

RED ROVER

PERDITION GAMES



DEATH
is the prize in a twisted game

L.E. FRASER

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First Edition – June 2016

ISBN

978-0-9947742-3-1 (Paperback)

978-0-9947742-2-4 (eBook)

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Red Rover, Perdition Games

Skully, Perdition Games

Simon Says, Perdition Games

For my mother
who taught me that reading was a pleasure not a task.

PROLOGUE

IT WAS A gorgeous spring day, and Roger had decided to cancel his Friday psychiatric patients so he could attempt a little cognitive behavioural exercise. The objective was to practise spontaneity, something he usually avoided. His unannounced visit would thrill his lover almost as much as his uncharacteristic impulsiveness.

Forty-five minutes after leaving his Cabbagetown home in downtown Toronto, he pulled off the highway and into the city of Vaughan. Not wanting to arrive empty-handed, he found a flower shop and bought a bouquet of yellow roses before continuing north along a country road toward Brenda's farm.

Just as he spotted the left turn into her gravel lane, a burping tractor popped into view on the decline of a small hill on the opposite side of the two-lane country road. Roger sat impatiently with his indicator ticking off the seconds. He cursed when he spied a line of traffic approaching from behind the tractor. A Ford truck led the procession and was travelling fast, closing the distance. If the damn farmer hurried up, Roger figured he'd have just enough time to make the turn. He leaned forward, grasped the steering wheel, and waited for his opportunity.

“Come on! Move it!” he yelled.

The second the tractor cleared the driveway, Roger hit the gas and sped into the left lane, confident that the approaching pickup had plenty of time to slow down. Too late, he realized the asshole wasn't reducing his speed. In fact, the heavy vehicle had accelerated on the hill's decline. Second-guessing himself at the last minute, Roger slammed on the brakes. The car stalled. Trying not to overreact, he quickly pressed the start button and fumbled with the gears. His foot slipped off the clutch and the car stalled again.

A horn blared. Brakes squealed in protest. The truck's locked tires howled against the asphalt, and a sickening odour of burning rubber assaulted Roger's nose. His heart galloped in his chest as he grasped the steering wheel and frantically jammed his finger against the start button. Turning his head, he saw the front of the giant pickup swerve as the driver tried to steer away from the imminent collision. Frozen, Roger watched in horror as the truck skidded sideways but continued rushing toward his Audi. Drywall flew off the truck bed, breaking against the road. A chunk bounced off the windshield of his convertible and struck him in the face. The back of his head bounced against the headrest, and he flung his arms over his head and closed his eyes with a moan of despair, waiting for the sound of crunching metal as the truck sideswiped him. When the crash didn't occur, Roger opened his eyes and saw that the pickup had stopped less than an inch from the side of his car.

Blinking rapidly and trying to catch his breath, he looked behind the Ford. One car was in the ditch. Two more had managed to stop on the side of the road. People were climbing from

their vehicles and shading their eyes against the sun in an effort to see what had happened. The old man behind the wheel of the Ford leaned on his horn and flipped the bird through his open window.

Roger wiped a trickle of blood from his forehead with a shaking hand and managed to start the car. Anxious to avoid an ugly scene with the other driver, he sped into Brenda's long laneway, hoping that the hillbilly truck driver wasn't going to follow and confront him.

There were two cars and a truck in the gravel yard, but plenty of room for his Audi. Wanting to surprise her, Roger parked on the far side of the decrepit garage where she wouldn't see his car from the house. He got out, peered into the side mirror, and dabbed a tissue against the cut. Satisfied that it wasn't serious, he reached into the car for the flowers. Bouquet in hand, he strolled to the back of the property, chuckling as he imagined Brenda enthralled by his story of the near miss.

Since he was usually sneaking in and out, he'd never had a good look at the farmhouse and had never been in the backyard. Enjoying the warm spring sunshine, he turned his back on the ugly stone house and his eyes scanned over the land to the north. Clusters of tall maple and sycamore trees dotted rolling green fields, and colourful wildflowers bloomed in the overgrown brush where crops had once thrived. A charming location and it was hard to believe that downtown Toronto was less than an hour away.

The illusion of beauty shattered when Roger's eyes drifted to the south where a decaying barn perched about ninety metres from the back of the house. He shuddered and imagined rats

scurrying to filthy nests. About forty metres to the right of the barn was a pus-yellow shed. The outbuildings were garish scars against the bright blue sky and emerald fields. Nature only compensated for so much. Brenda may as well squat in a condemned building in the Garden of Eden.

Turning in a semi-circle, he studied the back of the dilapidated farmhouse and the falling-down garage beside it. In spite of the demolition costs, the land's resale value would be well over two million, more if they sold to a developer. It was a damn shame Brenda's obstinate husband refused to sell.

The idiot had moved his family of five from the city with the intention of renovating the house and three outbuildings. A reasonable man would recognize the futility of trying. Besides, according to Brenda, her husband wasn't handy. He started projects and left them half-finished, which might explain the blue tarp that covered a portion of the garage roof.

In Roger's professional opinion, Graham suffered from the Dunning-Kruger effect, a cognitive bias that made him believe he possessed superior skills compared to everyone else. If she couldn't convince her moronic husband to sell the money pit, winter would be a freezing nightmare of despair. How could the man subject his family to such squalor? It was selfish, vindictive... stupid. Roger should have no problem outsmarting a man like that, and yet, here he was, skulking around in the middle of the day like *he* was the bad guy.

If he lived like this, he wouldn't want anyone to know. He chewed his lower lip. Maybe he should go around front and pretend he hadn't seen the mess in the backyard. In fact, maybe he should leave. On the other hand, he'd been inside the house on

more than one occasion. Now that he'd seen the entire property, he could genuinely sympathize when she complained.

Decision made, he headed for the back door, a journey that required agility because of the broken cement stones that were an inch elevated in places along the pathway. At the back entrance, he hoped his knock wouldn't bash in the screen door that dangled precariously from a single hinge. His fist stopped in mid-air as he heard voices enter the kitchen on the other side of the door. Angry voices.

"She has an active imagination." Brenda. "You should be proud of her." She sounded frustrated.

"What are you talking about?" a male voice asked incredulously. "You didn't even look at it. I'm telling you, there's something wrong."

Graham was home. Brenda had told him yesterday that her husband was going away for the weekend. Unpleasant surprises like this were why Roger avoided spontaneity.

"The only thing wrong with her is her brother," Brenda was saying. "Are you going to do something about Jordan?"

"It was a joke. Lighten up. Isn't that what your precious Dr. Peterson told you to do?"

Roger jumped at hearing his own name enter the argument.

"Don't start!" Brenda yelled. "Every time I bring up Jordan, you turn the conversation around and accuse me of cheating on you."

"Tell me why Dr. Peterson turned you over to another head-shrinker," Graham demanded. "Let's see, was it a twisted shot at ethics?"

"Graham, I'm warning you. If—"

“*You’re warning me?*” Graham laughed. “How do you think the College of Physicians would discipline a psychiatrist who reassigned a patient so he could fuck her?”

Roger’s blood ran cold. Another complaint would ruin him. He slid out of sight, glancing around for an escape route. There wasn’t one. Graham would see him from the kitchen window.

Before their friendship had progressed to a sexual relationship, Brenda had introduced him to her husband. All six feet, four inches and three hundred pounds of him. Hard muscle had loosened and fallen to flab, but the man was still threatening. He’d played football with the Toronto Argonauts until three years ago when he’d blown his knee out as an offensive lineman. Now he was a stereotypical embittered alcoholic who guzzled beer and relived the glory days with friends.

Over the past year, Roger’s opinion of the odious bully had shifted from indifference to dislike to outright hatred. He had no doubt that the arse would lodge a grievance against him. Especially if Graham found him snooping around with a bunch of posies clutched in his hand.

He jumped off the back porch to a patch of dirt alongside the house and pressed his body against the fieldstone wall under the window. How had he gotten into this mess?

From inside the house, the arguing was still going strong and their voices drifted out of the open window. He’d missed part of the discussion, but they were back on the subject of the children.

“Oh, right—*boys will be boys,*” Brenda mimicked in a drawl. “What happened in the city was not okay. What happened at

the high school was criminal. When are you going to open your eyes?”

“Nothing happened!”

The voice was directly to Roger’s right, in front of the screen door. If Graham glanced outside, he’d see him skulking under the window. Roger repressed his instinct to bolt, stood still, and held his breath.

“The only problem with this family is you,” Graham yelled. “You’re setting such a great example, whoring around with your psychiatrist.”

“Look around you!” Brenda shrieked. “We’re living like animals. The basement is flooded with sewage.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“And you’re unbelievable. You’re okay letting the kids—delights that they are—live in raw sewage like gutter rats.”

Something smashed on the floor. Roger jumped. Was the argument escalating to physical violence? He had to do something.

“There’s no sewage! It’s the sump-pump or the receptacle. Give me a chance to fix it.”

“Don’t you get it? *You* can’t fix anything,” Brenda shouted.

“I’ll figure it out!”

“When? When are you going to *figure it out*? I married a football player. I didn’t marry a farmer. I hate you for forcing me to live like this!”

“So leave.” Graham’s voice moved away from the door and into the kitchen. “Who’s stopping you? Run off with your darling doctor.”

The voices drifted further away from the kitchen, and Roger missed Brenda's response. He had no trouble hearing Graham shout, "Good! Let's see how happy you are with him when he loses his licence. Let's see how many people buy his self-help books when I out him as a cheating fraud." A door slammed inside the house.

Roger stood on his tiptoes and peeked in the kitchen window. The room was empty. He quickly turned and picked his way across renovation waste piled against the side of the house. Once he reached the path, he broke into a jog. He could get to his car from the other side of the garage. So long as Graham hadn't exited the house through the front door, Roger could escape unseen.

He couldn't let the vindictive arse accuse him of seducing a patient. He'd had no idea Graham knew the truth. Why hadn't Brenda warned him? Roger stopped abruptly beside the garage. He was short of breath, his chest felt tight, and his hands shook. Perspiration poured down his face but he felt cold. He pulled his hair hard, trying to ward off a panic attack. Slowly, the pain in his chest eased and his breathing evened out. He paced in a circle, taking frantic, jerky steps. If the media discovered he'd slept with a patient again, the scandal would ruin him. He had to do something.

Focused on his musings, Roger didn't notice the young man until he bumped into him. Dressed in football gear, the teenager held a scuffed helmet that was a frightening map of brutality. Mixed with stains of ground dirt were smears of dried blood. The knuckles on the hand that gripped the helmet strap had ugly bruises and bloody scrapes.

The teenager clenched his square jaw, and his eyes narrowed menacingly. “Who the fuck are you?”

No wonder Brenda had so many complaints about her eighteen-year-old son, Jordan. Roger’s temper rose to a breaking point, and dancing black dots distorted his vision. “Watch where you’re going,” he retorted.

The kid looked down at the flowers in Roger’s hand, and his lips pressed together to form a tight smile. “Right. I get it.” The smile turned to an ugly smirk. “No fun playing with the cow when the bull’s in the yard, eh?” The kid leaned into Roger’s face. “I know who you are,” he said in a singsong voice.

Without thinking, Roger shoved him hard in the chest with both hands, but the burly teenager barely moved.

Jordan laughed and held up his hands in mock submission. “Assaulting a high school student on his own property. What do you think that’ll get you, doc? Some time in prison is my guess.” The kid brushed by with a swagger and a nasty chuckle. He disappeared into the house, slamming the back door behind him.

Standing motionless, Roger tried to steady his breathing again. Cloying sweetness from the roses wafted up and his stomach somersaulted. He tossed the bouquet into the garden.

Roger envisioned a media headline and heard a disgusted broadcaster’s voice in his head. *Bestselling author and renowned psychiatrist caught seducing a patient and assaulting her teenage son.*

Seeing the flowers discarded on the ground, hearing the arguing that still pierced the air from inside the house, and imagining the end of his life’s work, he snapped. He didn’t know what he was going to do, but he had to something.

Before he could lose his nerve, he marched back to the door and peered inside. He couldn't see anyone, but it sounded like the voices were coming from below him. He opened the screen door and stepped into a small foyer. The kitchen was to the right. Straight ahead, about five feet from the door, was a staircase. Ten or twelve steep steps led down to a landing with a wall. A second set of stairs descended to the left of the landing, presumably ending in the cellar. The angle of the split staircase prevented him from seeing into the actual cellar.

He hesitated and swiped his hand across the moisture on his brow. Blood coated his fingertips from the cut on his forehead. He didn't have a tissue and thought again about going back to the car.

Just then, he heard the heart-stopping sound of flesh smacking flesh, followed by Brenda crying out. Her voice propelled him into action. He tore outside and frantically searched the yard for a weapon, settling on a rusted pipe that lay in a pile of renovation waste on the right side of the porch. He grabbed it. It weighed maybe ten pounds. He swung the pipe, adjusted his grip, and sprinted back up the porch steps to the door. Above him, the outdoor light flickered and went out. There were loud footsteps in the kitchen, the sound of crashing furniture, smashing glass, and the clatter of falling objects.

Roger leaped off the porch and stood on his toes to peer through the kitchen window. Jordan was leaning against the open fridge door, drinking from a milk carton. Two chairs lay on their sides and the contents of a utensil drawer littered the floor. Judging from the amount of broken ceramic on the floor, someone had smashed most of the dishes. As Roger watched, Jordan

hurled the milk to the ground and stomped out of the room. Angry footsteps thumped on the stairs. An upstairs door slammed. The house was silent. Gripping the pipe, Roger returned to the porch, quietly opened the door, and stepped inside. He stood in the entry, straining to hear any sound from the basement. Nothing but silence.

Perhaps Brenda had also come upstairs when he was outside hunting for a weapon. Maybe he could find her and get her out of the house without having to confront Graham. He crept through the main level of the old farmhouse, and the pipe grew slick in his perspiring hand. Heavy metal music now blared from somewhere upstairs. Brenda wasn't on the main floor. Roger snuck to the back door and took a hesitant step down the first step to the basement landing. Did he hear a whimper? He took another step, leaning down to better hear. Someone was weeping. It had to be Brenda. She was in the cellar.

He tiptoed down the stairs. Halfway to the landing, his foot slipped out from under him. A jolt of panic engulfed him. His left hand hit the wall, but there was nothing to grasp. His feet scrambled against the edge of the narrow stair before he fell to his ass and slid down to the landing.

He remained perfectly still, barely breathing, and waited for approaching footsteps. Nothing. Slowly, he climbed to his feet. His tailbone throbbed, and his elbow stung. He turned to face the second staircase that descended into gloom. He could smell the stench of sewage, and, from below him, he heard an irregular clanging that sounded like metal hitting metal. Graham must be fiddling with the sump-pump.

Worried about losing his balance again, he looked around for something to hold onto so he could lean into the staircase to get a sense of how far it descended. Perched on the landing wall was an electrical box, and the rusted metal door was open. He shifted the pipe to his left hand and tugged on the door. It seemed firmly attached to the box so he grasped it, leaned into the stairwell, and peered down. Beneath the fifth step was pitch black. Impossible to guess how many stairs remained before reaching the cellar floor. He couldn't risk using his cell to light the staircase because he didn't know exactly where Graham was working. The clanging echoed in the old cellar and seemed to be coming from every direction.

He let go of the breaker box door and transferred the metal pipe to his right hand. Slowly, he descended. He counted seven stairs. The suffocating reek of sewage was stronger, and he struggled not to gag. Two more stairs and he reached the bottom. Cold liquid sloshed across the top of his shoes. He didn't want to imagine what floated in the water. A flashlight beam illuminated the back wall, about ten metres from the stairs. He could just make out Graham crouched in front of a sump-pump.

Roger's breath came in small gasps. He could just go back up those stairs, assume that Brenda was safe, and hope her abusive husband wouldn't act on his threat to ruin him. Against the darkness, he imagined the looks of disdain on the faces of his esteemed colleagues. A public accusation by an irate husband would be the demise of all of his hard work and dreams. Years of medical school for nothing. Massive legal bills to defend his reputation would leave him penniless. He'd lose his house, his car, his friends. Sniggering ridicule would follow him for the rest

of his life. He gripped the pipe in both hands and licked his lips, telling himself that it was only a matter of time before Graham seriously injured Brenda, maybe even killed her. He had a responsibility to protect her. He swallowed hard. His mouth was dry. He had to decide what to do. Any minute, Graham could turn around and see him.

Roger took a deep breath and made his decision, knowing it would change his life forever.

CHAPTER ONE

REECE

AT SEVEN-THIRTY on Saturday morning, Reece was wandering through the crowd at the St. Lawrence Market on Front Street. Unable to sleep again, he'd left the loft at five a.m. and walked the sixteen blocks to the Saturday farmers' market. He'd learned to leave the car at home. No parking. Anywhere. Ever.

He mumbled, "excuse me" and "pardon me" as he tried to carve a path to the organic butcher kiosk. He didn't need to visit the butcher, but there wasn't any reason to race home. Sam was swamped with PhD work and spending the day at the university. Reece didn't have any friends in the city, and a boring weekend alone stretched ahead of him. Again.

After moving to Toronto last year, the market had become his favourite place in a city he hated. The building was over two hundred years old and housed a ton of artisans selling their wares from stalls set up in a vast space with steel-beamed ceiling rafters and cement floors. Instead of enjoying the spring sunlight streaming through the many windows set high against the old walls, Reece's eyes roamed across the crowd. A throwback to being a cop.

It wasn't Toronto specifically or Torontonians that Reece distrusted—it was any metropolitan area. He was a country boy at heart, and quiet towns suited him better. But he'd tendered his resignation as an inspector with the Ontario Provincial Police at the Uthisca detachment to be with Sam, a private investigator from Toronto. Being in love with an urban dweller meant adapting. For Sam's sake, he was trying. It wasn't going well.

What Reece hated was the lack of parking, constant crowds, indifference, and noise. He felt disconnected from people and nature but was trying hard to find positive attributes about city living. Watching Abigail—the only one of Sam's friends Reece liked—dance with The National Ballet of Canada was fun. So was the historical tour of the city he and Sam had taken. That was about it. Along with his dissatisfaction with city living, he also wasn't keen on PI work. He had an offer on the table from Toronto Police Services but wasn't sure homicide detective was his destiny either. Truth was he didn't know what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. Living in a state of limbo sucked.

With a sigh, he reminded himself that the only problem he needed to solve today was how to plot a course to the butcher on the west side of the crowded market. He wished Abigail had been available to meet him. The ballerina's ethereal beauty caused mobs to part in awe. Abby was a sweet woman who seldom spoke and had tremendously sad eyes. Reece hadn't met her girlfriend, Talia, and hoped he'd hit it off with the Canadian Armed Forces officer when she returned from overseas. Having some friends might help him settle into Toronto.

He finally reached the butcher kiosk, feeling flustered and out of sorts. While waiting his turn, his phone chirped. Reece

dug it out and glanced at the caller ID. Unknown number. With a frown, he answered and barked, “Hash.”

“*The dew of the morning, sunk chill on my brow,*” an unfamiliar voice quoted. “Early rising is a residual effect of country living, I presume. Regrettably, I called Sam first and woke her.” The man chuckled. “She dispatched an eloquent reprimand prior to furnishing me with your cell number.”

Reece didn’t have a clue who would call him to quote poetry. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“I call on bended knee to implore you to assist me. How are you with a hammer?”

“Who is this?”

“Roger.”

It took a minute before it clicked. Roger Peterson, a psychiatrist friend of Sam’s. She’d introduced him months ago at a Christmas party, and Reece had immediately labelled the man an ostentatious stuffed shirt. “I’m at the market. Didn’t recognize your voice.” He refrained from adding, *which should be a given since we only met once.*

“Ah, the next contestant on *Master Chef*.” Another chuckle.

“What’s up, Roger? That one,” he added in response to the butcher’s question, pointing at a lovely duck.

“A barn raising. Well, a deck raising, at my place. Cold beer on ice and steaks on the lunch menu. I know that it’s short notice, but I do hope you’re available this afternoon,” Roger said primly. “I’m also inviting Jim Stipelli. You two get on well, I believe?”

“Yeah, Sam and I worked for him on a murder case a few months ago,” Reece said.

Jim was great when he wasn't around his harridan wife. Lisa Stipelli, Sam's best friend, was a passive-aggressive woman who milked sympathy by portraying herself as a hapless victim. Worse, she treated everyone who enjoyed a glass of wine with dinner as an alcoholic. It was impossible to get a word in edge-wise, busy as she was lecturing you on your shortcomings. If you tried to defend yourself, she'd snipe about how you monopolized the conversation. Reece couldn't stand her, and it baffled him that Sam was friends with the hateful woman. More bewildering was why Roger, a passionate professional in self-help, tolerated Lisa's antics. The last thing Reece wanted to do was to hang out with Lisa.

"Sorry, Roger, we can't make it. Sam's tied up today," Reece said.

"I know. She told me she's spending the day at the university, which works because I was planning a boys' afternoon." Roger paused and then added, "Lisa won't be here."

Reece handed over his cash, accepted the bag, and waved at the butcher, who ignored him as usual. The next man in line hip-checked him out of the way and shouted his order. A woman loudly objected, insisting it was her turn. Reece picked his way through the crowd to the back wall of the building.

"Why the short notice? If you want to build a deck, it'll take planning," Reece said.

"The project's planned. Listen, Sam told me you might be at loose ends today. I've been meaning to invite you over for weeks. I'd like to get to know you." He laughed. "After all, you never know when I might need the services of a private investigator."

Jim Stipelli was Toronto's top defence attorney. Why was Roger inviting a criminal lawyer and an ex-cop to his house without notice?

"Roger, is everything okay?"

The man's response was a bit fast. "Sure. Everything's fine. Come on, it'll be fun."

"Well... okay," Reece agreed, curiosity getting the better of him. "I picked up wild mushrooms that I'll bring over to go with the steak. I have to drop by the loft first though." Roger lived downtown, he knew. Reece checked his watch. "How's eleven o'clock?"

"Great. I'm in Cabbagetown on Wellesley Street East—"

A rude shopper plowed into Reece, and he fumbled for his phone before it smashed onto the cement. He caught it and brought it back to his ear. "I'll get the address from Sam, no worries. See you later."

After he hung up, he gazed at the chaos before him.

Yeah, he thought, a change of scenery would be good right about now.

THE CIRCA-EIGHTEEN-HUNDREDS homes on Roger's street were striking. The charming neighbourhood had been part of the historical tour Reece had taken with Sam. Protected by the Cabbagetown Preservation Association, the area on the east side of downtown Toronto was a spectacular example of one of the largest Victorian housing districts in North America. Gentrification had begun in the 1970s, and many of the restored semis, row houses, and detached homes on the narrow streets

now sold for millions of dollars. Remarkable, considering impoverished nineteenth-century Irish immigrants had grown cabbages in their front lawns to feed their families.

Roger's home was a two-and-a-half-storey brick structure with elaborate cornices. A peaked roof capped the dormer attic window, gorgeous dentils decorated the facade, and rounded columns supported a delightful second-storey portico. Elegant ivy hugged the stone around a protruding bay window. It was, in a word, stunning.

Reece pulled into Roger's lane and manoeuvred his Toyota beside a brand new Audi convertible. Nice ride, but much too fancy for Reece's taste. Squeezing his six-foot-three frame out of his car to avoid even touching the Spyder, he cursed the city and its tight spaces.

"Salutations, Reece."

Reece jerked at the sound of his name and looked over at Roger, who had opened the gate in the back fence.

"Great house," Reece said. "Architecture is a hobby of mine, and she's a beauty."

"Most visitors park on the street."

Nice welcome, Reece thought, glancing up and down the street. There wasn't any available parking. Annoyed by Roger's rudeness, but not wanting to get off on the wrong foot, Reece asked, "Is there a side street you'd recommend?"

"You may as well leave it," Roger said with a sigh of annoyance. "I'm surprised you failed to see the sign."

Reece had indeed seen the sign but assumed it was to protect the parking pad from strangers, not to prevent the homeowner's guests from parking there.

Instead of going through the gate, Roger walked to the front door and held it open. When Reece entered the house, a sense of déjà vu engulfed him. Hemlock floors ran throughout the open main floor, and the wood had the same unusual grey stain as those in the loft he shared with Sam. The walls were the same shade of grey with smoky white trim, and even the modern, minimalistic furniture style was similar. He trailed along behind Roger and stopped to gawk at the kitchen. Carrara marble countertops, identical to the stone in Sam's kitchen. Same cabinetry and backsplash. The light fixtures were different, but the similarities between Roger's decor and Sam's were striking. Creepy, in fact.

"Something wrong?" Roger asked.

"Ah... no. Nice place. Did you design it yourself?"

"Not entirely. I bought it six years ago," Roger said. "The den is my creation." He gestured to the left of the eating area at the back of the kitchen.

Reece crossed the room and peeked through the door. A masculine space with a brown leather sofa, a heavy walnut desk, and plaid curtains. It didn't match the sleek, minimalistic design of either the front room or the kitchen. It also didn't fit Roger, who was a bit effeminate. He was a short man, maybe five-seven, with a slight build and blond hair styled just so. He wore expensive designer clothes and purple paisley socks. Last time Reece had seen Roger, the socks had been orange with white polka dots. Sock fetish aside, Roger reminded Reece of Niles Crane from the show *Frasier*. The resemblance was in part because Roger was a psychiatrist, but also because of his prissy appearance, persnickety mannerisms, and condescending tone.

Reece wandered back to the kitchen where Roger was fussing with an elaborate coffee machine. “It’s amazing how similar your house is to Sam’s loft,” he said.

“Really?” Roger looked surprised and pleased.

“Haven’t you been to her place?”

He shook his head. “In what way is it comparable?”

“The floors, paint colours, fixtures, stuff like that. How come you’ve never been to the loft?”

Roger shrugged. “Sam’s protective of her space and privacy. She isn’t fond of entertaining.”

Correct on both counts. Still, it was peculiar she’d never invited one of her five childhood friends in the three years she’d lived there.

“Well, we’ll have to have you over for dinner sometime,” Reece said.

“What a delight it would be to partake in the culinary enchantments concocted by such a gifted chef. I dabble in the kitchen myself. Check out the steaks, they’re in the fridge. Wagyu beef.”

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes at Roger’s highfalutin way of speaking, Reece opened the fridge and took in the array of expensive foodie delights. The three Wagyu sirloins were a thing of beauty.

“Geez, those must have set you back a few bills.” He closed the fridge and accepted a mug of coffee.

“You can have two, if you have a large appetite. Regrettably, Jim isn’t available to join us.”

“That’s too bad.” Reece had been looking forward to hanging out with Jim without Lisa.

“There’s imported white wine vinegar and fresh Tarragon, if you can handle Béarnaise with sufficient technique to avoid breaking the sauce.” Roger blew on his coffee. “Otherwise, I can execute it with ease.”

Anything you can do, I can do better, Reece thought. It was childish, but he couldn’t squash his growing distaste for the pompous, condescending man. Last time they’d met, Reece had had the same reaction to Roger, but had decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Seemed his first impression had been accurate.

In response to the suggestion of Béarnaise sauce, Reece landed a shot of his own. “Come on, only a novice would smother spectacular beef with a rich sauce.”

“You think?” Roger shook his head with a smile, as if Reece’s comment amused him. “Classically trained French chefs would beg to differ, but I suppose that’s neither here nor there.” He raised a perfectly groomed eyebrow. “From what Sam has said, you’re a fine chef. It’s a surprising observation, coming from her. I’ve never considered her to have a discerning palate or much interest in the culinary arts.”

Reece wasn’t getting into a pissing contest with Roger. He tried a different line of conversation. “So, how did you and Sam meet?”

“She attended school with my younger sister. Jim and I are six years older than Sam and Lisa,” Roger said curtly, clearly not interested in the topic. “How about we start on the deck. You can let me know what you think of my new grill.”

Grilling the steaks would take away some of the sting of having to suffer Roger’s company. One of the drawbacks to living in

a downtown loft was a lack of barbecue. Reece took his coffee and followed Roger outside.

Displayed on a cedar deck was a brand new barbecue—flashy cooking surface, gas and infrared burners, warming ovens, and a stainless steel woodchip smoker. Reece knew the price tag for the sleek, grilling beauty was well over ten thousand dollars.

“What do you think?” Roger asked with a pensive gaze, as if he wasn’t proud to own one of the best barbecues money could buy.

Pretentious and superfluous, Reece wanted to say, but instead replied, “It’s something.” He looked around, a little confused. “I thought you wanted to build a deck.”

“That’s right.”

The large hexagonal deck, ringed with benches and stairs that led to a small garden, was pristine.

“What’s wrong with this one?” Reece wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“Not a thing. You’re tasked with constructing a lower deck on the grass.”

“Tasked? You said you wanted *help*.” Reece took a deep breath and tried to rein in his growing temper.

“Pish posh,” Roger said dismissively, handing him a magazine. “It looks easy.”

Reece studied the picture of the ground deck with elevated gardens in *Dream Decks and Patios*. It didn’t look at all easy.

“Do you have plans?”

Roger tapped the magazine picture with a manicured finger. “Right here.”

“I can see the damn picture, Roger. I’m talking about building plans.”

“A depiction suffices for talented carpenters. Don’t you concur?”

“No, I don’t,” Reece retorted, his temper beginning to get the better of him.

Roger’s expression implied that Reece was stupid and unreasonable. “Well, perhaps it’s a project best left to a professional. There’s no reason to become confrontational.” His tone was one of exaggerated patience. “I was under the impression you could do it since you’re a man’s man.” He dropped the magazine to the table and sat on a swanky teak patio chair.

The man clearly didn’t want or need a new deck. It pissed Reece off that Roger had fabricated a ruse to get him over to the house. He was beginning to feel like he was the butt of a bad joke.

Reece remained standing. “I’m not being confrontational. I’m trying to understand what’s going on here.”

“Come now, you sound paranoid.” Roger chuckled. “Nothing is going on. It’s a beautiful day and I wanted to get to know you.” He sipped from his coffee cup and winced. “Cold. Perhaps it’s time for a beer. Shall we partake and get to know each other?”

“You said on the phone that you might need a PI someday,” Reece said. “You want to tell me why?”

Did Roger’s face pale? Reece wasn’t sure, but something changed in the man’s demeanour. Roger stood abruptly and fussed with a potted tulip plant on the table. His movements were flustered, but he’d lowered his head and Reece couldn’t see his expression.

“It was a figure of speech,” he said, without meeting Reece’s eyes.

“Why am I here, Roger?” Reece didn’t care that he sounded confrontational now. He couldn’t tolerate lies and hated hypocrisy. Roger had some reason for inviting him and Reece wanted to know what it was.

Wide eyes filled with earnestness met his steely gaze. “I assumed you could assist. I’m afraid I’m more suited to intellectual pursuits.” He glanced at his watch. “It’s almost noon. Shall we grab a beer and grill those steaks? It would be sacrilege to waste Wagyu beef. I don’t suppose you’ve ever tried it.”

By his expression and tone, it was clear he thought a *man’s man* ate squirrels and roadkill.

Reece walked across the deck to the back gate. “Thanks for the invitation, but I’m not staying.”

Roger followed him. “Look, I’m sorry I’ve offended you. It wasn’t my intention. I really do want to get to know you. Sam and I have been close friends since childhood. Please stay. You can initiate the grill and enlighten me on your gastronomic opinion.”

Reece eyed the barbecue. He was itching to discover if it was worth the money. Those steaks had looked damn good, too.

“Please stay and we’ll give this another try.” Roger held out his hand.

It would be petty not to accept the apology. Might as well enjoy the luxury grill and the food. With a sigh, he shook Roger’s hand. “Sure. What can I do to help?”

“How about you deal with the mushrooms you brought?” Roger suggested, and went into the kitchen.

Unable to shake the feeling he had accepted the Judas kiss, Reece reluctantly followed.

Over the next half hour, they cooked and kept the conversation light. In spite of himself, Reece began to have fun. The man was brilliant, and Reece found his work in recovery interesting. The craft beers Roger had stocked were delicious, and he told Reece about some independent breweries around the Greater Toronto Area that offered tours.

Outside, the afternoon sun felt like June rather than early May, and the grill lived up to its reputation. Controlling the heat to get the proper char was easy and being able to transfer the meat to a reduced heat zone to obtain the perfect medium rare temperature was handy.

Roger set the outdoor table while Reece tented the steaks. As the meat rested, Roger grilled Romaine hearts for Caesar salad, and Reece finished the wild mushroom crostini with imported goat cheese. The food was fantastic, the day was beautiful, and Reece felt satisfied with his decision to stay.

The sun was hot and Roger swiped his hair off his forehead, holding long bangs flat against the crown of his head. With his hairline exposed, Reece noticed a bandage in the centre of an ugly looking bruise.

“Ouch, what did you do to yourself?” he asked.

Roger looked startled and dropped his hand. He ran his fingers through the longish sweep of hair that covered the left side of his forehead. It fell into a perfect wave that Reece immediately suspected resulted from a curling iron.

“Nothing. I mean, just bumped my head getting out of a friend’s car. No big deal. Let’s get the table cleared and grab another beer.”

Hitting his head might explain the cut on his forehead, but Reece had also noticed a nasty scrape on his elbow. The man clearly didn’t want to talk about it, and it wasn’t any of his business so Reece dropped it. He collected his plate and utensils from the table and followed Roger into the kitchen.

After they cleared the table and tidied the kitchen, they returned to the patio.

Reece was examining the labels of the craft beers that remained in the outside fridge when Roger asked, “If there’s a home accident involving death, are police involved?”

Reece straightened, holding a bottle of coffee-flavoured ale in his hand. “Sure. Any time there’s an unexpected death, police investigate.” He took the bottle to the table and sat. “Did someone you know die?”

Roger shook his head. “No, I’m just curious. Sometimes I treat patients with severe survival guilt, you know, when there’s a fatal accident. How intensely do the authorities investigate a home mishap?”

“They’re very thorough. You’d be surprised how many accidents turn out to be something more nefarious.”

Roger played with a teaspoon and chewed his lower lip. “Before that mess in Uthisca, how many murders did you investigate with the OPP?”

Canada had few serial killers and mass murders. After what had happened at Bueton Sanctuary two years ago, people frequently asked him similar questions. Roger didn’t strike Reece

as the type of person who would have such a macabre curiosity though.

“More than I care to remember,” he replied obliquely and looked around for the bottle opener.

“So you have experience with police procedures in murder cases?”

Reece frowned. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

Roger dropped his eyes and picked a piece of lint off his slacks. “Just making conversation.” He stood, walked to the back gate, and opened it. “Thanks for coming.”

“Ah... no problem.” Reece put the unopened beer on the table and dropped the opener. He stood and met Roger at the gate. “Lunch was great. Thanks for inviting me,” he said, confused by the urgency to see him out.

“Next time,” Roger said, “I’d prefer it if you parked on the street.”

With that, the gate closed in his face, leaving Reece standing on the parking pad with his mouth half-open.

CHAPTER TWO

SAM

“DO I LOOK okay?” Reece asked.

Sam was watching *Better Call Saul* on Netflix and she glanced at Reece, who was standing at the base of the ladder staircase that led up to the bedroom loft. His sky-blue eyes were a little wild and he was fidgeting with his belt. It was rare for Reece to be nervous. Instead of laughing, she turned off the television and stood to face him, twirling her finger with a grin. He frowned but spun around. His ass looked marvellous in his new jeans, the black T-shirt showed off impressive abdomen and bicep definition, and he'd had his thick black hair cut in a way that tamed the cowlick above his left eye. The crooked tooth in his otherwise straight white teeth was showing and the dimple in his right cheek puckered when he smiled at her. Her partner in life and in business was amazing in every regard. Sam enjoyed a moment of smug self-satisfaction. Her mother would swoon.

Even the thought of her mother caused Sam to wince internally. How was she going to get through an entire evening with the woman? It didn't matter that other people would be at the party she and Reece were attending. Other people's presence did little to curb her mother's sharp tongue. In fact, an audience

gave Grace, who was anything but gracious, plenty of opportunities to make her daughter look like a troll. For over three years, Sam had cut her out of her life. Now she had to introduce the heinous woman to her fiancé. Thinking about the next few hours made her stomach roll with anxiety.

They'd planned to visit over Christmas, but Sam's stepfather had taken Grace to Europe to meet with an Alzheimer specialist. Since returning, Harvey and Reece had both been pestering her about the introduction. It was stupid to have ignored them. If she'd arranged to go over for a drink, they could have had a short visit and escaped. Instead, poor Reece would be stuck at a party all night with Grace telling nasty stories about what a miserable brat her daughter had been.

Since Lisa grew up next door and knew her family dynamics, going behind her back and inviting Grace and Harvey to the party was a crappy thing to do. In fact, everything Lisa was doing these days was shitty. Reece disliked her best friend, and Sam couldn't blame him. He'd never seen the warm, caring side of the beautiful Italian artist. This new Lisa was a stranger. It was as if an alien had transformed her childhood friend into an unrecognizable bitch.

The whole situation sucked and Sam was dreading the party. At least there was nothing negative Grace could say about Reece. Mother Dearest would love everything about him.

"Is it too much black?" he was asking, and she tried to focus on him rather than worrying about the hideous party. "Should I wear a button shirt? Maybe the T-shirt is too tight." Reece tugged at the sleeves and frowned.

Sam was about to tell him how fantastic he looked when her eyes fell on the watch he was wearing. His dad's Rolex never left the safe deposit box.

"You look great." She took his hand and ran the fingertips of her other hand across the face of the watch. "Your dad's watch looks great on you, too."

He licked his lips and swallowed. "Yeah, well, you know. Since I'm meeting your mother for the first time..."

She smiled. "You wanted a piece of your family with you."

"Stupid, eh?"

"Not at all," she said. "You know, your dad would be proud of you."

His face crinkled with distaste and he shook his head. "No, he wouldn't. On top of not finishing law school, I left the OPP." He turned away to pick up his jacket.

Dumb, dumb, dumb. Why hadn't she kept her mouth shut? His father had been a federal court judge, and, from what Lisa's lawyer husband had told her, Justice Hash had ranked judges followed by lawyers at the top of the law enforcement pack. Federal police, provincial police, and municipal police followed. PIs didn't rank at all. According to Justice Hash, they were useless organisms, slithering around in the muck, impeding intelligent people's attempts to avoid anarchy within the masses. Although he'd never said, Sam imagined a young Reece calling his father "My Lord" rather than "Dad."

"So, before we go, is there anything you need to tell me?" Reece asked.

Fair question. Last year, she'd told him her mother was dead. They had almost broken up when he discovered the truth—

well, that and a few other lies that blew up in her face. Sometimes late at night, she still woke in a cold sweat over how close she'd come to destroying their relationship.

"Yes. My mother is a bitch."

He laughed. "Something you *haven't* already told me."

She sighed. "With the exception of Talia, you've met everyone who'll be at the party, so no surprises there. Remember, Grace has a habit of using the Alzheimer's as an excuse to be mean. My stepfather told me last week she's had amazing success with a trial drug for early onset. Don't let her bamboozle you."

"Well, people change when they face serious illness." He picked up his phone and put it in his pocket. "I'm excited to meet her."

A nasty prickle of apprehension scurried up her neck. Evil people did not change but she held her tongue. "Remember your promise," she said instead.

The response was a dismissive hand gesture. "I'm the Starship Enterprise with a non-interference directive. I'm not going to try to force you to mend your relationship." He paused. "Even though it's important to sort through the pain. You don't want regrets."

Amazing how couples always circle back to the main personality difference between them. Reece was a "confront the past and work toward closure" personality. She was a "do it and be done with it" type. Time to change the subject.

"I should warn you," she said, "Lisa has theme parties."

Reece went to the front door and held it open. “Geez, I hate those. Why can’t adults get together to celebrate something without turning it into a kids’ party?”

“Well, you said earlier that you’re starving. You’ll like the food. It’ll be catered by some up-and-coming chef.” She couldn’t help rolling her eyes. “It always is at Lisa’s parties. Me, I’d prefer burgers on the barbeque. I’ve never understood the purpose of things like micro-greens.”

Reece laughed. “They’re pretty. We eat with our eyes.”

Sam picked up her keys and wandered around the loft, stopping to give Brandy, their golden retriever, a pat.

“Stop dawdling,” Reece said. “I’m activating the alarm. You have sixty seconds to get your butt out the door.” He keyed in the code.

With a sigh, she shuffled over and he kissed the top of her head. “It won’t be that bad. I’ll protect you from your mother.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “We could stay home and have alone time,” she suggested, with what she hoped was a seductive smile. She wasn’t good at seduction and wasn’t surprised when he laughed at her.

“Fine,” she said with a sigh. “Let’s get this hell over with.”

“THEY AREN’T COMING,” Lisa announced the second they’d walked through the door of the High Park house. “So stop bitching at me for inviting a guest to my party without asking your permission.”

From the corner of her eye, Sam caught the disappointment on Reece’s face.

“Why not?” she asked.

“How should I know?” Lisa glanced at Reece with a sour expression and didn’t acknowledge him.

Oh boy. This is going to be a fun evening.

“Hi Lisa, nice to see you.” Reece leaned in and pecked her cheek. “Thanks for inviting us.”

In way of a greeting, Lisa said, “It’s an urban animal theme.”

That explained the squirrel costume.

“Where’s my gorgeous goddaughter?” Sam asked, peeking over Lisa’s shoulder to the family room.

“Staying overnight with my brother and Janice. Kira wants you to take her to the zoo on Saturday,” Lisa said. “Can you please call her? She doesn’t understand why you aren’t around.” She shot Reece a scathing glare. “Her feelings are hurt.”

“Sounds fun,” she said, ignoring Lisa’s guilt trip. “So long as it’s just me and Kira.”

Typically, Lisa’s sister-in-law pawned her three little monsters off on Lisa. Sam always referred to her friend as having “kids”—plural rather than singular—and she wasn’t fond of Lisa’s nephews. She wasn’t taking them to the zoo, where they’d wreak havoc and she wouldn’t be able to corral them. On the other hand, she adored her five-year-old goddaughter. She wasn’t keen about gawking at animals trapped in cages outside their natural habitats, but maybe she could coax Kira into staying around the petting zoo and stuffing her chubby cheeks with treats.

More guests arrived and Reece was speaking to an owl. Because of the costume, Sam couldn’t tell who it was and wandered into the living room. Lisa had decorated it as a city park. A woodland mural hung against the long wall that divided the

front room from the formal dining room, and a couple of inflatable trees sat beside papier mâché rocks. Cheap synthetic grass covered the gorgeous Persian carpet. It was ridiculous but Sam couldn't help but laugh when she spied a park bench covered with graffiti.

In jarring contrast with the childish party decorations, formal servers dressed in black pants and starched white shirts strolled around the room with trays of hors d'oeuvres. A bartender operated a corner bar that displayed a vast assortment of booze, and catering staff was setting up an elaborate buffet in the dining room. The big prime rib roast was a welcome sight. Sam always feared that one of Lisa's avant-garde chefs would reveal some disgusting delicacy, such as bull penis.

She chatted with a chipmunk, a bat, two birds, and a deer. The chipmunk was already drunk, and Sam didn't blame him. None of the urban animals looked happy.

When she returned to the entry to fetch Reece, she found him holding two paper bags.

In answer to her unasked question, he dolefully said, "Costumes."

Lisa popped her head back into the hallway. "I rented them because I knew you wouldn't. You can change upstairs." Her tone was judgemental when she added, "I'm sure your boyfriend is dying for a drink." With that, she flounced away with her bushy tail wagging behind her.

"Is there a reason Lisa thinks I'm an alcoholic?" Reece asked. "Every time I see her, she implies I drink too much."

Reece didn't drink much and the comment wasn't about him. "Her dad was an alcoholic," she told him. "She's sensitive around people she doesn't know well and booze."

"Then she shouldn't serve it at parties." He tugged her into the corner of the stairwell. "Why did she rent us costumes?"

"It's just in fun." Sam kept her tone cheery.

His jaw jutted out stubbornly. "We're not five years old. I'm not wearing a bloody costume."

"Abigail and Talia aren't here yet, and Talia won't wear a costume." She flicked the brown bag. "If you don't want to wear it, it's not a big deal. At least take a look, okay?"

"Is Roger here?" Reece asked.

She shrugged. "Not that I noticed, why?"

"I am a little curious to see that fussy spot in a costume." He grinned at her.

She laughed and led him up the stairs to the bedrooms.

In the guest room, he handed her the bag with her name on it and opened his own.

Slowly, he extracted a black costume. "At least it matches my clothes." He turned the fabric over in his hand. He froze and his eyes widened.

"What? What is it?"

He held it out but she couldn't tell.

Once he turned it around to face her, she felt her own eyes widen.

"Oh."

A long white stripe ran down the back of the black jumpsuit from the collar to the tip of a fluffy tail.

Reece dropped it on the bed. "I'm not wearing it," he said with a composed tone but ugly expression.

It took her a minute to figure out what her brown suit with the white front was. When the animal came to mind, her cheeks flushed with anger.

Reece's expression shifted to curiosity. "Well, what is it?"

"It's... a weasel."

He burst into laughter.

There was a knock on the door and Sam yanked it open to find Jim the coyote and Roger the raccoon standing forlorn on the other side.

"I'm not wearing it," Reece told Jim.

Jim draped a paw across Reece's shoulder. "It's over the top, I'll give you that. I warned Lisa, but, when she gets an idea, she's a pit bull with a kitten locked in its jaws."

"What did you get?" Roger asked Sam as he tugged at the neck of his raccoon sweater.

"A weasel."

Roger's groomed eyebrow rose. "Ah, an oblique metaphor per chance?"

"Of course it is." Reece waved his hands at the costumes. "She specifically chose these. It's an insult."

"You're reading too much into this," Jim said in his persuasive courtroom voice. "You don't have to wear it. My wife has taken the theme too far. It was poor judgement, not a personal attack. Come on, let's get a drink."

Sam wasn't positive it was unintentional. She ran the weasel costume through her fingers before dropping it to the bed beside Reece's skunk.

Roger put his hand on her shoulder. “A word before you go, Sam.”

“Sure.”

After Reece left with Jim, Roger said, “I’m concerned about Lisa. She’s acting very disagreeable.”

“I know.”

He fussed with his raccoon gloves. “It started five months ago, after their Christmas party. That’s also when I became aware of the way she interacts with Reece. Lisa doesn’t like him.” He picked up the skunk costume. “This is her way of driving home her point. Did something happen between them?”

Before she could answer, someone started to shout obscenities from downstairs. It sounded like Talia, but Sam wasn’t sure. Alarmed, she followed Roger downstairs. The front door was wide open, and Talia was in the entry, looming over Lisa. Talia’s face was a mask of rage and Lisa was screaming at her but wasn’t making any sense. Something about not knowing and how it wasn’t her fault.

Party guests stood in the doorway between the front foyer and the living room. Everyone wore shocked expressions, and it stunned Sam to see a few of the women crying. Reece exited the bathroom, looking confused by the crowd of people in the entry.

When Talia saw Reece, she pushed Lisa aside. What Sam glimpsed in the soldier’s eyes terrified her. Not understanding what was going on, she immediately felt a need to protect Reece and stood between him and her friend.

“It was you!” Talia screamed at Reece. “All those walks around the city. You sick motherfucker.”

Jim wrapped his arms around Talia. He was crying. Even as kids, Sam had never seen Jim cry. A ribbon of fear unravelled in her stomach, and a sharp cramp nearly doubled her over. Something had happened. Something terrible.

“I promise it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t Reece,” Jim said. “You’re distraught. Let us help you.”

“How could you do this to me, Talia?” Lisa yelled through tears. “How could you say such a terrible thing to me?”

Someone had shut off the music. Stunned servers stood stationary among the sobbing guests.

Sam grabbed Lisa’s upper arm. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Abigail.” Lisa’s voice trembled. “She’s dead.”

“What? How?” Sam’s eyes darted between Lisa and Talia. Shock prevented her from accepting what she’d just heard. “When? I don’t understand.”

“She was pregnant!” Talia screamed, fighting against Jim’s grip. “She killed herself.”

Sam couldn’t breathe. Her chest felt tight, and there was a ringing in her ears. She slid down the wall and landed with a thump on the floor. Reece rushed to her side, helped her up, and gripped her shoulders, forcing her to look up at him.

His voice was calm—a cop’s voice. “I’m so sorry, Sam. But you know Abby and I were never together that way.”

“She was afraid of men!” Talia screamed. “You’re the only men she’d ever trust. One of you knows who violated her!”

Lisa’s face drained of colour. She was gripping Roger’s hand so tightly he was wincing.

“I know it wasn’t you,” Sam whispered to Reece. “Get rid of everyone. Get them out of here.”

He nodded and left to herd people to the door. Jim dragged Talia into his office. Lisa followed and slammed the door closed behind her.

Sam leaned against the wall, clamping an iron fist around the pain and shock. She'd known something was wrong. Abigail had always been fragile, and Talia's second deployment had crushed her. The signs of depression were so obvious now.

Talia's accusations still ringing in her ears, her eyes fell on Roger, sitting on the stairs with his face in his hands. Roger had offered to counsel Abigail four months ago. Disgust and anger took the place of the pain.

No, he wouldn't. He couldn't have.

But he had before. Years ago, he'd taken advantage of a patient. She'd seen it with her own eyes. He'd lost professional objectivity and had given in to his attraction, harming his patient in the process. This time it wasn't just a patient. It was Abigail, whom he'd known for nearly three decades. Why would he suddenly develop feelings for her?

It's a symptom of physician burnout, a voice whispered in her head. Just like last time.

Reece's voice drew her from her miserable thoughts. "Babe, Lisa asked that we leave. Jim is trying to talk to Talia and thinks it's best if everyone goes."

"I never attended Abigail's performance," she said. "I didn't see her dance with The National Ballet. Now I'll never see her dance again."

"I know."

Tears burned behind her eyes and she pushed him to the door. "Go, I need a minute."

Reece went outside, and Sam turned to stare at Roger.

His expression was cold as his pale blue eyes held hers. “Accuse me again, Sam, I’ll ruin you.”

CHAPTER THREE

REECE

TWO DAYS HAD passed since Abigail's funeral, a week since the terrible news. It was two-thirty in the afternoon, and Sam was in bed. The amount she slept worried Reece. She hadn't cried in front of him, not once. That scared him. Out of desperation, he'd dropped by Roger's house to ask for help. All he suggested was to listen and not to push her in a direction she wasn't ready to go. Sam needed to process the grief and work through the steps, Roger had said.

The fact that the psychiatrist was a mess didn't instill confidence. Something about Roger's attitude during the short visit made Reece suspicious. It didn't feel like grief so much as fear, but he didn't know the man well enough to judge.

Reece didn't know where Talia was. She'd refused to speak to any of them at the funeral. Cocooned in a shell of anger and grief, the soldier had stood dry-eyed at parade rest during the service. At the end, she'd accepted the ashes without a word and left.

Reece was having his own issues dealing with the suicide. He should have recognized Abigail's desperation and done something. But, intellectually, he understood that suicide was a per-

sonal choice that had little to do with anyone else. He'd called a friend at Toronto Police Services and asked for a copy of the Coroner's findings, and Abigail's autopsy report had hit home the deliberation behind her act.

She'd slit the inside of both forearms from the heel of her hand to her elbow. There were no tentative, hesitant cuts. The toxicology report noted a high amount of acetylsalicylic acid in her blood. In addition to consuming Aspirin over the course of several weeks to thin her blood, she'd killed herself in a bathtub filled with warm water to increase exsanguination. She'd been nineteen weeks pregnant.

The day before her death, Abigail had packed all her clothes, sorted out her personal belongings, and called Goodwill to pick up everything. She had sold her car two weeks before she died and transferred all her money into a co-signatory household account she shared with Talia. Their condo was spotless, and Abigail had paid all the bills. She closed her social media and email accounts. Although she'd wiped and formatted her computer, police IT specialists recovered the hard drive and found nothing of interest. On the bathroom sink was a copy of a life insurance policy and her will, which she'd had drawn up a month before her death. In the document, she listed the funeral home she'd chosen and had settled the account for her service and cremation. In death, as in life, Abigail hadn't wanted to be a bother. Everything about her suicide fit Abigail's meticulous, considerate nature to a T. Everything except for one detail that Reece could not understand—why hadn't she left Talia a note?

The hardest part for Reece was that he couldn't talk to anyone about his feelings. Sam and her friends had known Abigail

since kindergarten. In his mind, their grief took precedence over his own—he'd known her for six short months.

The one-thousand-square-foot loft felt like a prison cell. The walls were closing in on him. Brandy hadn't had a decent walk for days, and they would both benefit from getting outside. As Reece attached the leash, the old dog gazed up at him with mournful eyes.

"We're going to get through this, girl," he promised. But he wasn't sure, and Brandy's head tilt and droopy tail suggested that she wasn't sure either.

After a long walk, he felt a bit better. As he approached the door to the loft, a long-haired man came down the hall wearing a kimono style robe and a tattered pair of slippers. His eyes were glassy and he stunk of pot.

"Hey man, this your crib?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Got a piece of mail for you. We had a gig in Detroit. Just got back." He handed Reece a thick, creamy envelope.

Reece thanked him and went inside, hoping Sam would be up and doing something—anything.

She wasn't. He checked and found her asleep. Strawberry-blond curls stuck to her damp forehead. When he ran his fingers across her cheeks, he felt tears and it broke his heart that she was crying in her sleep.

Back in the kitchen, he glanced at the envelope addressed to him and tried to think of anyone he knew who was getting married. The weight of the stationery implied it was an invitation. No return address on the front. He turned it over. The back was blank. He tore it open, didn't recognize the handwriting on the

letter, and flipped to the last page. His heart stopped and he fell into a chair. Slowly, he shuffled the sheets to the first page. The date on the top was the day before Abigail had killed herself.

Dear Reece,

Thank you for your kindness. For how you never forced me to talk. How you never asked questions or offered advice. How you never touched me, not even gently on my arm. You never made me feel broken. I want you to know how much I looked forward to our Saturday morning market trips and our walks around the city. For those few hours, I was able to forget and to live again.

You are a sweet man, the only man I ever met who never asked for anything from me. You are an accepting man, a man whose personal journey will allow him to understand that my death was inevitable. And so I write to you because these words will not destroy you.

My death will hurt Sam. She will entomb the pain in layers of brick, but acid will erode the stone until her heart is hard with poison. Promise you won't surrender to her attempts to drive you away, for she loves you and that love frightens her because it makes her vulnerable. You are her salvation and she is yours. Your souls entwine. Please do not give up on each other. Love is a tangled root that twists through the soil in search of nutrients, but it is the foundation of the tree of life.

My shame is no longer a burden too heavy to carry. It's a palpable entity. The heartbeat relentlessly hammers at me like a hundred drums that beat to placate a vengeful god. The persistent pounding drives me forward to the lips of the

abyss. My world has become miniscule, constricting me with bleakness until even dancing has become unbearable. I see only black and crimson when I close my eyes now. I hear only Satan howl as his demons call me over, but I will never break through their line to find peace again.

Unimaginable horrors haunt my dreams, and I understand that, be it on this earth or be it in a different dimension, hell is my destiny. But here on earth, Talia must bear witness. I will not damn my love to stand wretched and consumed by her impotency. With the last of my strength, I will prevent her from pursuing me through the darkness. This is the kindest thing I can do. This is the greatest gift I can offer.

My skin burns from the caress of his hands. I can't wash the stench of his body from my flesh. At night, I feel his seed inside me and know I'm damned. It was a single second of unbearable loneliness—a tiny moment when my desire to experience something beyond despair ascended in defiance. But I cannot look at the horror through a victim's eyes this time. I was complacent and I am culpable. I will forever exist behind the silhouette of iniquity, where the light of forgiveness can never reach.

I implore you and Sam to help Talia. She must live and learn to find joy in life. You and Sam survived great tragedy. You both found your way through perdition's maze. And so I beseech you to revisit the abyss to save my love. Pull Talia from the banks of hell and bring her home. Do everything within your power to give her what she needs to find peace.

With my everlasting gratitude,
Abigail

Reece read the letter three times, shielding it from his tears. The flowery prose that matched Abigail's love of poetry again showed Reece the determination and planning she had put into her suicide. Now, he thought he might understand why she hadn't written to Talia. Shame over cheating on her girlfriend had made it impossible. Abigail was asking an objective observer to help her beloved girlfriend understand that shame.

A red mist coated his eyes when his sorrow inexplicably morphed to rage. Some bastard had defiled his friend. Some bastard had betrayed Talia while she served the country.

"What's that?"

Sam's voice caused him to jump, and he snatched the pages from the table.

She sat and studied him. A ring of red lined her swollen eyes, and her freckles were brash spots of colour on a face that was gaunt.

He didn't know what to do, didn't know if he should give her the letter or if it would make things worse. When she plucked the thick envelope from the table, he realized the decision wasn't his to make. Abigail had made it for him. The only way he could help Sam would be to allow her to read her friend's final words.

Sam gazed at the writing on the front. Her throat worked and she blinked rapidly. She stared at him with naked desperation, her eyes wide, and her pain etching deep furrows in her forehead.

She threw the envelope on the floor, and her eyes dropped to the sheets of paper he clutched in his fist. "I can't read it. I won't read it. Don't ask me."

He took her hand to prevent her from bolting from the table. “I’m not asking you,” he said. “Abigail is.”

For a moment, she didn’t move and her face became a battleground between her desire to hold onto her friend and her implacable grief that commanded she protect herself from further pain.

“I could read it to you,” he offered, sliding his chair over so he could wrap his arms around her and pull her close.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. They sat together in silence, and Brandy put her snout on Sam’s leg, whimpering in sympathy.

Her throat worked as she repeatedly swallowed, fighting tears. She pulled away and sat rigid on the chair with her shaking hands clasped tight in her lap. “I need to do this alone,” she whispered. “I need you to leave. Please.”

Slowly, he stood and shuffled to the door. Leaving her alone and in pain was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do.

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