sighing, “Honestly, I don’t know that I’m up for the move. I’m so tired. The retirement center is so nice, but I just keep missing Ralph. Oh, Sammy, I wish you could have seen how much he changed, and how gentle and kind he was toward the end.”

Sammy swallowed, putting the car in gear. “We did talk a little at the hospital. I could see the change in him.” He checked over his shoulder and pulled out into the street.

Patsy sighed again. “You know, there’s not much I want to do anymore. I started cutting out squares for a new quilt, then just put everything away. I just didn’t feel like starting another one. I can’t drive to the quilting circle any more; it’s too far across town, down the tollway. I don’t like getting on the tollway.”

He nodded heavily. She paused, wrapping her coat a little tighter around her knees, and Sammy flipped open the heater’s floor vent.

She watched as they passed Lakewood Baptist, then remarked, “Everyone at church has been so kind, but, it’s only been eight days since Ralph died, and I don’t hear from anyone anymore. It’s been three or four days since anyone has called.

“Oh, I don’t blame them; I know they’re busy. But... I just don’t have anyone left, except you. I’m grateful for your attention, Sammy, but, I know you’ve got a family to take care of. I don’t want you to spend family time with a tired old woman.”

He listened gravely, then cleared his throat. “I don’t mind, Patsy. I owe it to you. Can you maybe put off the visit to the Arboretum for a little while?”

“That’s what’s so funny!” she said, looking for something that happened to be in his coat pocket. “When I saw the invitation, I got excited about going! That’s the one thing I actually want to do. Oh, my goodness, what do



you suppose will be there?"

"Well," his voice cracked. "There are some nice trails, and a koi pond, and a brook with a bridge across it. I don't know what it will all look like in midwinter, but I'm sure it's nice."

"I want to go," she said, smiling at him.

Stopped at a red light, he looked across at her, heartsick. The light changed to green.

Eyes forward, he shifted into first to proceed through the intersection. There was a slight bump, and suddenly they were sitting in the parking lot of the Arboretum. Sammy frowned, looking down at the steering wheel under his hands. "How did we get here so fast?"

"I don't care how. Let's go," she said, opening her own door.

Sammy hastened around the car to help her out, forgetting his hat. The wind was whipping around them, so he hustled her up to the entrance of the Arboretum, where the gates stood open. He glanced back to the parking lot, seeing about 20 cars close to the entrance. But he saw no one in line and no one in the plaza. He saw no one else at all.

Patsy tossed her head in the wind like a new filly. Her gray hairs blew out of her chignon, but she didn't care. "Where do we go?" she asked excitedly.

"This way." He grimly pointed to a path through the evergreens.

For the first time, he saw the line of yew trees on either side of the path, and scowled. Patsy shuffled forward as fast as she could on swollen, unreliable ankles. Sammy supported her.

Once they got in the trees, the wind died down. Patsy unfastened the top button of her coat under the sad little fur strip around the collar. "Spring is in the air," she said, lifting her face. "Can you smell it?"

"No," he said, head down. To him, it was just cold.

She walked a little faster, following the path. He reluctantly stepped up his stride. She chirped, "Oh, look! I believe those are tulips coming up. They'll be in bloom soon." He raised his face petulantly, and saw red and yellow tulips budding and blooming as she passed. He blinked at them, then at her outpacing him on the path.

"Slow down," he complained. How was she able to move so fast? He looked down at her slender ankles. Her clunky orthopedic shoes were getting in the way, so she kicked them off.

"Wait, now," he cautioned, picking one shoe up. He couldn't find the other one. "You're going to step on something sharp and hurt yourself. Don't run ahead of me like that."

"Sluggard," she laughed back at him, dark hair blowing across her bright eyes. She let him catch up so that she could lean on him to strip off her heavy black socks and toss them away. He stared at her flushed cheeks. Her coat was falling off her sleek shoulders, so she dropped it on the dirt path.

"Hey, you need that," he protested, picking it up.

"No, I don't. It's slowing me down," she sang, skipping ahead barefoot and unencumbered. Her dark woolen dress grew bright and light, flowing around her legs like a dance skirt.

"Will you cut that out? Come back here and look at the koi pond!" he said crossly. A submerged fountain in the

middle of the pond suddenly sent up an arc of shimmering water. He started, having never seen it before.

From ten feet up the path, she turned to blow a kiss. “Hello, koi fish! Sorry I can’t stop to visit right now!” Slender and glowing, she started running down the path. Sammy had to drop her coat and run just to keep up with her.

“Patsy!” he cried. “Patsy, wait!”

She would not. Coming to the end of the path, she caught her breath in joy, her lithe hands flying to her smooth, radiant face. “It’s you! I saw you in the hospital!”

Panting, Sammy stopped at her side. Thirty feet ahead was the large, lighted gazebo surrounded by spring flowers, filled with people and music. The brook ran between the path and the gazebo, with the arched footbridge providing the only means in sight of crossing the water.

A man had exited the gazebo to walk over to the footbridge and lay a hand on the railing. His smile was warm and familiar. “Hello, Patsy. It’s good to see you again.” It was Fletcher Streiker.

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## Chapter 16

Streiker trotted over the footbridge toward Patsy and Sammy, then paused on their side of the brook to wave her over. “Come on, Patsy; they’re all waiting for you.”

Looking toward the gazebo, Sammy saw all the party-goers suddenly turn, wave and call, “Patsy!” “She’s here!” “Oh, look!” “Hurry, dear!” At the front of them was Ralph, young and radiant, arms open in welcome.

With a cry, she sprang toward Streiker, but Sammy caught her arm. “Patsy, wait! I wanted to make it up to you, Patsy—all the years I defied you and Ralph—all the heartache I gave you—”

She turned, laughing, to kiss his cheek, and he could hardly endure her beauty. “Oh, Sammy, can’t you see that it doesn’t matter now? Go love your family!” She escaped him to run take Streiker’s hand, who began leading her over the bridge.

Doggedly, Sammy followed her to the bridge. He then glimpsed someone else waiting in the gazebo. On blind impulse, Sammy began to rush across the bridge.

Things happened very quickly then. Streiker wheeled with a look of denial, and suddenly Adair was blocking Sammy from crossing the bridge, her hands on his chest.

Since he could no more brush past her than he could nudge aside a brick wall, he watched over her shoulder as Streiker continued to lead Patsy into the gazebo, where Ralph encircled her in his arms. A crowd of friends converged on them, and their laughter was like a fist in Sammy’s gut.

Looking at Adair’s lovely, sympathetic face, he said, “I saw someone in the gazebo. There’s someone I needed to talk to.” He could no longer see who that was, as white mists descended to block his view. He was struggling to remember who that was.

“Not right now,” Adair said. Her hands on his chest, she began pushing him back from the bridge.

Before the mists completely obscured his view of the gazebo, he saw Patsy turn and wave good-bye. He groaned, “I wanted to be good to her.”

“You did all that you needed to do for her, Sammy. She does not need anything else from you,” Adair said, pushing him another step back from the bridge.

“I screwed up,” he said despondently.

“Not too badly,” she assured him. Step by step, she pushed him back. “There are other people who need you to be good to them now.”

He paused. “Marni,” he told her.

She pushed him back another step. “Yes.”

“And Sam, and Clay.” He was feeling a little woozy. “Pam and Clayton and Pruett, the bonehead.”

“Yes. Lie down, Sammy.” His knees folded, and she gently pushed him to the ground. He sat, and she made him lie on his back on the path. It was hard, like concrete. The trees were gone.

“I want to get up,” he said.

“Lie down,” she insisted.

“No, I’m okay. I need to get up,” he said.

She said, “Lie down! Stay there! We’ve got to check you over.”

He blinked at the blue paramedic uniform she wore, and the latex gloves covering her hands. Also, it wasn’t Adair.

Sammy sat upright, staring at the lopsided Mustang in the middle of the intersection. Another car was wedged deeply into the Mustang’s passenger side.

“What happened?” he cried. Tentatively, he felt a knot on the left side of his forehead, and he wondered how long he had been unconscious.

“Lie down, please,” she repeated in exasperation.

“No, I’m all right. Patsy! My aunt Patsy!” he cried. Firefighters were bringing the jaws of life off their truck.

He jumped up and ran to the passenger side, inaccessible for the front of the second car which was compressed like an accordion against his vehicle. The firefighters had managed to extract that driver, and his sheeted body was being lifted onto a gurney. All Sammy could see of Patsy was her left hand slightly above the dash.

A traffic cop at his side said, “Come on back, sir. Stay back, please.”

“What happened?” Sammy demanded. “I never saw a thing.”

“Yeah, uh, the Grand Am ran a red light and broadsided you. Traffic camera caught it all; you weren’t at fault,” the cop said. “Let me see your license, please.”

Sammy was surprised to find that he was still wearing his coat. That was good, because it was cold today. He felt his back pocket, and was gratified to find his wallet there. Pulling it out, he glanced at the blocked-off intersection, the long lines of traffic being detoured, and the rubberneckers watching from sidewalks and corners.

The cop took a photo of his license and handed it back to him. “You got proof of insurance?”

Sammy nodded. “In the glove compartment, if you can get it open.”

“Okay, we’ll wait,” the cop grunted.

Sammy swallowed, feeling in his pocket for his phone. Since it wasn’t there, he walked over to the open driver’s door of the Mustang. His phone lay on the seat. Sammy pocketed it, then removed his keys from the ignition. The garage-door remote had been smashed. His hat was inaccessible in what had once been the back seat.

Someone was ordering him out of the car, but Sammy paused to lay a tender hand on the top of Patsy’s head, her gray hair mussed in its chignon. Her arms were stretched across the seat, hiding her face; her shoulder slightly elevated. The rest of her body was hidden under mangled, bloodied steel and white leather.

“Sir, please, come out,” a firefighter insisted. Reluctantly, Sammy withdrew from the car. He wanted to tell Patsy good-bye, but she had already done that far better than he could.

He was coaxed to sit in the ambulance so the paramedics could check his pupils and vitals. One paramedic, upon removing the blood-pressure cuff from Sammy's arm, said, "You have one badass guardian angel, to walk away from that accident without a scratch."

"She wouldn't let me come over the bridge," Sammy said, watching the firefighters pry off the Mustang's door. "Ed is going to kill me," he groaned. "It's totaled," he said in resignation.

"You need to ride with us to Baylor Medical to get checked out," the paramedic said.

"No, thanks," Sammy replied, hopping out of the ambulance. He brought out his phone to consider the contact list, then pressed an entry. "Hey, Clayton. Are you busy? I need a ride home. Well, it's like this...." Phone at his ear, he began walking toward the tow truck that had just pulled up.

An hour later, Clayton was driving back to his house with Sammy in the passenger seat of the pickup. Sammy was quiet in his grief until Clayton told him, "Marni and the boys have been at our house since you left. Her mother is helping her put some color rinse on her hair. You're not supposed to know about it, so act surprised when you see her. She was under the faucet when I left, but wanted to know why I had to go pick you up. I told her you had been in a fender-bender."

Sammy nodded, pulling out his phone again. He exhaled, "Guess I'd better fill her in on the details, if she's all done."

While Clayton drove and listened, Sammy called Marni. He heard some murmuring and scissor-clipping in the background, but she said she could talk, so he didn't ask what she was doing. He told her about picking up Patsy, taking her to the Arboretum, and seeing her fly across the bridge to Ralph and their friends. Marni must not have caught the part about Ralph, because she didn't seem to understand that this was not a typical Arboretum visit. Also, somebody on her end kept murmuring at her.

He went on, "I tried to cross the bridge, and it really ticked off Streiker. Adair had to come shove me back."

"Why," Marni asked in confusion, "why would you try to follow Patsy across?"

"I wasn't thinking. I wasn't following her so much as trying to get to the person I saw in the gazebo. I needed to talk to them," he explained somewhat.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"I don't remember!" he said, irritated at himself. "It just seemed real important at the time."

"Well—what happened to Patsy? And your...." She went silent, beginning to connect the dots.

"Yeah, uh, when I woke up, I was flat on my back in the street. Another car broadsided us in the intersection, on the passenger side. The paramedics couldn't find anything wrong with me, but, Patsy...."

She started crying.

"Hey, it's okay; I'm okay," he insisted. "I did all I could to make Patsy stay a while longer, but she was ready to go party. Uh, Clayton is pulling into his driveway here, so I'll see you in about thirty seconds."

"Okay," she said faintly.

Sammy put his phone away to climb down from the pickup. As soon as he had slammed the door and started up the front walk to the Taylor house, the door opened. A small body came rocketing out without coat or shoes:

“Dadadada!”

In a blinding flash, Sammy knew that it was his dad he had seen in the gazebo. Sam had been waiting for Patsy as well. He had to thank her for taking care of his son. Sammy, seeing him, had responded with the innate urge of a son to follow his father.

So his son Sam, Junior, was also constrained by the bond of a son to his father, good or bad. Where Sammy led, Sam was predisposed to follow. It was a staggering thought. Sammy clapped his hands and held them out for Sam to take a flying leap into his arms.

Carrying him up the walk, Sammy glimpsed a sultry redhead in tight jeans and a white sweater waiting at the door. Turning on his arm, Sam said, “Whoa, baby.”

Sammy looked her up and down, then grinned. “Well, hi, there.”

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## Notes

In the analogy of this series, Streiker represents the resurrected Jesus Christ; Adair represents a believer fully equipped by faith and obedience. Darren Loggia represents Satan; Quinn Reilly is someone who has fallen under his control. Sammy, Marni, and the other characters represent believers in various stages of their Christian walk.

Regarding Streiker sending Sammy out to fail in Chapter 13, Sammy gets off easy. God has sent some of his greatest prophets on futile missions that were beyond their comprehension: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’

“He said, ‘Go and tell this people:  
‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;  
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’  
Make the heart of this people calloused;  
make their ears dull  
and close their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.’” ([Isa. 6:8-10](#))

Adair’s tulle around Sammy when she faces down Darren Loggia in Chapter 13 represents the presence of God as described in this excerpt:

“I was attending a prayer-meeting held for the promotion of scriptural holiness, when a strange lady rose to speak.... She said she had had great difficulty in living the life of faith, on account of the second causes that seemed to her to control nearly everything that concerned her. Her perplexity became so great, that at last she began to ask God to teach her the truth about it, whether He really was in everything or not.

“After praying this for a few days, she had what she described as a vision. She thought she was in a perfectly dark place, and that there advanced towards her from a distance a body of light, which gradually surrounded and enveloped her and everything around her.

“As it approached, a voice seemed to say, ‘This is the presence of God; this is the presence of God.’ While surrounded with this presence, all the great and awful things in life seemed to pass before her— fighting armies, wicked men, raging beasts, storms and pestilences, sin and suffering of every kind.

“She shrank back at first in terror, but she soon saw that the presence of God so surrounded and enveloped each one of these, that not a lion could reach out its paw, nor a bullet fly through the air, except as His presence moved out of the way to permit it.

“And she saw that, let there be ever so thin a sheet, as it were, of this glorious presence between herself and the most terrible violence, not a hair of her head could be ruffled, nor anything touch her, unless the presence divided to let the evil through.

“Then all the small and annoying things of life passed before her, and equally she saw that these all were so enveloped in this presence of God that not a cross look, not a harsh word, nor petty trial of any kind, could reach her unless His presence moved out of the way to let them through.

“Her difficulty vanished. Her question was answered forever. God was in everything; and to her henceforth there were no second causes.” Hannah Whitall Smith, [\*The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life\*](#)

Background information on some events and minor characters mentioned in this story are found in these books:

Yvonne Fay, Charles Whinnet, Darren Loggia: [\*Streiker's Bride\*](#)

Daniel, Madame Prochaska: [\*Streiker: The Killdeer\*](#)

Beaconville: [\*Streiker's Morning Sun\*](#)

Linda Threlkeld-Rains, Sam Watterson, his incarceration and pardon: [\*Sammy: Women Troubles\*](#)

Sam Watterson's marriage to Dolly Threlkeld: [\*Sammy: Love Shouldn't Hurt\*](#)

Great Deal Life Insurance Company: [\*Sammy: The Consolation of Bucephalus\*](#)

What almost happened to Abby in the hospital is rare, thank God:

[Patient Wakes Up as Doctors Get Ready to Remove Organs](#)

["Horrible" Mistake to Take Organs from a Living Person Was Averted](#)

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