

The Orb Lady

Cali's
Story

A Novel

Beth M James

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By
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Dusken Publishing

Written by Beth M James
Copyright © 2023 Beth M James
Published February 2024
Dusken Publishing
ISBN 978-0-9889428-6-8 (eBook)
ISBN 978-0-9889428-7-5 (Paperback)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023923280

Cover Design: Margo DePaulis

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All characters in this book are fictional and have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names.

This book is dedicated to those who rescue and or help trafficked victims.

Acknowledgments

Thank you Ellis (my editor), Mike, Thekla, and ARC readers for your reviews and edits. Thank you to Margo for an awesome cover. Thank you to Blain for being unique. Thank you to the numerous websites and communities that provide authors a vast playground to learn, grow, and network. And a big thanks to those who have reviewed my books on different retail sites. I appreciate it!

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(Book 3, Dream or Reality Series)

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∞ Part One ∞

The Journey

Chapter 1 – Cali Discovered

Cali McGraw fidgeted with her pen and tablet as she waited for the trucker to place his order from the menu. She glanced out the front window when headlights flashed. A fancy white sedan with gold rims drove in and parked in front of the building. She wondered why an expensive one like that bothered to stop at the diner.

“I think,” the trucker said, bringing her attention back to him. He paused again and flipped the page, giving her time to watch the sedan as its headlights turned off.

An overweight driver got out from behind the wheel and opened the back door. A man in his late fifties appeared. He wore a crisp navy suit with a red-striped ascot. His dyed yellow hair was perfectly shellacked and combed to the side. Cali shivered. Something felt ominous about him, but she didn't know why.

Most customers, like the one sitting in front of her, wore the typical flannel or blue button-down shirts, jeans, and truck hats that were the norm for the truck stop eatery. Which reminded her ... time was up for her indecisive customer.

“I can come back when you're ready,” Cali said, sweet as pie. Her other table looked ready to order.

“No, nope ... I'll have” He clearly wanted her to stay. “I think I'll go with the Dempsey Doubles.”

Hallelujah. The guy decided.

Cali finished taking his order, then went back to the kitchen. She clipped his order to the bottom of the shelf for the cooks to take.

They were busier than normal, especially for nine o'clock at night. All the booths and tables in her section were full. From the counter on the left side of the diner, she couldn't see the

sedan, but she recognized the semi-rig with the lightning bolt on the hood that pulled into the adjoining truck stop and headed for the pumps. The trucker was a regular customer and would be in the diner in about an hour. She hoped he sat at one of her tables. He was a good tipper, and she needed the money to add to her savings so she could leave the shoddy town of Dempsey and find something better in life. A purpose.

The front door jingled.

Cali returned to the front.

The man in the suit jarred her to a stop. The way he paused and stared at her with his grayish-blue eyes, full of lust, made her skin crawl. He didn't seem to care that she was barely an adult and less than half his age.

"I got him," Abby, the lead server, said for only Cali to hear when she grabbed a menu from the pile. She smiled at the man.

Leave it to Abby to come in like a mama bear to protect Cali. Whenever a male customer had the potential for being trouble, the lead worker kept him under her rein until he left the diner.

"Just one today? Follow me please."

The man stared at Cali for a moment longer before breaking eye contact. He patted down the back of his hair as if annoyed, then followed Abby.

Cali went to find her mama, who worked the same shifts she did. She heard her arguing with Hank, the owner of the diner, in his office. They stood with the door open. Their boss wore his usual white attire, which included a full apron and a towel slung over his shoulder. Mama had on the required uniform for the servers—black shirt with gold piping and any type of black pants or skirt. She had her hands on her hips, her elbows out, and stood inches from their boss with nostrils flared.

As they argued, they seemed to be in a standoff. It was the third time in two weeks they argued. The first time Mama and Hank argued occurred when their boss wanted Brigitta, her mama, to work opposite shifts from Cali. She argued until she won. The second time they fought, her mama left in a terrible mood. She wouldn't say what it was about, but Cali guessed it was because they needed more servers. Being short staffed, the extra hours made everyone cranky.

"Don't worry." Abby appeared by her side. "I seated him at one of my tables." She nodded toward the yellow-haired man. "He seemed fixated on you, so better to be safe than sorry."

Cali glanced toward the tables on the main side of the diner and found him. Prim and proper, he looked out of place with the outdated decor. The diner could have been in a scene from *The Rockford Files*—her mama's favorite show—with its dark paneling, diamond-shaped

lighting, heavy wooden tables, and avocado green booths. The yellow-haired man was dressed to dine in a restaurant in Beverly Hills.

“Thanks, Abby.” Cali shook her hands to get the bad feeling out. Abby and her mama were always there to protect her. More than once, they’d stopped an obsessed trucker who wanted her to party with him in his tractor. This creepy one was different. His intense stare got to her, but she had to let it go. She had customers.

Ten minutes later, work was back to normal.

“Three more hours to go,” Abby said as she stepped to Cali’s left to keep from running into her. The rail-thin woman, a pro at carrying more food on a tray than anyone else, scurried off to serve two truckers.

Cali felt better. Mama was out of Hank’s office and seemed okay. As she was busy catching up with her tables, Abby continued with her own tables, and Cali avoided the yellow-haired man. He didn’t bother her until after he finished his chef’s salad.

“Calista.” His deep voice called out as she passed, sending a wave of dread through her.

She stopped a few feet from his booth. A square diamond ring sparkled from his little finger as he motioned her over.

Cali approached the table.

“I’d like a dessert.”

“Sure. I’ll find your server,” Cali said and turned away.

“No,” he said in a clipped, cold voice. The tip of her black tennis shoe snagged against the carpet when she stumbled to face him again. He smiled at her compliance. His words were crisp and pronounced. “I’d like you to take my order.”

With a forced smile, Cali asked, “What can I get you?”

She wondered if he was one of the investors she had overheard her boss talking to on the phone. This guy would fit.

“Calista.” He said her name again as he pulled a cigar from his inside suitcoat pocket. He placed it on the table next to his coffee cup. Blue translucent nail polish, almost the same color as his creepy eyes, shined from his manicured fingernails.

Customers weren’t allowed to smoke in the diner, but she didn’t want to be the one to tell him not to. If he was an investor, she would be nervous about doing anything to upset her boss.

“Have you worked here long?” He continued to stare at her like she was a menu item to choose from.

“Two years next month.” She curled her toes in, anxious to leave.

He frowned and pursed his lips in thought. “I don’t remember Mr. Hank Brice mentioning

you.”

Why would he, she wondered.

“I’ve been here. Full time.” Cali searched for Abby but didn’t find her.

“You are exceptionally beautiful,” he said. “Your eyes ... hazel with hints of violet. Another waitress here has the same unusual color in her eyes.” He squinted. “In fact, you resemble her.”

Cali nodded. “My mama works here.” If he’d noticed her mother’s eyes, he must have been here before, but Cali hadn’t seen him.

Abby was MIA from the floor. Her mama, who was usually there to help when Cali felt uncomfortable, was busy waiting on a trucker at the counter.

“If you’d like, I can bring you the dessert menu.” Cali itched to get away from the guy. He gave her a bad vibe.

“You tell me. What do you have?”

“We have bars, sundaes, and five different types of pie to choose from.”

His thin lips curled into a smile. “Is your hair naturally blonde?”

“Yes.”

“All over?”

Cali shifted her weight. Did he ask her what she thought? She felt her cheeks burn bright red, unsure about this customer.

“Beautiful and refreshing,” he said as if delighted. “Such a rare find. Do you ever let your hair down?”

“No. Health rules,” she said automatically to refuse his request. Male customers always wanted her to undo her bun to see how long her hair was.

The dad from the family of four held up his hand to catch her attention. He motioned for the bill, and she nodded to signal she was on it.

“I suggest ordering our apple pie. It’s super yummy with ice cream.”

He smiled. “I will take a slice.”

“With a scoop of vanilla ice cream?”

“Oh, yes, I will take the cherry too.”

Cali ignored the comment, wanting to be as far away from him as possible. “I’ll place your order right now.”

“Calista.”

She cringed. Two more steps and she would have been free. She turned to him.

“Please tell your boss, Mr. Brice, to come see me. We have a matter that needs to be taken care of. Immediately.”

“Will do.” She shot across the diner to the family of four to give them their bill. The further away she was from the creepy guy the better.

Chapter 2 – Out of the Way

Brigitta McGraw eyed the yellow-haired man who stared at her daughter while he sipped his coffee and ate his salad. No doubt Cali caused many men to gawk at her beauty, but this guy seemed too obsessed with her. He reeked of money and had an “I always get what I want” attitude. She narrowed her eyes and glared at him, hoping he’d notice her warning to back off. He didn’t.

“Waitress,” the old trucker—a particularly fussy one—called out from the counter. “Where’s my syrup?”

Brigitta retrieved the syrup from the microwave.

“Here you go,” she said and placed the bottle on the counter in front of him. “I warmed it up for you.”

She glanced toward Cali and saw her shift her hips uncomfortably as she talked to the yellow-haired man—one of Abby’s customers. Brigitta hated when older men who should know better drooled over her daughter. They loved her eyes, intrigued by the sharp violet hue mixed within the browns and greens. Her young body was also a draw with her perky breasts and long legs. She remembered the days when she looked like that too. For her daughter, she was glad to be there when customers showed too much interest in Cali. Either she or Abby would make sure they understood Cali was off limits. But this guy ... he was no good.

The yellow-haired man finally caught her glaring at him. He narrowed his eyes as if daring her to stop him.

“Where’s the salt?” The fussy trucker wrinkled his face in disgust.

She cursed the interruption under her breath. Brigitta broke contact with the yellow-haired man and faced the trucker. She picked up the salt, two feet away from him, and set it in front of his plate.

Another man came in and sat at the counter, and she had to get back to work. Recognizing him as a regular, Brigitta greeted him with a smile and a menu.

As she worked, she noted how the yellow-haired prick continued to ogle her daughter.

Brigitta recalled seeing him before, coming into the diner a couple of times in the last month. When she asked her boss who he was, Hank avoided giving her a straight answer.

“Abby,” she called out when her co-worker appeared from the prep station with four salads on her tray. “Isn’t Table 10 in your section?”

The rail-thin waitress glanced over to the booth. “Yep, mine. Now what does he want?”

“Apparently Cali.”

Abby grunted and made a face. “I noticed. He reeks of cigar smoke.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know for sure.” Abby adjusted her tray to keep it balanced on one hand. “Hank calls him Mr. B. Rumor has it that he’s loaned money to our boss. Hank crawls up his ass whenever he’s here.”

“Well, he better stay away from my daughter or there will be hell to pay,” Brigitta said. Her patience with Hank was running short.

They were required to work double shifts, sometimes triple, after the new girl Mandy disappeared. She had been great, arriving on time and working hard every day for the two weeks she worked. However, after an argument with their boss, she didn’t show up at the diner again. The police and FBI came to talk to them and believed she’d been trafficked. Poor girl. That was three weeks ago.

“Hey,” Hank growled, making them both jump. “What’s the problem here?”

“Nothing.” Abby darted away with her salads.

Brigitta stared at her boss but refrained from saying anything. They already had one disagreement tonight about the scheduled triple shifts for the next week. She didn’t have the energy for another confrontation. Besides, her two plates of pancakes were up for Table 1, and they wouldn’t stay hot for long.

Seeing Cali busy with her other customers and out of harm’s way, Brigitta relaxed. She checked on the yellow-haired man, the one Abby thought was called Mr. B. He was on his phone, but he kept an eye on her daughter like a hawk ready to devour his prey.

“Brig, your regular just came in.” Abby said as she passed her in the dining area.

Curious, she glanced toward the door. The lonely salesman waved to her. He liked to flirt and ignored the gold ring on her wedding finger. She headed for the counter to the third seat where he always sat.

“Hey, beautiful,” the slightly overweight man greeted her with a big smile. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been good, Jeffrey.” Brigitta smiled with a silent sigh. “I’ve been good.”

Customers didn't want to know how tired she was from working long shifts. How she struggled to make ends meet because her husband liked to spend his time and their money at the bar drinking until he passed out. Instead, customers, like Jeffrey, only wanted to tell her about their problems.

People came to the Dempsey Diner for fast service, a warm meal, and a break from their travels. Most times, she enjoyed their short conversations. Tonight, her fight with Hank and the creepy yellow-haired man lusting after her daughter put her on edge.

Brigitta took Jeffrey's order, gave it to the kitchen, and then refilled another man's coffee while making small talk with those at the counter. In her peripheral vision, she kept tabs on Hank as he left his office and sauntered over to Mr. B's table. The yellow-haired man wasn't happy as he talked to her boss. He tapped his finger on the table as if to make a statement. Whatever he said angered Hank because he stood abruptly and walked away, red-faced with anger.

"Mr. Brice," the yellow-haired man called out.

Hank's hands clamped into fists, and he raised his eyes as if to control himself from wringing the man's neck. He returned to the booth.

Mr. B reached inside his suit coat and pulled out a thick white envelope. He set it on the table and slid it toward Hank. Her boss shook his head, as if refusing to take it. The yellow-haired man pushed the envelope closer to him. With reluctance, Hank scooped it up and beelined for his office.

"What was that about?" The salesman watched the interaction as she had.

"No clue," she said and wondered if others noticed as well. As much as she cursed Hank for his recent outbursts, she cared for him. They'd known each other for many years, and he'd been a great boss, giving her some flexibility to match Cali's schedule with hers.

As she made her rounds, Brigitta watched as Mr. B rose from his table, adjusted his suit, and then walked toward the door. As he passed her, he smiled like a smug Cheshire cat. She wanted to tell him to fuck off but knew she'd be fired for it. Instead, she held her hand down close to her leg and gave him the finger, being discreet so no one witnessed her behavior.

Good riddance.

"Brig," Abby called to her. They met near an empty booth. "Hank wants you in his office."

She checked her watch. They had a little over an hour left in their shifts before she and Cali headed home for the night. Two of the late crew had pulled into the parking lot to start the late shift. She doubted her boss would approach her and ask her to stay. "Any clue to what he wants?"

Abby shrugged. “Nope. He hasn’t said a word to me all night, except when he snapped at us earlier.”

After delivering the salesman’s food, she went to Hank’s office. Stale grease and body odor permeated the tiny room. Catalogs, a stack of bills, three dirty plates, four glasses, and a stained coffee mug covered his desk. Brigitta knocked on the doorframe.

“Close the door,” he said without looking up.

Taking one last decent breath before she entered, Brigitta stepped inside and closed the door. With the room the size of a walk-in closet, she coughed when his aftershave overwhelmed her. She waited for him to finish writing numbers on a spreadsheet.

With the door shut, the kitchen and dining room noise dropped to a minimum. She opted to stand and tap her foot impatiently against the floor instead of removing the carton of napkins and one dirty plate from the extra chair. Her customers wouldn’t wait all night. “What’s up, Hank?”

She was still mad at him from their earlier argument. Playing nice or being respectful wasn’t in the cards, especially if he thought she’d take another shift tomorrow.

He stopped writing and stared at his desk. His face contorted as if he were in pain.

“Are you all right?” Her voice softened, concerned if it was his health.

Hank rubbed his jaw and let out a heavy breath. “You’re laid off.”

Brigitta eyed him, unsure if she heard correctly.

Hank wouldn’t look at her.

“Wh-what did you say?”

He glanced at her chin, not her eyes. “Tonight’s your last night.” He grabbed an envelope from the side of his desk and shoved it at her. “Here’s your paycheck through tonight.”

She stared at the envelope.

“There’s a little extra in there as well.” He pushed it toward her until she took it.

Brigitta’s legs weakened. Had she heard right? She leaned against the wall to stay upright. None of it made sense. “You’re firing me?”

“No. I’m laying you off.”

A moment of silence passed between them as she processed what he said. It didn’t make sense. For two months the diner bustled with customers. Hank needed her. When she couldn’t come up with a reason on her own for why he’d lay her off she asked, “I’m one of your best servers, Hank. What’s this really about?”

His face hardened. “Tonight’s your last night.”

“But—”

“Do you want me to fire you?” His eyes met hers for the first time as if to say he wasn’t in the mood for an argument.

Brigitta’s fingers squeezed the door handle, and she opened the door. “Is it because we argued earlier?”

“No.” He stood to tower over her. His eyes were like brick walls. “Get your things and leave.”

“What about Cali?”

“She stays.”

Chapter 3 – Three in the Corner

Cali avoided the creepy man as she took care of her customers. She didn't dare look toward his table for fear she'd make eye contact with him again. The cook said earlier that his name was Mr. Bendwinder, or Mr. B for short. The cook thought the man loaned Hank money to update the diner. Their boss had said something to him about replacing the nicked tables and chairs, the torn vinyl bench seats, and worn carpeting—something they had yet to see.

“What a waste,” Abby said as she showed Cali the untouched pie and melted ice cream she had served Mr. B.

“Well, at least we only have”—she checked the clock on the wall—“ninety minutes to go.”
“Ain't that right.”

When they passed each other again, Cali was surprised half an hour had flown by.

“Can you take over Table 2?” Abby pointed with her pencil.

Cali eyed the booth with a single trucker. “Isn't that Mama's table?”

Where was she? Mama was nowhere in sight.

“Hank's office.”

“Oh.” She wondered if they took their argument into his office where they'd have more privacy. “Yeah, I'll go help.”

The man was ready to pay for his dinner. Cali went to grab the tab at the register. She peeked over by the prep area near the kitchen and toward the back. Hank's office door was closed, so she guessed her mother was still in there. Cali went back to the table and gave the man the bill. When she finished, Mama was out of the office, with her jacket and purse. Abby was giving her a hug as if to comfort her.

Cali's stomach flipped. She darted across the room and bypassed the trucker waiting to place his order. Her mama's face was as white as the paper napkins they used to wrap the silverware. Even Abby was somber as she ran her hand down Mama's back to soothe her.

“What happened?” Cali stopped in front of them.

Her mama straightened and composed herself as if to hide how upset she was. She didn't

look hurt, like a heart attack or a pulled muscle, or sick. Was it Pop?

They locked eyes. Something bad happened in Hank's office. The air was too tense to say different.

“Are you okay, Mama? Did something happen to Pop?”

“Heavens no. Kyle is fine.” She rolled her eyes.

Cali noted she didn't say anything about being okay. She glanced at Abby, who was standing by the register running a report.

“There's nothing for you to worry about now, Cali.” Her mama's voice trembled.

The office door burst open. Hank stopped as if surprised the three women were blocking his way out without a confrontation. His bloodshot eyes and reddened face were far worse than Cali had ever seen. As quickly as he came out, he backed up, shut the door, and hid in his office again.

Abby pulled out tip money from the till and handed it to Mama. “You can have mine too.”

“No. You keep yours.” Mama's hand shook as she gave half back. Normally, they divided their tips among the three of them since they covered each other as needed.

Cali groaned with frustration. She stomped her foot. “Will someone tell me what happened?”

“I've been laid off.” Her mama stuffed the tip money into her purse.

“What?” Cali shrieked, flabbergasted. “No, that can't be. We're busy. You can't leave.”

“Go figure,” Abby said and snorted with disgust. “Hank let her go.”

“Well, I'll go too.” Cali raised her chin and stepped past her mama to retrieve her own jacket and backpack.

“No,” Mama said and grabbed Cali's upper arm and stopped her. “Finish your shift. We'll talk when you come home tonight.”

“But—”

“No buts.” Mama released Cali's arm. She pointed a finger at her. “You stick by Abby until you're done working.”

Cali's bottom lip trembled. This wasn't right. They worked great together. The cook called them the super team. She hiccupped, ready to cry.

“Do you hear me?” Mama gave her the stern “I'm-your-mother” look that made her eyes even more violet. “Stay by Abby.”

“Okay. Okay.” Cali agreed, not sure what else to say. She walked away to take the trucker's order. The bells to the diner jingled loudly when the door opened and then again when it closed. Her mama had left.

The diner was too quiet as the customers waited to see what happened next. When nothing

did, they resumed eating. The show was over. And she was supposed to act like nothing happened. Cali went through the motions as she worked her tables and half of her mama's. She messed up another customer's order and went to fix the tab.

The door was open to Hank's office, and he was sitting in his chair with his head down, almost between his spread legs. Was he tired of Mama always arguing with him? Usually, their disagreements would pass, but not this one.

"Ma'am," a guy called out.

No break. Not one frickin' break. She went to help him.

Thirty minutes before her shift was over, Cali had one table left when three men entered the diner. They didn't bother to wait to be seated. Instead, they strolled to the corner booth and sat down at Table 4.

Cali went over to greet them and hand them menus. The older one, with round, wire-rimmed glasses and a thin moustache, sat in the middle. He reminded her of a weasel with his long eyes, long nose, and wide mouth. He acted like he was the boss of the other two men.

The man sitting to his right tapped his hands on the table as if impatient. His pocked face was hidden behind a Fu Manchu-style moustache and a bushy goatee. A scowl deepened the wrinkles on his forehead and a snarl curled his lips. When he turned his head to glance out the window, she spotted the deep scar on his neck. He wasn't the type of person she'd want to mess with.

The third one, closest to her, was the youngest of the three and the most approachable. He had deep-set eyes and thick, prominent eyebrows. His eyes gleamed as he batted his lashes at her as if he considered himself a lady's man and she would want him.

"Hi there," she said in a cheerful voice. Being grumpy didn't get tips.

Eyebrows, the young one, gave her the once-over in approval. He checked the name on her badge.

"Hi, Calista. I like your name."

This was the second time tonight someone had called her Calista instead of Cali, like everyone else who knew her. If they didn't, they called her "Hey" or "Waitress."

"Thank you," she said to Eyebrows. Abby and her mama trained her to be polite but not show interest in the male customers. If she did, they tended to believe it was an open invitation for them to know her better. To avoid his stare, she focused on her pen and her tablet, ready to write. "What would you like to drink?"

"A Coke." He leaned toward the aisle and batted his eyes to get her to look at him. "You're gorgeous. You know that?"

“Thank you.” She acknowledged him, then moved to Weasel. “What would you like, sir?”

“Tea.”

Cali waited for Scarface's drink choice.

“You must be the manager here.” Eyebrows was bent on flirting with her.

“No.” She glanced at him. “I'm not.”

“You should be.”

“Sir?” She hoped to get the mean-looking one to answer.

“Coffee,” Scarface mumbled.

Cali left to get their drinks. She might have been a little rude, but she didn't care. It was late, and she was anxious to head home. At least the men didn't stink of alcohol or act like partiers who wanted to cause trouble. They were clean-cut and wore nice clothes. An easy in and out.

After she took their food order, she swept the carpet around the empty sections. At different times as they waited for their food, the three men eyed her as if judging a prime Heifer at auction. When she caught them doing so, they averted their eyes from her. She hoped they didn't hassle her as they paid their bill. For some reason, that's when a lot of men liked to flirt and ask her out.

“Why don't you leave,” Abby said and put her foot in front of the sweeper to stop Cali from pushing it across the floor. “Your shift's almost over. I can take over.”

“I can wait until they leave,” Cali said and pointed her head to the corner booth where the men sat. “Their food should be up any minute.”

Abby twisted her mouth as she eyed them and thought about it. “You're better off if you head out now.”

Cali opened her mouth to protest, but she realized the lead server wanted her to leave before any trouble occurred. After Eyebrows smiled at her for the hundredth time, she agreed it was better if she left.

“I'll take you home,” Abby said as she took the carpet sweeper from Cali and headed toward the register.

“You've got tables.”

“Jack is here. He can help them if needed.”

Cali shook her head. It took seven minutes to walk home. “I can handle it. I'll cut through the cornfield.”

With a nod she said, “All right. Go straight home.”

Cali rolled her eyes. “Where else would I go?” She had no boyfriend, no friends, no car to drive anywhere. Stuck in a dull life. Home and work. Work and home.

“Give your mama a hug for me. Tell her to call me.”

“I will.” Cali disappeared to the kitchen. She said goodnight to the cook, grabbed her backpack, and then stepped outside the back door. She knew Abby would divide their tips after they closed and leave hers in an envelope in the register to collect tomorrow.

Slipping out the back door, she stood for a moment to adjust her eyes to the night. The interstate traffic was a constant whirl and louder than normal. In the back, one light post lit the lot where the employees parked. Bugs flew around and hit the light. Better up there than around her, she thought.

Cali spotted Abby’s clunker van parked a few spaces down from her usual spot. A truck with a trailer full of furniture parked sideways in her normal space and took up four other spots. She wondered who owned the truck. Other than that, nothing appeared unusual.

She walked toward ten semi-rigs parked in the corner of the lot, designated for overnight parking. Some engines were shut off. Others idled a constant rattle as the truckers chilled or slept inside their tractors.

A cold wind gusted across her face, and she lowered her head. Cali zipped her hoodie, layered underneath her jean jacket, and untucked the hood, pulling it over her head. For the middle of May, the temperature seemed colder than usual.

Even in the late hour, she liked walking home. It gave her time to unwind and collect her thoughts after a busy day. She walked the space between the row of tractors and then crossed the ditch that separated the truck stop’s property from a farmer’s cornfield.

Every year, in August, the farmer complained to the truck stop when truckers went into his fields and picked the corn. He’d get the police involved, but there wasn’t much they could do unless the thieves were caught in the act. Cali had taken corn herself, but only six at a time to have for dinner. But now, the stalks were brown and ready to be cut to start this summer’s crop.

When she entered the cornfield, a dusty, dry mold from the dead plants hung in the air and irritated her nose. She sneezed as she walked in the row between the tall stalks. Her black work shoes crunched against the yellowed leaves on the ground as she zigzagged to the other side of the field. For tonight, she was glad the farmer hadn’t cut the plants yet. She didn’t have to worry about anyone seeing her.

Cali slowed when she reached an open space in the middle of the field where the corn never grew. In the spring, the area flooded with water when the heavy rains came through. Now, there was only mud.

She stopped for a minute to admire the stars twinkling above her. Even with the glow from the interstate lights nearby, a lot of stars dotted the sky. The moon was almost full, and the man in the moon stared at her as if watching her every move. Tonight, he looked lonely. Just like her.

“Help me out here, will you?” she asked him as he continued to stare at her with haunted, solemn eyes. Working long hours at the diner was grueling. At least the pay was good. But because she gave most of it to her mama to help pay the bills, she knew her savings fund wasn’t growing like it should. She needed money to buy a car and leave Dempsey. She wanted to find a better job and go to college. She wanted to find herself and not be stuck in a town that offered nothing to help her.

An owl hooted as if telling her to hurry home. Cali took the hint.

Out of the cornfield, the wind and traffic noise picked up as it carried across the open land. She crossed the street and entered Shady Oaks, Dempsey’s trailer park community. Thirteen years ago, the neighborhood had been brand new—shiny trailers, black pavement, landscaped lawns, and flower beds on every corner. Cali had loved the bright and colorful houses. As a little girl, she loved her childhood and early teens. They had been the best years, but in middle school things changed. Her friends moved away. Pop drank more. Mama worked longer hours and then she began to work too. Somewhere, they had forgotten to enjoy life.

Cali walked the main loop before she turned left down her street. Their trailer was at the end of the cul-de-sac and sagged like the other trailers. The streetlight next to their trailer flickered. At times, it stopped working and the street was completely dark. Maybe it was for the better, so no one saw the faded blue siding with the broken slats. Or the dirty windows with grungy shutters and ripped screens, the lopsided porch with chipped and warped stairs, or the yard that was more dirt than grass. She could go on.

A light glowed from behind the kitchen blinds in the front window. Mama was up, waiting for her. Cali increased her pace, anxious to know what happened between her and their boss. When she entered the front door from the porch, stale smoke greeted her. Mama stood in the kitchen.

“Abby didn’t drive you home?”

“She took care of some customers for me so I could leave early,” Cali said as she took off her shoes and socks. The old, worn green shag carpet in the living room massaged her bare feet, and it felt good after being in shoes all day.

“Anything happen? After I left?” Her mama walked over to the kitchen table and picked up a pack of cigarettes. She grabbed one of the long, brown sticks and lit it with her lighter. After taking a hit, she exhaled the smoke in one thin line.

“I thought you were going to quit smoking?” Cali said for the umpteenth time. Mama started two years ago when Pop was fired from his fifth job and had stopped looking for work.

“I am,” she said and sat down at the table. “I will.”

Cali removed her backpack and dropped it to the floor near the door.

“What happened with you and Hank, Mama?” Cali hugged her before sliding into one of the wood chairs next to her. She had taken off her jacket but kept the hoodie on. She lowered the hood. “Why were you laid off?”

Mama had washed off her makeup. Her eyes and cheeks, red and swollen from crying, made Cali’s heart fall.

Her mama stared at the smoke as it swirled upward from her cigarette. She was beautiful even without makeup. Her black tousled hair and hazel eyes made her alluring, like her namesake, Brigitte Bardot. She sat quietly for a moment before answering.

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know.” She stamped out the burning end of her cigarette to save the last half for later. “I have worked for Hank for over twelve years. You know that? Twelve years. Almost thirteen.”

“Maybe it’s meant to be,” Cali said to cheer her up. “You always dreamed of working in Branson, but you never had the time off to find a job there. Now’s your chance.”

“True,” she said.

Cali took it as a sign to continue. “I can work at the diner until you get a new job, and then we can move out there. Pop might be able to find a job in the city too.”

“Hold on.” Mama shook her head. “You’re not working at the diner anymore.”

Cali’s head jerked up in alarm. “What? Why?”

“You can’t stay there. Not without me.”

Her mama was being ridiculous. She didn’t make sense.

“I can’t quit. We need the money.” It then hit Cali as to what she meant. “Oh, I get it. If I quit, Hank will have to hire you back.”

“No, something else is going on there.” Mama stood from her chair and walked over to the kitchen counter. With two fingers, she spread apart the blinds to peek outside. “Besides, Hank already said that if you quit, he wouldn’t rehire me.”

“That leaves Abby alone.” Cali frowned.

“I can’t protect you if I’m not there.” Her mama flipped off the light above the sink.

“I can protect myself,” Cali said and huffed. At times, she hated being treated like she was a little kid. “I’m almost eighteen. An adult.”

“Oh, my sweet honey.” Her mama returned to the table and stood in front of her. She rubbed

Cali's chin. "You have no idea what's out there, beyond Dempsey. And being a beautiful young woman, you're vulnerable in more ways than you can imagine."

Cali rolled her eyes.

"Yes, even when you roll them, those eyes of yours can get you in trouble." Brigitta said as she tapped her finger against her daughter's nose.

"I can handle myself," Cali said in her best stern, adult-like voice. "I know what to do. You've taught me well."

Her mama gave her a long, hard stare "Maybe. But there's something bad going on at the diner that I can't quite figure out. I feel it."

"We need the money." Cali stood. "End of discussion."

She raced to her room before her mama disagreed.

Chapter 4 – A Bump in the Road

“It’s only a bump in the road,” Fish said to encourage himself as he walked toward the truck stop.

Selling his guitar had crushed his soul. He needed that Fender Stratocaster to audition for a job in Nashville. What a bad mistake that was to sell it for a night’s stay at a warm hotel and a three-day supply of food, though for the three days it had helped his attitude tremendously. But it would take forever to own a Fender like that again. And at what cost? He was in the same situation—hungry and cold from the rain. No, he was worse than before. Now, he had no money *and* no guitar.

Inside the truck stop, he used the restroom to splash water on his face, wet his long dark hair to smooth back the mohawk into a ponytail, and then wash his beard with the hand soap. Fish took the time to be neat and stylish, grooming his coarse beard to be straight and neat. When completed, he tied a thin leather string an inch from the bottom of his beard to keep the ends together.

Fish didn’t care that people avoided him because of his biker-type appearance. They didn’t understand artistic forms of display. And personally, he had revolted against the normal business attire that had been expected of him in the last three years. Now he loved how his hair, beard, and tattoos were part of his uniqueness.

Out of the bathroom, he headed toward the rack of maps. He found an atlas and opened it to Missouri. Yesterday, he had hitched a ride through St. Louis. Now he would head ... south. Follow the streets along Interstate 55 as best as possible and then cross over into Tennessee.

Fish put the atlas back into the wire slot. The lady at the register, with the bright red hair, kept tabs on him as if he were a thief. Before he opened the door to leave, he smiled. “Don’t worry. I put it back.”

Outside, he stood at the curb to adjust to the heat after the air-conditioned building. It was a hot one. Lots of intense sun with no clouds, like it had been in Denver and the first half of Kansas. As he traveled the second half of Kansas, it rained almost the entire time until he

crossed into Missouri. Since then, he'd had a mixed bag of weather.

He glanced up and down the road in front of the truck stop. The interstate roared with noise from the speeding vehicles, but it wasn't visible and there were no street signs to show which direction was south.

"Where you headed?" A trucker wearing a well-worn, red trucker's cap came up beside him. He must have walked out of the truck stop and seen the lost look on Fish's face. The man carried a jumbo-size bag of chips, a six-pack of root beer, and a bag of chocolate donuts in his hands.

As Fish stared at the food, his stomach growled. He almost forgot to answer. "I'm heading south." He glanced at the road and then back at the trucker. "Do you know how to get out of here? Which way is south?"

The man raised his hand carrying the six-pack of root beer. He pointed to the right and said, "Once you reach the end of the frontage road over there, you'll take a left. The interstate is just over the hill."

"Thanks for your help." Fish nodded his appreciation.

He resisted the urge to grab the chips and run. Instead, he cut across the parking lot and walked along the frontage road until it came to an end. The trucker told him to take a left. Most times, the frontage road ran parallel with the interstate, but this one didn't. He wasn't sure if going left would lead him in the right direction.

The rattle of a tractor rolled closer to him. Fish moved to the curb to stay out of its way and not get hit. The semi-rig slowed. It stopped with a sneeze.

Fish glanced over his shoulder. Tractors were monsters, and he didn't like being near them, whether they were idling or moving. A few times he'd almost been hit as he walked across parking lots.

The driver slid down the passenger window. "Hey, you need a ride?"

Taking four steps back, Fish saw the driver after he leaned closer to the passenger side. It was the man with the food. He seemed like a decent enough guy to trust.

"You bet I do." Fish hitched himself up to the cab, opened the door, and closed it before the man changed his mind.

"You said you're going South?"

"Yes, sir."

The trucker shifted into gear and then pressed on the gas. Fish bounced in his seat. The tractor was old but clean. A curtain hid the back part of the cab. Fish guessed a bed, a small table, and a television were behind it. Trucking meant long hours on the road. At least the drivers had a warm, dry place to sleep if needed.

“My name’s Bobby.” The man said over the rumble of the engine. He took off his red hat. His short reddish-brown hair was dented where the hat had flattened it.

“I’m Fish.” He grabbed the door handle as Bobby turned left. “I really appreciate the ride.”

“Fish, huh?” The trucker drove a quarter mile before turning right to the on ramp. He gained speed as he monitored the traffic and then merged onto the interstate. “Is Fish a nickname?”

“Yeah. I got it as a kid.”

“You like to fish?”

“I do, but I earned my nickname when I was little and used to flop around a lot in bed. My dad said that I couldn’t keep still when I slept. I’d fall off the bed more nights than not.”

Bobby chuckled. He changed gears, and the tractor hesitated for a second before the engine picked up speed. “Where’s your destination?”

“Nashville.”

The trucker was quiet as he calculated something in his head. After a minute he said, “I’m heading to Memphis. I can take you as far as the truck stop in Dempsey. I always eat at the diner there.” He had a grin on his face as he leaned toward Fish. “I know a drop-dead, knockout gal there who likes to play cribbage.” Bobby repositioned himself in his seat. “You can probably hitch a ride from Caruthersville into Tennessee, via Interstate 155.”

“That works for me. Thanks.” Anything to accomplish his dream. He eyed the potato chip bag, already open in Bobby’s lap. Grease and salt. His stomach growled.

Bobby must have heard it. He pointed to the bag of chocolate donuts between the seats. “Help yourself if you’d like.”

“Thanks.” Fish dived in. He wanted to eat the entire bag, but he only took three of the donuts. “You said you played cribbage?”

“Huh?”

“With the gal.” Fish bit into the donut. Artificial heaven. The first one disappeared in two bites.

“Yeah,” Bobby said and chuckled like a schoolboy. “She’s about the nicest, sweetest gal you’d ever meet. She’s got these different eyes. Strange in a way, but pretty.”

“Girlfriend?”

Bobby grunted. “Sure’d be a dream come true ... but no. She’s out of my league. Besides, her mama, who also works at the diner, keeps a close eye on her. She’s like a hawk, protecting her—which isn’t a bad thing. You know, with trafficking, prostitution, drugs, and all.”

Fish had seen his fair share of suspicious activity at rest stops, truck stops, and other places along the way. It was a crazy world out there.

“What's in Nashville?”

“Music.” Fish sat straighter in his seat. “I’d like to be a studio musician or join a band.”

“What do you do?”

“Play guitar. I can sing, play piano, and write music too.”

The trucker glanced down at the duffel bag between Fish’s feet. “Where’s your guitar?”

“I sold it in Kansas. I needed the money.”

“Rough times, huh?”

Fish exhaled a heavy breath as he stared at the last donut in his hand. “Yeah, rough times. It’ll get better.”

“Sounds like a woman was involved.”

“How’d you guess?” Fish grimaced.

“It's written all over your eyes and face.” Bobby laughed.

Fish snorted. “She was nothing but trouble.”

They made small talk as they headed down the interstate. Once they reached Dempsey, Bobby took the exit for the truck stop and diner. Bobby stopped at the diesel pump.

After getting out of the tractor, Fish shook Bobby’s hand and thanked him again for the ride.

“I’ll be in the restaurant when I’m done here,” the trucker said, standing at the diesel pump. “You can join me if you’d like.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.” Fish raised his open palm in appreciation as he stepped away. The truth was he couldn’t afford it. “You have fun with that knockout gal of yours. I hope you win at cribbage.”

Bobby chuckled as Fish walked away to the truck stop. The place was full. Two long rows of tractors lined the back parking lot. He guessed Bobby’s semi-rig would be in the lineup after he filled his tractor. He wondered if any of the other truckers were heading to Nashville. Another ride would be sweet.

Inside the truck stop, the store was clean yet cramped. Three aisles were stacked with food and supplies. The walls in the back held the refrigerated items in bright floor-to-ceiling coolers. Fish hoped for free coffee, but there wasn’t any available. Hesitant about buying expensive junk food, he headed to the center of the building to the restrooms that were shared by the truck stop and diner. To the right side, by the men's, a staircase led to the shower rooms. A sign stated “Paid customers only.”

After using the bathroom, Fish peeked into the diner. A mixed group of travelers, but mostly truckers, filled the room. Since he couldn’t afford a meal, he left the building and walked across the parking lot. He found a grassy spot under a light post to sit, rest, and scope out the truckers

as potential rides. He set his bag next to him and leaned his back against the pole. Night would come in an hour or so. If not tonight, he'd ask tomorrow morning if anyone was willing to give him a lift to Nashville or somewhere in that direction.

Not long after he settled in, a Lincoln Continental pulled into the parking lot. Fish watched and admired as the shiny black sedan rolled in with its red fancy rims. One day, he'd be able to afford something like that ... or a sports car ... or maybe both. Yeah, both.

The sedan parked twenty feet from where he sat. Three men got out of the Lincoln—an older Asian man, a mean dude, and an arrogant-looking thug with big eyebrows. They adjusted their jackets and pants as they scanned the area.

Shit. Fish didn't want to be in the middle of a drug deal. He lifted the hood on his jacket and covered his head. He slid his bag between his thighs and chest, keeping his knees up to secure it. Not wanting to draw attention, he pretended to sleep although he was ready if one of the men approached. He figured he could take the younger one down and maybe the older one. The third guy, no way in hell. His arms were like machine guns, ready to hit and damage whatever or whoever fell into their path.

The three men didn't act like they cared that he was there. They stayed near the car as if waiting for someone. They didn't say too much but when they did their words were too muffled for him to understand until the younger one said, "Here he comes."

Fish opened one eye. A creamy white Cadillac pulled into the parking lot and parked next to the Lincoln. The older man opened the backdoor and a yellow-haired man—yellow like corn—exited the sedan. The guy was dressed in a full gray suit with navy ascot, light gray handkerchief in his breast pocket, and shiny black shoes. He also scanned the area. By the way the three men had jumped to attention after he left the car, Fish guessed the yellow-haired man was either the three men's boss or someone important.

"Mr. B," the older man said in greeting.

A few words were said among them until Mr. B made a quick phone call. Soon, a man in a white apron came out of the diner and walked toward them. He wiped his hands on a towel, then tossed it onto his shoulder as he approached the man called Mr. B.

There were no handshakes or friendly gestures between Mr. B and the aproned man.

"Is she out?" asked Mr. B.

"I let her go last night." The aproned man snapped. "She was one of my best servers. I needed her."

"What do you know," Mr. B shot back. "The bitch was a hindrance. Are we set?"

"Give it a few days," the aproned man said. He raised his head and squinted as if the sun

hurt his eyes. “We’ve got time. Or better, how about someone else?”

In a sharp, crisp voice, Mr. B said, “I’m not happy that you hid her to begin with. You didn’t think I’d find out?” The yellow-haired man gave a contemptuous huff. “I should withhold part of your payment.”

The aproned man didn’t like the last statement. He grabbed the towel from his shoulder and wiped the sweat from his face. He pursed his lips as if to keep from saying anything that might harm him.

“Is she inside?”

The mean dude stepped forward. “Yes, I confirmed.”

“Good.” Mr. B then said to the aproned man, “You stay out of the way, Mr. Hank Brice. I’d hate to see unfortunate events occur to your establishment if ... you should interfere.”

Footsteps shuffled about. Fish didn’t dare spy on them again until a car door shut. Mr. B was in his vehicle. The driver took off.

Two of the other three, the young one and old one, left to enter the black Lincoln. The mean dude pointed a finger at Hank Brice, the aproned man, as if to warn him.

“Fuck off.” Mr. Brice spat on the ground.

“You’ll be the one fucked if you don’t listen.” The mean dude stepped back and joined the others in the Lincoln.

Mr. Brice waited until the sedan sped off before he headed back into the diner.

Fish raised his head. The cars and men were gone. Everything was back to normal at the truck stop and diner. He shook his head in disbelief and said aloud, “What the hell was that about?”

He second-guessed staying overnight at the truck stop, but he didn’t care to travel in the dark either. Too many unknown noises weirded him out.

Be a man and just get up and head for the road.

The thought didn’t appeal to him. Something told him to stay.

Chapter 5 – The Note

Cali stood inside her narrow bedroom and whipped her hair into a high ponytail then twirled it into a bun. She was nervous, going to work the day after her mama had been laid off. She wondered what kind of mood her boss would be in that afternoon. Was today her day to get laid off? She gazed at herself in the full-length mirror that hung behind the door. A spot of dried food soiled the pocket of her black shirt.

“Did you say you’d be home by 11:15?” Mama yelled from the living room.

“Yes, I’m off work at eleven tonight.” She went to the bathroom, grabbed a wet washcloth, and wiped off the stain, making sure to clean the gold piping as well. She checked it again, this time in the bathroom mirror. Now she had a big wet spot just above her boob. Oh well. It should dry before work.

Her mama waited in the living room for her to appear. “Listen to Abby. Do what she tells you to do.”

“Yes, I will.” Cali said flatly as they went through their routine.

“I wish you had your phone.” Her mama picked up Pop’s dirty plate and glass from the end table.

“I do too.” The screen on Cali’s smartphone had cracked in three places. Last week it died with no chance of salvation. Now it was buried in her dresser drawer with the rest of her junk. She needed to buy a new one, but she hadn’t had the time off from work to do it yet.

Cali glanced at the clock in the kitchen. If she left now, she’d be a little early, before her shift. It would be better than constantly being reminded to be careful. She donned her hoodie and jean jacket from the hook nailed to the living room wall.

“You want me to drive you? I can.”

“No, I’ll walk.” She slid on her black tennis shoes and tied them. “I’m a big girl, Mama.”

Brigitta’s eyes narrowed and her jaw tightened. “I don’t need lip from you. I’m concerned after what happened with me being laid off.”

“Sorry,” Cali said without meaning it. She grabbed her backpack from the floor near the

front door and swung it over one shoulder. She met her mama between the living room and kitchen. They hugged. "Say bye to Pop for me."

"Come straight home after work." Mama squeezed her tight.

"I will." Cali pulled away. She closed the door behind her and exhaled in relief to be out of the trailer. The fresh air felt good. The sun was out, but it wasn't so hot that she'd sweat walking to work.

When she reached the main loop in the trailer park, she waved her hand to say goodbye. Like always, Mama watched from the kitchen window until she disappeared. At times, her mama was too protective.

Since it was daylight, Cali stayed on the streets to walk to the diner instead of cutting through the cornfield. She didn't want to smell like old, moldy corn husks or have pieces of it in her hair when she got to work.

Dang. She forgot to wish her mama luck if she searched for a job today. Pop should really be the one to get out there and work. If only he stayed sober long enough to keep a job, it would make life easier for all of them.

Pop. She wasn't sure why she called him that name. At twelve years old, she learned he was Mama's boyfriend, not her real father. It took a long time to get over it. The man who once took her out for ice cream, kissed her boo-boos, and taught her how to play baseball wasn't who she thought he was.

After she learned the truth, her relationship with Pop changed. Now she didn't mind that he wasn't her father, since he was more of a burden than not. But was her real father better than him? Probably not since he'd abandoned her. Mama didn't talk about her real pop or gran. Anytime she asked about them, Mama's wall went up and her mouth closed tighter than a drum. They were not discussed. Ever.

Cali opened the door to the diner. She checked her shirt, and the spot was clean.

Here goes another day.

The first half of her shift was uneventful. The place buzzed with customers. Breakfast plates came through the kitchen at a constant pace even though it was closer to the dinner hour. Her mama had been wrong about being concerned. It was work as usual.

As she made her way to the back of the diner, with a tray of drinks in hand, she glanced out the front window. A bright orange semi-rig pulled into the truck stop, and she smiled, knowing it was Bobby. The trucker was one of the regulars and a true friend. He came in about once a month, sometimes driving off-route, so they could play cribbage. He was one person she looked forward to seeing.

Bobby rounded the corner to head to the pumps. A passenger sat in the tractor with him. Dang. It meant he might not be able to play cribbage with her tonight. But maybe that was a good thing since the diner was busier than normal. The rumor was that the truck stop north of them was closed for remodeling.

Cali kept his table available until he came in to eat. When he did, Bobby was alone. He glanced about to find her and she waved. His face lit up and he waved back. He headed to his table and sat down. She finished taking an order and gave it to the kitchen before greeting him.

“Hi, Bobby,” Cali said with a real smile. She set down a mug and filled it with coffee from the carafe. “You stuck here for the night?”

A wide grin beamed across his face. “I am.”

The trucker was in his thirties and overweight with an extended potbelly. He removed his hat and finger-combed his short brown hair with his fingers. He smelled like an Irish rain.

“You have time for a few games of cribbage?”

“I probably can later tonight.” She checked the diner and saw two more people at the door, waiting for tables. “It’s been busy, and we’re understaffed.”

Mama should be at work with her.

“I’ll take a short nap and stop in after the dinner crowd.” He eyed the menu but closed it after one quick glance. Bobby handed the menu to her but quickly jerked it back when she was about to grab it. “You’re letting me win tonight, right?”

She laughed. “You wish.”

In the last year, she won most games. They played the best two out of three for twenty dollars. The money she won went toward her car purchase.

“Try around seven. I’ll keep our table open.”

They played at the diner, taking one of the small booths in the back. Once, when there wasn’t a table available for them to play, Bobby invited her to his truck. She agreed, curious to see the inside of his tractor, since she’d never been in one before. He had a table set up in the back with a bench on each side, which converted into a bed. The cab included a TV, stereo, and small refrigerator. They had started their second game when Mama, furious, banged on the door and ordered her out. Bobby nearly pissed his pants. They laughed about it now, but she never stepped foot in his tractor again.

“Where’s your friend?” she asked, remembering the other person in his tractor.

Bobby had taken a drink of coffee. He looked up with knitted eyebrows to think. His eyes lit when he remembered. “Oh, my ride. I met him at the last truck stop and offered him a ride. His name’s Fish.”

He craned his neck to look out the window. Cali followed his gaze. A younger man sat on the grass at the far end of the parking lot. He leaned against the light pole with his legs up and his arms placed over his knees. From what she saw, he was quite handsome. The sides of his head were shaved but the top part was long and pulled back into a ponytail—a unique style popular with men in their early twenties. He had a long beard, something she didn't care for, but it suited his bad-boy appearance. He wore a white tee shirt and tight jeans that showed muscular arms and a fit body. Something about him made her tingle inside.

A lone soul, like her.

“What's his story?”

“He's on his way to Nashville to get a job as a musician.”

“And he's hitching rides?” She wrinkled her nose.

“Fired from his job in Denver. Girlfriend kicked him out of the house. Sounds like she was a trip.”

“So, a little down on his luck.” No wonder she sensed a loneliness about him. At least he was doing something to change it, unlike her.

“I asked if he wanted to join me.” Bobby sipped his coffee. “But he refused. He said I've been too generous already.”

“He's humble,” she muttered more to herself than to him. She liked the guy.

Cali took Bobby's order, then gave it to the cooks. Near the register she had a nice view of Fish, and she had the urge to meet him. But how?

A black sedan with red chrome wheels drove into the lot and parked away from the other cars, not too far from the musician. The driver got out of the car. Scarface. The mean-looking one from last night. The younger guy, Eyebrows, and the older man, Weasel, got out of the back of the car. They stood and waited by the sedan's trunk.

Fish spied the men too. He pulled the hood of his jacket over his head as if hoping they'd ignore him. She guessed he didn't want any trouble, and she didn't blame him.

Scarface turned, his eyes drawn to the diner. Cali jerked when their eyes met, and he smiled like she was about to be eaten. A chill ran down her back. When he tipped his head to acknowledge her, she broke eye contact and scuttled away. Abby came through the prep area with a tray of food and they almost collided.

“Whoa,” Abby said as the tray wobbled, and she danced to keep it balanced.

“I'm so sorry,” Cali held out her hands to help if needed.

“What's the matter?” Abby must have noticed her frazzled state. She switched hands to steady the tray.

Cali pointed with her head toward the big window. “Those three men from last night are back. They don’t seem to be the type to come here to eat. Once, maybe. Twice ... way too odd.”

Abby followed her stare and nodded. “I didn’t like how they watched you as they ate their food. Not even the horny truckers would dare stare at you like that. If they come in, I’ll be their server.”

Times like these, Cali was glad to have an overprotective lead server. As they continued to work, both women kept their eyes on the men. After helping another customer, Cali went to get Bobby’s food. When she took his food to him, the same white sedan from last night was parked next to the black one. The yellow-haired man, Mr. B, stood by the other three.

Cali almost dropped Bobby’s stew in his lap. An odd look crossed his face. “Are you okay?”

“Sorry, it’s been a hectic day. I heard the stew’s awesome tonight. You’ll like it. I’ll be back with your bread.”

She left Bobby and found Abby at the counter.

“He’s here. Mr. B, the creepy guy,” Cali whispered into her ear so the customers couldn’t hear.

Abby’s eyes narrowed. “He’s been here more than I like.”

They positioned themselves near the window and watched as Mr. B phoned someone.

“Do you know who the other guys are? Did they say anything to you last night?” Cali gnawed on the end of her pen.

Abby paused before she responded. “They were quiet and talked to themselves. The younger one asked where the gorgeous girl—you—ran off to, and I told them your shift was over. The men stared at each other for a minute but got over it.”

Hank burst out of his office. A scowl crossed his face as he pushed the front door open. The bells clanged instead of jiggled as he stormed out. He walked toward Mr. B.

“Miss,” a customer called out from the dining area. Cali glanced to see that it was one of her tables and went to help him.

After getting him an extra side of mayonnaise, she went to the next table to take their order. Two men and three women. When one hesitated with their side choice, she glanced out the window. Mr. B was in conversation with their boss. She couldn’t see Hank’s face, but his hands were on his hips and his head tilted down as if listening to something he didn’t want to hear. By the time she finished taking their orders, the meeting outside was over. Hank scowled when he came back inside. When he caught her staring at him, he turned away, back to his office.

Ten minutes later, he came out with his jacket on. He found Abby.

“I’m leaving for the night.”

Their boss left without giving the lead server a chance to respond.

“I guess I’ll work extra hours, like I have a choice,” Abby muttered more to herself than anyone else, but Cali heard her. The woman’s face and shoulders sagged, tired of the long days.

Cali felt bad. Abby had worked a double shift yesterday as well. Tonight, she’d have to stay until one in the morning, when the other lead server came in to take her place. She needed a break. “I can help.”

“No, you need to leave at eleven. Brig would ring my neck if you’re not home on time.”

Her mama had been adamant that she be home right away. Cali agreed.

Abby checked her watch. “It’s six-thirty. Why don’t you take a break.”

Cali’s stomach growled. A break and dinner sounded good. The cook took her order—two hamburgers and double fries. She planned to eat before Bobby returned to play cribbage.

“No chicken salad today?” The cook leaned down through the open window between the kitchen and holding area.

“Not today. I’m in the mood for a juicy burger.”

“You got it,” he said and went back to the grill.

As her food cooked, she scribbled a note on a napkin with her favorite pen that glided across anything she wrote on. She folded the napkin in half and placed a twenty-dollar bill inside the fold.

A couple came in and sat at the counter. Cali took their order. After she sent it to the kitchen, her meal was ready—one on a plate and one in a box. The cook already guessed she would be saving the second hamburger for later. But this time, she didn’t intend to bring it home.

After eating her meal, she tucked a few ketchup and mustard packets and a few more napkins into the container. Next, she taped the napkin that she wrote on to the inside top of the container.

“I’ll be right back,” she told Abby and grabbed a bottle of water.

“Where are you going?” she asked, protective like a mother duck.

“Outside for a minute.” Cali ignored the stern glare.

The weather was nice with a slight breeze. She walked across the parking lot to Fish, the musician. His head was down, and he used his bag as a pillow. She hesitated, unsure whether she should say anything when he didn’t move. Was he asleep? If so, she was impressed. One truck at the pump had his engine idling, a store employee was emptying a garbage can near the front door and banged it loudly against the sidewalk, and the traffic roared from the interstate. She doubted if she’d be able to sleep with the noise.

She nudged him with her knee. “Hi there.”

His head jerked up. Cali jumped and almost lost the container. Regaining control, she stared into chocolate brown eyes. They were sharp, deep, and carried a lot of soul.

“S-sorry to wake you,” she said. Her breath pulled in and her stomach fluttered. Up close, the musician was more handsome than she thought. Younger too, but older than her. “I didn’t think you were really sleeping.”

He continued to stare at her through his dark lashes. She thought he wore eye liner, which she’d seen many guys in high school start to do, but it was just his thick lashes that made it appear that way. She wished she was that lucky. Mascara was a must to enhance her eyelashes. Fish blinked a few times.

“This is for you.” She held out the container for him to take.

He was hesitant to accept. “I didn’t order any food.”

His voice was twice as awesome as his looks, the way it flowed in a sexy drawl. He had the complete package—eyes, face, beard, and body. She blushed, knowing she stared at him but couldn’t stop.

Flustered, she said, “This is on the house. I thought you might be hungry. And here’s some water.” Cali held out the bottle, hoping he’d at least take that. “Bobby told me that he gave you a ride here.”

He took the bottle first, set it down by his side, and then took the container from her. His hands were clean, even under his fingernails. She imagined them on her waist, pressing against her back, or holding her hand.

Stop it.

“Enjoy,” she said and spun around, needing to get away from him or else she’d start to giggle like a dumbstruck little girl. Only once had she felt that way, three years ago, when she dated one of the football players at school. He ended up being a jerk though. Just like the other guys she dated—before work took over and the dates stopped.

She headed back to the building and figured he watched her. To flirt a little, she put an extra swing into her hips.

“Thank you!” he yelled out when she reached the sidewalk.

Cali raised a hand to acknowledge that she heard him, and she entered the diner.

Abby waited for her near the register and tried to contain a smirk.

“What?” Cali asked, ready for a snide comment from Abby.

“Nothing.” She playfully hit Cali on the shoulder. “Nothing at all.” The lead server moved around her to head into the dining room but stopped to say, “He’s steamy hot.”

Cali grinned as Abby left. She glanced out the window. Fish opened the container and pulled

out the napkin. She hoped the note and the money helped him in his travels. It wasn't much, but at least he'd have a full stomach before moving on.

Fish lingered on the woman with creamy skin and out-of-this-world eyes. When she came up to him, he had to clamp his mouth shut to keep from gaping at her. Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful, like an angel. Not perfect, but captivating. Her eyes continued to hypnotize him after she walked away. He'd never seen anyone with deep violet and brown eyes. They were smoky, clear, deep, enchanting. They were a song. A kaleidoscope.

She had to be the girl Bobby played cribbage with. No wonder the driver was so giddy to see her. Fish would go out of his way to spend time with her too.

He admired her backside as she headed toward the diner. Her hips swayed as she walked. The woman had a tight ass—a little curved yet not big.

“Thank you!” he yelled out.

She raised a hand in acknowledgment before she disappeared into the building.

The hamburger called to him.

Fish opened the lid. A thick, juicy burger with all the trimmings and a pile of steaming fries waited to be eaten. The heavenly scent triggered his stomach to growl louder.

He popped a French fry into his mouth and savored the salty, crisp potato. While he chewed, he found the packets of ketchup and mustard, along with some napkins. Two more fries found their way into his mouth. Fish stretched his legs, removed the bag from his lap, and then set the container against his thighs. He opened the lid all the way. A napkin was taped to it, and he carefully peeled it loose.

Something was inside the napkin, and he unfolded it. A twenty-dollar bill fell out and landed on the French fries. Fish picked up the money and held it in his hand. He spotted the writing and read:

Day One: Do something for yourself to make you happy.

Day Two: Do something to improve your situation.

Day Three: Do something for someone else.

Repeat to make the world a better place.

Fish reread the napkin again. The words, though simple, were profound. He had the urge to

go inside the diner and thank her again, but he stopped. She was working. Bobby was there. Fish didn't want to interrupt if they were playing cribbage. That'd be way too awkward. Besides, it'd be rude. The man gave him a ride here, and it wouldn't be right if he took the trucker's time away from her. He'd wait.

After placing the money and the note into his inner jacket pocket, Fish settled back to eat his hamburger. He planned to save the French fries for later, but when only four remained, he stuffed them into his mouth.

Full, he needed to get up and walk. Again, he thought about heading into the diner.

Nope. Bobby's territory. Playing cribbage with the woman was the one thing the trucker looked forward to, and he couldn't butt in.

Twenty dollars. The note said to do something for himself. Today had to be Day One.

Fish headed toward the frontage road and saw the sign for Dempsey, a mile away. He headed that way.

The town was four blocks long and three streets wide. The first building, a grocery store with the weekly specials marked in orange on the windows, closed an hour ago. Two stores next to it were empty.

On the next block, an older man leaned against a building and smoked a cigarette. As the man watched him, Fish assumed what the man was thinking. *You don't belong here.*

With long hair, long beard, and tattoos on his arms, Fish already knew it. His ex-fiancé had wanted him to cover his tats with long-sleeved, button-down shirts. She coaxed him into shaving off his beard—not as long at the time. Now it grew again to the length he liked, just to his chest. For the most part, after they split, he wanted a haircut to give him a different, rugged coolness that fit the musician persona. The stylist had decided what to do, and she nailed it.

The older man continued to eye him. Fish nodded in greeting as he walked past. He sensed the locals didn't welcome strangers, especially one that looked like trouble.

At the end of town, he spotted the liquor store. The narrow building had bars on the windows and door. Inside, dozens of bright lights dangled from the ceiling. After entering, Fish stopped for a few seconds to adjust to the brightness. Cameras were everywhere. The place must have been robbed more than once. At least a few times for the owner to get pissed enough to prevent it from happening again. A sign behind the cashier warned they used guns first and called the police second.

Fish browsed down the aisles and found what he wanted—peppermint schnapps. The dual-purpose liquor was cheap enough and would freshen his breath and warm him on cold nights. He paid for the pint with the twenty-dollar bill the woman had given him, grabbed his change,

and left the unfriendly town. On his way back to the truck stop, he untwisted the cap to the pint of schnapps and drank a small swig to freshen his mouth and warm his belly.

Day 1: Do something for yourself to make you happy.

Accomplished.

He dropped the bottle into the inner pocket of his jacket and then checked the front pocket of his jeans to make sure the rest of the money was safely tucked away. Half would go for food and the other half for supplies.

The green Dempsey Truck Stop & Diner sign glowed against the evening sky as he entered the parking lot again. Two semi-rigs came up the interstate ramp and headed toward the truck stop. He guessed for the night. Fish only needed one to give him a ride. Only one.

He wondered how long before he'd reach Nashville. One day? Two?

First thing he'd do is get a job—any job—so he could buy a guitar. He wasn't one to brag, but he played damn good, like the instrument was his soul. He didn't have a doubt he'd be successful in Nashville. And when he did, he'd come back to Dempsey, find the woman at the diner, and do something for her. She'd have to accept, since she gave him the note that told him to do something for someone else. He picked her.

Hoping to see her inside, Fish passed the windows in front of the diner and peeked in. A thin woman with reddish-brown hair piled on top of her head stood at the register with a customer. Bobby wasn't inside. Nor was the woman. Fish's heart fell in disappointment.

Disheartened, he meandered around the building to find a place to sleep. He spotted a trailer stacked with furniture. A tarp covered most of the stuff to hide or protect the items from rain. He circled to the other side and saw the flat tire.

Fish grinned at his luck. The truck wasn't leaving anytime soon. He ducked under the tarp to sleep.

Chapter 6 – Never Walk Alone

Cali glanced every so often at the parking lot to search for Fish after he left his spot under the light post. Secretly, she wished he'd be there when she got off work. Maybe he'd walk her home. But as night fell, he never returned. Losing her chance to see him again, she hoped he was on his way to find his dream.

Bobby didn't show until 8:00 when the diner was quieter, and the truckers were settled into their tractors for the night. He apologized for taking a longer nap than expected. With her boss gone, she was able to play cribbage without fear that Hank would come out and snap at her. After he laid off her mama, she didn't like being in the same room with him. Along with the other workers, they ignored him as much as possible. No one liked his mood swings, and they were afraid they'd get laid off too.

She won the first round in cribbage. As they started the second, she asked, "Have you seen your friend again? Fish?"

"Nope. He's probably hitched a ride by now." Bobby clearly had no desire to talk about him.

Cali let it go. The handsome one was a passing star in the night. Admired and then gone.

Their second game took longer. Cali waited on customers in between turns. Bobby was patient, and she bet he liked the advantage because he won. With a tie, they'd usually play a third game, but the time was late, and a group of teenagers came in and sat in her section to eat.

"How about the last person to win takes home the pot," he said as he placed the pegs back into the holder under the board.

Cali laughed. "I don't think so, Mister. It's a draw."

Bobby grinned. "I thought I'd try."

"How about we add the money to the next time we play."

As he contemplated her motive, he squinted his eyes and grinned suspiciously. "Ha. You believe you're going to win, don't you?"

"I sure do."

"We'll see about that," he said with a chuckle.

She wished him well as he left the diner.

For the rest of the night, she managed her tables at a steady pace, without being rushed.

“Half an hour to go,” Cali said when she joined Abby by the register.

“You want me to give you a ride home?”

Cali gazed out the window. The night was calm. “I’ll walk. I’ll go through the cornfield again.”

Abby glanced across the room. “Why don’t you leave early?”

“Are you sure?” She yawned, tired from restless nights and anxiety about Mama and their situation. A solid eight hours of sleep would be awesome before she had to work again tomorrow.

“Go.” Abby waved her hand for her to leave. “There’s nothing else going on here tonight.”

“It’s a deal.” She saluted the lead server. She stayed another ten minutes to serve the teens their food. Abby calculated the night’s tips and gave her half. Cali stuffed the money in her backpack without counting it.

Outside, the air felt cooler than it had last night. The month of May was always up and down with the temperature. She zipped her hoodie and snapped her jean jacket together as she headed toward the rigs to reach the cornfield.

A flashy semi-rig with lots of chrome pulled out of the pumps and came her way. The headlights were bright, blinding her. She stepped back to stand by the building and then stopped to let him do whatever he needed without getting in his way. The trucker drove past her and gave a short blast from his horn in thanks. He disappeared around the corner to the front side.

Diesel fumes assaulted her nose, and she waved the air away from her face as she coughed. The one downside to working next to a truck stop was the fuel smell. At least for her, working inside the diner smelled better from all the hot food being made in the kitchen.

Cali repositioned her backpack to center it across her shoulders and walked to the overnight rigs. She turned into the lane between them and spotted Bobby’s tractor. A light glowed through the small window in the back where his bed would be. She had an impulse to knock on his door to say goodnight but reconsidered. Mama would be anxious for her to get home. Abby had texted Mama right before Cali left to let her know that she was on her way.

After passing Bobby’s and another rig, the air changed. Cali’s skin prickled. No one was there, but she sensed something wrong. Two more steps and a man appeared from behind a rig.

“Hello, Calista.”

Too late to divert. Eyebrows from the diner stood in front of her and blocked her from going any farther. The light from one of the light posts glowed against his left side. He smiled like a fox

finding his prey.

Cali stepped back. She wondered if she could dart between the rigs and head for the truck stop.

“Relax, Sugar.” Eyebrows raised his hands with palms open to show he meant no harm. “I just came out for a smoke.”

She wasn’t dumb. This wasn’t a “by chance” meeting. Cali’s legs twitched, ready to run.

Eyebrows reached into his leather jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. “You want one?”

“No.” She swallowed hard. Besides the lull of traffic from the interstate, the night was quiet. None of the truckers were outside hanging out. No one.

If she ran between the rigs to her left, she might reach the cornfield without him catching her. But if he did, she’d be farther away from anyone hearing her. She had to run to the front of the building or pound on Bobby’s tractor.

“You’re okay.” He laughed as if to shame her for being nervous. “I promise. I won’t bite.” He lit his cigarette. “I hear your mom was laid off. She seemed like a good waitress.” Eyebrows exhaled a long trail of smoke. “I know I can help find a better job for her.”

Cali squinted her eyes at him. How would he know she was laid off?

“Really, I can. I have connections.” He took another puff from his cigarette and pointed it at her. Smoke trailed out of his mouth as he said, “I can get high-paying jobs for both of you. You want to work at an upscale restaurant? A popular bar? Whatever you want.”

Of course she did, but she didn’t dare tell him. Cali kept silent and took another step back.

The tractors in front of her were dark on the inside. Bobby’s semi-rig was behind her. A few beyond his idled as they parked, so they might not hear her if she yelled. No vehicle drove into or left the parking lot at that moment. No rigs were at the pump. She was alone.

Eyebrows stepped closer. “I know where you can make triple the money. Maybe more. You’re a great waitress. Smart. I bet you could manage a place in the cities.”

Cali took two more steps back.

“What do you say, Calista?”

“I’m not interested.” Her voice was flat. Three more steps back and she could run to Bobby’s tractor and pound on the door.

“Why not?” He snickered and became angrier. “If I were you, I’d grab the chance to make more money. Don’t you want to help your mom?”

Cali needed to get out of there. He had to be a trafficker. Her legs twitched with nervous energy. She didn’t want to show the panic building inside her.

Stay calm.

Eyebrows stepped closer. "You don't want to be trailer trash for the rest of your life, do you?" She froze. How did he know where she lived? "Go fuck yourself."

"No, but I'd like to fuck you." Eyebrows's face hardened as if done with their fox and prey game. He leaped forward.

Cali jumped to run, but he grabbed her hood and jerked hard to stop her. She cried out as her hoodie tightened against her throat and cut off her breath. She wriggled and chopped his hand with the side of hers until he released her hood. Cali coughed to catch her breath, giving him the chance to grab her left arm, twist upward, and push it into her backpack.

The pain radiated through her. Cali yelped and sidestepped to ease some of the pressure. Eyebrows drew her closer to him. His hot breath steamed her face. He reeked of cigarettes and gin.

"Cali?" Bobby called out. The trucker appeared in front of his tractor and seemed perplexed as to why she'd be there.

Eyebrows loosened his grip, giving Cali a chance to untwist her arm and break free from his hold. She stumbled backward and fell on her butt.

"What's going on?" The trucker looked at Cali, then Eyebrows. His mouth tightened in anger as he took in the situation. "What the— Is he bothering you?"

Bobby came over to help her up, but Eyebrows slapped the trucker on the shoulders to push him back.

"Mind your own business, Fat-Ass," he growled. "We were just leaving."

Eyebrows went to grab Cali again, but his hand found air when she rolled to get away. His nostrils flared. He glared at her, then Bobby. The trafficker raised a finger at him. "Leave."

"Come on, Cali." Bobby motioned with his fingers for her to come to him.

"She's not going with you." Eyebrows stepped between her and Bobby.

"Oh, yeah?" The trucker formed a fist, stepped forward, and fired a hard punch to the trafficker's face.

Eyebrows fell back. His eyes crossed. He kept his balance by leaning against the grill of the tractor closest to him to recover.

"Bobby," Cali cried out when two other men appeared from behind the semi-rigs. Scarface strutted forward with bared teeth. He was like a Doberman Pinscher who'd been aggravated one too many times. Weasel was next to him. His eyes became slits, and he glared at Eyebrows as if angry that he'd failed his one job to get her.

The trucker stood in front of Cali to protect her.

"No," she stammered. Her friend would never survive their meanness. He was too polite and

gentle. "Bobby, you have to go."

Scarface headed toward Bobby. Cali stepped around the trucker and darted out to push the man over. He batted her away like a fly, and she fell to the ground. Her wrist twisted and the pain reverberated through her arm. As she tried to get up, Weasel grabbed the front of her jacket and dragged her away from Bobby.

Cali pressed her toes into the pavement to stop him, but her feet lost traction. She twisted around to face him, hoping he'd lose his grip. Weasel struggled. One more hard twist and she was free.

As she swung away, she heard Bobby grunt as Eyebrows punched him in the stomach. The trucker doubled over and wheezed to catch his breath. Scarface hovered over him and slammed his fist into Bobby's cheek. The trucker's head snapped from the impact. His body spun and he went down.

"No," Cali shrieked as she scrambled to reach Bobby. Weasel went for her again. She tripped and fell into him. As he held her, her hand hit something hard and cold near his hip. A gun was tucked into his pants.

"Hut," Weasel called out.

She didn't know what it meant, but it made Eyebrows step away from Bobby and head toward them. Eyebrows pulled out a white cloth from his pocket, handling it carefully. Cali's eyes widened. If he got close to her, she'd be out.

Eyebrows smiled at her as if to say "Gotcha."

Cali twisted back and forth to free herself from Weasel. He tightened his grip. She found his gun and ripped it out of his pants. The weapon went off. The shot echoed against the tractors.

Weasel released her and fell back. His legs crumbled. Cali sidestepped to distance herself from him.

"Put the gun down," Eyebrows ordered.

She barely heard him above the ringing in her ears, but she saw him edge closer to her. Cali pointed the gun at him. He stopped yet stared at the weapon as if calculating the right moment to grab it from her.

Cali's hand shook so hard she almost dropped it. She brought her other hand up to steady it and let out a sob, not knowing what to do. Bobby tried to get up. Weasel was on the ground, and a black stain spread across his pants.

Eyebrows lurched toward her. Panicked, Cali pulled the trigger. Fire blasted from the end of the barrel. The gun recoiled and her arm jerked upward. The bullet hit his stomach area and his face contorted. Shock set in his eyes as he grabbed his midsection. Blood stained his fingers.

A weird, horrified noise escaped Cali as she realized what she had done. Eyebrows fell to his knees. The trafficker's eyes rolled up, showing only white, as he collapsed to the ground.

"Cali, watch out," Bobby yelled over the gunshots still ringing in her ears.

Scarface sprang forward to grab her or the gun. She leaped to the side. The trafficker missed and tried again. Cali raised the gun and aimed it at him. He froze as she stepped back a safe distance from his reach.

Weasel tried standing up and bellowed something to Scarface. Scarface ignored him, not finished with Cali.

Sirens. Lots of sirens came from the interstate.

"Run, Cali." The trucker wheezed. "Give me the gun."

Cali wanted to run over to help the trucker, but Scarface was too close. The trafficker eyed her, waiting for a chance to move in.

From where he lay on the ground, Weasel snapped another command at him. Scarface glanced over at the man and then back at Cali. He pointed a finger at her. The trafficker curled his lips into a snarl. "I will get you. I promise."

"Go," Bobby yelled.

Cali tossed the gun to the trucker and ran.

A noise startled Fish and he half-woke. He readjusted his hip an inch to the left to keep a drawer handle from poking into his butt.

Bang.

Fish jumped and rapped his head on an upturned leg from a table on its side.

"Son of a bitch." He pressed against the spot to relieve the pain.

Voices came from the area where the rigs parked overnight. If it was two truckers, Fish didn't want to get involved, but when a woman cried out, he lifted the tarp and maneuvered his way through the furniture and out of the trailer. He scanned the back parking lot, not seeing anyone outside. Curious, he worked his way toward the tractors.

Bang.

He jumped as another shot rang out. Out in the open, halfway to the rigs, Fish sprinted the rest of the way to hide behind one of the semi-rigs.

"Cali, watch out," someone yelled. The guy sounded desperate.

Fish wove between the tractors. He peeked under a trailer and saw legs. Bobby was on all

fours. His face bloodied yet focused on something. Someone else was down. Out cold. Or dead.

“Run, Cali.”

The female cried out. Her legs danced as if unsure where to go. He recognized the yoga pants and the black tennis shoes—the girl who bought him the hamburger. His heart flipped and the alarms in his head went off. She was in danger.

Bobby said something too low to hear. He then told her to go, and a gun slid across the pavement as the female ran. Another guy in boots went for it. He grabbed the weapon ahead of Bobby. The guy aimed at the trucker. Fish sprang into action. He plowed into the man before he could shoot. They both hit the pavement. The weapon skidded out of reach.

Fish landed on top of the guy and pummeled the man's face. When Fish recognized him as the mean dude from the black sedan, he froze, losing his rhythm. No way would he survive a fight with this dude. He fell off him to get away. The mean dude grunted as he regained his balance and found Fish. The dude's fist—with a huge skull ring on his middle finger—swung at him. Jerking back, Fish missed getting hit in the face.

“Time,” the man who was shot in the leg called out. The mean dude stopped. He stared at Fish, long and hard. He spit on the ground before limping away to help the older man stand. They disappeared behind a rig.

“Fuck.” Fish cursed as he caught his breath. What the hell just happened? A man lay in a pool of blood with his face to the pavement. He had to be dead. Bobby was on the ground too, and he groaned.

“Bobby, you okay?” The trucker's face was splattered with blood. Fish ran over to the trucker. “Come on, man. Get up.”

Bobby whimpered. “I think my nose is broken.”

“Let's go.”

“No. I can't,” the trucker said as he wheezed. He coughed blood.

Red lights flashed against the parked rigs.

“Give me your arm.” Fish helped him to sit.

Bobby refused. “Go.”

“I can't leave you.”

“I got this,” Bobby said between breaths. “Don't get involved.”

Chapter 7 – Night Moves

Brigitta stared out the window at the empty street in front of their trailer. The glow from the distant lamppost shined across the pavement like a spotlight on a stage. Only no players performed. Where was Cali? Abby texted her twenty minutes ago, telling her Cali had left the diner where they worked. Her daughter should be home by now.

Lighting one of her slim brown cigarettes, she inhaled, long and hard, to calm her nerves. Brigitta took another hit and then placed it in the ashtray. She walked from the kitchen to the living room and pulled back the frayed curtains.

The next-door neighbors had a pile of junk—an old wheelbarrow, a rake, a cracked kiddie pool, and pieces of wood stacked against the house—sitting there for years. They weren't the only ones with junk in their yard. The trailer park was a dump and had been for a long time. They should have left years ago. Their trailer was supposed to be a temporary place to stay, until Kyle and she found better jobs closer to the city—either St. Louis or Branson. But the years got away from them. They liked their neighbors. Their kids played together. They formed friendships with many in the community. It was fun, until one by one their friends moved away. They had been the smart ones.

Brigitta moved back to the kitchen, grabbed her cigarette, and stood near the sink to stare out the window. All she needed was movement on the street. A head. A young woman walking home.

“Where in the hell are you, Cali?”

Why wasn't Kyle home? She fumed, knowing he was at the bar spending their grocery money. They couldn't afford to waste any money with her laid off.

A truck backfired on the interstate. Or was it a gunshot?

She shouldn't have let Cali go to work. Her plan was for the two of them to drive to Branson to find jobs. A mother-daughter vacation of sorts. She had money for a two-night stay at a motel—hidden where Kyle wouldn't find it—while they applied for work in town. As a treat, they'd buy tickets for a show. Have a fun night out.

Another backfire. Brigitta twitched with nerves. She smashed the end of her cigarette on the side of the kitchen sink to put it out. One more pack of cigarettes was left to smoke, then she'd quit.

Smoking was bad for her health, but waiting for her daughter was worse.

God, we need to leave here.

Brigitta had to do something. In the living room again, she slipped on her shoes and grabbed her jean jacket from the coatrack. Entering the porch, she heard sirens in the distance. They grew louder as the vehicles came up from the interstate. They must be headed for the truck stop. She sent a quick text to Abby to find out what was going on. As the message was sent, Brigitta heard footsteps down the street. Running. Her head snapped up.

Where?

Cali appeared under the lamppost.

"Oh, thank you, God." Brigitta looked up to the sky.

Cali ran toward the trailer. Brigitta opened the screen door for her.

"Mama," she said between sobs. "Help me, Mama."

Her daughter's eyes were wide with fear as she ran up the stairs. She stumbled over the middle step.

"What is it? What happened?" Brigitta reached out to steady her. She glanced down the road, wondering if someone chased after her. No one followed.

Cali hurried into the house. The second Brigitta stepped inside behind her, her daughter slammed the door shut and locked it. She leaned against the door as if to keep a monster out. Her hand shook as she wiped away the tears that ran down her cheeks.

Electric pulses of nerves rushed through Brigitta as she waited for Cali to catch her breath. She searched her daughter for clues to what happened. Cali's hands were scraped as if she'd fallen on pavement. Her black yoga pants were ripped, and dark stains splattered across her pants.

Brigitta squeezed her daughter's shoulders. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I k-killed someone," Cali whispered.

"You *what*?" Brigitta blinked hard and shook her head to clear her ears. Cali couldn't have said what she thought.

"I killed someone." Cali's hand shook as she brought it up to her mouth. Her eyes were distant as if she was in disbelief.

"Oh, Lord." Brigitta stood, too shocked to know what to do or say.

Cali collapsed to her knees on the living room floor, and Brigitta knelt next to her. She

spotted blood on her daughter's hand. More stains on her jean jacket. Blood?

"Are you hurt?" Brigitta brushed her hands down Cali's arms and legs. "What happened?"

"I shot ... he came after me ... there was one, then two more ... Bobby heard ... they went after Bobby."

Brigitta tried to decipher her daughter's scrambled words but none of it made sense. She recognized the trucker's name. The one Cali played cribbage with when he came into town.

"Weasel had gun ... Eyebrows ... dead."

Gunshots. Not backfire. Brigitta's face paled. She grabbed her daughter's shoulders.

"Cali," she said in a sharp, demanding tone. "Take a deep breath."

Brigitta inhaled an exaggerated breath to get her daughter to do the same. Together they sucked in air, held it, and then exhaled. They repeated the action a few times until Brigitta felt Cali's arms stop shaking. "Were you at the diner or on the way home?"

"Parking lot." Cali's eyes glazed over as she replayed the action in her head. "I left the diner. I cut between the overnight tractors, like I always do to get to the cornfield. He was waiting."

"Bobby?"

Cali shook her head. "Eyebrows."

Brigitta didn't follow. "Eyebrows?"

"They were in the diner. Three guys sat at Table 4 last night. They watched me while I worked. The night you were laid off."

More sirens, and this time they sounded like they came from town and headed toward the diner.

"Speed it up, Cali." Brigitta had to know before the police showed up at their trailer.

The girl breathed in, then the words came out in a rush. "Eyebrows wanted me to go with him to New York. I told him to fuck himself. He grabbed me. Bobby came out of his semi-rig to help. They beat him up. Blood all over his face. Weasel had a gun and I grabbed it." Her hands covered her face as she sobbed again. "I shot him and Eyebrows."

"Son of a bitch." Brigitta's throat constricted. She closed her eyes and cursed to herself. Why hadn't she seen it coming? The truck stop and diner were perfect places for trafficking.

Whatever happened at the diner, she thought, had to stem from Mr. B, the yellow-haired man. The image of him, the night she was laid off, raced through her head. He'd been smiling at her like he'd win. There'd been something "off" about the way he paid attention to Cali. Was he to blame? If so, the man was evil.

Fear of what could happen if the traffickers came to the house looking for Cali shot Brigitta's adrenaline through the roof. She needed to protect her baby. But Cali wasn't safe here.

“You need to leave,” Brigitta said. They didn’t have a choice.

“Huh?” Cali’s eyes widened, not understanding.

“You can’t stay here. You need to leave. Hide.” Brigitta was more afraid of the traffickers and Mr. B than the police.

“Hide?”

Brigitta stood and grabbed the cigarettes from the table. She shook the carton until the last pack tumbled out. This was their boss’s fault. If Hank hadn’t laid her off yesterday, she’d have been there. She removed a cigarette and lit it. The nicotine cleared her head, giving her time to think.

“How many did you say there were? Of the men?”

“Three bad guys and then my friend Bobby.”

“You killed two?”

“Yes. Maybe. Weasel was alive, but there was a lot of blood.” Cali trembled as she stood and wrapped her arms around her stomach. “Scarface, the mean one, said he’d find me.”

Brigitta’s hand shook as she took another puff of her cigarette. She had no doubt the trafficker would hunt her down. Soon. “Quick. Change your clothes. Dress in layers. Something warm.”

“But—”

“Now, Cali.” She raised her voice to make her daughter move. Brigitta bet the traffickers had already scoped out where they lived, but she guessed the police would arrive first. “You have to leave before the police show up. Where’s your backpack?”

“I must have”—Cali searched for it—“dropped it.”

Evidence for the police that she was there.

“Was there anything in it?”

She rubbed her face. “I don’t know. My license. Money. A candy bar. Extra pants. Toothbrush.”

Brigitta went to find another backpack from the closet. She grabbed Cali’s old black one from the corner. Her daughter hadn’t moved through the door. She loosened Cali’s hand from her stomach and led her to her bedroom. The room was small, making it hard to move around with both women in there.

“Jean jacket, hoodie, shirt. Off.”

Cali stripped them off and put on a tank top that hung from her bedpost.

“I don’t want to leave, Mama. It was an accident.” Cali layered the tank with a tee shirt.

“I know,” Brigitta said as she went through the dresser drawers and pulled out clothes. She

tossed a shirt to her daughter, which she also put on.

As Brigitta finished packing the backpack, Cali buttoned the shirt. She scanned her room and grabbed other items to stuff into the backpack as well. Brigitta wasn't going to argue. At least her daughter got it. She had to leave.

Where?

Only one place came to mind. One woman who could protect her at this point.

They had no choice.

"Cali." Brigitta stood in front of her. "Listen to me."

Her daughter stopped tossing her stuff into the backpack.

"You need to find your grandma." The words were hard for her to say. She'd sworn they'd never go back to Sumner Point.

Cali's eyes widened in surprise. "Gran? You don't like her."

"I never said that." Brigitta forced herself to stay calm, but her voice cracked. "She ... she'll know what to do."

"But, why? You always shut me down when I ask about her."

Brigitta was ready to blow. Cali acted as if she had a choice. "If those men find you, you will never be seen again. You hear me?" Brigitta glared at her daughter. "Your grandma will protect you. Hide you."

"Wh-what about the police?"

The police were the least of their worries. But yes, they'd pursue her too. "First, we need you safe." Brigitta disappeared into the bathroom and grabbed toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant. She left and went back into the bedroom, almost running into Cali in the hall.

"I need to work, Mama. Both you and Pop aren't working. I need—"

"To leave." Brigitta handed her the hoodie she had worn earlier.

Cali took it. Tears welled in her eyes.

Brigitta put up a thick wall to keep from breaking down. She wished to hug her daughter and tell her everything would be okay. But it wouldn't. Not with those men after her. And she didn't trust the police. Even in jail, the traffickers would find her. Worse, they would pay her bail and take her as a slave.

"Mama,..." Cali pleaded.

She turned away from her daughter. One of them had to be strong.

Money. She needed money.

Brigitta sprinted to the kitchen, opened the cupboard, and found the small cookie tin. As she pulled out the money, Cali joined her.

“Gran lives in Sumner Point, northwest of Nashville. Go find her.”

Cali’s face paled. “Another state? By myself? I’ve never been to Nashville.”

“Yes, you have. You were young.” She raised her hand and held out the money for her to take. “It’s everything I’ve got, but enough for you to get there.”

Cali stared at the bills. After a second, she whipped around and left for her bedroom as if she’d forgotten something.

Time was running out.

Food. Her daughter needed food. She went to the kitchen. Brigitta slapped together two sandwiches.

Cali returned with her backpack and additional money in her hand, more than what Brigitta had given her.

“Here, Mama.” Cali held it out for her to take. Brigitta stared at the cash and then at her daughter, wanting, yet not wanting, to know how she got it. Cali must have seen the horrified look on her face. “It’s my tip money.”

Relief flooded Brigitta. Of course. She pushed her daughter’s hand away. “You keep it.”

“I took money out for me. You can have some of it too. And yours.” Cali placed it on the table.

Brigitta bit her lip. No time to argue. She motioned for the backpack, and Cali handed it to her. She shoved the sandwiches and two bottles of water into the backpack.

More sirens sounded, one an ambulance that must be heading to the truck stop. A helicopter flew above them. It seemed to hover, then move on.

“Listen.” Brigitta grabbed Cali by the shoulders. “Be careful what you say to people. Don’t trust anyone. You head straight to Gran’s.”

Cali’s lips and chin trembled. “I want to stay here. We’ll be okay. I’ll—”

“I don’t want to hear it. Don’t tell anyone where you’re going. *No one.*” Brigitta spotted her jean jacket and handed it to Cali. “Put this on over your hoodie.”

“Mama.” She stared at it. “This is your favorite jacket.”

“And it’ll help keep you warm. The nights are cold.”

Headlights flashed through the kitchen window.

“Quick. They’re here.” Brigitta shuffled Cali to the back of the trailer, to the side door.

She opened the door and the cool evening wind rushed in. “Straight to Sumner Point.”

Cali stopped before Brigitta shut the door.

“Mama. How do I find her?”

“When you arrive in Sumner Point, ask for the Orb Lady. People will tell you where she lives.

Just be careful who you talk to.”

Brigitta shut the door before Cali asked any more questions.

A car door slammed outside the trailer as Brigitta locked the door on her daughter.

“You can do this,” she said aloud. At first she meant it for Cali, but it was also meant for herself when a loud, urgent knock rapped on the porch door.

She shook her hands to calm her nerves as she walked down the hall toward the living room. Her lit cigarette called to her from where it lay in the bathroom sink. She grabbed it and took a hit as she headed to the front door. She opened the door enough to peek out. A man stood on the other side of the enclosed porch.

“Mrs. McGraw?” He said with his face up against the thin, bent screen door. The man lifted his coat to show a shiny badge hooked to his belt. “My name is Craig Stelzer. I’m a private detective working with the Missouri Attorney General’s Office Human Trafficking Task Force on trafficking cases.”

Was he telling the truth? Or was he really one of the traffickers? No matter, he knew she was inside.

“I’d like to talk to you before the police come to question you.”

She stepped into the porch. “Why?”

“Is she home?”

“Who?” She stayed in the shadows, making him sway from one side of the door to the other to find her. He still had his badge out. The car behind him was a gold classic Nova. The man held himself like a cop. He was tall and well put together. He worked out but wasn't beefy like a wrestler or a bouncer working at a bar. Besides, if he was a trafficker, he'd have forced himself inside.

“Your daughter. Is she here?” He spotted her as she moved closer.

“How do I know you’re a detective?”

He showed her his badge again. “As I said, I’m a private detective working closely with the AG office concerning two cases of trafficking. I’ve been hired to find Mandy Gregor and Julie Tymen.”

Brigitta gasped. Mandy. The server who didn’t show up for work. She recognized the other name from a newspaper article. Another missing person.

“Now can I come in?”

Was it a bad thing to let him in? She stretched her neck to check out the gold Nova again.

The man waved his hand as if growing impatient. “Your daughter might be in danger. I’d like to ask you some questions.”

Brigitta stared at the tall man and sensed he spoke the truth.

“Come in.” She’d play hard and keep her emotions in check.

She went inside, back to the kitchen table, and let him make his own way into the living room. Brigitta took a drag from her cigarette and noted how he closed the door as if making sure she didn't run out on him. Stelzer scanned the place, noting every detail. He stayed by the door and focused on the shag carpet.

Brigitta’s heart skipped a beat. Had Cali left something behind after she collapsed on the floor? She glanced down to determine if there was something there to catch his interest.

“Does your daughter go anywhere after work?”

“Usually she comes home.” She put her cigarette out and walked to the kitchen counter.

“Coffee?”

“No, thanks.”

“Your loss. It’s good.” She grabbed the coffee pot, an electric percolator, hoping she looked at ease. “I roast the beans myself.”

“I’ll take a cup.”

She turned her back on him, so he didn't see her shake as she held the percolator and poured him a cup. Bad idea. She wouldn't be able to hand it to him. Brigitta looked over her shoulder to see Stelzer glance down the hall from the living room. Luckily, she had enough sense to shut off the lights before answering the door. She made her move and set his cup of coffee on the kitchen table.

“Is your husband home?” His attention fell to her again as he walked over to the table.

“No,” she said with more bitterness than she expected. “I’m guessing he’s at the bar.”

“In town?”

She nodded and realized she gave Stelzer another person to talk to. She had no doubt the man would visit Kyle next. Brigitta offered him a chair, but he refused. His actions told her that he wanted information fast. Taking the coffee was either being polite or he needed the caffeine.

“You also work at the Dempsey diner, correct?”

“Used to. I was laid off yesterday.”

Stelzer’s eyebrow rose. He must not have known. “Why?”

“Ask the owner.”

“I will.”

“So why the questions?” She wanted him to get to the point and leave her alone. “Why do you believe my daughter is in danger?”

He hesitated for a moment. “There’s been a shooting at the diner tonight. Didn’t you hear

the gunshots?”

“A shooting? No. However, I thought I heard a car or truck on the Interstate backfiring.” She feigned concern and placed her hand on her chest as if realizing her daughter may be involved.

“Cali. Is she all right?”

He eyed her suspiciously. “She hasn’t called? Come home?”

“Her phone doesn’t work. It broke. Cali’s not here.” Brigitta paced the kitchen floor. Now she didn’t care that he saw her tremble. “What happened at the diner?”

“An altercation in the parking lot. Two men were shot. We believe your daughter was involved or witnessed it.”

She stopped pacing. “Cali wouldn’t be involved in something like that.”

He raised one eyebrow as if to say “Oh, really?” Instead, he said, “The men are associated with a human trafficking ring. She may not have been involved, but she could have been targeted. Did you witness anyone or anything odd at the diner when you were there in the last month?”

Brigitta stared at the private detective. His nose had been broken at some point and had healed crookedly. It gave him a rough appearance, like he wasn’t afraid to fight. His close-trimmed moustache hid a thin scar near his upper lip. She wondered what battles he fought and if he had won. She decided to tell him part of the truth. “There was a man at the diner who came in the day I was laid off.”

“What did he look like?”

She described the man to Stelzer and included how he eyed her daughter. “They called him Mr. B.” She hesitated as she recalled his full last name. “Mr. Bendwinder. I can’t remember his first name. Hank seems to know him.”

The detective took a gulp of his coffee. “Hank Brice is the owner of the diner, correct?”

“Yes.” She leaned her hips against the counter and hugged herself.

“How about the other men? There were three others.”

“Mr. B was alone. I didn’t see anyone else.” She wished she had. “But Abby, the lead server, might be able to help you.”

“Can you tell me about Mandy Gregor?”

“Mandy? I liked her. Even though she seemed to be a drifter, the girl was a good worker. The police were in and talked to Hank after she didn’t show up for work.”

Stelzer asked her a few more questions about Mandy, and Brigitta answered the best she could. Her energy level plummeted. She rubbed her face and wanted the nightmare to go away. When she felt the silence in the room, she looked up. The detective observed her.

“Are you sure you don’t know where your daughter is?”

“I don’t,” she said truthfully.

“Do you have her phone?”

She had to think. “I don’t remember seeing it. If I find it, I’ll let you know.”

“Can I search for it?”

Brigitta stood straight and her eyes hardened. “No. You’ll need a search warrant.”

The air tensed. She wanted him out. The longer he stayed, the more chance for him to figure out Cali had been there.

Stelzer took another gulp of coffee. He set the cup down on the table.

“Two officers will visit you tonight. Officers O’Reilly and Hoffman,” he said. “Make sure to ask for their names or IDs so you don’t provide information to the wrong officers. They’re at the scene, but I’m guessing they will be here shortly.”

“And why aren’t you there? At the scene.” She hugged herself again.

“My job is to find innocent children kidnapped by or running from traffickers. And your daughter.”

Stelzer walked to the door. She followed him. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a business card. “If she calls you or you hear any other news, you can reach me at this number. Call anytime. Twenty-four, seven.”

She took the card. Basic white cardstock with a gold embossed badge on the left side. On the right was his ID number, name, and two phone numbers—office and cell.

Stelzer opened the door and stepped onto the porch. He faced her. “You’re right. The coffee tastes great. Thank you.”

Britta let out a humph as if telling him “I told you so.” She kept the door open as he walked to his car. He scanned the perimeter as if hoping to see Cali hidden in the shadows.

“Hey, Stelzer,” she called out. He paused before getting into his Nova. “What happens if you find Cali?”

“Consider yourself lucky.”

Brigitta swallowed hard.

Chapter 8 – The Journey Begins

Cali walked along the country road. She had no idea where she was or where she was going. She only knew she was headed south. One foot in front of the other, she kept a steady pace to run as far away from Dempsey as possible.

After walking an hour, her heart continued to pound hard even though the adrenaline rush had dissipated. Her ears rang from the gun blasts, making it hard to hear if a car was coming. She monitored the roads for bouncing headlights or reflections shining in the trees. When a vehicle appeared, she left the road, hiding behind whatever she could, to avoid being seen. Otherwise, she was alone. Not even the stars in the sky gave her comfort.

“Go find your grandmother,” Mama had said.

The words repeated in her head. Words that were useless. She had no address. No direction. Only instructions to ask for the Orb Lady. What was an orb lady? Mama never called her grandma that before. But then, her mama never talked about Gran or allowed Cali to ask about her.

A flash of headlights sprayed against the trees and caught her attention. Cali scanned the dark countryside for a place to hide. A dirt field to her left. A black void in the distance—possibly a lake. To her right, patches of tall, thin pines. The headlights went behind a hill.

Cali cut across the ditch and ran into the pines. The trees weren't thick enough to hide her, but if she lay flat, behind a fallen log, it might be okay. As she started to crouch, she spotted a small house and garage on the other side of the trees, not too far from the road. With no lights, she hadn't seen it in the dark. She sprinted toward the garage and made it before the headlights lit the road. As the lights drew closer, she pressed her back against the wall.

The car wasn't in a hurry, unlike the other cars she hid from.

The car's rumbling stopped. The headlights turned off. Cali was about to peek around the corner to see if the car was still there when she saw another bright light cast into the woods. She guessed a flashlight. The bright beam moved slowly in her direction. She stepped back to make sure the garage hid her as the light continued to search for something or someone. She'd be

spotted in a second if she moved. Her only escape, if she were found, would be running into the woods.

The light wavered to the left, then across the pine trees, to the house again, and then to both sides of the garage. After a few more swipes across the yard, the flashlight shut off. Cali listened for footsteps. The only sound was the high-pitched tone in her ears that drowned everything else out.

Stretching her neck to peek around the garage, she saw a red glow from a cigarette. A person was standing outside the car near the driver's door. The headlights were off. Another figure opened the passenger door, and the interior light went on. The man got back in. She didn't recognize the guy, but she did the car. The black sedan.

Cali plastered herself to the wall again and waited. What if it was Scarface?

Her legs shook. Her upper lip beaded with sweat. Instinct told her to run. Fight or flight. She wanted flight. But if she did, they'd see her.

Don't run. Don't run.

After a minute, the headlights turned on again and the car moved. She peeked around the garage again as the sedan backed up, stopped near the front of the garage, and then drove slowly forward as it passed the house. The red taillights glowed as it disappeared over a hill.

A sob escaped Cali's lips. She took deep breaths of relief as she folded herself in and rested her hands on her thighs.

Way too close.

Cali stayed hidden until her heart returned to normal and her legs stopped shaking. When the night appeared to be quiet again, with no car in sight, she brushed her sweaty palms on her jeans and peeled herself away from the garage. She walked for hours with only one car and a UPS truck passing by.

As dawn cracked the morning sky, the road became busier. Cars and trucks passed with purpose as the drivers started their activities for the day. She must be closer to Hayti. Soon a gas station came into view. Chancing it, she went inside to use the bathroom. Cali bought a map of Missouri and Tennessee. She tucked both into her backpack and planned to look at them later. Besides, her eyes burned from lack of sleep. She needed to rest. A bed. Somewhere safe.

To stay away from traffic, she changed her route and walked the side streets in Hayti. Cars continued to pass by, but in the city she couldn't avoid them. A few teenagers walked down the sidewalk with books in hand and backpacks hooked to their shoulders as if heading to school. Cali took the opportunity to be a student too. She placed her hood over her head and walked behind them. When the school came in sight, she turned down another street.

If she hadn't been curious about the old Packard rusting away next to an auto shop, with the bird nest tucked between the door and side mirror, she might not have seen the weathered sign above it. An arrow pointed to the right with Boondock Motel written underneath it.

Cali followed the pointed arrow to check the motel out. She had some money—not a lot but enough if it was cheap.

The motel was less than a mile away. The green-painted building was V-shaped and resembled a clean mom and pop business. There weren't any broken shutters or peeled paint. Beside each door sat a bench with a flowerpot filled with daisies and tall grass. Cali liked it and justified her stay—get a full night of sleep, map out her route, and take a hot, hot shower.

Cali kept her hood up to cover her hair before walking across the parking lot. The office was in the center of the V. She entered a small reception area with two chairs, a coffee table, and a shelf filled with used books and games. The front desk was straight ahead. A skinny teenage boy with unruly red hair sat at a desk in a backroom that appeared to be attached to a living space. The clerk was focused on his phone and wasn't in a hurry to leave it. She guessed he was playing a game. Why wasn't he in school?

“Can I help you?” He dragged himself off the phone to the high counter. He placed his phone on the shelf underneath the counter, so she couldn't tell what was on the screen.

“I'd like a room for the night, please.”

“Sure.” He studied her for a minute. “Cash?”

Her cheeks burned red. She lowered her eyes. The motel must be popular with people coming and going—hourly. Pay cash and no ID required. No questions asked.

“How much?”

The total for the night was a little more than she expected. When she hesitated, he explained that she had to pay extra for an early check-in. She got it. That was fair.

“Make it two nights.” The words blurted out. Two nights would give her time to sleep, think, and recalculate. Cali checked in as Laurie Smith. The clerk gave her a key to Room Ten with a big gold ball attached to it.

“Enjoy your stay. Office is always open.” Before she left, the clerk had already buried his head in his phone again.

Her room was toward the left end of the motel. The door handle was loose, and she struggled to unlock it with the key. When she finally did and opened the door, disinfectant blasted her nose. Cali waved her hand in front of her face and coughed. At least they cleaned the room. She flipped the switch on the wall, and the ceiling light came on. She closed the door. Two full-sized beds with checkered green and blue bedspreads took up most of the room. Other furnishings

included a long dark dresser with a TV, a nightstand between the beds, and a small round table with two worn chairs near the window.

She tossed her backpack on the chair closest to her. Next, she walked across the bluish-green carpet to check out the bathroom. Not too bad. The sink had a few chips, the tub had some rust stains, and the corner tiles were stained. On a better note, the tub was clean and had a decent-sized showerhead. Cali looked forward to a shower.

Returning to the room, she found the “Do Not Disturb” sign and placed it on the outside handle of the door. She contemplated her decision. If she kept the sign outside the door, people would know someone was inside the room. Was it smart?

Cali removed the sign, then closed the door. She locked and bolted the door. The maid wouldn't show up to clean the room until tomorrow.

Making one last check, she pulled back the curtain panel to view the parking lot. No sedan. No police car. Satisfied everything was good, Cali replaced the curtain and shut off the light. She undressed down to her bra and underwear before collapsing into bed.

Cali woke to the sound of a diesel truck parked next to her room. She sat straight up and looked around the dark, unfamiliar room. It took a moment for her to remember she was at a motel.

Rubbing the sleep from the corner of her eyes, she found the clock on the nightstand. Eight o'clock. She'd slept nine hours. With a yawn, she relaxed a bit and took some time to gain her bearings. She must have been knocked out. The bed was barely ruffled.

A door slammed, reminding her of why she woke. Cali slipped out from the covers and walked barefoot to the window. With a finger, she moved the curtain back. A beefy chrome truck grill glared at her from four feet away. One slip of the gas pedal and the truck would be through the window and wall. A man in a leisure suit and bolo tie appeared from behind the truck. He carried a grocery bag and headed over to the room two doors down from hers. He didn't seem like a threat.

She let the curtain go and was about to hop into bed again when she stopped and reopened the curtain by a few inches. The position of the sun was east, not west. She frowned. Was it really morning, not night? That meant she slept ... twenty-one hours straight? No way.

Outside, a truck whizzed by, heading in the direction of Hayti. An older man in a polo shirt and jeans walked out of the motel office. He rolled a suitcase behind him as he headed toward a white work van parked on the other side of the lot. The maid's cart was in front of Room Three.

No mistake, she'd slept solid for almost a full day.

Cali let the curtain close. Her stomach growled, but she didn't dare leave to find something to eat, for fear of being seen. She remembered Mama had packed her two sandwiches. The first one, a chicken sandwich, she'd eaten when she took a break from walking. One more was in her backpack.

After turning on the ceiling light, Cali grabbed her bag and placed it on the extra bed. The second sandwich was squished between her notebook and shorts. Peanut butter and jelly. She wolfed it down—dryness and all—then went to the bathroom and filled a glass with water to drink.

“Ughh.” She spat the liquid sludge out of her mouth and nearly puked. It tasted like it came from a pond.

She fished inside her backpack for a bottle of water. No luck. After emptying everything out, she took stock of what she had. Something bulged out from her tank top. Cali uncovered a roll of money and picked it up. Confused, she checked her pants pocket. The cash she had was still there.

Mama.

Dang her. Mama was supposed to keep the money, not give it back.

Cali gathered the money together. She separated it by denomination across the bedspread and counted \$723.00. More than enough for her to reach Gran's place, wherever that was. Most of it had been part of her down payment for a car. So much for that. Another dream slithered down the drain.

Not wanting to store the bills in one spot, Cali divided out the money. She placed one third of the cash into the top two front pockets on her jean jacket, another third into the back pockets of her jeans, and the remainder into the small, zippered compartment of her backpack. Next, she rolled up her clothes in tight bundles and stuffed them into the middle section of the bag. Makeup and personal items went into the side compartment. The last item on the bed was her notebook.

She picked it up and leafed through the pages until the photo fell onto the floor. Cali bent over to retrieve the old, curled picture she had found under her mama's dresser seven years ago. Cali studied the photo for the millionth time. She was about two years old, maybe closer to three and stood on the porch of a white farmhouse. Gran, behind her, had smokey black hair that cascaded over Cali's shoulder. Gran smiled and looked into the camera with soulful eyes.

Mama sat on the steps next to them. Her tousled black hair framed her face. Part of her long bangs hid her eyes, but her mouth was open as if someone had said something funny. Mama was

vibrant and beautiful back then. She still was but the lines on her face showed a hard life had taken its toll on her.

Missing her mama, Cali placed the photo against her heart. What happened between her and Gran that was so bad? Why couldn't they visit her over the years as she grew up?

Saddened, she missed her mama. If only she had accepted a ride from Abby. If only she'd quit, like her mama wanted her to do, then none of this would have happened. She'd still be home. Safe.

Cali slipped the photo between the middle pages of the notebook and tucked it into her backpack. Glancing at the TV, she wondered if the news had anything about the shooting. She wanted to know but at the same time didn't want to know.

The remote was on the dresser. She really should find out how much trouble she was in.

Grabbing the remote, she pointed it toward the TV and turned it on. Two channels came in—a game show and a kids' show. Both were distorted. Cali pressed the off button. She'd try again after her shower.

The hot, steamy water rained down on her hair and body as she stood to enjoy it. Every second was bliss. At home, she was never allowed to take long showers. Pop would always bang on the door, yell at her for using all the hot water and then tell her to get out because he needed to use the bathroom. Now she could take as much time as she wanted. And she did. The water pulsated down the front and back of her body like a massage. The heat relaxed her knotted muscles. For that alone, the price of the motel room was worth it.

After her shower, she dressed and then combed her hair. A vacuum hummed from the room next to her. The maid's cart was near her window. Cali opened the door and grabbed an extra couple of shampoos, conditioners, and soap from the cart. A sewing kit was tucked in one of the bags hanging from a hook, and she snatched it. After dumping the goodies onto the bed, she kept the door open a crack and waited for the maid to appear from the other room. She let the woman know she didn't have to bother cleaning her room.

With nothing else to do, the day ticked on. And on. And on. Cali pulled out her Tennessee map and found Sumner Point. She opened the Missouri map to figure out how to navigate from here to there. Her finger scrolled across Tennessee. Cali groaned. It could take weeks to travel to her grandma's house if she had to walk.

Her best bet was to catch a ride from one or more truckers. Ones she trusted. Folding the maps back up, she tucked them in her backpack, then watched a distorted Antiques Road Show on TV. After a while, she shut off the TV and napped. She woke hungry.

Cali went to the window and pulled open the curtain a couple of inches. A vending machine

was stationed in the middle part of the motel by the office. Movement caught her attention. A gold Nova drove into the lot and parked near the office. A tall, lean man got out of the car and adjusted his pants and sport coat. His eyes were like lasers as he panned the parking lot and motel rooms. Cali moved back and continued to watch him from near the bed.

The guy was fit and acted like a police officer. He wasn't in a uniform though. Still, she didn't picture him as a trafficker—not like Mr. B's men. She shuddered, thinking about Scarface and his snarly look. How he threatened to find her.

Her stomach growled again. She'd wait until the guy and the Nova left—just in case he was a cop—before she snuck out to the vending machine. In the meantime, she found the sewing kit and removed the small scissors from their slot. People on the run changed their appearance. The police would be searching for a girl with long hair. Not anymore.

With scissors, comb, and hairband in hand, Cali went into the bathroom and stood at the sink. Her hair was damp from the shower, so it would be easy to cut. She played with the strands, combing her fingers through them. With Gran and Mama having dark hair, she must have inherited her blondeness from her real father. Cali gathered her hair together, placed it into a low ponytail aligned with the base of her neck, and then grabbed the scissors. Cutting her hair wasn't a big deal.

Really, it wasn't.

I can do this.

After inhaling a deep breath for courage, she raised the scissors and pulled her ponytail tight.

“Here it goes.”

Cutting two inches above the binder, the small blades gnawed at her hair a little at a time. The cut hair sprang back, around her shoulders. When the last clump was free, she held the ponytail in her hand. Fifteen inches. Gone. Cali removed the plastic liner from the bathroom trash can and dropped the ponytail inside the bag. The bag was placed carefully inside her backpack. Fifteen inches was perfect for donation. When she had a chance, she'd find a salon to give it to.

Cali headed back to the bathroom and examined the blunt cut that remained. She didn't like how the jagged strands fell around her shoulders. And one side was longer than the other. For the next thirty minutes, she snipped the ends to make them even and then layered the sides and back, remembering how her mama would style her own hair. Last, she trimmed and tapered her bangs to eye level. Finished, Cali stepped back for one last inspection. Not bad. Her mama would be impressed.

Putting the scissors away, Cali couldn't ignore her hunger anymore. She felt jittery from not eating. She glanced out the window again, like she had for the hundredth time that day, and saw that the Nova had left. If he was a policeman, the clerk must have kept his mouth shut about her. Otherwise, the man would be banging on her door.

Or was he getting reinforcements?

Stop it. Don't worry. He's gone.

One more night and she'd be out of there.

The sky was dark, and no one hung out in the parking lot. Cali cracked open the door and slid out. Hot, humid air greeted her. A few moths fluttered by the lights but otherwise everything was quiet. She darted toward the vending machine with money ready in hand. The machine housed the typical fair—none of it healthy. Her smallest change was a five-dollar bill. Feeding it through the slot, she purchased a bag of trail mix. The change clinked against the bucket as it came out.

Cali cringed and tried to muffle the noise by catching the coins as they dropped. The last thing she wanted was to make a ton of noise. She fed the slot two more times to purchase a cinnamon roll and chips. A second vending machine carried soda and water. She purchased a bottle of water.

Next to the machines was a display rack with travel brochures. Cali browsed the different booklets and took the ones that might be useful to her. She carried her pile back to the room. With the door locked and chained, she settled into the chair next to the table and ate the chips and nuts as she went through the brochures. Two of them had detailed maps that might be helpful once she got closer to Nashville. She ripped those out and placed them with her other maps in her backpack. Without anything else to do, Cali set the alarm for early morning and then fell asleep.

The alarm woke her while the sky was still dark, and she left the motel room with her belongings. She crossed the parking lot and entered the office to return the key. The boy who checked her in sat on a stool behind the front desk. His thumbs danced across his phone screen.

"Checking out." Cali placed the key on the counter.

"Did you have a pleasant stay?" He glanced at the key to verify the room number.

"Yes, thank you." She headed for the door.

"Hey," he called after her. The clerk was standing now. "Some guy was here asking about you. A detective."

Cali froze. She hoped her fear of being caught wasn't noticeable. Her throat constricted as she stared at the clerk, unsure what to say or do.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him you were here.” He waved his fingers as if hinting for something.

It took a few seconds before she got it. Pulling a twenty out of her pocket, she placed it on the counter.

The clerk eyed the money, disappointed.

“It’s everything I got.”

The teenager snatched the bill in his hand and smiled. “Have a wonderful day, Laurie.”

When she reached the truck stop on the outskirts of Hayti, a couple of truckers left the building as they prepared for their day’s run. One tractor was already heading out. Cali checked the idling rigs parked for the night to see if she recognized any of them. No luck.

She headed for the diner. Inside, the white walls and blue carpet made the place cheery, unlike the dull browns at the Dempsey Diner. The server by the register motioned for her to sit wherever she pleased. Cali picked a booth to monitor the truckers as they came in and out the door.

The server, a weathered lady with sun-wrinkled skin and thin blonde hair, tossed the menu onto the table instead of handing it to her. “You need coffee?”

“Please.” Cali gave the woman a cold stare as she sat with her back straight. She didn’t like the server’s attitude, implying she was a lot lizard. Dempsey had plenty of those women who’d walk the parking lot in the back of the building and wait for the truckers to take an interest in them. A few would come into the diner if the trucker bought them dinner, but most stayed outside near the trucks, not wanting trouble.

When the server came back with a mug and pot of coffee, she placed both on the table and asked, “Heading anywhere in particular?”

“South. To Memphis.” The lie would help if anyone came in to ask about her.

“For fun?” The weathered blonde poured coffee into her cup.

“My father’s in the hospital.”

“Oh.” The server puckered her mouth as if she had a change of heart about Cali. “I’m sorry to hear that. What can I get you?”

Cali ordered the trucker’s breakfast special, knowing it was a good deal.

“You’re here by yourself?”

With a casual shrug, Cali said, “My dad’s a trucker. I’m used to eating in truck stops.”

The weathered blonde nodded as if satisfied with her answer. “Your food should be out soon.”

“Thanks.” Cali offered a slight smile.

Alone again, she sipped the coffee. Not bad.

The truck stop was busier than the diner. Each time someone entered the restaurant, she popped her head up to scrutinize them as potential rides. When two truckers came in whom she recognized, Cali's hopes lifted for a second until she realized they were truckers she didn't like or trust. Traveling alone, her safety was more important. Mama drilled it into her head repeatedly. She'd pass on them.

The server came back with her meal. She placed a plate of fried eggs, three pieces of bacon, and hash browns in front of her. On her return trip, she set a small plate of two pancakes and syrup to the side. "Enjoy."

Cali planned to do exactly that. Food. The eggs disappeared first while they were hot. Next were the pancakes. She was halfway through eating them when a trucker entered the restaurant and sat down at the table across the aisle from her. She thought she recognized him and sent quick glances toward him to make sure.

Jose always wore a dirty red cap, like this guy. He'd grown around his midsection. The trucker needed a larger shirt as the buttons were ready to burst open. No matter, she trusted him. And he was an independent trucker who didn't have the restrictions that companies made for their drivers—like no passengers.

"Hi, Jose." She waved to catch his attention. He made a funny face as if knowing he'd seen her before but not from where. She leaned over from her table. "It's me, Cali, from the Dempsey truck stop."

His eyes lit up and he smiled, showing a mouth of stained teeth from chewing tobacco. "Oh yeah. You work here now?"

She shook her head and lowered her voice so the server wouldn't overhear. "No, I'm headed to Nashville. My dad is in the hospital. Kidney issues."

"I'm sorry to hear."

"You want to join me?" She patted the other side of her table for him to sit opposite her, not next to her.

He didn't hesitate as he slipped from his booth over to hers.

Cali smiled even more. She had a ride. And just in time. A police car had pulled into the truck stop.

Chapter 9 – A Trucker’s Delight

The ride with Jose beat traveling by foot and being alone. He loved to talk, and Cali let him prattle away. When he stalled, ready to ask her a question, she diverted him by asking one instead. Keeping the attention on him was better than having to make up more lies about herself. Ones she’d probably forget. Besides, his life problems were a welcome distraction over hers. The trip to Jackson, Tennessee, where he’d drop her off, went by faster than expected.

At the truck stop, Cali went inside to go to the restroom. As she sat on the toilet, she pulled out her map of the state to figure out where she needed to go. She had to travel east, on the interstate to Nashville before going north.

“Cali,” Jose called out after she left the restroom and entered the store. He met her in the chip aisle. “There’s a guy filling up now. He’s willing to give you a ride to Nashville.”

“Really?” The city was farther than she wanted to go, but it could work.

“Yeah, I asked around.” A smug smile painted his face as if he were her hero. Jose pointed his finger at a man next to a purple tractor. The trucker was older, about forty or fifty years old, and he had a thin, gray ponytail. She couldn’t see his face with his back to her, but he appeared to be safe. “That’s Southern Pete. He’s ready to go, so you better move it.”

“Thank you!” Cali gave him a quick hug. “Can you—”

She almost asked him to tell Abby that she was okay the next time he stopped in Dempsey. Instead, she pressed her lips together. No one needed to know where she was at or heading.

“Can I what?”

Cali waved her hand. “Never mind. I appreciate your help.”

“Anytime.” Jose blushed. “I’ll see you in Dempsey.”

He wouldn’t but that was okay. Cali gave him a thumbs up before she ran inside to buy a large bottle of water and a few snacks for the road. Southern Pete stood near the driver’s door and waited. When she walked toward him, she raised her hand to catch his attention.

The man smiled as if he’d struck gold. His cheeks puffed out and his smile revealed stained teeth with one missing on the side. He offered his hand. “Name’s Southern Pete. I’m told you

need a hitch to Nashville.”

“I do.” Cali shook his hand. He seemed friendly, not overbearing.

The trucker opened the passenger door and helped her into the cab. Cali set her backpack and bag of snacks on the floor. His semi-rig was a little newer than Jose’s but looked pretty much the same with a narrow compartment in the back for sleeping. She settled in while Southern Pete walked to the other side and got in. He shifted into gear, and they slowly drove out of the parking lot.

“Jose said you’re heading to the city to help your dad.”

“I am,” Cali said. His tractor was quiet on the inside compared to the noise they made on the outside.

He wanted to know why she traveled alone. Again, she told the lie about her dad being in the hospital and needing a kidney.

“You plan on donating one of yours?”

She hadn’t thought about it. “I hope so. If I’m a match.”

“I bet you’d be a perfect match,” he said with a wide grin. “I’m sure it will work in your favor.”

Cali nodded as the trucker glanced over at her as if undressing her. When he licked his lips like a wolf, a warning bell rang through her. Did she make a mistake getting into the rig? If so, it was too late. They were on the road going seventy miles per hour.

Annoyed that he kept staring at her body more than the road, she glanced down to see if her zipper was down. It wasn’t, but her tank top displayed loads of cleavage. Cali couldn’t find the zipper on her hoodie fast enough to zip up and cover her boobs. Luckily, she had put on her jeans in Jackson.

Southern Pete turned on his CB radio. It squelched, making her jump.

“No need to be skittish,” he said. “I like to have the CB on. A few of us old-timers like to use it to communicate.”

Cali smiled awkwardly, unsure what to say. She gazed out the passenger door window to avoid the trucker. When she stole a glance toward him, he appeared to be lost in his own preoccupied thoughts.

After a time, they passed Highway 22, which confirmed they were headed in the right direction. She calculated how much farther they had to go until she reached Sumner Point but struggled without digging out her maps. Going to Nashville, she’d have to backtrack a little and head north once he dropped her off.

“You doing okay over there?” Southern Pete brought her attention back to him. “You’re a

quiet one.”

“Yep, I’m fine.”

He licked his lips again and smiled at her. “Hot damn, you sure are pretty.”

Cali shifted in her seat. Stuck in his rig, she wasn’t in the best position to do or say anything that would offend him. At least he couldn’t make any type of move on her while he was behind the wheel. She took a swig of her water instead of responding.

“I can’t believe Jose passed you on to me.”

Passed her on? Cali tensed and stared straight ahead at the backside of a bus as it drove in front of them. Abby’s warning about customers repeated in her head. “Don’t give them any ideas. Don’t let them flatter you. Don’t let them get under your skin.”

Southern Pete got under her skin. This was going to be a long ride.

“You up for some dinner tonight in Nashville?”

Cali was so hung up on how he thought Jose passed her on to him that she almost didn’t hear his question. She wanted to scream, “Hell no, you prick,” but she didn’t want to piss him off or say something that she’d regret later. She didn’t need him handing her over to the police.

“Sorry. I can’t. My brother will be waiting for me.”

His hands tightened on the wheel. “Aww, come on. What’s dinner?” He glanced at her. “Besides, I’m the one giving you a ride ... helping you out.”

If she blew him off, he’d be angry. The trucker didn’t act like the type who got over anything easily.

He continued. “I know a place that has enormous steaks. I go every time I drive to Nashville. You’d be amazed how juicy and tender the steaks are. Melt in your mouth, like other things.”

Oh, lordy. He was the type of trouble her mama and Abby warned her about. Her palms sweated. She rubbed them against her thighs.

“You wouldn’t let me down now, would you?” Southern Pete tilted his head and batted his eyes, half flirting and half expecting.

“I am hungry.” She kept her voice as casual as possible. She pulled out the Tennessee map she’d tucked into the front pocket of her backpack. She had no choice but to determine where they were and when to ditch him. “I guess my brother could pick me up at the restaurant.”

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. After a minute, he nodded as if he thought of a better plan. “Tell you what. After we eat, you call your brother, and we’ll figure out where to meet him.”

“Sounds like a great idea.” She fake-smiled like she did at the customers at the diner who annoyed her.

Southern Pete seemed satisfied with her response. He whistled a tune and focused on driving.

They were close to a major turnoff.

“Hey, can we stop? I really need to go to the bathroom.”

“I have a portable in back.”

Cali delivered the most disgusted look possible. “I can’t do that. Not when you’re driving. Besides, I’m a girl. I’d like to freshen up.”

The trucker eyed her. “You can’t wait until we reach the restaurant?”

She glared at him with a you-got-to-be-kidding-me look.

Southern Pete rubbed his nose, annoyed. He caved. “We’ll pull into the truck stop at the next exit.”

Good. She did have to go to the bathroom.

The truck stop was a national chain with ample parking—easy on, easy off. He pulled in and parked away from the other rigs. “Don’t take too long.”

“I won’t.” Cali grabbed her backpack and opened the door.

He tried to snatch the bag, but she was too quick. Cali placed it close to her chest.

Southern Pete’s voice hardened. “You can leave that here.”

“What?” She scrunched her face to say he was being silly. “I need it. I want to put on makeup for tonight. Change.”

His eyes lit. “Something nice?”

“Of course.” Cali jumped down to the parking lot and then beelined it to the bathrooms. He watched her like a hawk.

Cali’s legs shook as she walked to the truck stop. In the bathroom, she hid in one of the stalls to calm down. Southern Pete had made her more frazzled than she cared. Cali took two deep breaths. The good news, she was out of his rig.

After relieving herself, she washed her hands at the sink. Cali caught her reflection in the mirror and looked at the stranger who stared back. She was just a kid. A girl having to get herself out of trouble.

The door opened and she jumped. A skinny meth-looking woman walked in. Her hand was squeezed tight as if she held something precious. She kept it close to her chest as she darted toward the end stall and locked it. Cali didn’t want to be in the bathroom when the woman came out.

After securing her backpack across her shoulders, she opened the door and peeked out. The space that separated the women’s and men’s bathrooms was empty. A toilet flushed on the other

side. It could be Southern Pete.

Cali hid in the last aisle near the canned goods. She scanned the perimeter. From what she saw, the trucker wasn't in the store. The man coming out of the bathroom wasn't him either. Thirsty, she headed to the beverage coolers and grabbed a bottle of iced tea. As she waited in line, she had full view of Southern Pete's purple rig.

Where did he disappear to?

She felt a tinge of guilt for ditching him. The trucker was kind enough give her a ride. However, he was a prick to expect a date in return.

The man behind the counter rang up her purchases and asked if she needed to pay for gas. She told him not today. When she shoved the bottle into the backpack's netted pocket, the clerk said, "Be careful of that guy over there." Cali followed where he pointed in the parking lot on the opposite side of Southern Pete's parked rig. Near one of the gas pumps, a man in a tan raincoat and hat stood with his back to the building. He was tall but his upper body was slumped over a bit. "We've had trouble in the past couple of months, scumbags out to lure girls away—pretty girls just like you. I believe he's one of them."

The other clerk behind the registers walked over to see where he pointed. Her afro bounced as she shook her head in disgust. "Are they here again?"

When the man at the pumps faced the building, Cali paled.

Weasel. He limped around the blue car—one she didn't recognize. He dragged his left leg, the one she had shot. His arm held his hip as if to keep it in place. The trafficker leaned over to talk to a man who sat in the backseat. When Weasel stepped back, the man rolled up the window and the car took off.

"Oh, shit," the woman clerk said under her breath. "Here comes the other one. I've seen him before and I don't care for him at all."

What?

Cali's head jerked like a chicken. Scarface walked toward the store, and she hiccupped in panic.

The woman clerk heard her. "You want to leave out the backdoor?"

Cali nodded vigorously, unable to talk.

The woman pointed to a hall in the back. "Out that way, down the hall by the office. Door says the alarm will go off. It won't."

"Thanks," Cali squeaked. She darted to the back and found the door. She pressed the handle in and pushed it open to the employee parking lot and garbage bins.

Staying close to the building, she scanned the area to determine where to go. A grove of trees

to her left and beyond the rigs was too far away to reach safely. The areas to the back and right sides were flat, open fields. Too easy for them to spot her there if she ran across them. She couldn't go back inside, especially if Scarface was there.

Cali walked alongside the back of the building and peeked around to the front. Southern Pete sauntered toward his semi-rig but stopped. He turned back and forth as if trying to find her. He headed to the bathrooms.

Her head dropped in disbelief. The black sedan parked behind the rig.

Could this day get any worse?

Weasel was missing. Scarface might be in the store. Southern Pete headed that way. She prayed the trucker didn't ask for her. If the men connected, she wouldn't stand a chance.

Cali flattened against the wall and stared at the grove of trees, calculating the distance. They'd spot her if she tried to run it. She peeked around the corner again. Weasel came out of the truck stop and limped toward the sedan. Scarface was out of sight. If she went back inside to hide in the bathroom or in the back, he might find her.

A cement enclosure that stored the dumpsters made a good hiding place. The garbage bins were full. The lids were open. The putrid odor lofted from the walls. She gagged. Twice.

I can do this.

Cali crawled behind the least smelly dumpster, the one with the cardboard crammed in the bin, and leaned against the thick wall for support. With her face between her knees, she took shallow breaths to keep from breathing in the god-awful smell. Settled in, she listened for noises since the cement walls blocked the view.

Rigs and other vehicles drove in and out of the truck stop. Vehicles whizzed by on the freeway. Crows cawed as they perched on the roof of the building. Three planes flew overhead. Something dripped in one of the dumpsters, pinging against an empty can.

She couldn't believe Weasel was alive. She hadn't killed him. Did it mean she could be charged with one attempted murder instead of two murders? Or manslaughter? Cali forgot what she had learned in her criminology class in high school. She should have paid more attention. And now, he had to be searching for her. If he caught her, she wondered what type of cruel punishment he'd do to her for shooting him? She cringed, too afraid to think about it.

The backdoor of the store burst open. Cali froze as she waited for the person to toss another bag of garbage into the bin. Instead, the woman clerk hung by the door and talked casually to someone on her phone. She must be on break. After ending the call, the woman went back inside.

Cali stayed in her hideout until the sun descended to dusk. Southern Pete had to have left by

now. Mr. B's men were probably off to the next place too. Little did they know she was right under their noses. One chalk mark for her.

A gust of wind blew into the cement enclosure. Cali coughed as the stench from the dumpsters entered her mouth, forcing her to breathe it in. She couldn't take anymore.

Like an old lady with arthritis, she unfolded her legs and stood. Every muscle was stiff and hurt after being in the same position for hours. Her left shoulder tingled as if it had fallen asleep. Was that even possible?

Cali hobbled out of the enclosure and used the cement wall for support. She stretched and shook her legs as she walked to the end of the building. Peeking around the corner, she confirmed Southern Pete's tractor was gone. The black sedan was gone too.

Leaving the safety of the building, Cali crossed the parking lot to the frontage road. She walked until she came to another major road that bridged the interstate. Pulling out the Tennessee map, she decided to head north to Camden, taking the country roads. She hoped no one would find her.

Chapter 10 – Down Comes the Rain

Cali convinced herself that traveling at night wasn't a bad thing. She'd done it many times before after her shift at the diner. Tonight, the humidity hung in the air, but the slight breeze helped keep her cool. The moon and stars offered her company. The road was smooth for walking. The surrounding trees offered protection if needed. She should feel great. Enjoy the time alone. Instead, loneliness engulfed her.

All her life she counted on her mama to be there. If she felt sad, Mama would console her. If she had an issue, Mama would help. If she wasn't sure what to do, Mama had the answer. Well, no more. Cali was on her own to figure it out until she reached Sumner Point.

She tried to calculate. Two or three more days to reach her Gran? If she had her smartphone, an app would tell her what backroads to take and how long it'd take by foot. But she didn't have a phone. Once she got to her grandma's house, she'd have to buy a new one.

Cali avoided the idea about what she would do if she didn't find her grandma. What if she was dead? What if no one knew who the Orb Lady was? How did Mama know her grandma still lived there? After years of shutting her out, Gran could be sailing in the Bahamas. But hopefully not. Cali didn't have a Plan B.

What would it be? Stay in Sumner Point? Go to Nashville? Head home again and hope everyone was over the shooting?

Going back to Dempsey was the least desirable option. The town had done nothing for her or her mama. For Kyle either. This was Cali's chance to get her life in order. The chance to find herself. Be free. Be an adult. Tomorrow she'd be eighteen years old. A perfect time to start over.

A coyote howled in the distant woods. The haunted call drifted toward her like a warning, telling her she wasn't free. If anything, she'd spend the next ten years or more of her life behind bars.

Cali's smile faded. Instead of dreaming, she had to stick to finding Gran. Hopefully her grandma would know what to do.

As the night wore on, her pace slowed. Cali needed sleep. A park was up ahead with a

weathered wooden playground set. She climbed the ladder to the top of a tower where a pirate's wheel let kids pretend they were on a ship. The tower had no roof to protect her from the dew, but it did have an enclosed slide. She lay inside the tube on her belly, feet first, and with her backpack on. Her head and shoulders rested against the top platform to keep her from sliding down. Although the position was awkward, most of her would be dry in the morning. Cali closed her eyes. She had no issue falling asleep.

A squirrel chirped. Cali tried to ignore him, but the rodent was persistent.

Chirp. Chirp. Chirp.

She opened her eyes and shifted. Forgetting she was on top of a slide, Cali slipped, unable to find anything to grip. She slid down and became stuck where the tube curved. She should have slept there. Using her hands and feet, she inched through the curves to the end of the slide.

The sun, still behind the trees, rose on the horizon. The grass shined with dew. Even the playground equipment had beads of moisture on the wood. Cali touched the back of her head—damp but not wet. She sat at the bottom edge of the slide. The park was empty except for the squirrels scurrying about, a rabbit eating near a tree, and a few birds singing from atop the swing set.

Day Four.

She was officially an adult.

“Happy birthday,” she sang without enthusiasm.

Every year for her birthday, Mama made her two cakes—a dark fudge torte and a lemon poppyseed—since she couldn't decide which she wanted more. They started the tradition when she was eight years old. Now it ended with eighteen.

Cali opened her backpack and found the cinnamon bun she bought from the motel's vending machine. The sugary glaze was too sweet, but she forced herself to eat half. She threw the remainder to the ground for the squirrels to enjoy and then headed on her way again.

Three hours into her journey, Cali grew tired of her surroundings. The bad thing about country roads was the limited scenery. It was beautiful, but she'd like to see more than woods, fields, and an occasional farmhouse. When the sun was high in the sky, her stomach growled for the first time that day. She walked another hour before coming to a junction. The sign promised a small town down the road, a mile away.

Reaching town, Cali surveyed the buildings for a place to eat and didn't find one until she reached Main Street. The family restaurant was busy, so she guessed the food was good. Entering the old building, the customer noise greeted her.

A young, stocky hostess with green eye shadow, fake eyelashes, and bright red lips smiled at

her. “How many?”

“Just me.”

The hostess grabbed a menu and swished her thick thighs. “Follow me.”

Cali followed her to the back of the restaurant, keeping her eyes down. She glanced up once to browse the room to note who was there. Most were older men in Carhartt jackets and hats. A women’s club took up one full corner of the dining room. A few glanced at her when she passed. Otherwise, they stuck to their chatter and food.

The hostess sat her at a small, private table near a window—perfect to see who came in, who drove into the parking lot, and what cars passed by. Cali ordered coffee before she perused the menu to find the hamburgers. When her server, an older woman, who looked like a wallflower compared to the brightly lit hostess, came by with the coffee, Cali ordered a bacon cheeseburger with fries.

Two TVs hung on the walls. The one by the women’s group aired the news and the other, by her corner, had on golf. As she waited for her food, people started to leave the restaurant. A few more tables opened. Cali relaxed and enjoyed her coffee. She needed the caffeine. The background noise—customers, TVs, and the kitchen—were comforts from home.

“Here’s your food,” the server said as she placed the plate in front of her.

“Oh.” Cali jumped, surprised she had zoned-out.

“Tired?”

“Yeah,” she said and straightened in her chair. “I just got off a double shift.”

“Where do you work?”

Dang. She scrambled to think. “McGregor’s.”

The server’s eyes looked up as if trying to place the name.

“It’s a manufacturing plant.”

“Probably why I haven’t heard of it,” she said. “Well, enjoy.”

Cali did. The food was good. The burger was juicy and better than Dempsey’s. The bacon stayed crisp, and the slice of cheddar cheese melted over the sides. After she devoured the hamburger, she started on the French fries. They were thin cut and coated with a crisp batter. Her stomach ballooned from eating too much food.

“Can I get you anything else?” The server swung by again to fill her coffee mug.

“No, thank you.” Cali popped the last of her fries into her mouth. “The food was tasty.”

She chuckled at the empty plate. “You must have been pretty hungry.”

“I was.” Cali handed the server her plate. She sat back in her chair to finish her coffee.

“Police are ...” Cali straightened as she listened to the newscaster on TV. “...still searching for

a person of interest in the shooting death outside the Dempsey Truck Stop in Missouri.”

The last French fry stuck in her throat. She couldn't swallow. Cali scanned the room to see who else watched the news. From what she could tell, only a teenage boy stared at the TV to avoid talking to his parents. His eyes were half-glazed over, not really paying attention.

“The woman, Calista McGraw ...”

Her heart lurched and beat faster. A picture of her, from the diner's cameras, blasted across a portion of the screen along with her description: long blonde hair, hazel/violet eyes, five feet five, and approximately 115 pounds.

“Calista McGraw was last seen on the night of the shooting. Police believe she is traveling to Nashville. If you see the woman, call ...”

Cali dropped her head. She didn't hear the rest of the news as her nerves went haywire. The food churned in her stomach.

Her picture was plastered on TV. How did they know she was heading to Nashville? At least they didn't say Sumner Point. If the police knew, then the detective who asked the motel clerk questions must know as well.

Her server walked by. Cali raised her hand to catch her. “Can I have my bill, please?”

“Sure thing.” The woman continued on her way.

Don't draw any attention.

When the server returned, Cali took the receipt and calculated the tip. She left the tip on the table and then went to pay at the register. Once outside, she headed down the cross street toward the county roads again.

Her nerves twitched like there was a short in an electrical line. She was out there. On TV. All over the place. A frickin' person of interest. The police were searching for her. Now everyone knew her route, including the traffickers.

How was she going to come out of this mess?

Cali groaned in frustration and stomped her feet as she reached a railroad crossing. She needed a train to jump on or to let it hit her and put her out of misery. No one needed to look for her.

She decided to walk the tracks. No police car or black sedan could follow her there. As she walked, the tar fumes rose from the wood. The ties were hard to maneuver, so she gave up on matching her steps to each one.

The sky darkened. The clouds drifted close to the ground and threatened rain. Cali wasn't sure where the tracks would lead or if she'd find any shelter besides the woods. When she spotted a winding road beyond the trees, she left the railroad tracks and headed for it. She

stopped to determine which way to walk. If the clouds were heading northeast that meant she had to go left.

After a mile, the pavement ended and left her walking in gravel—not a good sign. She hated to backtrack or hit a dead-end road with the storm approaching. Up ahead, around the bend, she spotted a street sign. Cali picked up her pace when she saw it was another road. Hallelujah. Paved.

The wind gusted and whipped her short, loose hair in every direction. Lightning flashed in the distance when she turned right on the paved road.

A roll of thunder rumbled across the sky as Cali searched for shelter. Open fields lay on both sides of her. Another forest was half a mile ahead and could protect her somewhat. The temperature dropped. Rain smelled heavy in the air. She hoped to find a building, like a barn or a shed.

As she reached the edge of the woods, Cali spotted a bridge before the curve. A river ran under it. She walked faster, hoping the underbelly of the bridge could shelter her. When the first raindrops plopped to the ground, she ran. The clouds unleashed and the rain poured down. Cali crossed the bridge and then jumped over the rail. She slid down the embankment and ducked underneath it.

She screamed. A man stood in front of her.

Chapter 11 – Under the Bridge

Fish listened to the thunder rumble overhead. Another delay in getting to Nashville. On the other hand, he didn't care to travel in the rain. If he got wet, it took days to dry everything. Better to wait out the storm than push through it. He found the perfect spot, under a bridge, to spend the night.

The bank under the bridge was steep, but it gave him plenty of room to shelter from the storm coming. Tomorrow he'd figure out where he was and where to go.

Damn lady. He should never have hitched a ride from her. The middle-aged woman didn't speak fluent English, but he thought she understood when he told her he was headed to Nashville. When she left the highway and drove north, he questioned it. After thirty minutes in the car with her, when she stopped for a stop sign, he jumped out. She then reversed. If he hadn't rolled away, the open door would have hit him. She had yelled at him to get back in, but Fish got up and closed the passenger door. The woman cursed him out, but he should have been the one cursing her out.

Fish rubbed his back where it still hurt from falling out of the car.

The lady drove him north, somewhere near Camden, not east. Now it'd take him even longer to get to Nashville.

Fish settled in and braced his feet against the cement to keep from sliding down the abutment. The sky darkened as if night came early. The rain started with thick, sloppy drops. After a few minutes, it thundered down. The drops stirred the riverbed, and it wasn't long before a strong fish odor permeated the banks. A smell Fish could do without.

A loud clap of thunder cracked through the air. Fish jumped to a standing position. The rain danced wildly across the river. He moved toward the edge of the abutment to monitor the sky.

A large blob flew down the embankment and landed next to him. Fish cried out and stumbled back, thinking it was an animal. An arm flew up. The blob became a woman.

"Whoa." Fish grabbed the slender arm to stop her from sliding on the cement bank into the river.

She leaped back and shrieked, her eyes frightened, panicked.

“It’s okay.” He raised his open hands to show he wasn’t going to hurt her. He backed away to give her space.

The woman repositioned her legs to balance. Her face was gray from the cold. Strands of hair stuck to her face. She was ready to head back up the embankment to escape.

“Wait,” Fish said and held out his hand, palm up. “Stay. It’s safer.”

She wiped the hair away from her eyes. A slight frown creased her brow as she looked at him. Something clicked inside him as well. “Hey, I know you.”

How did he not recognize her right away? Those beautiful eyes and kissable lips.

“It’s me, Fish.” He smiled and tapped his hands against his chest. “I’m the one from the truck stop. The one you gave the food to.”

She tipped her head in recognition but inched toward the edge to run up to the road. “Why are you following me?”

Fish glanced around the abutment. “I was here first. Who’s to say you weren’t following me?”

The woman hesitated. Her cheeks flushed against her pale skin.

“Here,” he said and stepped back. She was too skittish for him to offer a hand and help her. “You’re in the rain. Come over here, by the middle, so you don’t get soaked.”

A loud clap of thunder made her jump again. The wind gusted, causing a wave of rain to blow in under the bridge. As it sprayed her side, she leaped to the middle.

Fish wondered why she was in Tennessee. Earlier, he had scrolled through his phone's browser and seen on the news that the police were searching for her.

To keep her from running, Fish stayed calm. No one would be looking for her under a bridge in the middle of nowhere. He returned to his spot near his bag and sat with his knees up to keep him from sliding down. She continued to stand like a frightened, wet deer.

“Why are you here?” She raised her voice to be heard over the rain.

“I’m headed to Nashville.” He thought Bobby would have told her.

She shook her head and her eyes narrowed, suspicious again.

“Oh.” Fish got it. “After Dempsey, I hitched rides. My last ride, a woman who didn’t speak much English, took me off track. I think she had other plans for me.”

The woman shuddered. He wasn’t sure if it was his last words or if she was super cold.

“There’s plenty of room for the both of us to stay here. Take a load off.” He pointed to the space on both sides of him. “The incline is steep and the cement slippery. I found this spot to be the best for sitting.”

The woman stood for another minute as if contemplating her options. She gave in and sat an

arm's distance to his right. Removing her backpack, she placed it next to her and unzipped the middle compartment. She pulled out a jean jacket and put it on.

"I'm Cali, by the way."

"You cut your hair." He remembered how her hair had been twirled into a thick bun. What a shame that it was shorter, but he guessed why. If he were on the run, he would've shaved his beard. "It looks good."

"Thanks," she said without meaning it.

Fish was floored. What were the odds of them meeting again? They were out in fuckin' nowhere land. It had to be fate. They were meant to be together. She looked like she needed something warm in her belly to calm her down. He pulled out the bottle of peppermint schnapps from his jacket. Untwisting the cap, he offered her a drink.

"No thanks."

The rain came down harder than before. A heavy gust of wind blew the branches on the trees closer to the river. Again, he was thankful for having shelter.

Fish took a swig of the schnapps and then raised the bottle. He said over the rain, "I bought this with the twenty dollars you gave me. My first day purchase. It was part of what you wrote about doing something for myself to make me happy."

She hugged her legs close to her chest as he took another drink. One of her eyebrows rose. "Booze makes you happy?"

"Booze doesn't make me happy, but an occasional warmth in my stomach does, especially a swig after a rough day. I also like how it freshens my breath." He placed the cap back on the bottle.

Cali wrinkled her nose as she played with her shoelace. Fish loved staring at her face. She had a unique look, even in the shadows, that showed her deep eyes and a face that narrowed to a pointed chin. Her face was partially in the dark, but he remembered the faint, tiny freckles that lined her upper cheeks. He thought they were cute.

"Where are you headed?" she asked.

"Nashville. And you?"

"Up near Charlotte." Her lips clamped shut as if her destination slipped out accidentally. She hugged her knees again and shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"I'll be fine."

"If your clothes are wet, and I'm guessing they are, you should change. In Kansas, I was caught in a huge downpour, and it took days to dry my clothes. That wasn't fun." He pulled his

smartphone out of his back pocket and searched for the weather. He opened the app.

“Thunderstorms for the next hour. Rain pretty much through the night.”

She huffed, not pleased at her situation.

“At least we have shelter.” He hoped to make her feel better.

The river churned brown as the current flowed stronger with the additional rain. He looked upstream and wondered if they had to worry about flooding. It was spring, and the rivers in Colorado always had flash flood warnings.

He checked his phone again. One bar and 36 percent battery. He'd have to charge it sometime in the morning.

Cali shuffled her feet for a firmer grip against the cement. She rubbed her legs. “How long do you think it'll take you to reach Nashville?”

Good question. Fish shrugged. “Maybe tomorrow. If I hitch another ride.”

They were silent again as they watched the storm from their shelter. A bright flash of lightning lit the sky. Fish counted to one when a roll of thunder vibrated against the earth. The storm was directly above them.

“What are you going to do when you arrive in Nashville?”

“What?” Fish yelled. The noise was deafening. Who thought rain could be so loud.

She leaned slightly toward him and repeated the question.

He nodded to signal he understood. “Find a job as a musician. Start my career.”

Cali nodded as if she already knew but had tested him to see if he gave the same answer as Bobby. He hoped he passed. Fish continued. “I play guitar, but I sing and write songs too.”

“How cool.”

He wanted to divert the questions from him and learn more about her. Fish smirked. “You know, Bobby's got a huge crush on you.”

“Bobby?” She wrinkled her nose. “He's a friend. I play cribbage with him.”

“Yeah, he told me. Bobby said you're lucky, and you've taken a lot of his money.”

She laughed. “I have. But he's good too.” Cali changed the subject back to him. “Where are you from? Were you in a band?”

“Denver. I was in a band in high school and then I formed one in college. We were an awesome band. We had gigs almost every weekend, but that ended on a sour note.” The words came out bitter, and he didn't mean to sound angry.

“Bad breakup?” She remembered Bobby saying something about it.

“You could say that.” Fish played with his beard. She was clever, getting him to talk about himself again. He didn't like talking about his failed personal life, but he spilled for her. “My ex-

fiancée, Jolene, didn't like me practicing or playing in a band. It took time away from her. She wanted me to work at her father's business. For three years, I was told what to do by her, her parents, and my parents. They hated the band."

"And, since you're here, I assume you quit."

"Unfortunately, yes." His body tensed as the anger rose inside him. "From the day after I graduated from college, I worked full time for her father's CPA firm. I hated every minute of it."

"Sounds like a rough time," Cali said with empathy.

Everything about his ex was wrong for him. He'd gone with the flow for too long, allowing her to manipulate him. Suppress his creativity. And he should have taken the cash out of their joint account before she did.

Fish reached into his jacket pocket and took out the peppermint schnapps again. He opened the top, took a swig, and then swished the alcohol in his mouth before swallowing. He offered her the bottle.

Cali shook her head.

"It'll help you warm up. Take the edge off." He thought about her note and how one of the requests was to help someone out. He wanted to help her.

Fish exhaled a long breath, wanting to release his anger after thinking about his ex. Cali's presence made it easy for him to let it go. He relaxed and thought about the note. Again, touched by her kindness. "You know, I took to heart what you said to me."

Cali was at a loss as to what he meant.

"The note you gave me with the food." She nodded as if to say she got it. "That afternoon, I left the diner and walked into town. I spotted a liquor store and knew that the schnapps would be a treat for myself. I've always liked the fresh burn." He noted half the bottle of booze remained. "The second day, I had to think more about how to improve my situation. That was tough." Fish tapped the bottle against his leg. "I didn't have a job—not reaching Nashville yet—and I couldn't play my guitar on the street for some change. I decided that hitching another ride would take me closer to my destination. Small step, right?"

She agreed.

"On the third day, I helped an old lady fix a flat tire, and she offered me a twenty for my service. I have to say, it was hard not to take it, but I felt good about myself for refusing payment."

Cali smiled. "I'm glad the note helped."

"How about you?"

Fish's question threw her off. Whenever Cali saw someone at the diner who seemed down on his or her luck, she'd write the note and treat them to a slice of pie. That's how she met Bobby. She never thought about applying it to herself.

"Well ...," she said, having to ponder. "For myself, I stayed at a motel to shower and get a good night's sleep."

"And did you?"

"Yes. I loved the hot shower, and I slept like a rock." Cali still couldn't believe she'd slept twenty-one hours. "And to improve my situation ... I guess I'm like you, traveling to my grandma's house. And lastly, doing something for others ... I haven't yet."

"I'd say you have." Fish grinned. A spark played in his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't run after seeing me under the bridge. I'm thankful you stayed. With my journey off course, I'm glad we got to see each other again."

She smiled. Fish offered her the bottle. This time Cali accepted the schnapps and took a swig.

Her eyes popped, surprised by the strong peppermint flavor that burst in her mouth. She expected more of a subtle mint, like a piece of pie or flavored coffee. Boy, was she wrong. Worse, the alcohol burned like fire as it went down her throat.

Cali placed her hand over her mouth and coughed to catch her breath.

"Not used to alcohol?" He seemed surprised.

She shook her head, unable to talk. After she coughed again, she asked, "How did this make you happy?"

"As I said, the booze takes away the edge. Traveling alone is tough."

"Tell me about it," she agreed and tried the schnapps again, taking a smaller drink. This time, prepared for the burst of mint, Cali's mouth tingled. Fish was right. The taste was refreshing, and the alcohol relaxed her. She was freezing from being wet, but it was bearable now.

Cali handed the bottle back to him. She noticed the callouses on his nimble fingers and wanted to smooth her thumb across them. How was it possible to meet again, in the middle of nowhere, miles from Dempsey. Was it fate?

"Fish," she said. "That has to be a nickname."

He let out a small laugh. "Most people don't like my real name."

“Try me.”

“Lucifer.”

Her eyebrows went up as she teased, “Are you the devil in disguise?”

“My parents think so.” He grinned. “When I told my mother that I was going to pursue a career as a musician, she wouldn’t talk to me for a week. And when she did,” he changed his tone into a high-pitched voice to mimic his mother. “That devil music will take you straight to hell.” Fish chuckled, as if remembering, and then shook his head. “She wasn’t happy about me preferring music. She said I would waste a good education.”

“What type of music do you play? Punk? Acid rock?”

Fish rolled his eyes. “Not quite. More Country. Country rock. Blues.”

Cali made a face. “And you’re going to hell for that?”

“I guess. What music do you like to listen to?”

She laughed. “The most music that I’ve listened to lately is customers, kitchen noise, tractors idling, and faint renditions of classic rock through the diner’s speakers. Usually, I’m too busy to pay attention.” Cali waited until a loud clap of thunder rumbled by before she continued.

“Otherwise, I like country, blues, and rock. I guess I’m going to hell too.”

“Welcome to the club,” Fish said.

The rain pelted down in a continual drone, hitting the ground, the rocks, the river. Even though the breeze was cold, their hideout was comfortable. She liked the rain. Storms were different. Living in a trailer wasn’t the best place to wait out a storm, especially during tornado season. She hated when the walls creaked, and the windows rattled. She was always afraid the trailer would lift and spin away with them in it. Cali felt safer under the bridge. Who would have thought she’d spend her birthday in the rain, under a bridge, and with a cool guy.

“Why are you smiling?” Fish broke her thoughts.

Cali shook her head a few times, not feeling the need to share.

“Come on. You can tell me.” He slid his leg over and tapped his boot against the side of her shoe as if to show that he cared.

“All right. It’s my birthday.”

“Today?” His eyes lit. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Well, that’s reason to celebrate.”

Fish twisted to kneel in front of her. He sang a slow rendition of “Happy Birthday.”

Cali loved his deep, soulful voice. When he stared into her eyes, she blushed. At the end of the song, he included a last raspy growl that extended each word.

Cali clapped when he finished. “Thank you.”

“This deserves a toast.” Fish pulled out the schnapps again and raised the bottle. “Here’s to you turning eighteen. May nothing stand in your way. May the angels above guide you. May you be happy.”

This journey was a new start for her. Cali took the schnapps and drank two large gulps. Her eyes watered as she handed it back to him. She let out her breath in a whistle. “Oh my, that burns.”

“It’s better to sip and enjoy.” He winked.

Cali liked Fish. His dark, warm eyes, between dark, thick lashes, hypnotized her. Fish—Lucifer—was a decent person.

Cali woke to the rumble of tires above her head. A small piece of cement tumbled down the abutment and stopped at her hand. She stared at the bridge’s beams. In the corner of one pillar, the cement had crumbled away to expose the rebar.

She blinked a couple of times as a warm breeze blew against the side of her face. Cali turned her head. Fish’s face was right there. They were close enough to kiss. She jerked her head back.

His eyes stayed closed. His breath was even. She didn’t want to wake him, but she wasn’t comfortable being close to him either. After all, he was a stranger. Okay, maybe not a stranger, but someone she had just met. Again.

Fish’s jacket fell from her chest as she rose to a sitting position. Assessing their situation, she realized that she had been curled up next to him. Asleep.

Fish stirred. She scooted over.

“Everything okay?” He raised his head and looked around as if he expected something to be wrong.

Last night, they waited for the storm to die down, they had chatted about favorite bands and musicians. When she yawned, ready to get some sleep, he helped place her backpack in the right position for her head to lie on. The last thing she remembered was him singing to her in a low, soothing voice. She must have fallen asleep.

“How come I have your jacket?”

“You were shivering in your sleep,” he said and moved to sit. “I wanted to make sure you were warm.”

She gave it back to him and immediately felt the chill of the morning. Cali hugged her arms across her stomach as she gazed at the fog that rolled over the river and seeped into the woods.

“It’s freezing cold. You can wear it.” He offered his jacket back to her.

“No,” she refused. “You’re shivering. Besides, I have my hoodie and jean jacket on.”

“Such a hog.”

She laughed.

Fish put his jacket on and pressed the sides together. He smiled. “Ahh, nice and warm.”

“Where’s the sun?” She lowered her head and stretched her neck to look beyond the bridge deck.

“When I looked yesterday, my phone said it should be sunny and warm, like in the seventies.” He dug into his pocket and took out his smartphone.

Cali bit her lip and wished she had a phone. If she could only call her mama ... find out what’s going on. No one would recognize his number. But then, Mama might not pick up because of it.

Fish hit his phone against his leg and checked it again.

“What’s the matter?” She raked her fingers through her hair to comb out the snarls. Automatically she continued down, forgetting she’d cut her hair. So weird.

“My phone’s dead. And now, no service. How about yours?”

She made a face. “I don’t have a phone.”

“What?” He looked at her like she was crazy.

“It broke a few weeks ago. I didn’t have a chance to buy a new one yet.”

“You’re traveling without a phone?” He was about to say something, thought about it, and then let it go. “I’ll charge mine in the next town. We can check the weather later.”

Cali rubbed her neck. She ached from sleeping on cement.

Wait. What did he say?

He looked incredible after a night under a bridge. She wished she did. Part of his long hair had come out of the top ponytail, but it looked stylish. His thick eyebrows had a few hairs that strayed, but that was it. No sleep in his eyes. No splotchy skin. And his beard was perfectly shaped and still tied near the end.

“What?” He caught her staring at him.

“We will check the weather?”

“Yeah,” he said and stood. Fish stretched and his flat, hard stomach peeked out from under his shirt as it rose higher than his pants. Even though muscular, he needed a couple more pounds on his bones. She guessed he was on the lean side due to traveling and having no money for food.

Fish held out his hand for her to take. His warm grasp sent a tingle through her arm as he

pulled her up. Cali stumbled and he placed his other hand on her waist to steady her.

“You all right?”

“Y-yes.” She gathered herself together and let go of his hand.

“It’s steep. Be careful.”

Cali nodded. She wasn’t sure how to handle her new circumstance with Fish. Her focus was to find her grandma’s place. Instead, she was sleeping with someone she barely met, yet she found him interesting and attractive. This wasn’t the time to start a relationship.

Fish flipped his black duffle bag over his shoulder and stepped out from under the bridge. He looked up at the sky. “I’d say the fog will lift soon.”

She pulled on her backpack and joined him. Her stomach growled.

“You hungry?” He grinned but didn’t wait for a response. “I am too.”

Cali wished she had his eyes. His thick black eyelashes highlighted the deep brown in his eyes. The black ring surrounding each iris was noticeable too, giving them more depth.

“All right,” she caved. Spending part of the morning with a hot guy wasn’t the worst thing in the world. Besides, they both needed to eat. “I guess I need to go east for a bit before heading north.”

“Good. It’s a deal. We’ll walk together until you head north and I continue east.”

That wasn’t what she said. She was about to correct him, saying she only agreed to breakfast, but she stopped when he smiled. How could she refuse? It’d be nice to have a travel companion to pass the time.

She climbed the embankment first. A rock loosened from under her foot and she slipped. Fish’s hand pressed against the back of her upper thigh to keep her from falling. She leaned forward for balance. Now his face was inches from her crotch.

Chapter 12 – Time on the Road

Cali scrambled the rest of the way up the embankment. She whipped out the map from her backpack to hide her red face. How embarrassing. His face was next to her butt. Her cheeks burned. Too personal. Way too personal.

“This way.” Fish pointed in the direction she had been traveling. He didn’t seem as bothered as she was about being so close.

When he started walking, she had to sprint to catch up. He walked fast. When she joined him, he asked, “You said your destination is Charlotte, right?”

“Near there.” She felt safe telling him. “Somewhere near Sumner Point.”

“What’s there?”

“Why?” She glanced at him.

He shrugged. “I thought you could come to Nashville with me.”

“I have to find my grandma.”

“I guess that’s important,” he said and tried to hide his disappointment.

“I haven’t seen her since I was a toddler.”

“That’s a long time.” He paused as if thinking about what she had said earlier. “Do you know where she lives?”

“I don’t. Mama thought I should be able to find her though.” Cali changed the subject to him. “Do you know what part of Nashville you're going to?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. I’ve never been there, so I’m not sure where to go or the best place to take roots.”

Cali tried to remember past conversations with truckers and if she’d heard anything about Nashville. None came to mind. “I wish I could help. I’ve never been there either. Or anywhere really.”

They never travelled. No family vacations, weekend jaunts, visits to relatives. Once she’d been to Branson. That’s it. She never had the urge to travel the world, fly to exotic places, but she would like to tour the other states.

“Umm,” he said after they walked for a time in silence.

“What?” She was curious.

“We’re kind of on the same type of journey. We’re heading to places we’ve never been.” He hitched his bag over his shoulder after he carried it like a football. “What if you can’t find your grandma?”

“I will,” she said matter-of-factly. She had too. “Gran needs to help me.”

“Help you what?”

Dang. It slipped out. She didn’t want him to know she was a fugitive. Cali chose her next words with care. “I need to start over. Get me on the right track again.”

Fish nodded. “Same here.”

His expression changed from sad to angry as a flicker of pain crossed through his eyes. Cali felt for him. “She really hurt you. Didn't she?”

“What do you mean?” He snapped as if he’d been caught showing his emotions.

“I see it in your eyes. You’re not over her yet.”

“Trust me,” he said with a snort. “I am totally over her.”

“Okay.” Her hands rose to signal a truce. Obviously it was a sore subject. She dropped the subject. Tit for tat. She couldn’t expect him to tell her about his past when she wasn’t willing to offer hers.

They walked another half mile and entered a curvy section in the road, thick with pine trees. Cali’s hips hurt. Sleeping on cement last night had its repercussions.

Fish kicked a piece of metal off the tar.

“I was a fool,” he said, deep in thought. “I totally went against what I wanted. When I met her—Jolene—I fell head over heels for her. She loved my music. Like I said under the bridge, she liked going to the bars to watch me play. I don’t know what changed. When we were engaged, she always kept us busy with commitments we had to go to. And then we moved in together. With rent, which we struggled to afford, I needed a steady, fulltime job. Hence, the reason I was hired by her father. During tax season we were swamped, and I had to work like eighty-hour weeks. I finally had to quit the band. I’m pissed that I let myself get swallowed into a life that I never wanted. I made everyone else happy but me.”

Cali asked, “What did you go to school for?”

“Business with a minor in finance. My folks insisted that I earn a degree. I figured that if I became rich and famous, I’d know how to handle my money.”

“Well, it looks like you’re doing a fantastic job of it,” she teased and flicked a wicked smile at him.

Fish laughed.

“So, tell me about her. Jolene.”

“Are you sure you want to know? The woman was a trip.”

“I’ve got time to listen.” Cali glanced ahead. From the top of the hill where she stood to the horizon, they had a long walk. “Besides, it’ll be healthier for you to talk about it instead of having it eat you raw.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She made a face. He should know. “Let it go.”

“Okay. Okay.” Fish cleared his throat. “Like I said, she was a trip. It wasn’t until after I left her that I realized what I had gotten myself into. Jolene managed to twist me into something she wanted me to be, which included being able to afford the rich life she felt she deserved.”

“She was from money?”

“We both had rich parents.”

Cali raised her eyes in surprise. He didn’t act like the kids she knew from school who had money.

“Anyway, I hated sitting at a desk punching numbers all day. I wanted to play music. Anytime I mentioned joining the band again, Jolene threw a fit. She must have known that I was ready to bail on work, the wedding, and her. Six months before the wedding, I told her that we needed to step back and postpone it.” He shook his head and tsked. “So much drama. The crying. The screaming.” His jaw tightened. “Not even a week after I said it, she dumped me for another guy from the country club. The next day, her dad fired me. I had no job. My parents were pissed. I was a disgrace to the family. That was another entire set of screaming and yelling.”

“Ouch.” Cali winced. He did have a story. She giggled. “I can’t picture you behind a desk in a white shirt and tie.”

“I looked ridiculous,” he said.

“What pushed your button? The point you realized it was over?”

“The wedding.” Fish stared straight ahead as they walked. “She expected to have this huge, expensive fairytale wedding. I wanted something simple up in the mountains. When I found out she had placed a \$20,000 down payment on a dress, I knew I couldn’t afford her for the rest of my life. Not to mention, what she wanted in life wasn’t what I wanted.”

“Twenty thousand dollars on a dress?” Cali’s eyes widened. “I can’t even imagine ...”

She knew some people were rich and spent money on pretty, lavish things, but to her it was a waste. Maybe she’d feel differently if she had money, but she was doubtful.

“Totally ridiculous, right?” Fish shook his head.

“I’d say.”

“So, here I am now. Starting over.”

“Why not stay in Denver and rejoin your band?”

Fish thought about it for a moment and then responded. “If I begged for them to take me back, they would have. But I only wanted to get the hell out of town. I needed out. I believe things happen for a reason, and I was meant to leave Denver. To start over.”

Cali wondered if she was meant to leave Dempsey. A twist of fate. However, murdering a man wasn’t the best way to start over.

As she focused on the uneven road, Fish hummed a tune. He mumbled for a bit as if to get the lyrics right. Ready, he sang with a country twang.

*When the sun comes out, after a night of rain
I leave my past, a life of pain
For an adventure that awaits
I’ll build from fate
I walk with you, a purpose in mind
Let’s enjoy together, keep in time
To the rhythm of us
Where there is no fuss.*

He had a beautiful voice. Cali liked the song but didn’t recognize it. She imagined him singing in front of an audience with guitar in hand. “Who sang that song?”

“I did. Just now.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know that. Who originally wrote—sang—it?”

“Me.”

“You? You wrote it?”

“Just now. Songs will pop into my head.” He stopped and dropped his bag. “I have to write it down.”

Cali waited as he scribbled the words he just sang into his notebook. She smiled. He had paper in his bag like she did in her backpack.

“I’ll have to fine-tune it, of course.”

“I liked it as is.”

She lifted her face to the sun. “I wish I had talent.”

He put his notebook and pen into the bag, zipped it, and then tucked it under his arm again like a football.

“I’m sure you do,” he said when they continued walking. “Tap into your creativity and you’ll find it.”

Every step, every mile walked, Fish realized how much he liked Cali. Her beauty mesmerized him. He loved how her hair blew in the soft breeze. How the violet specks in her eyes lightened in the sun. How her body moved with a clunky grace because she’d travelled a lot on foot in the last few days—just like him.

Fish also liked her simplistic views, caring about money but not to excess. She wasn’t like Jolene, who spent money like crazy. Cali understood the value of a dollar. She was funny. Silly. Mysterious. However, he noticed she tensed every time a car appeared on the road. Her feet twitched as if she wanted to run but forced herself not to. He wasn’t 100 percent sure, but he guessed she had the gun and shot the men on the night at the truck stop.

They stopped in Camden to eat breakfast at a small café. Fish searched and found a booth that had a plug-in underneath the table to charge his phone. As they waited for their food, he checked Google to discover where to head next. First to Waverly. They’d go separate ways—her north and him east toward Dickson. He didn’t want to leave her. The more time he spent with her, the more time he wanted with her.

“Hey,” he said, spotting Eva Beach on the map. “How’d you like to take a little detour?”

“What do you mean by a detour?” She eyed him as if unsure she liked the idea.

“According to this,” he referred to his phone, “we’re not too far from a beach. We can sit in the sun, take a breather from walking. You up for it?”

She thought about it but then shook her head like it was a bad idea. He had to think fast.

“We can soak our feet in the water. I don’t know about you, but my feet hurt.” She raised her eyes as if interested but not convinced. He amped his game. “We can rest, stretch out, dry out. Regroup, repack, recharge.”

“I really ...”

He melted into his pity look, giving her his best sad puppy eyes, and batted his lashes.

Cali tried not to break but the edges of her lips cracked into a smile.

“Agh. Okay.” She rolled her eyes. “But only for an hour.”

“Yessss.” Fish pumped his fist in victory as their food arrived.

They ate oatmeal, bacon, and toast. Cali insisted on paying.

Fish hated himself. He should pay for both meals, but he doubted he had enough money. He

swallowed his pride, vowing to make it up to her later.

“Bathroom time,” she told him after she paid the bill and placed a tip on the table.

“Same here.” Fish gulped down the last of his coffee. “I’ll meet you outside.”

After doing his business, he exited the café and waited underneath a large maple tree, out of the sun. Fish checked his phone for missed calls—one from his mom and three scams. Nothing in email that warranted attention. He glanced up on occasion to look for Cali. She was taking her time.

A truck honked. A gold Nova stopped, breaking hard. The man almost ran through a four-way stop. He waved as if to apologize to the truck before continuing through the intersection.

Fish always wanted a Nova. They were classic cars back in their day. The gold one in front of him had rust along the passenger door and on the back bumper—an easy fix. He’d want a black one. Or maybe red. He tapped his thigh.

Why is she taking so long?

It didn’t matter. They would spend time at the beach, which gave him more time with her. He guessed he had tonight and most of the day tomorrow.

When Cali finally came out of the café, she had changed into shorts. He liked how the fringed hem lined her thighs and wove in close to her crotch.

“I got us each a muffin to go.”

For the first time, he noticed the white bakery bag in her hand. “Cool.” Breakfast was good but not enough to make him full.

She pulled out a large blueberry muffin with the crumbles on top and handed it to him. She pulled out a second one for herself. They ate as they left Camden and headed for Eva Beach.

At the beach, they found a private area to the side where they could sit on the grass instead of the sand. Three young kids played on the water’s edge, filling their buckets with water and sand to make a castle. Their mothers kept tabs on them from beach chairs as they talked to each other.

Fish removed his boots and socks to give his feet much needed freedom. He pulled up his jeans over his knees to expose his legs to the sun. He should’ve changed into his kilt. Gone commando and really aired out.

Cali laughed when she sat next to him. He glanced over. She’d been watching him. “What?”

“For traveling across the states, your legs are pale as mashed potatoes.”

He twisted to check out his legs. They were hairy and white. “These beauties? I’ve never been compared to mashed potatoes before.”

“I would’ve said pale as a ghost, but I don’t believe ghosts have legs,” she said with a giggle.

She lay down and stretched out, using her backpack as a makeshift pillow, as she closed her eyes. Fish did the same. He listened to the kids argue about how to build a moat around their castle. Shortly after, a group of loud younger men walked through the park. He opened one eye to make sure they kept their distance. One of the guys had a football, and they were ready to play in an open space away from the beach. No threat.

Fish flipped to his side to face Cali. It was sacrilegious to ignore someone as beautiful as she was when their time together was limited. “You feel good?”

“Right now, yeah.” Her eyes stayed closed. “We used to go to the parks when I was young. I loved the beach. We stopped when Mama had to work double shifts, after Pop lost his job.”

“In Denver, we had Cherry Creek Reservoir—a man-made lake that was always crowded.”

He studied her face, the way her nose and cheeks curved together. How her hair fell away from her face. Cali had a slender neck. Kissable, like her full lips. He trailed down to her chest—the first time she hadn’t been buried under layers of clothes. She wore a tan bra underneath a white tank top. His pants tightened.

Fish had to adjust and turn onto his stomach so she wouldn’t see how hard he was from imagining her naked. Through curtained eyes, he continued to ogle her. He was fortunate to have her right there, next to him. For the first time since they’d left the bridge, she seemed relaxed. He didn’t blame her edginess. When he scrolled through his phone before the bridge, she’d been all over the news, especially the day after the shooting. The police wanted her for questioning. In the café, he didn’t dare check his phone too much. He didn’t want to upset her, but he should tell her if she didn’t know.

“Why are you staring at me?”

Fish focused on her again. “How did you know?”

“I feel your eyes on me.”

He smiled. “First, you’re gorgeous. Second, I’m concerned for you.”

Cali lifted to her elbows, surprised. “Concerned?”

“You’ve been in the news. Did you know that?”

She bit her lip. He guessed she did by the way her eyes fluttered open and her face hardened.

He rose to a sitting position. “I’m not one to judge or turn you in, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Cali looked away from him to watch the men play football. He wished she’d trust him. Fish doubted she knew he’d been there and tackled the mean man in the boots after she ran. Should he tell her that he was there?

“Anything I can do to help?”

“I wish, but no.” She said and sat up. She kept her gaze on the ground and tugged on a blade of grass. “What I’ve done isn’t fixable.”

His stomach tightened. He’d help and protect her. “Are you sure? Everything’s fixable.”

She continued to play with the grass, running her fingers through the blades. Her head came up and she stared at him for a few seconds as if wanting to tell him but still hesitant.

“I’m a great listener. No judgment.”

Cali let out a long breath before she confessed. “There were these guys, customers at the diner, who’d been hanging out.” She swallowed hard. “After my shift—that day I saw you—I left the diner to walk home. One of the men waited for me to leave for the night, like he just happened to be there. He blocked my way so I couldn’t get past the tractors. He offered me a job as a manager at one of his bars in New York.”

“Yeah, right.” Fish snorted and tossed a stick he’d been playing with. He knew about human trafficking and how any place along the interstates was a target.

“Hey,” Cali took offense at his comment. “I’m an awesome worker. I could manage a bar.”

Fish held up a hand to show he didn’t mean to offend her. “I have no doubt you’d be great at it. I just know ... men like him. They lure young women, like you, with their promises. They weren’t there to give you a job, you know. They were going to take you.”

“I know.” She clutched her stomach.

He not only saw her shiver, he felt her fear. “Are they still after you? Is that what you’re afraid of?”

“They’ve been following me.”

“Damn.” Fish shifted closer to her. He confessed. “I was there that night.”

“What?”

“I slept in a trailer full of furniture, under a tarp. I woke to gunshots and went to check what the commotion was about. Bobby was on the pavement, struggling to get up.”

A spark of anger flashed in her eyes. “You knew?”

“No,” he said and winced inside. She was mad at him. His words rushed out. “Not totally. One of them went after Bobby, and he didn’t stand a chance, so I tackled the guy. We fought until the older trafficker called out to him. With the police coming, they got the hell out of there.”

She grimaced. “I didn’t see you there.”

“You ran. That’s when I arrived.”

Cali brought her legs up to her chest. Her eyes welled with tears. “Is he okay?”

“Bobby?” Fish shrugged. “I think so. His face was bloody and so was the front of his shirt. He

was hurt but didn't want help, and he was adamant that I got out of there. Bobby didn't want me to get involved. I left."

"He yelled at me to run too." Cali hugged her stomach tighter.

"You had to."

"Bobby," she whispered. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"I'm sorry." Fish placed his hand on her lower back.

She pursed her lips together to keep from crying.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away, under the bridge. You were scared enough, and I didn't want you running again, especially in the storm."

Fish shifted and swung his leg behind her. He hooked her closer to him. He raised his hand to cup Cali's chin, wanting her to look at him. When she did, he said, "You're safe with me. I'll protect you."

With the back of her hand, she wiped her nose and sniffled. He wished he had a tissue for her. Instead, he handed her his tee shirt. She let out a laugh and refused. She leaned over to her backpack and dug out a tissue from the front pocket.

"I mean it, Cali. I know what happened. I can be your witness. I can tell the police that it was self-defense on your part."

She blew her nose. As she wiped it again, she said, "I don't want to go to jail."

"You shouldn't."

"I ran from the crime scene. I killed a man."

Fish sucked in his breath. What he thought was true. "It was self-defense."

"Can you imagine what my grandma will think when I find her?" She shook her head. "I'll be like, 'Hi, Gran. Guess what I did? Oh, by the way, Mama can't stand you, but she said you could help me out. Why, you ask? Because I've got the police, a detective, and traffickers looking for me.'"

Her words triggered his memory. Fish recalled the dudes hanging by the Lincoln Continental and the Cadillac when he sat under the light post. Now he realized who they'd been talking about. Her. Traffickers making a deal.

"Son of a bitch." It blew his mind in many ways, especially because they planned to take her that night. She was the one.

Why didn't he figure that out right away? If his head had been on straight, he might have prevented her from walking into their trap.

Guilt rushed over him. Fish grunted, angry for being so stupid.

"What?"

Fish tightened his jaw. He placed his hand on his forehead. "I overheard the guys who attacked you. They were talking in the parking lot. Before you showed up with food. A Mr. B. came out of the Lincoln and talked to a man who came out of the diner. I believe he said Brice?"

Cali gasped. Her back straightened. "Hank. My boss."

"Well, Mr. B paid your boss money to keep from interfering in their business."

"Interfering?"

"Kidnapping you."

"Why me?" Cali lowered her voice.

"Really?" Fish couldn't believe she had no clue. "You're hot. I'd stare at you all day long, but we know that'd be creepy."

Her face paled.

"What?"

"Creepy. Mr. B. Yellow plastered hair and thin lips?" She looked to him for confirmation, and he nodded. She shuddered. "In the diner, as I worked, he kept staring at me."

"That asshole was—is—bent on taking you." Fish remembered the hard, cold stare Mr. B gave her boss.

"I can't believe it." She wiped her nose again with the tissue. "I fell right into it. The police were always coming in, warning us to look out for traffickers or potential victims already taken and on the move. I wonder if that's what happened to Mandy."

"Mandy?"

"A server who disappeared. The police questioned Hank, my boss, about her, but they kept it low-key."

"Because he was involved." Fish said.

"Argh," Cali groaned and rolled her eyes. "Poor Mandy. We could have saved her."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

He felt bad for Mandy but at least Cali got away. If Bobby hadn't been there to help, Fish might not have seen her again. The thought sent a chill through him. He ran his hand down his face to erase the image. Cali was with him now and that's what mattered.

"Come on," he said and patted her leg as he glanced across the park. The kids continued to play at the beach. The football game was going strong. Even so, the beach lost its appeal. "Let's go and check out the campground. They might have showers."

Like Fish, Cali was ready to leave. Her stomach churned, thinking about what Fish had said. It made sense if Hank was in on it. But really? This was the man who gave Mama cash when her car broke down. The man who bought a freezer full of meat for them when her pop drained every last cent of their grocery money at the casino. How could Hank be involved? He was like an uncle to her. She sat, stunned. Her boss sold her out.

She glanced over at Fish as they left the beach. His mood was somber. She should say goodbye to him now. He didn't need to be in her messed-up life. Instead of being with her and traveling by foot, Fish could hitch a ride to Nashville and get there quicker.

"Come on," he said when she fell behind.

Cali picked up her pace. A shower would feel awesome. Her head itched. She longed to be clean.

The sign on the road pointed to the entrance to Nathan Bedford Forrest State Park. They bypassed the visitor center and followed the signs to the campground. Lucky for them, the park had showers.

"I don't have shampoo or soap." Fish disappeared into the men's room. He came out. "Nothing in there."

"Here." Cali dug into her backpack and found the used bottles of shampoo and conditioner from the hotel. She also found one of the small bars of soap. "You can use these."

"I can't take these," he said when she held them out. "You need them."

"No. You need them."

Fish laughed. "I stink that bad?" He raised his arm, sniffed his pit, and then made a face. "I guess I do."

He took the bottles.

Cali went to the women's side. The motion light turned on when she entered so she should have the place to herself. The air was musty, but the showers were decent. She found the shampoo and conditioner she had grabbed from the maid's cart and took a quick shower, not wanting Fish to wait too long. With no towel, she used the hand dryers to dry herself enough to put on her clothes over a damp body—better than a wet one.

Fish wasn't out yet from his shower, so she sat on top of the picnic table to finish drying in the sun. The breeze helped as she brushed her hair to get the tangles out. Cali missed her long hair, but she liked how the shorter style bounced up into waves. When finished, she leaned back on the tabletop and rested on her elbows.

Ten minutes went by. Fish still wasn't out.

Cali found the map in her backpack and opened the folds to determine where they were. She

frowned as she followed the line from Eva Beach to Waverly, her next stop. As she suspected, they'd have to backtrack to Camden to cross the river. Ugh. A morning lost.

The shower door slammed. Fish came out bare-chested. The top of his white underwear peeked from his jeans. Cali tried not to stare, but it was hard to avoid his solid, flat muscles. He could be in a commercial; he looked that good.

"You're out already?" Fish set his duffle on the table before shaking out the longer hair on top of his head.

"I've been out for a while." She folded the map and tucked it into her backpack again.

He gathered his hair from front to back and placed it in a ponytail. His sculpted chest and biceps rippled as he worked. Fish wasn't overly muscular, but he was lean and fit, and she wanted to touch him.

"You hungry?"

Cali was about to say she wasn't, but her stomach growled.

"I believe that's a yes." He laughed.

Fish grabbed a blue tee shirt from inside his bag and put it on, giving her one more time to admire his pecs without him noticing. If she didn't need to find her grandma, she'd go to Nashville with him.

He pulled out a twenty from his jean pocket and held it up. "My treat this time."

"Where'd you get the money?" The twenty she gave him with his hamburger had been partially used for the schnapps.

"I found it in the bathroom." Fish tucked it back into his pocket. "I guess it's my lucky day."

Cali doubted if he found the money in the showers, but she wasn't going to press him about it. A hot meal sounded good before nightfall.

They left the park and went to a family restaurant after they crossed the bridge. Cali made sure to keep her food under eight dollars. The special, meatloaf with mashed potatoes and corn was \$7.99. Fish ordered the same, with water for both of them. When the food came, steaming hot, she took a spoonful of potatoes and raised them to eye level. She looked at the potatoes and then down at his covered legs.

"You're mean"—he laughed—"My legs aren't that white."

When they finished, Fish paid with the "found" twenty. As he lifted his duffel bag, the notebook he'd written in earlier slipped out and fell to the floor. Cali picked it up. The pages were full of lyrics. Chords were above the words. On the page that opened, she read:

Life passes by

*Strong as the wind yet frail as a sigh
Woven together yet torn at the sides.*

Impressed, Cali said, "I like it. This verse is good."

Fish peeked over the table to see which one she meant.

"I think it's the start of a hit song." She closed the notebook.

"Really?" He opened his duffel for her to place it inside.

"Yes, I do."

"Thanks for seeing it fall out." He zipped the bag. "I'm glad I didn't lose it."

"That's a lot of songs in there you've written," she said about the filled pages.

"Most are verses, not full songs. I'm writing in it all the time. Some I have completed into songs. I have those in another notebook at the bottom of my duffel."

"Sing me a song," Cali asked as they continued their journey.

"All right." He thought for a minute.

When are you going to come down?

When are you going to land?

I should have stayed on the farm ...

"Hey, I recognize that song." She thought he'd sing one of his own songs.

Fish grinned. He kept singing "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" by Bernie Taupin and Elton John. When he came to the chorus, he pointed to the road ahead of him.

Cali joined him as they belted out more of the song. They forgot a few of the lines, but they mumbled through them.

"You have a sexy, bluesy voice," Fish said. "Maybe you should think about a career in music."

"Me?" Cali made a noise, expressing that he was crazy. Singing wasn't her thing. Her only skill was serving food.

"You'd like it. Become a backup singer."

She laughed. "I don't have a voice like you."

"Nor should you. Everyone is unique." He reached out and weaved his fingers with hers.

"Come to Nashville with me." Fish squeezed her hand.

She relaxed her fingers to pull them away, but he wouldn't let go.

"I can't. Not now." She gave him a set stare to remind him of her situation.

"I'll protect you."

“How can you protect me if you’re building your career? I’d be in your way. Besides, you need to focus on getting a job and finding a place to live.”

Fish moved closer to her. “But I want to do it with you. There’s something about you ... I feel it.”

He stopped walking and pulled her into him, pressing her hips into his. Cali leaned forward and felt his body against hers. Electricity sparked, landing in her belly. Her insides grew hot, wanting him. Everything in her wanted to say yes, she’d go with him, but the words remained trapped inside her.

“Nashville has a ton of jobs. You’d be hired in no time.”

She was a murderer. He didn’t need to be involved or have a girlfriend who was in prison. Besides, there were other things she needed to do first. “The timing isn’t right. I promised my mama that I’d find Gran, and I want to find her. I want to know who she is and if I resemble her.”

They continued to walk in silence.

“How about this,” he said after a minute. “You go to your grandma’s and get to know her, and I’ll go to Nashville and settle in with a job. Once you’re ready, we’ll meet up again. Maybe you can stay in Nashville with me and see if you like it.”

Cali considered it. His plan had potential. He didn’t provide dates, only a promise when they were ready. That might be one year, two years, or five years from now. “I like that idea.”

He stopped and jerked her back. “It’s a deal?”

“It’s a deal.”

Fish’s eyes brightened. He hugged her. “I really feel good about you. Connected. Like we’ve known each other for a long time.”

The way he poured his emotions out made Cali melt, especially because she felt the same way. They had a bond, something deeper. She couldn’t explain it, but the idea of their being together seemed real, like a premonition.

She smelled his musk, wanting more. Cali folded into him and licked her lips. Fish took the cue and leaned his head down to kiss her. Gentle at first as if testing the water. When he kissed her again, she matched his desire.

A car honked as it passed by.

Cali pulled away. She touched her swollen lips with her fingertips, wanting more.

“You want to walk again?”

“No.” She bit her lip and looked toward the woods.

Fish found her hand and led her down the ditch and into the trees. They wove through them,

until they came to a flat spot.

“Is this okay?” Fish tested the patch of grass for softness.

Cali nodded and her breath quickened with anticipation.

Fish dropped his bag to claim their spot. Cali slid her backpack off her shoulders and set it next to his. Her back was hot and damp from carrying the bag. She pulled off her tank top to let her skin breathe.

“Oh, my, my.” Fish groaned as he stared at her cleavage.

Her breasts were ready to burst from the cream-colored bra. Thankfully the bra had lace—one of her fancier ones.

He cupped her sides and then swooped in to cup her breasts. Fish gently pushed them higher as he bent forward to kiss the line between them.

Cali’s skin ignited with fire as his lips found each swell. He unhooked her bra, and she maneuvered her shoulders to shrug it off. The freedom invigorated her. She’d never been naked in the open air. She lifted her head to the sun. Fish leaned in and kissed her neck.

“Now I know why you guys like to go shirtless all the time,” she said. It was freeing. Refreshing.

“You can go shirtless for me anytime,” Fish said in a husky voice.

She needed him naked as well. Cali pulled his tee shirt over his head. He helped her pull it off. His shirt landed in the pile with her tank and bra.

Fish moved close to her. Her breasts compressed against his chest. Her heart pounded in time with his as they kissed again and let their tongues tango together. Cali barely remembered him pulling down her shorts and underwear, only realizing it when she couldn’t move her feet. She kicked them off. He lowered his head and kissed the dark patch between her legs.

The breeze hardened Cali’s nipples, and she placed her fingers over her breasts. Fish moaned. He used one hand to release his jeans. With a few tugs, they were down. She helped him, peeling his underwear away from his hips. His manhood sprang out, ready for action. Her hand automatically grabbed his shaft, and she rubbed her thumb against the tip.

“Oh, God.” Fish jerked as if trying to keep himself in control. He pulled her down to the ground. His breaths came in pants. “Anytime you want me to stop ...”

“Please don’t,” she pleaded.

“You. You are so beautiful,” he whispered as his hands ran down her waist and hips. He stopped to massage her most private area.

Cali raised her hips. She wanted more. Him. Inside her.

Fish spread her legs apart and lifted himself on top of her.

“Are you protected?” he asked.

Birth control. Damn. She stopped taking the pill over a year ago, after she broke up with her boyfriend and figured she had no time to date with working so much.

“No, I’m not. You have a condom?”

She kissed him, not wanting the moment to be ruined.

“I’ll pull out of you, right before I come. You okay with that?”

Unable to speak, Cali nodded. As their hands explored each other, their heat rose to fire. Fish cried out as he came hard, spilling his cum over her hand to her belly. He never made it inside her.

“Lordy have mercy,” he panted and fell to her side.

Cali’s desire throbbed, but he had stopped. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Oh, no,” he said with a moan. “You did everything right.”

They lay in silence. Cali looked at the blue sky, feeling ... lost?

“I’m sorry,” he apologized as he caught his breath. “I couldn’t hold it. Too excited.” He twisted and threw a leg on top of her. “You got me, Cali. You got all of me.”

Maybe it was better this way, she thought. Neither had protection. And if she became pregnant, Mama would be furious. She’d rip Fish’s balls off.

“What?” Fish raised his head.

Cali pressed her lips together, realizing she had chuckled aloud.

“Was I bad?” He apologized again.

“You’re fine.” She tugged on his course beard. “You did what you were supposed to do. Pull out.”

Fish ran a finger across her breasts. Her nipples hardened again to his touch, and she shivered in delight. If this was it, before they had to separate, she’d take it. She started to move, a signal for him to get up.

“Not so fast,” he said and flattened his palm against her stomach to keep her down. “Your turn now.”

He used his fingers, the way he’d tickle the keys on a piano, as he teased her into an orgasm. Like him, she came hard. Cali jumped to a sitting position as the powerful wave hit. She pressed her palms into the ground for leverage as the burst of pleasure overtook her.

“You and me,” Fish said, tapping his chest and then hers. “We have something extraordinary.”

Cali purred in agreement. He kissed her nose, her lips, her neck.

“How can I find you?” He inhaled and kept his nose nuzzled into the curve of her neck.

She tilted her head to give his head a hug. “Sumner Point.”

“No address?”

“No address.”

“What’s your grandma’s name?” He lifted his torso and moved down to kiss the top of one breast. He switched to the other.

“I don’t know.”

Fish stopped. “You don’t know your grandma’s name?”

“I don’t.” Cali never heard Mama call Gran by any other name.

He opened his mouth as if perplexed but closed it again.

She thought she better explain since it was unusual. “My mama and grandma had a fight. They haven’t seen or talked to each other in fifteen years.”

“No shit?” He leaned back on his knees.

Cali rose to a sitting position. “What I do know is that she’s called the Orb Lady.”

Fish raised an eyebrow as if unsure how to take what she said.

“Don’t look at me like that.” She grabbed his shirt and threw it at him. “I guess people in town call her by that name.”

“Well, I guess I’ll ask for the Orb Lady.” He pulled on his shirt. “We’ll make it work.”

Fish’s head went up like a dog hearing an intruder.

The rumble of a slow-moving vehicle grew louder from the road.

Cali’s heart skipped a beat. She tried to stand to see the vehicle. Fish held her back.

“It’s got to be them,” she said. “How would they know I’m here?”

“They don’t,” Fish whispered.

On his knees, he searched for his underwear and pants. He found her clothes and tossed them to her before finding his. The car passed them. In short, quick swoops, Cali slid her underwear and shorts on. She strapped her bra on, then pulled her tank top on over it. Fish had finished dressing as well.

In a lowered voice he said, “Let’s give them a bit of time to drive ahead before we leave.”

The car’s brakes squeaked to a stop. Something in the engine clunked. It went into reverse.

“Shit,” Fish cursed. They were coming back.

As he stretched his neck to see high enough to monitor the road, Cali stayed hunched to the ground. She wanted to run. Her nerves were getting the better of her. She grabbed her backpack and looped her arms through the straps. Next, she took her socks and slid them on her feet.

Fish’s eyebrows creased together as he looked at her, confused.

“What’s the matter?” Cali hurried to put on her tennis shoes and tie them.

“It’s not the black sedan. I’ve seen the vehicle before, but I can’t remember where.”

She ignored his hand signal to stay down and peeked over the bush. A gold Nova idled on the side of the road. The car from the motel. The same guy got out and walked around the car. He examined the dirt and grass at the side of the road where Fish and she shared their first kiss.

Cali tapped Fish on the leg. In a whisper she said, “I saw him at the motel where I stayed.”

“He stayed there too?”

“No, he questioned the clerk, if he’d seen me.” She silently thanked the man for not ratting on her. The twenty-dollar tip was worth it. “The clerk kept his mouth shut.”

But she hadn’t been careful if he found her so quickly.

Fish tapped the edge of his pants near the hip. He mouthed, “Badge.”

She looked again. The shiny metal piece, hooked to his belt, flashed from the sun’s reflection.

The man proved to be smart, having stayed on her trail. Cali had to get ahead of him. Find her grandma before he found her.

Fish continued to watch him. He kept his hand on her thigh.

What the hell was she doing dragging Fish into her mess? She kept telling herself to let him go. It was time.

Another car passed at full speed and honked as if angry at the detective for parking on the side of the road. Soon after, the man got back into his car. The Nova clunked as it shifted into drive.

Cali let go of her breath. He was leaving.

She tapped Fish on the shoulder until he looked at her. She pressed her fingers to her lips, kissed them, and then pressed them to his lips.

His eyes saddened as if knowing what she was about to do.

Before the man decided to come back, she ran deeper into the woods.

Chapter 13 – Enough is Enough

Brigitta jumped when her smartphone vibrated. The damn thing hadn't stopped ringing since the night of the shooting. Reporters, police, cousins, and friends—including those whom she hadn't seen in years—all wanted to know what happened. Now, she only answered to the police and Abby.

As her phone continued to buzz, she left it on the table and went to the kitchen. She poured another cup of coffee to keep up her energy. The last few nights had been terrible. Four hours of sleep at the max. Her stomach hurt like tenderized meat. She had no desire to eat. And after continually biting her nails, they were down to nubs. She was a wreck, to say the least.

Her phone beeped. A new message. Someone from the local news asked her to call them. They were willing to put her on the air to plead for her daughter to contact the police. They would interview her and do whatever she needed them to do.

“Fuckin’ reporters,” she muttered. They didn’t care about her daughter. They only wanted to be the first ones to get her on the air to help them boost their ratings.

Her phone vibrated again. This time Abby’s name came up.

“Hi, Abby,” she said and listened to how strained she sounded.

“How are you today?” Without waiting for an answer, her friend continued. “It’s been hell over here. Police are hanging out. Not many customers. Only truckers and a few curious stragglers.”

Brigitta let her friend ramble on. Abby’s voice cracked on every other sentence. She also cleared her throat a lot as if nervous and stressed. Welcome to the club, Brigitta thought.

“And the trucker who was there, in the fight ...” Again, Brigitta paid attention to her friend. “He’s out of the hospital. Broken nose. Ribs. Bruised spleen. Or I think it was the spleen.”

Bobby was a respectable guy. He had a crush on Cali, but he always kept his distance knowing mama bear was nearby, after she had found them in his tractor playing cribbage. In hindsight, she realized nothing was going on, but her daughter should never have been in there in the first place. It gave the wrong impression, and she had worked hard at keeping Cali away

from the assholes. Until now.

One time. She wasn't there. One time. The traffickers almost got her.

Brigitta prayed that they hadn't found her. Cali was smart. She'd find her grandma. Hopefully on her birthday so that she wouldn't have to spend it alone. Eighteen. The first one Brigitta couldn't celebrate with her. It was damn wrong.

Abby continued. "Hank's been in his office a lot with the door closed. Sounds like he's been shredding papers."

"Really?" Brigitta sipped coffee to clear her throat. "Do you think he's been straight on his finances?"

"Probably not. Hank looks like shit. You talk about bags under the eyes. He has enormous ones."

Brigitta didn't care about her ex-boss. He laid her off.

The door to the bedroom opened. Kyle was finally up. She glanced at the clock on the stove. Almost noon.

"Abby, let me call you back." Brigitta didn't want to be on the phone when he came out. Last time, he ripped the phone from her hand and yelled at the person on the other end to mind their own goddamn business. It had been the officer assigned to the case.

She slid the phone into her back jeans pocket. Kyle shuffled to the bathroom. He left the door open while he used the toilet. His pee hit the bowl like Niagara Falls. At least he hit the toilet. There were nights when he hadn't.

If only she had a cigarette. Her hands shook like an addict needing a fix. This wasn't the time to stop smoking again, but she had no choice. No money to buy them.

"Where's the coffee," Kyle grumbled when he appeared from the hall. He dragged his feet, sloth-like, across the living room carpet to the kitchen. The thin, faded green robe he wore had a tear in the bottom. The thing should have been thrown out years ago. He didn't bother tying the sides together. His bloated belly and boxer shorts, with a wet spot near the end of his covered penis, was in full view.

When did he become an old, lazy man? Kyle used to be energetic and fun. Now his face sagged like a bulldog's. His eyes were bloodshot, and his skin was pasty white. If he was home, his preferred entertainment was TV and booze.

"Any news?" Kyle yawned as he passed her. He'd been drinking again last night. He reeked of stale smoke and cheap booze.

"No," she answered and sipped her coffee. "I talked to Officer Ben. He asked me questions about Mandy, but nothing about Cali."

“Mandy?” Kyle cleared his throat, then spit in the sink. “Who in the hell is she?”

“The server who disappeared a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, that one.” He poured his coffee, spilling part of it on the counter. He tasted it and coughed. After another sip, he made a sour face. “Is this a new batch? Tastes bitter.”

“Coffee’s fine.” The beans she roasted a week ago had been her best batch. She hit the mark when taking the beans out of the roaster for the utmost medium flavor.

After another sip he asked, “Did this cop of yours tell you that Cali’s fingerprints were all over the gun?”

Brigitta stiffened. “What?”

Kyle walked to the refrigerator, stopped, and looked at her smugly.

“Something you don’t know?” He laughed as if it was funny that he knew something she didn’t. “Good ol’ Cali forgot to wipe the gun clean. Her fingerprints are all over the weapon that shot both men. No wonder she ran.”

Her heartbeat rose a notch. Officer Ben said nothing about finding the gun. “How do you know?”

“Where’s the cream for the coffee?” Kyle buried his head in the refrigerator.

“We’re out.”

Brigitta rose from the chair to pace. The air in the trailer was cold and damp. She grabbed her pink shawl from the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders. Again, she asked, “how do you know?”

“Didn’t you go to the store?” He pulled out the jelly from the door shelf. When he set it on the counter, he searched the counter. “Where’s the bread?”

“We’re out,” she snapped. How could he think about bread? Why in the hell wasn’t he worried about Cali?

“You didn’t go to the store?”

She fumed. “Did you?”

“It’s your job.” He cocked his head, ready for an argument. His bloodshot eyes sparked with anger. “Speaking of jobs, shouldn’t you be back at the diner? Ain’t they short of help now with Cali gone?”

Brigitta blinked hard as she stared at him. If he turned into ice, she’d shatter him into a million pieces. What happened to him? Where did the bright, responsible, funny man go?

He had changed. She had changed.

Keeping her cool, she asked for the last time. “How do you know Cali’s fingerprints were on the gun?”

“The bartender at Joe’s. He’s friends with one of the cops.”

She pressed her lips together to keep from blurting out that it was in self-defense. If she had said it, he’d know she held something from him. Things he’d love to tell his friends and bartender.

Brigitta lowered her head into her hands and rubbed her face. She needed to be with her daughter.

Chapter 14 – The Last Stretch

Cali's heart pounded. Sweat dripped down her face and back as she jogged the curved country roads. Her only goal was to reach Sumner Point. Ten more miles. Just move. Let the legs burn. Keep breathing steadily. Stay in the zone.

Traveling through Tennessee had taken longer than she expected. The ride from Jose helped. He saved her a lot of foot-walking. Southern Pete knocked time off her journey as well, but it wasn't her best decision. If he hadn't insisted on her joining him for dinner, along with other activities, she might have reached the small town sooner. But on the other hand, she wouldn't have met Fish again either.

She smiled as she recalled how Fish's eyes sparkled when they talked. How he played with his beard, smoothing it down. How he laughed at her humor. How he promised to protect her. Cali wouldn't hold him to his promise. He deserved success and a good life without her. In her situation, she'd only bring him down, especially if he had to visit her in jail. Now that they were apart, she realized it was for the best. She'd refuse to see him again.

The thought crushed her. She'd finally met someone who she wanted to be with and felt close to. They had something special, like he had mentioned earlier. She'd never forget his kisses or how hard and smooth his skin felt under her caresses. At least she had met him again. His eyes and smile would stay in her heart.

Once she left Fish, she zigzagged through the woods and different roads until she came to Waverly. On the outskirts of the city, a farmhouse had three bikes, a wagon, and a stroller lined up against a tree near the driveway entrance. She had searched for a sign indicating that they were free. When she didn't find one, she assumed they were and took the adult-sized ten-speed. The bike ride went smoothly until she came to Charlotte. The bike's front tire hit a pothole, and she crashed into the pavement. With the wheel bent beyond repair, Cali found a dumpster, leaned the bike against it, and hoped the garbage man would take it.

As she jogged, Cali's lungs were on fire, and she slowed to a stop. Her shoulders ached from carrying her backpack, and she tried holding it in different positions. The bag felt like it weighed

twenty more pounds than when she had started. Even her feet and legs hurt as if they had been slowed down by the weight.

With the sun below the trees, she would not reach her grandma's tonight. Not in the dark. She sat on a guardrail to get off her feet and rest. She pulled off her backpack and grabbed a bottle of water from the middle compartment. As she drank, she surveyed the countryside. She doubted if there'd be another gas station or store before reaching Sumner Point. A few houses dotted the road, but most were hidden in the woods with long driveways.

Cali listened as the crickets and frogs turned on their singing for the coming night. A motel would be her first choice. A shower. A bed. A warm, snugly, comfortable bed. She closed her eyes as she pictured herself sinking into a mattress and falling into a deep sleep.

A muscle twitched in her back. Cali's head jerked up as she returned to the present. Time to find a place to hide and sleep. She put her backpack on and continued down the road. A mile up, she spotted a driveway with a chain running across the entrance. The ends of the chain were attached to stone posts, and one had a heavy-duty lock to keep strangers out. A good indication no one was home.

Cali walked around one of the posts and followed the gravel driveway as it curved through the pines. She stayed on the side, in the grass, and checked to make sure her footprints didn't show in the dirt. The detective had been thorough when he had examined the area where she and Fish had kissed and left the road. If he was able to find them there, she didn't want to give him any clues to finding her now.

The chimney and roof appeared first between the trees. Cali slowed her approach. No cars were in sight. She continued walking with caution.

The small two-story log cabin, built with gray logs and thick white chinking, had a screened porch in the front. The windows on the side of the place had shutters closed over the panes—another good sign that no one was home. In fact, she gathered it had been abandoned for the winter months. With it being May, the owners might be coming up soon but not yet.

The four stairs up to the porch moaned under her feet. The door opened with a tug. Cali slid in and shut it again. The porch was narrow. A worn, yellow-cushioned wicker chair blocked the front door. To the right of the chair was a matching couch. To the left were a wooden chair and planters filled with dirt and dead flowers. She leaned over the wicker chair and tried the front door. Locked.

No problem. The porch would do.

Cali's nose tickled from the dust that stirred from her being in there, and she felt a sneeze coming on. She hid her lower face into the crook of her arm and suppressed the sneeze. She

poked one of the couch cushions and a puff of dust sprayed the air. She sneezed. On full alert, Cali waited for someone to come out after hearing her.

All was silent.

Since the cabin wasn't visible from the road and no one heard her sneeze, she guessed she was safe. And if someone did arrive by car, she'd hear them unlock the chain, giving her time to escape.

Cali placed her backpack on the floor and sat down on the couch. The cushion crinkled underneath her. She sneezed again. After she blew her nose, she took out a snack-sized bag of trail mix and a bag of chips from her backpack. She ate dinner as night fell.

Wow, it was dark.

A thin layer of clouds moved in and covered the stars. She searched for the moon. No luck. The temperature dropped and the air was chilly. Finished eating, she placed her garbage into her backpack and pulled out her hoodie, jacket, and jeans and put them on.

Cali lay down and closed her eyes.

A branch snapped in the woods.

She popped her head up and scanned around the trees even though it was too dark to see anything. Another branch snapped. Cali listened and watched for movement. If Fish was with her, he'd pass it off as a squirrel. He'd wrap his arm around her and sing or talk to her until she fell asleep.

Damn cop or whoever the hell he is. If he hadn't shown up, she'd have spent one more night with Fish.

To think of something pleasant, she dreamed of them skinny dipping in a lake with the evening sun warming their bare skin.

A loud bang woke Cali. A gun? Her heart rose to her throat. She slid off the couch to the floor. Dust irritated her nose.

Not now. Not now.

The sneeze stopped.

The wind gusted outside and rustled the leaves on the trees.

Another bang. Cali's legs shook.

Thinking straight, she realized it wasn't a gun. It had to be the shutter on the side of the cabin.

There was no way Cali was going to sleep again.

She couldn't wait to find her grandma.

∞ Part Two ∞

The Gift

Chapter 15 – Sumner Point

A sense of pride swept over Cali as she read the Welcome Visitors sign for Sumner Point. The quaint little village had 1,486 residents.

She made it. Seven days of travel that included different countrysides, towns, people, and weather. Best of all, she avoided the detective, the police, and the traffickers. Now if she found her grandma, then life would be good.

The road curved up a hill, and she walked along the sidewalk where three-story Victorian homes became the gateway to Main Street. She marveled at the decorated houses with their colorful gingerbread makeup. She instantly liked the area, warmed by the charm. The downtown area began with an old brick building, a white church with a steeple, and a garden center with flowers, statues, and other lawn ornaments.

As she neared the church, its bells tolled from the steeple. The massive arched doors opened a minute later, and people began to pour out. She wondered if her grandma would be one of them.

A bench in front of the garden center offered a place for her to rest and watch in case any of the women resembled her grandma. She only had the years-ago photo where they posed on the porch of the farmhouse. So far, no one looked familiar. Most of the churchgoers scattered to their cars. Some stopped and turned their heads up at the sky, noting the storm clouds rolling in.

An older woman stood at the end of the church's sidewalk. She leaned against a walker with her back hunched over as she looked up and down the street as if expecting someone. The woman spotted Cali and stared at her. Her eyes squinted and her mouth tightened as if recognizing a stranger in their midst.

Cali doubted the older woman was her grandma. The eyes and face didn't match. Gran had sharp, clear eyes and high cheekbones. When a blue van appeared from around the corner, the old woman waved to the driver. The van parked in front of her, and a bald man popped out of the driver seat. He walked around the vehicle and helped her into the passenger side. Soon they

drove off.

Within half an hour, the churchgoers dissipated. Cali considered how she was going to find her grandma, the Orb Lady. She didn't realize how hard it might be until arriving in the village.

The streets were empty again. Cali spotted a gas station two blocks away and headed over there. She used the bathroom to freshen up and then grabbed something to eat. A decent hot meal really sounded good. Turkey and gravy, mashed potatoes, and corn. Dempsey Diner had the best turkey dinner. Instead, she settled on a sweating hotdog and large coffee with cream.

At the register, a young woman rang up her food. Knowing she had to start somewhere, Cali asked, "You wouldn't happen to know the Orb Lady would you?"

"Orb lady?" The clerk looked at her funny. "No, I can't say I do."

Cali took her change and thanked her. Maybe the woman was too young to know. Outside, an older man pumped gas. He was in a suit so she figured he must have come from church.

When she asked him, he replied, "Sorry, I'm not from around here. I'm only passing through."

She found it odd but didn't say anything. A park was down the side street, off the main road, so she walked the block and a half and then crossed the lawn to the swing set. She placed her coffee cup on the ground and then sat in one of the swings to eat her hot dog. This one was warm, juicy, and tasty. Even the bun was soft and fresh. She should have bought two. Abby from the diner would have yelled at her for eating bad food. Lucky for Cali, she wasn't there.

A little girl with black hair, short pigtails, and almond eyes slid down the yellow slide attached to the colorful playground. Cali hadn't seen her earlier. The girl, about seven years old, ran to the swing next to Cali and grabbed the chains. She plopped her stomach on the leather seat and pushed off with her feet.

"Hi," Cali said and smiled between bites.

"Hi." The girl watched her eat.

Cali glanced around the area, not seeing anyone resembling the girl's parents. A man wearing a wide-brimmed hat walked his dog on the far side of the park, but he was too busy getting the dog to stop sniffing a bush to notice them. Finished with her hotdog, Cali picked up her coffee from the ground. "Where are your parents?"

The girl didn't respond. Instead, she turned around to sit on the swing.

A few people gathered by a sports utility vehicle across the street, but none of them appeared to be looking for a girl. Odd, Cali thought, that someone would let their kid play alone at the park.

"You like to swing?" she asked the girl between sips of coffee.

“No,” the girl said.

“No?” Cali laughed, not expecting her reply. “I like it.”

The girl jiggled the chains with her hands and kept staring at her. Cali felt uncomfortable but that seemed to be the norm for her. With nothing to lose, she figured why not ask. “You wouldn’t happen to know who the Orb Lady is would you?”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t say if she did or not. The girl kicked her legs, more interested in her black shiny shoes than answering. Cali didn’t expect she’d know. She rose from the swing to find a trash can and throw away her garbage. Staying in the park wasn’t getting her anywhere.

Cali turned to face her. “You have fun swinging. Bye.”

The girl jiggled the chains again and said, “In the forest.”

“What?” Cali stopped.

“The forest.”

She stepped closer to the swing. “Where?”

A woman yelled from a bungalow across the street. The girl jerked her head. She slid off the leather seat.

“Bye.” She sprinted away, leaving her without an answer.

The mother scolded her daughter as she shooed her in the house.

Thick woods surrounded the village. A river threaded along the other side of the park, heading behind the Victorian houses. To a little girl, the forest could be anywhere, including a patch of trees in her backyard. Cali wondered if there was an actual forest. However, the girl knew about the Orb Lady. Others might too. Mama said people would know who she is.

Cali walked across the park, then turned down the street parallel to the church. The man with the dog lingered in front of the laundromat. She approached him with her eyes more on the dog than the owner to make sure the part poodle and something else with long legs wasn’t going to attack her. When the dog spotted her, he barked and wagged his tail. The man gripped the leash tighter. He peeked at her from under his hat with his mouth open like a squirrel.

“Sorry to bother you. But do you know where I can find the Orb Lady?”

The man blinked his eyes a little too heavily. “Can’t say I do.”

Lowering his head again, he placed his attention on his dog and moved along as if to get his pet away from her.

People weren’t talking. Cali felt it.

Moving on, she spotted a one-story apartment building with two older women outside. She headed toward them. The larger, plump woman with deep-set eyes and a tire-sized stomach

rocked in a chair and smoked a cigarette. Her curly gray hair spiked in different directions as if she'd wakened that morning and forgotten to check herself in the mirror. They stopped talking when Cali approached.

"Ex-c-cuse me," Cali said. She felt ridiculous asking. "I was wondering if you could help me."

The woman with a cheap walnut-colored wig asked, "What you lookin' for, child?"

The plump woman grabbed the pack of cigarettes from the small table between them. She held them to her chest as if Cali were going to take them.

"You wouldn't happen to know who the Orb Lady is would you?"

The plump woman with the cigarettes grunted. The wig lady stared at Cali, sizing her up. "Why you need to know her?"

Cali's heart skipped. They knew her, or of her. "I heard she lives here in Sumner Point."

"In this building?" The thin one asked as if Cali was crazy.

"No, in town or around here."

"You got pictures?"

"Pictures?" Cali squirmed, not knowing how to answer. Mama always warned her about giving away any information about herself, but how else was she going to find her grandma? People were closed mouthed in Sumner Point. "I'm related to her."

The plump woman stopped rocking and said to her friend, "Don't they all say that. A relative."

The wig lady gestured for the plump one to give her the cigarette pack. With some reluctance, she did.

Cali tried again. "Do you know who she is? Where she lives?"

The wig lady scrutinized Cali after she lit a cigarette and said to her friend, "Could very well be a relative. Look at those eyes."

"If you don't have business with her, I wouldn't bother finding her." The plump woman pursed her lips together.

"I do." Cali was annoyed at their vagueness. "I need to find her."

"Someone die?"

"Something like that." Cali lowered her eyes. Bad idea to ask them. Maybe another person would be kinder. She started to back away.

The plump one stamped out her cigarette against the table leg. She coughed to clear her lungs. "All right. Don't tell her we sent you."

"I won't." Cali raised her right hand, giving them her word.

The wig lady pointed and said, "You stay on this road here and keep going for about three

miles. You'll turn down the road in front of the old schoolhouse. It only goes to the right. Keep going 'til you find a long driveway on the left side with a rusted mailbox and a jug lying underneath it."

"Three miles?" Cali looked in the direction of where she needed to head. Her feet ached and a sharp pain went through her arches as if yelling at her that they were done walking. Too bad. After what she'd walked in the last seven days, they could handle a few more miles.

"Thank you for your help. I appreciate it." Cali smiled. "Enjoy your day."

"It's going to storm," the plump woman said.

The wig lady agreed as she sniffed the air. "Better git going. It's going to get windy. Nasty one coming in."

They were right. To the west, the sky darkened with low-hanging clouds. Great. More rain. Cali was about to leave but stopped. "If anyone asks, please don't tell them you saw me."

Both women squinted as they stared at her. The plump one asked, "You in trouble?"

Cali didn't want to answer for fear they'd ask more questions, but she needed to get to her grandma's house. "Some men are trying to find me. One in a Nova and the other in a fancy black sedan."

The woman frowned. "Why shouldn't we tell them?"

And there was the next question. She needed to make it the final question. "For the Orb Lady's sake, please keep quiet."

The wind picked up as Cali left town and walked along the country road. Treetops swayed and a few leaves flew in the air, unable to hang on to the tree limbs. She hoped the ominous weather wasn't a warning to stay away. She had no idea how her grandma was going to accept her ... if she did.

Hi, Gran, I'm your long-lost grandchild, Cali.

Hi, Gran, I'm Cali. I'm in trouble. Mama said you could help me.

Hi, Gran, do you remember me? Cali? I need your help.

Cali guessed she had a 50-50 chance her grandma would take her in. She had to be prepared if the door was slammed in her face.

The wind gusted, pushing her along. She started to jog. The old schoolhouse came into view. As she turned right down the last road, the first roll of thunder bowled over her head. Mama told her as a little girl that the noise was angels bowling in heaven. Cali hoped they could wait to strike and let the rain pour down until she got to Gran. When she glanced back, the storm was over the village.

As she continued to jog, the woods became thicker, reminding her of Hansel and Gretel

walking through the forest to the evil witch's house. The driveways were far apart. No rusted mailbox or jug was in sight. Had the old women scammed her?

The smell of rain warned Cali it was coming. She slowed to a walk when she reached a curve in the road. She smelled something else besides rain. Smoke? She sniffed around her. The smell wasn't from a campfire or someone burning. It had fragrance—not flowery. She sniffed again. A familiar scent from her youth. Like a spice. Not a spice.

“Sage,” Cali said aloud when she recognized the scent.

The first drop of rain hit the tip of her nose when she spotted the mailbox and jug underneath it. Another gust blew and carried her with it as she ran the last stretch. She was so close, almost getting to the driveway, before the rain poured down. Turning into the grass driveway with the worn tire lanes, the tall trees provided a canopy to help with the rain, but the wind was still strong. Cali didn't like how the trees groaned. She wanted to turn back to the road, but she forced herself to continue. She concentrated on where to step to avoid the mud and unlevel ground.

Above her, a tree groaned and cracked. She stopped and watched in awe as it fell. A wide bouquet of leaves fell toward her. Cali shrieked as she realized the tree was coming at her. She jumped but it was too late.

Chapter 16 – Nashville

Fish shivered with cold. The sun was out, but the clothes he wore weren't drying fast enough. The storm caught him off guard, leaving him soaked.

Welcome to Nashville.

He limped as he surveyed the streets on the western side of the city. The rundown buildings with bars on the windows had lost hope of a friendlier, safer community. Trash littered the sidewalk and graffiti covered whatever it could. Fish left the neighborhood and headed to the next one—better than the first. He crossed the street to stay in the sun. He stopped to rest and leaned against a tan brick building with a barbershop pole to the right of the glass door. The light on the pole was lit, but the red, white, and blue stripes weren't twirling.

Fish closed his eyes for a second to enjoy the heat. He pondered where to look for a job. Of course, he wanted to visit Music Row and the Bluebird Café in Green Hills, but he'd like to visit there with Cali. Everything he saw, he wanted to share with her.

He already missed being with her. He hated how they parted. How she stared at him with sadness in her eyes in a permanent goodbye. If only he'd said something, signed something ... anything to assure her they would be together again. But he couldn't because Cali was long gone.

Fish vowed he would find her. They would be together again. But first, he needed a job and a place to establish some roots.

Opening his eyes, he took out his phone and scrolled the map to the left, right, up, and down to figure out where to go. He decided somewhere around the Gulch neighborhood might work for him.

The door to the barber shop opened and closed. Fish didn't think much of it until a foot pushed against his leg. He caught himself to avoid falling over.

"Go on. Scram." A man in a white lab coat flung his hand at him.

"Take it easy, man." Fish raised his hand in defense and stood away from the wall.

"You're not hanging in front of my shop, you bum," he growled and shook a finger at him.

"I'm going," Fish said and stepped onto the street. He walked away, glad to be leaving for a

better part of the city.

After bypassing three more neighborhoods, Fish relaxed when he found another part of Nashville with clean sidewalks, quaint stores, and baskets of flowers and ferns hanging from the lampposts. The area had a good vibe, like he should be there. He went inside a corner gas station to buy a bottle of water. A sign inside the door showed the daily specials. Today they offered a free large coffee with any purchase. Fish grinned. He bought two hot dogs—also on sale—and grabbed a coffee. Sweet.

He sat outside at a picnic table next to the gas station. As he ate, he noticed a music store on the other side of a parking lot, one block over and down from the road he was on. How could he resist going into a music store? Wasn't that why he was there? To play music?

After finishing his hotdogs, he walked over to the store. The two-story brick building had three tall, narrow windows with white, scrolled frames on the second floor. The store took up the main level. Above the main entrance was a worn, painted sign reading "Where Music Happens." A clear plastic sheet covered the left window display and also draped part of the sidewalk. The other window was visible with a shiny new drum set, two mega amplifiers, and two Fender guitars on display. Fish itched to play again. He sat down on the bus stop bench to finish his coffee.

An older man with a gray crown for hair came out of the store carrying a ladder. He struggled getting it out the door without hitting the glass door and windowpanes. It was too tall to fit lengthwise. Fish stood to go help, but the man managed to maneuver the ladder out the door without breaking any glass.

He looked to be the owner. He wore a buttoned shirt tucked into trousers—too dressed up for an employee. The man situated the ladder in front of the covered window and then went back into the store. He reappeared a few minutes later with a paint brush, can, and supplies. Now it made sense why the window was covered. Fish guessed the man was going to paint the sign. The owner didn't seem enthusiastic about painting. He adjusted the ladder, stared at the sign, bent down to open the paint, stood back up, stretched, looked at the sign, and then bent down again to stir the paint.

A van pulled into one of the diagonal parking spots in front of the building. Two men got out of the vehicle and maneuvered around the ladder to enter the store. The owner covered the paint can with the lid, placed the paintbrush inside a gallon-sized storage bag, and then went inside.

Ten minutes later, he came back out, behind the customers. One of the men toted a guitar case with a repair tag hanging from the handle. The other held a bag. After they left, the owner uncovered the paint can and brush. He carried both up the ladder and set them on the folding

tray.

Another customer showed up. The owner looked at the sign, the paint, and back at the door. Fish assumed he said a few choice words under his breath as he covered everything again and went back inside the store. If he was the only one working, the sign wasn't going to get painted.

Fish remembered Cali's napkin with her three requests:

Day One: Do something for yourself to make you happy.

Day Two: Do something to improve your situation.

Day Three: Do something for someone else.

Fish couldn't remember what day he should be on, but it didn't matter. He had nothing else to do, and the man might give him a couple of bucks for helping.

With coffee finished, he walked over to the other side of the street. He tossed his cup into the trash before setting his bag in the corner near the ladder. Looking through the window, he checked inside the music store. The man was busy behind the counter. Fish climbed the ladder and uncovered the paint can and brush. He dipped the brush into the white paint and started painting the background, careful not to cover too much of the black-painted letters.

"Hey, what are you doing up there?" The man growled with a thick accent.

Fish jerked, startled by the abrupt voice. He grabbed the ladder with brush in hand. White paint splattered on his arm.

"I'm helping."

"You can't be up there." The man squinted at him with his arms bent into wings.

"You looked like you could use some help."

He harrumphed. "I can't pay you."

"I didn't ask you to."

Another mom and her teenage son walked up the sidewalk toward the store. The teen smiled, showing a mouth full of steel. "Hi, Mr. Yurmac."

"Hello." The man greeted him. He held the door open for them. "Dean's in the back finishing a lesson."

A corvette pulled into the parking spot next to the van. A slim older guy with mirrored glasses and five chains around his neck hopped out.

"Yurmac, my man," he called out. "You got those strings I ordered?"

"You bet, Mr. Hayes."

Fish gripped the ladder. Isaac Hayes? The man resembled him.

“Dig that beard, man,” Mr. Hayes said as he passed Fish. He turned to the owner named Mr. Yurmac. “You finally found someone to paint your sign, I see. It’s about time, man.”

“He’s helping me out for the day,” Mr. Yurmac said, giving in with a slight grunt as he glared at Fish. “Only for the day.”

Fish grinned. The older man was the owner, as he thought.

After painting what he could reach, Fish descended the ladder and moved it. Mr. Hayes walked out. The man wasn’t the iconic musician, and Fish should have remembered that the icon died in 2008. Yet, he had to admit, the thought of meeting some famous people in Nashville was going to be exciting.

“You have a great day, Mr. Hayes,” Fish said.

The man chuckled. “You too, Beardman.”

He took off in his Corvette, letting it roar like a lion as it drove away.

As Fish climbed the ladder, someone inside the store played the drums, stopped, and started again. The sound came from an open window on the side of the building. He guessed it was the boy with braces, having his lesson. The teenager’s timing was off. The beats weren’t consistent.

When the drums silenced, Fish listened for the door to open. When the boy came out of the building with his mom, he called after the teen. “Hey, man.”

The boy shielded his eyes to look up.

Fish climbed down from the ladder with brush in hand. “Practice your beat. You almost have it. I practice as I walk.” He demonstrated by counting his steps. “One, two, three, four ...” He strutted as he walked. “Think of the song “Staying Alive” by the Bee Gees or “Another One Bites the Dust” by Queen. Sing the song in your head and follow the beat with your feet until it comes naturally.”

The teen nodded and smiled. “Thanks. I’ll try it.”

Fish saw Mr. Yurmac standing in the doorway, having heard the conversation. The owner asked, “You play drums?”

“I prefer guitar, but I play both.”

“Come in when you’re done. I’ve a job if you’re interested.”

Fish grinned from ear to ear. Cali’s simple steps worked.

Yep, he had a good feeling about the town.

Chapter 17 – Trouble on the Way

Athena's phone rang on her landline. She left the screened-in porch and went into the living room to answer the phone. Today she already had two calls. One from Earl who called earlier in the morning to let her know a young female stopped him while he pumped gas to ask if he knew the Orb Lady. After she hung up with Earl, Vic called to tell her the same thing.

"Hi, Orb Lady, it's Joyce," the woman said when Athena answered. Her poker buddy and client who lived in the senior living apartments sounded serious. Her friend got to the point. "A young filly is looking for you and claims to be a relative."

Athena nodded slowly, getting the pattern. "Did she ask for me by name or by the Orb Lady?"

"Orb Lady." Joyce paused for a second. "The young filly has your eyes. And she looks like Brigitta, in a way."

Brigitta? Athena's breath hitched. Joyce would know. She babysat Brig on many occasions. "Did you let her know how to find me?"

"Yes. She's on foot."

"Was she alone?"

"As far as I could tell," she said but hesitated.

"What's up?" Athena needed details.

"She acted skittish, like a cat, and didn't want anyone else to know she was here. I think she said something about a gold or black car looking for her."

"Ummm, okay." Either the girl was running away or in trouble. "I'll watch for her. Thanks for the call. And like she said, no one needs to know."

"You have my word."

"Thank you." She hung up. Athena could trust Joyce. Vic and Earl didn't mention the part about the cars. They might not have known.

Athena returned to the front porch and stood near the screen door with her arms crossed. The trees swayed from the wind. Low-hanging clouds crept through the sky like a prelude to a

dark symphony. An omen? She hoped not.

Fifteen years was a long time since she'd seen her daughter or grandchild. Joyce said the girl looked like Brigitta. It had to be Calista. The last time she saw her was through the back window of a truck. The girl had tears streaming down her face, knowing she was moving away.

At the time, Athena had been too stubborn to beg her daughter to stay, not that her plea mattered. Brigitta had been set on leaving. She wanted to be as far away as possible from her evil mother. Kyle, driving the truck, was a surprise. Since Brigitta's husband refused to move, she found a replacement.

Athena walked to the side of the porch and stood near the table by her rocking chair. She grabbed the bottle of Jack and poured the whiskey into a shot glass. She downed the liquid gold and welcomed the burn. It gave her the medicine needed to calm her nerves.

Heading back inside, she found the extra bedding from her bedroom closet and took it upstairs to the loft. Cobwebs hung from the wood ceiling. Dust coated the iron bedframe and the little table and chair next to the small window. The room needed a good cleaning. She set the bedding aside and wiped down what she could before changing the sheets and fluffing the pillows. She covered the bed in a midnight blue quilt.

The loft was stark compared to the bright pinks and yellows that decorated Cali's bedroom as a toddler. No matter what she liked today, the bare room would have to do.

A bolt of lightning flashed, lighting the loft. Goose bumps ran up Athena's arms. Trouble was coming, and the feeling was stronger and darker than her espresso coffee.

The phone rang again. Athena's stomach flipped. She hurried down the narrow stairs to answer it.

"Hi Athena." This time it was Allie, the bartender at Allie's Summit Bar and Grill. "Just to let you know, a man was here asking for you."

Athena frowned at the new twist. "A man?"

"I think he was a detective. Tall, good-looking, hard ass. I'd do him in a second if he didn't look like he could bite my head off."

A loud clap of thunder cut into their conversation. Athena waited until it dissipated before she asked, "Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, he was vague. Kind of standoffish. He asked if any out-of-towners had stopped by, like businessmen who looked out of place."

"Did he drive a gold or black car?"

"I didn't see him pull in or leave."

"Keep me posted, will you?"

“You bet. I’ll ask around.”

Athena gently set the phone back on the cradle. For years she lived a quiet life. People in town looked out for her, as she did for them. She had clients who came for readings. She made her special roast coffee beans and sold them to the general store. She volunteered, and she took care of her property. All this took time to accomplish after her daughter left. As she healed, life returned to a new normal. But deep down, the hurt continued to simmer.

Heading to the kitchen, Athena pulled out four bags of whiskey-infused coffee from the pantry. Next time she was in town, she would pay her friends a visit, giving them each a bag from the batch she made last week. They loved her coffee, and she appreciated their loyalty.

Again, she glanced out the living room windows. No one in the yard or driveway. She continued to check outside—both front and back—for signs of her grandchild, while she cut meat and vegetables for beef stew. It might not be Cali coming to visit, she had to remind herself. But instincts told her it was. She placed the food into a crockpot to cook.

A gust of wind blew the white lace curtains upward from the open windows as if telling her to pay attention. Another roll of thunder warned of the oncoming storm. After she closed the windows, Athena glanced beyond the porch to the driveway and woods. Still no sign of this girl.

What if she missed the road? What if she needed help?

Rain tinged against the metal roof. The storm arrived. Athena went to the back door off the kitchen and grabbed her raincoat and boots. She put them on and headed to the front. Knowing Joyce, the woman would tell the girl to find the mailbox with the jug underneath it—the main driveway. The closer one, in the back, was the one her clients used for their readings. Before heading out, she unhooked the long-barreled .357 Magnum revolver from the wall brackets above the window.

The rain gushed from the sky. Athena pulled up her hood and left the porch. In the woods, a crack split the air as a tree fell, then crashed with a heavy boom. Great. It was the third tree to fall that spring.

Athena walked across the yard, not seeing it yet. As she entered the driveway, she scanned the woods and found it. A huge branch had split from one of the larger oaks on her property. It now blocked the driveway. She couldn’t see past the thick leaves to the other side, and guessed it’d take at least three days to clean up the mess.

She approached the branch to assess the numerous limbs she and Lonnie, who lived in the farmhouse, would have to cut and haul away. As she did, a speck of gray caught her attention. Athena used the gun’s barrel to pull back a limb to step through the leaves. A person moved under a massive branch. She aimed the revolver. “Who’s there?”

“Don’t shoot. Don’t shoot!” a female shrieked.

Athena leaned over a branch and spotted blue denim. A small figure.

“Come out,” she ordered.

“I can’t.”

The person sounded scared. Athena lowered the revolver and pointed it toward the ground. With her free hand, she reached over to pull back a limb. Drops of water splattered across her face from the wet leaves, and she had to blink three times to clear her vision.

The girl twisted around but struggled to free herself from a thicker limb.

“Can you move?” Athena used her back to secure the limb she had been holding and pulled on another one to survey the situation.

The girl tugged on her leg, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Your foot must go below that branch there before you can move it from under the trunk.” She pointed with her gun. “Turn your foot sideways. Toward me. There’s a gap between the trunk and ground where you should be able to pull your leg out.”

After following Athena's instructions, the girl was successful.

“Now twist around and climb over the one near your right leg.”

After the girl crawled over the limb and maneuvered herself away from the branches, Athena met her on the other side of the driveway. A soaked gray hood hid the girl’s face.

Athena aimed the gun at the intruder’s legs. She learned never to trust anyone until she knew them or who they were.

The girl raised her head. Her eyes widened when the revolver’s barrel pointed at her. She shrieked and doubled over. One arm over her chest and the other arm covered her hips to protect herself.

“Please don’t shoot,” she pleaded. “Please. It’s me, Gran. Cali. Your grandchild.”

“Look at me,” Athena raised her voice to be heard over the rain.

The girl straightened to a standing position. She flipped the hood off her head and let the pouring rain beat down on her.

The Pavaloma women had the same eyes, passed down from generation to generation. Even in the rain, the violet specks in her grandchild’s eyes were prominent.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” she said under her breath.

Cali’s eyelids fluttered as she eyed the gun.

Athena lowered the revolver. “You decide, today of all days, to come here to find me?”

“I ... I didn’t have a choice.” The girl moved to the side to steady herself, but her leg buckled. She cried out in pain. She grabbed a tree limb to keep from falling.

“What’s the matter?”

“My ankle.” Cali tried to stand again. She lifted her pantleg. Her ankle swelled against the shoe. Hints of blue and purple speckled her skin.

Athena stepped closer for a quick examination to verify no bones protruded from the ankle or leg.

“You’ll live,” she said and patted her skirt for her phone. She’d left it on the table in the porch. Athena eyed the long driveway—uneven and full of puddles. She wasn’t sure she could help Cali walk without them both falling in the mud. She searched the woods for a makeshift cane and spotted a fallen branch sturdy and straight enough to work. “Wait here.”

Walking sideways down the hill, Athena grabbed the piece of wood. The stick was solid and didn’t break from her weight. Satisfied, she climbed the bank and handed it to Cali. “Here. Use this to help you walk.”

If her grandchild thought she was going to have it easy, coming here to her home, the girl was wrong. Athena tucked the revolver into her skirt pocket—made for carrying a gun—and headed up the driveway. After a few feet, she glanced over her shoulder. The drenched girl hadn’t moved. Mascara ran down her face. Her lips trembled and were blue from the cold.

“Are you going to stay out here in the rain?”

Cali hesitated. The Magnum must have scared her enough to make her wonder whether it was safe.

“I’m not going to shoot you.” Athena continued to walk.

As she reached the curve, she checked on Cali, now following behind her. The girl kept her head down as if trying to avoid the puddles. She used the stick to help her walk. Athena slowed her pace to monitor her grandchild.

Her mind couldn’t get over Cali being physically there. But why? Money issues? Running away from home or getting revenge on her mama? Passing through? And why were the cars following her? Athena needed to know the girl’s motive before she dropped her guard. Fifteen years was a long time. Long enough to make her suspicious.

Athena held the door open for Cali, who struggled as she crossed the lawn. Her grandchild seemed puzzled as she stopped for a moment to view the gray log house, as if trying to place it from many years ago. When she got to the door, the three steps to the porch were tricky for her to master. Athena grabbed her upper arm and helped her into the porch and then inside the front door.

“Sit at the table,” Athena ordered and pointed across the living room to the wooden table in the kitchen before she stepped back on the porch. Cali hobbled over to it with the stick clunking

against the wood floor. Athena removed her own raincoat and boots before entering the cabin. She tossed them on the porch floor to take care of later.

The storm brought in damp, cold air, which didn't help their situation. If her old bones were cold, Athena guessed her grandchild was ten times worse. She went over to the stone fireplace and built a fire.

"I don't remember this place," Cali said between shivers as she sat with her arms wrapped around her stomach.

"You wouldn't." Athena returned to the kitchen. "You remember the farmhouse."

After Brigitta left, she moved out of the farmhouse to the cabin. She liked the simple house. It suited her needs more than living in a three-story house. Instead, she let Lonnie live in the larger house, and he helped maintain her buildings and property.

"Take those wet clothes off," Athena said. She'd have thought her grandchild would have more sense. She went to the bathroom and grabbed two fluffy towels out of the cupboard, then handed them to Cali. Next, she went to her bedroom and found a sweatshirt and pair of sweatpants. Clothes she never wore but always had on hand. They'd be big on Cali, but they were dry and warm.

"You can wear these."

While Cali dried off and changed clothes, Athena rummaged through the closet near the back door. She grabbed an old bucket to use for soaking Cali's ankle. As the bucket filled with water in the kitchen sink, she checked the beef stew. Poking a potato and carrot, she determined it needed a little more time to cook. Bucket done, she filled a kettle with water and placed it on the stove to heat for tea before checking on Cali again. She was dressed and had one of the towels wrapped around her head. Her wet clothes were in a neat pile on the floor.

"How's your ankle?" Athena carried the bucket of water over and set it on the floor next to Cali's feet.

"It hurts." Cali pulled up the sweatpants leg to show her.

Athena lowered onto her knees to examine the ankle. She pressed her fingers against the bruised skin near the top of Cali's foot and below the calve. Her grandchild cried out and jerked her foot away when Athena pressed too hard on one side.

"I'm not feeling any broken bones. Put your foot in the bucket. Let's get the swelling down."

Cali placed her foot in the water and popped it back out. "It's cold."

"The cold will help." Athena went back to the stove. The kettle water was almost boiling. Hot enough. She filled two tea balls with loose tea, grabbed two mugs from the cupboard, set the tea balls inside the mugs, and then filled them with the hot water.

As she waited for the tea to steep, she heard Cali's teeth chatter. The last thing she needed was for her grandchild to get sick. She didn't need her feverish and incoherent.

Athena went to the living room and checked the fire. The logs were in flames. The fan should kick in soon and blow heat into the room. She grabbed a quilted throw off the couch, then headed back to the kitchen. She wrapped the blanket around Cali's shoulders.

A loud crack of thunder snapped the air. Cali jumped and water splashed out of the bucket.

Something bad happened to her grandchild to make her so skittish. Athena let her be for now. Time enough for questions once she finished with her chores. She went to the back entrance to grab two old towels. She placed them on the floor near the bucket to soak up the spill. Spotting Cali's wet clothes, she picked them up and left to set them in the bathroom tub.

The steeped tea was ready when she returned. Athena removed the tea balls, added honey to the tea, and then took both to the table. She gave one to Cali. It was time to find out why the girl came to pay her a visit.

"Did your mama send you here?" Athena sat in the chair next to the pail. She motioned for Cali to take a sip of tea.

She did and kept the mug held tight in her hands. "She did."

"You in trouble?" Her grandchild's high cheekbones resembled Brigitta's and her own. There was no question who she belonged to.

A bolt of lightning flashed outside. This time, her grandchild didn't flinch. It was only the loud crack that rattled her.

Cali stared into the mug. Her chin trembled.

"I'll need to know what we're up against," Athena said. "No matter what it is. You'll have to tell me. Everything. I don't want no surprises."

Athena sat back in her chair to listen. She sipped her tea and waited until Cali was ready to talk. In the living room, the grandfather clock ticked. The fire crackled. The storm outside continued to erupt in lightning and thunder. Her grandchild fidgeted as if she struggled with what to say or how to say it. Athena had time. The cabin was heating up. The tea tasted good, and the stew would be done in the next half hour.

Seeing Cali wipe her nose with her hand, Athena left her chair to grab a box of tissues from the counter. She set it on the table before sitting again. Cali thanked her and pulled out a tissue. She blew her nose.

"I shot someone." Her voice cracked as she said, "Well, I shot two but killed one."

Athena's breath hitched. Not what she expected to be blasted with from her grandchild. She forced herself to stay neutral, not blow up in anger. On the inside, her blood pressure rose. She

expected some type of nasty fight or losing a job ... but killing someone? She coughed to clear her throat. “You better explain, child.”

“He ... he was one of the men who was ... who tried to kidnap me.”

A little better, Athena thought as she took a sip of her tea. Sounded to her like self-defense. Allie had mentioned a detective-type person who had come into the bar and snooped around. Now it made sense.

“I shot another one too. I thought I killed him, but I saw him again later on. I shot him ... in the leg.”

“Again?” Athena struggled to follow her story.

“No. That night.” Cali pulled out another tissue from the box, dipped it in the bucket, and then wiped under her eyes as if knowing she looked like a racoon with dripping mascara.

Athena needed a drink of whiskey. Tea wasn't going to hold her together. She rose from the chair and went to the freezer. She took out the Jack Daniel's No. 7 and grabbed a shot glass.

“Why did they want to kidnap you?” Athena asked as she sat again.

“Trafficking.”

“I'm not familiar with the word. What's trafficking?” Athena didn't watch TV or the news. Lonnie or the gals in town kept her updated on what she needed to know.

“They ...” Cali tried finding the words. “They're bad people who kidnap or entice their victims into coming with them—females and males—to force them into slavery. Mostly for sex. We'd been warned about traffickers by the police. They like to troll places near the interstates because they're easy on and easy off when they kidnap their victims or transfer them out.”

“Oh.” Athena was getting a better picture of her grandchild's situation—a darker situation than she'd imagined. She poured the liquor into the glass and slammed it down in one swallow. “I need a little more background. What got this started?”

“So, a guy I waited on at the diner, I guess he took an interest in me. He kept staring at me while I worked. Real creepy.” She shuddered. “Anyway, I think the three men who came in the next night worked for him. The one I named Eyebrows was waiting for me when I got off work. He hid between the tractors—semi-rigs. He wanted me to come with him to New York and said he'd find me a job as a manager, making more money.”

A scumbag, Athena thought. She already hated him.

“When I told him no, he tried taking me.”

Cali's hands hugged her neck, and her pinkies massaged the bottom of her jaws as if to relieve stress. Her eyes glazed with tears and became unfocused as she replayed the night in her head.

“You need to tell me what happened, Cali,” Athena said, softening her voice to nudge her grandchild to continue.

“It went so fast, Gran.” She shook her head. “First it was only Eyebrows. Then the other two men came out. Weasel, the older one, grabbed me, and I tried to get away. He had a gun hooked to his pants. I pulled it out and shot him in the leg. Eyebrows came after me, so I shot him too.” She hiccupped. “I know he died. Oh, and Bobby tried to help. They beat him up.”

“Who’s Bobby?”

“A trucker. He comes into the diner about once a month. We play cribbage when he stops in.”

Athena wanted to make sure she pieced it together. “So, you work at a diner at a truck stop. Some old guy wanted you and had ... or hired ... the two men to kidnap you.”

“Three men. The third one, Scarface, tried getting me too, but the police were coming. Weasel, I think, told him to stop.” She shuddered again. “He said he’d find me.”

The towel unwound from her head, and Cali grabbed it. Her hair fell in a tangled mess around her face. She attempted to comb it but gave up. Instead, she took her foot out of the bucket and wrapped it in the towel to dry.

“And how’d you get here?”

“Walked mostly. I hitched a ride from two different truckers. I then met up with a guy whom I knew from the diner, and we walked together.” Her eyes lit up. “Fish—his name—was heading to Nashville. I really liked him. A lot. He made the trek easier. But we split when the detective almost found us.”

“Detective?”

“He was really on my tail.”

Athena rubbed her temples. She needed to process what her grandchild was saying. She should focus on the traffickers and the shootings, but she couldn’t help but wonder about Brigitta. The woman kept her grandchild away for fifteen years. Athena searched for them. Lonnie tried more than she had, but they came up with nothing. After two years, she stopped. She’d searched the internet on occasion, but nothing came up.

“You okay, Gran?”

Cali’s question brought her back to the present.

“Where was your mama during all of this?” She kept the bitterness out of her voice, but it was hard to.

“Mama worked at the diner too, but Hank laid her off the day before it happened.”

A coincidence? To Athena, it sounded like the boss was involved. She clicked her tongue, not

liking her grandchild's situation. Or hers.

Chapter 18 – One Last Time

Brigitta paced from the kitchen to the living room and then back as she contemplated what to do. She tried not to hate her boss, now ex-boss. She'd known Hank for years. But if she'd been there, working at the diner, this wouldn't have happened to Cali. Her daughter wouldn't be out there alone with a pack of wolves on her tail. She should be home. Safe. Instead, the shooting was on every news channel. Cali was a person of interest.

The police hoped Cali would turn herself in. Brigitta guessed so they could arrest her. How about Bendwinder? Was he a person of interest? Did he turn himself in for questioning?

According to the web, Bendwinder had been charged three years ago with enticing and sexually exploiting minor girls at his penthouse in Chicago. He was also involved with sex trafficking. However, the judge dismissed the case because the prosecuting attorneys didn't have enough evidence on Bendwinder after their one key victim wound up dead before she could provide a written statement. Suicide. No one else would come forward. From what she read, the guy was evil enough to make his victims too afraid to say anything. And he had the money to hire the best lawyers.

Her smartphone rang, and she checked the screen. Abby's name appeared.

"Hi, Brig," her friend said when she answered. "How's it going today? Any word?"

"None yet." Brigitta returned to the kitchen and lit a cigarette. She bought another pack, vowing again it would be her last. Besides, with the stress, she couldn't quit now.

She spotted the empty bottle of vodka tucked underneath the couch and swore under her breath. It made sense why Kyle had passed out last night on the living room floor. She had dragged him to bed, where he was still passed out.

Abby rattled on about life at the diner. There weren't as many customers coming in. Truckers were going to the next truck stop. Those who came in were the curious ones.

"He's been asking how you're doing," Abby said.

"Who? Hank?" She grabbed the empty bottle from the floor and threw it away in the trash.

"Yes, Hank. He hinted he wants you to come back to work."

Brigitta stopped cleaning up. Hank wanted to rehire her? Her blood boiled. He had the gall to want her back? She took a drag from her cigarette.

The sound of dishes, music piped from the ceiling, and voices played in the background as the two women were silent. Abby asked, "Brig? You there?"

She frowned and started pacing the kitchen again with cigarette in hand. "I am. You said it's been dead there. Why would he want me back?"

"It's been dead, but we've had three girls quit."

"I don't blame them," Brigitta muttered. "Well, I'm not coming back."

"Really?" Abby sounded surprised. "I bet you could wheedle a hefty raise out of him."

"Will it bring my daughter back?"

Her friend was quiet on the other end.

"Sorry. I'm stressed. I have no idea what's going on with Cali. She hasn't tried calling me. She has no phone so I can't call her." Brigitta spoke the truth but also guessed the police might have tapped into her phone, so she had to be careful what she said. Taking a deep breath, she asked, "Have you heard anything?"

"No. Like I said, it's been quiet. I think we've had some detectives and FBI agents show up. We've had some odd customers come in asking questions, being nosy. The truckers don't like being asked questions. If they can't make it to the next truck stop for fuel, they'll come in here, fuel, and then leave again, faster than jack rabbits."

"Word does travel fast," Brigitta said. She wondered if Cali was keeping up with the news. Did she know the police were looking for her?

"What are you going to do, Brig?"

She let out a stream of smoke before answering. "I have no idea, Abby. No idea."

Her original plan was to head to Branson and look for a job. With Cali gone, she didn't dare. She couldn't move away to another city. If Cali came back, she wanted to make sure she was home. And starting a new job would be tough too.

"Keep me posted. I'm sure Cali is fine, Brigs." Abby tried boosting her spirits. "And if you get desperate, you can always come back here."

Poor Abby. Stuck in the middle. They'd been through a lot. Brigitta supported her friend when she went through her divorce, and Abby was there for her when Kyle needed to be bailed out of some bar or jail. They watched their children grow up. They gave each other encouragement, and they worked like a well-oiled machine when it came to running the diner. Maybe one day they could work together again.

Kyle coughed from the bedroom. He was alive.

“I have to go,” she told Abby. Next came his usual hacking as he tried clearing his lungs.

“Yeah, I hear him.”

Brigitta ended the call and slipped the phone into her back pocket. She stamped the burning part of her cigarette, placed it in the ashtray, and went to the kitchen counter to make a fresh pot of coffee. Kyle stumbled to the bathroom. At least this time he closed the door.

She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. What the hell was she going to do? Her husband was a drunk and a loser. She had no job. She couldn't leave Dempsey to find a new job, and her daughter was on the run for killing someone.

“Damn it,” she cursed as she opened her eyes again and stared out the kitchen window. Frustrated, she slapped her hands against the counter.

What happened to her happy, quiet life? She wanted to be safe, loved. She wanted peaceful nights with no stress or ugly nightmares. Was it too much to ask?

Years ago, when she left Sumner Point, her mama had warned her not to leave town. Kyle wouldn't make her happy. She was wrong. They had good years together. Great years. But it fell apart when he lost his job. He turned into a hot mess and found comfort with his buddies at the bar instead of with her. Night after night after night. Because he drank and couldn't hold a job, she had to work long hours at the diner to pay their bills.

None of it mattered anymore. She'd hit bottom.

“What the hell are you doing? Napping?” Kyle snapped at her.

Brigitta jumped. She hadn't heard him leave the bathroom.

“I'm making coffee.” The commercial grade coffee maker gurgled to announce it was almost done. She had an old-fashioned percolator too, but the commercial one was faster.

“Getting lazy, I see.” Kyle shuffled to the refrigerator to find food. He scratched his head as he peered inside. His tee shirt barely covered his bloated belly. His white boxers sagged at the butt.

Yes, so lazy. Brigitta rolled her eyes and relit the cigarette she'd extinguished.

“We still don't have any food?” He cursed. “Didn't you go to the store? I'm in the mood for eggs.”

Brigitta took a drag of her cigarette. She inhaled long and deep.

This was her last chance to make it right. And not with Kyle.

“I'll go to the store once the coffee is done,” she said.

“It's about time.” He slammed the refrigerator door shut so the bottles on the door shelves rattled. “Wake me when you're back.”

Kyle shuffled out of the kitchen and plopped down on the living room couch.

Brigitta steamed as she glared at his back. She was done with him.

The coffee maker let out a hiss to announce the fresh pot of coffee was made. She wouldn't let it go to waste. When he fell back to sleep, she found a thermos, rinsed it out with hot water, and then filled it with coffee. When his snores were loud and rhythmic, she went to their bedroom and pulled out the soft-sided Samsonite luggage and unnested the pieces. Brigitta set the middle one on the bed and packed a few belongings, including a pair of dress pants and a shirt in case she looked for a job.

Kyle choked on a snore from the living room, and she froze. She waited until hearing his rhythmic snores again before she headed to Cali's room. She grabbed a couple of her daughter's favorite shirts and pants and then returned to her bedroom and packed them in her suitcase.

She remembered Cali's money. Earlier, when cleaning her daughter's room to make sure there was no evidence from the night of the shooting, she'd found more cash in a box under her Cali's bed.

Brigitta zipped her suitcase and carried it out to the hall. She went in her daughter's room, retrieved the cash, and then stuffed it into her jean pockets to give to Cali someday.

Someone else owed them money too.

Brigitte didn't bother leaving a note for Kyle. With suitcase in hand, she left the house to find her ex-boss.

Chapter 19 – Gran’s Place

Cali woke with a start. It took a moment to remember she was at Gran’s. The living room was dark except for a soft light from the kitchen. The only noise in the cabin was from the fan above her head as it twirled off-balance. Her gaze followed the ceiling to a railing. This was the first time she noticed the second floor, a loft with narrow stairs.

My backpack.

Panic filled her. She jerked up and swatted around for her backpack, not remembering what happened to it. Her hand hit something on the floor. Looking over the cushion, she found it. Cali sighed in relief and lay her head on the pillow again. Once her heart returned to normal, she snuggled into the heavy quilt and closed her eyes.

I’m safe.

She fell back to sleep, not ready to face the world.

The next time she woke, Cali needed to go to the bathroom. She wanted to stay in her warm cocoon, but her bladder wouldn’t allow it. She drank a lot of tea last night.

After they ate stew, Gran made her lie down on the couch. She gave her a pillow for her head and one for her ankle. Cali didn’t remember anything else. She’d been drained after telling Gran everything. Well, almost everything. The part about her and Fish being naked in the woods was left out.

Cali flinched when she slid her legs out of the quilt. Her ankle hurt like hell, and it was twisted in the sheets. She sat up to untangle her leg and had to reexamine the issue. The sheet was actually four dishtowels wrapped around her foot, ankle, and calf. They were tied around her like a super large bandage. She wasn’t sure how Gran connected the ends. A little overkill, she thought, but the towels were probably better than nothing.

She spotted the stick she used to walk to the cabin leaning against the chair next to the couch. Cali grabbed it to help herself stand.

Cali hobbled toward the bathroom with help from her wooden stick, taking slow steps, feeling off balance. Gran had given her pills to help with the pain. They must have helped her

sleep too because her eyelids were as heavy as lead.

The cute little bathroom was L-shaped with the toilet under the stairs and the sink and shower in the longer section. There wasn't a ton of room, which made it easier to hold the walls to steady herself. When finished, she headed back to the couch and heard noise in the kitchen. Gran was busy making a pot of coffee. She wore a baby blue satin bathrobe with the belt tied around her small waist. Her grandma was physically fit and carried herself well, like a woman who knew how to take care of herself, which Cali admired.

Cali glanced at the time on the microwave. Five-fifteen. No wonder it was still dark out. She turned into the kitchen and sat at the table.

"I'm sorry if I woke you," she said to the backside of her grandma. "You can go back to bed if you want."

"Nonsense. I'm up. You're up." Gran fluffed her shoulder-length hair. With her fingers, she combed her long bangs back and to the side so the wisps of white and smoky gray blended in smooth layers. Gran was pretty.

"Coffee is almost ready," her grandma said as she waited for the percolator to finish.

Cali hoped she took after her grandma when she aged. Gran's skin was smooth with only a few wrinkles around her eyes and neck. Her deep, sharp eyes were similar but lighter than Mama's. More purple in them too. Mama's eyes were dark and sultry, like a French model.

Like Mama's, Gran's eyes also showed she didn't take crap from anyone, including her grandchild. If Cali calculated right, her grandma was now in her early sixties.

"Do you need meds for the pain?"

"Yes, please." In a way, Cali was glad her grandma was to the point. The woman was not the old biddy type who liked to crochet and bake cookies for the church bazaar. Instead, she was someone strong and fascinating to watch.

"Thank you," she said when Gran gave her a glass of water and two white pills. She popped them into her mouth.

The woman turned around and disappeared into her bedroom, leaving Cali alone. She finished the glass of water and decided the chair was too uncomfortable. She hobbled back to the couch, sat down, and then stretched her leg over the cushions.

The grandfather clock ticked louder without the rain thundering against the roof. The logs in the fireplace had burned down to ash. The thick wood mantel had two pillar candles, no pictures. In fact, there were no pictures of family on the living room walls or the tables scattered

about. Odd.

Gran returned from her bedroom. She had changed her clothes and wore a long skirt layered in blues and purples. A wide leather belt cinched the skirt around her waist. She also wore a simple black top and a black sweater. Her grandmother dressed in a boho fashion, very chic-like. Her makeup was black mascara and black eye liner that popped the sharp violet streaks in her eyes.

“Raise your ankle up.” Gran pointed to the decorative pillow in the corner of the couch, suggesting she use it.

Cali did as ordered, while her grandma went to the kitchen to check on the coffee. She wanted to ask why there weren't any family pictures in the living room. Was it because whatever happened between her and Mama was still a sore subject? They had to have other family members as well. First, before she asked, Cali had to figure out if she was welcome to stay or not before causing aggravation.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I am,” she said. Cali thought of a different angle to ask. “Do you live here alone?”

“I do,” she said and poured two coffees. “Your granddad died long ago, before you were born.” She brought out the coffees and set one down on the wooden table in front of the couch. “Did your mama say anything ... tell you about me?”

“No, not really.” Cali wished she could say they had talked about her all the time. How Mama missed her. But it would be a lie.

Disappointment flashed across her grandma's face, but it disappeared quickly. She drank her coffee in silence.

Cali caught the coffee's aroma. She leaned over and grabbed her cup from the table. “The smell reminds me of Mama's coffee.”

“At least that's something.” Gran flicked her eyebrows. “The blend is a special roast, passed down from generations. I'm glad to know your mama is making it. Did she teach you how to roast the beans?”

“Yes and no. We have a small roaster, but nothing like yours.” Cali eyed the three stainless steel roasters on the counter near the refrigerator. “At home I added the beans to the roaster and packaged them when done. Mama always prepared them and listened for the right cracking to know when to take them out.”

“It sounds like you need to learn how to make our special roast.” She raised her cup in a “cheers” salute, then went back into the kitchen.

Cali sipped her coffee as she waited for breakfast. The aromas from the kitchen were like

heaven. She licked her lips when two homemade cinnamon rolls landed on her plate. She set her mug down on the table and took the plate from Gran. Her eyes widened at the delicious spread. Besides the rolls oozing with icing, breakfast included bacon and two thin slices of cantaloupe.

“Wow.” She inhaled deeply. Cali loved the smell of home-cooked food. “It all looks so good.”

Gran pulled out a set of silverware from her skirt pocket and handed the cutlery to her. Cali couldn’t wait to dig in but had a hard time deciding which one to taste first. She went for the roll. Her teeth sank into the dough—soft, gooey, and perfect. She chewed slowly to savor the first bite.

“Would you teach me how to make your rolls too? They are so good.”

She took another bite. To her disappointment, the first roll was already gone; she was hungrier than she thought. Next, Cali ate the bacon and cantaloupe, saving the other roll for last. Gran refilled her coffee.

“Don’t get used to this,” she said.

“I won’t,” Cali responded. “Both Mama and I worked our butts off at the diner. I’m used to serving food, not being the customer.”

Cali’s gaze dropped. She missed her mama, and she worried about her. Did she head to Branson to look for a job? Would they be able to contact each other soon? Somehow?

Gran was busy in the kitchen with the dishes. Cali asked, “Has Mama called you? Does she know I’m here?”

Her grandma placed a dish in the sink and then turned around to face Cali. Her jaw tightened. “Your mama hasn’t called and she probably won’t. And you can’t go calling her from here either. You understand?”

“But wouldn’t it be normal for you to call? Talk to each other?”

She hardened her voice. “We haven’t talked in years. Doing so now would raise suspicion.”

“Oh.” It made sense. Cali should have thought about it more.

“You can’t call your Fish guy either.” She moved away from the sink. She grabbed a slice of bacon from a plate on the counter and pointed it at Cali. “You hear me?”

“Okay.” Cali’s shoulders slumped forward. Gran’s warning reminded her of how terrible her situation was and what she faced with killing a man. She could still see Eyebrows’s eyes—shocked and full of fear. A look she’d never forget. A reminder that she murdered someone.

Cali had to leave. She set her empty plate on the end table and lowered her leg off the couch.

“Child, what are you doing?” Her grandma frowned as she finished eating the slice of bacon.

“I’m sorry, Gran. Maybe it was a bad idea to come here. Mama told me to find you, but now ... now you’re going to be in trouble too.”

“How am I going to be in trouble?” Gran turned in her chair to face her.

“You’re hiding a fugitive.”

“Lie down,” she ordered and flicked her finger as if annoyed. “Don’t you worry about me. Put your foot back up and rest.”

Cali sank back into the couch. She wasn’t going to make her grandma mad.

Athena regarded Cali after she fell asleep on the couch. She felt it best to let her sleep in the living room until her grandchild could handle the loft stairs. Besides, she liked watching her. The child was beautiful, like an angel with a flair for heartbreak and danger. She chuckled silently. The danger definitely came with a bang. Her grandchild was a true Pavaloma woman. Most important, she sensed the child’s gift, like a present waiting to be unwrapped and opened. Something told her Brigitta never spoke to Cali about their gift.

The child had a right to know, but Athena had to be careful how she approached the topic with her. She didn’t need or want another Brigitta who had rejected her gift and made the spirits angry. Now was her chance to fix it and help Cali.

Her brow knitted together as she contemplated her grandchild’s situation. Cali was in a bad predicament. The child killed a man. It wasn’t murder, but it didn’t look good how she ran from the scene. And if a detective was searching for her, he’d be here soon. She guessed the traffickers would too.

The thought of calling Brig was tempting, but she knew it wasn’t smart. Instead, she pulled her smartphone out of her skirt pocket and walked into the bedroom. She called the one man who would do anything to help. Lonnie. Cali’s father.

Chapter 20 – The Reading

The next morning, Cali woke to tapping against the wall. She glanced over her head, curious to find it. The front living room windows were open and the white lace curtains billowed as a warm breeze blew into the cabin. The noise came from the curtain cord hitting the wall. She rose to a sitting position.

Sometime during the night, a lighter blanket had been placed over her, and her ankle had been wrapped in an elastic bandage, replacing the dishcloths. Funny, she didn't remember anyone working on her foot. Removing the blanket, she swung her legs out and placed her feet on the wood floor. She tested her ankle—tender but not bad.

“Gran?” Cali called out but didn't expect an answer. She already sensed she was alone.

All her clothes—jacket, hoodie, shorts, pants, shirts, tanks, underwear, and bra—lay folded on the recliner chair. Next to them were a toothbrush, hairbrush, and deodorant. Cali ran her fingers through her tangled hair. She must look terrible. Her skin had a layer of dried sweat on it. Yuck.

Since the day promised to be sunny and warm, she picked out a tee shirt and shorts to wear. She scooped up the products and tucked them into her clothes to make them easier to carry with one hand. Her other hand held the walking stick. In the bathroom, she found two yellow towels on the counter near the sink.

Cali couldn't wait to shower and feel clean. She stripped out of the sweats and sat on the toilet to unwrap the bandage from her foot and leg. Her ankle throbbed as it became free. The top of her foot and ankle were still swollen and bruised, but she could move her foot around. She put the bandage in the sink.

The shower stall was small and lined with tin or some type of metal, so the water tinkled against the walls, like the cabin roof sounded when it had stormed. She turned up the hot water to enjoy the heat and steam. Halfway through her shower, the water became tepid. Cali raced to finish washing herself before it turned cold.

Dried and clothed, she left the bathroom with the elastic bandage in her hand and sat at the

kitchen table. She wished Gran was there to help wrap her ankle again. Cali should have paid more attention when her grandma unwrapped it yesterday to rub an ointment on her skin. After two attempts, Cali made sure the bandage was tight on the third try and called it good enough.

As she hobbled over to the counter, she spotted a plate of blueberry muffins with pats of butter melted on top. A jar of homemade blueberry jam sat next to it. Yum.

First she needed coffee. The percolator on the stove was warm to the touch but not hot. She lit the burner to heat the coffee. As she waited, a man sneezed from outside. Peeking out the window above the kitchen sink, she investigated. A stone path weaved between the trees from the log cabin to a smaller rustic cabin with an open porch. Interesting how Gran had two cabins.

She caught movement outside toward the left side of the window. Cali stretched over the sink for a better view. A man talked with Gran. He must have been the one who sneezed. They were near a woodshed, and his clothes were covered in sawdust. The man was tall, thin, and with shoulder-length dark blond hair. His face drooped, as if permanently sad. He looked a little familiar, like she should know him but couldn't place him. Gran knew him. They were in an animated discussion. Her grandma's hands flew about, while he paced in front of her.

The hiss from the percolator grew louder. Cali turned off the stove's burner. She poured steaming coffee into a mug and then decided to eat the muffins standing at the counter. She didn't dare try walking to the table with hot coffee.

Finished eating, she set the dirty dishes in the sink. With nothing else to do, she hobbled through the cabin to the front. Cali stepped out to the porch where Gran and the man were in better view. He picked up a chainsaw from the ground and headed down the driveway. She guessed he'd been cutting the downed tree.

Gran's speckled grayish-white hair blew in the breeze, and she pulled a long tress from her face as she walked back to the cabin. Cali opened the porch door for her.

"Athena." The man called out and stopped to catch Athena's attention. He saw Cali at the door.

"Ahh," her grandma said as if unsure what to do with the two seeing each other. She recovered quickly. "Cali, this is Lonnie. He lives in the farmhouse." She turned to the man who continued to stare at Cali. Gran raised her voice so he could hear. "Lonnie, this is my grandchild."

Lonnie looked from Cali to Gran. The man swallowed hard and shifted from one leg to the other as if trying to figure out what to do.

"Nice to meet you," Cali said and smiled to break the awkwardness as he continued to stare at her. She guessed he was around her mama's age. He had lines under his dark, deep-set eyes,

and he had a thin beard that covered the start of a double chin.

“You need something, Lonnie?” Gran asked.

He nodded. “I was going to say ...” He stumbled again. “I’ll—when I’m done, I’ll pile the smaller wood over by the woodshed. The larger chunks I’ll leave by the driveway to take to the lumber mill.”

“Sounds fine to me, Lonnie.” She waved him off. The man was reluctant to leave, as if wanting to say more, but Gran was finished with him. She pointed toward Cali’s chest. “I see you found the muffins.”

“I did.” She glanced down at her shirt and brushed the crumbs off. “They were good. So was the jam.”

“Follow me,” she said. “We got other things to do.”

“Like what?” Cali followed her into the cabin.

“Put your shoes on. We’re going to the shack.”

Cali guessed it was the smaller log cabin in the backyard. She found her shoes next to the couch and took them over to the kitchen table to put on. She struggled to get her injured foot into the shoe but finally managed, keeping the shoestrings loose. When she was ready, they headed out the backdoor.

Gran walked too fast, and Cali tried to keep up. She wished she’d remembered the walking stick to help support her ankle. A crutch would have been better. For each step, a shot of pain ran up her leg. She winced but kept quiet. Somehow she didn’t think Gran would give her any sympathy.

By the time she reached the shack, Gran was already inside tinkering. The width of the porch was half the size of the main cabin and screenless. A small round table and two chairs occupied the right side of the porch. Two additional folding chairs leaned against the wall on the left side. The rooms were sparse. The living room included a wood stove in the corner and an armoire and old cedar trunk against the back wall. Centered in the room was a ten-person oak table used for plants in different stages of being dried. In the back of the shack was the kitchen. Boxes covered the tiled floor. Jars of jam, beans, and other items filled the doorless cupboards. The refrigerator and stove were missing.

Cali had mixed feelings about the place. The air had a dusty, sagey smell that tickled her nose. It wasn’t bad, just different. As she walked around, she tried to determine what bugged her. It seemed more of a feeling than anything else. She caught Gran watching her.

“If you’re going to use your senses,” she said, “you need to let them go to experience it. What’s going on? What are you feeling?”

“I don’t know.” Cali frowned. “From here, I sense calm.” She stepped toward the front window to the right. “And here, mixed emotions.”

“Dig inside yourself a little more.”

She wasn’t sure what Gran meant, but she closed her eyes and raised her hands with palms up. Her arms tingled. She slowly waved them around like she did when relaxing in the bathtub. Warmth blew across her hands, yet her upper arms were chilled.

“I feel night and day. Happiness and sadness.” She tried to explain words that popped into her head. Someone laughed, followed by a sob. Cali let the words tumble out. “Joy yet pain. Things people choose to forget. People wanting to know, needing help, not wanting it to end. People near and far. Loneliness and connection. People waiting to hear yet not wanting to know. Lightness. Darkness. Mystery.”

The buzz from Lonnie’s chainsaw broke the moment. Cali opened her eyes. She let out a breath, not knowing where her thoughts came from.

Her grandmother monitored her with a keen eye. She leaned on the table with an impressed look.

“I have no idea why I blurted out what I did.” Cali’s cheeks heated with embarrassment.

“It came from deep inside you,” her grandma said and pressed a fist against her chest. “Were the vibes in here strong or patchy?”

Cali thought about it. The weight of the air and the emotions came from within her chest. The warmth and chill came to her hands and arms. They were real. “Strong.”

“I thought so too.” A satisfied smile played on her lips. Cali waited for her to explain, but Gran left the table and walked to the armoire. As she opened the doors, an array of fragrances—sweet, spicy, grassy—filled the room. The armoire had eight shelves of dried plants. She picked up a bundle from the third shelf. “And that’s why we need sage.”

“You have a lot of dried plants.”

“I grow most of the plants and dry them in the sun. Besides sage, I have lavender, mint, lemongrass, and others, depending on what decides to grow during the season. I like sage because it purifies the air, which we need to do. I have someone coming in half an hour.”

“Someone is coming here?” Cali didn’t understand.

“A client.” Her grandma pulled a lighter from her skirt pocket and lit the end of the sage until a line of smoke trailed into the air as it burned. She walked across the living room, holding the bundle in her hands and let it sift through the air. She gave it to Cali. “Wave this around in here some more. Do it again on the porch, especially by the table. Don’t let it burn out.”

Gran handed her a long, narrow plate.

“Once you’re done, place the sage on the plate and leave it on the table to burn. I’ll be back.”

Gran left the shack and headed toward the cabin. Cali walked with the sage, hoping she waved it the way Gran wanted her to. The fragrance was the same as she smelled when she first arrived and found the mailbox and jug. She wasn’t sure if her mind played tricks on her or if it did work, but the sage blew away the mixed emotions she had experienced earlier.

Deciding she must be done inside, Cali went to the porch and waved the bundle around, starting with the left side. She crossed the length of the porch and ended at the table, careful to cover the area more heavily than the other spots. The sage continued to burn when she left it on the plate.

With nothing else to do, Cali sat on the porch step to rest her ankle and wait for Gran. She contemplated hobbling up to the cabin but didn’t want to leave the burning sage. The last thing she needed was to set the shack on fire.

The backside of Gran’s house was across the lawn. She liked the gray logs with the white chinking. The black frames on the windows gave it a nice, sharp look. In the middle of the back roof was a dormer with a window. Normally dormers were in the front of a house, making Gran’s cabin different from most. The main level had two windows—the kitchen, and Gran’s bedroom—plus the back door with two steps down to a cement landing. Both cabin and shack fit cozily within the yard full of scattered trees with the woods beyond. Cali felt safe. She was glad to be there, listening to the birds chirp, the squirrels chatter, and Lonnie’s chainsaw cut into the tree.

The back door to the cabin opened and her grandma came out. She had changed into a fitted, purple button-down shirt, a black gypsy-style skirt, and black boots. A beautiful amethyst stone necklace hung around her neck and shined in the sun. Gran had also styled her hair in a loose chignon instead of letting it fall across her shoulders. The only thing missing was a crystal ball.

“I love your necklace,” Cali said as her grandma approached. She moved out of the way so Gran could step onto the porch.

Gran touched the stone. “A family heirloom. Eventually it’ll be yours.”

Cali loved the thought of having something passed down to her from generations past.

Her grandma went to the table and leaned over the sage to inhale the smoke.

“So why did we purify the air?” Cali followed behind her.

“It’s like a reset. All those emotions you experienced are from other spirits surrounding us.”

“Spirits?” Cali looked around. “Like ghosts?”

“Spirits,” Gran repeated as if not liking ghosts. “We’re putting them to rest, similar to how smoke will put bees into dormancy.”

“Why?”

“It helps me to focus on my client and let their spirits come forward.” Before Cali asked another question, Gran said, “Go inside and grab the two tablecloths and black chair cushions from the trunk.”

Cali found the items and brought them out to the porch.

“The cloths go on the table. Black one first. Burgundy over it, diagonal.”

“How did I do?” Cali asked as she recentered the sage plate.

“Good.” Gran gave a satisfied nod. She had placed the cushions on the chairs. She stamped out the burning sage. “You can head back to the house now. Stay inside and don’t open the door for anyone.”

Gran disappeared into the shack.

It was useless for Cali to ask her anymore questions or get in the way as her grandma finished preparing for her client. She hobbled back to the cabin.

In the kitchen, she poured a glass of water from the sink. As she gazed out the window to see if her grandma had come out of the shack, a reflection of light in the backyard caught her attention. A car appeared through the trees—another driveway she hadn’t seen. The beat-up car parked next to the shack.

Cali edged to the left of the window to watch Gran as she came out of the shack and stood at the end of the porch to wait for her client. The woman got out of her car, but Cali couldn’t see very well with the three trees in the way.

She guessed she’d have a better view from the loft window, but she hadn’t been up there yet to know. Finishing her water, Cali went into the living room and contemplated her odds of climbing the stairs with her sprained ankle. The steps were narrow, but there was a railing to help her.

Cali went for it. She crawled up the stairs, using her hands and knees to keep the pressure off her feet.

The loft was larger than she expected. The middle part of the room was high enough for her to stand. A queen-sized bed with a beautiful quilt and matching pillowcases was against the wall near the stairs. The other side had two short dressers. In the back was the dormer window she had seen when admiring the backside of the cabin. Next to the window was a wooden chair and small table. She decided to sit on the floor next to the window to stay as hidden as possible while she spied on her grandma. She had a perfect view.

The client was a woman who appeared to be in her sixties. She wore stretchy pants, a flowered shirt, and a cream-colored sweater. The woman held a photo in her hand. They talked

as Gran offered her a seat at the table.

After a lengthy discussion, Gran took the photo and turned serious as if her work started. She studied the photo and then placed her index finger over the bottom corner. For a time, they sat in silence. The woman sat back in her chair with her hands folded in her lap and waited.

Gran's head twitched. She raised her head. The woman leaned forward. As Gran talked, she glanced back and forth from photo to client. She pointed to where she had placed her finger. At one point, the woman's hand went to her chest as if surprised, and not in a good way. Her grandma continued to talk until the woman settled down again.

Cali's curiosity peaked about her grandma being called the Orb Lady. What was she doing with the photo? The lady at the apartment building had asked her if she had one. What was the significance?

When Gran gave the photo back, the woman thanked her as she stared at it and then back at her grandma. Their conversation turned light again. Money was exchanged. Cali figured the session was over when they stood. She didn't want to get caught in the loft when Gran came back to the cabin.

Looking down the stairs, Cali hesitated. The distance from the loft to the living room was daunting. The steps appeared steeper than when she climbed them. She had no choice. Turning around so she faced the stairs, Cali used her hands and knees again. Near the bottom and without thinking, she placed her bad foot on the floor and stood. Pain shot up her leg and her knee buckled. She grabbed the railing to steady herself.

The back door opened.

Cali bore the pain as she hobbled to the couch and plopped her butt on the cushion. As Gran took off her boots in the back entry, Cali unwrapped the bandage from her ankle and let her foot and leg breathe. She spotted a jar of gel on the coffee table. Pain medicine. Opening the lid, the aroma of cloves and peppermint filled her nose. She liked it and scooped out a gob to rub the medicine around her lower leg and foot. The gel tingled.

"Is it hot in here?" Gran asked. She walked through the kitchen and waved her hand in front of her face to cool off. She flipped the switch to turn on the living room fan.

"It is," Cali agreed. The morning breeze had dissipated, leaving the cabin stale. The day was too nice to stay inside. "Can I sit on the porch?"

"Up to you." She disappeared into her room.

Cali heaved off the couch and used the walking stick to help her to the porch. She was about to sit in the first rocking chair, but the chair had a thicker cushion on the seat and a shawl draped across the back. Gran's spot. She maneuvered around the table and sat in the far rocking

chair.

Settled in, she spotted Lonnie coming up the driveway on a lawnmower with a trailer full of wood and branches hitched to the back. He headed toward the woodshed. He saw her after he wiped his forehead with a towel.

Cali waved and he waved back. She hoped he'd come say hi in person, but he continued his way to the woodshed. She supposed he needed to finish cutting and hauling the tree branch away, so they could drive in and out of the driveway. She'd help him if it weren't for a bad ankle. Sitting for long periods of time was driving her nuts.

Gran came out of the cabin to the porch. She'd changed into a white scoop-necked shirt and a lighter pale blue skirt. Cali noticed her grandma liked to wear flowing skirts with wide leather belts. She pictured her as a hippie in her early years.

Settling in her rocking chair, Gran eyed Cali's foot resting on top of a small pedestal table meant for a candle. Cali jerked her foot off the table, afraid her grandma was mad. "Sorry. My foot felt better up."

"You weren't ready for stairs, were you?"

Cali's face heated, having been caught. "How did you know?"

Gran let out a humph before responding. "I saw you spying on us from the window."

"Oops."

"Oops is right. Go ahead and use it," she said and motioned for her to put her foot back up. "You need to keep it raised."

Cali asked, "So, why was the woman here?"

Gran fixated on the front yard for a moment as if deciding what to say. She rocked for a time, stopped, and then started again. She tilted her head and looked at Cali. "Are you sure your mama never said anything about me?"

Cali shrunk in her chair, feeling bad. "I asked many times about you. I asked if we could see you again."

"And the answer was no, I bet," Gran said with irritation.

Cali swallowed hard. She had to ask. "What happened between you and Mama?"

Gran stood abruptly. "Wait here. This sounds like I'm going to need Jack."

She excused herself and went into the cabin.

Whatever happened, it festered in Gran too, like an open wound. Cali waited for her to return. When she did, she carried a tray with a pitcher full of iced lemonade, three glasses, and a tall spoon. She set the tray on the round table between them. She then reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a bottle of Jack Daniels. Cali snickered. When her grandma said she

needed Jack, she thought she meant a person and not whiskey.

She lowered her foot from the table and turned to help her grandma. Cali poured the lemonade into the glasses but hesitated before pouring the third.

“One is for Lonnie.” Gran poured a dose of whiskey into the three glasses. “Just in case he wants to take a break.”

“Oh.” She kicked herself for not thinking about him and filled his glass with lemonade.

“This is what you call Lynchburg lemonade.”

“I’m not old enough to drink.” Cali stared at her glass, not sure if she should drink it.

“I think you’ll want to.” Gran stirred her drink with a spoon. “It’s about time you’re told some truths.”

Cali took her word for it. For just turning eighteen, she was getting her share of alcohol. She tasted the lemonade. While the peppermint schnapps was in-your-face refreshing, the Lynchburg lemonade was tart, sweet, and had a little bite. She liked it.

“Well,” Gran said with a sigh as she began. “You were three years old when you moved away. Do you remember the day?”

“I don’t.”

Gran nodded in understanding. “I walked home to the farmhouse, after meeting with a client. Your mama was loading suitcases in a truck parked in the driveway. The truck was running, and smoke came out of the exhaust pipe, stinking things up. As I reached the house, your mama placed you inside the truck. Right then I knew she’d had enough. I asked her to stay, but she said no. The last straw was two days beforehand when a person in town threw a rock at her and called her a witch. She was carrying you as she tried to get to her car, and the rock hit you in the head. Luckily no damage. That scared her. She said you two didn’t need to be part of my circus anymore.”

“Circus?” Cali was confused.

“Figure of speech,” Gran explained and pressed her lips together as if saddened by the memory. “Your mama refused to accept who she was, what she could do. She fought it, making it harder on herself. Your mama was stubborn.”

“She still is.” Cali smiled, thinking about her mama. Many times, Mama would have her hands on her hips and give the look. Nobody would confront her. “Why did we leave?”

Gran stared into the woods. “The gift. Like other generations of Pavaloma women, we have a gift.” She took a drink of lemonade. “We’re slightly different in what we can do. My gift is reading orbs.”

“Ah.” One of Cali’s questions was now answered. But she didn’t quite understand what Gran

meant. “What are orbs?”

“They’re spirits. Energy around people. Most times they appear in photos but aren’t visible to the naked eye. I can read orbs from photos.”

“That’s why your client brought one? For you to read?”

Gran nodded.

The pieces were starting to weave together. Why Gran was known as an orb lady. Why the one lady at the apartment building asked if she had a photo.

Her grandma swiped her hand across her glass to remove the sweat beading, then dripping on to her skirt. “When a client hands me a photo with an orb, I use my thumb to feel the spirit. I can tell if it’s a loved one, a relative, an acquaintance, or a stranger. If bad or good. I can tell them why the person—orb— is there. Have you ever seen an orb?”

“Not that I know of.”

Gran wiped her wet hand on her skirt, then reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out two photos. She looked at both before handing the first one to her.

Cali studied the black and white photo, smoothing out the curled edges with her fingers. A man with a long beard and moustache stood in the woods, posing for the camera. He had an axe in his hand but most of his body was faded against the sharpness of the trees. “Who is he?”

“A spirit, or what some may call a ghost. I took the picture out there, near the schoolhouse on the corner of the road.

“Did you know him?”

Gran shook her head. “I tried to read the image, but it didn’t work for me—I can’t. I did some research at the library but found nothing on him. Later, I asked my mother if she knew who he was, and she ran her finger over the image. She thought he could have been one of the men who cleared the land for the schoolhouse.”

“That’s cool.” Cali handed the photo back to her grandma and then took the next picture from her.

“This one has an orb.”

The second photo was again a black and white picture of a family. The father was standing behind an antique loveseat, the kind with an ornate wood frame. His hand rested on the mother’s shoulder as she posed on the loveseat with a baby in her lap. Three other children, two girls and a boy, sat on the floor near her feet. Between the two girls was a white circle or splotch.

“Is that the orb?” Cali asked and pointed to the white circle.

“It is. This is your family, Calista.” Gran tone softened. “I’m the younger sister sitting on the floor. The orb is my older brother Pete, who died when I was ten years old.”

Cali brought the photo closer to her as she studied it. “Your eyes are like your mama’s.”

“Your great grandmother,” she confirmed.

“I didn’t know I had aunts and an uncle.” She had relatives. Something her mama had never mentioned. Cali glanced over at her grandma. “Can I meet them someday?”

“Unfortunately, not,” she said with regret. “Your aunt Tia, the last one, died about a year ago.”

Cali pouted with disappointment. “I wish I could have met them.”

“You did, but you were a baby.”

As Cali continued to study the picture, the orb stuck out as if wanting attention. “How did your brother die? Why is he an orb?”

Gran tilted her head forward and gazed at Cali. “You tell me.”

“Umm.” Cali’s eyebrows knitted close together as she looked at the photo. To her, the blob could have been a drop of water that damaged the photo. “I ... I don’t know.”

“Keep the photo. It will come to you.”

Cali laser-eyed the photo, hoping it’d help. No luck. “What do you see, Gran? His face?”

“It’s his spirit,” she said. “It’s more than his face. It’s his being.”

Setting the photo on her lap, Cali wondered about her mama. “If you read orbs, Gran, did Mama as well?”

“I’m not sure. Your mama tried hard to ignore the gift we’ve been blessed with for generations.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “We?”

Her breath hitched with excitement. Was she part of the generations who had the gift? Why Gran wanted her to read the orb? She remembered her mixed emotions in the shack. How grandma wanted her to close her eyes and tell her what she felt. It was crazy.

A cold breeze blew across the porch, through the screen. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and then her arms tingled as well. Cali lifted her right arm. Goosebumps covered her skin. She glanced around the porch and wondered if an orb caused the reaction.

Gran chuckled as if knowing what she was doing. “As a little girl, your mama saw beyond orbs. She saw spirits too, like what you’re trying to do now.” She took a drink of her lemonade. She lowered her voice in sadness. “But for your mama, something bad happened. I’m not sure if a spirit had scared her or if a friend at school made fun of her. Or both. At least once a week, Brigitta would come home crying because her classmates had called her a freak or a witch. They threatened to burn her.”

“That’s terrible.” Cali felt bad for her mama, but she could relate. When she was in fourth

grade, a group of girls had been bullying her for over a week. The next day, Mama came to school with her and yelled at the teacher, right in the classroom. She pointed at the girls who had bullied her and gave them a long, evil stare until they cowered in their chairs. The girls never bullied her again. Now Cali wondered if it was the stare that made her friends scared or if Mama had cast a spell on them.

“Are we witches?” Cali wanted to make sure her grandma wasn’t talking about black magic or anything evil.

“No, we’re not.” She shook her head to assure her. “We have a gift. For your mama, she avoided the spirits as much as she could. They haunted her at night. She’d cover her head with the blankets, so they couldn’t find her. I’m guessing she might have had a bad spirit scare her. For a long time, she didn’t sleep at night. One day, when she was about seventeen, she blocked them out of her head. Brigitta shut down, except when it came to being angry at me.”

Gran rubbed her neck as if she was having a hard time talking about it. What Cali didn’t understand was why it was an issue. “Do you think Mama was angry at you because you could read orbs?”

“In a way.” Gran rubbed her chin. “Brigitta didn’t like how I had clients, those from town whom I helped. Her friends knew what I did, being called the Orb Lady. Since they thought I was a freak, she had to be one too. Your mama distanced herself from me, not wanting me to rub off on her.” Gran took another drink. Her hand shook slightly. “I thought we had a chance to make amends when you came along. I came here to live, giving her the farmhouse to live in.”

She pointed her glass toward the woods to the left of the yard where a path ran into the woods. Cali found the wide path, but the farmhouse wasn’t visible through the trees. She’d have to go exploring after her ankle healed.

“As you know, behind the cabin is the shack where I meet with my clients. Brigitta was busy with you and seemed happy. She avoided this part of the property and what I was doing over here—out of sight, out of mind. However, once you showed interest in what I did, you figured out how to find me. At two and a half years old, you’d walk the path, over here, on your own. Brigitta would panic when she couldn’t find you, thinking you wandered into the woods by yourself. Each time, she’d find you here. She’d be furious.” Gran whistled. “Boy, would she be angry at me.”

“It wasn’t like you took me.” Cali tried to reason.

“No, but you were curious, and you wanted to be with me. One day, after the rock incident, your mama had enough. She packed up and left with Kyle. Brigitta cut off ties, not wanting me to find her or you.”

“I’m sorry.” Cali cringed. She didn’t remember the woods or her grandma living in the cabin. She vaguely remembered the farmhouse, but maybe it was only because of the photo.

“No need to apologize. It’s not your fault.”

Cali grabbed her glass of lemonade and gulped two hard swallows, forgetting about the whiskey. She sucked in her breath.

“Wow.” She tried not to cough. “It’s stronger than I realized.”

“It can sneak up on you too,” Gran said, while she made herself another glass.

“If mama didn’t like you seeing clients, why did you continue?”

Gran frowned. “Why would I quit?”

Cali shrank back into her chair. “Because ... it caused a rift between the two of you?”

Her grandma raised her chin proudly. “I embrace my gift. I help others because they don’t have the gift like we do.”

There. Her grandma said it again.

“I don’t have the gift, Gran,” Cali said matter-of-factly. She lifted the photo. “I can’t read the photo like you wanted me to. I don’t think I’ve seen ghosts or orbs in my eighteen years on this planet.”

Her grandma adjusted her skirt and cleared her throat. “For generations, the women in our family have had the gift. You were born with it.”

Cali didn’t comprehend. “You’re saying I have the gift?”

“You do.”

Cali blinked a few times as she processed what Gran said. She wanted to know more, ask questions, but she couldn’t. Instead, she pushed the rocker with her good foot to get the rhythm going again.

“Keep yourself open to it, child,” Gran said as she rose from her chair. She leaned over and patted Cali’s thigh. “Trust me. You have the gift.”

Cali stayed on the porch while her grandma went inside. She had a gift passed down for generations. A gift her mama never told her about.

Chapter 21 – The Shooting Range

Athena poured another cup of coffee and stared out the kitchen window. The morning dew glistened like crystals against the lawn. The sun, rising in the sky, would soon dry the grass. Today was going to be busy. She was cleaning her guns and on the last one.

Without knowing who was coming after Cali or when, she had to make sure her grandchild could protect herself. They needed to prepare as much as possible and then it still might not be enough. The traffickers were looking for her. She sensed it. And the detective would be visiting as well. He was already in Sumner Point snooping around, so she didn't have a lot of time to prepare.

She had called her lawyer's office but learned Margo Longmont was on a cruise with no access to the internet or her phone. However, the office promised, in case she was able to call in, they'd tell Margo to contact her due to the urgency of the matter. Athena prayed she would, unsure if she could keep Cali safe on her own.

Athena returned to the table where her .38 revolver lay on a red cotton towel. She sat down and finished cleaning and oiling the gun. The bed squeaked upstairs. Cali was awake. She figured if the girl handled the stairs yesterday to spy on her, then she was ready to use the bedroom to sleep.

After putting the tools and oil away, she cleaned up her mess on the table. She reloaded the gun cylinder with five full metal jackets, ammo used for the range, and then placed the revolver in her left skirt pocket. The Magnum was still in her right pocket. All her skirts had been custom-made with two deep pockets, one on each side, that were molded to fit her guns. Normally she'd carry one gun but now she wasn't so confident.

Earlier that morning, she researched traffickers on the internet to know what and whom she was dealing with. Athena tsked, disgusted by the assholes, both men and women, who lured young girls and boys into a horrible life. They were a justified shooting in her eyes, and she'd be happy to take one or two of them out if it meant protecting Cali or others.

This was her chance to help and protect her grandchild. Athena also planned to spend time

with Cali and teach her a thing or two. The main one, how to use the gift.

Yesterday had been successful. Cali might not be able to read orbs yet, but she was receptive. The violet streaks in her grandchild's eyes flared with curiosity when she learned about orbs. She absorbed every word when Athena told her about the Pavaloma women and their gift. It was only the beginning. The child had a lot to learn to reach her full potential. But the first lesson of the day was how to protect herself.

When Cali struggled down the stairs and then headed into the bathroom, Athena warmed up a plate of scrambled eggs, ham, and hashbrowns. She set them on the table.

"Good morning, Gran," Cali said as she appeared and eyed the food. She licked her lips. "For me?"

"Eat fast," Athena ordered while cleaning the kitchen. "We got things to do."

Her grandchild sat down and picked up the slice of ham with her fingers and nibbled on it. She seemed to be comfortable, living here. Athena wanted her to stay but didn't dare hope that her grandchild would.

"What are we doing today?"

"Gun practice."

Cali stopped chewing. She dropped the ham on her plate and squeaked, "What? Why?"

"Eat up." Athena chose to ignore her grandchild's questions.

She left the room to give Cali time to finish eating and went to her bedroom. She took out the M1911 pistol from her nightstand and carried it into the kitchen where she set it on the table.

"You can start with this one."

Cali stared at the gun like a frightened deer. "Gran, I can't."

"Why? It's not going to hurt you if you know how to use it."

"I-I shot someone, Gran," Cali stuttered, barely getting the words out. She hugged herself in a protective mode. "I can't."

"Put your shoes on," Athena ordered. "If you know how to handle a gun, you won't be afraid of using it the next time."

"There won't be a next time." Cali shook her head.

"Let's hope you're right. But if there is, you need to know what to do." Athena went to the back door and found Cali's tennis shoes. She took them over to her and dropped them on the floor.

Cali released her protective grip and managed to put her shoes on. She stood and took two steps to leave without the M1911.

"Pick it up," Athena snapped. The child had to overcome her fear. Fast.

Cali gave her a mean look, but she picked up the gun with her thumb and two fingers as ordered.

“Barrel down.” Athena swooped in when Cali pointed the pistol at her. She reached over and helped place her grandchild’s hand in the correct position around the handle. “Watch what you’re doing when you’re carrying it. Keep your finger off the trigger. You don’t want to point the gun at anyone or any animal unless you’re aiming to shoot. Always believe the gun is loaded.”

Athena left to put on the scuffed cowboy boots she wore when doing outside chores. She opened the back door. “Remember, finger off the trigger and aim down.”

Cali followed her out the door, and they walked beyond the shack to a path in the woods.

“Watch your step.” Athena pointed to a stump. Her grandchild was paying more attention to the pistol in her hand than where she was walking, and the narrow path was hard to walk, even for her. Rocks and roots stuck out of the ground, making it a trip hazard. Athena slowed her pace and pointed out the spots for Cali to be careful. She didn’t need her grandchild stumbling, falling, or having the M1911 fire by accident.

After rounding a hill, they reached Athena’s favorite spot to let out frustration.

“Welcome to my gun range,” Athena said with pride. The range was fifty yards away, behind a low wooden rail fence. Three bundles of hay, stacked three high, were staggered across the range—fifteen feet, thirty feet, and fifty feet away from the fence. Beyond the hay was a hill, partially dug out, to stop the bullets if the bundles didn’t.

Athena headed toward the prepping area, off to the left and a safe distance from the range. Cali followed her, and they stopped at the weathered oak buffet table—meant for a dining room yet perfect to store gear, ammo, and targets.

“Why do you need a gun range?” Cali asked.

“I like to practice. A few people from town use it as well.”

Cali scanned the woods. “Aren’t you afraid you’re going to accidentally shoot someone?”

Athena removed the .38 revolver from her left skirt pocket and set it on the table. “I have over twenty acres. I have signs warning people not to trespass. If anyone is on my property and gets shot, it’s their own damn fault.”

“Oh.” Cali swallowed hard.

“So far, no fatalities.” Athena couldn’t guarantee it would be the case if the traffickers showed up on her property.

“Where does that go?” Cali asked and pointed to the path as it continued into the woods, beyond the range.

“It goes to a creek and to a stone bridge your granddad built by hand. We’ll hike there one of

these days.”

Athena turned back to what she'd been doing. She pulled open the table drawer and took out an empty clip. She then found a box of 9mm range ammo and opened it.

“I'm guessing the thugs used pistols, so I'll show you how to use the M1911 first.” She pointed to the gun her grandchild held with the barrel down. “Hand it over.”

Cali gladly did. She rubbed her hands on her hips as if to remove any remnants or bad vibes from the pistol. Athena ignored the gesture as she removed the clip with defense ammo. She used the empty clip to show her how to load it with the practice ammo and then place the clip into the gun. She then removed the clip and ammo, giving her grandchild a chance to practice loading the pistol.

“Good job,” Athena said when Cali mastered her first lesson. “Now set the gun down. Why don't you sit for a minute. Rest that ankle of yours.” She pointed to one of the wooden chairs used for anyone watching as someone practiced.

While Cali rested, Athena walked around the wooden rail fence and picked up the empty tin cans scattered on the ground. She set them on top of the hay bundles and then returned to the buffet table. She opened the middle drawer and pulled out two pairs of ear protection and safety glasses. One set was brand new with a bright pink camouflage design that she handed to Cali.

Her eyes lit up. “Pink?”

“Lonnie thought you might want your own set.” Athena had chided him for buying pink, but he figured she'd like them. And she did. Cali wore the eyewear and ear protection without hesitation. The man was smart.

“We'll start with shooting at the fifteen-foot mark.” Athena walked up to the wooden rail. She motioned Cali over. She taught her how to stand, hold the gun in both hands, how to remove the safety, aim, and pull the trigger. Finished with the lesson, she stood back to give her grandchild room. “Whenever you're ready.”

The gun shook in Cali's hands.

“Steady yourself.” Athena stayed back. There wasn't a breeze, making it a good morning to shoot. “If you're not ready, step back and adjust your grip. Remember what I taught you.”

Cali lowered the gun—finger off the trigger—and took a deep breath. Her expression turned hard as if determined to get it right. She aimed and fired. The shell bounced back, hitting her on the shoulder. Cali yelped as if she'd been shot.

“It's only the shell. Nothing to worry about.” Athena chuckled as she approached her from behind. “You didn't do too badly for your first shot.”

The bullet hit somewhere in the dirt wall but not too far off from the hay bundle. With the

first shot out of the way, Athena showed Cali how to aim by using the site. “Again, take your time. Keep shooting until the clip is empty. Remember to aim at the cans.”

Cali used the site, closing one eye as she aimed. The second shot nicked the can on the right, and the third knocked it off the bundle. She glanced back with a big grin. “I did it, Gran.”

Athena approved. “You feel comfortable with the gun now?”

“No.”

“Well, at least you’re honest,” she muttered.

Cali shot until the clip emptied. She walked back to the buffet table and set the gun down. Next, Athena handed her the .38 revolver. “Try this one next. I named her Hatchet.”

“Hatchet?” Cali giggled. “Is Molly the M1911?”

Athena smiled as she pulled the .357 Magnum revolver from her other skirt pocket and set it on the table. “No, this one here is Molly.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “It looks nasty. Why do you have three?”

“You can’t have enough.” She decided not to tell Cali how many guns she owned. Over the years, a few clients had gotten out of hand, getting angry with the results of the reading. After one tried to strangle her, Athena made sure to carry a gun whenever she was with a client. She also had a few hidden around her property.

“One gun is too many,” Cali replied.

“Not out here. I like the added protection. I also like to shoot. It’s a great way to let go of your frustrations. And you’re better off knowing how to shoot different types of guns than not. It gives you the control.”

She had her grandchild reset the cans to use as targets before letting her take the two loaded revolvers—Molly and Hatchet—to the wooden rail.

Lonnie came to watch. He stayed in the distance, behind the buffet table. He had his eye and ear protection on from working on the fallen tree.

“She’s got good aim,” he said as Athena stood next to him.

“Hatchet, the .38, is harder to aim,” she noted. “I’m glad she’s taking more time with it.”

Cali missed the cans on the first two shots.

“Did she like the ear protection? Glasses?”

“Yes.” Athena laughed. “You were right. Pink worked.”

He grinned.

Athena changed the subject. “Has anyone said anything in town?”

Lonnie shook his head. “Nothing yet.”

Cali shot the remaining three bullets from Hatchet and then picked up Molly. She kept both

hands on the gun as she focused on the can at the fifteen-foot mark.

“I better go,” Lonnie said.

“Hold on.” Athena held out her arm in front of him. “Watch.”

Cali pulled the trigger on Molly. The .357 Magnum kicked hard as it recoiled, scaring the hell out of her grandchild. Her face was priceless. Athena chuckled.

“You’re bad, Athena,” he said, trying not to smile at her amusement. He disappeared into the woods.

The power of the gun firing reverberated through Cali’s hands and arms. She set down the Magnum on top of the rail post to shake out her hands.

“You could have warned me, Gran.” Cali glanced back toward the table at her smiling grandma.

“You handled her quite well.”

“I don’t think I can use Molly.” Cali rubbed her shoulder.

“Trust me. If your adrenaline is running high, you won’t have an issue.” Gran went to retrieve the guns. “You done good for the day. You can practice firing Molly and Hatchet when we practice again.”

Cali released her breath in relief. Her arm and back were sore, not to mention her ankle throbbed with pain again. She hobbled back to the prep table and took off her gear.

“What’s your thought about guns now? Still think they’re bad?” Gran asked as she put everything but the guns away.

“Well …” Cali had to think about it. When fighting the traffickers, she pulled the trigger out of fear to keep the men away from her. At the gun range, she wasn’t under any threat. Gran explained in detail how to hold, load, and shoot the three different guns. “I don’t think I’m totally confident in protecting myself with a gun yet. However, I do feel better knowing I can handle and fire one the right way. I’m not as terrified of them.”

“Good people have no intention of using a gun to threaten or shoot a person. They’ll only use it if there is no other route to take. It’s important to know the difference.”

Gran pointed to the three guns she spread out on the table. “Which one did you like best?”

“Hatchet.” Cali didn’t hesitate in her response. She liked how the .38 Special felt in her hands. It was also cool having to cock the gun, like they did in old western movies.

“Your mama liked Hatchet as well.” Gran handed her the gun to carry. She then placed the

M1911 into her skirt pocket. She carried Molly in her hand as they left the range.

The walk to the cabin seemed longer. Cali's ankle hurt as if someone had weighed it down with lead. She struggled to walk and tried not to whimper. When she stumbled, Gran was there to help. She stayed close to her side until they entered the cabin.

"Go wash your hands in the bathroom. You need to use the Lava soap on the plate. And I mean, wash really good to get the lead off your hands." She handed her a roll of paper towels. "Use these to dry them."

Cali followed orders. She set Hatchet, the revolver, on the coffee table then went into the bathroom. After cleaning up, she plopped on the couch.

"I have a client coming. You stay on the couch and rest. Make sure to rub the healing gel on your ankle and keep it raised until I get back."

"What should I do with the gun?"

"It's your new friend," Gran said. "I want you to always keep it with or near you. This afternoon, slide it under the couch cushion. Tonight, upstairs under your bed."

While her grandma went to change, Cali slipped the gun under the cushion. She made it from Dempsey to Sumner Point without a gun, and she didn't think she needed one now. Shouldn't she be safe now that she was here? Cali decided not to say anything to avoid a lecture.

"Who's coming today?" she asked when Gran came out of her bedroom, dressed in purple layers.

"An old friend who lives in Waverly. Jerry found two photos in his mother's photo album, and he wants me to read them."

Waverly was where she spent time with Fish at the beach and park. She missed his long-lashed eyes and how he smiled at her like she was the only one for him. She longed to tug the end of his beard, where he tied it together, and pull him in for a kiss. If only she could see him again ...

A car door slammed. Cali opened her eyes. The grandfather clock chimed three times. The last time she remembered, after she'd settled into the couch, it had chimed once. Two hours. She must have been tired. It took her a few minutes to fully wake.

Cali grabbed the cane and walked into the kitchen. Her ankle felt better, not hurting as badly, but she kept as much weight off it as possible, not wanting to aggravate it more. She peered out the window. The car's taillights disappeared out the back driveway. Gran stood on the porch and folded the tablecloths to put them away.

She thought about helping her but dreaded having to walk to the shack. Gran would

probably yell at her too. Instead, she headed out to the front porch—a shorter distance. She used the small table again to keep her leg raised.

As she waited for her grandma to finish, she watched two birds splash themselves in the rain-filled birdbath. A chainsaw whined in different tones as it hit wood. Lonnie must be cutting more of the branches in the driveway. If only she could get out there and explore the property. She wanted to find the farmhouse. Walk the driveway. Go into town. Start her life, here with Gran—if she'd let her stay.

The backdoor creaked open and then closed. Gran's boots clicked across the kitchen and living room floor as she walked to the front door and onto the porch.

“What happened to staying put on the couch?”

“I slept for two hours. I needed some fresh air.”

Satisfied with her response, Gran moved to her rocker. Her movements were slow, and lines marked her face. She had changed again, this time into a dark blue skirt with a white button-down shirt. Cali hadn't heard her come in to change. She really must have been out cold sleeping.

“Are you okay, Gran?”

“I need to sit for a bit.” She pulled her gray hair out of the bun and let it spread around her face. “This one wore me out.”

“Because he had two photos?”

Gran agreed by nodding. “I had a hard time distinguishing the orb in one of the pictures. It confused me until I realized there were two, one on top of the other.”

“Really?” Cali perked up, interested. She wished she could have seen the photo.

Her grandmother fanned herself as if the heat was getting to her.

“You want me to bring you something to drink?” Cali was ready to bounce out of her chair and head inside, but Gran stopped her.

“Sit. I'll go.”

Cali sank back into her rocker, showered with guilt. She needed to help out more. Gran wasn't going to like her living there if she sat around being lazy. Besides, she was antsy.

A mosquito buzzed by her leg. Cali went to hit it, but she lost focus. Her head pulsed.

“Oh, crap.” She became lightheaded and her temperature dropped, like she was about to faint. Cali gripped the armrests on the rocker, holding tight, as the pulsing continued.

They're coming.

The woman's voice sounded desperate. Cali glanced around her. She was alone.

She listened for the woman again. Her skin prickled, like little firecrackers as if reminding

her of the danger she was in.

Gran came back with a tray of tea, glasses, and a plate of scones. Her face dropped in concern when she saw Cali. “What’s wrong, Child?”

“I-I don’t know.” The pulse moved from her head to her shoulders, like a rope wrapped around her, tightening and then loosening. She no longer felt faint, but her hands shook so she rubbed them together to get them to stop. Cali glanced into the woods. She bit her lip, confused. “I-I heard someone. A voice.”

Her grandma set the tray on the table. She stood near the screen door and scanned the perimeter. Her hand slid into her skirt pocket where she carried a gun.

“I don’t think it was ... anyone here. My head felt weird for a second. Now it’s my body, my shoulders are ... pulsing.”

Her grandma tilted her head in curiosity. “What kind of voice?”

“Female. She said they were coming.”

“Oh.” Gran’s face changed. “A warning.”

“What?” Cali didn’t understand.

“Someone gave you a warning, letting you know to watch out. I’m not sure if she meant it’s the police or the traffickers.” Gran paused and then asked, “Do you know who sent the message?”

“Great Gran.” The words came out without thought. Cali gasped, then raised her hand to her mouth, shocked. Her eyes widened. “Is that my gift, Gran? Hearing people?”

Gran bobbed her head as if noncommittal. “I’m not sure yet. Warnings are a little different than hearing people or voices.” She sat in her rocking chair and leaned toward Cali. “Let’s see what you got.”

She motioned to Cali to sit straight in the rocking chair. When she did, she said, “Now close your eyes.”

Cali closed her eyes but flicked them open again as her nerves kicked in. She didn’t want a demon or bad spirit to come out and scare her. “Do I need sage or something?”

Gran thought for a second before she flung her hand as if to dismiss the notion. “Nah. Take some deep breaths. Loosen up.”

Readjusting in her chair, Cali closed her eyes and relaxed her shoulders. She slowly breathed in and out while concentrating on the tree leaves swaying and fluttering from the slight wind. Two different birdcalls—a bluebird and a mockingbird—sang out. A squirrel chirped near the birdbath. In the distance, the chainsaw continued to buzz.

Nothing.

After a few minutes, Cali asked, "What am I supposed to be listening to?"

"Not listening." Gran corrected her. "You need to feel."

Cali kept her eyes closed as she straightened her back and tried again. The pulsing in her shoulders had stopped. She listened to the breeze and felt normal again. No pulsing or temperature change. Gran scooted closer, took her hand, and held it. Cali was surprised at how cold her grandma's hand was. Soon, Gran's cold skin turned warm and then hot. Cali tried pulling her hand away, but Gran held tight.

"You're fine, Calista. Take a deep breath."

Cali inhaled through her nose, letting her lungs expand to full capacity. She held her breath and then exhaled slowly. Little sparks snapped inside her. The heat from Gran's hand changed from heat to energy, and it flowed between them.

"Now, find the voice again, inside you."

The little sparks snapped inside her chest to her legs and then back up her spine. Her hand jerked but Gran kept a firm grip. Cali fell into a darkness, like being underwater. At first she felt scared but then the pressure around her became soothing. She let her barrier down.

A breath warmed Cali's cheek and she smiled. Fish was with her. He moved closer. His brown eyes were intense, worried, which stopped her smile. He wanted to protect her, but he was also ... torn? Fish looked nervous as he glanced over his shoulder. Behind him, a woman, his age, was in the room with him. The woman had short black hair. Freckles lined her cheeks in a cute way, but her eyes reflected a know-it-all-type attitude. The woman glared at him like he needed to make a choice. This woman's pull was strong, as if she was sucking the willpower out of Fish.

Cali let out a groan, not liking the woman.

Gran interrupted her vision. "Who do you see?"

She shook her head, wanting to stay focused. She needed to know why the woman was with him. But in a snap, he disappeared. Another stranger came into view. His face was hidden in the shadows. He aimed a gun at the back of another man's head but then swung the gun around and aimed the barrel at her. Cali froze. Her breath seized. The stranger pulled the trigger and a loud bang echoed through her head. She flinched, expecting to be hit, but the bullet flew past her. The man didn't want to kill her, only to frighten her. The stranger started coming toward her, and she yelled out for him to leave her alone.

"Cali."

A sharp voice called her name.

"Cali."

Someone grabbed and shook her shoulders. Cali jerked her eyes open, blinking hard to return to the present. Gran was leaning over her, staring at her with concern. "Are you back now?"

"I'm okay," Cali said, but she wasn't. She blinked and didn't know what to think.

Gran backed away, giving her space.

"A man shot at me."

"Did he hit you?"

"No. He missed. I think on purpose, like a warning shot."

Cali's head hurt. She rubbed her temples and then pressed a finger against her nose. She had no idea why, but the pressure was comforting.

"It was so vivid, Gran. I smelled the lead when the gun fired." Cali rubbed her nose.

"You're more sensitive than I thought you'd be." Gran reached behind the table and grabbed two shot glasses off the windowsill. A bottle of whiskey came out of her skirt pocket. She poured the liquor into both glasses and then handed Cali one.

Cali stared at the shot glass, wanting it but knowing she shouldn't have it.

What the hell. Why not?

She slammed it down. The alcohol burned but she handled it.

The vision of the man shooting the gun had scared her, but seeing the woman with Fish was more disturbing. Cali believed the woman was his ex-fiancée. Cali's eyes narrowed, wondering if her vision meant that Fish went back to ... what was her name? ... Jolene ... again. Maybe Fish was torn, but ultimately he was in his apartment with his ex.

She turned to her grandma. "My vision. Is it a premonition?"

Gran took a sip of her whiskey, then said, "I'm not completely sure. I don't have visions. I don't have warnings, like you had today. For me, I sense things. Our gifts are different."

"Terrific." Cali scowled. She hoped for a better answer from the Orb Lady.

Her grandma's expression changed as if disliking Cali's attitude. "Remember, you had to learn to walk before you could run. This is the same. It'll get easier once you know the rules and listen to your body. You'll learn what you're capable of in due time."

"I hope so." Cali didn't like what her gut was telling her right now about Fish and Jolene.

"It's complicated." Gran drank the rest of her shot. "Be patient."

Cali didn't have patience. She wanted to talk to Fish.

Now.

Chapter 22 – Finding Cali

Fish yawned as he woke. He stared at the ceiling and smiled.

I'm finally in Nashville.

He couldn't believe his luck.

After Mr. Yurmac learned he was new to the area, the owner let him stay for the night in the vacant, somewhat furnished, apartment above the music store. The next day, after he finished painting the store sign, Fish took one of the guitars off its stand and played "Eruption" by Van Halen. Three customers stopped shopping to listen and watch. One customer wanted their son to take guitar lessons from him. Fish agreed, if it was okay with the boss.

Mr. Yurmac hired him that day, making Fish a guitar and drum instructor, salesperson, and maintenance guy. They negotiated a deal for him to live in the apartment, and the rent would come out of his pay.

Lying on the couch, Fish rose to a sitting position. The bed in the small bedroom had a worn, lumpy mattress and was terrible to sleep on. He'd have to buy a new bed once he had money. For now, the couch worked fine.

Sunlight poured into the living room from the half-open curtain. He glanced at his phone to check the time. His first student, in for a guitar lesson, would arrive in an hour. Fish left the couch and went into the kitchen. He grabbed a cup next to the sink and filled it with water. He drank two glasses, knowing it would be his "breakfast" until he could run to the grocery store during his break.

Heading into the bathroom, he washed his face. Last night, he had a dream about Cali, and he replayed it in his head. She was leaning over him, her wild violet eyes staring at him with wonder. He pulled her in for a kiss, and he enjoyed her sweetness as he teased her with his lips and tongue. When she moved away, he moaned with disappointment but then sensed something wrong. Her eyes teared with anger as she stared at him again, this time with hurt in her eyes. He felt like he'd done something wrong. And then he woke. He managed to fall back to sleep, but the dream continued to bug him.

Every day since they parted ways, he thought about her. Every day he wanted to pick up his phone and call her. But she had no phone. That was the worst thing ever. He scrolled the internet and there wasn't much on Cali or the shootings. The reporters were already on the next news story. Seeing her should be safe. After he got his first paycheck, he'd find a way to get to Sumner Point. And he'd find her.

As he brushed his teeth, his smartphone rang. Fish spit out his toothpaste in the bathroom sink and then found his phone in the living room on the floor next to the couch.

Jolene's name was up on his screen.

He growled at his phone and didn't answer it. Why would she call him? After she kicked him out of their house, the selfish brat screamed that she never wanted to talk to him again.

Fish placed his phone in his back pocket and finished brushing his teeth.

Ten minutes later, he left his apartment and descended the rickety stairs to the back parking lot. Mr. Yurmac's red Camry was parked in his usual spot, next to the shade trees. Fish entered the store through the back door, knowing it'd be unlocked.

Three beeps sounded, noting his arrival. By the time he shut the door, his boss stood in the stockroom, waiting for him. His eyes glared and his scowl deepened.

"Someone is here, wanting you," he said in his thick accent.

Fish frowned. He wasn't expecting anyone.

Shit.

His stomach churned as he thought of Jolene. He shot a glance down the short hall toward the front of the store. "A female?"

"A private detective." Mr. Yurmac placed his hands on his hips.

"Oh." Fish's mouth dropped.

"You in some kind of trouble?" Mr. Yurmac's eyes burned into him like Fish was a criminal.

"I'm not, sir."

"I don't want trouble here. You trouble, you go."

"I am not trouble or in trouble." Fish's hand flew up in promise. "I bet he's here about a girl I know."

Mr. Yurmac shook his finger at him. "No trouble."

"Understood."

His boss relaxed. "The guy isn't friendly. Eyes hard like diamonds."

"Where is he?"

"Outside, in front. He's waiting for the store to open."

Fish glanced at the clock on the wall and noted he had time before his first student's lesson.

“I’ll go talk to him now.”

He headed out the back door instead of walking through the store and unlocking the front door. Going through the alley gave him a chance to check the man out before meeting him.

Fish spotted the gold Nova first. He guessed the car was from the seventies; it was in surprisingly good shape. There was rust in the normal spots, but it looked like he was working to fix it up. When he saw the private detective, he recognized the man right away as the one who almost found him and Cali in the woods.

Mr. Yurmac was right. The detective didn’t look friendly at all. He scowled as he leaned against his car, waiting for him. The man was tall, lean, and weathered, like a cowboy. A bad ass dude.

Fish matched the man’s take-no-shit attitude as he turned the corner of the building.

“Lucifer Guthrie?” The detective straightened when Fish appeared. He stepped away from his car.

“Call me Fish.”

“Private Detective Craig Stelzer,” he introduced himself. He didn’t offer his hand to shake. Instead, he flashed open his leather coat to show his badge that read National Private Detective in blue letters.

“Is that like Magnum P.I.? A private investigator?” Fish was curious.

“One and the same,” he confirmed, then asked, “Were you running with a young woman named Calista McGraw?”

Fish placed his hands on his hips. “I wasn’t running.”

Stelzer’s eyes flicked for half a second as if surprised by his response. “When were you last with her?”

“Why? Did she commit a crime?”

“You should know. You were the last to see her.”

Fish let out his breath to calm his nerves. He’d give Stelzer only bits of information, not all, based on the man’s attitude. “I hung with her a few days ago. Four days? Something like that.”

“Is she here with you?” He eyed the building, looking up at the windows on the second floor as if knowing Fish lived there.

“I just told you it’s been a few days since I last saw her.” Fish didn’t like how he tried twisting his question.

“Where is she?” Stelzer stared back at him.

“I can’t say. She wasn’t sure either.”

“Did she drop any names? Her grandma? Did she tell you where she was going?”

Fish rubbed his jaw as he hesitated to answer. The detective mentioned Cali's grandma. Damn.

Stelzer stretched to show his height, about two inches taller than Fish. "It's in your best interest to tell me what you know."

He didn't let the man intimidate him. "How can I tell you if I don't know what you want. You tell me why you're looking for her."

The detective switched his weight to his other hip as if impatient. "You were placed at the truck stop on the night of the shooting."

"I was there," Fish admitted. He couldn't lie. Not with the cameras. "I got a ride from one of the truckers."

"Did she?"

"I meant that a trucker dropped me off there," Fish corrected. "I didn't catch another ride until later. Not with her. She worked at the diner."

"But you met up with her again."

"Pure coincidence. She happened to be traveling the same road. We hung for a while."

"Where'd you meet?"

"Not too far off ..." Fish had to remember. "I believe Interstate 40."

"Where'd you go?"

The questions were getting tougher. Fish shifted his feet, wondering how much to say. He wasn't sure what information Stelzer had, and he didn't want to lie if he could help it. "We headed up by Camden. It's around there where we split."

"Why?"

Fish shrugged. "I was heading to Nashville. She wasn't."

"Did she tell you anything about the shooting? What happened? Who was involved?"

"I know she seemed to be afraid for her life."

"Why?" His question was fast, quick.

"She didn't say."

"Did she tell you she shot and killed a man?"

"Cali wouldn't kill anyone."

"She did."

"If so, I bet it was self-defense."

"She told you about it?"

Fish's heart pumped. He didn't like being drilled. His palms itched.

A white SUV distracted them as it parked in a slot next to the Nova. His student, a middle-

aged man with a long brown ponytail, got out of the driver's seat and locked the door.

"Listen, I need to get to work. He's here for a lesson." Fish nodded and raised his hand to greet the man as he stepped onto the sidewalk. "Hi, Joe. Head inside, start tuning your guitar. I'll be there in a minute."

Stelzer stared at him again. He pulled out a business card from his coat pocket.

"Call me if you see or hear from her. She could be in danger."

Fish examined the white card with the shiny badge emblem. His ears tuned in to the way the detective emphasized the word danger. His head came up as he eyed Stelzer. "What do you mean she's in danger?"

"She's involved with traffickers. Dangerous men." Stelzer walked around the front of his car to the driver's door. He pointed his finger at Fish. "Don't go anywhere. I'm not through with you yet."

"No doubt," Fish said, more to himself than to the detective.

Now more than ever, he wanted to find Cali to make sure she was okay.

Chapter 23 – Sooner Than Later

Cali stepped out of the shower as the phone rang in the living room. She grabbed a towel to dry herself. Gran answered the call, but beyond the typical hello, her voice was too muffled to hear the conversation. And, she thought, who had a wired landline phone in their house anymore?

This was her fifth day with Gran. The woman was still a mystery to her, keeping to herself. Cali guessed she wasn't used to having guests. Her grandma lived a simple life and was content living alone. She had her own bubble where the days flowed in perfect rhythm and the nights were quiet and peaceful. And then Cali came along. She hoped she could stay for a while. Gran hadn't said anything about her situation, and Cali didn't have the courage to ask.

As she finished drying her hair with the towel, Cali wondered what they'd be doing today. Last night they had stayed up late. They first talked about orbs. Cali tried "reading" the orb in the family picture again but without any luck. Afterward, they switched topics to her. Cali talked about school, work, and friends. Basically, what she'd done for the last fifteen years of her life.

"Cali," Gran called out from the living room. "Dress and get out here."

Her stomach lurched at her grandma's tone. She imagined the police peeling into the driveway, stopping in front of the cabin to arrest her. Or the detective searching for her. Or the traffickers coming to get her. She shivered.

"Cali," Gran called for her again with impatience.

She jumped at being yelled at again. She dropped the comb and put on her clothes. Cali flung the door open. "I'm here, Gran."

In the living room, Cali glanced out the front windows but didn't see anyone there. Gran was in the kitchen at the counter, whisking some type of batter in a bowl.

"A young man's looking for you," she said.

Cali froze for a moment, wondering who. She didn't know anyone in Sumner Point. She gave Gran an I-have-no-idea look.

"Fish."

“What?” Cali’s heart skipped out of her chest. “Fish?”

He found me.

“Is he here?” Cali remembered the phone ringing and spun around to look at her grandma. “Did he call?”

The lines on her face deepened when she shot Cali a look. “How’d he know where to find you?”

She shrunk with guilt. Her grandma wasn’t happy. “He didn’t know. Like me. I didn’t know. I told him that I was heading to Sumner Point, but I didn’t know where.”

“Did you tell him to find the Orb Lady?”

Her face turned red. “I did.”

Gran let out a heavy, disappointed sigh as if having to accept it.

“I’m sorry.” Cali felt awful. “I trust Fish. He won’t say anything.”

“We can only hope,” she said. “The phone call was from Allie who bartends at her parents’ bar. The young man asked for you and then me.”

“She knows I’m here?” Cali was curious. If everyone supposedly knew the Orb Lady, did word travel about her grandchild being in town? How she was in hiding?

“I’m sure she’s guessed by now.” Gran set the bowl down when toast popped up from the toaster. She tossed it on a paper plate and then brought it to the table where Cali stood. “Eat.”

Dry toast. No butter. No jam. She was down to the bare minimum. She really blew it. Mama had told her not to tell anyone where she was going. But Fish was different, and she trusted him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Who else did you tell?”

“No one.” Cali couldn’t look her in the eyes.

“I gave her permission to give your friend directions. He’s on his way.”

Cali took a moment to process what she said. Gran okayed Fish coming to see her. She raised her head and dared to look at her grandma.

Gran pointed to the plate. “Eat your toast and then finish getting ready. I’m making brunch.”

Relief and gratitude flooded Cali. “I promise. You’ll like him.”

“Eat,” she ordered. “And put some color into that face of yours. You look paler than an albino squirrel.”

“How long before he gets here?” Cali grabbed the toast and started eating. She needed coffee to wash it down.

As if reading her mind, Gran placed a steaming cup in front of her. “I’d say about ten minutes.”

Crap. She didn't have a lot of time. Wait. It took her longer. "Ten minutes walking? It took me hours."

"He has a car. Allie texted to let me know he's driving a red Camry."

Perplexed, Cali wondered how he got a car. No matter, there was no time to waste. She stuffed the rest of the toast into her mouth and sipped on the coffee as it was too hot to gulp down. She had to find something better to wear. Her tee shirt had a stain on the front. New clothes would be terrific but that wasn't happening at this time.

It was almost noon. Taking a quick peek out the living room window, she noted the sky was partly sunny, the birds were out, and the grass was greener than yesterday. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day.

She hit her bad foot against the step as she climbed the stairs too fast. *Damn ankle.* She'd wrap it later.

Cali kept her shorts on, but she changed into a white tank top.

"Here," Gran shouted up to her. "I have a tee shirt you can wear."

"Oh, good," she said and headed back down the stairs, trying to keep weight off her ankle.

The dark purple shirt had a psychedelic elephant pictured on the front. Not bad. She could live with it. Cali thanked her and slid it on. She went to the bathroom to fix her hair and load mascara on her lashes.

Five minutes later, Gran announced, "He's here."

Cali let out a squeal. She checked herself in the mirror. Her eyes were darker with the thick mascara. She pinched her cheeks and wished she had some lipstick. She opened the medicine cabinet and spotted the Vaseline. It would have to do. After applying it to her lips, she fluffed her hair and left for the living room.

A light shined in the window as a red car appeared from the woods. Cali sprinted for the front door. Gran, already waiting at the door, held out her arm to make her stop. "Let's figure out if he's alone first."

The Camry stopped where the dirt and rocks ended. Gran didn't have a true driveway. After the woods, it was a free-for-all on where to park. Cali calmed herself for her grandma's sake, though her heart pounded against her chest like the rain had done when it came pouring down on the bridge.

She saw his beard. His funky hair style. She shrieked. "It's Fish, Gran."

The driver's door opened. Cali held her breath as he got out of the car.

"He's a good-looking fellow."

Cali beamed. "Isn't he?"

Fish wore a white tee shirt and faded, relaxed jeans. Both were loose fitting but not too loose to hide his muscular chest and thighs. He'd trimmed his beard. It wasn't as wild. Like before, he tied the bottom of it together with a leather string.

"I wonder where he got the car." She couldn't believe he was there.

"I wonder where in the hell he got that hair style," Gran muttered.

Lonnie appeared from the side of the cabin and walked with caution toward the car. His untucked shirt bulged near his hip. He was packing, and he didn't bother hiding it. Gran always carried hers too. She remembered she was supposed to have hers as well. It was under the bed in the loft.

The two men shook hands after Fish introduced himself. They talked.

Cali rubbed her fingers together, antsy to get the okay from Gran to leave the cabin.

"Brunch will be ready in a few minutes." Gran lowered her arm. "When you're ready, invite him in so I can meet him."

"Okay." Cali gave herself one last check, smoothing out her tee shirt and adjusting her shorts before sprinting awkwardly across the porch and out the screen door.

Fish's eyes lit up, seeing her come out from the house. He stepped forward but stopped, glancing toward Lonnie as if to make sure he wasn't going to be shot at or tackled. Lonnie had already retreated, giving them space.

Cali bounced down the two stairs from the porch. She accidentally put too much weight on her sprained ankle and almost fell. Fish swept in and helped her as she threw her arms around him.

"You found me," she said and hung on as he lifted her up. She curled her legs like a clamp against his hips, while his hands cupped her butt to keep her up.

"I said I would." He grinned and kissed her.

Fish tasted of beer; evidently he came from the bar. She didn't care. They kissed long and hard, showing how much they missed each other.

When they broke from their kiss, she buried her head against his neck and inhaled his scent. When traveling, he'd been her safety net. Her companion. The last time together, they parted without a kiss goodbye, without words, when she ran to keep from getting caught by the detective. Cali hugged him tight, not believing he was physically here.

Cali unwound her legs from around him and stood. He kept her in a hug when he asked, "Do you know how hard it was to find you?"

"I do." She'd been in the same predicament five days ago.

"I asked about twenty people. No one knew who I was talking about. When I tried the bar, the bartender averted her eyes and made herself busy. I believe she called someone, like getting

the okay, because afterwards she gave me directions.”

“And now you’re here.” Cali beamed.

Fish stepped back to take her in. His smile was as wide as his face. “You look awesome. Really. You look great.” He brought her back into a hug and whispered in her ear, “I thought about you every day.”

“I did too.” She noted the Camry. “You bought a car?”

“Borrowed.”

“You made friends.” She hoped no girlfriends.

“Actually, my boss let me take his car for the day.”

Cali’s expression lightened with glee. “You have a job?”

He grinned. “I’m working at a music store. I’m teaching guitar and drum lessons. Mr. Yurmac, my boss, is super cool. Grumpy, but cool. He’s helped me out a lot.”

“How’d you find him? The job?”

“I was across the street, figuring out my next move, when I saw him trying to paint the sign above the store’s entrance. He kept getting interrupted, having to go into the store when a customer showed up, so I took an opportunity to help. I remembered your note to help someone else, so I did. In turn, he gave me a job and a place to stay above the store.”

“Wow.” Cali was happy for him. She smiled from her heart. “You did it, Fish. You made it to Nashville.”

He looked to the cabin. “And you made it to your grandma’s house.”

“Speaking of Gran, you need to meet her. She’s been in the kitchen cooking a ton of food.”

“Food?” He covered his stomach with his hand. “Real, homemade food?”

“Yes.” Cali laughed. She took his hand and led him toward the cabin.

Fish tugged on her hand, making her stop. “You’re limping.”

“I sprained my ankle when I got here.” She motioned toward the porch and kept going. “I’ll tell you about it, but first let’s eat.”

The aroma of warm, delicious food welcomed them as they entered the front door.

“My-oh-my.” Fish held his stomach again and inhaled through his nose as if delighted. “My stomach’s going to like this.”

She agreed. “Gran is a good cook.”

Two plates were already set, waiting for them. Her grandma appeared, coming from the back entryway, as they reached the table.

“Just in time.” She eyed Fish with a hard stare.

Cali wondered if Gran used her gift to determine if she liked him or not.

“He’s a good soul, Gran,” Cali said, a warning to keep her from scaring him away. “This is Fish. Fish, this is my grandma.”

“I’m pleased to meet you.” Fish offered his hand.

“You can call me Athena.” She wiped her right hand on her skirt before shaking his hand.

Her grandma must approve, Cali thought with relief. She wasn’t as gruff with him as she had been with her when she arrived.

“I’m glad Cali found you, ma’am.”

“Same here. Now have a seat.” She pointed to a chair at the table.

Her grandma served them grits, chicken, eggs, hash browns and bacon. Fish wasn’t shy. He filled his plate full.

“Aren't you going to join us, Gran?”

“You two eat. I’m sure you have some catching up to do.” She set a mug of coffee in front of each, then disappeared to the back entry and out the door.

Fish sniffed the dark liquid in front of him and then stared at Cali. “Is this ... is there whiskey in the coffee?”

She smiled. “There is. My grandma’s own roast.”

He closed his eyes and inhaled the steam as it swirled up from the mug. Fish took a sip, careful not to burn his mouth. Cali waited. He sipped again and then once more. “Ahh, this is good.”

“Wait until you taste her food.” Cali started eating.

Fish took samples of everything on his plate and savored each bite. Soon he ate nonstop, shoveling it in like he hadn’t eaten in a few days. He tried to be polite, especially when his plate was nearly empty, and he eyed the chicken.

“Go for it. Have as much as you want,” she said. He didn’t hesitate.

Cali decided to go first, updating him on the rest of her journey, so he could eat. She told him about finding her grandma, spraining her ankle, and learning to shoot a gun. She omitted telling him about Gran’s clients, the orbs, and her gift. Cali wasn’t comfortable talking about it yet when she was trying to grasp it herself.

“It’s good you’re learning to shoot,” Fish said after some thought. He helped himself to another chicken leg and grits. Instead of diving in again, he paused from eating to regard her. His thick eyebrows knitted together as he lowered his voice to ask. “Do you have any more news?”

She guessed what he meant. “No, I don’t. I know they’ll find me though.”

“Why do you say that?” Fish took a bite of his chicken leg.

“A feeling I have,” she said without relating her experience of hearing the voice. Stuffed, Cali wiped her hands on a napkin and pushed her plate to the side.

Fish leaned forward. “A private detective came to the music store and questioned me.”

“What detective?” Gran asked.

Cali jumped, not realizing she’d returned. Fish did the same. He looked to Cali.

“It’s okay,” she said. “What did he say?”

Fish glanced to Gran and then back to her. “People witnessed me hanging with you. He asked questions about us, about the night at the truck stop. I asked if you were in trouble, but he wouldn’t answer. Instead, he wanted to know where you were heading. I told him you weren’t sure.”

“What did he look like?” Gran asked.

“Tall, thin, mean.” He shrugged. “Short hair combed back. Five o’clock shadow.”

“What did he drive?”

“An old gold Nova.” Fish shot Cali a look. “Private Detective Craig Stelzer.”

She understood. He referred to the car and the man who had been searching for them when they rushed to put their clothes back on. Cali glanced over to her grandma and saw she was frowning. “What’s wrong, Gran?”

Her grandma stared at Fish. “And what makes you think he didn’t follow you here?”

Fish paled. “I-I ...” He fought for words and fidgeted in his chair. “I was careful. No one followed me.”

Gran wiped her hands on a towel. “You two can clean up here. I need to go do some business.”

Cali froze. Gran was not happy. She glanced over to Fish. His face twisted with shame as if realizing his coming there might not have been a smart idea.

“It’s okay.” Cali reached across the table and patted his hand. “My grandmother is being cautious.”

He kept his head down. She rose from her chair and went to assess the kitchen. The counter and sink were full of dirty dishes, pots, and pans. What a mess.

“I’m sorry, Cali.” Fish stood behind her and circled his arms around her waist to hug her. “I’m pretty sure I wasn’t followed.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She squeezed his hands with her own. “It’s bound to happen sooner or later, right?”

If the private detective came to the cabin, he’d arrest her and transport her back to Dempsey. If it was the traffickers ...

She shook her head, not wanting to go there.

Fish buried his face between her neck and shoulder. “You know I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you.”

“I know.” Cali turned and stepped back to make him look at her. She offered a smile. “Now, let’s clean this kitchen. I have a place I want to find in the woods.”

His face brightened as if wondering if he’d be liking it. Cali smiled but didn’t confirm.

Taking the dirty dishes out of the sink, she filled it with hot water and dish soap. Gran didn’t have a dishwasher, so they were going to be busy. As she prepped, Fish brought the used plates and silverware over and found room on the counter for them.

He kissed her shoulder and then moved to her neck. “Did I tell you how much I missed you?”

Cali shivered in delight. “I missed you too. How long can you stay?”

“I told Mr. Yurmac I’d have his car back tonight.” His hands brushed over her stomach and then rose to her breasts.

Cali’s head spun, thinking about their lovemaking in the woods. She wanted to turn around, grab his ass, and then devour him in kisses. But she also wanted to clean the kitchen before Gran came back. Between panted breaths, she said, “Let’s get this done.”

“Like having some intimate time?” He pressed his hips into her, and she felt his hardness.

“No.” Cali laughed. She flicked the suds on her hand at him. “The kitchen. We’ll have our time later.”

The incentive was enough for him to let go of her waist and start cleaning.

While he put the food away, he told her about the songs he was writing. He sang a few of the lyrics to test whether she liked the words and the melody. Fish told her about the cherry red guitar—a Fender—he had his eye on at the music store. It was going on sale next week, and he planned to put it on lay-a-way, hoping to pay it off in a month or two.

“A month or two is a long time.”

“Not when you’ve been without a guitar or money for a while. I can wait,” he said. “I’d rather have a good guitar with an awesome sound for an audition than a cheap one that won’t impress anyone.”

“Makes sense.”

The last pot to clean had grits stuck to the sides and bottom. Cali filled it with soap and water and left it in the sink to soak. She’d scrub and clean it later.

While Fish wiped down the counter, Cali wrote Gran a note, telling her where they were going. She went upstairs to grab the revolver from under the mattress and tucked it in her shorts.

“Wow,” he said when she came back down. He stared at the bulge near her hip. “You’re in serious protection mode.”

Cali patted the gun. “Gran wants me to wear it if I’m away from the cabin. You know. In case I need it.”

Fish glanced outside. His eyes darkened. “Do you have another one for me?”

“Do you know how to shoot?”

“I’m good with a water gun.”

She laughed. “How about a knife instead.”

Cali found the hunting knife from inside the table drawer where the phone sat. Yesterday, Gran had showed her where she hid different types of weapons for her to use if needed. For Fish, the knife was a perfect size for him to carry. She handed it to him. “Here. You can take this one.”

He unhooked the leather tab and pulled out the knife. His eyes widened at the heavy-duty blade. “Nice.”

“Let’s go.” Cali directed him to the back door.

“What’s in this cabin?” Fish asked as they left the cabin and passed the shack.

“Gran stores a few things in there. It’s kind of like a she-shed.”

“It looks pretty old,” he said, admiring the building. He slowed, almost stopping.

“It is.” Cali dug her walking stick into the ground as she waited for him. She’d seen it next to the couch and grabbed it at the last minute. Her ankle felt good, and she wanted to keep it that way.

When they headed into the woods, she warned him of the rocks and roots he could trip on, like Gran had done for her. Fish’s eyes were wide with awe as he enjoyed the towering trees, the ferns, and wildflowers.

“This is all your grandma’s property?”

“Yes. I believe she said she has about twenty acres.”

“Look at these flowers.” Fish pointed to a patch of bright red, yellow, and blue flowers in full bloom. He picked a yellow one, then handed it to her. “A flower for you, my lady.”

“Ahh, thank you.” Cali curtsied and then raised the flower to her nose to sniff its sweet fragrance. She then wove the stem into her hair to wear it above her left ear.

As they turned a corner, Fish stopped. “You’re kidding me. This is a gun range? Sweet.” He walked over to the mid-ranged stand. “Can I use it?”

“Later. Maybe next time.” She had other plans for them.

Cali leaned against the table and waited as he took in the range. Fish picked up the tin cans and reset them on the hay bundles. Stepping back, he removed the hunting knife from his back

pocket—sheath on. He pretended it was a sword and swung it back and forth.

The covered blade swooshed through the air in front of him as he prepared to fight. Looking back and forth, he watched for the enemy and then attacked the tin cans, letting them fly from the hay bundle. When the last can fell, he bowed to his invisible enemies and left the range to where she waited.

“Had to get it out of you, didn’t you?” she said, amused, and then clapped. “Nice show.”

Fish grinned as he tucked the knife into his back pocket again.

“Come on.” She left her spot and headed toward the path Gran had said led to a bridge. They were going on a hike to find it.

The path turned narrow and zigzagged down the steep side of a ravine. Cali led the way while Fish followed close behind. They concentrated on where they stepped as the slope tested her ankle.

“This is quite the hike you’re taking me on,” Fish grabbed a tree branch to help steady himself.

“I hope it’s worth it,” Cali said more to herself than to him. She was having second thoughts about her plan.

“You mean you haven’t been down this path?”

“Nope.”

“Then how do you know what it is that you’re going to show me?” He glanced behind him and made a sour face as if knowing they’d have to climb the hill on their way back.

“My grandma told me about a bridge that’s on this path.” She continued walking, determined to find it.

The trail improved as they reached the bottom of the ravine. Walking side by side again, they veered left through a grove of pine trees. Soon the shallow creek appeared beside them, and the water gurgled across the rocks.

“Look.” Fish pointed ahead of them. “Is that the bridge?”

Cali smiled. They found it. The arched bridge was built with dark stones. The design was crude but symmetrical. The stones were strategically placed to create the arch and walls that spanned the creek.

“It’s beautiful.” She soaked in the postcard view with the sun shining down on the rustic bridge and sparkling water. Her heart swelled with pride. She may not have met her granddad, but she could enjoy something he’d made with his hands. “My granddad built the bridge.”

“Now I get why you wanted to come here. I’d hang here all day if I could.” Fish scanned the scenery, taking it in. He nudged her. “Let’s check it out.”

They climbed a slight hill to get to the bridge. Rocks lined each side of the path in front of where the bridge started. Fish took the walking stick from her, then he moved aside so she could walk across the narrow span first. Cali let her fingers glide along the top of the three-foot walls on each side of her. A few stones were missing, and she wondered if Gran thought about replacing them.

“You know, bridges could be our thing,” Fish said as they stopped midpoint to gaze down at the water flowing at a swift pace.

They weren’t too high above the creek, but enough where it would hurt if they jumped or fell. Cali leaned into Fish when he placed his arm around her waist, and they took in the view of the creek weaving through the woods and then disappearing.

“We do have a thing for bridges.” She chuckled, remembering how he had scared the crap out of her after she took shelter under the bridge. “You’ll have to write us a song.”

With that, he started singing “Ode to Billy Joe” and how the namesake jumped off the Tallahatchie bridge.

“Stop.” Cali giggled and hit him on his shoulder. “That’s terrible. We need a love song.”

Fish stopped singing and pulled her in again. “I will write you a love song. I promise.”

His hold was more loving than casual as he pressed himself against her. The slight breeze caught the scent of his clean skin. Cali inhaled the musky fragrance. She turned toward him at the same time he faced her. They met in a kiss.

Cali melted into him. She loved how his hands gently touched her, caressing her silhouette like it was a precious work of art. He warmed her insides, stoking her desire for him.

“Can we find a place?” he asked huskily, as if telling her he was ready for her as well.

Cali scoured the area around them. Going under the bridge was out—not enough room. The side of the creek, from where they came, was rocky and heavy with trees. The other side was better with a flat, grassy spot a few feet upstream, perfect for a little privacy. She pointed toward it, and they crossed the bridge. He led the way and picked a spot where the grass was soft and slightly even. He set down her walking stick.

“I thought about you constantly. Morning, day, and night.” Fish pulled her closer until no space was between them. “Decisions I made were for you.” He kissed her tenderly. “For us.”

Cali fell for him. Hard. He captured her heart with his words. She believed him.

She placed her hand on his chest. She stared into his pure brown eyes. “I thought about you as well. Every day. I still can’t believe you’re here.”

“I had to see you.”

His hands cradled her head as he kissed her with more urgency. Their tongues danced

together.

Tired of feeling his shirt instead of his firm chest, Cali pulled off his tee shirt and let it fall next to him. He slid her purple tee shirt over her head, taking the tank top with it. He unclasped her bra. Cali dropped her shoulders and leaned forward so the straps fell down her arms, to the ground.

“Are you okay with this?” Fish’s breathing turned heavy.

She caressed his jaw, then tugged at his beard. “Take me, Mr. Fish.”

He unbuckled his belt and unsnapped his jeans. As he pulled his pants down, the knife fell out of his pocket. He stopped to pick it up and set it on the ground where he could find the blade if needed.

Cali removed her gun and placed it next to the knife—barrel away from them. She was about to remove her shorts when Fish stopped her. “That’s my job.”

Using his pointer fingers, he inched down her shorts, letting the lace of her undies appear like candy. He bent to his knees and kissed her belly. Desire rushed through Cali. The heat spread between her legs. She moaned and had to grasp his shoulders to keep from swaying.

Fish applied more belly kisses to her stomach as his hand reached up and found her nipple, already hard and eager for his touch. Cali moaned again. He stopped kissing her to finish removing her panties.

Her eyes turned to his body, so close to hers. “Commando, I see,” she said with a tease. “Aren’t you cocky.”

“I am cocky.” He had no issue showing off his manhood and letting it spring in front of her.

Everything about him was perfect—his smooth chest, the ripped six-pack, the tight curls below his belly, and his manhood. Pulling him down, Cali flipped over to straddle him. She ran her fingers down his chest, to his stomach, and then grabbed his manhood with her hand. Fish moaned as she buried him in her mouth and played with him until he shook, close to the point of no return.

“Not fair,” he said between breaths. He grabbed her waist and turned her onto her back. “Undies off.”

Cali kicked them off her ankles while he fumbled through his jean pocket. He found a condom and put it on. Soon he was on top of her with his hardness pressed against her skin. She spread her legs and led him to her sweet spot. The feeling of him inside her was like a million stars sparkling in the sky. The connection between her and him was electric. Energy. She couldn’t explain their bond, but it was there. They were a perfect fit. His rhythm grew faster. His breath shorter.

Fish came with a moan, then collapsed on top of her. Cali traced a finger up, down, and around his back as he recovered. His beard tickled yet scratched her breasts and she loved it.

“You are amazing,” he said into her shoulder. “Every day I thank my lucky stars that I found you.”

Cali smiled. She had thought about a million stars sparkling in the sky and he had thought about lucky stars. It had to be fate why they met. But she had to correct him. “I think I found you.”

Fish lifted his head and raised an eyebrow at her. “Maybe. But I know one place that I found, and you like.”

As he slithered down her body, Cali didn't argue.

Chapter 24 – Not Wanting to Say Goodbye

The sun descended toward the trees, warning Fish the day was passing. Only a few more minutes, then he'd nudge her. He loved the warmth of the sun on his back and Cali's softness as his pillow. He ran his hand over her breasts, down her side, and around her hip to her thigh to memorize her curves. Fish wasn't sure of the next time he'd see her, and he needed to memorize every inch of her for his dreams at night.

"We better dress and head back," Cali said. Like him, she didn't act like she was in a hurry to move. "I don't want Gran to come looking for us."

Fish moaned in protest, but he agreed. He'd been subject to her grandma's burning stare when she asked if the detective had followed him. He didn't want to give her another reason to banish him from seeing Cali. He rolled away and rose to his knees. But it was so hard not to touch her.

"I could be with you, day and night, for a thousand years." He pressed one last kiss to each of her breasts.

Cali pushed on his shoulders when he stayed too long. "Up."

"Fine." This time, he moved away and found his pants. While he dressed, he watched as she put on her clothes. His heart swelled like a classic love song that would never get old. They had something strong. Undeniably strong. Fish felt it in his soul.

"I wish you didn't have to leave tonight," she said, putting on her tank top and shirt.

"Same here." Fish hooked the knife in his pants pocket. He grabbed her gun and handed it to her when she was ready.

Dressed, they walked to the creek near the bridge to watch the water flow. Fish found two flat rocks near the bank. He tried skipping the larger rock against the current. It skipped once, then disappeared. He meant it when he said that he could stay there. He wondered how she felt.

"I never did ask you. Are you happy here?" He tried skipping the second rock, but it sank without skipping. He spotted another flat rock in the water and picked it up. He positioned the stone in his hand but stopped in midair when she didn't answer. His question must have thrown

her off guard because she frowned like she didn't know how to respond. "You feel safe here, don't you? Like, with your grandma?"

"I'm safe with her," she agreed.

"But ..." He noted her hesitation.

She sat down on a rock to retie her shoe. "I don't know how long I'll feel or be safe. The traffickers are still after me. The police and the detective as well."

Fish dropped the rock into the water. "It won't be forever. They'll lose interest. That guy ... Mr. B ... will find someone else to stalk."

Cali shrugged. "Maybe. But is it fair?"

"No." Fish agreed, point taken. "But it's not fair to you either."

"And what about the detective coming after me?"

"I'm guessing you'll have some legal stuff you'll need to deal with."

She nodded. "My grandma said she's waiting for her lawyer to call. Something about her being on vacation. Hopefully we'll hear from her soon."

Cali spotted a rock on the ground and picked it up. She tossed it back and forth in her hands. Fish went to sit on a rock wedged between hers and a larger rock. He picked out the pieces of grass from her hair.

"Someday," she said and looked at him with a smile. "Someday I'd like to visit you in Nashville."

"Visit?" He emphasized the word like he was offended. "How about live with me?"

"Right now, I'm where I need to be, until this mess gets cleared up." She didn't take his bait. Instead, she made a face at him. "It sucks right now."

"You know, I'm as much involved as you are."

Cali's head popped up as if not understanding.

"I fought the trafficker off Bobby."

"I remember you telling me. You were there to help."

"I should have stayed. I could have given the police a report. I was a witness." Fish kicked himself over and over for not staying. "I fucked that up."

Cali stared at him as if she processed what he said and justified it. "Yes, you should have stayed. I should have too. But we didn't know. It happened so fast. We did what Bobby wanted us to do. I reacted. I ran. You reacted. You left."

Fish couldn't justify it. "I'll call the detective. He gave me his card. I can let him know you were defending yourself."

"No." Cali shook her head.

“I’ll tell them how I was the one to shoot the traffickers.” He’d do anything for her.

“No!” Cali’s eyes widened in horror. “You can’t take the blame. This is my mess. Not yours.”

She stood and wanted to pace, but there wasn’t room by the creek. She headed toward the bridge.

Fish didn’t follow. He was the worst person ever. He didn’t deserve her.

She must have seen his distress, because she retraced her steps and stood in front of him.

“I’m not judging you, Fish.” Cali ran her fingers across his ponytail. When he didn’t move, she leaned over and hugged him.

He groaned. “I failed at helping you.”

“No, you didn’t. It’s just a shitty circumstance that happened. And I happened to be the one they picked.” She rubbed his shoulder. “We’ll get through this. Let’s take it day by day.”

Fish snorted.

She patted his head. “We have to go.”

They got to the bridge when Cali remembered her walking stick. Fish went back to retrieve it.

“See,” she said with a gleam. “You helped me.”

He groaned but couldn’t refrain from smiling at her attempt to humor him. The hike up the ravine was hard. Fish walked in front of Cali and gave her a hand or a lift when needed.

“Let’s take a break,” he said when they reached the gun range.

“Good idea.” She stopped to catch her breath. She leaned heavily on her stick to keep the weight off her ankle.

Cali needed to get off her feet. He spotted the prep area.

“Hold the stick,” he said and lifted her off her feet. He carried her over to the buffet table and set her down. He stood in front of her and squeeze between her legs.

He had another thing he wanted to get off his chest.

“Hey.” He moved in closer and touched his forehead to hers. “I’m sorry I asked you to come to Nashville. It was selfish of me. You have your own journey, like me. I remember you said you didn’t know your grandma. This is your time to do so.”

Cali’s face softened. She slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “I will come to Nashville. I promise. And you are right. This is my time to find out who my grandma is and who I am.” She hesitated, then became serious. “I’m discovering I have a lot to learn from my grandma. Things I didn’t know I could do.”

Fish pulled back to see her face better. “What do you mean? Like learning to shoot a gun?”

“No.” She patted the table next to her for him to sit. Fish moved away from her and hopped onto the table. When he was situated, she continued. “Gran has a gift.”

She waited as if to see his reaction. Fish was curious. He pushed a strand of her hair away from her cheek. He wanted her to know he was open to whatever she had to say. “Tell me. I’d love to hear.”

Satisfied with his response, she said, “I guess the women in our family have this gift.”

“Does this have something to do with your grandma being called the Orb Lady?”

“Yes, it does.” Cali seemed impressed he’d caught on.

“So, what does she do? Run after orbs like a ghostbuster?”

She laughed. “No. Gran helps people. They bring her photos with orbs in them. She can tell them who the orbs are and why they’re in the picture. Or what happened to them.”

Fish thought back to some photos he took. He remembered one photo he took at a bar, a few years back. The band played in Central City, an old gold mining town. The back of the bar was super cool with ornate wood and a huge mirror. He had to take a picture of it. In the photo, an orb glowed next to the bartender. At first he thought it was a reflection in the mirror, but it was too low, positioned more toward the bottles of booze lined up on the counter. He turned to Cali. “You’re talking about the glowing circles that can show up in pictures.”

“I am.”

“I’ve seen them. Is your grandma a psychic?”

“Something like it.” She explained how Gran met with two clients since she’d arrived. “The porch on the shanty is where they sit for a reading.”

“Makes sense now, why everyone would know her.” Fish nodded his head.

“Thank you,” she said.

Fish jerked his head. He didn’t understand. “Why?”

“For not taking it as a joke or as nonsense. For believing me.”

He took her hand. He never wanted Cali to think she couldn’t talk to him. He wasn’t sure how to respond, but he did catch on to what she had mentioned earlier. “You said it’s a gift the women in your family have. Correct?”

She nodded.

“Does this mean you?”

Cali shrugged and contorted her mouth as if unsure. “We’re working on it. I can’t do what Gran does and read orbs. At least not yet. She said I’ll be able to eventually.”

“I’ll be damned,” Fish muttered. He sang, “I got me a witchy woman. Living in the woods ...”

She made a face. “We’re not witches.”

He laughed. “Don’t get in a tizzy. It’s cool. And it makes sense. You have something about you. Your aura. Something good, different. I knew and felt it the first time we met.”

“Yeah, and someone else thinks so too.” She scowled.

Fish knew she meant the trafficker. The old creepy guy she told him about.

“They’ll catch him.”

“I hope so,” she said. Her expression changed as if remembering something. She didn’t continue.

Now he had to know.

“What’s up?” Fish asked and waited for her to spill.

Cali frowned. “Have you met anyone in Nashville? Like a woman with short black hair? Freckles on her cheeks?”

Fish stiffened. He tried to recall if he’d described Jolene to her. “What about her?”

Cali’s voice faltered. “Did you meet a woman?”

“No,” he said quickly to keep her from getting mad. “I didn’t meet anyone in Nashville. Promise. I’ve been too busy.”

She swallowed hard, but he saw the hurt in her eyes. The violet streaks thinned as she stared at him. “Then who is she?”

“You described Jolene, my ex-fiancée.” Fish didn’t like where the conversation might go. He jumped off the table and faced her. “Did you see her or something? Like a premonition or ...?”

“I had a vision. The woman was behind you, in a room. Did Jolene come see you?”

His jaw tightened. “No, but she called me the other day. I didn’t answer.”

“Oh.” Cali lowered her head but her eyes, sad as hell, looked up at him. “Are you over her, Fish? Do I need to step back?”

He groaned, frustrated. “It’s over between us. I’m serious. I have no desire to go back to her. What I am is mad at myself because I didn’t leave her sooner.”

Cali’s gaze dropped.

“Hey.” Fish nudged her, wanting her to look at him again. He placed his hands on her thighs and waited until she looked up.

“Trust me, Jolene was wrong for me in so many ways. You and I are right for each other. We have a connection. I didn’t have one with her. I did what I thought I was told with Jolene. You didn’t have to tell me anything. You didn’t give orders.”

She grunted with a touch of anger. “You’re comparing me to her?”

“No.” He squeezed her thighs. “My point is that, for the first time, I have someone I want to protect. I want to be with you. Always.”

He caressed her cheek as she stared at him with her big violet eyes.

Fish started to worry when she didn’t say anything, yet he didn’t want to push her into

saying anything either.

After what seemed like forever, she said, "I believe you."

"Thank God." Fish let out his breath, not realizing he'd been holding it in. He gave her a solid, tight hug, thankful she understood. He wanted to tell her that he loved her but feared she'd back away.

"One more question," she said and pushed him away as if to get his full attention. "Is Jolene over you?"

He pondered for a moment to make sure, respecting her question.

"Jolene is over me. She's the one who killed our relationship months ago. There was no love, no warmth, no affection from her. It was all status. Besides, she had found someone else." He paused again. "She couldn't stand me in her life for one more second."

"Something's not right." Cali seemed adamant. "I know this sounds odd, but the vision of her in your apartment shook me. Like it's not over."

"Jolene has no idea where I live."

"I'd be careful," Cali warned him. "I can't connect the dots yet to get the full picture, but she was there."

"I will be careful," he promised. "I have no intention of seeing her again."

Fish cupped Cali's ass and lifted her off the table.

She grabbed his shoulders. "What are you doing?"

"I'm carrying you." He tucked his hands underneath her thighs, trying to press her against the core of his body. He strained to keep them both upright. "I'm ... doing ... the ... gentlemanly thing."

Cali slapped him on his shoulder. "It's very kind of you. Now put me down."

His foot hit a rock and he lost his grip on her thighs. Cali dropped her legs, and Fish fell forward. He twisted, taking her down with him but managed for her to fall on top of him.

The air exploded from his lungs. He couldn't catch his breath.

"You okay?" Cali rolled off and hovered over him as he wheezed.

Fish nodded. Little white dots floated in front of him.

"Sit up." She helped him. She made him stay on the ground until he caught his breath. When he managed short breaths, she patted him on the shoulder and said, "Great job there, Buddy."

He tried to laugh but it hurt. She kept her hand on his back and waited until his breathing became regular.

"I'm good," he whispered and lowered his head, embarrassed by his dumbass move. "When's that sprain of yours going to heal?"

“As soon as I stop using it too much.” Cali examined her ankle and frowned as if annoyed with it. “I guess I should be grateful I didn’t break it.”

Fish stood and took her walking stick. He exaggerated how much he needed it more than she did.

Cali laughed. “You’re so full of it.” She tried grabbing it, but he kept the stick close to his chest.

When she planted her fists on her hips, he gave it to her. “You win.”

“Rightly so.” She limped away with the aid of her stick.

When they reached the shanty, Cali started to say something but stopped. She placed her stick in front of him and he stopped. She pointed with her other hand toward the cabin. He spotted red and chrome. A truck was parked in front of the cabin.

Fish hooked his arm into hers and helped her sprint from the shanty to the side of the cabin. He flattened himself against the wall and she followed his lead. He motioned for her to look over him. “Do you recognize the truck?”

Cali shook her head. “It could be one of Gran’s clients, but they mostly use the back driveway.”

Voices.

He held Cali as they stayed against the cabin and listened. Athena and another female stepped into the porch from the living room door. Their voices were too low and muffled for him to hear what they were saying. By the way Cali held her right ear up, Fish guessed she struggled to hear as well.

Athena and the woman with long, black hair appeared through the porch screen as they headed to the truck. They talked for a while before the woman opened the door. Cali’s grandma handed her a brown bag.

Fish glanced to Cali, questioning if she knew what was in the bag.

“Coffee,” she mouthed.

The woman started the truck and backed it up.

“She’s gone,” Fish said after stepping closer to watch her leave.

Cali led the way as they walked around the cabin to the front.

Athena spotted them coming. She wiped her hands on her skirt and waited.

“Who was the woman, Gran?”

“Someone from town. A friend who works at the liquor store.”

Fish didn’t like the way she scowled. Something was up, but it wasn’t his place to ask.

Athena turned to address him. “It’s best you head back to your place. A storm’s coming and

will hit Nashville tonight.”

As if on cue, the wind picked up and the air cooled. Fish doubted Athena was worried about his safety. Did the woman in the truck warn her about something? He was about to say he didn't mind driving in the rain when Cali tugged on his tee shirt and cut him off.

“You should probably go.”

Fish nodded reluctantly.

Cali must have noticed his disappointment because she said, “if this storm is nasty, like it feels it'll be, you might run into hail. You wouldn't want to get your boss's car full of hail damage.”

She had a point. He didn't like it, but she was right. The last thing he needed was to wreck Mr. Yurmac's car. He hoped his boss would let him borrow it again next week to visit Cali.

He faced Athena and smiled politely. “It was nice meeting you, ma'am.” He bowed his head. “Thank you for the lunch. It was awesome.”

Athena's face softened. “Nice to meet you as well. Drive safe.”

She left to enter the cabin.

Cali grabbed his hand, and they walked to the Camry. “When can I see you again?”

“I have a couple days off next week. I'll see if I can borrow the car again.”

“I'd like that.”

“Oh,” Fish said when he remembered his gift for Cali. He'd meant to give it to her when he first arrived but forgot. He held up his pointer finger for her to wait as he opened the back passenger door and reached inside to grab the bag on the seat.

“I bought you something.”

“For me?” Cali's face lit up.

“Here.” Fish pulled out a cell phone and handed it to her. “This is one of those pre-pay phones. I bought it yesterday and set up the basics for you. My number is in Contacts. You can call me anytime.”

“Wow.” She seemed pleased with the gift. “I've seen these in stores, and I always wondered about them. If they'd be a good choice.”

“What's nice is that no one should be able to trace your calls. But to be safe, don't call anyone else. Only me.”

“Got it.” Cali took the phone and held it to her chest as if it were a treasured jewel. “I miss having my phone. She reached out and hugged him. “Thank you.”

He grinned. “You're welcome. And I mean it when I say you can call me anytime. If you need me, I'll be here. I will find a way to get here.”

“I believe you,” Cali said.

He curled his arms around her waist and held her tight. Fish drew in a deep breath and caught her scent—fresh like a light summer breeze.

Cali looked at the sky. “Gran was right. The storm’s coming.”

Fish followed her gaze up at the sky. The clouds weren’t bad yet, but they were creeping closer. He said, “I know. I should go.”

She raised the cellphone camera. “We need a picture of us.”

He helped her take two snapshots of them. “You’ll have to send them to me.”

“I will.” She tucked the phone into the back pocket of her shorts.

Fish shut the back passenger door and opened the driver door.

“Oh.” It was Cali’s turn to remember something. “Wait here. Don’t go yet.”

She ran into the cabin, ignoring her bad ankle. Her limp became more pronounced. Fish was going to yell at her to slow down but changed his mind. Instead, he leaned against the Camry to wait and was glad she liked the phone. It was a last-minute idea when he’d run into Walmart to buy a snack last night.

A few minutes later, she came out of the cabin. This time she hobbled. Cali had something in her hand. Out of breath, she stopped in front of him. “Here.”

She placed a roll of cash into his hand.

“Cali.” Fish almost dropped the money. His eyes widened as he stared at the cash. He extended his hand to give it back to her. “I can’t take this.”

“Yes, you can.” She pushed his hand back. “I want to help you buy the guitar. The one on sale next week.”

Fish’s face heated with embarrassment. “I can’t take your money.”

He tried giving it back again, but she covered his hand with both of hers to stop him.

“No.” She eyed him like a mother would a stubborn child. “You need a guitar so you can find work as a musician.”

Cali was right. He did.

“Consider it an investment in our future.”

He really did need the guitar to audition. If he bought the Fender on the first day of the sale, he wouldn’t have to worry about anyone else buying it. He could also practice, get to know the guitar.

“All right. An investment.” He stashed the cash in his jean pocket.

Smiling, she said, “Lucifer Fish Guthrie, you’re going to make a name for yourself. You hear me?”

Fish laughed. "I do hear you. And I will."

He kissed her goodbye. It wasn't the long, lustful kiss that he wanted to give her, but a nice one. He had a feeling her grandma watched.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." He squeezed her hands.

"I'll call you." She gave him another short, sweet kiss.

"Cali." Athena called out from the porch.

Gran's warning call. He was right. She had been watching.

After he backed up, he waved and blew Cali a kiss.

"You and me," he mouthed.

She patted her chest as if to tell him that her heart beat only for him.

Chapter 25 – Wasted Time

Brigitta stared at the neon *Dempsey Truckstop & Diner* sign above the building. She shifted her old Toyota Corolla into park. Normally she parked in back, like an employee, but not this time. Over ten years of her life had been spent working her ass off here, which included double and triple shifts to make ends meet. She didn't miss it, even knowing she had no income.

As she got out of her car, she regarded the building in a different light. The place had aged in the last few years and begged for a facelift. The outside needed a good coat of paint, a new sign, and windows. Inside, she knew the place needed new kitchen equipment, dinnerware, and updates to the entire dining area.

The only thing that kept customers coming in was the food and service. Prices were decent, too, for most menu items. But what she hadn't noticed, having to hustle all the time, was the type of customers who came in to eat. More and more they'd become seedier. A few times, she'd called the police on a suspicious person who acted too nervous to be a normal traveler. And damn her for not seeing what was under her nose.

She should have noticed her daughter was targeted by a trafficker. They came in all sizes, ages, and looks. The one who wanted Cali happened to be a creepy, old guy.

Brigitta tightened her hands into fists to release the anger inside her. She had to stay and keep calm when she entered the diner. Her ex-boss's truck was parked in its normal spot near the side of the diner. He was the one she wanted to confront.

The warning bells jingled when she opened the door.

Hank was behind the counter, next to the kitchen. He was talking to Abby but stopped when she came in. His eyes lit up and a big grin shot across his face.

"Look, Abby. It's Brig. She's back."

Abby spun around. Her face brightened.

Brigitta should have warned her friend she was coming in for a short visit. But then, she was afraid Abby might not have kept it a secret. She stared at Abby, hoping she'd get the message to disappear.

The server's smile dropped. She took the hint and left to help a customer. Good girl, Brigitta

thought.

Nearby, two men sat at the counter, regulars she knew by name. When they smiled at her, she glared at them, more in warning, until they lowered their heads and kept to themselves.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come back,” Hank said as if she’d returned from vacation instead of being laid off. “I can put you on the schedule to work tomorrow. Your choice of shifts.”

Brigitta’s attention returned to her ex-boss. She couldn’t believe his ego was swollen enough to believe she’d return. “Really, Hank? You think I’d return to work after what you did to me and Cali?”

His grin dropped as if realizing this wasn't going to be a pleasant visit. He wiped his forehead as he glanced at the customers sitting at the counter.

He kept his voice light as he motioned to the back. “Let’s go to my office.”

“Fuck you, Hank,” she said and knew the two men heard. Maybe the two truckers in the first booths did as well.

“Office,” he ordered through gritted teeth.

Brigitta stepped closer and pointed her finger at him. “You took money—payment—from those men. You sold my daughter to traffickers.”

He raised his voice a notch. “I didn’t sell her to anyone.”

The diner became quiet. Only background music played.

Hank’s face turned red, aware all eyes were on him. He flipped around and headed for his office. The door slammed behind him.

“Coward,” Abby said as she appeared next to Brigitta. “It’s been bad here, Brig. Real bad. I’m guessing he’s in trouble.”

“He should be,” Brigitta snapped. She stepped past the register to the prep area and stared at the closed door. If she had a hammer to smash every bone in his large hands she would. Let him feel the pain she held in her heart.

Brigitta squeezed her fists tighter, making the knuckles white. She took a deep breath, then slowly expelled the air from her lungs. Stay calm. She glanced at Abby before heading toward the office. Brigitta opened the door without knocking.

Hank was sitting at his desk. He held a pencil in his hand as he scrutinized a spreadsheet in front of him.

The office was missing something, but she wasn’t sure what. The room seemed like it had more space. Whatever. She didn’t care.

“What happened to you, Hank?” She looked at her ex-boss in anger, frustration, and a little bit of sadness. “Who did you sell your soul to? Mr B?”

He shot her a hard look, displaying cold, bloodshot eyes.

“You put my daughter in danger, Hank. Danger.” Her voice trembled. “How could you? Because of you, I may never see her again.”

“She did it herself.” Hank threw the pencil down on the desk. The vein in his neck thickened. “Cali was always flirting with the truckers, swinging her ass around them.”

Brigitta sucked in her breath. She stayed calm, not letting him intimidate her. Still, she had to defend her daughter. “Cali was no flirt.”

Hank grunted as he wiped his hands on his apron. “You’re delusional.”

Brigitta’s anger spouted like a mountain erupting. She stepped closer and slapped him hard on the cheek.

He grimaced but didn’t move.

A sharp pain ran through her arm from the impact. She ignored it. “Call them off, Hank.”

“I can’t.” He lowered his head. His shoulders slumped.

“You can’t? Or you won’t?” She had no sympathy for him.

Hank rubbed his cheek where she’d slapped him. He looked at her, making eye contact for a second, before lowering his gaze to his lap. “My hands are tied. These men go for the jugular. Nothing gets in their way. Including me.”

“Yet you took their money.”

“I had no choice.” Her ex-boss waved his hand over the pile of bills on his desk.

His eyes glazed. He was done with her.

Brigitta realized her words, her anger, wouldn’t do anything. He was emotionally detached. She wiped a tear from her cheek. “You’ll go to hell for this, Hank.”

He glanced at her. His face said he didn't doubt it.

Abby waited for her by the register. She chewed on her fingernail as she always did when nervous. “I heard the slap. Are you okay?”

“No.” Brigitta tried controlling her emotions. The urge to burst into tears and lean against her friend for support was close to happening. She gulped in another breath. “I’m not.”

“Like I said, this place has gone to hell.” Abby grabbed a napkin. The lead server folded the corner around her finger and dipped it in her water glass. “Come here. Let’s wipe the mascara off your face.”

Brigitta stood still as her friend wiped the skin under her eyes. She asked, “Have the cops come in? Have they said anything to you?”

“They’ve been here a few times. Some other undercover cops as well. They’ve been talking to Hank.” She lowered her voice. “They took his computer and files.”

“Good,” Brigitta said, realizing why the office seemed less cluttered. His file boxes weren’t stacked against the back wall. The space where his computer had been on his desk was empty. “I hope they find the money he took from those men.”

A couple, jumping to get out of there, approached the register to pay their bill. The woman clutched the man’s arm with one arm and had a death-grip around her purse with the other. The man threw down two twenty-dollar bills. “Keep the change.”

Abby fell into work-mode and smiled at the couple. “Thanks for coming in. Enjoy your day.”

The woman stared at her as if she was nuts. When the bells chimed and they practically ran across the parking lot, Brigitta couldn’t help but chuckle. “They won’t be back.”

“That’s not the first time customers have left in a hurry,” Abby said.

Brigitta scanned the diner. Only five tables were occupied. The men at the counter had left. A few crumpled bills had been tossed near their plates. She hated leaving Abby. Her friend deserved better.

“You need to quit, Abby. Find a different job.”

“I know.” Her eyes glanced across the room. “It’s hard though, you know. I’ve been here a long time.”

“Call me when you’re ready to leave Dempsey,” Brigitta said.

Abby frowned and stared at her. “What do you mean? You’re leaving?”

“I can’t stay here.”

“Kyle?”

“I’m going alone.”

Abby saddened, like she’d lost her best friend. Brigitta felt the same way. How many times had they talked about their troubles, jobs, and men. Abby divorced her husband eight years ago when she caught him with another woman. Brigitta was there for her when she’d lost everything.

A flash of headlights caught her attention, and Brigitta glimpsed out the window. A police car pulled into the parking lot. Another followed.

“Here we go again. I wonder what they want this time.” Abby gave Brigitta a look of dread. With a sigh, she tossed her order tablet on the counter. “One of these days, this place will be forced to close down.”

Brigitta didn’t want anything to do with the police right now. Since they had no leads in finding Cali or the traffickers, why bother talking to them? Besides, she didn’t want to explain why she was at the diner or get asked other questions she continued to answer the same way.

“Come here, Abby.” She grabbed her friend by the arm and pulled her in for a quick hug. Brigitta whispered into her friend’s ear. “I’ll call you later. Let you know where I am.”

“Are you going to find Cali?”

“I can't say,” she said truthfully.

Abby bit her lip. Her eyes welled. “You ... take care.”

“Stay strong.” Brigitta gave her one last hug. She opened the door and the bells jingled as she fled out the door.

She lowered her head as she passed the two policemen, still in their cars, talking in the parking lot. Brigitta recognized the tall one assigned to the case. He'd been stationed near her trailer, waiting to see if Cali returned.

“Mrs. McGraw.”

Damn. She almost made it. Her hand was on the door handle of her car. She closed her eyes and raised her chin to look at the detective as he walked toward her.

“Mrs. McGraw,” he said again, this time in greeting.

Brigitta scanned the parking lot and spotted his gold Nova parked to the side, away from the diner. She wondered if he'd been following her. If so, she'd have to be careful.

“Do you have a minute?”

She didn't say anything but gave him her attention. He looked good in his leather jacket. Or maybe it was his tan skin contrasting against the crisp white shirt underneath it. Either way, he was handsome. Too bad his eyes were like stone. No warmth to them.

“I'm Private Detective Craig Stelzer, in case you've forgotten.”

“I haven't forgotten.”

“I'm wondering if you've heard from your daughter yet.” He was right to the point. Doing his job.

“I haven't,” she said and opened her car door. She flung her purse onto the passenger seat. One foot was on the floorboard as she turned to face him. Thankfully, she'd had enough sense to place her packed bag in the trunk. If he'd seen it, as he tried looking inside now, he would have questioned her. Brigitta drew his attention back to her. “Do you know where my daughter is?”

He glanced at her, catching the sarcasm. Stelzer ignored it. “I don't.”

“Then shouldn't you be out looking for her?” The words came out bitter. Brigitta cursed herself for being bitchy, but she was tired.

A slight smile, showing no warmth, curled on his lips as he stood with his legs apart. “I am working to do so, ma'am. I know your daughter has been traveling to Tennessee and hanging out with a young man named Lucifer Guthrie. Also known as Fish.”

What?

Her foot left the car and went to the pavement. What would Cali be doing with a stranger?

“What do you mean? Did you see her with him?” Her heart raced.

“No. He was here at the diner on the night of the shooting.”

The blood drained from Brigitta’s face. She held onto the top of the open driver’s door to keep her knees from collapsing. “You mean she’s with one of the traffickers?”

“No. Someone passing through.”

“Is she in danger? Is he dangerous?” Her eyes widened as her mind raced, going through the last few nights at the diner with her daughter. She didn't remember Cali talking to anyone. Bobby always stopped in to play cribbage with her, but the detective didn't say his name. Besides, Bobby was still in the hospital.

“The assumption is he’s helping her. The boy claims he hung out with her for a few days as she traveled through Tennessee. He was heading to Nashville.”

“So he’s not dangerous?” Brigitta only cared if Cali was safe.

“He’s not a known trafficker.”

Brigitta placed her hand over her heart in relief.

“Witnesses spotted them together in Camden, Tennessee.” He waited for a reaction. Brigitta kept her face expressionless, like the detective’s. “Do you know anyone in Tennessee who she might be running to?”

Damn. He set her up. “My mother lives in Tennessee, or I’m guessing she still does. I haven’t had any contact with her in ... fifteen years.”

“Why not?”

Stelzer would think she was crazy if she told him it was about their gift. Mama’s little readings. “I was young. We quarreled. I didn’t want to live her life.”

“Has your daughter ever been to Nashville? Know anyone there?”

Brigitta shook her head. “Cali’s never been to Nashville. We’ve been stuck here in Dempsey. She might know truckers who’ve been or lived there, but no one she’d visit.”

Or would she? Now Brigitta was unsure. If her mama wasn’t at the farmhouse, Cali may have gone to Nashville. Or hitched rides from truckers. Her anxiety rose.

“Detective Stelzer, you said my daughter hung out with this Fish guy. Did you talk to him? Did he say how she was? Can I talk to him?”

“You can’t talk to him at this time. What’s important is we need to find her.”

Asshole. He was of no help.

She snapped. “And how about those men who were at the diner? The traffickers? Did you find them?”

“No, we haven’t.” He paused. “However, they have been spotted in Tennessee.”

Brigitta swore under her breath. They *couldn't* find Cali.

"Why are you here at the diner?" he asked.

She snorted. "I came to give Hank—my ex-boss—hell. Tell him to call them off."

His eyebrow rose.

"I yelled at him for doing this to Cali. To me. I saw Hank take money from Mr. B, so I know he's involved."

The detective stood straighter. "Did you tell this to the officers who questioned you?"

She shrugged. "I don't remember. I think so."

He glanced toward the diner and then back to her. "If your daughter contacts you, call me." Stelzer handed her another card. "If you want to keep Calista alive, you'll need to help us. Anything you hear or remember. Call me." He stepped away from her but stopped. "By the way ..."

Brigitta waited.

"The girl who used to work here ..."

"Mandy?"

He nodded. "They found her in Texas. She'd been put to work in a sex factory."

The thought made her shudder. So sad. "Is she okay?"

"Unfortunately, no." His voice softened. "She died of an overdose. The police found her dumped in the river."

Brigitta lowered her head and closed her eyes. She prayed for Mandy's soul.

"Ms. McGraw, we need to find your daughter before the traffickers do. We don't want her to be unfortunate like Mandy."

He walked away.

Brigitta could barely swallow. Now more than ever, she had to find Cali.

Chapter 26 – The Family Orb

Athena's heart poured out to her grandchild as she said goodbye to her boyfriend Fish. Cali gazed at him with dreamy eyes, listening to every word he said. And he seemed just as infatuated with her. Athena decided he was a decent young man who was good to Cali. Both were in tune to each other despite the havoc going on in Cali's life. Athena supposed his too. It was a shame her grandchild had some serious trouble ahead.

For the last hour, her phone had buzzed constantly with texts from friends who lived in nearby towns. She'd put the word out to let her know if the police or anyone was asking questions about her or Cali. She also asked them to watch for a shiny black sedan with red rims. The car was spotted at the gas stations, the bars, and the restaurants in several areas. The men in the car asked about a female, describing Cali, except with long hair.

And then her friend Liz stopped by on her way home from Nashville to tell her a detective had come into the liquor store asking questions about a female and male traveling together or alone. He had also described Cali and Fish. He told Liz that she'd remember Fish if she'd seen him, with his haircut, long beard, and tattoos. Athena was surprised they hadn't been caught yet.

Heading inside, she stayed busy in the kitchen, giving the two time to say their goodbyes. After cleaning the pot Cali had left in the sink, she heard Cali run into the cabin, up the stairs, and then down again as if forgetting something.

Athena gathered lemonade, whiskey, and glasses and set them on the tray to prepare for another lesson. She entered the porch and set the tray on the table between the rocking chairs. She called Cali's name to warn her time was up. There was no reason for Fish to prolong his leaving. Besides, she needed to start their lesson. This might be her last time to help Cali awaken her gift before trouble showed up on her property.

Athena sat down in her rocking chair to wait. She thought about the traffickers after her grandchild. They were persistent and dangerous. Whoever paid to have her taken must want her badly. She hated to think why and what he planned to do to her for his own sick pleasure. Men like that should be shot.

Car doors closed. The Camry's engine started and Fish drove off. Cali walked to the porch.

“Hey, Gran,” she said with a sad sigh.

“Come sit and cool down.”

“I’ll be right back.” She disappeared into the cabin.

When Cali came back out, she carried a white box fan. The one Athena found to help keep Cali cool at night. Her grandchild plugged the fan into the outlet on the other side of the porch and then positioned it so the breeze blew on their feet.

“What the hell are you bringing a fan out here for? Is that what they taught you in school?”

Cali laughed. “No, Gran. It’s to keep those annoying tiny bugs from biting me. They like my ankles. Besides, it’s getting muggy and I’m hot.”

“Um,” Athena grunted. Her grandchild’s reasoning made sense. She inched her rocker out from the wall until the fan’s breeze centered on her legs. She’d have to wait and see if the bugs left her alone, but the breeze would help keep her cool. She gathered her skirt, letting the fabric hang above her knees.

“Pretty smart, huh?” Cali smirked.

“How’d you learn to do this?”

“Mama.”

“Brigitta’s a practical one,” Athena had to admit.

The setting sun colored the sky pink as it reflected off the clouds thickening in the sky. Cali seemed drained of energy as she slouched in her rocker and watched the trees sway.

“Quite the day for you,” Athena commented.

Cali exhaled and her bangs lifted in the wind. “I wish he could’ve stayed.”

“He’ll be back. He’s too smitten with you not to.” She wanted to start the lesson before night came. “Do you have the picture on you? The one of my family.”

“I do. I figured you’d want me to try again, so I brought it down with the fan.” Cali pulled the photo out of her back pocket. “I have been practicing.”

“Anything?”

“No, not yet.”

“Go ahead and try.”

Cali stared at the photo as she rubbed her thumb across the glossy paper, copying what Athena had done with her clients’ photos. Cali closed her eyes. She scowled as if she tried harder.

Athena hoped the child would be able to read orbs by now. She had an idea what might help. “Let’s see if we can jump-start it.”

She rose from her chair and walked around the fan to the other side of the porch. She went

over to the table and opened the drawer. She grabbed one of the pipes, a snack-sized bag of weed, and a lighter. Brigitta would be furious if she knew Athena was about to get her daughter high.

Settling down again in her rocker, she filled the bowl with weed. She ignored Cali's stare and the way the girl's mouth almost dropped to the floor.

The distinct earthy and herbal aroma of the weed mixed with the residue in the bowl as she packed it down. Athena didn't smoke often, but an occasional hit helped to relax her after a long day. With them sharing the bowl, the weed wouldn't be enough to affect them if danger came, but it might be enough to loosen her grandchild's blocked spirit.

"Gran," Cali said, pronouncing her name as if to scold her. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yep. Home-grown."

"That's bad for you." Cali frowned. "Am I going to find used needles around the cabin and holes in your arms?"

"Not in the least. This is as far as I go." Athena flicked the knob on the lighter. The flame caught but then went out from the fan's breeze. She turned her back to the fan and tried again. This time the lighter stayed lit as she placed it against the weed and sucked in through the pipe's mouthpiece to ignite it.

"This stuff is pure without any of the added shit those dealers put in it," Athena said between small, short puffs as the weed caught fire. She passed the pipe to Cali.

Cali leaned back into her rocking chair. "Uh-uh. Mama would be furious if she found out. She told me never to accept pot from anyone, especially a trucker."

"Your mama's right. Like I said, there's more than weed in the stuff those truckers probably use." Athena sighed with impatience when her grandchild refused to take the pipe. She jabbed it toward her. "Let's open that mind of yours, unveil your gift."

"I don't know how this would help. My mind works fine." Cali didn't seem convinced.

Athena took another puff to keep the weed burning. The smoke filled her lungs and she let it sit there for a few seconds before exhaling. She passed the pipe to her grandchild again. This time Cali took it.

"Inhale lightly for the first time to get used to it."

Cali placed the pipe in her mouth and barely inhaled. Her face turned red as she pulled the pipe away and coughed. When she finished, she tried taking another, harder puff. This time, she had a coughing spasm. She swung the pipe toward her. Athena grabbed it.

"Oh, it burns." Cali fanned her mouth as if it would help. Her eyes watered as she gasped for breath between coughs. "It's worse than peppermint schnapps."

Athena suppressed a chuckle. She allowed her grandchild time to recover and then handed the pipe back, letting her take another hit. “Try holding a little of the smoke in your lungs for a while before coughing it out.”

Cali gave her an evil eye. She managed to keep most of the smoke in her lungs for a time before coughing it out. Satisfied, Athena motioned for the pipe. She took another hit. When done, she used her thumb to snuff out the remaining weed and kept it on the table, ready to light again if needed.

“Now what’s supposed to happen?” Cali’s voice was strained from coughing. She took a sip of her Lynchburg lemonade. “Did Mama smoke?”

The question threw Athena off. She hadn’t seen her daughter in years. She thought back to Brigitta in her teenage years. Her daughter liked to party with her friends, when she had them, but she had been a straight kid who kept mostly to herself.

“I can’t answer about your mama. For you, it should relax you.”

They rocked in silence and enjoyed the evening as dusk set in. The porch was one of Athena’s favorite places to sit on nights when the air cooled, the frogs and crickets sang, and the wind brushed the leaves. And now, tonight, she had her grandchild with her.

If only her daughter were there as well. That would make Athena happy. Even if her daughter hated her, she’d be okay with it. The three of them together—grandma, daughter, and grandchild—would draw an energy, a magic, that no one could take away from them. She missed those days when she, her grandma, and mama had been together. She longed to have that time again.

Cali slapped her hands on her thighs as if having some type of revelation.

“You know, Gran. I’ve always been busy from morning until night. I studied my butt off so I could graduate from high school early. I hustled at the truck stop so customers had prompt service. When I got home, I’d clean. Mama wasn’t too keen on cleaning. I was always, always helping.” She shook her head as if thinking. A few seconds later she continued. “I never sat too much. I never enjoyed the evening. Sometimes I’d follow the sunset through the diner’s window. Sometimes I’d be able to hear the owls when I walked home at night, if the traffic wasn’t too loud.” She turned to look at her. “I’ve missed out on a lot.”

“Haven’t we all,” Athena said and let go of her breath. “Time goes by fast.”

“I agree. I was so busy I lost my friends. Work. Work. Work. Clean. Clean. Clean.” Cali tsked. “And I couldn’t save money—as much as I wanted to—because I had to help pay for groceries and lot rent.”

Athena didn’t like what she heard. “And where was Kyle in all of this?”

Cali's face soured. "He drinks a lot. He wasn't home much and if he was, it was only to sleep."

Athena wasn't surprised. She had a bad feeling about Kyle from the moment she met him. He was Brigitta's way out, and she risked being with him to find a better life.

"I can't wait to see Fish again." Cali hopped to her next subject. "It was wonderful he came here today. What do you think of him, Gran? Isn't he handsome?" She leaned forward. "When can he come back to visit?"

She was about to answer when Cali interrupted.

"I feel like he's my protector. Like we're meant to be together." She sat back again. She raised her legs and placed her feet on the rocking chair while trying to rock at the same time. "He came to me when I needed him the most."

Athena was curious. She kept her amusement down, noting the weed was affecting Cali. "What do you mean by protector?"

Cali thought for a moment and then said, "I always felt safe around him. When we met, when we touched, I tingled all over." She wiggled her fingers. "It's like we were two old souls, reconnecting after years of being apart."

"Interesting." Athena remembered when she had met her husband, James. After their first kiss, she knew they'd be together until he died. Husband and wife. She missed him.

The breeze swirled, telling Athena it was time.

"Take a look at the photo."

"What photo?"

"The one in your lap."

Cali relaxed her legs and found the photo in her lap. She put her bare feet back on the floor as she picked up the photo and studied it. "Old photos look so different from today's pictures. Back then, no one smiled. No one did funny poses. No one did selfies."

"Photos were expensive to develop. You didn't waste film, and you paid for each picture. You could only hope no one blinked."

Her grandchild glanced at her with a blank, questioning stare.

Athena chuckled. "Back then, cameras used rolls of film that would have to be taken into town, to a store, to be developed. Taking a photo wasn't hitting a button and getting ten instant pictures in a row."

Cali went back to the photo. "Why are Great Gran's eyes shaded? Like she's hurting?"

Her grandchild's observations were getting better. Athena was pleased. "Do you think she's hurting?"

“Like ... people didn’t like her. They banned her.”

“The church was afraid of her gift. Your great grandma had to be careful what she said.”

“Like what Mama is doing now.”

“Yes, but for different reasons. Your great grandma wanted to use her gift, whereas your mama didn’t.”

Cali’s expression became solemn as she ran her finger over the woman’s face. “She didn’t like hiding it, so she helped people, and they kept it secret.” Cali let out a laugh. “Great Gran called nonbelievers namby-pambies.”

Athena chuckled. She hadn’t heard that word in years.

“Pride and joy,” Cali said.

Athena’s head shot up. Her throat constricted. Her mama had always called Pete her pride and joy.

“She had a hard time after he died. It took a lot of her energy.”

“It’s hard to lose a child,” Athena agreed.

She remembered her mama spending days in her bedroom, mourning Pete’s death. When she finally came out of her room, she had forgotten how to enjoy life. Like Brigitta, she had tired of her gift and refused to use it. However, after ten years of mourning, something snapped inside her, like flipping a switch. She vowed to use her gift to help others from that day forward.

Cali looked up from the photo and gave Athena a questionable look. “Lily?”

“Your great grandma’s name was Lily.”

Sitting back in her rocking chair, Athena gazed across the yard and then up at the sky. Night came quickly. Half the sky was dark with thunder clouds while the other half carried the stars. She sipped her Lynchburg lemonade and gave Cali time to absorb what she read and to get a feel for the others in the photo. After a time, she coaxed her to continue. “Are you learning anymore?”

Cali nodded, keeping her eyes focused on the photo. “My great granddad worked hard. He kept to himself.” She tilted her head and made a face. “Did you know he had a bad heart? Even when he was little?”

Athena raised her eyebrows. “Really? He was always short of breath.”

Her father had always struggled to breathe when he did anything strenuous. After a few hours in the barn, he’d come inside the house and sit in his chair for the rest of the day, unable to spend time with them. Sometimes, he didn’t have enough energy to eat. As the years passed the episodes grew longer, until he stayed in bed day and night.

“When my papa was too weak to do chores, he counted on my brother Joel to help out with

the farm.”

Cali stared at the porch screen as if mulling it over and piecing the bits of information together into something more comprehensible. “They didn't know how long your papa had to live. Joel knew Papa was dying too. He wanted to take over, be the caregiver for the family.”

“And he was. Papa died when Joel was sixteen. My brother worked hard to make sure we had food on the table. We helped, but he carried the burden.”

“He has a good soul,” Cali moved on, rubbing a finger over the older sister. She frowned. “Cecilia was ashamed of her mama, and she didn't stick around.” Cali's head came up. “What happened to her?”

“Cissy left one night to elope with her boyfriend, who was in the army. She moved to California. We didn't make contact too often.”

Cali paused for a moment as if to process it more. “Cecilia had a hard time finding her path. She never fit in, no matter where she went. She kept pretending she didn't have the gift. I guess like my mama.”

Athena stopped rocking. Her throat constricted. Cecilia committed suicide just shy of forty-one years old. Brigitta turned forty this year. The thought raised the hair on her arms. Her daughter would never, couldn't, do anything like that to herself.

“Mama is headstrong. Don't worry, Gran,” Cali said as if reading her mind.

She believed her grandchild. Athena switched focus, pushing any bad thoughts aside. “What about the baby in the photo?”

Cali went back to the photo and giggled. “Tia was the rowdy one. She got fired up about everything. She was your favorite.”

“Tia lived with me for a couple of years after your mama left. She was a good kid.” Athena smiled. “When we were little, we'd rise early, do our chores, and then run off to swim in the river with the neighbor boys.” Cali's eyebrows lifted, curious to know more, but Athena changed the subject. “And the last one?”

“The orb?” Cali concentrated again on the photo, moving her thumb across the orb.

Athena waited. She poured a splash more of whiskey into her lemonade and took a sip. Her mouth was still dry from the weed so she drank a little more. Soon her glass was empty. She was about to pour another when Cali cleared her throat. A sadness crossed her face.

“I see him.” Cali glanced up at Athena. “You cried a lot when he died. And you ... you were afraid. Why?”

“You tell me.” Athena rested her empty glass on her lap. She braced herself for what Cali might have to say. When her grandchild hesitated as if she wasn't going to like it, Athena coaxed

her to continue by nodding.

“Okay. It was super windy.” She stared at the orb again, but then her eyes became unfocused as the vision came to her. “You were playing outside, running around in a field when the storm came up. You were scared, especially when the air changed. You kept telling Pete everything would be okay, but you said it more for yourself because you knew it wouldn’t be.”

Cali gasped. Tears sprung to her eyes. “I’m sorry, Gran.”

“I am too.” Every muscle tightened inside Athena as she relived the memory. It took constraint to keep from crying herself, and her voice faltered when she said, “The tornado came from across the field. I fought the wind to get us to shelter. I tried to protect Pete, hoping I could save him. I couldn’t.”

“He’s still with you, Gran. That’s why he’s in the picture. It wasn’t your fault when the piece of metal flew into him.”

Athena shook her head. Bless her grandchild for thinking so, but it was her fault. She should have gotten him out of there.

“If it helps, he never suffered. Pete yelled for you to hold on to the steel clothesline pole. He knew if you hung on it would keep you alive.”

The memory of Pete yelling at her was vivid. Athena couldn’t understand what he was saying as his words were swallowed into the wind. As the tornado came, her body was on the ground and pushed against the pole like someone held her there. She couldn’t get up to help him.

“Pete knew you’d be safe there. If you ran to help him, you would’ve died too.”

“Dear Lord,” Athena gasped. She grabbed the bottle of whiskey and opened the cap. The liquid sloshed as she poured a generous amount into her glass. The first gulp went down fast. She focused on the burn instead of crying. She paused before downing the second one.

“Pete’s with you.”

“He can move on.” She didn’t feel worthy of his protection.

“No,” Cali said as if reading more into it than she let on. “We have angels, or souls, who watch over us. They walk with us. Guide us. All the time. He’s one of yours.”

“True.” Athena moved her feet to rock her chair. “Very true.”

An owl hooted. Cali tried to mimic the owl’s call and waited for a response. After a minute, the owl hooted again, louder.

“I like owls.” She then changed subjects. “How did I do, Gran?”

Athena lifted her glass to her. “Well done. I believe your gift will go beyond the orbs in the photos.”

Cali grinned with pride. “I did it. I read the photo.”

“Use your gift wisely, Calista.” Athena raised a finger toward her. “People can get a sense that you’re special. They will want you to help them. They can also turn against you. Before you give advice, you’ll need to learn and understand your full gift, what you have here,” she tapped on her chest, “before anything else.”

“I will, Gran. I will.” With that, Cali slapped her hands on the armrests as if she had enough for one night. “You know what?”

“What, child?”

“I’m really hungry right now.”

Athena chuckled. “Weed will do that to you. There’s food in the fridge. Figure out what you want.”

Cali almost tripped over her feet as she maneuvered around her to enter the cabin.

“You want me to bring you a snack?”

“No, I’m good.”

Athena sat in her rocking chair and enjoyed her lemonade as Cali clanked in the kitchen, searching for food. The storm continued to grow, but it hadn’t reached them yet. Fish might have had more time to stay, but all-in-all, things happened for a reason. She was glad to have the time to open her grandchild’s gift.

And why had her grandchild’s gift been suppressed? Was Brigitta good at persuading Cali that she was imagining things? Or had the gift waited until now to be released.

“How’s she doing?” Lonnie’s voice came from outside the porch, beyond Cali’s empty rocking chair.

Athena jumped, almost spilling her lemonade. She recovered quickly. “Cali’s got it.”

“I figured she did.” His face and shoulders were shadowed. “Is she around?”

“She’s in the kitchen looking for something to eat.” Athena held up the pipe to show him why. “She’ll be out here again.”

He nodded. “I went into town this afternoon. We might be getting visitors soon.”

“They’re not going to get her, Lonnie.” Athena shook her head adamantly. “No one is going to take Cali from us again.”

A shimmer of light reflected from the trees.

Athena jumped up from her rocker. She glanced at Lonnie who acknowledged her warning and disappeared.

Out of habit, she patted her skirt pocket to verify the gun was in place and ready. She peeked inside the cabin to see her grandchild was still standing at the kitchen counter, making a

sandwich.

“Cali,” she called for her. Her grandchild spun around. “Stay hidden. Don’t make noise and don’t be seen. Someone’s here to visit.”

Cali’s eyes widened. She got it.

Athena shut the door as a gold Nova appeared between the trees in the driveway. Fish said the detective drove the Nova. As she walked down the porch steps to meet him, she spotted Lonnie in the woods with his rifle in hand.

The man got out of the car seconds after turning the engine off. He was tall with a rough appearance like Liz had described. Athena waited for him to speak first.

“Are you Athena Pavaloma?”

“What business do you have on my property?” She had no desire to greet him.

He sized her up and seemed to know he had found the right person. The man walked toward her but stopped ten feet away to give them space. “I’m here concerning your granddaughter. Calista McGraw.”

“What about her?”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

Athena avoided his question again. “State the reason why you’re here on my property, Mister ...”

“Private Detective Craig Stelzer.” He opened his sports coat to show her his badge. He didn’t waste time with pleasantries, which suited her just fine. “Your grandchild is a person of interest, wanted for questioning by the police.”

“And I’m a person of interest, wondering why you’re trespassing on my property.” She placed her hands on her hips to mimic him.

“I’ve already interviewed her mother, Ms. Brigitta McGraw.”

Athena raised her eyes, surprised. Her daughter kept Lonnie’s surname. Or maybe Brigitta never married Kyle.

The detective must have noticed her interest. “When was the last time you made contact with your daughter, Mrs. Pavaloma?”

“It’s been years.”

“How about Calista McGraw?” He scanned the property.

“You’re asking a lot of questions, Detective Stelzer. What’s your point? What happened?”

A slight smile flashed on his lips as if amused by her attitude. He looked beyond her toward the cabin. Something caught his eye. Athena refrained from following his gaze. She had to trust Cali was out of sight. After a short time, he returned his attention to her. “Calista was involved in

a shooting we're investigating. We believe she shot two men in the incident."

"Did she kill 'em?" Athena kept any emotion out of her voice.

"One died."

"So, you're out to arrest her?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then what are you saying?"

"She's wanted for questioning."

"Is she a suspect?"

His mouth tightened as if tired of her banter.

"We've traced her here."

Athena didn't take the bait. She remained silent.

"We need to find her, Mrs. Pavaloma." His eyes bored into hers. "We believe she's in danger. The men she shot are known traffickers. They've been paid good money to kidnap her for a very rich man who believes he's entitled to her."

By the concern in his eyes, he wasn't lying. Athena swallowed hard to keep her composure. "Out of curiosity, why would someone feel 'entitled' to her?"

Stelzer stretched his neck from side to side as if to keep his patience in check. "He has money, which gives him power. Normally he selects and takes women to entertain his friends. When he's done with them, he'll offer them to others who will farm them for sexual acts. Prostitution. Slaves. Whatever they wish. For some reason, he picked Calista, your granddaughter, to personally entertain him."

"Oh." Athena appreciated his honesty. Even so, her first order was to hide and protect Cali until her lawyer returned and advised them on what to do. Crossing her arms, she said, "I can't help you here, about Cali, but I've been told from friends a black Lincoln has been prowling about, looking for her."

Stelzer's eyes scoured the woods surrounding the cabin. "We can place surveillance on your property."

"I can take care of myself, Detective Stelzer." She patted her skirt. "I have fine pieces of metal that'll come out when needed."

The detective chuckled when he noted she referred to her gun. "I don't doubt you're able to take care of yourself." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a business card.

"However, you must understand, they will do anything to catch her. You will not get in their way."

Athena took his card and tried hard to ignore the emphasis he put on his last comment.

“Call if you see or hear from Calista and, or if ... no ... *when* the traffickers pay you a visit.”

Something in his voice sent a shiver up her spine. She was playing a dangerous game by hiding Cali and not telling him the truth.

Stelzer stepped back and turned toward his car. He glanced at the woods and then back at her. “Good to know you have help. But you’re going to need more than him to protect you if the traffickers show up.” He opened the car door. “Call me.”

Athena took a step forward. The urge was too strong. “Detective.”

He stopped from shutting the door.

She hesitated and bit her lip. “How’s my daughter?”

His fingers tapped against the door. After a moment he responded. “She’s as stubborn as her mother.”

She assumed he meant Brigitta wasn’t talking to him either. Good to know.

Chapter 27 –The Private Detective

Cali's hands shook as she held back the lace curtain and kneeled on the floor. She was at the very edge of the window, not wanting to be seen, as she spied the detective with Gran.

Stelzer kept his hands on his hips as he talked to her grandma. By his expression—cross yet amused—she must be giving him a rough time. When he raised his head and eyed the cabin, Cali fell back, hoping he didn't catch the curtain's movement.

She wondered about him and who he was. He looked like one of those hardcore actors in an action flick. Someone who could take on ten guys at once—either killing them or leaving them near death, based on his mood. The hero. Even though he looked intimidating, he did it for his job.

Curious, she took her phone out of her back pocket. She moved the curtain to peek out. The detective had returned his attention to Gran. Cali positioned her phone by the glass pane, zoomed in with the camera, and clicked three pictures.

Sitting down on the floor, she viewed the photos. They were hazy due to the window and porch screen between them, but it didn't affect the activity in the picture. She zoomed in on the left of the photo where the first small orb was in the woods, a distance away from Gran and the detective. Lonnie was also there, next to the orb and hiding behind a tree. She hadn't seen him. He'd been watching Stelzer too. She rubbed her finger over the orb next to him and concentrated on what popped into her head.

Irving. She thought it could be Lonnie's father. She'd have to ask Gran or Lonnie if she was right.

Sliding her finger across the screen to move the photo, she stopped at Gran. A halo of blue, yellow, and then white light glowed around her body. No orbs, only light. Almost angelic. She rubbed her thumb along the light and her entire thumb tingled. Mixed thoughts jumped through her head. Cali couldn't tell if the light was a spirit or a shield of protection.

She scrolled the picture over toward Stelzer. Three yellowish-blue orbs floated next to his head. She zoomed in and placed her fingers on the orbs. A warm energy ran through her. The

orbs were there to protect the detective. The larger orb called out to her, showing it had a tight bond with him.

Cali stopped for a second and stretched her neck to look out the window to make sure she was safe, and nothing had changed outside. Stelzer was getting ready to leave. She relaxed again and pressed harder against the screen to read the larger orb. Cali closed her eyes and lowered her head, keeping the phone close to her face. Images appeared in her head.

The orb was a man who had witnessed a lot of death. War? On the job? She couldn't tell. He didn't want Stelzer to die as he had. Randy. Randy wasn't going to let his friend down. No, he was more than a friend. A mentor? They were supposed to bring in a bad guy together, but Randy made a mistake. Cali sensed his angst.

A loud sharp noise popped in her head, making her flinch. She stayed focused. Randy came into view again and was caught in crossfire, near a dock ... or a shipping yard. He ran in the opposite direction from Stelzer, taking over the fight. She got it. Randy was his partner and had to keep Stelzer alive. Stelzer had a young son who needed him.

A car door slammed outside. Cali jumped and dropped her phone to the floor. Her brain twitched—if that was a thing—as she came back to the present. Analyzing what she visioned, she assumed Randy had died in the gunfire.

“Wow,” Cali said under her breath. She was amazed by what had happened. Now she understood what her grandma meant about understanding her gift. They took a lot of energy.

The screen door opened and then closed. Gran's boots clicked as she walked across the porch and entered the cabin. She stood in the middle of the living room and looked about.

“Cali?”

“Here, Gran.”

“What are you doing on the floor?”

“I hid.” She got up, using her hands to steady herself as she stood.

Gran wiped her brow as if relieved.

Cali followed her grandma when she returned to the porch and picked up the pipe and lighter from the table between the rocking chairs. She pointed toward the glasses. “I sure hope the detective didn't count the glasses. He was eyeing something up here.”

The glasses. Maybe that's what the detective was seeing, not her. At least she hoped that was the case.

“Let's clean up here before anyone else shows up,” Gran said.

“Why was he here?” Cali picked up the bottle of whiskey and glasses. “To arrest me?”

Her grandma shook her head but didn't elaborate as they entered the cabin.

Cali couldn't read her grandma's expression. Was she too afraid to tell her? Angry? They headed to the kitchen and set their items on the counter. Each second Gran didn't answer made Cali more jittery. She couldn't take it. "Tell me, Gran."

She grabbed the towel hanging from the oven and wiped her hands. "All right. Detective Stelzer is concerned about your safety. A rich man, the one you told me about, paid the men to kidnap you."

"I don't get it." Cali huffed with anger. "How could he pay for me?"

"I'm guessing you were sold."

"I wasn't for sale," she snapped. "Or ..."

She remembered Fish telling her about the incident in the parking lot with the three traffickers, Mr. B, and Hank. How one of them handed her boss an envelope. She then recalled the night Mr. B had her take his order. He gave her boss an envelope on that night too. Money.

"What?" Gran tossed the towel on the counter.

"I bet it was Hank. My boss." She stared at her Gran. "I bet he sold Mandy too."

"Mandy?"

"The server who disappeared." Gran nodded her head remembering. "The day she didn't come in to work, Hank acted funny—very short and snappy with the servers. And you know what? A few days before he laid off Mama, he avoided me. He wouldn't look at me."

Cali had thought it was great, not having to deal with him. Instead, he'd pawned her off and probably felt too guilty to look at her.

"Why me?" She remembered Abby's words and quoted her: "I'm just a poor-ass girl who worked in a truck stop."

Gran snorted as she drummed the countertop with her fingers. She shook her head in disbelief and stared at Cali. "Child, you're a beautiful, naïve, young woman. If you're like—which I know you are—the other Pavaloma women, your aura intrigues people. They can sense your gift."

Cali wrinkled her nose. "How could they sense my gift when I didn't know I had it?"

Her grandma grabbed the bottle of whiskey and walked over to the kitchen table to sit down. Cali followed, taking the seat on the opposite side.

"It's your aura, like I said. And your violet eyes. They intrigue people."

Her grandma's turquoise ring—a kidney-shaped stone with a silver band—caught her attention. The ring looked good against her tanned, weathered skin. Cali wondered if she would have strong yet agile hands like her grandma. Would she be as beautiful? Her Gran might be tough, but she had a grace, or a mystique, that had intrigued Cali from the day they met. Is that

what others saw in her as well?

“You have an aura.” Cali remembered the photo she took. “You have a halo of light surrounding you.”

This time, it was Gran’s turn to give her a startled look. “You see light around me?”

Cali nodded and smiled. “It’s beautiful. The glow is midnight blue close to your skin and then flares out into gold and then white. Very bright.”

Her grandma pushed the whiskey aside. She didn’t seem to know how to take it. Cali wanted to tell her about taking a picture of her on her new phone, but she was afraid Gran wouldn’t be happy. She changed the subject.

“I feel the detective is a good guy too. He looks mean, but he must be, I’m guessing, for his job.”

Gran gnawed on a fingertip and tilted her head. “I guess we’ll have to wait and find out.”

Cali yawned, ready to crash.

“Go.” Gran brushed her off. “You’ve had a big day.”

“I’ll clean up,” she said and stood.

“No. You go on upstairs. And take Hatchet with you. I need some time alone.”

That didn’t sound good. What else did Stelzer say to worry her grandma?

Gran seemed to have read her mind. “Don’t worry about it.”

Cali placed her hand on the revolver to make sure it was tucked into her shorts. Even with its hefty weight, she had forgotten about it.

“Good night, Gran.”

“Night.”

Cali went to her bedroom. She set the revolver next to her on the bed and then pulled out her phone from the back pocket of her shorts. After turning on the camera to her phone, she stretched her arm out and took a selfie.

The picture of herself showed an awkward face with no smile—way too serious for becoming an adult. Faint lines crept around her eyes and mouth, evidence of how the last couple of weeks strained her. Observing the detail in her eyes, they were more violet and darker than usual, which could be from sitting close to the lighting. Or because of her situation. But what disappointed her the most was, she had no auras or orbs near her.

Cali’s mood declined. Doomed at eighteen. She should be with her friends, partying. Life should be easy and fun. She should be excited to start college or a career. Instead, she was stuck. The thought of being confined to a bed, behind bars or as someone’s abused doll, sickened her. Which was better? After some thought, she decided neither. Both were slow deaths, whether

physical or spiritual.

Abby had said she'd find her place in the world. So far, Cali didn't like where it was heading.

"I'm going outside," Gran called up to the loft. Cali jumped and reached for her gun. "I won't be too long."

"Okay," she yelled back and relaxed again.

Gran shut the front door and locked it. Her boots clicked against the wood floor as she walked from the living room to the kitchen and then to the back door. Soon that door shut and locked as well. Cali bet this was the first time in a long time Gran had locked the doors. All because of her.

Cali hated putting her grandma in a tight spot. The police might charge her for hiding a suspect. The traffickers might shoot her. Kill her. Whatever Stelzer had said must have made Gran realize how bad her situation was.

Was it time for her to buck up and be an adult? Leave Gran and run? Cali shivered at the thought.

Looking at her phone, the photo of her and Fish appeared when it opened. She opened the screen with her contacts. Only one number showed in the list.

Your Fish e Poo.

She loved how he entered his name. Cali pressed the Call button and moved from her bed to the corner of the room, away from the railing. Peeking out the window, she spotted Gran talking to Lonnie. They were barely visible, but they were outside, so she'd have privacy to talk.

The phone rang four times. She was about to cancel the call when the phone clicked.

"Hello?" A female answered.

Cali stared at the screen.

"Hello?" The voice sounded sleepy, yet sultry.

Not knowing what to do, Cali hung up. It had to be a wrong number. She dialed again, just in case.

"Hello?" The female said, now irritated. "Who is this?"

Why would a female answer Fish's phone? Her hand shook. Cali's voice cracked, making it hard to talk. "Is Fish there?"

"He's ... in the shower. Who's calling?"

"A friend. Who's this?"

"His fiancée."

The air whooshed out of Cali's lungs. She couldn't breathe.

He told her they broke up.

“Hello?” The voice switched to an amused tone as if knowing whoever was on the other end had been shocked by her answer.

“I’ll call later.” Cali hung up. The phone fell from her hand into her bed.

Chapter 28 – Jolene’s Push

As he left Cali and drove back to Nashville, Fish plotted when and how he could visit her again. He couldn’t rely on Mr. Yurmac loaning his car again. He didn’t want to take advantage of his boss. The man had already taken a chance on him, and he didn’t want to screw it up. Nor did he want to screw it up with Cali’s grandmother. The way her eyes drilled into him made him shake when she realized he could have been followed. God, he hoped not. The last thing he wanted was to be on bad terms with her.

He’d give it a week. Ten days. That was it. If Cali needed to talk to him, she’d call. In the meantime, he’d buy the guitar on sale in a few days, work his ass off at the store, stay in good graces with Mr. Yurmac, and memorize the bus schedule.

Nearing the city, the polluted, dusty rose clouds hung low as the sun set. He closed his window and turned down the radio from blaring to inside loud. Fish sang along with Johnny Cash as he stopped for a light.

As he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to “Ring of Fire,” he glanced out his side mirror. A black sedan turned from a parking lot and headed in the opposite direction. He couldn’t tell if the car had red rims on the wheels. Earlier, he had passed two other black Lincolns but neither had the distinguished red.

I’m getting too paranoid.

Not every black Lincoln was out to get Cali. He pushed it out of his head as he exited the highway and navigated the roads to the music store. A grocery store was up the street. Fish was getting hungry again. He decided to purchase a few groceries, head home to eat, then go out again to get the Camry gassed up and washed.

After his errand, Fish pulled into the parking behind the music store. A woman sat on the curb near the stairs that lead to his studio apartment.

He squinted to see better. The woman played with her ponytail, twirling it with her fingers. Fish’s stomach tightened. His mood dropped fifty degrees in a downward spiral.

Jolene spotted him. She stood and waved. With no chance of backing up and getting the hell

out of there, he took his time parking the Camry. Stirred-up emotions twisted inside him. He flashed back to the years of her knocking him down. Loving him. Knocking him down. Repeatedly. Why did she have to continue to haunt him?

Fish got out of the car, taking his purchases with him, and locked it. He thought about leaving it unlocked, in case he needed a quick escape, but changed his mind.

Face your problem.

“Hello, Lucifer,” she said as he walked toward the stairs to his apartment. She dangled her Gucci purse with the thick gold chain wrapped around her hand. She’d used it as a weapon before, hitting him in the head.

Her skin was creamy white, and she hid the freckles on her cheeks and forehead with foundation. Her makeup was perfect, including the black eye liner that made her eyes more dramatic and the peach lip gloss that plumped her lips more than he remembered. Her ponytail hair was perfect too, not a strand out of place. Same old Jolene.

“What brings you here?” His voice came out cold, like he intended.

Jolene raised an eyebrow, but she ignored his rude behavior. She batted her fake lashes at him and smiled like they were buddies. “You’re looking handsome as ever. Have you lost weight? Looks like you don’t have the little gut of yours anymore.” She stroked her fingers under her chin as if she had a beard. “And I like the longer beard. Interesting how you tied it.”

This was the woman who took everything. Townhouse. Savings. His balls. He wasn’t in the mood to listen to her butter him up. “How’d you find me?”

“You were in the news. You were associated with the woman the police are searching for.”

He stopped and frowned. “When did you see me in the news?”

She stood a few feet in front of him. Her fancy perfume filled his nose. He used to like the flowery fragrance but not anymore. Jolene bobbed her head trying to remember. “I don’t know. A couple of days ago? Daddy said the police came to the house and asked questions.”

Fish lowered his head and cursed. If the police questioned her parents, then they must have visited his parents too. They had to be furious—not that it mattered to him.

“Did the police talk to you?”

His ex twisted her mouth. “They came by, but I brushed them off. I’ve been busy.”

He was sure she gave them a mouthful. Now he’d have to worry if the police were going to ask Mr. Yurmac questions as well. He had explained to his boss how he met Cali but not her situation. When he saw him again, he’d have to let him know.

“Anyway, I knew you were in Nashville. They thought the woman was here too.” Jolene glanced over at the car as if expecting Cali to be inside it and then realizing she wasn’t. “What’s

going on with you and her?”

“You still haven’t told me how you found me. Here.” He pointed to the ground.

She rolled her eyes. “GPS, Mr. Silly.”

The wheels spun in his head. It hit. Fish froze. Of course. His phone and her phone were connected. He’d forgotten. Shit.

“Are you okay?” Her voice softened.

He wasn’t okay. Fish didn’t want to deal with her, but he had no choice. “I’m fine. So why are you really here? What does it matter to you if I’m in the news or not?”

Her back straightened and her lips turned into a pout. Her emotions always jumped from one extreme to another. “Life hasn’t been the same without you. I miss you.”

She played with the gold chain on her purse. Her feet curled in. By the way Jolene’s nostrils flared when she peeked at him, he knew she could tell he wasn’t buying it.

“I’m sorry. I miss you.” She gave him her best sad eyes. She shifted her weight from one hip to the other. “Do you miss me?”

“No.” He told the truth. “I don’t.”

Not once did he miss her. She left his heart bleeding in Denver and through Kansas. It took that long to mend himself and feel halfway decent.

Jolene raised her chin as if to cover the hurt. “You didn’t think of me at all? After what we had together?”

“Oh, I thought about you.” Fish widened his stance. The sarcasm in his voice didn’t register with her. Instead, Jolene’s face shone with hope. It wasn’t his intent. He had to cut her off fast. “I had a tough time getting over you, Jo. I forced myself to analyze what happened between us and why.” He couldn’t look her in the eyes. Fish didn’t want her to know how much she’d hurt him. “My mind was messed up for a long time. I didn’t know how I was going to make it. As you know, you left me with nothing.”

“If it’s worth anything, I was miserable too.” Her expression turned into exaggerated sadness. “I’m sorry, Lucifer. I’m sorry.”

She dove in and threw her arms around his shoulder, catching Fish off guard. He straddled his legs and opened his arms to keep them and the groceries from falling.

Her scent. The familiarity of her body made his penis react. He cursed as he tried moving back. It was too late. She’d discovered his hardness.

“You did miss me,” she said in triumph and ran her fingernail down his chest.

Fish fumed at his body for failing him. Her perfume got to him. It meant nothing.

“Jolene.” Fish pushed her back, keeping four feet between them. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“Fine.” Her nose went up. She played with her diamond necklace—two half-carat rocks set in a silver swirl. He’d given it to her for a Christmas present, and it was a reminder of the money he spent to make her happy. He wasted so much time trying to keep everyone happy—her, her parents, his parents.

“I can help you,” Jolene said, bringing him back to the present.

“Why do I need your help?” Fish shifted the bags in his hands. They were getting heavy. If she’d leave, he’d be happy.

“You want to start your career, right? Be a big country or rock star?”

“Yeah ...” He waited.

His ex continued to play with the necklace as if to make sure he noticed she was wearing it. “Well, I know someone who can help you. Get you in the door.”

Okay. She had his interest. “Who?”

“I talked to my cousin. He’s connected to an agent who manages some of the larger country stars. I can arrange for you to meet him. He’s interested.”

“You never told me about your cousin before. Why now?” Fish eyed her with pessimism.

Jolene shrugged. “I didn’t know what he did. It wasn’t until I sat next to him at a family event that I found out.”

Fish scrutinized her. She seemed to be telling the truth, but he didn’t trust her. He’d love to meet an agent. It would be a dream come true and give him the chance he needed.

“It’s hot out here.” Jolene fanned herself. “Can we go inside?”

The underlying need for her to be impressed with him, where he lived, continued to affect his ego. He wasn’t comfortable bringing her up to his stark place.

“Didn’t you reserve a hotel room?”

“No, I didn’t. I drove straight here to find you. I figured you’d let me stay with you.”

“I don’t have a bedroom for you to stay.”

“I’ll sleep on the couch.”

If he’d suggested that to her when they dated, she’d have thrown a fit. What the hell was she smoking, he wondered.

Jolene turned and headed toward the building, but not before she smiled, showing she’d won. Fish stood in the parking lot, unsure what to do. He’d rather be out here than head into the apartment with her. But the storm was coming, and the air was thick with the increasing wind. If he found Jolene a hotel, they could pick up their conversation in the morning. But it meant he’d have to spend money. He didn’t have any to spend, and he wasn’t going to use any of Cali’s money.

“I’ll be damned,” he muttered under his breath, remembering Cali had told him about her vision. A woman who was in his apartment, and whose description fit Jolene. But the Jolene she described had short hair. She now had it in a ponytail. Longer. But still ...

“Are you coming?” Jolene yelled out as she headed up the stairs. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

Fish rolled his eyes. He wasn’t going to win this one. He’d allow her to stay for one night. Get the information he needed about her cousin, let her sleep on the couch, and then say goodbye in the morning. Once he unlocked and opened the door, she made a beeline for the bathroom.

He set the bags on the counter, along with Mr. Yurmac’s keys. As he waited for her to come out, Fish emptied the grocery bags, placing items in the cupboards and refrigerator. He’d have to put the other stuff away later.

His ex was taking her dear time in the bathroom.

Checking his phone battery, he saw it was at fifty percent. He plugged the phone into the charger next to the toaster. Outside, the first drops of rain splattered against the kitchen window. He was in for a stormy night, one way or another, and the irony made him laugh.

“You are playing music, aren’t you?” Jolene asked as she came out of the bathroom. “I mean, that’s why you left. Right?” She glanced about his meager abode and wrinkled her nose. “How’s it going for you?”

“I have a job. A place to stay. I’m off to a good start.” He picked up the scattered newspapers from the floor.

Jolene scanned the room. “Where’s your guitar?”

“I had to sell it.”

His ex raised her eyebrows. “Really. That thing was more precious to you than I was.”

Fish ignored the comment. She was right.

He stacked the papers in his hands and placed them on the end table near the couch. He wasn’t finished going through the want ads yet to circle the ones looking for a singer, guitar player, or songwriter. He went to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water. “You want anything? I have water, coke, or orange juice.”

“No thanks.” Jolene sat down on the couch and tested the cushions. She had been sitting in the middle and decided the side was better. She looked at the top paper from the stack. His ex pointed to one of the ads he circled. “A drummer needed. Rock. Country.” She tapped the ad with her finger. “Why is it circled? You don’t play drums.”

“I play drums.” Fish grabbed a pillow and blanket from the closet and set them next to her.

“Oh,” Jolene said. “Can you get my overnight bag? It’s in my car.”

Her nose was stuck in the paper as if she found reading more important.

“Where’re your keys?”

“In the car.” She didn’t bother looking up.

Fish shook his head in disbelief. Same old Jolene. Of course he’d grab her bag. Of course he’d take the job at her father’s business instead of pursuing his career as a musician. Of course he’d work long hours at a job he hated to help pay for her necklace, ring, and wedding.

The outside air helped clear his senses. The storm clouds were in the northwestern sky and dropped toward the earth, indicating rain moving his way. At least he wouldn’t be in the center of it. He had enough to deal with.

Guilt especially. Cali warned him.

He wiped the sweat from his palms. What if Cali knew she was there, right now?

Please, Cali. It’s not what you think.

Cali, music, and the road. That was the life he wanted. He envisioned the two of them together, travelling from one gig to the next, exploring the different cities, falling more in love, and loving life. His pants tightened. This time he turned hard for the right reasons.

Only one other vehicle was in the lot besides Mr. Yurmac’s car. Fish hadn’t seen the red Volvo SUV parked in the back corner. He’d been too shocked at seeing Jolene. When he’d left her in Denver, she had an Audi. Fish walked over and opened the back door. The rain reached him, coming down hard. He grabbed the bag and sprinted back to his apartment before getting soaked.

Opening the door, he found Jolene in the kitchen area with her back leaning against the counter. Her hands rested against the countertop, and she smiled as if caught doing something she shouldn’t have.

“My bag,” she said and hopped toward him to take it.

Fish eyed her suspiciously as she took her bag over to the couch and set it on the floor. Something was odd. He wasn’t gone too long. She’d been on the couch, focused on the paper. Nothing looked unusual in the kitchen. His phone was face down. Usually, he kept the screen up, but he had been frazzled—still was—with her in his apartment.

He walked into the kitchen area to grab his water. His hand stopped. What if she poured something in his water? She did drugs on occasion. It wouldn’t surprise him if she slipped him something to make him high, like a date-rape drug. Fish put the bottle down and pushed it toward the sink. He rubbed his hand on the side of his jeans before picking up his phone to check the time.

A smudge of makeup was on his screen. Fish glanced over at Jolene, who was digging for

something in her bag, almost as if ignoring him.

He went to recent calls.

Cali had called. Twice.

His stomach tightened. He opened the information from the first one. Incoming call. 15 seconds.

Fish didn't talk to her. He opened the second one. Forty seconds.

What the—

His head whipped up. "Did someone call me?"

"Huh?" Jolene tried acting innocent as she raised her eyes and batted her lashes.

Panic hit. He squeezed the phone and held it up. "Why did you answer my phone?"

She shrugged as if it was no big deal. "It was only a wrong number."

"Bullshit." Fish stared at Cali's name—top two on the list. It wasn't a wrong number. "You answered my fucking phone."

"Was it her?" Jolene sat back on the couch and crossed one leg over the other.

"Who said you could answer it?" Fish fumed. His face burned hot. Not only had he failed Cali by not answering, now she was sure Jolene was here.

Jolene rolled her eyes. "She asked for you. I told her you weren't available."

Fish grabbed Mr. Yurmac's keys from the counter.

"Honestly, Lucifer." She stood. "What's become of you? You're better than ... this." She waved her hand at his phone to refer to Cali. "You can't run after a fugitive. She should be arrested. She's a wanted criminal."

He squeezed his hands into tight fists to keep from picking her up and throwing her out the living room window. He ground his teeth together. He was done.

"Where are you going?" she asked as he threw the front door open.

Fish didn't answer. He slammed the door shut. His shoes pounded against the stairs as he ran down them to the parking lot. He opened the Camry and sat in the driver's seat. Taking out his phone, he called Cali.

The phone rang.

"Come on, Cali. Pick up," he pleaded.

After the phone rang four times, it clicked off. No voicemail.

Fish banged his head against the steering wheel.

Chapter 29 –Texts in the Night

Cali woke from a solid sleep as the phone vibrated next to her head. The loft was semi-dark. Rain fell in a steady rhythm against the steel roof and windowpanes. Lightning lit the sky but didn't seem threatening. She didn't know what time it was, having gone to bed early.

Her phone vibrated again. Cali didn't have to look at the caller to know it was Fish. He tried calling her earlier. She ignored his calls, and he had finally stopped trying ... until now.

Jolene was there, in his apartment. By the tone of her voice, Cali didn't like her. Every inch of her cringed, knowing she was with Fish.

Trying to go back to sleep was useless. The humidity clung to the walls, the bed, her pillow. Cali's tank top and underwear molded to her skin like a plastic sheet. She'd forgotten to bring the fan up from the porch. Better yet, she wished Gran had air conditioning. At least their trailer back home had it—though it sputtered and clanged when working.

Grabbing her phone, she checked the time. She was surprised that it was close to morning. Fish. Fish. Fish.

She had to believe he hadn't seen his ex-fiancée when she asked him. He seemed truthful when he said she had called, but he didn't answer the phone. It stung when Jolene claimed she was his fiancée—not ex.

Cali rolled out of bed. Downstairs was quiet. The light from above the kitchen sink glowed into the living room. Gran must be asleep. She crawled over to the window. It was open an inch to let the breeze in. The sill was wet, but the rain had stopped coming in. Since the air outside was cooler, she pushed open the window more and placed her head near the screen to breathe in the fresh air. She sat on the floor with her knees up and rested her chin against the sill.

The image of Jolene stuck in her head. Cali wouldn't blame Fish if he hooked up with his ex again, since Cali couldn't be his girlfriend. She was naïve to think it would work out between them. Too many bad things outnumbered the good ones: Jolene, the traffickers, Mr. B, the police, the detective. Murder.

She needed to come to grips with having killed someone. Whether it was in self-defense or not, she did something bad. If she turned herself in, she'd do her jail time and then get released.

Jail had to be better than being kidnapped by the traffickers or having Mr. B touch her. Cali wanted to gag at the last thought. She shuddered, thinking how creepy he was and how he looked at her with lustful eyes. Somehow, she bet he didn't like anything normal.

Her phone vibrated.

Cali jumped. Without thinking, she answered it.

"Hello?" Fish was on the other end.

She was about to end the call, but the sound of his voice caught her off guard.

"Cali, are you there?"

"Yeah," she choked and wished she'd hung up instead.

"Is everything okay?" His voice cracked with worry. "I have a missed call from you."

Missed call?

She frowned, confused, and then remembered. His girlfriend must not have told him she had called. Cali's fingers tightened on the phone. She wanted to yell at him, but if she did she'd wake Gran.

"It wasn't missed. Your fiancée answered," she snapped but kept her voice to a whisper.

He hesitated. "What?"

"I'm not playing this game, Fish." She ended the call.

The phone vibrated as he tried calling her again. She clicked to decline it.

After the second attempt, he sent her a text.

"Let me explain. Call me."

When she didn't respond right away, he sent another.

"Jolene was here waiting for me when I got home. She found me."

Cali stared at the text message. She thought back to the times when he told her about Jolene. He'd been hurt, mad, and at times indifferent. He had no reason to lie when they had talked under the bridge or during their travels. She had to give him a chance, but she didn't have to make it easy.

"Didn't you think I'd find out? Why didn't you tell me?"

She waited. In a few seconds, he responded.

"I would have told you. I didn't have the chance. I'm trying to get rid of her. I told her it was over between us. She won't leave."

A typical response, an excuse to stay out of trouble, she thought.

"Why is she there?"

Leaning against the wall with her knees up, she cradled the phone in her hands, between her legs. As she waited, she gazed out at the night. The breeze had disappeared, leaving nothing else

to cool her down.

Her phone lit up with his response, and she turned the screen toward her to read the text.

“Jolene just showed up out of the blue. She said she talked to her cousin who could get me a record contract or something. He’s willing to meet me but he’s in Denver.”

Cali wasn’t sure how to respond. His text didn’t give her any idea if he was excited about it or not.

“Are you going back with her?”

His response was quick.

“No.”

He immediately sent another.

“We—you and me—have an issue. Jolene now has your phone number.”

Cali shot up and leaned against her knees, alarmed. She read it again. What would the woman do with her phone number? Give it to the police? Would they be able to trace it?

A loud bang sounded outside, somewhere around the shack. It wasn’t from the storm. Cali turned her phone down and held it against her thigh to block the screen’s light.

“Cali?” Her grandma’s voice rose from the living room.

“I’m here, Gran.”

She quickly sent a text to Fish.

“Gotta go.”

Chapter 30 – Fish’s Nightmare

Fish woke with his head on the steering wheel of Mr. Yurmac’s Camry. His neck cracked when he raised it. The morning light came through the windshield. He moved his legs, and his phone fell to the floorboard near the gas pedal. He picked it up. No new messages from Cali.

She said she had to go. He assumed her grandma was the reason. Why else? Fish thanked his stars she finally answered her phone to talk to him.

He’d been in the car all night, sleeping on and off. His entire body ached. But it was better than being in his apartment with Jolene.

He glanced over at the corner of the parking lot. He scowled. Jolene’s Volvo was still there. Fish started to text Cali, but a massive, sharp pain shot through his calf.

“Fuck,” Fish howled. He pulled his leg up and his knee hit the steering wheel.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!” His phone dropped to the floor as the muscle in his calf hardened into a knot. He rubbed the length of his lower leg to smooth the muscle out.

Not working. Fish had to get out of the car.

Lifting on the door handle with his hand, he used his shoulder to push the door open. Fish fell out of the car while holding his leg. He managed to sit on the pavement and stretch the calf muscle out. Finally, the pain started to subside. Fish rubbed the muscle to relax it and was glad he hadn’t had one of those in years.

He glanced up to his apartment above the music store. The ceiling light was on in the living area. The thought of going up there made him nauseous. His options were to hang out in the store, hide until she left, or confront her. He preferred the first two options but the third is what he had to do before she did any more damage.

Fish walked off the rest of the pain. He remembered dropping his phone and found it on the driver’s side near the gas pedal. He started texting Cali but then changed his mind. If she responded, she’d ask if Jolene was there. His stomach churned.

First, he had to deal with his ex. Fish headed up the stairs and quietly entered his apartment. The room was empty. A blanket and pillow were strewn across the couch. Her bag was missing. At first he hoped she’d left but then recalled her car was still outside. The bathroom door was

closed. He walked closer. The shower was on.

What next? Wait for her to come out? Fish looked for her bag again. She must have taken it into the bathroom with her. He spotted her pink phone on the floor near the couch. It was plugged in to charge the phone's battery. Fish wondered if she'd changed her password. Grabbing her phone, he typed in her password. Bingo. A picture of her in a slinky party dress came up as her wallpaper.

First, he found her contacts to check her recent call list. This morning she called someone who wasn't in her contacts. Swiping down the list, the number showed three more times—ingoing and outgoing. Fish was tempted to call the number, but he refrained. Instead, he left her contacts list and found her browser app. He clicked on the icon and a GPS map with driving directions came up. She hadn't closed her browser or removed the link. He swiped the screen with his thumb and index finger to determine what she mapped.

The blue location dot was in the middle of a green patch with a blue wiggly line—a river or a stream. He reduced the size to gain a better idea of what area held her interest. The small town was to the left of the dot. He moved the map over and then made it larger. He recognized the streets and the road heading out.

Sumner Point. Fish's mouth dropped in disbelief. Jolene knew where Cali's grandmother lived.

The bathroom door opened. Jolene stood with a white towel wrapped around her head. She wore a pink lacy bra and flowered mini skirt. She froze for a moment when she realized he had her phone.

"What are you doing?" Her voice snapped in anger. She pounced forward and grabbed it from him. The cord pulled away from the phone and fell to the floor.

"Why do you have Sumner Point on GPS?" He didn't want to say it was Cali's.

"What's on my phone is none of your business."

"Using GPS to find me here in Nashville was none of your business. Who are you stalking now?"

With a blow like being run over by a truck, he realized what she'd been doing. His blood boiled.

"Were you tracking me?" His voice was one notch from yelling at her.

"Well," she said and tucked her phone into her bra to hold it. "I had the information. It was right there. And you weren't home."

"Son of a bitch." Fish clenched his fists. A day in hell. That was today. "Really, Jolene?"

Her defenses went up. "Why would you want to be with a murderer anyway?" His ex

unraveled the towel from her head. “She’s hiding in the middle of nowhere so the police can’t find her.”

Fish stared at Jolene. Her words struck him as odd. Yesterday she had said Cali was wanted for murder. A criminal. “She’s a murderer?”

“Yes,” she said like he was crazy. “The woman killed a man in cold blood. Shot him in a parking lot. There’s no excuse for it.”

He froze. The news on TV never mentioned Cali being wanted for murder, but twice now Jolene had mentioned it. “How do you know she killed someone?”

Jolene fidgeted in the doorway. She was hiding something. As a distraction, she rubbed her hair with the towel. “Well, you know.”

“Know what?” He reached over and grabbed her arm to keep her from going into the bathroom. “You owe me, Jolene.”

“I owe you nothing,” she spat.

“Did you talk to the police?”

Her head rolled, not wanting to commit to anything.

“Was it a detective?” Fish squeezed harder and she cried out. “Tell me.”

Jolene’s eyebrows knitted together. “No, they were bounty hunters. Real bounty hunters. When I stopped here and found you weren’t home, I went to eat at the restaurant in town.” He released her arm, and she rubbed it. “Terrible food, by the way. As I drank what they called tea, I overheard the men ask a waitress if the girl was there. They were sitting at the booth behind me.”

“Two?” Fish tried piecing it together. “Bounty hunters?”

“Yes, two.” His ex stepped into the bathroom. “One of them was mean looking, kind of like Dog without the hair.”

He remembered she loved watching “Dog the Bounty Hunter.” She always said she’d love to help them nab someone.

Fish leaned against the wall outside the bathroom door. He rubbed his face, not wanting to believe the nightmare unfolding before him. A fucking nightmare. “What did you tell them?”

“How did you know I talked—”

“What did you tell them?”

“I turned around and told them I thought I might know where they could find her.” She appeared in the doorway again and was dressed in a yellow blouse to match the flowers on her skirt. Jolene moved past him as she combed her wet hair.

“You didn’t show them your GPS, did you?”

When Jolene remained silent, he had his answer.

His insides ripped apart. Unbelievable.

Cali's grandmother thought he could have been followed. Oh no. Instead, his ex-fiancée was right there to help.

"Oh," she said as an afterthought, pointing her comb at him. "You would've liked their car. Super shiny black with these cool red rims."

Fish ran out the door.

Chapter 31 – Backyard Noises

Athena lay awake in bed with the covers thrown off. She stared at the ceiling fan and cursed; she'd forgotten to turn it on before going to bed. No wonder she was hot and sticky.

She heard the floorboards creak above her, Cali shuffling from her bed to the window, then pushing up on the window to open it. A restless night for both.

After she'd told Cali to go to bed, she left the cabin to talk to Lonnie about her conversation with the detective. Stelzer's final words stuck to her. The two of them—she and Lonnie—weren't enough to stop the traffickers. For the first time in years, Athena was unsure what to do. Unsure of her gift. Unsure if she'd be able to protect Cali.

She thought about Brigitta and how it must have crushed her to send her own daughter to a mother she hated. A last-hope effort. Athena hoped Brigitta would come to them eventually. And when she did, Athena wanted Cali by her side.

No use trying to sleep now. Athena pulled herself out of bed. Morning was only an hour away.

She changed into a loose-fitting blouse and ruffled skirt. She grabbed the first belt she found in her top dresser drawer—a wide chain with roses scrolled in the center of each metal square. Athena was about to put it back and find another one that wasn't as heavy, but something told her to wear it. Once dressed, she took her gun from the nightstand and placed it in her skirt pocket.

She left the bedroom and went into the open living room where the air was slightly cooler. Upstairs was quiet again. She hoped Cali had fallen back to sleep.

In the dark, Athena stood between the living room and kitchen. The air was thick with moisture after the rain stopped. But something else ... Her back stiffened as she picked up a bad energy. She sensed a presence or an intruder.

Bang.

Athena jumped at the loud noise. It came from the backyard.

“Cali?” Her heart pounded.

“I'm here, Gran.” Cali moved from her bed and leaned over the railing. “What was that

noise?”

“I’m not sure. Could be something fell.” Athena let out her breath to soothe her nerves, but it didn’t work. “Why don’t you get down here. With Hatchet.”

Cali disappeared but soon came down the ladder. She had on a tank top and sweat shorts. The gun was in her hand, pointed downward. Athena should have told her to change, but they didn’t have time to waste. She had to investigate where the noise came from.

Athena pulled out her 9mm and disengaged the safety. “I’m going to have a look around.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “What if someone is out there?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out.” She went to the back door and slipped on her worn, unlaced boots. Cali trailed after her. Athena straightened. “Tuck yourself in the corner of the living room. Stay hidden until I come back.” She tipped her head toward Hatchet. “I trained you how to use it.”

“Gran.” Cali’s voice squeaked.

Athena ignored her. She slipped out the door and closed it quietly behind her. She stood for a moment to adjust her vision to the semi-darkness. The sky was turning blue from black as the sun began to make its way toward the horizon.

She scanned the woods for movement. She looked for anything out of place. The frogs stopped their nightly croaking, but the crickets continued to chirp. Counting to three, she crossed the wet yard, using the scattering of trees to help shield her. Athena headed to the shack. Again, nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. A metal birdhouse lay on the ground. It had been hanging from a tree limb yesterday and might have made the loud noise as it fell.

Getting to the shack’s porch, she felt someone had visited but saw no tracks. The thought of the detective snooping around came to mind. A distinct smell of body odor lingered by the door. She opened it slowly, knowing the hinges would creak once halfway open. She slipped inside before the creak and closed the door.

Everything within the dark room was as it should be. The odor hadn’t followed her in. She picked up one of the dried pieces of sage on the table and breathed deeply the clarifying scent. Lavender touched the air as well. This was her haven. Athena closed her eyes and lifted her head. In a whisper, she called to her spirits to help protect them. Opening her eyes, she inhaled a deep breath, then left the shack.

Outside, the muggy air was oppressive, which may have been blocking her senses. She hoped not.

A red streak peaked on the horizon between the trees. The yard grew lighter, allowing her to see more. She glanced at the back driveway. In her bones, she sensed something amiss. But first,

she had to check on Cali. Call Lonnie.

She headed down the porch with her hand in the gun pocket. As she stepped onto the grass, she eyed movement near the side of the cabin. A shadow behind a tree.

Her breath hitched and she aimed her gun at the person.

“Don’t shoot!” The shadow moved and stepped away from the tree.

Athena blinked twice. Brigitta?

She recognized her daughter’s tall and lithe body along with her dark eyes and hair. Brigitta’s face had matured with age. In the dawn’s light, the dark circles under her daughter’s eyes were clear. Her face was gaunt.

Taking two deep breaths to calm herself, Athena lowered her gun and slid it back into her skirt pocket. She’d take the blame for their fighting, she decided, but her daughter never made it easy.

“Fifteen years.” Athena still couldn’t believe her daughter was there. In front of her.

“It’s been a long time, Mama.”

Brigitta’s eyes suddenly widened as she stared from the shack to Athena. Her daughter’s mouth opened to say something but she froze.

Athena felt the presence before seeing him. She slowly turned her head.

An Asian man with round glasses pointed a gun at her head.

“Don’t move.” He then glanced from her toward Brigitta. “You move, she dies.”

The man came out too fast from behind the shack. He held a gun, aimed at her mama’s head. Brigitta’s eyes widened in horror. The air left her lungs in one short whoosh, taking everything out of her. She couldn’t talk. She tried warning her mama, but the words stuck in her throat.

“Don’t move. I have no issue pulling the trigger.” The man threatened her mama again when she turned toward him. He continued to watch both with his beady eyes.

“Leave her alone.” Brigitta’s voice faltered but the words came out. She had to think. Buy time. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mama slide her hand into her skirt pocket.

The man smiled smugly and his pointed nose turned upward. “Brigitta McGraw is it? How convenient you were laid off from the diner. Wouldn’t you say?”

Brigitta swallowed hard. He knew who she was, where she worked. With his small eyes and pointed nose, he had to be the one Cali named Weasel. A deadly weasel.

“You’ve done enough damage.” Brigitta’s first onset of panic turned to anger. “Leave us alone.”

Weasel grinned. “I have every intention of leaving. You only need to cooperate.”

A flicker of light shined from the back driveway. A black sedan approached, stopping at the shack. A burly man got out of the driver’s door. Weasel used his free hand to text on his phone while keeping his gun pointed at Athena.

Brigitta glanced at her mama. Athena tipped her head; she’d be all right.

A tear ran down Brigitta’s cheek. She shook her head, knowing what her mama intended to do.

“Mama,” she sobbed.

Athena frowned at her but had to divert her attention from Brigitta when Weasel moved closer to her. The gun at her chest.

The cabin’s backdoor banged open. A scar-faced man pushed Cali out the door to the yard. One of his hands was clamped around her waist. The other held a gun.

Brigitta’s heart seized.

“Cali!” She stepped toward her daughter, but the scar-faced man aimed his gun at her.

“Mama!” Cali cried out. She raised her legs and kicked at the man holding her. He struggled to secure her. He pushed the gun to her jaw and whispered in her ear. Cali paled and stopped fighting.

“Stop,” Brigitta begged. He must be the one Cali called Scarface. The mean one. He held her daughter like a ragdoll. “Please. She’s my daughter.”

Brigitta started to wheeze. She couldn’t breathe. Her body swayed.

“Brig,” Athena snapped. “Pull yourself together. Now.”

The harshness in her mama’s voice jarred Brigitta. She sucked in air and pulled herself upright.

Weasel chuckled with amusement at Athena for scolding her. He motioned for Scarface to move toward the sedan. The man lifted Cali closer to him. She clung to his arm as if he was squeezing her too hard when he walked her across the lawn.

Brigitta’s heart pounded as she was ready to take action. She leaped forward but stopped when the burly driver stepped forward and pointed his gun at her. A sob escaped her lips. Helpless, unable to save Cali.

“You can’t take her.” Athena raised her voice enough to make Weasel turn his attention to her.

He cocked his eyebrow at her. “We are.”

Athena continued. "She's wanted by the police. They're going to find her."

Weasel laughed. "Our boss paid good money for her. She won't be found."

"No!" Anger burst through Brigitta as she yelled out.

Weasel turned toward her. Scarface stopped.

The outburst gave Athena time to pull her gun and aim it at Weasel.

"Drop it."

Surprise flashed in his eyes, but he quickly recovered. He adjusted his gun, straightening his arm to shoot. "You will not win."

"Bet me." Athena pulled the trigger.

The shot rang through the yard. Weasel's gun went off as he fell backward to the ground.

Athena's hand pressed to her side. She fell to her knees.

"Mama!" Brigitta cried out as Athena went down.

A shot fired from behind Brigitta. The bullet whirled past her head. She ducked as she scrambled to her mama. Blood seeped through Athena's shirt and skirt. Taking the lower edge of the skirt, Brigitta bunched it together and held it on the wound. Athena groaned.

A hand touched her back. Brigitta jumped as she glanced up and then over as Private Detective Stelzer leaned down to quickly examine her mama, seeing she'd be okay. "Keep pressing the wound."

The detective continued onward, sprinting toward Weasel. He kicked the trafficker's weapon to the side while at the same time pointing his gun at the sedan. He fired. The bullet hit the side of the car.

He fired again. The sedan gunned it in reverse.

"Cali!" Brigitta screamed.

The traffickers were getting away with her daughter.

Chapter 32– The Black Sedan

Cali fell headfirst to the floor between the seats when Scarface pushed her into the back of the sedan. He dived in behind her and pressed her back to keep her down. She struggled to sit up, but he was too strong.

Gunshots rang in the air. A bullet hit the car.

“Go!” Scarface slammed the door.

The sedan jerked, going in reverse. Cali’s head bounced between the seat cushion and the back of the driver’s seat. Scarface grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her head up. She cried out. He shoved a vial between her lips and tipped it upward. The liquid poured into her mouth. Cali pushed her tongue against the bottle’s opening, refusing to swallow.

“Drink it, bitch.” He tugged her hair tighter.

The sedan bounced as it hit a pothole. Scarface lost grip of the vial. Cali pushed it out of her mouth with her tongue. She spit out the liquid, but some went down her throat. She gagged but nothing came out.

More gunshots. One hit the back passenger door, next to Scarface. The other hit the window and cracked the glass. She couldn’t tell where the third one hit.

“Drive,” Scarface yelled as he ducked next to her.

The driver pushed on the gas pedal. The sedan came to the road. It made a sharp turn and sped forward.

Cali noted they headed right from the driveway. Three curves. Right turn. Or was it left? Her stomach roiled. Her head swam. Was that another turn? Her arms and legs felt like lead—too heavy to move. Her eyelids drooped.

The sedan stopped with a jerk. Cali hit her head on the door. She tried to get up, knowing she should be sitting on the seat, but a hand pushed her down.

Why was she so ... so fuzzy?

A loud noise woke Cali. She blinked her eyes open. A puddle of saliva stuck to her cheek and

the seat underneath her. She moved to wipe her face, but neither hand moved. Her wrists were tied together with a rope. She twisted her hands and pulled, but the rope held.

Nausea squeezed her stomach. She puked, leaving a puddle on the floor. She remembered the vial rammed into her mouth.

Bits of memory came back. Scarface in the living room, snatching her and dragging her outside. A man aiming a gun at Gran. Mama. Gunshots. Thrown into a car.

Was mama there or had she been dreaming?

Cali wiped her mouth against the back of the front seat and struggled to sit up. She had no strength. At least she was alone. Readjusting her legs, she raised herself to a sitting position. The move made her head pound.

I need to get out of here.

She whimpered. Whatever Scarface had given her made her mind hazy. The air inside the car was hot, thick, and stifling. She breathed in air to clear her head.

Cali twisted again to lift herself onto the back seat. Her lap sparkled. She wore a shimmery dress with a flouncy skirt that barely covered her thighs. Her boobs were tight against the bodice with spaghetti straps holding it all up. How'd she get the—

“No.” Her chest heaved in horror. Someone had changed *her*. Taken off her clothes. Wiggled her into the dress. The skimpy little dress.

Heat rose to her cheeks. Her skin crawled. What else had they done?

Her woman parts felt normal. She didn't hurt. She wasn't sore or wet.

“Fuck.”

A tear fell from her eye and stained the skirt. Another one dropped. With her hands behind her back, she couldn't wipe them away. Cali blinked hard to see beyond the tears.

Rage and humiliation rose inside her. She banged her head against the front seat headrest, needing to unleash her frustration.

The door to her side flew open.

“Hey!” A man grabbed a fistful of her hair to stop her. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Scarface's head was inches from hers. His breath, heavy with cigarette smoke, sent another wave of nausea through her. He turned her head before she puked so none got on her dress.

“Agghh. Goddammit.” He wasn't amused. “Get out.”

She didn't move.

Scarface gripped her arm and dragged her out. Cali stumbled and one knee hit the ground.

“Fuckin' whore.” He jerked her up and squeezed her arm until the pain was overbearing.

“Stop,” she cried. Her words slurred together. “You're hurting me.”

“Yeah, well, just wait.” His cold sneer chilled her. He pushed her against the car and grabbed her crotch. “This will be so sore, you’re gonna beg to use your mouth instead.”

She gagged, wanting to be sick. Scarface let go and stepped back to stay clear. Cali kept her legs closed and slid to the ground.

Scarface laughed. “We’re not the ones you need to be afraid of.”

Chapter 33 – Fish and the Detective

Fish gripped the steering wheel as he sped down the road. Like an idiot, he didn't fill the car with gas as he'd planned. Last night, he meant to head home, where he'd eat, chill for half an hour, wash Mr. Yurmac's Camry, and then gas up to show his appreciation for letting him borrow the car.

All of it went to hell when Jolene showed up.

"Damn it." He was almost there. A mile? Two? A warning light had signaled two gallons left some time ago, but he should've had enough gas.

The Camry sputtered. Fish couldn't chance the car dying on him and having to park it on the road. If the police towed it, he couldn't afford to get it out of the impound lot—not to mention having to deal with Mr. Yurmac's fury.

Ahead was a church. He pulled into the parking lot and coasted into an end spot. Fish locked the door. He'd retrieve the car later, once he knew Cali was safe.

Fish cut across the parking lot to the road. He jogged at a steady pace. Sweat dripped from his forehead. His jaw and neck were wet, making the skin underneath his beard itch. Why didn't he gas up before heading home? He was such a moron.

A car whizzed past him. The detective's gold Nova. The asshole didn't stop to pick him up. Fish frowned. Stelzer was going fast like it was urgent.

Oh, shit. He knew where Cali was hiding.

Fish burst into a run. After half a mile, he saw the schoolhouse. A distant gunshot rang out. His feet twisted, but he caught himself and kept running.

She was okay.

Don't panic.

Another gunshot. The night at the diner, between the semi-rigs, replayed in his head. Somehow he knew this wasn't going to be the same. She wouldn't be able to run from this one. He pictured her with blood staining her tee shirt.

Fish cried out. He wasn't going to lose her. Not now. Not ever. She had to be okay.

Almost there. Almost there.

Fish sputtered like the Camry had as his side cramped. He ignored the pain, but it became too sharp. He doubled over and stopped to massage under his ribs.

The schoolhouse and the turn to the Orb Lady's cabin was right there in front of him. One turn. Down the road. He could do it.

"Catch your breath. Catch your breath." Fish forced himself to walk again.

More gunshots—different ones. One after the other.

Fish was about to turn down the road when tires screeched ahead, on a side road beyond the schoolhouse. A black sedan appeared, coming out of the woods in reverse. The car turned onto the road, lurched to a stop, shifted, and sped away in the opposite direction.

"No, no, no." Fish's heart tightened with dread. He turned and ran after the Lincoln.

Cali was in the car. He sensed it.

His arms pumped like pistons as he followed the sedan. He ignored his burning lungs. The pain ripping his back and thighs. The Lincoln disappeared around a curve.

He couldn't stop running. If he did, he'd lose her forever.

Tears and sweat streamed down his face. Fish made it to the curve in the road where the sedan had vanished. Up ahead was an intersection. No sign of the car—to the right, left, or straight ahead.

He was fucked.

"Cali!" Fish wheezed.

He couldn't take it. He stopped in total exhaustion.

Where was the detective? Why wasn't he in pursuit? Cali could be gone by now. Lost to the traffickers. Lost to him. He cried out in frustration. He failed at protecting her. Fish placed his hands on his head as he paced. Pissed at himself. Pissed at the world—at Jolene for finding him and Cali.

Ranting wasn't going to help. He dug for his phone and ripped it out of his pocket to call for help.

"9-1-1. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"My girlfriend's been taken," he yelled into the phone. "Kidnapped. Traffickers."

"Where is your location?"

He had no idea. GPS.

"Hold on." Fish went to the app that gave his location. His heart skipped a beat.

His phone. Cali's phone. If she had her phone, he could find her.

Fish gave the dispatcher his location. She was asking another question, but he ignored her.

Instead, he went to his settings, drilling down to track Cali's phone. The GPS map came up.

"Sir? Sir?" the 9-1-1 dispatcher called out.

Service was slow.

"Come on." Fish held his phone up to the sky to get better service. He stared at the screen. The map came up with a dot. He zoomed in.

The dot wasn't moving. GPS showed they stopped.

"Sir?" the voice called out again.

Fish put the phone against his ear. He gave the dispatcher the approximate directions on where to find the black sedan.

A car raced down the road, toward him. By the noise of the engine, it was the Nova. He wasn't going to let the detective pass him again. He hung up on the dispatcher.

Standing in the middle of the lane, Fish waved his hands to signal him to stop. The Nova slowed and then veered to the side as if ready to pass him. Stelzer must have recognized Fish as he laid on his brakes. The tires screeched as he stopped.

Fish ran to the Nova and opened the passenger door. He jumped in.

"Go." He looked at his phone. His hand shook. "Take the next left."

"You better be right." Stelzer gunned it. They turned left.

"Keep going." Fish stared out the front windshield as they neared the dot. "It has to be up ahead."

Stelzer slowed down.

"Which side?" The detective craned his neck, scanning the field and trees around them.

"The dot's ... to the left." Fish glanced out the passenger window, seeing a plowed field behind a row of trees. No road.

His heart fell like an anvil. This was his chance to find Cali. To save her. The dot was now behind them. He feared the traffickers had found her phone and dumped it as they drove on.

"Turn around."

Stelzer turned into a long dirt driveway. A quarter mile down set a farmhouse, barn, and silo. Fish wondered if Cali had been taken there. His gut didn't think so. The detective swung the car around.

"Pull over," Fish said when they were directly across from the dot.

He flung the passenger door open before the detective shifted the Nova into park. Once out of the car, a helicopter chopped in the sky, getting louder. Fish checked the ground. Tire marks turned off the road into the field. He followed them.

The detective made a noise to get his attention. Fish glanced back. The man was crouched

down, gun out, and on his smartphone as he crossed the street. He motioned for Fish to stay back.

No way. Fish sprinted forward, keeping low. Dead sticks and leaves snapped under his feet, and he tripped on a rut. At a line of trees, he stopped. Two men stood in the field. The taller one looked familiar. When he turned to the other one, Fish recognized him. Scarface. The one he had tackled at the truck stop.

The shorter, stockier man waved to the helicopter.

Cali wasn't in sight.

The thumping of a helicopter's blades woke Cali from her stupor. She opened her eyes, surprised to be outside. She kept her head against the side of the car as she watched the black dot in the sky. Her head was too muddled to figure out why it was coming toward her.

Cali moved her limbs and remembered her hands were tied. Dirt clung to her bare legs.

The dress sparkled, reminding her why she was there. How she was undressed without her knowing. She shuddered, then pushed the thought out of her head.

Her mouth was dry, and she wished for a big glass of water. Better yet, Gran's Lynchburg lemonade. Maybe not. She'd been drugged. At least this time she didn't feel as nauseous or detached.

The helicopter grew louder as it crossed the field and lowered in the sky. Cali had no idea where she was. Nothing looked familiar.

A burly man, like a wrestler, appeared from behind a tree. He zipped up his fly and joined Scarface. They watched and waited for the helicopter. Scarface looked over his shoulder at her. His dark smile sent a shiver through her, and she lowered her eyes. Cali slumped her shoulders as if to tell him she wasn't going anywhere.

When she peeked through her lashes, Scarface had turned back to watch the helicopter.

Run, Cali. Run.

The inner voice screamed at her. Cali rose to her knees. She ignored the rocks digging into her skin. Using her back and body weight, she leaned against the car and pushed with her legs to stand. Her legs wobbled. Whatever she'd been given in the vial made her muscles feel like rubber.

The helicopter hovered over the field and kicked up a ball of dust. The pilot glanced about as if looking for the best place to land. A man with aviator sunglasses sat next to him. Another man

sat behind them. The helicopter turned as it hovered.

Yellow hair. Mr. B was in the back seat. She couldn't see his eyes but felt them on her. Fear of him set Cali in motion.

She tried the doorhandle on the car. Locked. She looked beyond the sedan and found the road, about fifty feet away. If she made a run for it, a car might stop for her. Or she could run and hide in the woods, like before.

Scarface was on his phone. The other guy with him was waving his hands, directing the helicopter. Cali stepped away from the sedan into a rut. She jarred her back but stayed upright.

Run, Cali. Now.

An invisible hand pushed her into action. Cali sprinted across the field and headed toward the trees to her left where the woods offered more coverage. She stumbled over the uneven ground, her legs not working right.

Someone shouted. They spotted her.

Cali ran faster. She tripped on a rut and hit the ground, knees first, then her face. Without hands to help protect her, she ate dirt.

"Cali, run!" Fish yelled.

Was it in her head? Like the voice?

She rolled her head to the side to see Fish running. He charged toward Scarface, who was running for her. Fish leaped into the air and hit Scarface in the chest with his shoulder. As they fell, Scarface grabbed Fish's ankle and swung him around. They landed with a thud.

Fish got to his feet first and slammed his fist into Scarface's cheek. The man stumbled but rebounded quickly. He slammed his gun into the side of Fish's head. When Fish staggered and landed on the ground, Scarface pointed his gun at him.

Cali cried out. He was going to kill Fish.

"Help, please," she begged her spirits. She squeezed her eyes shut, calling to the other Pavaloma women. To Pete.

An energy burst inside her. A low humming noise, like bees, vibrated within her chest, down her arms and then legs. It grew stronger, bursting out of her.

When she opened her eyes, small and large orbs whirled toward Fish. They glowed in different shades of white, silver, and blue.

Scarface stumbled backward as if a strong wind blew against him. He struggled to stay upright. A dust cloud swirled around him.

A man with a gun jumped out of the hovering helicopter and ran toward her. Mr. B stayed in his seat, but kept his pistol out, aimed at her.

Cali sucked in her breath. She wanted to help Fish but froze with Mr. B's gun on her.

Scarface saw the helicopter man running for her. He flew into action as if wanting to get to her first. Seeing both coming after her, Cali yelled. She struggled to free her wrists from the rope. When it didn't work, she labored to stand. The energy she had felt from the orbs weakened.

A gunshot blasted, piercing the air to her side. Cali flinched. She expected to be hit. Nothing. A hand touched her shoulder. "Stay down."

Stelzer ran past her, his gun up. He shot again. Scarface flipped into the air, then landed on his back. The guy with the sunglasses jumped over Scarface and aimed his gun at Cali. Fish leaped from the ground and ran toward him. The guy didn't see him fly upward and tackle him. His gun flew out of his hand.

Another gunshot. The dirt exploded three feet from her legs. Cali looked up. Mr. B fired his pistol at her. By the look on his face, he shot to get her attention. His smile said it all. An icy shiver rippled down her back. He would be back for her.

Stelzer fired at the helicopter as it lifted, blowing more dirt around the field. The man Fish tackled reached for his gun. Stelzer shot him.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Cali struggled to stand up. A thick, strong hand grabbed her arm. The burly man. She forgot about him.

"No." Cali pulled and twisted to free her arm as he dragged her to the sedan.

He jerked, nearly pulling her shoulder out, as he lifted her to her feet. Stelzer had his gun aimed at them, ready. The burly man used Cali as a shield. He pointed his gun at Fish who was ready to charge him.

"Move or I'll shoot him," the burly man said to Cali. "And the detective."

She followed his order.

As she walked, Cali drew in a long slow breath. She was strong, like a Pavaloma woman. She had a gift.

The buzzing inside her returned. Her great grandma's presence was there. Pete's too. Other ancestors. Spirits tied to the land.

A glow warmed her face, like a shield. The burly man jerked as if the glow's energy pushed against him. He released her.

A shot rang out.

The bullet whizzed past her and hit the man in the chest. The force knocked him backward before he fell to the ground. Lonnie stood near the front of the black sedan with Molly, the .357 Magnum, in his hand. The smoke lingered from the barrel.

“Cali!” Fish rushed over and grabbed her.
Cali collapsed in his arms.

Chapter 34 – Picking Up the Pieces

Athena hated being strapped to a gurney. She couldn't move her hands. Her face was covered with an oxygen mask.

"Release me," she said to the emergency medical technician who pushed the gurney by the side rail. When he ignored her, she looked at the other technician on the opposite side. "Where are you taking me?"

"The hospital."

"Oh no. I'm staying." She had to know if Cali was safe.

Her last memory was of firing her gun, smelling the gunpowder from the shot, and then having fire explode in her side. When she woke, she'd been on the ground with two EMTs hovering over her.

"Damn it," she cursed the EMTs through the oxygen mask. Give her some whiskey, and she'd take the pain. The gurney rolled over uneven grass, and she winced.

A female appeared beside her. She held and squeezed Athena's hand.

"It's going to be okay, Mama."

"Brigitta," she said with relief. Someone was there to help her. "Get me off this thing."

"What, Mama?" Brigitta leaned closer and pulled up the oxygen mask.

Athena yelled at the EMTs. "Stop."

To her surprise, they did. She looked at her daughter. "What happened?"

"You've been shot. In your side."

She remembered the man named Weasel pointing his gun at her. She fired first.

"Is he dead?"

"Who?"

"The one I shot."

"Yes, Mama. He is dead."

Good. At least now she understood why her side hurt so much. Why she had the damn oxygen mask over her face.

“Where’s Cali?”

Brigitta didn’t respond. Instead, she placed the mask back into position.

Athena stared at her daughter. She didn’t like Brigitta’s swollen, worried eyes. The wrinkles around her daughter’s mouth deepened and her lips pressed together as if to keep from crying again.

Athena grabbed her hand. “Tell me.”

“The traffickers took her.”

“What?” Athena’s heartrate skyrocketed. She tried sitting up, but the constraints got in her way. She cursed again.

“Whoa.” The EMT at the front of the gurney put his hand on her shoulder. “Ma’am, we need you to be still.” He turned to Brigitta. “And you need to step away.”

“She’s my mama.” Brigitta growled at the EMT as they pushed her again. She gripped the steel rail on the gurney and leaned closer. “They’re looking for her, Mama. The detective.”

“Find her.”

“They will. I’ll keep you posted.”

Brigitta let go of the rail as they reached the ambulance.

Athena cried out as the EMTs collapsed the wheels on the gurney and rolled her into the back of the ambulance. The two men hovered over her as she blacked out.

When she woke again, Lonnie sat next to her in the ambulance. His hat was off, and he held it in his hands.

She tried saying his name but couldn’t. Or maybe she did.

“Cali’s safe, Athena.”

Athena perked up. “Cali?”

“We found her near the Brandt’s place. A helicopter was coming to pick her up.”

She stared at him, needing more information.

Lonnie picked up on her cue. “Me and Molly, we did a good thing today.”

Athena chuckled. She knew the gun would come in handy. “Where is Cali?” She needed some whiskey. Anything to take away the dryness in her mouth and the pain in her side.

“Another ambulance has her.”

Athena’s shoulders relaxed against the gurney. Cali was safe.

As Lonnie turned to look out the open back, she spotted the bandage on the side of his head.

“What happened to you?”

“When I did my rounds around your place, a noise caught my attention by the shack. I went around the back and was hit over the head with a shovel.”

Athena coughed. “You got any whiskey?”

He glanced about as if to verify the EMTs weren't looking and took a flask from his jacket. Then he pulled her oxygen mask to the side, lifted her head, and tipped the flask to her lips.

The whiskey burned. She didn't care.

“They're going to take you to the hospital soon. The detective asked for them to wait.”

“Don't let them take me.” Athena motioned for another swig.

“You need to go to the hospital.” Lonnie tilted the flask up to her mouth. “Remove the bullet inside you.”

Once she drank, he lowered her head to the pillow. He was about to put the oxygen mask back on when she said, “Brigitta.”

Lonnie stiffened.

“She's here.”

“I know.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“No.” He slipped the oxygen mask back onto her face before she could say anything else.

Brigitta leaned against the police car with her arms crossed over her stomach. She tapped her foot on the ground, craving a cigarette, as she looked across at the four police cars, an unmarked car and three ambulances scattered in the driveway and yard. Police were everywhere. Yellow tape roped off the area behind the cabin and around the shack where the encounter and shooting took place.

If only it weren't so dang hot. The sky was hazy, thick with humidity, and threatened rain. She hoped it held off until the police were able to collect their evidence.

She glanced toward the ambulance closest to the driveway. The doors were shut and the EMTs were examining Cali. Stelzer, she learned, had driven her daughter back to the cabin, away from potential danger, where the ambulances waited. He blocked anyone from seeing her until the EMTs were finished with their initial examination.

A young man with a ponytail and beard sat in the second ambulance. An EMT was examining a wound on his head. She wondered if he was the one the detective spoke about. The one who traveled with Cali.

A chill ran through Brigitta. The image of Cali thrown into the backseat of the sedan by the trafficker still haunted her. The thought of never seeing her child again had ripped her heart open.

Thank God she was safe. Brigitta was dying to see her. All she wanted to do was hold her daughter forever. Keep her in her arms and never let anyone touch her again.

One of the EMTs, a middle-aged man with eyes that had seen enough in his lifetime, came out of the ambulance her mother was in. Brigitta got up from the police car and weaved around the other cars toward him.

“How is my mother doing?”

The EMT looked at her as if wondering who she was and then remembered. “She’s stable. We should be heading out soon.”

Her mother? Stable? More like stubborn. Brigitta thanked him and then headed to the cabin. She sat on the top porch step, feeling strange being there and not at the farmhouse. She wondered what had possessed her mama to live in the cabin.

A trickle of sweat ran from her hairline down her back. She brushed her hand against her neck to wipe it away. A memory came back to her, sitting on the farmhouse porch and doing the same thing as she watched a storm roll by. Sitting on the porch had been one of her favorite things to do when pregnant with Cali. It was also the one place where she and her mama wouldn’t argue. A haven or neutral ground of sorts.

Leaning back, she peeked through the screen door and noted the rocker with the worn scroll on the armrest and a shawl draped across the back. Mama still had her rocker. She wondered if Cali had sat with her grandma, telling her about growing up. Their pitiful life.

With Cali gone, Brigitta had time to think, assess, and realize she had made a mistake leaving the way she did. She had ignored her gift. She kept Cali’s gift a secret, even from Cali. She left the man who loved her. A father who was denied his daughter. She had to mend a lot of hurt.

“How’re you holding up?”

Brigitta jumped, startled by the voice. Her back straightened.

Lonnie, the man she left fifteen years ago, stood a few feet from her. He looked tired, yet good. On the day she left him, his hair had been short and crew-cut style. Now he wore it chin-length with a side part. She liked the hair but not his eyes. They looked lost, abandoned. Deep down, she knew she’d caused it.

“I’m not,” she told him and rubbed her face. “I’m a wreck.”

He nodded and stared at the ground as if unsure what to say or do.

“Today isn’t your typical day, is it?” She attempted to lighten the tension between them, but the words fell flat. She really needed a cigarette.

Lonnie crossed his arms and tucked his hands underneath his armpits as if shielding himself from her. He had every right. Her stomach churned, knowing the difficult conversations ahead. The anger and hurt she’d have to face and take. Brigitta hugged her legs. She swallowed hard. “Have you met her?”

His jaw tightened. “I met her.

“Does she know?” Brigitta stared at her shoes. She couldn’t handle seeing the hurt in his eyes. She had been wrong on many levels. Taking Cali away was one of them.

Lonnie cleared his throat. His voice hardened. “You obviously didn’t tell her.”

Brigitta winced. “I’m sorry, Lonnie. I just ...”

She had no words to say. No excuses to give him.

“I won’t let this go, Brig. She doesn’t know who I am, but she will. I won’t let it go.” He kicked the ground and then walked away.

He had every right to be angry. Lonnie never had the chance to be Cali’s papa. Brigitta took that away from him. From their daughter. Her soul would burn for keeping the two of them apart. But if she hadn’t left when she did, she would have gone crazy. Cali would know they had a gift, and she didn’t want it to affect her daughter the way it did her. The last thing Brigitta wanted was for Cali to become another orb lady.

Brigitta saw movement from the ambulance. Cali’s head popped out from the back doors. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and she glanced across the yard. Stelzer said something to her and then helped her down.

Brigitta jumped up from the step. She rubbed her arms to pull herself together as she headed to her daughter.

Cali burst into tears when she saw Brigitta coming. Her bare feet flopped as she tried to run.

“What—” Brigitta’s eyes widened, and her mouth gaped. “What did they do to you?”

Her daughter fell into her arms. Brigitta hugged Cali tight, keeping her close to her chest.

“She was given a date-rape drug,” Stelzer said, following behind Cali. “She’ll feel the effects of the drug ... I’m guessing ... for the next day or so.”

“Is she alright?” Brigitta looked at the detective over Cali’s shoulder.

“They’ll take her to the hospital to make sure. I told her she had ten minutes.”

Brigitta acknowledged him with a look of thanks.

Ten minutes wasn’t long.

“My sweet little girl.” Brigitta smelled Cali’s hair, shorter now than when she left home, to

take in her scent.

The blanket fell away from Cali's shoulders. The shimmer from the dress caught Brigitta off guard as she stared at the skimpy outfit.

"Those assholes," she said. Anger raced through her, imagining what the traffickers had planned for her daughter.

"I'm sorry, Mama." Cali blushed as she tried covering herself.

"It's fine. It's fine." Brigitta wrapped the blanket around her daughter again. She dropped her anger. Cali was with her. She didn't want to think about what could have happened. "It's not your fault."

Cali looked over her shoulder at the other two ambulances. "Where's Gran?"

"In the ambulance." Brigitta pointed her head toward the one parked near the cabin. "She's been shot. They're taking her to the hospital any minute."

"I need to see her." Cali stared at the vehicle where the EMTs were talking.

"She's okay."

"I need to see her."

Brigitta's stomach twisted, seeing Cali's determination and devotion to the woman who had caused so much angst. Her voice was more like a breath. "Go."

Cali stepped back from her arms, then stopped. She looked at her with anxious eyes as if sensing her mama's struggle. Ashamed, Brigitta had put her daughter in a position to have to choose. She smiled half-heartedly. "I bet Gran would like to see you."

Her daughter gave her one more hug, then made her way to the ambulance. Besides having a wobbly walk, she limped. Cali had been through a lot in the last eleven days. Her little girl was no longer little.

Behind her, a paper rustled. Brigitta turned. Stelzer stood next to his car and was unfolding a piece of paper. A twenty-dollar bill fell out. She picked it up off the ground and handed it to him. "A bribe for the detective ... or investigator?"

He cocked his eyebrow in question.

"Why do you call yourself a private detective versus a private investigator?"

Stelzer grunted. "My badge has national private detective written on it. When I tell people I am an investigator, they question why my badge has written detective. They'd get suspicious and wouldn't talk. Either way, it's the same."

Brigitta chuckled. "So what about the bribe?"

Stelzer looked at the paper. "It's a note from Fish."

"The one who was with my daughter?"

He nodded. She waited as he read the note to himself. A slight smile played on his lips.

“Care to share?” Brigitta was curious.

He looked at Fish, who was talking to a police officer and then back at her. He held the paper up again and read, “Day One: Do something for yourself to make you happy. Day Two: Do something to improve your situation. Day Three: Do something for Cali. Repeat to make the world a better place.” He handed the paper to her. “As you can see, ‘someone else’ was replaced with Cali’s name.”

The note, except for the change, was in Cali’s handwriting. Brigitta smiled. “This is something Cali would do. She must have given the note to Fish.” She handed the paper back to him. “He’s paying it forward.”

Stelzer tucked the paper and the twenty-dollar bill into his shirt pocket. His rough demeanor softened as if letting his armor down now the search for Cali was over.

“One more question.” Brigitta said to catch his attention before he left. After learning more about the detective from the police, she was curious. “You were hired as an investigator to search for Mandy and that other girl, Julie. No one hired you to find Cali. Why did you look for my daughter?”

The man turned his gaze to the woods as if to think before responding. When he did, a glint of emotion showed in his eyes. “She needed a chance at life. Neither Mandy nor Julie made it out alive.”

Brigitta shivered at the thought of Cali in the same situation. She had to ask: “Is my daughter going to be arrested?”

“I can’t answer that question,” he said. “We have a lot to investigate. Question people ...”

His voice trailed. When he didn’t continue, Brigitta became nervous. “Is that good or bad?”

He shook his head as if not wanting to say.

Her alarm went up more. “Did she do something wrong?”

Stelzer was about to say one thing but stopped as if needing to think it through. “Something else. Your daughter ... does she have a special ability?”

“Like what?” Brigitta braced herself.

He hesitated again. “This might be farfetched to say, but there were shapes—objects—glowing near your daughter.”

“Orbs,” Brigitta said, more to herself than to him. Her mama had in fact introduced Cali to her gift. She shouldn’t be surprised, but it still angered her.

“The Orb Lady,” the detective muttered as if piecing it together. “My understanding is your mother has psychic abilities to help people. Was she helping your daughter ... in some

supernatural way?”

Brigitta thought about it. Mama was at the cabin, away from Cali. She was unconscious for a time. Could it have been her? She doubted it. “My daughter had her own help.”

“I know people believe in other powers. I’m not one of them. However,” he said and shook his head as if questioning his belief, “whatever that glow was surrounding Cali, it saved her life. Fish’s too.”

“Wait!” Cali said to the EMT as his hand grabbed the handle to close the door. Before he could block her, she climbed into the back and sat down in the empty chair next to her grandma. She found her hand under the blanket and held it.

Gran looked so pale. Seeing her strapped to the bed with an IV in her arm and an oxygen mask over her face made her look vulnerable. Old.

Cali’s eyes welled with tears. She forced herself not to cry. She glanced over at the EMT who sat on the other side of her grandma. “Is she going to be okay?”

The man patted her grandma’s hand and chuckled. “This spunky lady here is lucky. If she hadn’t been wearing her belt, the bullet would have done more damage than it did.” He looked up at Cali again. “Shouldn’t you be in the other ambulance?”

“I’m fine.” She wiped away a tear.

Gran squeezed her hand.

Cali asked the EMT, “Can I talk to her?”

“A minute.” He removed the oxygen mask from her grandma’s face.

“Gran,” Cali said as she leaned closer. A hint of whiskey rose from her grandma’s breath. Cali made a face.

Her grandma frowned, warning her not to say anything about the liquor. Cali gave her a stern look but let it go. She hugged her hand. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for you to get hurt.”

“Don’t worry about me.” Her voice was weak. Tired.

“We’re ready to leave.” The EMT placed the oxygen mask over her mouth again.

She nodded. Cali didn’t want the EMT to hear, but she couldn’t tell him to leave. Instead, she lowered her head, so her mouth was near Gran’s ear. “I had orbs, Gran. I called them.”

Her grandma’s eyes opened, fully alert. Her eyebrows rose.

“Hundreds of them,” Cali whispered.

A smile appeared under the mask. She patted Cali’s hand as if to say she was proud of her.

The other EMT outside the ambulance held his hand out to help Cali out of the back. She quickly kissed her grandma on the forehead and then took the man's hand. Outside the vehicle, the EMT pointed to the ambulance on his left. "That one's your ride. I'll take you over there."

"I got her." Fish said as he walked up to them.

Cali let out a sob. When she tried hugging him, he backed away and winced. She stared at him in horror. Did she do something wrong? Was he mad?

"I have cracked or broken ribs." Fish winced but forced a smile. "It hurts."

Cali lowered her head, embarrassed. She should have known better. She tried to let go of his hand, but he held on. Fish pulled her in, more gently this time.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. Cali had been apologizing a lot lately. Her grandma was shot. Fish was hurt. Lonnie killed a man. Who knows what else happened that she was responsible for.

"Hey." Fish patted her back. "It's going to be all right."

Cali buried her head in his shoulder, feeling comfort in his warmth. "I thought I wouldn't see you again. I wanted you to come with us in the detective's Nova, but he said no."

"He wanted to get you out of there in case the helicopter came back or others came to help." Fish used his thumbs to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "Are you okay? Did they do anything to you?"

"I was drugged." She hiccupped, then shuddered. She wiped her face with the blanket. "The EMTs examined me and took some samples. I'm pretty sure I'm okay."

He sighed in relief.

Her brain was still foggy, but she remembered him carrying her. "You caught me after I collapsed."

"I did. Luckily, something pulled me back because I was about to take that guy down when I heard the gunshot. When I saw you faint, I veered to grab you. Otherwise, I might have been the one shot."

"We had a lot of help." Cali thought about the orbs and silently thanked them.

The ambulance with Gran pulled away. Fish held her as they watched it leave.

A policeman, walking across the lawn, stopped when he saw them. He hesitated but moved on.

Cali knew what would be coming next. "I don't know how long before I'll be arrested."

Fish squeezed her shoulder. "You're going to be okay, Cali."

"I don't know ..." She wasn't as confident. There'd been an awful lot of guns and dead men because of her.

"Listen." He moved to face her. "I gave a statement to the officer over there." Fish tilted his

head toward a taller uniformed detective who was now talking to her mama. “They weren’t after you for murder. They wanted to nab the traffickers. You were their link.”

Cali shook her head, still not convinced she was clear from her mess. “Stelzer said they had to gather information, get statements, and then determine if there’d be any charges against me. It could be tonight, tomorrow ...”

“After my statement, you won’t have to worry too much. Besides, I heard Bobby defended you as well. At first, he didn’t let on you were there. After his story didn’t match the evidence, he confessed the whole truth.”

“Bobby.” He was another one she had to apologize to. She felt guilty for leaving him in the parking lot.

“He’s doing good. He’s trucking again.”

She frowned. “How do you know?”

“I talked to him. I was worried after seeing those guys beat the heck out of him, but I was too chickenshit to call him right away. I called him yesterday. He’d been in the hospital for a few days with a broken nose, stitches in his face, a slight concussion, and a bruised spleen.”

Cali gasped at the news. She teetered and Fish steadied her. When he did, he suppressed a cry from the pain.

“You need to get to the hospital.”

“And so do you.” He took her hand. “Come on. Let’s see if we can ride together.”

She smiled. That she could take.

Epilogue

Cali entered the living room from the porch to retrieve the sandwiches from the refrigerator. She stopped when she saw Gran and Mama in the kitchen working together. They were getting along today, but it wasn't always the case. Both were hotheaded. Mama was angry at Gran for teaching Cali how to use her gift, while Gran argued that the gift had saved her.

Two weeks had passed since the attempted kidnapping and shootout. Gran had been in the hospital for three days, giving Cali and her mama time to reconnect and catch up on what happened after the night Cali fled. She learned that Mama had left Kyle. He'd been a drunk for a long time and her mama had had enough. He'd been dragging them down for too many years. At first Cali was sad to hear it, but then changed her mind. Her mama deserved better.

She also learned about their old boss, Hank Brice. As she suspected, he was charged with trafficking and other financial crimes. He was in jail waiting for his bail hearing. The diner was closed, and Abby went to her sister's house in Iowa to spend time with her.

"Cali." Mama spotted her standing in the living room. "Did you put ice under the potato salad?"

"Yes, Mama." Cali admired her mama for a moment. She looked better. The dark circles had disappeared from under her eyes. Her skin glowed. Or was she at peace?

Mama explained she had left Sumner Point because she didn't want Cali to go through what she did. It had been hard growing up as the Orb Lady's daughter. She didn't want to put Cali in the same position, being called names and cast as a freak or a witch. When she met Kyle and he offered her the moon and stars—a better life—she took it.

Hopefully now, coming back, her mama would think differently. Sumner Point was their home.

Cali entered the kitchen and grabbed the plate of sandwiches, careful not to let the assorted meat sandwiches tumble off the plate.

Fish would be here soon. They prepared a huge lunch: sandwiches, potato salad, beans, different cheeses, a fruit salad, and Lynchburg lemonade. Cali's stomach growled. After she set

the tray down, she snuck one of the hot pickles from a bowl and popped it in her mouth.

As her eyes stung from the heat and her nose started to run, she heard the Camry before it appeared. Fish honked the horn to announce his arrival. Cali was happy to see Mr. Yurmac let Fish borrow it again.

When she had talked to Fish after he returned to Nashville, she learned Mr. Yurmac had been furious to find his car missing. After Fish explained what happened, he had Stelzer confirm everything. The detective even commended Fish as a hero for saving a woman from being kidnapped. His boss seemed pleased.

Cali was more relieved when she heard Jolene was gone, no longer at his apartment or in Nashville. Fish hadn't seen or heard from her since; however, Stelzer assured him the police would question her.

Cali went outside to meet Fish. She brushed her hands against her shorts and waved to him as he got out of the car. He wasn't as agile with his ribs still healing, but he managed to give her a big hug.

"Hey, sexy." His smile beamed.

"My rock star," she said and made him blush.

"Not yet." Fish crossed his fingers.

"You will be." She had no doubt. Cali took his hand and pulled gently for him to follow.

"Come on. Food's ready."

After the greetings, they filled their plates and sat to eat. Cali gave up her rocking chair so Mama could sit next to Gran. Lonnie had also joined them for lunch and settled into a wooden chair by the food table. Cali sat with Fish on the porch stairs with the screen door between them and the others.

"What have you been up to, Fish?" Gran asked. "How are the ribs?"

"Drums are hard to play, but I am getting better. I bought a new guitar. It was on sale at the store. I'm excited to be playing again. And yesterday I toured the studios around Nashville to figure out where to audition." Fish looked through the screen at Lonnie. "Thanks for the tip, man. I already had one studio interested."

Cali raised an eyebrow and turned to peek through the door at Lonnie. He was smiling.

"What tip?" She was curious.

"We've kept in contact." Lonnie referred to himself and Fish.

"Really?" Cali had no clue.

Fish explained. "Lonnie knows the owner of a studio and gave me his number."

"Did you talk directly to Chet?"

“I did, sir.”

Lonnie seemed pleased. “Let me know how it goes.”

“I will. And what else is going on here?” Fish asked as if to divert the attention away from himself. He looked at Cali. “Any more news on your situation?”

Cali turned to Lonnie for him to respond. She wasn’t sure why he took an interest in getting her name cleared, but he’d been a big help in talking to Gran’s lawyer and to the police. She was grateful for his help. She also felt a special bond with him and wondered if he was her real dad. He and Mama were always tense around each other, and she guessed they had been close before her mama left Sumner Point. One day Cali’d ask if he was her father. But not now. She needed time to heal from the kidnapping before the next round of surprises hit.

“Margo, Athena’s attorney, is talking to authorities,” Lonnie said between bites. “They believe all charges against Cali will be dismissed, but they’re waiting on the final decision from the judge.”

Fish’s face lit up. “That’s good news.”

Cali agreed but she wasn’t ready to celebrate yet. She gave him the bad news. “Mr. Bendwinder is out on bail.”

His face dropped. “I thought I heard something about him getting out.”

“They’re speculating he’s going to plead not guilty.”

For the last two nights, Cali hadn’t slept. They didn’t have television at the cabin, so she kept up with the news by using her phone’s browser. Gran and Mama warned her not to, but she couldn’t help it. This was her life, and the mess wasn’t over. If he went to trial, she’d have to be a witness. She hated to think about it.

“Enough,” Gran said and slammed her hands on the rocking chair armrests. “We’re celebrating today.”

Cali frowned. “Celebrating what?”

She glanced from Gran to her mama to Lonnie and to Fish. All four had wicked smiles. Mama left her chair and went into the cabin.

Fish stood and took Cali’s empty plate, placing it on his own. He motioned for her to stand. “After you, my darling.”

When she did, he opened the screen door and they entered the porch.

“Here we are,” Mama sang as she came out from the cabin with two cakes, one in each hand. Cali stared at the dark fudge torte and a lemon poppyseed cake and almost cried. Her mama remembered. Nine candles burned brightly on each cake.

They sang “Happy Birthday” to her with Fish taking the lead. She blushed with

embarrassment but at the same time enjoyed every minute of it.

“Happy birthday, baby.” Mama smiled as she held the cakes out for Cali to blow out the candles.

When she did, one candle was left.

“Ahhh,” Fish said and grinned. “You have one boyfriend.”

“Do I?” she questioned him and picked up the candle. The flame flickered like mad and then turned into a calm flutter.

“No.” Fish shook his head adamantly. Cali gave him a sharp look. “I’m much more than that. I’m your soulmate.”

Cali agreed. She finally felt like her life was starting to make sense. She wondered if all the bad, her messy situation, had to happen to help her find what had been missing. If she hadn’t been forced to leave Dempsey, she would never have met Fish for the second time under the bridge. Cali would never have met Gran and become part of her life. She would never have learned about her gift.

What a perfect day. Her heart swelled with love as she looked at her family, including Lonnie. He was part of it too. Whatever came next with her, she could brave the storm.

Cali had them and her orbs to help her through anything.

After making another wish, she blew out the last candle.

Author Note

Thank you for reading “The Orb Lady.” I hope you enjoyed the book. The first idea I had for the storyline came from a photo that I admired of a woman with orbs surrounding her, and my fascination of orbs in photos. The second idea was to bring awareness to the growing issue of human trafficking. Always be aware of your surroundings and trust your instincts. Stay safe.

If a situation you see looks suspicious of human trafficking, please call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. If someone is in immediate danger, please call 911.

Author's Biography

Beth M James lives with her husband in a tiny home in Northwest Wisconsin and loves being surrounded by nature. Her passion is writing stories full of adventure and with twists and turns. She loves when people ask, "How in the hell did you come up with that storyline?" And as an author and writer, she's been interviewed for an article in *Time* magazine and was published in *USA Today*. She's taught classes to other authors/writers and to the public. You can read Beth's blog or find out more about Beth and her books at:

www.bethmjames.com

And as an independent author, she would be grateful for your review on Amazon, Goodreads, and or another retail establishment. Reviews are important to become established in the book world. Thank you in advance.

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