

**A Heritage of Death**

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A Reverend Cici Gurule Mystery

Book 2

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## A Heritage to Death

**An unconventional woman. A brutal murder. To solve the case, one reverend will look for help from beyond the grave . . .**

Reverend Cici Gurule dreams of a bruised and bloodied woman who looks alarmingly like Cici. She'd like to pretend the recurring dream is a nightmare and nothing more, but there are too many coincidences in her waking life to write it off. Like the baby that turns up on her porch—a baby who disappeared days before.

As she and Detective Sam Chastain race to find the woman, the killer finds her first. Worse, a personal message, pinned to the victim's blouse states, "You're next."

As the trail grows cold, Cici's only chance to solve the mystery before she becomes the next target may be a clue left by her ghostly twin.



Dedication

For Tracey.

## Chapter 1

Cici

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*Our earthly joys are almost without exception the creatures of a moment . . . —Rousseau*

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*A text from a blocked number read: If you want to see your baby again come out to Service Road 705. There's a cabin at the very end.*

*She found the ramshackle but serviceable structure. She didn't enter. Behind it about an eighth of a mile was the root cellar. That's where she was now—where he'd brought Isabel earlier.*

*She hadn't seen him when she came in, but he must have been lurking in the thick shadows.*

*"Hello, Grace," he said, his voice smug.*

*Before she could turn, he hit her with something, something that made her head bleed. When she woke, she was chained to the wall. Isabel cried from the port-a-crib.*

*Her phone was gone. Nearby were some bottles of water, granola bars, formula, two bottles, diapers, and wipes.*

*After a struggle with the chain and stretching, ignoring the blood dripping from her ankle, she managed to grasp the edge of the portable crib and bring it closer. Now, she and the baby sat in the darkness. Waiting.*

*Waiting for him to return.*

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Gasping as she woke, her body drenched in sweat as her heart tried to pound out of her ribs, was not one of Cici's favorite past times. It was, however, the fastest route she knew to insomnia. She knew this because she'd had this same dream three nights in a row.

With a trembling hand—residual adrenaline—Cici pressed her palm flat to her stomach, willing her diaphragm to unclench, to allow her lungs to inflate fully. Anger built, frustration at her sister's death, sure, but also at Anna Carmen's decision to flit in and out of Cici's life, unable or unwilling to help Cici solve some of the big questions she wanted answered. Just to facilitate these nightmares Cici didn't understand—and didn't want.

“Weeks go by with nothing from you, and *this* is what you send me?” Cici panted, still trying to slow her heart rate, to focus her mind. But all the emotions jumbled together, unable to coalesce around any one of the sensations Cici lived in the dream.

The depictions from those somnolent moments tricked her mind: she'd touched, smelled, felt. It was as if *she* were the person living through the events. Her body still hummed from her experience.

Since her death a year before, Anna Carmen seemed to try to impart knowledge to Cici that would help her—before this set of dreams, all the information had focused on helping Cici find Anna Carmen's killer.

This vision, though, had nothing to do with her dead identical twin or Anna Carmen's death. Nor did it have anything to do with any case Cici had read about in the papers. Which meant . . . What?

A shiver of unease slid over Cici's sweat-cooled skin.

*Bad.* The dream portended something terrible to come, meaning Cici could no longer put off getting in touch with her friend and Santa Fe police detective Samuel Chastain.

"I don't remember you being so selfish when you were alive," Cici grumbled at the cool, silent room. "That's what this is—selfish. You want attention? I'd love to lavish you with attention, Aci. I tried." That damn lump lodged itself in Cici's throat. "I wanted to but you shut me out." Cici slammed her eyes shut and pressed her forehead to her knees, compressing her lips together tightly so the next words wouldn't leak out: *Why can't you leave me alone?*

Cici didn't mean that. She loved her sister—wanted her alive, next to Cici more than her next breath. Yet, that wasn't to be.

As a reverend, Cici understood that this desire to lash out at her sister was a form of grief—an unhealthy one she needed to contain.

And . . . who knew if her sister's spirit lingered? Cici still had no idea how this whole communicate-with-the-dead thing worked. Not well, anyway.

"I miss you," she whispered into the room. She opened her eyes, blinking because the sun now crested over the eastern horizon, and streaks of golden and pink light flashed into the indigo sky. Mona, one of her Great Pyrenees pups, laid her white muzzle, punctuated with a delicate black nose, on the rumpled bedclothes, her dark eyes full of a patience only dogs seemed to expend.

Cici pet Mona's silky ears before she climbed out of bed and stared out her window. There, she pictured her identical twin as she'd last seen her: long,



dark hair brushed back from the pale brow, hazel eyes closed as if in sleep, and her black lashes brushing high cheeks. Her nose straight if a tad long, jaw delicate. She'd worn a pretty pink Chanel suit—Cici hadn't known she'd own such an outfit.

Not her favorite memory of her sister, but it was the one she revisited most often.

Cici missed Anna Carmen, always would. Acceptance of the hole in her life—in her heart—proved harder yet to manage.

A ride on her Harley might shake the melancholy and wake her up, get her going.

Cici showered and dressed after letting her dogs outside. Once she'd fed them both and ensured they had plenty of water, Cici slipped on her gloves and jacket between sips of coffee, then grabbed her helmet. She hesitated next to the bike, its body still scratched from last month's frantic trip through barbed wire.

She slid on the helmet, tucking her long hair back before straddling the seat. She revved the engine. Cici's smile grew and her body relaxed as she took to the lightly trafficked streets. Her sister had been right about the relaxation of riding the motorcycle.

Cici needed to do this more often.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out after reluctantly killing the engine and tugging off her helmet.

“Hello?”

“Reverend Gurule? This is Jan Knowles.”

“Blessings, Jan. What can I do for you?”

“I’m sorry it’s so early.” A long pause followed by a gurgling sigh. “I wanted to wait. I should have waited. It’s just . . . well . . . I . . . I . . . I found out last night I have cancer. St-stage f-four.”

Cici swallowed against the bitter acid biting up the back of her throat. Much as she loved the work she did, helping the congregants in her United Church of Christ family find faith and meaning in their lives, she detested this human suffering that punctuated the happier, sweeter moments.

“I’m glad you called me, Jan. Are you home?”

“Yes.” Jan’s voice turned watery.

“You’re off of Paseo, right?”

Jan gave Cici her address, and Cici said, “I’ll swing by now. Mind putting on a pot of coffee? If it’s not too much trouble?” Cici asked.

“It’s no trouble.” Jan heaved a deep soul-shuddering sigh into the phone, as many previous congregants had before her.

Starting a pot of coffee was something positive Jan could do—the task familiar, comforting, and Cici found it helped people reorient their lives a little.

“Thanks, Reverend.”

Cici replaced her helmet and restarted the engine. Time to start her day. She’d call Sam, soon. When she had some time.

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*I need to talk to you about a dream I had. Maybe call me later?*

Cici pressed the “Send” icon and continued to frown down at her phone. Much as Cici wanted to brush off the dejection and worry that plagued her

throughout the day—especially after comforting Jan and getting her to call her estranged older brother—she couldn't. She took comfort in Sam not calling. Not that he would ask her to an open crime scene, should he be at one. Even Cici knew that's not how police *actually* worked.

Cici wouldn't have had much time to talk anyway—she was without a church secretary until the board found a decent replacement. Unfortunately, no qualified candidate had stepped forward yet, and that left Cici to handle most of the office tasks on top of her regular duties.

Busy didn't *entirely* cover her current schedule. And it wasn't like she'd been making time for Sam lately anyway. Not since he'd blown off her attempts to talk after kissing her silly on the hiking trail.

Sam's reply came through hours later: *I'll come by tonight.*

Cici set her phone down after typing back *Okay*. This appeared to be part of their new strange game of barely acknowledging each other. She scrubbed her palms over her face, unsure what to do—how to be around him right now.

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Later that afternoon, Cici headed over to the Institute of American Indian Arts located behind a large master-planned community and the community college. She was one of the faith leaders asked to participate in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women bead project—a few IAIA artists carved and planned to fire the beads with the images of the woman who were known to be murdered or who had disappeared in both the United States and Canada.

“Nice turnout today,” Sylvia said. She was one of the artists who, from the look of her clothes and hands, Cici guessed had spent the last few hours

working with the brown clay. Sylvia pulled a faded bandana from the back pocket of her old, stained jeans and rubbed her swollen knuckles and palms with it. Bits of clay remained in the seams of her fingers and around her nail beds.

Cici hoped one day to have as much talent at something—or to at least have as much dedication.

“I appreciate the opportunity to take part in this,” Cici said, looking around at the fifty or so locals. She waved at the mayor, who was speaking with her friend and church board member Carina. “I had no idea so many women were missing.”

Sylvia nodded, her face grave. “I read over four thousand in Canada. We don’t have a firm number here, but it’s many. No one cares what happens to native women, Reverend.”

“I care,” Cici said.

Sylvia studied her. “I guess you do. So do I. One of my nieces disappeared from our front lawn in the seventies. This was up near Yakama, where I’m from originally. Growing up, lots of women disappeared, only to turn up a few days or weeks later, dead. FBI looked into it oh . . . ten years ago? Said they were homicides or accidental. The community was stoic, but you don’t have that big a group die without feeling the impact.” Sylvia heaved a sigh, the light in her eyes fading with the memories.

“I’m glad that congresswoman in North Dakota is working to bring up legislation,” Sylvia said.

Cici nibbled at the inside of her lip, wishing the initial bill for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women had moved out of its committee. She chose not to voice her concerns after Sylvia's story. Instead, she thanked the older woman and again offered to help. Sylvia smiled and got back to her project.

Cici spoke with some others at the event, then got on her motorcycle, ignoring a few startled glances when she straddled the electric-blue, vintage 1965 Electra Glide Harley she'd inherited from her twin. She'd learned to ignore others' ideas about what a reverend should do and instead enjoy the time on the open road.

She maneuvered her way back up through the tourists to her church off Rodeo Road. She tidied her desk and locked up the building as the last stragglers from tonight's community yoga class chattered while making their way out the doors and to their cars. She rode home and parked the bike in the single-stall garage tucked on the back side of her small adobe home.

She opened the door that connected to the kitchen to find both her dogs waiting, tails wagging, for her. While she hugged and pet them, she talked about her day.

"Ready for a walk?" she asked.

Strolling through the streets, Cici passed a few of her neighbors and waved. The heat stuck to her skin, coating her in sweat and an unwelcome, oppressive blanket.

She watched Mona frisk around, her plumed tail wagging. Rodolfo stayed close to her side, his pace sedate, his tongue already lolling. Poor boy. Recovering from near-death took time.

She leaned over and pet his ears.

“I’m so thankful you’re still with me,” she said. He turned his face up toward hers, brown eyes sharp, tongue sliding to the back of his mouth as his canine grin spread.

She walked toward the park at the end of the street, planning to let Rodolfo sit by the side of the cottonwoods while she and Mona attempted some fetch. Mona refused to drop the ball once she collected it, instead darting to and fro, and having a delightful doggy game of tag.

Not Cici’s favorite game but Mona lived for it. They transitioned into the park area and Cici grabbed the ball from her pocket.

She threw it just as a thick wave of dizziness slammed her, causing her to shut her eyes. A strange tugging sensation rippled over her, one she’d felt before. Cici shook her head, trying to force the vision out of her mind.

“No. I don’t like that,” she murmured. “Don’t do that to me, Aci. It’s awful.”

Her sister didn’t listen—not that Cici expected her to.

Cici continued to fight, but Anna Carmen tugged at her consciousness.

*Come. See. You don’t have much time.*

“Aci?” Cici asked, her heart aching at the sound of her twin’s voice, even if it was just in her head—in this nightmare. She succumbed to her sister’s voice, desperate for a deeper, a stronger, connection to her twin.

But her sister was gone, and Cici was back in Grace’s head, how she knew this, she couldn’t say. Just that she knew she *was* Grace Bruin and she was scared.

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*Becky finally appeared. As soon as Cici, no she was Grace . . . .As soon as she, Grace received the text, she forwarded it to Becky. She snuck out of the police building, her heart hurting for Henry, for herself, but she couldn't let her baby suffer.*

*"There were lights in the cabin. And an old SUV. I think." Becky swallowed, eyes wide in the dark. "I think it's the sheriff."*

*Grace's heart plummeted. "Take Isabel. Get out of here."*

*"I can't leave you here!"*

*"You don't have a choice. Please, Becky. Please."*

*"Where can I take her?" Becky asked. "There was a Taos police car here earlier. What if all the police are involved?"*

*"They might be." Grace bit her lip, tugging Isabel tighter to her chest. "Go to Santa Fe. To Reverend Gurule. She'll figure it out. What to tell Henry and everything. Yeah. Go to her."*

*"No, Gracie. I'm not leaving you here." Large tears tumbled down Becky's cheeks. "I'm the one who wanted to look into this. I'm the reason you're here."*

*"We don't have time to argue," Grace said, her voice urgent. "He'll come back soon. He checks in often."*

*"Has he . . ." Becky gulped. "Has he hurt you?"*

*Grace held out her daughter again. "Save her for me," she said, her throat clogged with emotion.*

*"I don't have a car seat."*

*“My car does. It’s out there, right? There’s a key under the driver’s side front tire. In one of those little magnetic boxes. Henry made me get one. He was worried about those stories—you know, babies dying in hot cars.”*

*“Okay.” Becky sniffled.*

*Grace pulled the sleeping baby closer to her and kissed her daughter’s soft, sweet face. “I love you,” she whispered.*

*“Grace . . .”*

*Grace turned her face away. Tears dripped from her quivering chin. “Go!”*

*Becky picked up the baby and clattered up the stairs. She turned once and looked back, her eyes wide with fear.*

*Grace almost called her back as the fear of darkness overwhelmed her.*

*What would he do to her once he realized the baby was gone? That someone else knew his secret?*

*Grace opened her mouth, about to plead with Becky to take her, too.*

*Becky disappeared. The wooden doors slammed.*

*And the wait for the inevitable pain began.*

\*\*\*

Cici blinked her eyes open and stared into the panting faces of her two dogs, who stood watch on either side of her prone body. She sat up, trying to ignore the nausea swirling through her system.

“That was awful,” she muttered. With effort, she pulled herself upright. Dark. When she fell into the vision, it had been early evening, before sunset. Now, white stars pixelated the deep, inky blackness of the sky.

“I need to call Sam,” Cici moaned.



She'd left her phone back at her house, ignoring Sam's warnings about keeping her phone on her at all times. But she needed this one hour she took each day for herself. Except . . . it must have been closer to two. Cici staggered back toward her house, trying desperately not to vomit on the way.

## Chapter 2

Cici

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*Civilization is a hopeless race to discover remedies for the evils it produces. —Rousseau*

---

Sam knocked on the front door before Cici had time to call him.

She made her unsteady way toward the door, Mona circling her legs and emitting high-pitched whines.

“Hey,” Sam said from her porch. He didn’t step up yet to hug her as he used to do before the opioid case last month.

Cici missed the easy camaraderie they used to share. And, after the day she’d had, she could really use another person’s caring. Before she could stop herself, she hurtled forward, forcing Sam to catch her.

He did, patting her back twice before setting her upright. Cici blinked back tears. All-righty, then. Guess she knew where she stood.

Anna Carmen’s voice rang through her head: *Fake it till you make, Cee*. With a mental shrug, Cici decided to take her sister’s bad advice. It wasn’t as though she had a better idea.

Cici walked back to the door and let Mona out, sure the big white fur ball would only scamper over to Sam and not bolt down the street. Mona proved Cici right, wagging right up to Sam and licking his hand as she shoved her face against his leg.

Sam reached down to pet the dog as his eyes swept the neighborhood. Well, at least Mona received the attention she deserved.

“I ordered a pizza,” he said, following Cici into the house. “Sausage, mushrooms, and green chile on whole wheat. Should arrive in the next twenty minutes.”

Cici’s favorite combination. She smiled. “Thanks.”

She walked to the kitchen and pulled down plates.

“Have you talked to Evan recently?” Sam asked. He hesitated, then leaned against the kitchen doorway.

Cici’s burgeoning pleasure at seeing Sam collapsed. He didn’t want to be here, with her. And why would he ask her about Aci’s fiancé?

“No, not recently. We went to dinner a couple of weeks ago,” Cici said with a shrug. “He was nicer than usual, but that’s probably because he was such an epic jerk to me that he feels bad.”

Sam scooted a bit closer. “You think Evan ever feels bad for the way he acts?”

“No,” Cici said, trying to keep a straight face, but the smile burst through. “He can be so pompous.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what Aci saw in him.”

Sam considered her for a moment. “He was good to her, for her.”

Cici wrinkled her nose. “To each their own, huh?”

Sam smirked. “You got that right.”

Something in his voice, or his stare, caused Cici to feel flushed. “I wasn’t sure when you’d be by. I . . . um . . . I have more to tell you now.”

Sam stepped into the narrow galley space and squinted out Cici’s kitchen window. “Can I get a drink? Then you can tell me.”

Cici grabbed a pitcher of tea from the fridge and poured them each a glass, handing one to Sam. After a sip, she wrinkled her nose and pulled out the agave syrup, adding a thick dollop to her glass. Sam shook his head before she could offer him any.

“That’s nasty,” he muttered. “If you must drink it sweetened, why can’t you just add sugar?”

She swirled the liquid in her glass. “Because the sugar doesn’t dissolve as quickly as this stuff. That means the last few sips are straight-up sweet.”

Sam turned his focus back to the window, studying the sky. “Looks like rain.”

Cici peered out the window. “Meh. Those are hail clouds.”

Sam chuckled, easing some of the tension that had built in Cici’s neck. But her head still throbbed.

“You don’t know that,” Sam said. “Why do you even say that?”

“They’re all thick and gray, like snow clouds.” This conversation was inane.  
*Any suggestions, Aci?*

Of course, her sister was no help.

“Or rain,” Sam said. “Rain also needs thick, dark clouds.”

Cici crossed her arms over her chest. “We’ll see.”

Thunder boomed—a low, harsh rumble—and Cici sighed. Sam smirked.

“But you’re not here to talk about my iced-tea drinking habit or the weather. Let me tell you about my dream. It may be nothing, but . . .” Cici shivered.

She settled her hip comfortably against the counter. “In my dream, there’s a missing woman. She has a baby with her.”

Sam stood to his full height, eyes widening. "I've not heard of a case like that."

"Maybe it hasn't happened yet," Cici said. She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't remember the whole thing. Just the part where . . ." She grasped the glass in her hand more tightly, needing the anchor, the reality, so she didn't slip back into that awful place again.

"She's been hurt by her captor. She has a friend . . . Becky. Becky shows up. Says something about . . ." Cici racked her brain. She'd lost it—that detail. It was important, too. "I don't know. But Becky takes the baby."

"And leaves the woman—the mom?"

Cici nodded. "She's chained to the wall or floor. Something."

Sam smacked his hands together. "Hold up. You saw this in your dream last night?"

Cici nodded. "And tonight. While I was walking the dogs."

Sam sucked his lower lip into his mouth, considering her for a long moment, before asking, "Has that ever happened before?"

Cici shook her head. "I didn't like it." She rubbed her hands up and down her arms. "It scared me."

"I can tell." Sam took a step, like he meant to get closer but he stopped. "I haven't been brought in on a murder case since . . ."

Cici inhaled sharply through her nose. Since Cici had nearly died on top of a mountain.

And Sam had kissed her.

Then ignored her.

Sam cleared his throat. He grabbed a pad from his rear pocket. His pencil was missing from the spiral top, so Cici opened the drawer by her hip and offered him a pen. He nodded his thanks, careful not to touch her fingers.

“You think these dreams or nightmares or whatever you want to call them are from your sister?”

Cici hesitated for a moment. “Yes. She talks to me at the beginning. Not much. Just that I need to see this, understand the situation. That kind of thing.”

Sam tapped his pen on the pad, his mouth twisting in a grimace of doubt. Still, he’d been there when her sister appeared in the aspens on the top of that hiking trail. Aci had communicated with him, too, so he wasn’t willing to totally discount her recounting as grief or crazed imaginings. Yet.

“Tell me everything you remember,” Sam said, turning on his no-nonsense detective mode.

Cici cleared her throat and walked them both through all the details she could. She settled her glass on the counter and gripped the counter behind her, but her mind still tugged at her as if wanting to fall back into that space. She needed to remember something . . . something about who was there . . .

“Cici?”

She blinked, dazed. “What?”

He frowned down at her, concern dancing through his gunmetal eyes. “You okay?”

“Um.”

She slid to the floor, her mind burning as it echoed with the woman’s.



## Chapter 3

### Cici

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*Every person has a right to risk their own life for the preservation of it. —Rousseau*

---

Sam must have collected her off the floor because she lay on the couch, covered by the soft throw blanket she kept over the back. She opened her eyes.

“What was that?” Sam asked, his voice catching.

She turned and squinted at him, where he knelt on the floor next to her.

“I don’t know,” she murmured.

He stood. “You scared me.”

Cici didn’t respond; she was focused inward, on the emotions and images that flickered through her mind like a fast-moving silent film reel.

“Soon.” She leaned forward, grasping Sam’s wrist. “She’s running out of time,” Cici said.

“Who?” Sam asked.

The urgency built, so she rose, the blanket falling to her feet. A flash of lightning brightened Sam’s face, causing his blue eyes to go momentarily translucent. Not Sam.

She needed to see the killer. The killer stalking her even now.

“I don’t . . . I don’t know.”

A knock sounded on the door. Cici jerked and a small scream escaped her lips. Mona skittered out of the kitchen, her hackles up, as she came to Cici’s side. Both she and Rodolfo barked.



When Sam opened the door, the dog's woofs turned half-hearted, just to let Cici know they cared about her and defending the house. The pizza guy showed up at her place often enough that they all knew each other. Sure enough, he scratched both dogs' ears before handing the pizza to Sam.

Sam scooted around the dogs as he shoved his wallet back in his pocket. He set the box on the table and studied her.

"Can you talk about whatever you saw just now?"

"I didn't see anything. At least nothing new."

She walked to the kitchen and grabbed the dishes. Sam gathered their drinks and napkins and they settled at the table.

Cici stared at her plate, now laden with a delicious slice of cheesy goodness, but she made no move to pick up her slice of pizza. She raised her head, meeting Sam's concerned gaze. "Something bad . . ." Cici sighed. "Something bad's coming."

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The rain began to fall after they finished eating, and it poured out in thick sheets of sleety hail.

"On the plus side, you were right about the hail," Sam said. The small skylight in Cici's kitchen pinged as the frozen pellets slammed against the tempered plastic, filling the small house with a tympani solo.

Now that they'd finished eating, Mona rested her muzzle on Cici's knee. As Cici pet her ears, the dog's brown eyes glowed like fresh toffee in the lamplight.

"You afraid, girl?" Cici murmured as she rubbed her hand over the top of the dog's head.

Sam stood in the large entrance between the small kitchen and dining room, rubbing his hand on a dish towel.

“Mind if I take some of the leftover pizza home?”

Cici shook her head. “Please.”

Sam disappeared again and Cici heard him moving around in the kitchen. She stayed in her chair, enjoying the moment with her dog.

“Nothing like a hundred-plus-pound ball of anxiety,” Sam observed as he returned to the living room.

“Better for her to live here, where it rarely storms, than in, say, Houston,” Cici said, still rubbing her hand in soothing motions over the dog’s large head. One thing about petting an animal—the repetitive motion soothed Cici nearly as much, maybe more, than the dog herself.

“Got a point,” Sam said. “Not just about the fewer thunderstorms. Your dogs are the most pathetic weenies when it comes to heat.”

“They don’t like bullets and arrows either. I’ve had enough death and bullets to last me multiple lifetimes,” Cici replied.

“You seem to find the worst dregs of our society—and lead them to either commit another crime or confess to an old one.”

Cici shuddered, hating that her mind immediately began replaying the events from last month. “Please don’t try to draw any connections that don’t exist.”

“I’m not drawing conclusions or correlations, Cee.” Sam leaned forward, his eyes focused on her face and his tone sincere. “You don’t have to justify

anything to me.” Sam held up his hands palms out. “I’m just telling you that your op-eds in the paper *could* be misconstrued as inflammatory.”

“And people could get their heads out of their rear ends and start treating each other with the kindness Jesus wanted. What happened to ‘Love thy neighbor?’”

Sam snorted. He stood up and refilled his glass, then stood once more to put away the pitcher of iced tea, slamming the refrigerator door with a resounding thump. Glass in hand, he slid into the chair across from hers.

“First, I’m proud of you for not saying ‘asses’ like you wanted. That’s growth. Second, you do realize I work for law enforcement, right? I don’t see much good in people most days.”

“Or weeks,” Cici grumbled. She rested her hand on top of Mona’s head.

“Too true. My job’s about as opposite as loving a neighbor as you could get,” Sam said.

“That’s because your neighbor is a mean-spirited man who refuses to believe there’s good left in the world.”

Sam settled against the back of the tall chair with a deep chuckle. He sipped from his glass of tea.

This . . . this conversation with Sam was cozy. Normal. Cici had missed this.

Mona’s ears perked at the next thick blast of wind; the hail had turned to rain and was hitting the windowpanes hard enough to sound like small bombs detonating against the house’s glass.

Rodolfo rose from his bed next to the small wooden table, his body still stiff from his recent wound.

“Hey, bud,” Sam said, reaching out to pet the larger of the two dogs. But Rodolfo stepped away, an unusual occurrence. He adored Sam and had never before turned down a pat.

Now, though, his back fur ridged and he growled, deep and low—the most fearsome sound he could make.

Mona pulled out from under Cici’s hand and walked across the room, her toenails clinking softly against the tile. She sniffed at the door and whined. After another sniff, she pawed at the door and whined again.

Sam stood and rounded the table. His face pulled into a look of concern that had him reaching for the gun still in its holster on the side table next to the couch.

“You hear that?”

“Yeah,” Cici said. She clenched her jaw together to keep her teeth from chattering.

Rodolfo growled again. He added a short, rough bark followed immediately by a coughing whine. The poor boy’s chest still ached from the arrow wound. Mere inches deeper or to the left, and Rodolfo never would have made it off the hiking trail, let alone to this point. Cici stood and went to the dog, placing her hand on his shoulder, where he liked to be touched. He leaned against her, a new occurrence since his surgery, but he kept producing the low rumbling growl and his muscles quivered under Cici’s palms.

“Get behind the dining table,” Sam directed, his eyes never leaving the door. “Crouch there. I’m going to open the door. If something happens, run out the back and start screaming.”

“Sam—”

Mona pawed the door again as if she were digging. She settled in front, her tail swishing back and forth like a large, white, plumed fan, her nose pressed tight against the wood.

Sam checked his weapon, swiping off the safety.

“I have to see what’s out there, Cee. Please get behind the table.”

“It sounds like—”

Sam unlocked the deadbolt and flung open the door in one smooth motion, all while holding his gun at gut level.