

CHAPTER ONE

Two days before Christmas, 2009.

Bella Amsel sat in her grandfather's favorite chair facing the fireplace, wrapped in her grandmother's robe, a solitary tear tracing down her cheek as she stared at the flames. The temperature in the house was fine; the chill that had descended in her soul was the problem.

The day had just been brutal. She had been simply overwhelmed by the number of well-wishers coming up to her to share their special memories of her grandfather. While Bella truly appreciated that Manfred was so well loved, the emotional battering it dealt her to get through first the memorial service and then the family's close friends retreating to the house to eat and reminisce had exhausted her. It seemed to last a lifetime, but finally the house was empty and quiet.

"Here, baby," Nathan said, offering her a cup. "This will help."

Bella managed a wan smile and took the cup from him. "It smells really good," she said, breathing in the steam rising. "What's in it?"

"Tea, with honey and lemon. And a dash of whiskey," Nathan said, sitting in the other armchair.

"Whiskey?"

"Yes, whiskey. Well, it's more like a generous helping than a dash. Honey, you're exhausted. I know how rough today was for you. I was thinking you'd probably want hot tea, and to soak in the tub, then get some sleep."

"How'd you know about the tub soak thing?"

"I have three sisters, remember? And growing up we all shared the upstairs bathroom. I learned early that when girls get upset, they head for a bubble bath. I also learned," he leaned

forward with a smile, “that the quickest way to get into trouble with sisters is to leave the seat up in the middle of the night.”

Bella laughed.

That’s better, he thought.

Bella took a long sip of her tea, flashing those hypnotic blue eyes at him over the rim. She swallowed, set the cup on the little side table between their chairs, and said, “The bubble bath sounds great. But,” she said, standing up, “Only if you join me.”

“Absolutely,” Nathan replied, reaching for her hand.

When they reached the bathroom, he glanced at the old-fashioned clawfoot tub, and said, “I don’t think we’ll both fit in there. But if you want, I’ll stay and talk to you while you soak. Your call.” And she nodded.

He rubbed her shoulders as she soaked in the tub, noticed her head drooping more and more. “Bella,” he said gently. No response.

“Bella,” Nathan said again, just a bit louder.

“Hmm?” she managed.

“Let’s get you out of the tub, and we’ll get some sleep. We could both use it.”

“M-hmm.”

He aided her in stepping safely out onto the floor mat and wrapped a bath towel around her slender frame. “I’ll be right back, okay? Let me go around and get the lights turned off.”

“Okay,” Bella said, yawning. “Meet you on the pillows.”

Nathan went downstairs and peeked into the kitchen. *God bless those women,* he thought, referring to Stacy and Ms. Robbins, the widow neighbor. *They put all the food away, so Bella wouldn’t have to deal with it.* Stacy and Brad were staying here with Bella while in Manassas

and had already gone to bed for the night; Brad's knee was acting up and he had finally had to take a Vicodin.

Nathan switched off the kitchen light and continued to make his way through the ground floor, making sure doors were locked and lights extinguished. His cell phone rang just as he was headed back up the stairs. "Thomas," he said.

"Nathan? Max. Just checking on things. How is she?"

"Exhausted, which is not surprising. It's been a hard day, for all of us."

"Agreed. Hey, I didn't want to burden her with this today, but Manfred's lawyer wants us at his office tomorrow for the reading of the will. Two-thirty."

"We'll see you there. And Max?"

"Yeah?"

"I know he was your best friend. I don't think I've taken the time to tell you yet – I am really, really sorry for your loss, man."

Silence for a bit, then, "Thanks, Nathan. See you guys tomorrow afternoon."

Nathan turned his phone off and climbed the stairs.

He paused at the bedroom door, and just watched her for a moment. She was already sleeping. He marveled again at finding the woman of his dreams, and the way it had happened. *I went to Vegas to take a break, that's all*, he mused. *Just a little relaxation before work picked up. And I found the love of my life.* The recollection made him smile as he crossed the room.

Nathan changed into his pajamas as quietly as possible and gently slid under the covers. Bella stirred in her sleep, feeling the warmth of him next to her, and instinctively moved closer. He wrapped his arms around her and heard her sigh. Closing his eyes, he rested his head against hers and drifted into sleep.

“Hey Abby,” Paula said as she put her purse in her locker. “What’s it like tonight?”

Abby laughed. “You’re kidding, right? Quiet. What else?”

“You on tomorrow?”

“Nope, actually managed to swing two days off in a row. See you Monday.”

“Good night, Abby.” And Paula checked her uniform one last time in the mirror before leaving the ladies’ break room to head to her station. Picking up the first clipboard, she looked at Miriam, the other night nurse on duty. “Any changes anywhere?”

“Only one,” Miriam replied. “New one in 404. I don’t think she’ll be with us long.”

“How so?”

“She’s pretty bad off. I just don’t think she’ll be here long. Sad too. She’s only 19. Car accident.”

Paula sighed. “Breaks your heart.”

Miriam nodded. “I know. We’ll just keep her comfortable, I guess.”

“I’ll start down at the other end.”

“Sure thing.”

Paula grabbed the first four charts and headed to the end of the hallway to room 430. She went into the first three rooms in turn and took vital signs, making notes on each patient’s chart. Although her patients were comatose, Paula believed they could still hear and sense some of what was happening around them. So, she talked to them as she worked. *I believe in miracles*, she had told co-workers previously. *I know that someday, if it’s meant to be, one of them will respond*. But none had yet in the three and a half years she’d been working this floor.

She finished her first three and headed toward room 425 and her favorite patient. She had a special place in her heart for this one. The first time she saw him, she had fallen hopelessly in love. Paula knew it was foolhardy, being in love with an unconscious man who might never wake up, but she couldn't help how she felt. So as much as she could, she took a little extra time with him. And she prayed that if a miracle happened on the fourth floor this holiday season, that he was the one it happened to.

But it wasn't happening tonight. His vitals remained unchanged, pupils still fixed, monitors still reflecting a bare minimum of brainwave activity. The only sound in the room besides the chirp of machines and her voice was the rasp of the respirator. She sighed as she made her notes on the chart. Then she went to his side and leaned down close to his ear. "I'll be back to check on you later," she whispered, and kissed his cheek. "I love you."

She left the room as quietly as possible, heading back to the nurse's station to drop off the completed charts and pick up the next four.

A knock on the door woke Nathan up. "Yes?" he called out blearily.

"Hey guys," Stacy said. "Breakfast is ready, if you're interested."

"Thanks, Stace," Bella replied. "We'll be down in a bit." And to Nathan she said, "How did you sleep?"

"Like a rock," he mumbled. "Seems like only five minutes, but it's..." he grimaced as he looked at the alarm clock, "seriously? We got eight hours? It sure doesn't feel like it."

Bella kissed him. "You'll be happier once we eat. Stacy makes the best omelets on the planet."

They headed down the stairs hand in hand. Brad was already at the table drinking coffee with Max, and Stacy was finishing up at the stove. She pointed to a plate at the end of table with her spatula. “Yours is there, Bel. Extra done, with ham and cheese.”

“Extra done?” Nathan asked as he sat by Max and reached for the coffeepot.

“Not shiny. At all. To anyone else, they’d be burnt. But, that’s how Bella likes them. Oh, and cooked on both sides, too, *before* you fill it and fold it. Right, Bel?”

“Absolutely!” Bella sat and lowered her head down toward the plate, savoring the aroma.

“Bacon’s on a plate in the middle, and here come the biscuits,” Stacy announced, placing a towel-covered bowl on the table and taking the seat next to her husband.

For a time, the only sounds heard were the clinking of forks against plates, an occasional ‘please pass’, and noises of contentment. When the meal was finished, they all pitched in to help with clean up before moving to the living room.

“So, what’s on tap for today?” Brad asked.

“Well, we have the will reading this afternoon. And at some point, Nathan and I need to check status on the case, make sure everything’s being closed out.” Max replied succinctly. He turned to Nathan and continued, “Though it may be a long, long while before any sort of trial happens. Have we heard anything on Metzger?”

“Last report said no change,” Nathan said earnestly. “And personally, I’m okay with that. I want him to pay for what he did, but he’s much less of a threat to anyone the way he is right now.”

“What I want to know,” Bella stated quietly, “is how his father knew Grandpa.” And she turned a solemn gaze to Max. “I know you know the history.”

Max cleared his throat. “I do.”

And he related the whole story, from Manfred's experience with Adolf in the classroom to the night in the graveyard to 1989 when they missed Adolf at the Wall by about an hour.

"After that, he disappeared again," Max continued. "No clue where he was. He was on our watch lists, of course, but he never surfaced. We know now that he had at least one alias, which is why he was able to get back into Germany and out again without tipping his hand. It was blind dumb luck that Snowbird saw him; otherwise we'd never have known he came back."

"How did Mikel come into all this?" Stacy interjected.

"We believe that Adolf adopted him somewhere along the way. We're currently trying to follow a paper trail backward to a place in Brazil called Manaus; that's where Metzger Industries is based. But it's slow going. We have to ask the right folks the right questions to be able to get permission to look around down there, so we don't ruffle any feathers."

"But I thought Brazil and the U.S. have good relations," Brad pointed out.

"We do," Max said. "But we still have to tread carefully so as not to offend and cause an international incident." He paused to sip his coffee, then said, "Anyway, that's where things are right now. We may never be able to connect all the dots. But maybe we won't have to."

Bella leaned forward. "How are Tommy and Nate and Chris? Have you heard anything?"

"They are all fine, and have no recollection of anything it seems," Nathan answered. "Of course, the Institute has been closed indefinitely as a result of all this."

"That part is a real shame," Bella said wistfully. "The Institute was the only real stability some of those kids had."

"If it helps any, Bella, we've checked out the other locations that Adolf founded, and they all seem to be legitimate. They've been taken over by non-profits in their respective cities.

There's even one here, down in Richmond," Max told her. "Should the tutoring bug prove too much to resist, you could still work with troubled kids. Of course, there's another option too."

Bella arched an eyebrow. "Which is?"

"Come work for me," Max said simply. "I find myself in need of someone who can teach French, Russian, and German to our students at the Academy. And you, my dear, speak all those. You're even better at them than Manfred was – he used to say so himself..." Then his face clouded for a moment, and he murmured, "God, I miss that old man."

"As do I, Uncle Max," Bella said softly, squeezing his hand. "As do I."

Paula crept back into room 425 in the few minutes before her shift ended, to spend a few more moments with the man she loved. She talked to him softly and stroked his cheek, hoping against hope that he would respond somehow – a blink, a shudder, something, anything. But there was nothing, just like always. Every day, for almost three weeks now. She knew it was probably futile. She sighed, told him she'd be back tomorrow, kissed his cheek once again, and left.

The reading of the will started off as expected; as Bella was Manfred's only living relative, she received everything except a small sum of money that Manfred left for Max – "*just in case he manages to outlive me*", Manfred had written.

But the old man had made a change very recently that surprised everyone. The lawyer cleared his throat, and read aloud, "*To Nathan Thomas, I leave a token of my esteem. He'll know what to do with it.*"

And the lawyer handed a small box to Nathan. Puzzled, he opened it, then smiled and showed it to Bella.

“Those are their wedding rings,” she said, tears coming to her eyes. “And my grandmother’s engagement ring he gave her in 1954. She used to let me wear it sometimes when I was little and played dress up.” It was exquisite – a delicate silver ring, adorned with a small tear-shaped sapphire, surrounded by little diamonds.

Tucked into the box was a handwritten note. “*Bella and Nathan – I hope your love stays as magical as mine and Rose’s did*” – *Manfred*

Nathan carefully removed the sapphire ring from its cradle and took one knee in front of Bella’s chair. “Will you marry me?”

She nodded and smiled as he slipped the ring onto her finger.