

# Muckross Folly

J.L. Austgen

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## **Prologue**

**W**ith a grim determination, she safed the rifle, leaving his lifeless body in the distance, and began to belly crawl backwards, her eyes scanning the hillside in front of her. The sage and dry alfalfa hid her movement as she slid into the tree line, but she did not feel comfortable rising into a crouch until she was fifty yards in the thick, dark timber of lodge pole pine and evergreen. When she did finally stand all the way up, over a hundred yards behind the line of trees, she would have been lucky to see fifteen yards in any direction. The trees were so dense they cast a pall across the forest, lengthening the shadows and making her surprisingly claustrophobic.

She spent many days of her youth in the woods of Colorado, growing up hunting and fishing in the high country, surrounded by dark timber like this. It was different this morning. The trees stared down, and while she did not feel judged, they seemed closer than normal. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and clutched her rifle, a beautiful seven millimeter Remington Magnum with a silver barrel, and a black, synthetic stock. Justice was finally done. She opened her eyes and was enveloped by the sounds of the forest. Things could go back to normal. There was no longer any reason to keep looking over her shoulder. With a purposeful stride, she stepped off towards her car.

The path back to her SUV, while not marked, was well known. The entire forest, its sounds, its scent, its presence, was as familiar as her dorm at the Air Force Academy. She hunted these woods before, and while she had not been here in many years, she felt safe. The other hunters in her target's party would not miss him for several hours, until he did not report at their next scheduled rendezvous. With luck, he would not be missed until later that evening when the party met for dinner.

She had left her ten year old Wrangler on the side of a forest road some distance away. Covering the ground quickly, she was driving north on Colorado 131 a little over two hours after she shot her target. A gas station and convenience store sat outside of the tiny town of Yampa, and she pulled up to the pump. There was only one other vehicle there that afternoon, a pickup truck, and she could feel its owner's eyes on her as she got out of her SUV and filled the tank.

The thought of being ogled no longer bothered her, and so long as it was not overt or blatant, she found it rather flattering. Tall, trim, young, and athletic with shoulder-length brunette hair and dark green eyes, she knew she was attractive. The physical fitness regimen prescribed by the Academy kept her in excellent physical shape, so it was only natural men would admire her.

Replacing the gas cap on the Wrangler, she walked into the attached convenience store and paid the cashier for the gas. With a nod and a small smile, she went back outside and stopped at the pay phone. She dropped several quarters in the slot and dialed a number. It was answered after the second ring.

"Thomas," she said into the handset, "it's Eve. Is my Dad there?"

"Yes. One second please, Ms. Morgan."

It didn't take long, and she idly scanned the store before a gruff voice came on the line. "Eve! I didn't know when I'd hear back from you. I'm glad you called."

"It's good to talk to you, Dad. I got your message." She was staying at a small motel just outside of town. The rooms did not have phones. When the receptionist handed her the message that morning, before she set out, she was a little surprised to learn her father knew where she was. Though, in retrospect, she should not have been.

"I need to talk to you," he said, "and it would be better in person. As soon as possible. Don't you need to report to the Academy soon? Your leave of absence should be just about up, right?"

"Yes," she said, glancing down at her now-normal stomach. "But I don't need to report for a couple of days. I needed some time to myself, so I drove up to the Flattops."

"I was a little surprised to learn you were up there," he replied, an edge to his voice. "Cold time of the year for backpacking."

"I know, but it was worth it. I needed to clear my head, you know?"

"I can imagine," he said. "Why don't we meet for drinks at the Ore House? It would be comfortable."

"How about Fish Creek falls?" she countered. "It was on my list of places to hit while I'm up here. Say in about an hour?"

"Ok," he said. "See you soon."

"Thanks," she said, replacing the handset. She climbed back into her Wrangler, but did not drive off. She sat there and tried to collect her thoughts. Even that brief reference to her son, given up for adoption barely six weeks ago, brought all the painful memories and emotions boiling to the surface. The Academy offered her a year's leave of absence to figure out what she wanted to do. She made the decision, shortly after discovering she was pregnant, to carry the baby to term and give him up for adoption. She was not in a position to care for a child, and she knew, no matter how difficult it would be, that the child would do far better with adoptive parents.

With a sigh, she wiped a tear from her eye and started the SUV. Her father, while she did not see him that often, was supportive

through the whole ordeal, offering to cover all of the expenses. Not that the expenses were a burden for him. The problem was that she had not told him how the child was actually conceived, and she worried about the consequences if he found out.

The drive to the small parking lot above Fish Creek Falls was uneventful, though her mind would not stop turning over the brief phone call with her father. What did he want? She arrived early and found the parking lot deserted. Stepping from the SUV, she could hear the falls in the distance. They were barely a quarter mile down the trail, and she took her time walking. The air was crisp, the sun barely floating above the western line of mountains.

A steep hill rose to her left, and as she followed the trail, it began to cut into the hill's side. After a few steps, the right side dropped dramatically to the river as it cut a gorge down the mountain. The trail, like the parking lot, was deserted. It was wide and well traveled, and before long she picked out a large wooden bridge crossing the river. The falls, a gushing torrent of water during the spring thaw, were still magnificent as a steady stream cascading nearly three hundred feet to the river below.

Stepping onto the bridge, she leaned against the rail and watched the water pour over the cliff. The steady noise from the falls, combined with the peaceful serenity of the forest, tugged at her mind. It wandered, but not to the scene she just left in the forests outside of Yampa. Instead, it travelled to happier times, to a smiling teenage boy, the warmth of his hand enveloping hers, the honesty behind his smile, and the love behind his eyes. It had all been hers, not that long ago, and sometimes she wondered if it would ever happen again.

Footsteps on the bridge brought her mind around to reality, and she glanced to her left. Her father, stocky and muscular with thinning gray hair, strode towards her. Behind him, his assistant stopped at the edge of the bridge, maintaining a discrete distance.

“An odd place for a meeting,” her father called as he approached. “Especially in December.”

With a nod, she acknowledged his statement and turned back to the falls. She knew he would have preferred to meet while relaxing in an armchair in a quiet room, sipping a glass of scotch.

“Do you remember coming here when you were a little girl?” he asked, stopping next to her and leaning over the rail.

“I do,” she said. “Mom would stay down in town.”

“She was kind enough to let me have a little time with you, however briefly.”

“It’s too bad she never made it up here.”

He grunted.

“So,” she said. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Do you remember when you told me you were pregnant?”

“Yes,” she replied carefully.

“And when I asked how it happened, you just told me it was one of those things?”

“Yes.”

“That wasn’t exactly the truth, was it?”

She studied him, crossing her arms over her chest, but her heart caught in her throat. “I’m not sure what we’re talking about.”

“I did some digging,” he explained, still watching the waterfall. “You declined to name the father on your son’s birth certificate.”

“Not all that unusual.”

“Perhaps,” he shrugged. “I also spoke with your boyfriend.”

“My ex-boyfriend, you mean.”

Wogan waved his hand in the air, signifying his indifference. “He said something interesting. Something you told him.”

She knew what was coming, and her heart sank. Despite everything, her father discovered the truth. It killed her keeping it welled up inside for nine months, but she knew she must keep it from this man as long as possible.

He turned towards her, and his eyes were suddenly cold and distant. "I've done a great deal for you over the years. I've supported you and your mother, made sure you were comfortable, provided the best schools, the best education money can buy. I covered all of your bills during the pregnancy. I offered the best doctors, the best of everything to ensure you were comfortable and successful. To ensure you delivered a healthy child."

As he spoke, he stepped closer until he was within inches of her face. She was pressed against the guard rail on the bridge, the rapids' whitewater crashing beneath her feet. "You have not been entirely truthful about several things."

"Are you pissed because I gave him up for adoption," she asked, the wooden guardrail cold against her back, "or because I wasn't entirely honest?"

His anger rose as he stared at her, the defiance in her eyes feeding his temper. "Where is my grandson?"

"Gone."

"I know that" he said, his voice menacing. "I thought we had a deal. The father's name is missing from the birth certificate."

"It was obvious what you wanted the minute you proposed that deal. The birth certificate didn't display the father's name on purpose. It's sealed. The entire process was finished an hour after I gave birth. My son is out of your reach. You won't use him."

His hands balled into fists at his side, he asked, "He's my grandson! Do you know what this could do to me? Did you even think for two seconds before you spread your legs what this might lead to?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, feeling the first tear swell at the edge of her eyes. "Of course! I love you!"

"Then how the hell did this happen?" he screamed, inches from her face. "How could you do this to me?"



“Do this to you?” she cried. “I did it for my son! I gave him up so he might have a life! I gave him up so he could not be tied to you! To protect you!”

“To protect me? You didn’t think about that when you were fucking your boyfriend’s best friend, did you?”

She shrunk back against the rail as though he struck her. It took all of her strength, all of the resolve she built over the last nine months, to remain standing, to not collapse. “Is that what you think happened?” she asked in a whisper. “Is that what he told you?”

“Yes.”

Shaking her head slowly, her eyes closed, she could scarcely believe this was happening. This was her father. The man was supposed to protect her. “I was raped.”

“What?” he asked. The sound of the rushing water over the rocks drowned her whispered words.

“I was raped, you son of a bitch!” she spat, looking up, meeting his eyes.

It was as though all of the sound, the crashing of the water, the birds flying through the air, the wind blowing through the trees, ceased to exist. It was sucked from her consciousness, replaced by a vacuum of sound devastating in its stillness. What was more disturbing, though, was how long it lasted. An eternity passed before everything rushed back in, pounding her senses with a symphony of noise.

Through all of it, she heard him ask, “Who? Your boyfriend’s best friend? What was his name? Greg?”

“Yes.”

He pursed his lips and stared at her, his brow furrowed. “Why didn’t you tell me this earlier? I could have done something about it, about Greg.”

She knew it was coming. “You don’t need to worry about him.”

“You don’t need to protect him.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?” she asked, wanting to laugh and cry at the same time. She met his blue eyes, but it was impossible to tell what thoughts were flying around behind them. The man was always an enigma to her, despite the fact he was her father. It did not help that her mother allowed only brief visits, sometimes not for months on end.

“I have a pretty good idea what you’re doing,” he said.

“What?”

“Protecting your son. Why? Are you afraid I might do something to him?”

“Yes.”

“Begotten through rape,” he spat, disgusted.

“That was not my son’s fault.”

“Do you know what this could do to me?” he asked, turning back to the waterfall, his fists resting on the bridge’s rail.

And there it was. The other reason why he never pushed very hard to be near her, to be involved in her life, other than the presents at Christmas, and the insistence that he pay for whatever college she wished to attend. She was the illegitimate daughter of an affair he regretted to this day.

“I love you, Dad,” she said, trying to get a grip on the emotions coursing through her, “but I won’t tell you his name. I won’t give up my son so you can use him.”

“What if this gets out?”

She continued to stare at the side of his face. “You don’t need to worry about that. I’ve taken care of it.”

It was as though he never heard her. “This could hurt me badly. If someone uses your son to get to me....”

“I was raped, and all you care about is your precious reputation? Or the reputation of your precious company?”

“I care about taking care of my family.”

“Including my sister and your wife?”

“They’re none of your concern.”

"They're family."

"My family."

She took a deep breath. "I see."

"Do you?" he asked, still not looking at her. "Because what you've just said could ruin everything I've worked for. If you go to the police --"

"I haven't said a word to them," she interrupted. "You know that or you wouldn't have asked me here today. Do you think I would worry about it now?"

He shrugged. "And the Academy?"

"They know I was pregnant, and that's all."

She watched as he turned it over in his mind.

"I want to know who it was. Which organization did you use for the adoption? Who set it up?"

"No."

"And if your son discovers who your father is?"

"The adoption is sealed. I've taken care of everything. He will never know who I am, who his real parents are. My son will grow up thinking his adopted parents are his biological parents."

"And Greg?"

A shadow passed over her eyes, though it did little to diminish the fire behind them. "I already told you it's been taken care of."

"What if Greg finds out who I am? Who your real father is? What I own?" He looked at her with disdain. "What if he learns about all of that and suddenly decides that his son should be a part of it? What if he realizes what could be gained? In the name of his son?" He stared at her. "Because you brought him to term."

She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself. This was her father. This was the man who brought her into the world, who supposedly loved her. "Is that what you're worried about?" she finally asked. "Is that really what bothers you?"

"You bet your ass."

She nodded, hugging herself tighter as he stepped back.

“Give me a name,” he demanded. “Tell me which organization you used!”

She looked at her shoes. “No.”

“I’ll find out,” he threatened. “You know I’ll find out.”

This time, she was the one that smiled. “No. I don’t think you ever will.”

He matched her stare for several minutes, the sound of the waterfall cascading like a thunderstorm behind them. “Then we’re done,” he said finally, turning on his heel and marching down the bridge, motioning for his assistant to follow.

## **Chapter 1**

**I**f she knew this was the night she would be murdered, she might not have ventured out. Hindsight was a luxury she was afforded throughout her young life, but in this instance, even if she could look back, it would not have done any good. Events beyond her control tumbled over themselves, consuming her in the process.

She was young, just starting her sophomore year at St. John's, and a night out, after five days of lecture, was exactly what she needed. Brushing her blonde hair, she laid her comb down, walked out of the bathroom, and stepped into the single apartment's kitchen. She checked her watch and swore, grabbed her purse, and started to root through it when a soft meow, followed by a purr at her elbow, interrupted her.

"Janx," she said, rolling her eyes. "I can't pick you up right now. I just got dressed. I'm going out." She dug through her purse again, looking for something, and the cat pushed against her elbow.

"You're not going to let me out of here unless I pick you up, are you?" she asked, finding what she needed in her purse and finally closing it.

Janx turned in a complete circle, his eyes never leaving hers. Throwing the shoulder strap over her shoulder, she reached down and picked him up. He rewarded her with a loud purr, nuzzling his head against the side of her neck. "I don't know how I'm going to pick somebody up tonight, covered in cat fur."

He purred louder.

“But it’s worth it.” She gently rubbed his head, then set him down on the counter. “I really have to go, though. All the good seats at the bar will be gone. I love you. See you in a bit.”

It was a short walk along Annapolis’s well-lit sidewalks to her favorite bar, one she frequented since her freshman year, just past the State House on Main Street. The fresh spring air was damp with that afternoon’s rain, and she inhaled deeply as she walked, savoring its crispness. It reminded her of her native Colorado and its summer nights, particularly after an afternoon thunderstorm.

A big part of her missed home, but after everything she endured in the past twelve months, she knew this was where she needed to be. It was a matter of pride that she show her father that she was capable of living on her own, without the need for someone to watch over her all of the time. It was no secret she made some poor decisions in her life, but she had put that behind her. Those demons were gone, and her reward was a furnished apartment where she could concentrate on her degree.

And have some fun, she admitted to herself, pushing the bar’s door open.

As she feared, it was crowded. Judging by the number of people jostling around the bar, she figured she was ten or fifteen minutes later than usual. She swore, scanning the long bar for an open seat. There was one, at the end, but judging by the beautiful woman next to it, it was probably already taken.

With nothing to lose, she shrugged her shoulders and walked the length of the bar, stopping just behind the empty chair. The woman sitting next to it was even more stunning than she first thought. Her fine brown hair was combed straight down and cut in a smart pageboy. As she stopped behind the barstool, the woman turned and looked at her with deeply intelligent, dark chocolate eyes.

“Hello,” the woman said.

"Hi," she answered, putting her hand on the back of the barstool. "Are you meeting someone? Is this seat taken?"

"No. Help yourself."

"Thank you," she said with a smile, finding it difficult to look away from the woman's eyes.

"Amelia," the woman said, holding out her hand. "Amelia Dyer."

Taking a seat on the barstool, she replied, "Janice Wogan."

Amelia smiled, perfect white teeth flashing through blood-red lips. "What brings you in here tonight, Janice?"

"A good time."

"Are you a student?"

"At St. John's, yes."

"Are you a graduate student?"

Janice smiled, a little uncomfortably. "No. I got a late start. I'm only a sophomore, but I'm an old sophomore."

"Did you take some time off after high school?"

"Something like that," Janice replied, watching as Amelia nodded, then turned back to her drink. "I spent some time at Yale before enrolling at St. John's." It wasn't the complete truth, but it was close enough. The people were one of the main reasons she came back to this bar time and time again, but she was still adjusting to how warm and open this woman seemed, especially given her stunning beauty. Janice's experience with such blindingly attractive women was usually the opposite. Often she found them cold and remote.

One of the bartenders approached as she turned this over in her mind.

"Hey, Janice," he said. "What'll you have tonight?"

"A vanilla stolie, please."

"Coke?"

"Please."

He smiled at her. "Coming right up."

“So you don’t come here often enough that they just bring you a drink when you sit down, but you come here often enough that they know your name.”

Janice turned in her seat and examined Amelia more closely. She was not young, at least not young enough to be a student, but she did not look nearly old enough to be a professor. There was a keen intelligence behind her eyes, and the tone in her voice suggested she was used to giving orders, and having them obeyed. A naval officer, maybe? They usually did not frequent the bars in Annapolis, preferring either the Officer’s Club at the Naval Academy, or something a little further out, to provide more anonymity. Most people were not so forward, though.

“Navy?” Janice asked, intrigued by this woman’s personality, and finding herself strangely attracted to her beauty.

Amelia smiled politely. “Does it show that easily?”

“Maybe it was the haircut.”

“No, I doubt it. You’re a smart young woman.”

Feeling herself blush, Janice said, “Thank you.”

“But you’re right. I am in the Navy. I’m on TDY to the Academy for the next several weeks.”

“Are you teaching?”

“Yes,” Amelia said. “I’ve got a class on the role of Japanese women in early feudal Japan. Specifically how they shaped decisions and the political process.”

“I thought Japan was ruled by samurai during that period.”

“It was.”

“I guess I didn’t realize there were many female samurai,” Janice admitted, confused.

Amelia laughed. “There weren’t. In fact, there’s very little that’s been published or studied on the role of women in feudal Japanese society, other than they were subservient to men.”

“No?”



“Well, there’s been a lot of study done on women in society, but there’s very little information on female leaders during that time. Men ruled women and the country. Little has survived to tell us of female warriors, for example.”

“Then how do you know they existed?”

The bartender delivered Janice’s drink, and Amelia paused while she tasted it and nodded her appreciation.

“Because some things have survived,” she said. “That’s what makes it so fascinating. There are stories and tales that have come down through history that detail how some women defied convention and became great warriors. Onna bugeisha were an entire class of women that didn’t sit at home and defer to their husbands.”

“And your class highlights those women?”

“Among other things.”

“Do you look at the role history has played in influencing these stories?” Janice asked. “You mentioned that only some have made it down to us, and it seems like Japan is a very masculine-influenced society.”

“We do look at that, because I believe it has played a large role in what did carry through. Japanese culture and society is very interesting in itself, but you take what influences it has placed on the lens of history, and it becomes fascinating, especially in the last ten or twenty years.”

“How?”

Amelia took a quick drink of her chardonnay. “Well, as I said, there haven’t been too many accounts of true female warriors in Japanese history. There’s references everywhere of women picking up arms when necessary -- the defense of castles, that sort of thing. But there’s not a whole lot on true female samurai.”

“What was that term you used earlier? Onna bugeisha?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t translate exactly as female samurai. They were female warriors, yes, and a member of the samurai class, but

when I think about the truly special women of Japan, I like to think of them as female samurai.”

“Ok.”

“One of the most famous female samurai, Tomoe Gozen, might not have actually existed at all, or maybe not under that name. She was supposed to have lived in the thirteenth century, but it’s never been proven that she was an actual historical figure.”

“You said she could have existed under a different name?”

“Well, the primary story that references her, or rather, the original reference, is a history of the struggle for power between two major Japanese clans during that time period. She’s a hugely popular figure in Japanese society, a legend.” Amelia’s eyes glazed over slightly before refocusing on Janice. It was as though she got lost thousands of years ago before finding her way back to the present. “I’m a believer that there’s usually some truth in the legends that make it through the fog of history, and I wonder if she might have been some real person, perhaps elevated through the eye of historical fiction.”

“The cultural implications are significant.”

“Yes, though it’s obvious to see why a male-dominated society would seek some sort of strong female legend.” She smiled. “Most men like to think of a strong female counterpart. Someone to test them.”

“I’ve always loved history,” Janice said, finishing her drink.

“Is that what you’re studying?”

“To be honest, I haven’t completely decided. I’m still working through a lot of the required courses. But I’d love to take your course. It sounds fascinating.”

“Thanks. I think so,” Amelia said. “Can I buy your next round?”

Janice looked at her empty glass. “I’d like that.”

She watched, a small smile turning her lips, as Amelia leaned over the bar, caught the bartender’s attention, and motioned for

another round for both of them. "What rank do you hold in the Navy?" she asked when Amelia sat back down.

"I'm a Lieutenant Commander. Do you know the Navy?"

"No," Janice said, shaking her head. "But my dad's tied into the Department of Defense pretty well, so I picked some stuff up over the years."

"Oh yeah? What does he do?"

"He's a contractor," Janice hedged, not quite sure how much she should divulge. Her dad always told her to be careful. And, really, how well did she know this woman? They just met.

"Which department? Do you know?"

"Uh, I'm not quite sure. I know he spends a lot of time in Washington."

"A lot of them do."

The bartender delivered their next round, and Amelia raised her glass. "Cheers," she said, smiling.

"Cheers," Janice replied, clinking her glass and taking a sip.

"How long have you been teaching?"

Amelia thought about it. "Nearly ten years now. Shortly after I got my masters."

"Always history?"

"Always."

"Do you like the Navy?"

"I like the security, and I like teaching. It's allowed me to do both with relative independence."

"How about being a woman in the Navy?"

"What about it?"

Janice caught her chocolate eyes and held them. "Is it hard?"

"It provides some interesting challenges."

"Like what?"

"Like being able to meet people," Amelia said, meeting her eyes.

"The right kind of people. Too often, they're too quick to judge."

"What kind of people?" Janice asked, her mouth suddenly dry.

“Can I buy you another drink?”

Glancing down quickly Janice had not realized she finished it. “Yes, please,” she said hurriedly, trying to gain some control over her emotions. She had been with a woman before. Well, she corrected herself, more like a girl. It was several years ago, in high school, and they were both very young. It had been... amateurish, she thought. But this. This could be so much more, judging by Amelia’s apparent experience. Perhaps it was time to branch out a little more. Certainly men weren’t the only ones capable of providing a good time.

The bartender delivered her drink, and she took a tentative sip before asking, “Are you staying somewhere around here?”

“The Academy has me in temporary housing.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that.”

“It leaves much to be desired.”

“Too old?”

Amelia smiled. “Too masculine.”

Janice took another drink, almost draining the stoli. “I’ve got a small place not far from here. Just a few blocks away. I’d love to hear more about Japanese history.”

“What excited you the most about it?”

Janice took a deep breath. “The women.”

Amelia’s smile grew, and she said, “Then let’s go.”

The walk back to her apartment took far less time than she ever remembered, her head overwhelmed with hopeful anticipation. The first time, the only time, she reminded herself, was awkward, with a lot of laughing and giggling. Watching Amelia’s purposeful strides, the small lines around her incredible chocolate eyes, expertly covered with makeup, Janice was convinced she was about to have a whole new experience. Her heart skipped another beat, and her pace quickened.

She opened the front door when they arrived at her apartment, neither having said a word since leaving the bar. “Have a seat on the

couch. Make yourself at home,” she said, the words almost catching in her throat. Forcing herself to take a deep breath, Janice walked into the kitchen and pulled two bottles of beer out of the fridge. She found Amelia on the couch, offered her one of the beers, then sat next to her.

“This is a nice apartment,” Amelia said, looking around.

“Beautiful cat,” she added, as Janx ran into the room, jumping on Janice’s lap.

“His name’s Janx,” she said, rubbing his head. “He hates it when I have company. I think sometimes he gets jealous.”

“How often do you have company?”

Janice looked up. “I’ve only had this kind of company once.”

Amelia nodded, almost imperceptibly, leaned forward, and kissed her, softly at first, delicately.

Closing her eyes, Janice felt the pressure of Amelia’s kiss increase. Janx jumped from her lap as Amelia ran one of her hands through Janice’s hair. As their kiss deepened, Janice surrendered herself, all of her hopeful anticipation exploding like electricity when Amelia wrapped her hand around the back of Janice’s neck, pulling her closer.

Janice felt her mouth open, their tongues touch, and she lost herself in the sensations wracking her body. It was not like the touch of a new lover, or even one she was with for months. It was something else entirely, and it was exquisite, quite unlike anything she ever experienced before.

Surrendering to every suggestion, both verbal and implied, Janice slowly undressed them, Amelia’s expert touch unlocking the newly naked flesh in waves of pleasure that steadily advanced until Janice’s eyes popped open and she exploded in a climax that left her breathless. But Amelia did not stop there. With a delicate purpose, she leaned Janice back and kissed her again before trailing her mouth down her body. Janice spent the next fifteen minutes

writhing, moaning, and sweating, her body wracked in an unending series of climaxes that left her clutching the couch.

Finally, Amelia leaned back, her own body glistening with sweat, her eyes ablaze. "Where's your bedroom?" she asked, huskily.

Janice could only point, still trying to catch her breath, her eyes unfocused, her body spent.

Taking her hand, Amelia helped her from the couch and led her into the bedroom. This was more than Janice ever expected, exactly what she needed after the last week of classes, and she offered no resistance.

As they crossed the threshold, Amelia held back. "Wait, just lay on the bed. I'll be right there. I'll take care of everything."

Janice did as she was told, powerless to resist. She fell on the bed, collapsing on her stomach. No man or drug ever made her feel like this. It was incredible. The crisp white sheets tickled her burning skin like ice, goose bumps exploding all over her body. A faint rustling came from the living room, Amelia going through her purse, and then, as if time did not have any meaning, she felt Amelia's sweet lips caressing her back.

Those same sensations swept over her, and she moaned in expectation, her eyes closed, her head back as Amelia kissed her neck. Wild thoughts flew through her mind when Amelia straddled her and wrapped one arm around her neck. Those thoughts abruptly turned to terror, and her eyes popped open in fear, when Amelia cupped a hand over her mouth and jabbed something sharp into her right thigh.

Her dread passed quickly, though, and she succumbed to the inky darkness invading her mind.

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There was nothing to drink in her condo, and she desperately needed something, so she stopped at a liquor store on her way back from FBI headquarters. If the clerk thought there was anything

strange about the beautiful brunette with piercing green eyes buying a bottle of scotch in the middle of the night, he did not show it. He did not mention the holster on her right hip, either, when she reached inside her trench coat for two twenties. He just took her money, dropped the bottle in a brown paper bag, handed it to her, and turned his attention back to the television blaring behind the bulletproof partition.

"Thanks," she mumbled, trying to be polite, though not really sure why.

She did not get a response.

The short drive back to her condo was lonely, most of the city dark at this late hour, the streetlights the only source of warmth. She pulled into her customary spot, walked to her door, and unlocked it, almost mechanically, her left hand clutching the neck of the bottle. The condo was just as lonely as her drive had been, the parking-lot lights casting strange shadows across the living room as she crossed into the kitchen. There was not much sense in turning on any of the lights inside, she thought, her mind still lost in that week's events.

With the same mechanical motion of the last five days, she reached into a cupboard and took out a glass tumbler. She dropped two ice cubes into the glass and poured herself a generous portion, tossing it down her throat with two quick gulps. Pouring herself another measure, she slowly swilled the scotch in the glass, letting it mix with the ice before she took a long drink, savoring the heat and smoke.

She did not really want to get drunk, she thought to herself, absently spinning the scotch in her drink, but she did not really know what else to do. Everything that needed to be said had been said. Everything that needed to be done had been done over the past five days. There was no sense getting her team up in the middle of the night to work on -- on what? What did she have for them to work on?

Another sip and a slow shake of her head.

The assassin they were tracking, that she was tracking, Omar Ben Iblis, was long gone. His operation to disrupt her investigation, to bring the investigative power of the FBI to its knees, had been a resounding success. Four of her agents were dead, including her lover, murdered by one of their own.

At least she had killed that traitorous son-of-a-bitch.

But did that really matter now? Would it ever matter?

She finished the scotch in her glass and poured more.

“Christ, Eve,” she muttered, running a hand over her face. The entire fight with the traitor Baker suddenly flooded her mind, and she saw herself catching his gun hand, smashing his collar bone, and breaking his neck, all in a split second. Just as quickly, though, the scene was replaced by Nichols’ broken body, crumpled in a heap where it fell, kicked to the ground by two of Baker’s pistol rounds. It was the nightmare that consumed each night since that tragic evening. She saw herself sobbing, swearing, screaming that she should have done something, should have done anything to keep Baker from killing Nichols. But it did not matter. Not now.

The tears came rushing again, despite her every effort to control them. She gripped the edge of the counter and sobbed, trying to take a breath to get control of herself, but every time she tried to stop, she saw his smile, she saw his body, and she was overcome.

It was several minutes before she regained control of herself. With a final sniff, she wiped her nose on the back of her hand and poured herself another drink, adding two more ice cubes and swirling the scotch in the glass. She took a small sip and sniffed again, forcing her emotions back into the depths of her soul.

Nichols was more than a lover. It was foolish to try and argue otherwise. Of course there had been other lovers since the incident in college. If they could be called lovers. But she could not compare those episodes to the night she spent with Nichols. She trusted him,



felt safe around him, and those were feelings she was only able to share with one other man.

She took another drink, if only to stop the sobbing again.

Nichols.

“Prost,” she said, raising the scotch with a half hearted smile.

“Do you always toast the dead?” a disembodied voice asked from the living room.

She dropped to a crouch behind the counter and drew her gun so quickly she surprised even herself, the years of training taking over and her muscle memory forcing her body to react instinctively.

“If I wanted you dead, it would have happened many days ago,” the same voice said with an eerie calm. “Please. Holster your weapon.”

“I can have half the FBI here in ten minutes,” she boasted, options and choices running through her mind.

“And you’ll be dead long before that.”

“I’m in good cover here,” she said, her mind still frantically trying to piece together all of her options.

“Evelyn. Please. Lower your weapon.”

If he was in the living room, she walked right past him in the dark, completely oblivious. He didn’t want her dead. At least not yet. This was something else.

“Please,” he repeated.

She stood up and holstered her pistol, surprisingly calm for such a situation.

“Will you sit down?” he asked.

An amused smirk formed at the corners of her mouth, though she doubted he could see it in the darkened space. “That seems like an odd offer coming from you. Especially considering this is my home.” She watched as a shadow slowly rose from her couch. “Omar Ben Iblis, I presume?” she asked, pouring more scotch into her glass.

“Correct,” he said.

“May I offer you a drink?”

“Please.”

She reached up, took down another glass, and poured.

“Thank you. Just set it on the coffee table.”

“May I turn on a light?” she asked, her eyes darting briefly to the gun in his hand.

“I really don’t think that’s necessary,” he said. “And I must insist that you put your cell phone on the table.”

“Alright,” she said, dropping her phone on the table before sitting down in a chair opposite him, her drink in her left hand. “I always wondered how this conversation would go,” she said, switching to Arabic.

“I’m impressed,” he said, a hint of admiration in his voice. “Your Arabic is flawless.”

“Thank you.”

“Where did you study?”

“At the Academy.”

“Which one?”

“The Air Force Academy. In Colorado.”

He smiled. “Colorado Springs. I have been there. A beautiful city.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Where else? Where else have you studied?”

“I’ve traveled extensively in the Middle East.”

“Not easy for a woman.”

“No, but well worth the effort.”

He picked up his scotch in a gloved hand. “So how did you think this would go? Would it be civil? Have you thought about it for long?”

“My entire professional career,” she continued, in Arabic. “And yes, I believed it would be civil. Professional.”

“Then it is as I thought.”

“What did you think?”

“That you were worth the effort.”

"The effort? What effort?"

She caught the gleam of his teeth in the darkness as a smile escaped his lips. "All of this, Evelyn. May I call you Evelyn?"

"You have the weapon, Omar. You're a man of intelligence, and, I think, to some extent, respect. You may call me whatever you wish."

A smile again. "Thank you."

"I was wondering when we'd finally have the chance to meet."

"Honestly, I hoped we never would."

She was surprised. "Then why are you here?"

"For a number of reasons. This is personal, and I knew you would be alone tonight."

"How did you know I'd be alone?"

He cocked his head to one side. "You're always alone."

Not always, she thought, remembering her time with Nichols. Now wasn't the time for those thoughts, though. "I didn't think things were ever personal with you."

"They usually aren't."

She thought about it for a moment. "It's a dangerous position to be in. Very dangerous. Especially in your line of work."

"I know."

"What I still don't understand is why you don't end this. You must know that I'll never stop hunting you, not after this week, not after everything that's happened, not with everything you've done."

Ben Iblis turned it over in his mind. "No, I suppose not."

"He was an innocent man," she said, a sudden hardness entering her voice.

"Nichols?"

"Yes."

"He was a casualty of war, Evelyn."

Aren't we all, she asked herself.

"But," he continued, "since you ask, this was professional courtesy."

"This visit?"

“Yes.”

She thought about it, her eyes glancing between the formless shadow and the gun held with rock-steady precision in its hand. “I’m honored,” she said after several minutes of silence.

“You should be.”

They lapsed into silence again, Morgan trying desperately to concentrate despite the alcohol coursing through her system. “Tell me how you set it up.”

“Why?”

“Because you killed him.”

“Nichols?” he asked, shaking his head. “I didn’t kill him. Baker killed him.”

“Through your influence,” she countered. “Because of your plan, your set up. You did this. You killed him.”

“So innocent,” he said, amused. “Did he really mean that much to you?”

“You’re damned right he did.”

“Why?”

“Because I trusted him.”

“Like you trust me?”

“Fuck you!” she exclaimed in English, all of the anger and hatred she’d pushed to the very back of her soul welling up in a single instant. “I know you don’t give a shit about him, but I want to know the details. I want to know what happened that night. I want to know about Baker, and how it all led to Nichols’ death. And if you kill me when you’re done, so be it. I don’t care. Nichols and I could have been something. We could have made something. It would be easier that way.”

“I’m not going to kill you, Evelyn.”

She threw up her hands in disgust and took another drink. “Then why the fuck are you here?”

“Because I do owe you something.”

"You're goddamned right you owe me something." She drained her scotch, got up, and refilled it, not even thinking about asking permission.

"Loss is a part of life."

"Is that your mantra? Is that what you tell all those widows whose husbands you killed? Is that what you tell their daughters?"

"I don't believe I've ever told them anything."

It did not surprise her. "Did you love her?" she asked, switching back to Arabic.

"Who?" he asked, confused.

"Astia Baykal."

She sensed, rather than saw, his grip tighten around the pistol.

"I think I did love her," he said. "Not that it matters."

"It does matter. That's what you don't see. That's what you can't see."

"Why?"

She thought back to Nichols' body lying by that briar patch. "Because you know loss. Regardless of what you believe, you lost Astia. You understand."

"You really believe that."

"Yes, I do."

"Then I should kill you now," he said, raising the pistol. "Because you won't stop hunting me."

"Please."

"Are you begging me?"

She snorted, amused. "No."

"Revenge is a dirty business. There's no profit in it."

"I'm not in this business to make money."

"Which is the pity of the world," he said, disappointed. "You would make a fantastic student."

"Morality must exist somewhere."

"Which is why you're not dead," he said simply.

It was an interesting statement, particularly from him, she thought.

“What happened all those years ago?” he asked.

She shifted in the chair, suddenly uncomfortable. “What do you mean?”

“Something happened, some time in your past. Something happened to change you, to set you on this course. It’s why you don’t date, why you’re never with men. I think it’s part of why Nichols was so important to you.”

She stared at his formless shadow, wishing then, more than any other time of her life, that he would just kill her. It would be less painful. It would be an end. She would not have to relive either of those nights -- the one, fifteen years ago when she found herself broken and bloody, or that night, barely a week ago, her lover dead in her arms because she was not able to save him.

“I think it would be easier if you just shot me,” she said.

“But that isn’t part of the deal.”

“It would be easier.”

“Or simpler?”

“Simpler,” she agreed. “But no, I’m not going to tell you.”

He nodded so slightly she barely caught it. “Because you don’t trust men?”

“I don’t trust a lot of people,” she said, her tone harsh. “Men and women.”

“And yet you holstered your weapon here.”

“I believe we have a certain understanding.”

“After all these years?”

“Call it what you like, but there is a certain amount of trust. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here.” She cocked her head to one side. “And I’d likely be dead.”

“True.”

“What happened the other night?”

“With Baker?”

She nodded.

He put his glass down on the coffee table and sat back, the pistol always rock-steady in his hand. "That's actually part of what I wanted to talk to you about tonight. Or, rather, the events leading up to that night."

"Ok," she said, waiting.

"I did set everything up, but it wasn't to have you killed. I couldn't, or rather, I didn't, foresee Baker's actions. I thought I was simply hiring him to fulfill a duty. I just needed him to get me inside, to take care of the surveillance so I could liquidate that terrorist cell. I don't think I ever expected him to take it to such an extent. Obviously, he had his own motives."

"But he did take it that far. Regardless of who pulled that trigger, you put him in the position."

"Part of me regrets his actions."

"Part of you? He cost me three agents."

"Would you rather it have been you?"

She looked at him, pain in her eyes. "I've thought about little else for the last five days, and I still don't have an answer. Part of me, a big part of me, would much rather have taken those bullets. But I don't know if it's because I would rather see those men alive, or if it's because I would rather be dead."

He studied her for several minutes, the diffused light doing little to show her features in any kind of detail. But her emotion, the raw power pulsing from her, told him everything he needed to know.

"I see that now," he said, still watching her. "As I said, part of me regrets Baker's actions, but they were out of my hands. I spared you a greater tragedy."

"What?"

"Death."

She closed her eyes. "I would welcome death."

"Don't be so dramatic. It makes you look weak."

"I'm being honest, not dramatic."

He paused, considering. It was obvious she was suffering from Nichols' murder, and he was not unsympathetic. His own mind tortured him regularly with Astia's loss. "What happened to Baker?"

She could feel his eyes on her, studying her in the pale glow from the parking lot. "He's dead."

"How?"

"I killed him."

If it surprised him, he didn't show it. "It's for the best."

"I know," she said, almost insulted.

"I'm somewhat surprised he was able to piece together enough of the puzzle to profit from it. How long did Vogel put him in command?"

"Twenty-four hours or so."

"I wouldn't think a man of Baker's intelligence capable of something like that. All I wanted was you to be demoted. You were getting too close. For Baker to manipulate the situation to be placed in command... well, I wouldn't have thought him capable of it."

"Is that why you put the whole operation together?" she asked. "To have me removed?"

"Yes."

"Why not simply kill me?"

"As you said, we've known each other for many years."

"But you knew Astia. You loved her all those years ago, and she's still dead."

"Yes," he said, his voice turning to steel. "I did love her."

"For a long time."

"I wouldn't say that. I knew her for a short time."

"Intimately."

The gun twitched. "Yes."

"And yet you killed her right after you killed her parents. Single shot to the head, if I remember correctly. You'll forgive me, but it I'm going on supposition here. I always assumed you were the one that made those kills. Her father was the mark, right?"



"Yes."

"Did she walk in at the wrong time?"

"Yes."

"And she just wouldn't understand, would she?"

"Would you?"

"Did you even try to make her understand?" she asked. "Did you even give her a chance? She probably loved you. God knows what she might have done, what she might have been capable of."

"No," he replied, his voice softening.

"Love is a powerful thing," she pressed.

"Yes. It is."

"It almost makes you do things you didn't think you were capable of."

"Yes. It does."

They lapsed into silence, Morgan wondering if she would have the capacity to forgive something so heinous. "You mentioned wanting to tell me something earlier."

"I did," he said, collecting his thoughts. "I'm retiring."

She almost choked on her drink. "Retiring? You?"

"Yes."

"How? Is that even possible in this line of work?"

"We shall see."

"Why?"

"It's time."

Morgan considered. "Where will you go?"

"I don't know, to be honest. Somewhere I don't have to constantly worry and watch over my shoulder."

"Do you really believe we'll stop hunting you?"

"No."

"You'll find little sanctuary," she continued. "Not now, not after Bin Laden. There are few places we can't reach."

"I know."

"What will you do then?"

“It’s no concern of yours.” He stood up. “But consider this a courtesy call. There’s no reason to continue your hunt. This is the end, Evelyn. If you pursue me, my retribution won’t be so lenient.”

“I understand.”

He looked at her across the dark room. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

## **Chapter 2**

**O**mar Ben Iblis strode from Morgan's condo, closing the door behind him, her cell phone in his hand. As he crossed the parking lot, he took out the battery and threw it in the bushes. There was a white sedan waiting for him, and just before he stepped inside, he threw the phone's SIM card on the pavement, crushing it with the heel of his boot.

"You took care of the landline, right?" he asked, dropping into the passenger seat and shutting the door. He glanced over at one of the most stunningly beautiful women he had ever known, even more beautiful than Morgan.

"Of course," she said, putting the car in gear and pulling out of the parking lot.

Ben Iblis watched her thin, delicate fingers manipulate the wheel. Her dark Corsican skin was difficult to make out with the muted light from the streetlights, but he could imagine it clearly as she drove towards the interstate.

"And the contract? Did everything go as planned?" he asked.

"Yes," Penelope Morelli said, not taking her brown eyes from the road. "There weren't any problems.

"Good."

"I thought it would be harder."

"Harder?" he asked. "Why?"

"Because of our history."

"You didn't have any history until tonight."

"With her father," Morelli clarified.

"Ah. Yes."

Her brown hair rustled slightly against her jacket as she chanced a glance at him. "And there wasn't much time to prepare. Less than a week. It was a rush job."

"That's true," he reflected. "We were lucky she goes to school in town. I don't think we can expect too many more like this in the future. This contract was born of opportunity."

Morelli didn't respond.

"And it did make you half a million richer."

Still no response.

"Are you alright, Ms. Morelli?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm usually like this after an operation."

He stared at the flashing streetlights as she accelerated onto the interstate. "Something I'll need to get used to, I suppose."

"I suppose." She paused. "How did things go in there?"

"As expected. Morgan was professional."

They drove through the deserted streets in silence for several minutes before Morelli turned on to the interstate and merged with what little traffic was on the road at that early hour.

"I would like to meet her," she said after settling the car at a comfortable speed.

"You are very much the same in many respects. Your attention to detail, your professionalism... your beauty." He was watching her again, and he caught the faint hint of a smile.

"Our beauty?"

"Yes. You are both attractive."

"It would seem you have good taste in women."

"I have good taste in a great many things." He smiled for the first time in as many days as he could remember. "It may have been

foolish, but I wanted to say goodbye. I needed to say goodbye to her.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I find that surprising, coming from you.”

“Why?”

“Because you always know. You always have a plan and a reason. So it’s surprising you don’t know in this case.”

He did know, but he did not need to tell her. “There is a distinct lack of permanence in this business, at least with the living, since we deal so much in the realm of death. I wanted to tell her, in person, about everything that happened over the last week. I also wanted to tell her why.”

“Admirable,” she said, trying not to roll her eyes.

“You say that as though you either do not believe it, or you do not mean it.”

“Perhaps a little of both.”

“Evelyn Morgan is one of the few people on this planet who has ever come close to tracking me down. We have history.”

“It’s that history that makes you blind.”

Did it? Ali Khalid, his assistant, thought that, too. “I don’t agree. That history and experience has taught me something.”

“What?”

“That killing is the easy part.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know,” he said. “Perhaps one day you will.”

It was not something he could teach her, even if she had the mindset to look at it openly. In fact, it took him nearly thirty years to reach that conclusion. There was more to the business, more to life, than just cutting it short. Letting Morgan live, continuing to let Morgan live, was something he needed to prove he could do.

"Morgan mentioned something interesting," he said, still staring into the city's glittering lights outside the passenger window.

"Something that struck a chord."

"What?"

"Have you ever cared for someone? Loved someone?"

"That's a difficult question to answer."

"Is it?" he asked, turning back towards her. "Why?"

"For me, at least."

"I can think of two, both dead now, both by my hand."

"That you loved?" she asked.

"In one way or another."

A slight nod was her only response.

"As I told Morgan, it is time for me to retire and find something else to do."

"It'll be difficult to find a safe place to go."

"That's what Morgan said."

"Just one more reason to remove her. After all these years, you must know she won't stop hunting you."

"That may be true." He did not want to get into the details with her, though. "Tell me about the operation."

If she was bothered by the change of subject, she did not show it. "It was straightforward."

"No issues?"

"No. The girl was practically begging to be picked up. I was rather disappointed that I didn't need to try a little harder. We left the bar and went back to a little apartment her father keeps for her near the city."

"You should not be disappointed. To be honest, I might have been concerned if you were forced to try harder."

"She was an easy mark," Morelli said, thinking back to earlier that evening.

"They will not always be that simple."

“Still, it makes you wonder what a woman of her background was thinking.” Morelli smiled, remembering the girl’s soft, yielding flesh. “I would’ve thought she’d know better. Or, at the least, been taught better. It was entirely too easy.”

Ben Iblis remembered his first target. That had not been simple at all, and he knew Morelli would have her fair share of challenges. Plus, he did not need it going to her head. Not yet. She was good, but she had a long way to go.

“Do not get carried away,” he said, catching the flush of her cheeks.

“Sorry,” she said, trying to focus, slightly embarrassed. “You’re right. There’s unfinished business that we need to take care of.”

“Are we headed there now?”

“Yes, but finishing the job won’t be pretty.”

“It never is.”

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Colorado’s bright sun filtered through the slats in the blinds and poured through his closed eyelids, causing him to grunt and nearly swear. He bit it down at the last second, though, remembering that his wife was lying next to him. Instead, he gently pulled the covers back, stood, and walked into the bathroom.

The mirror greeted him unkindly, enhancing his sagging face, his bald head with wispy white hair, and his pale, sallow skin. Exercise was a luxury he was not afforded this past week. Some sun, a walk, and fresh mountain air would go a long way to help his spirit. He sighed and picked up his toothbrush. He did not have time for a walk.

Running one of the largest defense contractors in the world did not allow him the indulgence of a flexible schedule. Board meetings, share holder meetings, client meetings, political meetings; they all just ran into one another. He needed a break. A vacation. Anything. Some time to get away, turn off his mobile phone, and see his wife

without constant interruptions. It was the same with the rest of his family. He would love to have lunch with his daughter without worrying about making it in time for the next meeting.

Hell, he would settle for time with his mistress without constant interruptions, but it was not possible. There was always someone watching, always someone who needed something, always something he had to take care of, and it seemed like he was the only one who was ever capable of taking care of anything.

After showering, he dressed and closed the bedroom door behind him, leaving his wife's sleeping form tucked comfortably under the heavy quilt. Their bedroom was in one wing of his mansion in the Rocky Mountains behind Pike's Peak, and as he walked down a long hall, he afforded himself a long look at the mountain's majesty. The floor to ceiling windows lining the hall offered an unparalleled view, but words often failed him when the early light of dawn lit up the mountain in that purple hue. It was one of his few moments of peaceful solitude, and it passed too quickly every morning.

With a sigh and one last glance, he walked through the living room, the foyer, and into the kitchen. His assistant, Thomas Dean, stood in front of a large butcher block counter, chopping onions.

"Good morning, Mr. Wogan," Dean said, not looking up.

"Good morning."

"Coffee's ready."

"Thank you," Wogan said, walking over to pour himself a cup.

"What are you making?"

"A frittata. Spinach, onions, cheese."

"Sounds delicious."

Dean nodded, but did not turn. "Will Mrs. Wogan be joining you?"

"I'm sure. But don't trouble yourself with the dining room table. We can eat in the sun room. It looks like such a pleasant morning."

"A little chilly, but it should be a nice day. Plenty of sunshine."

"Wonderful. Let me know when it's ready."



“Of course.”

Wogan took his coffee and walked into his luxuriously appointed office. The furniture and woodworking were a dark cherry, including his massive desk. He powered on his laptop, checked the few voicemails his secretary had not pre-screened, then started to go through the mountain of email. There were several items his secretary marked to his particular attention, but he was happy to see she was able to deal with most of the rest. However, one caught his eye, and he picked up the phone’s receiver.

“Senator Bradley’s office,” he heard after several seconds.

“Marjorie, it’s Andy Wogan.”

“Mr. Wogan, how are you?” Bradley’s personal secretary inquired. “Things are well this morning, I hope?”

“Yes, thank you. And yourself? How’s Washington today?”

“The same. Gray. The Senator’s been expecting your call. Shall I put you through?”

“If you please.”

There was a short pause and Bradley’s rather high-pitched voice came on the line. “Andy! Good morning. Thanks for getting back with me so quickly.”

“Of course, Senator. I hope something hasn’t changed regarding the vote?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Everything is well in hand there. As I said last night, we should have the paperwork complete by the end of the week. The vote for the final endorsement is set for early next week. Once that’s done, New York will be able to authorize the PO using the grant money.”

“Good. That facial recognition contract is very important to the company. After reading your email, I was a little concerned. You mentioned a troubling development. If it’s not the vote, then what’s the issue?”

“Well, I’m actually a little hesitant to bring this to your attention.”

“Please, Senator,” Wogan said, sensing Bradley’s embarrassment. “We’re old friends. Let’s not stand on ceremony. How may I help?”

“Well, it’s regarding that personnel director you were so kind to introduce me to the other evening after dinner.”

“Ms. Morelli?” Wogan asked, somewhat surprised. He provided the introduction to make it easier for Morelli to take Bradley to bed in the event a little persuasion might be required at some future date. “Has something happened?”

“Well.” He cleared his throat. “This is where I am a little embarrassed. We both had a little too much to drink after you and the General left. And, well, one thing led to another, and she joined me in the suite I keep at the Hilton.”

“I see,” Wogan said with a smile. It was the perfect outcome. The concerns he harbored because he had not heard from Morelli vanished. “Well, these things happen, even to married men.”

“Yes, yes,” Bradley said, somewhat impatiently. “But the problem is, she’s gone. She’s not here.”

“I’m not in the habit of getting involved in my employees’ private lives,” Wogan said with a sigh. “So perhaps you can tell me how I may be of service.”

“Well, she’s gone.”

“Yes, you said that. Several times. What exactly is it that you mean? Most women tend to leave at one point or another, especially after situations such as these. I believe there can be feelings of guilt and regret, especially with married men.”

“Yes, but I’ve been trying to contact her and I’ve not heard a word back. She did leave me her number before we parted ways last night.”

“Last night? But we had dinner nearly a week ago.” Wogan turned the situation over. Morelli was not supposed to leave. He had instructed her to remain with Bradley, to seduce him, of course, but to implant herself in his life in case they needed additional leverage. His mind raced through possibilities. “Well, Senator. I’m sure you

can understand how these things are, especially from a woman's point of view. Perhaps she felt it had been a mistake, and simply came to her senses. I've known it to happen."

"And that would be understandable," Bradley said, "if it weren't for the fact that she left all of her things there."

"Her things?"

"Well, yes," Bradley replied, his embarrassment all too clear. "I've been seeing her all week. All of her clothes are still where she left them. Even her toothbrush. But that's not the strangest part. I remember the phone ringing last night. She left immediately after answering it."

A small knot formed in the pit of Wogan's stomach. "She was with you last night, then?"

"Yes. As I said, we've been spending most of the week together. You, uh, you check your people, right Andy?" His nervous tension was clear across the digital circuit.

"Of course," Wogan replied automatically, but the knot in his stomach did not go away. "Let me make some calls, Senator. I'll look into this."

"Thank you," Bradley said, the relief evident. "I'll wait to hear from you."

"Of course. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Wogan dropped the handset onto its base, tapped his fingers idly on his desk, then yelled, "Thomas!"

Dean came racing in, his apron clutched in his hand.

"Morelli's gone," Wogan said.

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

"That's what I asked. I just talked to Bradley. She left some time in the middle of the night." He studied Dean closely. "Have you spoken with her?"

"Not since yesterday morning."

Wogan drummed his fingers on his desk. “I haven’t heard from her in several days. She was supposed to stay with Bradley. Why would she leave?”

“I don’t know.”

“We need to track this down immediately. Find out where she went, and find out now!”