

THE VERITAS DECEPTION

Lynne Constantine



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For Rick.

Thank you for always believing

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

Proverbs 14:21 (WEB)

CHAPTER ONE

Jack Logan had ditched his Catholic upbringing but kept the guilt. He hadn't planned on blowing his entire afternoon listening to the woman he was interviewing talk about her dead daughter, but he didn't have the heart to tell the grieving mother that he already had enough for the story. So instead, he bought her lunch *and* dinner, listening as she painted a picture of the girl she had loved and had failed to save. Now he was behind schedule and would have to work all night. Man, he hated the pieces involving kids. The parents got to him every time, and his attempts at comforting them were as effective as a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound.

His phone was ringing as he approached the door to his apartment, and he jammed the key in the lock. Pushing the door open, he rushed over and snatched it, upsetting the bottle of Bass Ale and spilling the dregs on the table.

"Great." He clicked the green button. "Yes?"

"Could you sound any more annoyed?" It was his editor.

"Sorry, Max. What's up?" He sunk into the worn leather sofa and ran a hand through his hair.

"Tried your cell. Went right to voice mail.

"I was interviewing one of the mothers."

The sound of papers rustling came over the phone. "You already did your piece on the decision. What's the angle on the follow-up?"

"The fall out, the casualties left in the wake of the decision to let the show go on."

A sharp intake of breath. "You're not saying they should have censored it?"

"No, no. Of course not. But their voices deserve to be heard." This had been a particularly difficult assignment for him. He wasn't much of a television watcher, but when the class action suit involving the production company behind *Teenage Wasted* reached the Supreme Court, he'd tuned in. At first it looked just like another of the ubiquitous reality shows jamming the airwaves—an eclectic group of teenagers allowing the cameras behind the scenes into their world. Within the first five minutes of the show, Jack had sat open-mouthed while a young man retrieved paraphernalia from under his bed, pulled up a porn site on his computer, and began doing what your average adolescent boy did behind closed doors. Cheap shock value but not

much in the way of entertainment. It wasn't until he put the noose around his neck that Jack's shock turned to horror. So that was what erotic asphyxiation looked like up close and personal.

The blogosphere went nuts the following day, and YouTube videos of other kids demonstrating their own secret hobbies began to appear. When kids started turning up dead, that's when it hit the fan. A class action suit was filed against Omega Inc., the entertainment giant responsible for the new show. The Supreme Court decision had been handed down a few weeks ago, and the parents were still in shock that they'd lost. The show went on—more popular than ever. Omega won under freedom of speech protection, which Jack couldn't argue with, but still, what they were doing was disgusting—perverting the first amendment for their own profit. He was happy to do his part to help tarnish their reputation.

“All right, email it when you're finished. You still coming tonight?” Max asked.

Jack grimaced. Sally Goldman's retirement party. He had forgotten.

“Wish I could, but I'm too jammed up with this.” Sally was a great gal. He was sorry he'd have to miss it. He'd send her some flowers tomorrow.

He'd better get to it. He opened up his laptop and began to organize his notes. He was starving; he'd barely touched his dinner earlier. He picked up the phone to order a pizza when the doorbell rang. He made no move to answer it. Maybe if he ignored it, they'd go away. It rang a second, third, and fourth time. He slammed the phone down, jumped up and strode to the door, ready to tell whoever it was to beat it. The words died on his lips when he opened the door. Probably best not to piss off a United States senator.

From the first time he'd met Senator Malcolm Phillips, something about him struck Jack as off. He couldn't put his finger on it exactly: the guy's manners were impeccable, his background impressive. Phillips was perfect. A little too perfect. Everything about him was so well rehearsed that Jack could almost believe there was an invisible teleprompter feeding him his lines. What surprised Jack most was how Phillips's wife, Taylor, failed to see he was all wrong for her. Of course, he kept this to himself. His opinion didn't mean anything to Taylor anymore.

He opened the door, and Phillips walked in.

Going no farther than the hallway, he began. “I won't waste time with pleasantries. I need your help.” His voice shook, and his face was ashen.

“What is it?”

“I scuttled the vote. It was supposed to be a good thing. But he added a gateway. He has to be stopped.”

“Whoa, what’s going on?”

He handed Jack an envelope as he spoke in an uncharacteristically nervous rush. “Take this. You’ll need it to convince Taylor. I didn’t believe it. He told me he would do it. I didn’t believe him but...they’ll kill me.”

This was insane. He hadn’t seen Phillips in years—and now here he was, rambling like a crazy person.

“What are you talking about? Slow down and tell me what’s going on,” Jack said.

“No time. You’re the only one I trust. You’ve got to find Jeremy. Get Taylor to him. They won’t hurt her now, but later...I was so stupid...”

Phillips was pacing now, and sweat had broken out on his forehead and upper lip.

“Who’s Jeremy? You’re not making any sense,” Jack said.

“Go to Taylor and show it to her.” He pointed to the envelope. “It’s a sealed letter, so she’ll know it’s real. Get Taylor and take her to the cabin.”

How did he know about the cabin?

“I’m the last person Taylor wants to see. She’s not going to go anywhere with me.”

Phillips grabbed his arm.

“They own me. And Brody Hamilton too. You’ll see when they kill me. Then you’ll know.”

“When who kills you?”

Phillips backed away.

“Promise me, you’ll get her to Jeremy.” He handed Jack a remote control. “This will get you into the garage. I’ve taped our address to the bottom.” He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “Remember, Jack, no matter what it looks like, I’m not suicidal nor prone to accidents.”

He was gone before a flabbergasted Jack could respond.

Jack shut the door, began to walk away, then turned back and engaged the extra deadbolt. His eyes narrowed as he looked around, half expecting a phantom to appear.

What was Phillips talking about? Did someone really want him dead—someone powerful enough to own two senators? His head began to pound, and he leaned forward to massage his temples. What had Phillips done? Maybe he was nuts, early onset dementia. Jack could only

hope. And now he expected Jack to play the hero to Taylor? He wouldn't blame her if she slammed the door in his face.

He would do some digging. Try and make sense of what had just landed in his lap. He threw the envelope on the table, opened his laptop, and set a Google alert for Senator Malcolm Phillips.

CHAPTER TWO

Senator Malcolm Phillips was 110 feet underwater. He checked the metrics on his dive computer—five more minutes before he was in danger of getting the bends. He had spent too much time in one room of the wreck and now would have to forgo exploring the rest of it. Scuba diving was the only time he truly relaxed. Wreck diving was his favorite. He loved the history and mystery associated with these old Japanese ships. Part of the appeal of this remote Micronesian island was his ability to blend in—nobody knew who he was or paid him any extra attention. After he had landed in Guam, he had called his old friend and borrowed his private plane. He wanted to disappear for a little while. After what he pulled with the vote, he knew it was only a matter of time. He wanted to be as far away from Taylor as possible—to be sure she wasn't caught in the crossfire. It was easy to get away; she'd never shown an interest in diving, and was used to him taking these trips alone. Knowing he was on borrowed time, he was all the more determined to make the most of this trip. Who would have thought that he would be willing to make such a sacrifice? Before Taylor, he had never done a single thing out of concern for another person. As some would say, miracles never cease.

He began ascending, making a concentrated effort to exhale as he rose. The water caressed his skin, and he surveyed the visual feast surrounding him. Angelfish painted in vibrant blues and yellows swooshed by, oblivious to their glory. The soft whooshing of his regulator filled his ears, and the lack of conversation added to his pleasure—no lobbyists hounding him to push a bill. Closing his eyes, he relished the feeling of floating through the ocean. His relaxation was interrupted by the sound of his dive computer. *Beep...beep...beep. What was wrong?* He looked at his wrist—the ascent warning. He was going up too fast. Swimming back towards the wreck, he grabbed the rope dangling from the boat above. Now he would need to hang for at least ten minutes. He continued checking his gauge while he held on to the rope, then began a slow ascent when enough time had elapsed. At last, he broke the surface and felt the warmth of the morning sun on his face. After climbing aboard the boat, he slipped the heavy tanks off his back and discarded his wet suit. He was looking forward to a well-earned lunch.

When he reached the outdoor restaurant, a young man showed him to a table overlooking the sea. He inhaled deeply. Salt and diesel combined to make a surprisingly pleasant aroma. He

ordered a Yap and made notes in his diving log. His waiter returned with the beer and smiled at Malcolm.

“We have nice fresh fish mister. You want same as yesterday?”

Malcolm nodded. “Let the chef know it’s for me. He knows how I need things prepared.”

“Yes, sir.” He bobbed his head and left.

The buttery fish was delicious and he devoured it. Leaning back with a satisfied sigh, he debated whether or not to order another beer. Deciding a nap would be even better, he paid the bill and walked the quarter mile to the small hut he was staying in. His throat felt funny. He tapped his pant’s pocket to see if it was there. *Deep breath, don’t worry.* Maybe he was coming down with a cold. When he reached the hut, he had to steady himself, and he leaned against the door. Sweat broke out on his brow and upper lip. The scratchiness in his throat intensified, and he became dizzy. The realization that he was having an allergic reaction hit him, and he pulled the EpiPen® from his pocket. He snapped open the case, removed the safety, and plunged the pen into his right thigh. *Relax. It’ll kick in soon.*

But it didn’t. The tightening around his neck increased, and he managed to croak out a dry, wheezing cough. Staggering to the dresser, he felt around for another Epi and stabbed it into his other leg. The face looking back at him in the mirror wasn’t his, the swelling so exaggerated it rendered him unrecognizable. This couldn’t be happening. Not yet. Dread filled him. Someone had tampered with the food—and his medicine. His shellfish allergy was in his medical file. Grasping the dresser, he pulled the phone toward him as he fell to the ground. When he lifted the receiver to his ear, there was only silence.

CHAPTER THREE

Jack had really thought Phillips was off his nut—on drugs, anything but serious. But when he got the Google alert that morning, he realized with a sinking feeling that Phillips *had* been telling the truth.

Dead. Phillips had been standing in this apartment less than a week ago. A chill ran through Jack as he grasped the full implications of this news. Phillips had made a powerful enemy, and if Jack decided to get involved, he would be turning himself into a target.

He'd done some quick research on the bill Phillips had been ranting about. It was fairly innocuous, just broadening the range of vaccines that received federal funding to help those who couldn't afford them. Sure, maybe someone didn't want to allocate the money, but to kill over it? That was a few days ago and he'd chalked up the bizarre visit to some medical thing that must be going on with Phillips. But as soon as he got the alert, he knew he had to get to Taylor right away. It was too coincidental. Phillips *was* dead—reportedly, some kind of accidental death while on a diving trip. He remembered Phillips's warning about not being accident prone.

Throwing a few things into a duffel, he opened his safe and took out his SIG. He made sure to pack extra ammo too. He went to the hall closet and grabbed his go bag. That would take care of Taylor and him for a couple of weeks. Now all he had to do was figure out how to get Taylor to leave with him. He had a few hours to think about it on the drive from the city to her house in McLean, Virginia. He took the 66 Mustang—no GPS.

Why would Phillips have been murdered? Maybe Taylor would know more; Phillips must have discussed it with her. And what was Hamilton's connection?

The sun was setting when he pulled up to the house. The massive, black iron gates were closed, and he had to get out of the car to swipe the card reader to open them. He had never been to the house Taylor shared with Phillips, and when he pulled up to the enormous, French colonial estate, his eyes widened. There were five exterior stone arches illuminated by large, round light fixtures above them. A second-story balcony above the first level ran across the entire front of the house. This place cost serious money—more money than senators made. He remembered reading about it a while ago in *Town and Country*; it had its own basketball court, indoor pool,

and home theater. Suited Phillips perfectly, but Taylor? Maybe she had changed over the years. What had happened to the little girl he had grown up with who hated ostentation?

He followed the circular driveway past the front door and around to the four-car garage, per Phillips's instructions. Using the remote, he opened the garage door. Once inside, he pressed the intercom and waited. Jack had the code to get into the house, but he didn't want to spook her.

A wary voice answered. "Who's there?"

Hearing the strain and grief in her voice broke his heart. "It's Jack." He heard a dog growling in the background.

A click and then the door opened. She was standing on the other side, a ghost. They looked at each other.

He pulled something from his pocket. "Gummy bear?"

A forlorn smile appeared then vanished just as quickly. He crossed the threshold, and she fell into his arms. Her shoulders shook, and he held her while she sobbed. A golden retriever lay on the floor at her feet, strangely quiet now, looking back and forth at the two of them.

Finally, she pulled away and wiped her face with a tissue.

"What are you doing here? How did you get in to the garage?"

"Malcolm gave me the remote."

Her brow furrowed. "What?"

"Let's go inside, and I'll explain everything." He followed her into the huge kitchen and took in the marble countertops and the ornate chandeliers hanging above the center island, which could easily accommodate twenty people around it. He'd have bet she and Phillips could've walked around this house for days and not run into each other. Suddenly, he felt like that kid again, the one from the working-class family who didn't know which fork to use.

The dog jumped up and nudged Jack's hand with his head.

"This is Beau." Her voice was wooden.

Jack crouched down and ruffled the fur on the dog's head. Beau's tail thumped wildly.

"Nice to meet you, Beau." He looked up at her. "Malcolm came to see me last week. Told me that someone was after him. If anything happened to him, I was to come see you."

"I can't believe he's d-dead." She stumbled on the word.

"Taylor." Jack took a breath. "It wasn't an accident." There was no easy way to say it, so he just said it. "He was murdered."

She shook her head. “No-no. What are you talking about? He died of an allergic reaction. He’s allergic to shellfish. The medical examiner ruled it an accidental death.”

Jack persisted. “He warned me that something was going to happen to him.”

“I don’t understand. Why would he come to you? You hardly know him.”

“He said I was the only one he trusted. He’s seen me around the Hill, knows my reputation.”

Jack hesitated before asking, “And I assume he knows our history, that I’d want to help?”

At this she glared at him. “Yeah, well, he should have gone to someone else.” She dabbed her eyes with the tissue clutched in her hand. “I still can’t believe it.”

“Did he say anything out of the ordinary before he left?”

She shook her head. “No. But…” She stood up, pacing. “Well, he *was* preoccupied, distracted. I just figured he was stressed from work. The trip was a last-minute thing, just to blow off some steam. I don’t dive. It’s something he does alone.”

Jack sighed. “He told me he would be killed, that I had to get you. You’re in danger. We have to leave tonight.”

“Are you crazy? I’m not going anywhere with you. I have to plan his funeral.”

He tried a different approach. “Let’s just back up a minute. What do you know about this vaccine bill?”

She shrugged. “Malcolm was for it. It was going to help a lot of families that couldn’t afford the vaccine. RSV is horrible and the vaccine is costly.”

“So then, why did he change his mind?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He voted no.”

“That doesn’t make any—”

She was interrupted by the buzz of the intercom.

“Are you expecting someone?” He didn’t like this. It was nine o’clock. He walked over to the window. Even with the outside lights on, the thick hedge of boxwood in front of the driveway made it impossible to see anything.

“See what they want, but don’t buzz them in.”

She gave him a skeptical look, then pressed the button on the speaker on the wall. “Yes?”

“Mrs. Phillips?” a gravelly voice asked.

“May I help you?”

“Sorry to disturb you, ma’am. We’re from the Capitol Police. We need to speak with you.”

She hit the buzzer. “Come in.”

“Why did you do that? How do you know they’re legit?”

“It’s the *police*. They must have news. What’s wrong with you?”

A few minutes later, the flash of headlights shone through the curtains briefly and a car door slammed.

Jack followed her into the hallway, and as she opened the door, he stood behind it, unseen. From Jack’s vantage point, he could only hear what was going on.

“May I see some ID, please?” Taylor asked. “What are you doing?” she asked, her tone rising.

Jack heard the storm door being rattled; then Taylor slammed the front door shut and engaged the deadbolt.

The sound of broken glass made them both jump, and Jack grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the hallway.

Her eyes were wide as she said, “When I asked for ID, he tried to open the door.”

Jack flew into action. “We have to leave. Now. Get in my car—it’s in the garage.” He pulled out his gun just in case there were any surprises waiting for them in the garage.

“I have to get my stuff.”

He could hear something ramming against the door. They’d be in the house any second.

“No time. Let’s go.”

“But—”

“Taylor, please!”

The dog started whining.

He started the car, not turning on the headlights. “I don’t know how we’re going to get past them.”

She pressed her index finger onto the fingerprint reader pad on the alarm panel, grabbed a key ring from the hook on the wall, then got back in the passenger seat. He watched in shock as the ground in front of the car opened into a black void that ultimately revealed a downward ramp.

“What the—”

“It’s an underground tunnel. Installed by the previous owners.”

This was something new. He pressed on the gas and slid the car into the dark opening. It led them about a mile from the house, still her property apparently, until they came to what looked

like a solid concrete wall that was stained red from years of ground water rusting the concrete's re-bar.

"Now what?"

She took the key ring, which had a small LED flashlight attached, and illuminated the wall until she found the oval embossed star on the face of the concrete. Holding the proximity sensor on the key chain against the star, the muted sound of mechanical movement commenced. The wall slowly opened as if it were a garage door.

Jack drove through and cast a sidelong view at Taylor. "Seriously? Was the previous owner regularly hunted by assassins or something?"

"She was a former head of state. It's one of the things that drew Malcolm to the house. He thought it was cool. Like the bat cave or something." She bit her lip. "I always thought it was ridiculous. Never thought *I'd* need to use it."

Jack was relieved to see that theirs was the only car on the road and that they'd make a clean getaway.

"Who do you think was at the door?" she asked.

"I can only assume they're connected to whomever killed Malcolm."

"So it's really true? He was murdered?"

"Looks that way. I know it's crazy, but right now we just need to put some distance between us and them—whoever they are. Let's get out of the state, and we'll stop somewhere for the night. I'll show you everything when we get there."

She ran a hand through her hair and looked at him.

"This is surreal. I can not believe I'm actually in a car with *you* running off into the night."

Then her hand flew to her mouth.

"Oh no."

"What?"

"My progesterone shots."

"Your what?"

"Jack. I'm pregnant—with a high-risk pregnancy. I need to take these shots for two more weeks. Without them, I could lose the baby. I have to refill my prescription. We have to go back."

Jack shook his head. "We can't. It's too dangerous."

Pregnant! Phillips had left that little tidbit out. Jack rubbed his temples and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The limousine came to a stop, and as Damon Crosse waited for his driver to get out and open his door, he admired the elaborate stone building he had commissioned. Towering iron gates, which surrounded the perimeter of the property, served as a deterrent to the curious; guards stationed in towers, and twenty-four-hour video surveillance ensured that he was informed of all goings-on at all times. He divided his time between this facility, and the one much more secluded and secret, where the important work was being done. But, today was the start of the new fellowship program and he was curious to get a look at the newest recruits. Before getting out of the car, he removed a long white hair from his pant leg. He would have to speak to his housekeeper about brushing Peritas more often. He normally kept the dog with him, but today his schedule was too packed to give him the attention he deserved.

The latest group had arrived last night, right on schedule. Walking the long hallway to the west elevator, he entered and pushed the button, tapping his foot on the descent to the basement level. He emerged and walked down the cold, bare corridor. Entering the room adjoining the barracks, he observed the new group through the two-way mirror. They sat on their bunks, awaiting further instruction. Their excited chatter and delight with the novelty of their circumstances would soon be replaced by an apprehensive awe due to the formidable surroundings. Every group reacted the same way. A knock at the door made him turn.

“You may enter,” he said.

“Sir, is there anything else you desire?”

“Everything is as it should be?”

“Yes, sir. The dossiers are on your desk. Everything so far is unremarkable.”

“That is all then.”

His estate manager cleared his throat.

“What is it, Jonas?”

“He’s waiting in your office, sir.”

“Very well.”

Damon watched as the heavy door closed. He observed them for half an hour. Deciding he had let the visitor wait long enough, he rose and returned to the main level, and to his study.

He stopped before opening the door, pulled out his cell phone, and watched the man on the screen. Dwarfed by the enormous wing chair he sat in, the visitor waited. Despite the chill in the air, perspiration had discolored his thin white shirt, and beads of sweat glistened on his brow. He muttered, “We’ll find her sir. Not to worry. Not to worry.” His head bobbed as he repeated the mantra to himself over and over.

Damon frowned, put the phone in his pocket, and opened the door.

“So good of you to come.” Damon’s smooth, deep voice resonated in the room. “I trust you have good news for me?” He seated himself behind the large mahogany desk and looked at the visitor with pursed lips.

The man swallowed. “She got away, sir.”

“How?” Damon pressed in a soft voice.

“She must have had someone helping her. Her car was still in the garage.” The man hesitated. “We never saw another car. I don’t know how she got away. It’s like she disappeared into thin air.”

Damon said nothing.

The man in the chair flinched, and hurried on. “We’ll find out who it is. We will. We’ve got a lot of men on it, it won’t be long. I’m sure, sir—we’ll fix it. Stupid, stupid, I know but—”

“Enough,” he said. His left hand moved to a small box that sat on the corner of the desk, and with deliberate calm, he pressed the red button. He looked up and studied the visitor for a full minute before he spoke again. “You have failed.”

As Damon stood, he nodded toward the back of the room and the three men who had entered silently surrounded the visitor. They didn’t need to use any force to subdue him. Everyone in Damon’s employ understood the consequence of failure.

He pressed his intercom. “Jonas.”

The door opened. “Yes, sir?”

“Send a team to the Phillips house. Have them retrieve the video footage. I want to know who’s with his wife, and I want to know yesterday.”

“Of course, sir.”

CHAPTER FIVE

One hundred and fifty miles later, Jack pulled over at a run-down motel and got them a room. The ruffled man behind the desk looked annoyed at having to tear himself away from his porn magazine to wait on them. In response to his request for a credit card, Jack slapped two hundred-dollar bills on the counter. They disappeared into the man's pocket and a room key appeared in their place. No one else was around, so it was easy to sneak Beau into the room.

The stink of stale cigarettes wafted over Jack when he opened the door. He flipped a switch, and a dingy bulb in a cracked lamp illuminated the room. He threw his bag on one of the two orange Naugahyde chairs next to the small, round wooden table.

Taylor looked around the room, her eyes resting a moment on the double bed, then back at Jack.

"One bed. You should have gotten two rooms."

He shook his head. "Don't worry. I'll take one of the chairs."

She pulled the comforter off the bed, folded it, and placed it on the floor. Jack didn't even want to think what kinds of stains would show up on it under a black light. Sitting on the bed, she called Beau over and patted the mattress until he jumped up next to her.

Jack handed Taylor a protein bar, but she shook her head.

"You have to eat. Think of the baby."

She took the bar, opened it, pulled off a small piece and put it in her mouth. "I don't even have any clothes with me," Taylor said, as she watched Jack put his duffel bag on the table.

"We'll have to pick some things up tomorrow." Rifling through the bag, he brought out a pair of faded blue sweatpants and a Boston University sweatshirt. "In the meantime..." he held his breath as he handed them to her, watching her expression carefully.

Her mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you still have these." She held the shirt at arm's length, looking it over, then shook her head. "You kept them all these years?"

He shrugged. "Couldn't force myself to get rid of them."

She got a faraway look for a minute, pressed her lips together, stood up and walked into the bathroom without another word.

He turned on the TV and flipped channels until he found CNN.

She returned, having changed, and sat down at the table. “Tell me again about what Malcolm said when he came to your apartment.”

“He wasn’t making much sense, was clearly agitated. He mentioned someone named Jeremy that we need to find, said now that he’d voted against the bill, they would kill him. He also said Brody Hamilton was in on it. He gave me an envelope for you. Then he left.”

“Let me see it.”

Jack went to his briefcase, pulled out the letter and gave it to her, then sat back down.

She read it, then handed it back to Jack. “Go ahead. You can read it.”

My dear Taylor,

Let me begin by how saying I am sorry and how painful is to know that nothing I can do will fix the mess I’ve made. No matter how it started, in the end, I did love you. If you believe nothing else, believe that. You will find things out—things that will make you hate me. I need you to understand that what we’ve gone through in the last two years to create this life you carry, it changed me. Brought us closer and gave me a glimpse into real love—something I’d never known before you. It was your love and the love I already feel for our child that gave me the strength to stand up to them. To finally do the right thing.

There’s so much more at stake than meets the eye. For reasons too complicated to explain in this letter, I have changed my vote. Look into the rider. It opens the door for untold evil. And look into Brody Hamilton’s record. Once my vote is cast, they will know that I have deserted, and they will kill me. I can’t tell you how it will happen, or when but you must know that regardless of what it looks like, when you hear of my death, be certain it was not of my own doing. They are excellent at making things appear as they want. After all, they made up my entire background.

You must find a man named Jeremy. He is the key to everything. He has been in hiding for the past year and has, over that time, built up a network of allies and advocates. I’ve enlisted the aid of Jack, he has skills you are not aware of, and I believe together you can accomplish what neither of you could do alone.

Trust no one. Not the press, not the enforcement agencies. They are everywhere. Disappear. Go deep. I have already arranged your first stop. Jack knows where to go. Once you arrive, you

will find instructions for your next stop. Don't waste time. It is imperative that you get to Jeremy as soon as you can.

I don't deserve your forgiveness but I pray that one day you will find it in your heart to grant it.

All my Love,

Malcolm

When Jack had finished, he looked at her. "Wow."

"Yeah, I don't even know where to start. What does he mean, 'they made up my entire background'?" she asked.

"I don't know. But he told me that he was owned. Hamilton too."

Taylor looked shocked. "No. That's impossible. You must be wrong."

"Look Taylor, I know this is hard to take in, but you need to think. Who else could be involved? He already mentioned Hamilton. What about other politicians in D.C.?"

Jack could see the wheels turning in her mind. She got up and took a seat across the table from him. Grabbing the cheap, plastic motel pen from the table, she rooted in her bag and brought out a small pad of paper.

"Number one: The rider. Two, Brody Hamilton, and three, Jeremy. Where is this cabin he mentioned?"

"The New Hampshire woods. It belongs to a friend of mine."

She looked confused. "Why would he know anything about your friends, and why would he be keeping tabs on you?"

"I don't know."

"How can this be? How did he get through the background checks?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Whoever he works for is powerful enough to build him a bulletproof identity."

The voice on the television got their attention.

"US Senator Malcolm Phillips was found dead in his room while vacationing in Truk Lagoon, a small island in Micronesia, yesterday afternoon. The senator apparently died of anaphylactic shock from a seafood allergy. In a bizarre twist, his wife, Taylor Parks Phillips, is missing. Funeral services are on hold until Mrs. Phillips is located."

Jack changed the channel again. Fox News was discussing the implications of Phillips's death.

"On a more personal note Bill, what do you make of the wife's disappearance? Seems a little strange, don't you think?" A picture of Taylor flashed across the screen.

The news anchor's eyes widened and he turned to his co-anchor.

"It seems there is a new development in the disappearance of Taylor Phillips. She may have been abducted. Take a look at this. A man was captured on video by the security camera."

The footage showed Jack holding a gun as Taylor was rushed into the front seat of his car.

Jack cursed and turned the television off. "How did they get that?"

"We've got cameras everywhere."

"Everyone will be looking for us. We've got to get moving, and we've got to dump my car."

"What about my shots? We need to go back."

She didn't get it. "We can't go back. I'll figure something out. Trust me."

As soon as the words left his lips, he regretted them. Her expression said it all—trust was the last thing she would bestow on him. He would earn it back. Somehow. He would figure out a way to make things right.

CHAPTER SIX

The sliver of light through the motel curtains woke Jack, and he stretched, trying to work out the kink in his neck from sleeping in the stiff chair. He glanced over at the bed and saw that Taylor was still asleep. He watched her as she slept and smiled when he saw that she still favored sleeping on her side with a pillow clutched tightly to her chest. It was hard to believe he hadn't seen her in almost fifteen years. They had been good to her, and if it was possible, she was more beautiful now than she was back then. He knew he should wake her, that she'd be furious to know he was sitting here, staring at her while she was asleep, but he wanted a few minutes more to really look at her without her looking back at him with accusation in her eyes.

Beau sprang off the bed, and nudged Jack with his nose, and barked, letting Jack know he wanted to go out.

"Beau." Taylor sat up, a look of confusion flickering across her face, as if she was trying to remember where she was. She slid from the bed in a single motion and put her feet into the loafers waiting on the floor.

"He needs to go out. I'll take him."

"I'll go with you."

"Honestly, Jack, I don't need a bodyguard. If you don't give me some breathing room, this is never going to work."

He put his hands up and backed away. "Okay, okay. Just let me do some quick surveillance to make sure no one found us."

"By then we'll have a puddle to clean up. Excuse me." She pushed past him, grabbed Beau's leash and opened the door. "I won't be long."

Jack followed immediately behind her. He didn't care if she got annoyed.

They returned to the room without incident. Jack was mentally assessing what he needed to accomplish before they hit the road again. He pulled out his laptop, wanting to see how many outlets had picked up his story. He typed *Manchester v Omega* into Google and his name. This was interesting. Not many papers had run the story. He typed in *Teenage Wasted* to see if others had covered the ruling on the show. The page was full of links—mostly to YouTube. He scrolled down, clicked the first link, and was taken to a video.

It had an adult content warning and he clicked it and waited. Jack watched in horror as a young man demonstrated the most efficient way to set up an autoerotic asphyxiation room. He gave a tour of his room, a list of supplies, suggestions on where to hide them, where to set them up, and promises of a live demonstration to come.

“What are you watching?”

He paused it.

“I did a story on *Manchester v Omega Entertainment*. You know the case I mean? The class action suit about the kids’ reality show that went to the Supreme Court.”

“Of course. It’s been all over the news. Disgusting. I can’t believe Omega won.”

“Take a look at this. There are hundreds of them.”

He hit play again, and they continued watching the video until it ended with the noose around the boy’s neck and him winking. Then the screen went black.

Taylor shook her head. “Unbelievable. I wish Omega had lost.”

He arched an eyebrow. “A surprising stance coming from a journalist.”

She looked at him. “It’s not so black and white, Jack. There was an analogous case out of California a few years back, *Brown v EMA*. The state banned certain violent video games from being sold, and the gaming company fought back claiming protection under free speech. The gaming company won, but only because there wasn’t enough proof that the games incited violence.” She raised her eyebrows and gave Jack a long look. “I think we can safely say that’s not the case with this show.”

“Listen Taylor. It wasn’t an easy call. On a personal level, I would like nothing more than to shut that show down. I’ve talked to those parents; they’re heartbroken. But I gotta say, it worries me when we start fooling around with constitutional liberties. This case was a slippery slope, dangerously close to censorship. But on an emotional level, I agree with you.”

Jack thought about the woman from his last interview. He’d seen a lot of grief, but the abject agony in her eyes haunted him. What could he say to this woman who had saved her daughter from the grips of death years earlier only to have her succumb to it in a misguided attempt to get high? Her words echoed in his mind.

“She spent years working with therapists. She was throwing up every day to look like those airbrushed models on the magazines. Finally gotten the bulimia under control. Was happy. And then...gone. Copying those foolish kids. Gone in seconds.”

How do you comfort someone like that? Did he want Omega to pay? Absolutely—but not if it meant screwing with the First Amendment.

“I read your articles.” She pursed her lips. “Your follow-up did a good job giving the parents a voice. It’s just that Omega’s behavior gives all us journalists a bad name.”

“Agreed.” He stood. “I’m going to run out and get some provisions before we hit the road later. Why don’t you start digging and see what you can find out about the bill and the rider? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Hold on. You can fill my prescription for progesterone.” She took the wallet from her purse and began looking through it. “Oh, no.”

“What is it?”

“I must have left it in my other bag. Jack, I need it. After everything I’ve been through, I’m not about to take any chances with this pregnancy. Get me a name of a pharmacy and I’ll call my doctor and have a new prescription called in.”

“We can’t do that, Taylor. It would lead them right to us.” Jack was quiet for a moment as he thought. “I have an idea.” He didn’t know why he didn’t think of it before.

“What?”

“My sister’s a nurse. I’ll see if she can get it.”

“Where does she live?”

“Boston. We’re headed there anyway.”

Relief filled her face. “That would be great. Here, let me write down the dosage.”

“You actually remember it?”

“Yeah, I could probably run my own fertility clinic at this point. Get fifty milligrams in oil. Enough for two weeks. Syringes too.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. Lock the door behind me and don’t go anywhere.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Crosby Wheeler, CEO of Omega Entertainment looked at the men gathered around the table. He was in a good mood, pleased by his recent win in court. It was unfortunate that the parents of the kids who had died had gotten together so quickly and organized the class action suit. It was ridiculous to pin the blame on his show. That was the problem with society these days—no one wanted to take responsibility for their own actions. Instead of trying to make him take *Teenage Wasted* off the air, they should have been more involved with their kids, known what they were doing, maybe look in a closet or check their cell phone texts. His job wasn't to parent America's children. His job was to entertain.

He had jumped on the streaming bandwagon early. Omega had started small but was now the uncontested leader, made popular by his original programming. He made shows that no one else dared make. He was criticized widely by some, adored by others.

He'd never really had any doubt that they would prevail, but it had been an inconvenience having to put a hold on the show until it became official. Luckily, the forced hiatus had only increased interest in it, and he was certain that the losses incurred over the past several months would be made up in no time. He looked at his executive producer.

"Ratings are continuing to climb?"

The man nodded. "Yes, I just got the latest figures."

"Any fallout?" he asked.

"Parents are outraged. They can't accept that they've lost. The other networks are using it to their advantage, hosting parent interviews. We've lost a handful of sponsors."

His new executive in charge of advertising, Adrian Winters, cleared his throat and spoke. "But we've got a long line of others waiting to take their place. I've replaced them at double the price."

Crosby looked at him with interest. He took a sip from his bottle of mineral water. "Do tell."

Winters picked up a mint from the crystal bowl in front of him and unwrapped it. "The media frenzy has caused the ratings to skyrocket. Internet channels are jamming from the traffic. It's an advertiser's wet dream." He popped the mint in his mouth.

Crosby spoke. “Good work. Email me the list and the new production schedule.” He addressed his producer again.

“The kids on the show okay?”

“Mostly. They were pretty upset, but the counselors talked them down, gave out some anti-anxiety meds. They’ve been compensated.”

Crosby nodded. “Good. They need to understand that they are not responsible for the deaths of those kids who imitated them. Make sure their contracts are all up-to-date. We don’t need any more lawsuits.” He stood and left without another word.

Back in his office, he reviewed the newest script. It was going to make the other episodes look tame.

He opened his email and input the addresses of his top ten YouTubers. He wrote a short note, letting them know what he had planned for the next show and telling them to be ready to imitate it on camera, then post their videos after the show aired.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Taylor had been reading the bill for over an hour, and her eyes were starting to blur. It must be the pregnancy. She moved over to the bed, stretched out, and patted the space next her. Beau jumped up and nestled against her legs. His warm body was comforting, and she stroked his head.

“You’re wondering what in the world we’re doing here, aren’t you, baby?” She sighed.

The enticement of sleep became stronger, but she had to think. *Oh, Malcolm, what did you do?* How could it be that she would never again hear his soothing voice or feel his strong arms around her? That he wouldn’t be there with her to raise the child they’d worked so hard to conceive? He’d been her best friend these past few years, the one she’d confided everything in. She still had a hard time believing that his whole identity had been faked. Hot tears wet her cheeks, and she hugged Beau closer to her. The familiar ache returned. Being with Jack after all this time brought it back: the heartache, the betrayal. She needed to clear her head.

“Come on, boy. Let’s take a walk.” She got up and attached his leash, grabbed her purse, and left the room. Her father would be beside himself with worry after the news report. She had to let him know she was okay. She pulled out her phone and dialed the number to his cell phone.

He answered on the first ring.

“Taylor?” The deep voice of Warwick Parks came over the line.

“Dad?” Her voice broke with emotion.

“Taylor! Thank God. I’ve been out of my mind. Where are you?”

“Oh, Dad. I don’t know where to begin. Jack showed up at my house last night. He said Malcolm told him to come and get me, to keep me safe. It’s all so mixed up, I don’t know what to believe.”

“Listen to me, Taylor. I don’t know what in the world he’s thinking—whisking you off like that, but the police think he kidnapped you. He’s in a lot of trouble.”

“He didn’t kidnap me. Some men came to the house, and we had to leave. Malcolm went to see him. I can’t explain it all now. I just wanted you to know I’m okay. We’re trying to figure it out.” She heard a long sigh.

“Taylor, you need to come home. You haven’t seen Jack in years. You have a funeral to plan. Everyone’s looking for you. You can’t just run off...I don’t trust Jack.”

“Dad. Stop. You have to trust *me*. I have to see where this leads. Jack is not going to hurt me.”
What did she expect? The bad blood between her father and Jack to just disappear?

“Tell me where you are.”

“At a motel somewhere. I don’t know exactly.”

“Where are you going?”

“We’re following clues Malcolm left in a letter to me, trying to find someone named Jeremy.”

“Are you crazy? This makes no sense. Come home!”

She had to hang up. “I love you. I don’t know when I can call again, but I will as soon as I can. Try not to worry.” She pressed End.

Beau sensed her mood and jumped, putting a paw on each shoulder, and gave her face three quick licks. Laughing, she rubbed his head.

“No matter what happens, I’ve always got you to cheer me up.” She took a seat on the bench by the motel’s front office and lifted her face to the sun. Beau curled up on the ground and rested his head on her foot.

The first time she had seen Beau, he had been a mess. Abandoned on the side of the road, his coat mangy, and with sores all over his legs, it was impossible to see what a beautiful dog he was. Taylor had loved him from the instant his soulful eyes locked upon hers. After a visit to the vet, he began to look better. But Malcolm had been less than thrilled. She recalled their conversation.

“How do you know where he came from? He could be rabid for all we know.”

Taylor had been floored. “The vet’s checked him out, and he’s fine,” she’d said fiercely. All he needs is a little TLC. Please, Malcolm. He needs me.” Her voice broke. “And I need him.”

He’d softened. “All right, but, at the first sign of any aggression, that dog goes.”

She had cupped Beau’s head in her hands and lowered her face to his.

“No one will ever hurt you again. I promise,” she’d whispered and kissed him on the nose.

Beau had turned out to be a loving, gentle, and loyal companion. It was his calm and nurturing presence that had gotten her through all her days of disappointment and devastation month after month, year after year, when it looked as though she would never achieve her dream of becoming a mother. Despite his teddy-bear nature, he had also turned out to be a fierce guard

dog and was particularly protective of Taylor. She had discovered this one day when the cable repairman had shown up at her door. Before she could let him in, Beau had gotten between her and the door, a deep growl rising from his throat. She had tried to calm him, but he'd been immovable. He began to bark ferociously, and, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't pull him away from the door. Finally, she had to call through the intercom and ask the man to come back later. When she'd phoned her cable company to reschedule, she had been shocked to discover that the man they were to send wasn't due to arrive for another two hours. She had wondered then, who had raised Beau the first few years of his life, and after that she'd never doubted his instincts again.

CHAPTER NINE

The Institute, 1975

May

I look straight ahead as the sedan climbs the long hill, and the stone building comes into sight. It is immense and imposing and makes me think of knights and maidens from a long time ago. A chill runs through me, and I have the urge to scream: *Go back! Let me out!* Get a grip, I think. My overactive imagination is at it again. I was chosen out of thousands for this elite, post-graduate fellowship program in medical research. We will be here for three months during which we will be closed off from the outside world. This is necessary, we are told, to help us to focus on the reason for being here—to get into the top 20% of the program and prove we are worthy of the one-year fellowship, all tuition paid. There is no time for distractions from family, friends, or lovers. I said my good-byes to my parents and my dear sister with the assurance that the months would fly, and before we knew it, we'd be celebrating my elevation into the full-year program. Because, of course, I intend to win. It's my only chance to work under Dr. Strombill, the bioethicist I've admired for years. Now that I am actually going to meet him, to have the opportunity to impress him, I am feeling awestruck and giddy, and I'm never awestruck and giddy.

The car comes to a stop, and the driver walks around and opens my door. I smile at him, and he looks right through me.

“Please proceed to the front steps.”

I grab my backpack, throw it over one shoulder, and walk the cobblestone path to the immense structure. I wait for the others to fall in line, and while I do, I study the ornate carving on the door. I've never seen anything like it before; it's a crest and a dragon-like creature. The beast is otherworldly and grotesque but beautiful at the same time. I am oddly drawn to it and reach out to trace the lines of its head when a voice behind me makes me snatch my hand back.

“Put your belongings on the ground next to you. You will have no need of them.”

There is an instant outcry of protest, and I clutch my purse to my side as my heart pounds in indignation. But then, the door opens and when I look inside, my indignation turns to awe.

CHAPTER TEN

Jack rushed down the aisle at Walgreens, throwing hair dye, scissors, make-up, and some local maps into his basket. He jiggled his keys while the line moved at a snail's pace. Why were there never enough cashiers? Biting his lip, he tried to stay cool as the elderly woman in front of him fumbled with a stack of coupons. At last, she was done. As she moved away, her foot caught on the rug, and she went tumbling. Jack lunged forward and caught her before she hit the ground.

"Oh my goodness. I don't know what happened."

The contents of her purse went flying. He collected them and handed her purse back. "Are you okay?"

"Thank you, dear. I *am* a little unsteady."

"Let me help you to your car." The blood pounded in his ears, but he maintained an air of calm. The poor woman looked like she was in pain. He was worried that she might not be well enough to drive. It took them ten minutes to walk to her car.

"Do you want me to call someone for you? Are you going to be okay driving?"

"I'm fine dear. Have a sore hip, that's all. Doctors keep trying to convince me to have it replaced, but I'm no fan of the knife."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Thanks. I'll be okay. You're a kind young man," she said as she smiled at him. Before taking a seat behind the wheel, she leaned in and opened the center console. "I want you to have this." It was a Saint Christopher medal on a chain.

He shook his head. "Thank you, but I couldn't possibly take it."

She pressed it into his hand. "I won't take no for an answer. There aren't too many like you, would stop and help an old lady. Please, he'll look after you." She put a hand on his and held his gaze. "Saint Christopher is on your side."

He doubted that but he closed his hand around it anyway. Seeing the earnest look on her face, he said, "I *could* use a little help." He gave her an impulsive hug and waited for her to drive away before running back to the store. The line was five-people deep again. He picked up his basket from the counter, and got back in line. No good deed goes unpunished, he thought.

When he was finally done, he threw his purchases on the passenger seat, put the medal in his jacket pocket, and pulled out his cell phone. Finding the contact, he pushed Send.

“Hello?”

“It’s Jack. I need you to leave Kyle’s truck unlocked with the keys in it. I have to borrow it for a while.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow night. I’ll text you when I’m close. Also, can you get your hands on some progesterone oil?”

“What?”

“It’s a long story. I need fifty milligrams of oil, enough for a couple of weeks. And needles too.”

“Is there something you want to tell me? Are you having some gender confusion?” She laughed.

“Very funny. It’s for a friend. Don’t ask.”

“I’ll see what I can do. And Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

“Love ya, Sis.” He hung up and drove back to the motel. As he got out of the car, he looked toward their room and cursed. Their door was open. Jack broke into a run towards the room.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

US Senator Brody Hamilton watched from the bed as Rita Avery rose and hurried to the bathroom and the steaming shower. He admired the view as she walked away, the perfectly rounded buttocks with the creamy skin, unblemished except for the tiny scorpion tattoo on her left cheek. He knew she was eager to wash away his touch. He found it amusing—the lengths to which she was willing to sink to achieve her goals. He grudgingly admired her tenacity and determination to become the most admired and sought-after lobbyist in the business. Hamilton knew all about her shabby beginnings, her mother’s insistence that she attend an upscale school, blind to the fact that their trailer park existence made it impossible for Rita to fit in. Yes, he knew all that and more, but not from Rita—Brody never let anyone get close to him without having them thoroughly investigated. No one would have ever suspected she had grown up in poverty. She carried her Birkin bags like a badge of honor—a different one for each season. Brody chuckled.

She came out of the bathroom in a beige Chanel suit, ready for their meeting, her Christian Louboutin alligator pumps clicking on the marble floor.

“Thanks for the tumble, darlin.” He liked rubbing it in her face. Hamilton snorted and his naked belly shook with his laughter.

She smiled tightly.

“I’ll go on ahead and meet you at the Blue Duck. Everyone will be there soon.”

He swung his legs over to the side of the bed where they barely reached the carpeted floor. Grabbing his robe, he put it on and stood. He was all business now.

“Go down the back stairs and out the side entrance.”

She nodded and left.

* * *

Hamilton was the last to arrive. Two other men on Rita’s team were seated at the table with her.

Rita pulled out a folder from her brown crocodile briefcase and laid it on the table.

“I want to talk about ingredient labeling. The health nuts are pumping out more propaganda about the vaccines. People are asking for ingredient lists. We want to make the lists unavailable.”

Hamilton raised his eyebrows.

“Do you now? And why, pray tell, should I support a bill that would do that?”

“It should be proprietary. Keep other companies from copying our formulas.”

“Don’t people have a right to know what they’re putting in their bodies?” Hamilton asked. He didn’t give a whit about the people’s rights, only that the public believe he did.

Rita smiled. “Well, of course we’d label the main ingredients, especially those that are a potential allergen, like eggs. What we don’t want to have to specify are the metals included.”

Hamilton took a sip of his Johnny Walker Blue, licked his lips, and then took another long swallow. “Metals?”

“Aluminum, formaldehyde, mercury, silicon, polysorbate-80—they’ve been in there forever without hurting anyone, but people may opt-out if they see all the ingredients.”

“Can’t blame them,” Hamilton said. Let her work for it.

One of the men jumped in. “Look, these are preservatives and bonding agents that are necessary to make the vaccines shelf stable. Sometimes there is a small downside to accomplishing a greater good. We don’t want children not to receive lifesaving vaccines because their tree-hugging parents are freaking out over a few metals.”

Hamilton, his eyes mere slits, leaned in close and spoke so softly that everyone else had to lean in to hear him.

“Don’t give me that true believer crap. You don’t want to lose any money by people opting out, pure and simple. And you don’t want to invest any money into replacing those so-called bonding agents with something safer. Let’s not kid each other here.” He leaned back in his seat and looked at Rita.

Rita sat up straighter and looked at Hamilton with what he had come to recognize as her “let me stroke your ego so you don’t notice I’m full of crap” look. He indulged her.

“Thoughts, Miss Avery?”

“Well, Senator, I respect your devotion to your constituents and your desire to look out for their best interests. They are indeed lucky to have someone like you representing them. Now I respectfully point out that there is no proof that these metals are dangerous, and to try and replace them with something that is only presumed to be safer would cost the company millions

in research, development and implementation. They would then have to pass those costs on to the consumer, thus making these vaccines unavailable to a large portion of the population who can't afford them. Additionally, my company would have to cut back on the vaccines they donate to third world countries. So in effect, instead of helping people by changing these bonding agents, we would be causing great harm to many children.”

Hamilton stroked his chin, pretending to digest this last bit of baloney. After a few more moments, said, “Well, my dear, as my grandpappy would say, your tongue is more silver than a tree full of tinsel. How are you going to position this?”

“We’ll list the organic materials and then we will put a statement like, ‘Could include combination of minerals all within U.S. defined safety standards.’”

Hamilton’s belly shook as he began to laugh. “Minerals. I love it. Honey, as my grandma used to say, you could sell ice to an Eskimo. I think I may have a solution that will suit all our needs.”

The three of them leaned forward like little birdies waiting for their mama to give them a worm.

“You know that my vaccine bill was unexpectedly scuttled and I have to go back to the drawing board and make some revisions before we submit it again. What say I add your little secret-ingredient list law to it? In the meantime, I need you to start lobbying my colleagues to support the bill. Wine and dine ’em. Tell ’em stories of dead babies who could have been saved if only they’d gotten the RSV treatment. I want a lot of people on it.”

Rita smiled. “Of course, Senator. Consider it done.”

Hamilton had been in Washington forever. The Senate’s long-time majority whip, he held a seat on the most important Congressional committees and had the ear of the President. His hillbilly colloquialisms belied a mind sharper than a grizzly’s claws. There was nothing he enjoyed more than the look of shock on the face of some poor fool who had fallen for the faux southern charm and failed to recognize the power he wielded—which is why he was furious that Phillips had scuttled the Vaccinate All Children Act. Did the fool really think he could stop them? What had gotten into Phillips anyway? One minute he had been completely on board, the next he’d killed the very bill he’d sponsored. Well, he’d gotten what he deserved.

Hamilton got up from the table without another word. On the way to his office, he pulled out his iPhone and opened the Twitter app.

No child should die of a preventable illness. Support the Vaccinate All Children Act #VACA

CHAPTER TWELVE

Damon's phone flashed, and he saw the tweet from Brody Hamilton. Picking up the phone he dialed Catherine Knight.

"Good afternoon Mr. Crosse." Her Texan accent was strong.

"I want you to put out stories on why the Vaccinate All Children Act is important. Find pictures, children who've suffered from RSV, parents who've lost children to it—flood all the outlets."

"I'm on it."

"I want print and broadcast too."

"Done."

He ended the call.

"Come, Peritas." He held out a dog biscuit.

The Great Pyrenees accepted the treat and then nuzzled his hand.

"Good boy. Down." The dog took his place next to his master's feet just as there was a knock at the door. Peritas growled deep in his throat and sprang up.

"Down." The dog obeyed immediately. "Come in."

Jonas escorted a woman in and seated her.

"Evelyn, I appreciate your making the long drive."

"Of course, sir. I know how important this is to you."

He drummed his fingers on the mahogany desk. "You heard from her?"

"Yes. She called Warwick. She's with Jack Logan. She told him that Malcolm had sent Jack to help her."

Damon's jaw clenched. How had he missed this?

"I'd have thought that Malcolm's pride would have prevented him from going to Logan. Do you have any idea why he changed his vote at the last minute?" If anyone understood Malcolm's psyche, it was Evelyn. Until she'd married Taylor's father, Warwick, she'd lived on campus, and been his most valued psychologist; she could detect a vulnerability long before it became a liability. No one advanced in the programs here without her approval. Her consulting services still served Damon well.

“There can only be one reason, sir.”

“And that is?” He was losing patience now.

She pulled her phone out of her purse and laid it on his desk. “I cloned Warwick’s phone and recorded the conversation.”

Damon listened to the call with no change in expression until Taylor mentioned Jeremy. His fist came down hard on the table.

“Jeremy got to Malcolm?”

“It appears so, sir. Jeremy must be angry enough to try and sabotage your work.”

“That phone call led my men right to her. Logan left her alone. She will arrive shortly. For the sake of the baby, I want her to feel safe, especially after what she’s been through. That’s why I summoned you. She’ll feel less threatened if she sees you.” He stroked the dog’s massive white head as he spoke. The thick fur felt good on his hands and he relaxed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Taylor was gone. He saw the laptop sitting on the bed and grabbed it before he flew out of the room. He ran around to the side of the motel. She was being pulled into the back of a brown Dodge, a snarling Beau still on his leash, clutched in her hand.

“Stop!” He flew towards them.

Dropping the computer, he pulled out his SIG and aimed at the right front tire, shot, then did the same to the left.

The driver scrambled out of the car.

“What the—”

“Drop your weapon,” Jack yelled.

The man didn’t move.

Gun pointed at the man’s head, Jack spoke again. “Do it.”

The man reached in his pocket and slowly pulled his gun out and threw it to the ground.

“Kick it away from you.”

The man complied.

Jack bent forward to retrieve it, keeping the gun trained on the man, and his gaze level. “Now get back in the car and no one gets hurt.”

The man put his hands up and backed away.

Taylor’s face was white as she ran towards Jack.

“Grab the computer and get in the car.”

They tore out of the parking lot as a black SUV rounded the corner and started gaining on them. Jack floored it, navigating around traffic like a race car driver, and sailed up on ramp to the highway. His eyes darted to the rear view mirror. The SUV was still behind them.

Jack jerked the wheel all the way to the left. The tires squealed as they did a 180 and headed in to incoming traffic. Horns blared as cars swerved to avoid colliding head-on with them.

“What are you doing?” Taylor screamed.

Jack expertly wove in and out of approaching traffic, swerved onto the shoulder, and turned the car around.

“Saving our lives!” he yelled above the din of screeching tires and screaming horns. In the rear view mirror, he watched as two cars collided trying to get out of the path of the SUV that was racing to catch up with them.

“Hold on.” He pushed the gas to the floor and changed lanes, clipping the back of the car next to him. They were on top of an overpass now. He had to get rid of them. He swerved again, until they were in the left-hand lane, against the low jersey wall. He slowed enough for the SUV to catch up. Taylor was ashen, gripping the sides of the seat. When the SUV was two cars back, he tapped the brakes a few times quickly. The car behind them slammed on his brakes, causing a chain reaction behind him. The SUV was sandwiched between a truck and a four-door sedan. Jack veered to the right again and sped up until the crash was no longer visible in the mirror.

“You okay?” He looked at Taylor.

She shook her head. “I’ll let you know when I can feel my face again. What was that? Where did you learn to drive like that?” Her voice was shaking.

“I took one of those evasive driving courses a few years back. Long story.”

“I guess you passed with flying colors.”

After another ten minutes of checking his rearview, Jack was satisfied that they were in the clear. “We should be in Boston in a couple hours. We’ll switch cars then keep going.” He fumbled behind the seat for his backpack.

He needed time to think. How had they found them so soon?

“Did that guy come to the door?”

“No. I was walking Beau, and he just pulled up and grabbed me.”

“I don’t understand how they knew where we were.”

Her hand flew to her mouth. “I think I know.”

“What?”

“I used my cell phone to call my father.”

He felt the blood rush to his face. “Oh, Taylor, I told you not to call anyone.”

“I had to let him know I was okay. Besides, we were using your computer; it didn’t occur to me that these people were that sophisticated.”

He took a deep breath. “I installed a VPN, a virtual private network. No one can track it. I didn’t know what we’d be dealing with so I took precautions. You need to take the SIM card out of your phone and give it to me.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh right.” He grinned. “I supposed you haven’t become any more tech savvy?”

“Ha-ha.”

He pulled off at the next exit, and removed the card from her phone, and threw it away while she used the bathroom. The last light was fading from the sky as they got back on the road.

“Just who are we up against?” Taylor asked, frustration in her voice.

“Were you able to find out anything more about the bill?” Jack asked.

“It looks pretty innocuous. It was just about adding RSV to the list of illnesses receiving federal assistance for vaccines—a good thing.”

“Tell me more about RSV.”

“Well, it’s a respiratory illness that preemies are especially vulnerable to. I have a friend who had twins and one of hers wound up in the hospital for a month. The treatment is expensive, and the preventive vaccine costs hundreds of dollars even after insurance.”

“So why wasn’t the vaccine a part of the inclusions in the first place?” Jack asked.

She shrugged. “It’s not that common. It’s only indicated for a certain subset of children. But for a child in that subset and whose family can’t afford to go to the doctor, it can be fatal. Malcolm was sponsoring the bill. I don’t understand why he killed it.”

Jack wondered the same thing. Obviously there was more to it. “We need to read the whole bill—see if there’s anything else. How many children get RSV every year?”

“I’ll check. Let’s hope the laptop didn’t get damaged when you threw it on the ground,” Taylor said. She unclipped her seat belt and reached back to get it.

Jack got a whiff of her hair as she moved past him. Lavender. He heard the twang of the Mac turning on. “Seems to be working.” Her fingers tapped the keys.” Well, someone’s certainly pissed.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I Googled RSV, and the entire page is populated with article after article from today. From every news outlet.”

“Strange, considering the bill hasn’t even been in the news,” Jack said.

“There’s a segment on *Newsline* tonight too, about a family who lost two of their three triplets. From what I can tell, it looks like the whole Knight news outlet is covering it: in print, Internet and television.”

Jack was stumped. This wasn't the type of do-gooder bill the power players cared about. Catherine Knight was the reigning media queen. Her holding company owned television stations all over the world, over thirty magazines, twenty-five major newspapers, a myriad of radio stations, and the second largest social media platform. Why would she expend resources to make a bunch of noise about something that affected such a small portion of the population? It's not like most people wouldn't already be in favor of increasing funding to make vaccines affordable to children. Someone was trying to stir up a public outcry. But why? And against whom?

"We need to read every line of that bill."

"I'll try and get through the rest of it when we reach Boston. It's over four hundred pages with the rider," Taylor replied.

She stared out the window into the darkness and they drove in silence for a long while. Finally, she spoke. "I never really knew him at all, did I?"

Jack shifted in his seat. What could he say?

"He was fighting his own demons, Taylor. His heart was in the right place at the end."

"I think I knew deep down that he was holding back, that things weren't as they should be, but it was all so intangible. We were both so busy those first few years. Between my hours at the network and the traveling I had to do when working a new story, we hardly saw each other. And then when I couldn't get pregnant he was so wonderful, supportive. It was like we were finally in a real partnership. I don't know what's real anymore."

"I'm sorry, Taylor. That must have been really painful for you."

"That's the funny thing. All—and I mean all—of the women I met in the infertility support groups complained about how insensitive their husbands were, how they couldn't relate to how devastating infertility is. Some of their marriages fell apart over it. But it brought us closer together. He was suffering just as much as I was, and he never said the wrong thing. I wouldn't have gotten through it without him."

Jack didn't feel like hearing what a saint Phillips had been. He drummed his hands on the wheel. "Try and get some sleep. You've been through a lot."

"There's no way I can sleep with all this going round and round in my head."

"Just lean back and close your eyes anyway."

She was out within five minutes. Every turn of their conversation had been rife with minefields. He didn't want to discuss her marriage or her pregnancy. She was supposed to have

married him. That had been the plan. She would finish her last year of college, and they would be married the following fall. He'd gotten an apartment in New York and a job with the Associated Press. Taylor used to come down on Friday afternoons, and they'd spent the weekends together exploring the city. They were going to live the life they'd always dreamed of—two journalists in the most important city in the world, the future at their fingertips.

He had never seen Dakota coming. A flash of red hair that framed a face defined by angles and contours, her blue eyes flashed with an intensity he'd found irresistible. He might never have met her if not for his sister. She had talked him into accompanying her to the art exhibit—not his usual Tuesday night diversion. Once they arrived, Jack went straight to the bar, grumbled that there was no beer, and grabbed a plastic cup of wine. Nails with chipped red polish reached out and took the cup from him.

“You don't want that rot. Come with me.”

Surprised and delighted by her boldness, he went along. She grasped his hand in hers and led him to the back of the gallery where a small kitchen hid. Picking up two crystal wineglasses, she held a bottle of pinot noir in her other hand and showed it to Jack.

“Much better, no?” She smiled.

“It's lost on me.” He grinned. “I'm happy with a cold beer.”

She stared at him and bit down on her plump bottom lip, her white teeth showcased by the soft pink hue. He found himself wondering how her lips would feel on his.

“Time to change that. You have no idea what you're missing.” Moving towards him, she lifted the glass to his lips.

He took a sip then shook his head.

“Sorry. Still rather have a beer.”

The full lips puckered in a pretty pout. “You're a terrible boor.” A smile lit up her face and she put a hand on his shoulder. “No matter. I've decided I like you, and I'm going to keep you.”

Jack frowned. “Keep me?”

“Oh don't worry, silly. I mean I want to be your friend. I'll keep you as a friend. Come on, let's see if any of my paintings have sold.”

“You're...?”

“Yes, I'm Dakota Drake.” She took a bow. “Welcome to my world.”

“Stop. Stop. Jack! Beau needs to go out,” Taylor shouted.

Jack glanced at her, startled. "Sorry. I'll pull over."

He steered the car to the shoulder and put it in park, then turned on the interior light.

"You stay here. I'll take him. Where's his leash?"

Jack held the leash while Beau sniffed in the dark for a place to relieve himself.

When he had finished, he loped up to Jack and licked his hand. Jack envied the dog his uncomplicated existence. He shook his head and wondered how he had managed to screw up his life so badly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Evelyn was about to leave Damon's office when his phone buzzed again and he put a finger up to stop her. He grabbed it from the desk and swiped. The color drained from his face as he listened to the man on the other end. "You lost her?" he demanded.

"Logan must have had some training," he told Damon. "They got away."

He ended the call and looked at Evelyn, the fury building in his chest. "You know her. What will she do next? Will she call again?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe he won't let her." She began to say something else, then seemed to think better of it and waited for him to speak again.

If Jeremy had indeed told Malcolm the truth about the bill, and he had passed that on to Taylor and Jack, they would follow the story to its conclusion. They were news hounds after all. He needed to find them before they got to Jeremy. He didn't share this with Evelyn. He leveled his gaze at her. "Figure something out. Use your talents. Find a way to make her call."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Institute, 1975

May

The entrance foyer is enormous, and there are racks lined up on the marble floor, each tagged with a sign bearing a name. Clothes hang there—*uniforms* is perhaps a better word. Shiny black jumpsuits with a red scorpion embroidered on the lapel. I take one from the rack and hold it up in front of me. It appears to be a perfect fit. There are slippers too, and scrubs, cotton shirts, blankets and pillows on a shelf below. I notice a Dopp kit and pick it up. Inside are toiletries— toothbrush, mouthwash, shampoo, and soap. I look around at the others. Everyone has the exact provisions. They have thought of everything.

Our driver clears his throat, and we all turn to look at him.

“You may follow me. Pull your cart behind you. We’re going to your quarters.”

His face is as expressionless as it was when he first picked us up, and I wonder at his lack of affect. I have an urge to reach out and poke him, try and provoke a reaction. But of course, I don’t. I make my face a mask and follow along with everyone as if this is the most natural thing in the world. We are led to an elevator and go down in groups. No one speaks while we wait our turn. I have to pee, but am embarrassed to ask. He comes for us, and we descend six floors, and when the elevator opens, we are faced by a steel door. A woman stands next to it, in a black jumpsuit, and smiles.

“Good evening students. Welcome.” She is pretty, not much older than me, and her eyes are kind.

I feel myself relax and gratitude rushes through me at her warmth.

She opens the door, and we push through with our new belongings.

There are beds lined up on each side of the room, army-barracks style, and others have already staked their claims and are sorting their things.

She turns to me and puts a hand on my arm.

“Maya, you’re over here.” She leads me to a bed at the end of one of the rows.

I am surprised that she knows my name.

“I’m Evelyn. I’ll be your coordinator for this session. Anything that you need, any problems you have, you can come to me.”

“Thank you,” I manage, my voice cracking. I look around. “Are we *all* staying in here?”

“Part of being here is learning how to think differently. Does it matter when you treat a patient, if the person is male or female? Does your examination differ?”

I shake my head.

“Of course not,” she says. “You would find it absurd if a male patient refused to let you examine him because you are a woman.” Her hand sweeps across the room. “It is no different here. This is where you all sleep, no matter your sex.” Then she laughs. “Trust me, at the end of the day, the only thing that will be on your mind is sleep.”

She leaves me then, and I watch her walk over to someone else. I think about what she said and I guess it makes some sense.

* * *

Today is the first day of classes. We are awakened early, though, I don’t know the exact time, as I no longer have my watch. We all wear our black jumpsuits and slippers. There are about thirty of us, and I dress silently, averting my eyes to avoid looking at the other half-naked bodies in the room and hoping they are doing the same. Despite my conversation with Evelyn, I am still unnerved to be quartered with the men and didn’t sleep well last night. I whisper to Amelia, the woman assigned to the cot next to me. “Don’t you think they should separate the men from the women?”

She doesn’t turn to look at me, but casts a glance in my direction out of the corner of her eye and answers, her words barely audible, “Shh. They’ll hear you.”

I bite back my retort, disappointed to realize that she’s a rule follower, and that I won’t be finding any companionship in her. We were told during initiation to keep to ourselves and focus on one thing only—being chosen as one of the the final twenty. The competition is going to be fiercer than anything we’d experienced at medical school. Our ability to display a singular focus and to shut out everything around us is one of the things we will be judged on. I can see that Amelia is as serious as I am about being one of the twenty admitted to phase two. Okay then, we won’t be friends.

The bell rings and we walk single file behind our training coordinator to begin a day filled with lectures. I am excited, wondering when I will get to meet him. We are taken in groups of five to the elevator and up six floors.

We are ushered into a classroom. It is nothing special, could be any classroom in any high school. There is a large screen at the front. A man walks in the room, and I bite my cheek to refrain from gasping. It is him—Dr. Strombill. He is shorter than I expected, almost diminutive, and I wonder if this can really be the man who has written with such passion and brilliance. He stands in front us, silent, assessing, and seems to examine each of us before he finally opens his mouth to speak. When he does, all my doubts dissolve, and his passion is so palpable I almost believe I can reach out and touch it.

“Welcome. The fact that you are here is evidence of your extraordinary talent and dedication. But more will be required. Innovation. Three-dimensional thinking. You must be able to see into the future and stride into the unknown. You have spent years being indoctrinated into the established way of viewing medicine. But we are to revolutionize the face of medicine, to see the big picture and make the difficult decisions that will advance medicine and treatment far above where we are today.” His Austrian accent is slight, melodic.

He walks from the front of the room without another word and turns off the lights. The screen comes alive, and we are looking at an older man lying in a hospital bed. I watch as the man on their screen gasps and wheezes in a vain attempt to get air into his lungs. His sallow skin is stretched tautly over his skeletal face, and his pained grimace reveals brown teeth. He croaks out a hoarse request.

“Nurse.” It comes out as a whisper.

His bony fingers press repeatedly on the call button as a look of distress fills his face. When there is no response, he sags backward, and his head hits the pillow in despondent resignation. The nurse finally appears, then frowns when she sees that the sheets are wet. She sighs.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, Mr. Smith. Lemme get some help in here.”

Two medical aides appear with another bed, and together they move the frail body into it. The man she called Mr. Smith grimaces in agony as they jostle him, and he cries out.

“Leave me in peace! Why can’t someone make the pain stop?” His anguished cries are punctuated with bouts of coughing and gasping.

The screen goes black, and light floods the room.

“What you have just seen can be prevented.” Dr. Strombill leans forward and peers over the dais at the students in the front row.

His voice rises. “You must be the voice of that poor man. It is up to you to make sure that a human being does not endure that kind of suffering. It is your moral imperative, your sacred duty as doctors, as purveyors of mercy, to spare your patients from this degree of pain and indignity.”

He scans the faces and looks pleased. “Who of us wants to spend our last days on earth filled with pain, fighting in vain for every breath? No. It is indecent. We cannot allow people to linger indefinitely until their disease-ridden bodies finally give up and free them from their torment and anguish.”

A timid hand waves.

“Yes, you.” He points at Amelia.

“What is the alternative? If we don’t give any treatment, the patient will still suffer from the effects of the disease.”

He looks at her, and a frown pulls at his mouth. “I assume you have heard of euthanasia?”

A look of shock appears on her face. “Are you suggesting that we actually kill people? Put them down like a dog?”

“And are *you* suggesting that a dog has more right to compassion than a human being? What is the profit in prolonging the life of someone who will be left with nothing but pain and indignity?”

I hold my breath, waiting for her response. Can’t she see she’s making him angry?

Her cheeks are flushed. “But it’s illegal.”

He walks toward her. “It is *now*. But that is changing and we must lead the charge.”

“But sometimes a terminal patient *does* recover. How are we to know which are hopeless cases and which are not?” She looks around the room, waiting, I think, for someone to come to her defense. No one does.

Dr. Strombill’s cheeks grow blood red, and a vein throbs in his forehead. He points a shaking finger at her.

“That is what is wrong with this country. Over-indulged children who grow up to be spoiled adults. The world does not have at its disposal the resources to squander on lost causes. Have you considered the financial and emotional toll on the family? Do you have any idea how

difficult it is to watch someone you love wither before your eyes until they are nothing but an empty shell?” Spittle flies from the corners of his mouth, and his eyes are slits.

Every eye in the room is on her. With tears streaming down her face, she stumbles to her feet and runs to the door, leaving her notebook on the desk.

Dr. Strombill turns to the class. “She won’t be needing this anymore.” He knocks the book to the floor. “I trust no one else has any questions?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They arrived at their destination.

“Where are we?” Taylor asked.

“Outside my sister’s house. Come on. Time to ditch the Mustang.”

They quickly moved everything from the car to a truck; then Jack told Taylor to get behind the wheel of the truck.

“Follow me.”

She drove behind him until they reached the Charles River, where they pulled into a secluded clearing set back from the road, and she put the truck in park and got out.

“What are you doing?” she cried at the sight of him positioning his beloved Mustang on the precipice of the hill, aimed at the river below.

“Got to get rid of it or they’ll know where we are. Can’t very well leave it at my sister’s and implicate her.”

“Oh, Jack! You love this car. You’ve spent hours and hours working on it and now you’ve got to get rid of it because of me.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“If Malcolm hadn’t involved you in this, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” was all he said. He couldn’t bring himself to admit what he really knew: she would never have married Phillips if Jack hadn’t been such a fool.

She turned around and placed a hand on the roof the car.

“I still remember when you brought it home. Your father had a fit, said it was a death trap.” She laughed. “By the time you were finished with it, he loved it almost as much as you did.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. His best memories with his father were because of this car; working on it was the only time he had really connected with him. A heart attack had taken his father right after his fiftieth birthday.

Taylor looked at Jack. “Do you really have to get rid of it? Can’t we hide it somewhere?”

He shook his head. “No, it has to be this way.” He stood straighter. “It’s just a car. Step back.”

Taylor took a last look, squeezed his hand, and stood back.

He leaned down and pushed. The car ran slowly down the hill until it reached the water. Jack held his breath as it began to sink, and when it was no longer visible he opened his mouth and exhaled. *Time to keep moving.*

An hour later, he pulled into a rest stop. Jack's sister had come through with the progesterone oil, and now, he followed Taylor into the cramped bathroom, arousing looks of curiosity and a few disapproving glares, so that he could give her the shot. The thick viscous liquid necessitated a large-gauge needle, and Jack cringed looking at the size of it.

"I'm used to it, Jack. It's no big deal."

She winced as the needle went in, and he slowly plunged the oil into the area right above her buttock. She rubbed the spot, then gamely smiled and thanked him for helping her.

They grabbed some drinks and snacks and got back on the road.

She was snoring, and he chuckled to himself. She would die of embarrassment if she knew. His attraction to her was still strong, and he felt like a heel, but he had enjoyed the glimpse of her slim hips when he gave her the shot. Being with her again made him wonder, for the thousandth time how, he had ever walked away from her. He had sacrificed her happiness as well as his own, and he hadn't even had the guts to tell her himself. It still shocked him to remember how selfish he had been.

After the art show, he had gone home and berated himself for flirting with Dakota. What was wrong with him? He was in love with Taylor—she'd been the only one for him from the time he was old enough to think about girls that way. Their relationship was story book—girl next door, high school sweethearts. So when there was a buzz on his intercom at 3:00 a.m., he should've known better than to answer it. Half-asleep, he pushed the button and her throaty voice floated into his room.

"Hey, Jack. Whatcha doing?"

"Sleeping," he'd mumbled.

A laugh came over the speaker. "The night is young. Buzz me up, I have champagne."

Against his better judgment, he had. He'd intended to tell her that he was involved already, then send her on her way.

She'd walked in his apartment, gone straight to the kitchen, opened the cabinet, and gotten two glasses, all like she'd lived there forever. She poured them each some champagne, leaning against his counter, her full lips shiny with gloss, just begging to be kissed.

He took the glass from her and threw it back in one gulp.

“Listen, Dakota. I like you, but I’m—”

She moved toward him and put a finger on his lips. “Shh.” He caught a whiff of her perfume, something spicy, musky.

And then they were kissing, and he was lifting her shirt off. The whole thing felt like a dream, and he half expected to wake up in the morning alone. When the bright light of day shone through the curtains, he’d realized with a sinking feeling, that he’d screwed up. Seeing the long, red hair fanned out on the pillow next to him—the pillow where Taylor’s head should have been resting, made him sick with guilt. He’d never been with anyone but Taylor before that night. Dakota had rolled over and looked at him, the expression in her eyes taking his breath away. There was something in those eyes that said, *I know you—you belong with me*, and he was torn in two, paralyzed by confusion. She closed the space between them, folding her body into his, and he felt himself respond. Like a drug, he had wanted more, needed more, and he knew there was no turning back.

After that, he and Dakota became inseparable. Her loft was a block from his apartment. They spent all their free time together. He was bewitched. She was fascinated by everything Jack had to say, loved to read his articles, would look at him like he was the only person in the world.

After a month he still hadn’t told Taylor. He didn’t know how. For the first time in his life, he lied to her. Told her he would be away on assignment. He knew he had to break the news, but how?

He had planned on going up to Boston on Friday and telling her in person. Dakota was cooking dinner when he mentioned it.

“I need to tell Taylor about us.”

She’d turned from the counter and sat down across from him, taking his hand in hers.

“Of course. Do you want me to go out for a while so you can talk in private?”

He rubbed her hand. “No, I have to do it face to face. I owe her that.”

A frown marred her face, and her lips turned up in a tight smile. She withdrew her hand and stood, turning her back to him. “Oh. When are you planning on going?”

Jack came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Don’t be mad. We have a long history together. I can’t just call her up and tell her I’ve fallen in love with someone else.”

She turned around and pressed against him, cupping his face in her hands. “I know. But I can’t stand the thought of losing you.”

“You’re not going to lose me. Not ever.”

“Of course, you have to go. I was just having a moment.” Her tone became light. “I would expect nothing less from you, my knight in shining armor.”

He smiled, relieved, and she reached out and grabbed his hand.

“Dinner won’t be ready for another half an hour. I know what I want for an appetizer.”

They fell on the sofa together, limbs tangled, lips locked and he could think of nothing else but the way she made him feel.

When they got the phone call on Thursday inviting them to a last-minute anniversary celebration in Las Vegas for her Aunt Sybil and Uncle Marcel that weekend, he’d modified his plans and made arrangements to go up to Boston the following weekend instead.

They arrived in Vegas late Friday night and Jack wasted no time in teaching Dakota blackjack. The party for her family wasn’t until Saturday, so they had the first night to themselves. As the chips accumulated and the liquor flowed, a pervasive euphoria filled Jack. He looked at Dakota and felt his heart swell.

Marcel walked over, clapped Jack on the shoulder, and gave him a broad smile.

“How’re you kids doing?” He glanced at the pile of chips in front of Jack. “Looks like you’re in the winner’s circle. We’re turning in for the night. See you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Marcel.”

Dakota got off her stool and, swaying, put an arm on Jack to steady herself. “Hey, handsome. Ready to call it a night?”

They walked arm in arm from the casino to the elevator.

She started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

She pointed to the sign by the elevator.

“The chapel of love. I was picturing us standing in front of an Elvis look-alike getting married.” She doubled over, laughing.

Jack chuckled and they both began to sing: “Going to the chapel and I’m going to get married. Going to the chapel and I’m gonna get maaaaarried...”

The both stopped and looked at each other.

“Would it be too crazy?” he asked.

Dakota bit her lip. “Nothing seems less crazy.”

He couldn't think of anything he wanted more. The truth was she owned him already.

“Let's do it,” he said.

The rest was a blur. Say this. Sign here. Kiss the bride. And then it was done. They were married. They left the chapel and walked into the cool evening air. Suddenly he was sober. What in God's name had he done?