

The book cover features a man and a woman in a dramatic, rocky setting. The man is shirtless and muscular, wearing jeans, looking towards the viewer. The woman is wearing a white crop top and jeans, with her hand on her head, looking slightly away. A bright, golden light emanates from behind them, creating a halo effect and illuminating the scene. The background consists of dark, jagged rock formations. The overall tone is epic and romantic.

HARLEY AUSTIN

BOOK THREE

LEGACY

A WAKENED SERIES

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AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK THREE

LEGACY

HARLEY AUSTIN

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*For my beautiful angel;
the love of my life and the very best friend
anyone could ever hope to have.*

LEGACY

1

Gage slipped the history book neatly into his locker, keeping a mindful eye on the other students who continued to flood noisily through the large hallway.

“Dude, you look paranoid.” Richard unloaded his own books into the locker beside his friend’s.

“Is it that obvious?” Gage lifted his backpack out of the short upper locker.

“Probably not. I just know you. Anyway, you should relax. The goon-squad got stuck in the media center on the way out. Canterbury will keep them busy for the next half hour at least.”

Gage smirked at his friend and relaxed a bit. He pulled a heavy white denim jacket from its hook and slipped it on.

“Hey, did you see the new girl yet? She’s a senior. I have her in my second, third and fifth periods.” Richard let out a soft whistle.

"Nice. I'm still a junior, remember? She's not in any of mine." Gage slammed his locker shut. "I don't even know what she looks like. I heard she's from South Carolina. Does she have Boyd's dorky accent?"

"Dude, there's nothing 'dorky' about her. *Whence thou she speaks the very winds refrain silent!*"

"Is that Shakespeare?"

"No, I just made that up. But seriously, she's hot."

"Yea, well, listening to someone say 'y'all' doesn't exactly strike me as sexy. Besides, I heard she was in Glee Club."

"So?"

"She's a cheerleader. Not exactly my territory."

"Oh, and what is your 'territory', exactly?"

Gage's lips thinned. "Well—"

"See that's the problem with you, Cameron; you second guess yourself all the time. Dude, have you looked in the mirror lately?" Richard lowered his voice. "You could fuck any woman in this building if you wanted to."

"Jesus, Richard—"

"Dude, I'm serious. Your confidence sucks. If I had your body and looks—I'd be an unstoppable—"

"—nerdy geek." Gage finished.

"Yea, okay, but at least I'd get laid."

Gage leaned against the locker. "Well, some of us have other things to worry about than getting—" He saw the look on Richard's face fall. Gage turned his head to see the four jocks making their way down the hall toward them. None of their lockers were even in this wing of the building. There was only one reason they'd be walking this way. Gage locked eyes on the burly students in their lettered school-colored jackets as they approached.

"Hey guys, lookie here, it's Gagey and his bitch." The four seniors surrounded Gage and Richard.

"What do you want, Barry?" Gage stared the slightly taller senior in the eye. Barry's left eye was still badly bruised.

"You went running like a little girl to Coach Green."

"I never talked to Green; you did. He's the one who made us sign the no-contact form."

"Yea, well you just watch yourself, Gagey. Contract or no contract, no one sucker punches me and gets away with it. If I were you I'd be watching my back. I've got my sights on you, Gagey."

"You don't scare me, Barry. Touch me and your little football season is over. If you're so tough why do you need your goons to fight your battles for you?"

One of the larger jocks stepped forward, "Y'little bitch, I'll—" But Barry's arm prevented him from moving closer. "No. Not here. They have cameras, idiot." Barry returned his attention to Gage, "You just watch your back, Gagey. Bad things happen to squealing little faggots."

Gage's face hardened as the four made their way out of the doors at the end of the hall.

Richard leaned back against the row of lockers, his heart pounding with trepidation. "Oh, we are so gonna die," he mumbled, looking up at Gage. "Coach Green made you two sign a no-contact?"

Gage nodded slightly, still watching the goons standing outside the doors, their breaths visible in the brisk fall air.

"Sinclair really has it in for you. What'd you do?"

"Nothing. He's a bully. He threw a punch at me and I fired back."

Richard nodded. "So that ugly black eye wasn't a helmet injury?"

"Is that what he's calling it?" Gage smirked.

"It's not funny, Gage. Sinclair's dad is a doctor and he's on the city council."

"So?"

"So, dude, you don't just mess with the Sinclairs. I've heard stories about them. They're really bad news. And Sinclair isn't going to just let this go."

"I know. Barry I can handle. It's the rest of his goons that bother me." Gage watched as the jocks finally left the doorway outside.

The parking lot was emptying slowly as students found their cars and headed home for the long holiday break. Now well into December, the mountain air of the small town was briskly cold, even in the full sun of the late afternoon. Gage had a sinking feeling as he approached his aging classic Firebird. It still had a nicely almost mirrored deep purple finish that he kept waxed, but it didn't take him but a few moments to notice that all four of his mostly new tires were now flat. The sidewall punctures would be unfixable.

"Ohh, Jesus," he breathed, resting his head onto his arms on the top of the car. He had a job to get to and he didn't have time for this kind of nonsense.

"Hey, are y'all okay?" The feminine voice behind him had a distinctly Southern drawl.

"Huh?" Gage lifted his head and turned around. Another student stood beside her car in the next parking space. "Oh, fine," he frowned.

"Oh, my God, what happened to your tires?" Her accent was thick but deliciously sweet at the same time.

"So you noticed that, huh?" he looked down at them again, a depressed feeling rising in his gut.

She walked up to him. He'd never seen her before but her accent clued him in on who she probably was.

"So what did you do?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

She chuckled. "You must have really ticked somebody off. What did you do?"

"Oh, well; I—I guess I punched a jock."

The gorgeousness in front of him was nicely dressed in designer jeans and a short white fitted ski jacket. Beautiful blonde hair flowed over her shoulders. He was having a hard time taking his eyes off of her.

"So you're the infamous Gage Cameron," she offered.

"Infamous?"

"Yea. The whole school's talking about you."

"Really?" He half frowned again.

"I'm Savannah Scotland," she twinkled, reaching out a nicely gloved hand.

"The new girl." Gage politely shook her hand. She gripped his firmly. Gage couldn't help but notice how elegantly she moved and how beautifully captivating her smile was. "Welcome to Leavenworth," he smiled.

"Thanks." All day Savannah had been listening to the gossip and rumblings about some guy named Cameron who'd punched the school's team captain and first-string quarterback. She'd met all of the team members while in Glee Club, but Sinclair tailed her like a puppy dog. He'd been unusually chatty with her in class and in the halls. Sinclair was tall, good looking and charming, in a plastic sort of way. He'd said that his black eye had come from a helmet injury while at practice, but she knew the real score. A lying Yankee was hardly anything new to her. But she had been wondering what kind of person would have been able to best a sizable guy like Sinclair.

Cameron was broad-shouldered, very well built, even looking at him from outside of his insulated denim coat; but he wasn't burly like Sinclair or a lot of the other jocks. In fact, Cameron wasn't actually a jock at all. His dark, neatly tossed hairstyle, cut shorter on the sides, accented his unusually

handsome features and dimples well. The guy looked like he could be a teen heartthrob on one of her favorite soap operas.

"I don't think your car is going anywhere tonight. Can I carry you home?"

Gage smirked, "Carry me?"

"*Take,*" she corrected herself, smiling. She was still adjusting to the nuances of the Northwest and its stupid idioms.

Gage was suddenly finding himself stuck between a rock and a hard place. Richard hadn't exaggerated. Savannah was not just cute, but beautiful. He needed a ride home and then to work, but he couldn't—or didn't rather—want this incredibly beautiful girl to see where he lived or have to give him a lift to work.

"It's okay," she began, seeing some odd reticence in him, "really, I don't mind."

Gage sighed. "I appreciate the offer, Savannah, but—"

"Gage Cameron, are you really going to turn down a girl who is offering to carry you home in the bitter cold?"

Gage smirked at the Southern attitude of this new girl. She had spunk. He nodded. "Alright." He gathered some things from his car, locked it, and followed Savannah to hers. When they had both tucked themselves into her sporty Acura, Savannah started the engine. The high-end sports car immediately began to feel warmer.

"I appreciate the ride, Savannah." Gage stretched his hands over the vents. "My place is up the Icicle. Do you know where that is?"

"Like toward Sleeping Lady?"

"Yea. Just make like you're heading for the resort; I'm not too far past there."

"That's quite a drive. I'd feel terrible if I knew you were having to walk all that way in this cold."

"Well, truth be told, not too many people would offer to give me a ride, even in this cold."

"I think that I've discovered that the hospitality of you Northerners is not very civilized." Savannah frowned as she deftly pulled the car out of the parking lot.

"Well, it's probably not because of lack of hospitality. People around here think I'm dangerous."

"Oh? Why?"

"Well I suppose you'll find out sooner or later. I moved up here with my mom about this time last year. And then this past summer, Mom—" Gage winced at the sudden well of emotion that came out of nowhere. He'd thought he'd been done with these feelings but now suddenly, sitting in the warmth of Savannah's car and her company, they all came rushing back in an inopportune instant.

Savannah looked at Gage and immediately was struck by the sudden pain that was written all over his face.

"Oh my God, Gage, what happened to your mom?"

Gage was only barely able to keep his eyes from misting more than they did. He drew a slow breath.

"I don't know, Savannah. She just—disappeared." He tried to regain his composure. "I don't know where."

"Oh God, Gage; I'm so sorry." Savannah reached out her hand and took his, squeezing it tightly.

"I must look like a blubbering idiot." Gage wiped his eyes, trying to make sure tears didn't start streaming out of them.

"No, no you don't." Her voice was sympathetic as she clung tightly to his hand.

It took Gage a minute to finally regain his composure.

"Some people at the sheriff's office tried to say I had something to do with it. They interviewed me like a dozen times. But I wasn't even in town when she disappeared."

"That is terrible, Gage. Your mom disappears and then they try to pin something like that on you? Did anyone ever discover what happened?"

He shook his head. "No, it's an unresolved missing persons case at this point. Some folks tried to tell me that sometimes parents will do that, move to a new town and then just leave their kids, you know, start a new life without them somewhere else."

"Idiots. I can't believe someone would even tell you that."

"Yea. Maybe they were just trying to make me feel better." He gazed out the window. "Make me think she just left. But that's not the person she was, Savannah. She would never just leave like that. I know her. We were close."

"I don't even want to try to guess what happened to her," Savannah offered, trying hard not to sound macabre. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"Last August. I went to Seattle for a few days with a friend's family and when I got back, she was already gone. She'd already missed work; she had a lot of voice mails that the police were able to retrieve. A bunch of them from me. But they never found her or her phone; our car was still in the driveway."

"Our?" Savanna asked.

"Yea. My Firebird. It was Mom's pride and joy. She'd just put new tires on it before she disappeared."

"Oh, my God," Savannah was shaking her head. "And no one knows anything?"

"No. We kept pretty much to ourselves. She was sort of seeing this judge in town, Walker."

"Oh. Judge Walker. I know him. Daddy had him over for dinner last weekend."

"Really? Small world."

"It's not a big town, Gage, honestly."

"So you like big towns?" he asked, wanting to keep the conversation going but not about his mom.

"Towns, yes; cities like Atlanta, no. We used to live in North Charleston. We had a beach house in Hilton Head and I was born in—" she held out her hand for Gage to finish.

"Savannah," he offered.

She nodded.

Gage chuckled.

"What?"

"You." He shook his head. "You and I come from completely different worlds, Savannah."

"Oh?"

"I'm not exactly upper crust."

"Well, I'm not exactly a snob."

"Oh, no, no, I—I didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry."

"All of us are born into something, Gage. We can't help where we're born or the families we're born into. Besides, you're not exactly a redneck. I think it's pretty obvious that your mom raised you very well. She had culture."

Gage nodded.

"So what are you doing with your mom missing? Are you living with friends or relatives now?"

"No, I'm still in the same rental; only I'm the one paying the bills now."

"All by yourself? But you're still in school."

"I know. CPS wanted to place me with some foster family after mom disappeared. But Judge Walker stepped in and issued an emancipation order for me. I'm legally an adult even though I'm still only seventeen."

"I like Judge Walker. He seems very level headed."

"Yea, well, I think he's kind of creepy, actually."

"Why do you say that?"

"He's super nice on the outside and he's helped me out a few times, but he just gives me the creeps. I don't trust him. I never have."

"Do you think it's because he was sort of dating your mom?"

"No. They weren't exactly dating. I think he wanted to but mom wasn't interested. She didn't have much use for him either. We both tried to avoid him, actually."

The classy little car turned onto the road leading up the canyon toward Sleeping Lady. They drove up the winding road not far past the resort. Gage pointed out the driveway leading to a small trailer park and a rundown mobile home that had become his home for the past year.

As they got out of the car, Savannah could hear the river just on the other side of the drive.

"You didn't tell me you had a house on the water!" Her grin was contagious as Gage let the two of them into the very modest, aging mobile home.

It was cool inside the trailer, but still much warmer than outside. Savanna was surprised to see an interior that did not reflect the dilapidating exterior. A plush carpet spread nicely throughout most of the space except for the kitchen, which had been set with large stone tiles. The finishes were timeless and the furniture looked fresh and new as well. The décor looked expensive, and the whole home smelled like it had been recently remodeled.

"Not what you were expecting?" Gage smiled as he closed the door behind them. "I did a lot of the work on this myself."

"This is really nice, Gage." Savannah ran her fingers along a shiny granite countertop. "From the outside I would never have guessed."

"Mom and I used to watch decorating and remodeling shows all the time. So when we moved up here and found this place to live by the water, we convinced the owner to give us cheap rent if we updated the place."

"I think he's getting the better end of the deal." Savannah's tone was admiring.

"Yea, probably. Still, it's what I can afford right now. I just need to grab my work clothes and we can head down to the body shop."

"Is that what you do? Fix cars?"

"Mostly I just paint them." Gage walked toward the back of the mobile home. Savannah followed close behind, marveling at the modern sense of style that surrounded her. The master bedroom of the home had been just as well decorated in creams and very dark dark-browns with touches of chrome here and there. It was a very nice masculine space.

"The other guys at the body shop do the repairs and then set up the paint booths for me do the finish work. Evidently the owner likes my work because he won't let me leave."

"What do you mean he won't let you leave? Did you try to quit?"

"Yea, several times, actually."

"Why?"

"I don't really get along with the rest of his crew. They keep accusing me of being gay." Gage rolled his eyes as he laid his backpack in the corner.

Savannah scoffed. "So? Why would they care?"

"Because they're idiot reprobates." Gage sat down on the bed to change his shoes.

Savannah smirked. "Now who's being a snob?"

"I don't have time for idiots."

"Why would they think you're gay?"

"I work out a lot and I walked into the shop the other day to pickup my check wearing a pink polo that Mom had gotten for me. She always thought I looked good in pastels. But that's all it took and the rumors started flying; not just at the shop, but around town. It even followed me to school. It's also why Sinclair got himself a black eye."

"He was teasing you."

Gage nodded. "He was following me around the locker room just as P.E. was letting out and we were all getting dressed. He wouldn't shut up, so I made some comment about his Neanderthal I.Q. and he took a swing at me."

"Yea, I saw the whole thing on *Instagram*, actually."

"Oh Jesus, don't tell me that. You did not!" Gage looked at her wide-eyed, suddenly feeling ill. "Don't tell me someone recorded and uploaded it."

"Oh, yeah. A bunch of people did." Savannah's piercing green eyes were sparkling with her smile. "Like you just said, Sinclair was following you around the locker room while you were getting dressed. He throws a punch; you dodge and pop him in the face, knocking him over the bench. It was pretty spectacular, actually. You're a celebrity, you and your now famous *Pump!* underwear."

Gage flopped back onto the bed, rolling his eyes. He shook his head. "I can't catch a break," he groaned.

"Not true. Coach Green saw the videos too. It's why Sinclair got in trouble and you didn't. I think Sinclair's lucky he didn't get thrown off the team."

Gage sat up again. "They won't do that. His dad is *Doctor* Sinclair. They named a wing of the hospital here after him."

"So are you?"

Gage looked up at her, "Huh?"

"Gay?"

Gage sighed. "To tell you the truth, Savannah, I don't know myself. And I haven't had a break from all of the nonsense going on in my life over the past few years to take the time to find out."

Savannah smiled. "Honesty. I like that." She turned and walked out of the bedroom while Gage's eyes remained fixed on her delightfully curved ass. He smiled, shaking his head.

2

Gage headed out the door for a morning run wearing a favorite pair of soft dark grey sweats to keep him warm. Savannah had been in his thoughts at work last night and now all morning. The Southern beauty wasn't exactly what he had expected. There was quite a bit more to this girl from South Carolina than the bubblehead he had originally assumed her to be. They'd talked quite a bit more in her car on the way to the shop and then, unexpectedly, she'd given him a warm hug just before he'd gotten out of her car. The memory of their hug and the sense of warmth he felt while watching her drive away still lingered in his mind.

He stepped out onto the rickety porch just as several sheriff's vehicles were pulling up into his empty parking spot and onto his frozen, weed-covered lawn.

"DO NOT MOVE!" The teen suddenly heard a siren chirp and lights flash as the words of a deputy echoed through the

small trailer park from one of the patrol car's loudspeakers. Gage stopped, his eye's wide.

"PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD, NOW!"

Gage had no idea what was happening or why the officers were even here. But he wasn't about to argue. He slowly raised his hands to his head while several deputies quickly emerged from their vehicles with pistols and shotguns already in hand.

Several of the deputies approached and began to handcuff him.

"Gage Cameron," one of the deputies addressed him.

"Yes?"

"You're under arrest for the murders of Carrie Cameron, Barry Sinclair and Savannah Scotland. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say, can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right ..."

Gage never heard the rest of the deputy's Miranda warning. He had already been arrested months ago after the disappearance of his mother. The sheriff's had run him through the mill then. But what he was hearing now was beyond belief. Savannah? Murdered? How? The stoic teen now felt an overwhelming and unexpected sense of dread as the deputies tugged him down his steps and stuffed him into a patrol car.

* * * * *

It had been several hours since Gage had been processed, fingerprinted, searched, cavity searched, humiliated and more than once pushed, punched and insulted. The entire time he'd said nothing. Not a word. He now sat in a cold, brightly lit interrogation room at the sheriff's satellite office. A thin, younger man entered dressed in a wrinkled light-gray business suit with an ugly tie and a small briefcase. He pulled a card from his pocket and set it on the table in front of Gage.

The card said the man was from the small county's public defender's office.

"I got here as soon as I could, Mr. Cameron."

Gage stared at the man blankly.

The man opened his case and removed a small stack of documents, obviously generated by the authorities.

"The sheriff's office issued an arrest warrant for you this morning, Mr. Cameron. They claim you know something about the disappearances of your mom a few months ago and now two of your classmates last night. If we can get a statement I think I can get this whole thing cleared up pretty quickly and get you out of here."

Gage just stared past the man. He'd heard his words. The authorities had just charged him with three murders. This wasn't going to get "cleared up" and he wasn't getting out anytime soon. Gage didn't trust any of these people. He played silent.

"You *can* talk to me, Mr. Cameron, the law protects our conversations. Even if the police were recording this conversation right now, which they're not, I assure you, it would be totally inadmissible in court."

Gage began to reach across the table toward the small stack of papers the attorney had placed between them. "May I?"

The man lifted the papers and handed them to Gage. The teen made sure his hand touched the skin of the attorney as he handed the papers to him. The sudden ill feeling Gage sensed when their fingers touched made him wince inside, but he kept his poker face just the same.

"I don't know that those will really be of any use to you, but you're more than welcome to look them over. It's really all just legalese."

Gage finished thumbing over the papers. "Is there a warrant?"

"Well, of course. It's part of the paperwork." The defender motioned at the stack.

"There's no warrant here," Gage pushed the stack back to the attorney, if he even was an attorney.

"Oh, I'm sure it is, let's see," the man began rifling quickly through the papers. "There we are," he pushed a paper toward Gage.

"That's not a warrant, Counselor."

"No, but it's the reference document. The warrant's been sealed for the time being."

"By who?"

"The court, Mr. Cameron. The court doesn't need to disclose who seals these things. I admit, it's a little unusual to see a sealed warrant, but it happens from time to time to protect certain witnesses and investigative proceedings while a criminal case and prosecution is in progress."

"Uh huh." Gage kept his face blank.

"Do you know where Barry Sinclair or Savannah Scotland might be?"

"Maybe you should ask your boss, or maybe the people who sealed your worthless warrant."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm through, Counselor. You're fired."

"That is your right, Mr. Cameron. But I assure you, you will need professional representation from here on out. I spoke with the D.A. this morning and evidence has surfaced in the disappearance of your mother and now Mr. Sinclair and Miss Scotland. I'm being assured that they have rock-solid evidence and motive that you were the one responsible for their deaths."

"But you just asked me if I knew where they were?"

"I did."

"Why would you ask that if already knew they were dead?"

"Are they dead, Mr. Cameron?"

"I wouldn't know, Counselor."

"It's up to you whether you want to cooperate or proceed, Mr. Cameron. I'll be available if you should change your mind." The attorney began to collect his things. "Keep the card in case you want to re-hire me and continue your defense."

"Don't hold your breath, Counselor."

"Very well. Good day, Mr. Cameron."

* * * * *

"Thanks for stopping by, Mr. Scotland; Dr. Sinclair. Please, both of you, have a seat," Judge Walker offered the two well-dressed men.

Rhett Scotland was a tall, tanned-skinned, handsome forty-something, refined Southerner, cleanly-shaven with well-groomed dark hair only beginning grey along the sideburns. His clothes were fine and conservative, reflective of his family's old money wealth.

Dr. Sinclair too was well into his forties and slightly overweight even for his stocky build. Raised in the small farming towns of the Northwest, he was well-to-do, but not quite so refined as the Southern gentleman Judge Walker had invited with him into his private chambers.

"Have you found the kids yet?" Dr. Sinclair's voice was nervous with trepidation as both men took seats in front of the judge's desk.

"No, no, not yet. We're all still very much looking for the both of them, though. I wanted to call you here personally to let you know a bit more of the situation and to ask a favor of the both of you."

"Anything, if it will help me get my Scottie back."

"It will, Rhett," the judge assured. "We've had a suspect under surveillance for several months now. We think this guy

may have something to do with the disappearance of Barry and Savannah last night."

"Who is he?"

"Kind of a troublemaker actually. I've had to deal with him in my courtroom a number of times over the past year. Several months ago his mother disappeared. No one knows what happened to her or where she went. She just vanished."

"Good God," Rhett breathed.

"We even arrested him, booked him into the county holding facility here in town; but—"

"But what?" Dr. Sinclair asked.

"But we made some mistakes, frankly. The kid got off. We had to release him for lack of evidence. We had to let him go—but we kept our eye on him."

"You just released this guy back into our community?" Dr. Sinclair looked like he was getting angry.

"Now hold on, David, I didn't have a choice. I can't just keep someone locked-up because I think they *may* have committed a crime, even a murder."

"So you think this guy has something to do with the abduction of my daughter?" Rhett asked.

"I do, Rhett. I'm sorry. The point is we picked up the kid this morning and we have him in lockup. He's not going anywhere. I'm using every procedural legality at my disposal to *keep him* locked up this time, until we can secure more evidence—evidence that is being provided to us by DHS, actually."

"What?" Dr. Sinclair looked at Rhett Scotland and then back at Judge Walker. "How is Homeland Security involved in this?"

"I was asking myself the same question when I got a call from them last night. When we processed the kid's arrest warrant it evidently set off something with the feds. I was on the phone for over an hour last night with an agent at DHS who

informed me that this kid is *Bratva*—he's on a watch list; he's part of the Russian Mafia."

"Oh, good Lord." Dr. Sinclair sighed, shaking his head. "They have their people in a high school?"

"They do, David. It's prime recruiting territory, I'm told. This kid and his mother moved up here from Las Vegas last year. Vegas has a huge Russian Mafia problem. They train their recruits in big cities like Vegas, L.A., even Seattle, and then send them out to much smaller towns like ours where we don't have the training or the resources to stop them or even slow them down. They commit all kind of crimes at will, everything from petty burglary to kidnappings, human trafficking, even murder. And when someone disappears, these people leave no evidence and no trace."

"Oh my God." Rhett's face paled as he glanced over at Dr. Sinclair, who was looking a little shaken himself. "Judge, who is this guy?"

"Well, you're both going to find out sooner or later. His name is Gage Cameron. He's got a rap sheet a mile long and he's only seventeen."

"Cameron?" Dr. Sinclair's brow suddenly furrowed. "The kid who attacked Barry in the locker room the other day?"

"Yes, David. The very same."

"Well that explains a lot!" Dr. Sinclair's face turned angry.

"Right. Barry wouldn't have stood a chance against this Russian military-trained soldier. I assume you saw some of the videos of the fight that the kids were uploading to the internet?"

"Yes, I saw them." Dr. Sinclair admitted. His frown deepened.

"Well, then, David, you saw how adeptly this Cameron guy evaded your son's swing and then counter-punched with what I am told is a martial jab. It knocked poor Barry right off his feet and over the bench. And did you see the way this kid

is built? No seventeen-year-old is that ripped unless he's doing a military workout everyday."

"Unbelievable. And knowing all of this you still let this kid back out onto our streets?" Dr. Sinclair grew even more incredulous.

"I just found out about this Mafia connection last night myself, David! I have to follow the law. He's been technically a minor and he's used that shield more times than we can count to get himself off the hook. But after his mother disappeared, I did manage to convince him to sign an emancipation order. He's now legally an adult so if we catch him again in some criminal act, I can put him away for a good long while."

"That's all well and good, Judge Walker," Rhett began, "but I don't understand how Savannah got all mixed up with this Cameron fellow."

Walker looked at Dr. Sinclair.

"I think that's my fault, Rhett. Barry took Savannah out for a pop last night."

"Pop?"

"Sodas, Rhett," the judge interjected. "Savannah and Barry were on a kind of date last night."

Rhett was nodding. "She called me late last night and said she'd be out with a friend; so she was with Barry?"

David nodded. "And now, because of this altercation between Barry and this, this *Mafioso*, you think maybe Savannah got caught up into whatever plans the Cameron kid had for my son?"

"I'm pretty sure that's what happened, David." The judge looked at Mr. Scotland. "I'm sorry, Rhett."

Rhett nodded, pursing his lips. "Listen, gentlemen; no one could have foreseen this Cameron kid doing what he did last night. I can't blame you, Dr. Sinclair, for any of this. You're just as much of a victim here as anyone of us."

"Still, Rhett, I can't help but feel responsible." The doctor worried his phone between his fingers.

"Don't worry about it now. We need to try to find out if our children are still alive and if they are still alive, where are they?"

"Absolutely, Rhett. But now that both of you know what's really going on, we have to keep a lid on it. DHS is in the middle of full-fledged investigation. I'm being told that they have some of their people flying into town in a few days. I need both of you to give me your word that you won't breathe any of this to anyone until I can get the all-clear from Homeland. One false move or slip of the tongue on our part, and we may never see our kids again."

3

Three A.M. Gage opened his eyes as if awakened by some internal alarm clock. He slipped quietly to the edge of his cell as the burly but overweight detention officer half-slumbered by on his routine bed check, far too close to the bars than he should have been. With Gage's hand now firmly in place around his fatty neck and windpipe, the only sound the startled officer was able to make were rasping gasps as he slumped softly and quietly to the floor, his brain temporarily deprived of oxygen. Gage had maybe ten to twenty seconds before the other detention officer noticed the camera that covered his cell; sixty seconds if the guy was not really paying attention during the cell check. At least the door was well oiled as Gage exited the cell without so much as a squeak from the sliding steel bars. The guard's RF card let Gage out of the minimum security inner cell block. Another wave of the RF card then allowed Gage to enter the main hall of the small

sheriff's station. He exited the building through an employee door and into a freezing cold and mostly empty back parking lot.

* * * * *

For the past two days Savannah had sat scared but fuming in the large lodge-like home seated high on the hill overlooking the Icicle valley and the Wenatchee River flowing through its icy riverbed below. She'd never been arrested in her life. But she was under some kind of house arrest now for Barry's disappearance. She wasn't sure why they hadn't placed her in a jail cell or allowed her to contact even her folks. The events of the past few days had left her wondering about what was really going on.

She'd had full run of the large modern home but there were armed security guards at every exit. The only place she had any privacy was in the home's windowless basement guest bedroom and bathroom.

Now early morning, she watched out of the home's living room window with curiosity as a white SUV drove up the winding driveway and parked under the porte-cochère. There were a number of muffled voices that she could hear down in the foyer and she watched incredulously as Judge Walker topped the stairs and approached her.

"Hello Savannah," he offered with a smile. "I'm being told that you're unhappy with our current protective custody arrangement."

"Is that what we're calling this? 'Protective custody'? How about kidnapping and illegal imprisonment?"

"Now, now, it's all very legal, I assure you. Besides, it's not as bad as it seems. And—"

"Not as bad? What could be worse than being held against your will without even being able to even make a phone call!?"

"Well, Savannah, the court could be keeping you in a cell somewhere. But under the circumstances, I thought my house would be a much more comfortable place. You're a lot safer here than in town."

"You mean I'm out of the way."

"It's however you'd like to look at it, Savannah."

"What I'd like to do is call my folks and go home."

"Well, unfortunately that's not possible at the moment. Some very important people are going to be coming into town in a couple of days and they're going to want to speak with you about what happened to Barry."

"I already told you what happened and I'm not talking anymore to any of you until I see my lawyer!"

"As you wish. But I have a feeling you're going to want to speak with these folks just the same. They're very interested in what—excuse me for just a moment." The judge tapped his smart phone and lifted it to his ear. "Oh, and Savannah, please try to keep quiet during my call; the police already know you're here."

The irate teenager frowned, glared, and then indignantly turned back toward the window in a huff.

"Yea," the judge began and then paused to listen. "Oh for godsakes! You're joking. Tell me this is a joke! HOW?!"

Savannah's ears perked as she listed to one side of the conversation.

"Alright, you know what to do. Follow the official protocol all the way. I want this kid found and found now! Understood?!" The judge fat-fingered his phone trying to turn it off, very visibly upset.

Savannah smiled. "Lose something, Judge Walker?"

The judge looked at the debutante with anger still in his face. But then, as Savannah watched him, a kind of wicked smile returned to his expression. "Yes. Yes, as a matter of fact I did lose something. And you know Savannah, my sweet? I

have a sneaking suspicion I know *exactly* where I'll be able to find him."

* * * * *

Gage's warm breath wisped lightly from him as he eyed the home from his unseen vantage point and studied the guards through a small set of military-grade binoculars. They had been quietly bringing in more people all day. There were now maybe two dozen of Walker's "people", as he called them. Not all of them were cops. At the moment he could see Savannah looking out of one of the large living room windows. They'd be waiting for him now, using her as bait.

Truth be told, Gage had never really paid any attention to women before; but this one—he shook his head. In the span of a few hours she'd managed to wind her way into his life and knock his mind completely off focus. Was he somehow actually more than just a little attracted to her? He didn't even want to think about that. He was free. He could be out of this two-horse town and onto the next one in no time. But there was much more to Savannah than just her beautiful looks. And now that Walker's people had her she was as good as dead.

So here he was; armed, prepped and about to do something really, really stupid. He took a bite from a protein bar and continued to survey the large lodge home from afar.

* * * * *

The winter night air of the remote canyon chilled all the way to the bone. The officer walked around the outer deck of the posh, big-timbered home with its grand view of the pine forested valley and river below. For a moment he thought he saw a shadow of something flicker across the light behind him. He turned with his hand on his weapon, but there was nothing.

He frowned and then shook his head at his stupid skittishness. He didn't know why Walker had loaded up the big pine home with so many PD. But it was good overtime, even if he did have to walk around in the frigid air at night. Then something stung him in the back of the neck. His hand went immediately to the tiny pain as he pulled a kind of needle from his skin. His vision blurred as he tried to focus on the pin or needle or was it some—the officer crumpled quietly onto the outside deck.

Another officer strolling along the outside of deck rounded the corner to see his partner lying motionless, but before he could reach his radio, a stinging sensation rang out just behind his ear causing his world to spin quietly into darkness.

A shadowy figure stepped silently over the two guards and then slipped into the darkened house through a French door. The figure moved through an empty bedroom and then into the dimly-lit living room.

Suddenly the lights of the living room were on as a dozen uniformed and plain-clothed people trained their weapons on to the darkly-clad muscular teen. But a strange stinging sensation was already being felt by four of them as they began to slump quietly onto the floor. As the attention of the officers was momentarily focused on their slumping comrades, other darts were quickly airborne, as another four felt the sting of darkness and slumped quietly to the floor.

Before another officer could retrain his weapon, the teen intruder had already moved like a blur, rolling and then sweeping his leg under the very surprised officer who landed on the plush carpet with a heavy thud. Gage moved past him leaving the small poisoned acupuncture-like needle-dart tucked neatly into his neck.

Gage was now on his feet again and stood only a couple of feet from another guard in plain clothes. Gage had no idea who the man was, but he wasn't any kind of trained police. The man leveled his weapon at the teen's chest, its barrel trembling.

“D-don’t — don’t move!” the thirty-something man visibly shook.

With a quick smooth motion, Gage disarmed the citizen leaving a thin needle in the man’s wrist. Gage pushed the dazed man into his fellow guards who instinctively lowered their weapons in an attempt to catch and keep him from falling to the floor. Another dart struck the flat rocker light switch on the far wall turning the room dark once again with the sound of three more men hitting the floor one by one.

4

Savannah awoke with a start at the sound of a police siren somewhere not too distant outside. She'd gone to bed in the guest room at Judge Walker's house, but the room she was now in was not the same room. The street noise outside gave her the impression that she was back in town. Somehow fully dressed, she was laying on top of the covers of a small twin bed in what was a kind of sparsely furnished small studio apartment, maybe on the second floor.

Light streamed into the apartment through some sheer drapes that Gage now was looking out of as a police car sped off in the distance.

"Gage?" Savannah recognized him.

He turned to look at her and then lifted his finger to his lips. She kept quiet. She watched him looking out the window. He was dressed in some black, tight-fitting sportswear. Savannah's eyes couldn't help but follow his muscular

silhouette against the light of the window. His slim but large muscled and cut masculine form along with the curved outline of a well-filled package awakened some oddly amorous thoughts within her. She frowned. What would her very proper mother think of her if she knew the kind of thoughts her daughter was having at the moment?

Gage turned from the window of the small room. He folded one leg under himself as he sat on the side of the bed next to her. "You okay? They didn't hurt you, did they?"

"No, I'm fine," she said quietly. "Where am I?"

"In town, just above Front Street. A little place I keep here. You're safe."

"Another apartment? I thought you were struggling for money?"

He smiled at her.

"Gage Cameron, what is going on? Who are you?"

"I'm just a guy, Savannah. A guy trying to make a living. Just like everyone else."

"Hardly."

"Honestly, that's the truth."

"You took me from Judge Walker's house."

He nodded slightly.

"How? Gage, they had armed officers with guns and rifles. You don't just walk into a—a fortress like that and take someone out of there. I heard Judge Walker on the phone. He was really upset that you'd somehow escaped from jail. Who the hell are you?" Her voice began to rise as she glanced around rapidly.

"I'm just a guy who rescued you, that's all."

Savannah could tell this conversation was going to quickly go in circles. No matter—she was just grateful to be out of Walker's clutches.

"I want to go home and just see my family."

Gage nodded. "Yea, me too. But as long as Walker is still out there, you'll only be putting yourself back in danger again, and maybe your family as well."

"I can't believe I trusted that man," she fumed.

"He's not a good person, Savannah. I never have trusted him. Mom never trusted the man either." He frowned and shook his head.

"Oh—your mom," Savannah looked at Gage with wide eyes.

"My mom? Savannah, what about my mom?"

"Oh my God, Gage, your mom; I think—"

"You think what, Savannah?"

"Oh, my God," Savannah lifted her hand to her mouth, a memory suddenly flooding into her mind once again.

"Savannah tell me! What happened to you the other night? They kept telling me that you and Barry had *disappeared*, and that they had evidence that I was responsible for your murders."

"Murders?"

"For some reason, Savannah, they want everyone to think you and Barry are dead; and they want to pin all of this on me. You need to tell me where Barry is."

"Barry. Barry's gone, Gage." Savannah stared.

"What? Gone? You mean dead? How?"

"After I dropped you off at the body shop. I got a call from Barry. He wanted to meet me for a soda. He'd been chasing me all week, so I said yes."

Gage nodded.

"After we'd finished he said he wanted to show me something really cool, something I'd never seen before, he said. I thought he was just wanting to go park somewhere, you know, and maybe make out.

"So, we drove up the canyon past your house and then off-roaded it up to this old abandoned mine. It was all locked up but he had a key."

Gage listened; his ears hanging on her every word.

Savannah's voice grew firmer. "It was all kind of creepy at first but we went inside and he started showing me this long tunnel with lights strung along inside of it. It was kind of an adventure, you know, wandering through an old mine like that."

Gage's face was devoid of emotion as he listened.

"Then he takes me around this corner and we see some different lights on inside the mine. They're sort of dim lights, you know, but in the mine it's dark, they look brighter, somehow." Savannah seemed to stare blankly now as she spoke.

"Savannah, what happened to Barry?"

"There's like this 'T' in the tunnel," she continued, as if in some kind of shock from the memory. "But the tunnel that goes left and right, it's not right, it's like got a smooth floor and the walls are like smooth frosted glass or something."

"Do you know what this is?" Barry asks me." Savannah's lips thinned as she continued to relive the memory.

"I've never seen anything like it. Barry, what is this place?"

"It's our secret. Our people have been keeping this quiet for over a hundred years. But we're the ones who've finally discovered what this place really is."

"Can we go in?"

"No, no. You don't want to go in there. It's too dangerous. But soon we will be able to. Real soon."

"Then he starts getting all cuddly and wants to kiss me. But I'm not in the mood. I'm too fascinated by the lighted tunnel."

It was like, familiar to me somehow. But I'd never seen it before.

"He tries to kiss me but I turn my head away."

"C'mon, Savannah, it's just a little kiss."

"Barry, I don't want—"

"But then suddenly he's like all over me. Kissing my neck, grabbing my chest. His hands are all over the front of my jeans and he's pulling and ripping my top."

Gage didn't stop her. He let her continue as the ugly memory spilled out of her.

"I—I just reacted; instinct I guess. I kned him really hard in the groin just like we'd been taught in self-defense class. He doubled over and I ran."

"Ran where, Savannah?"

"Into the light; the tunnel with the light."

"Then what?" Gage coaxed.

"He's—he's looking at me, all doubled-over."

"Where are you?"

"I'm standing in the smooth tunnel, with the light. But he's just looking at me really angrily, clenching his teeth; like he's gonna hurt me—real bad. He starts to move toward me, he's seething, gritting his teeth at me, and then he—he leaves." She blinked.

"He leaves?" Gage could see the shocked look crossing Savanna's face.

"Yea," she whispered.

"How? How does he leave, Savanna?"

"I don't know, he just—leaves."

"He was coming toward you, Savannah—wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Angry." Gage coaxed.

"Very. Very angry."

"He's coming at you," Gage emphasized trying to help her with the memory.

"Yes!" she began to whimper in fear as the emotion of the awful memory crossed her face.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm backing against the tunnel wall. He's coming at me!"

"He's in the tunnel!" Gage coaxed again.

"Oh, my God! The light!"

"What about the light, Savanna. Tell me about the light."

"It has him!"

"It has him?"

"He's fighting it! It's getting brighter! *Oh, my God, Barry!*" she screamed her eyes wet with pain.

"Barry!" Gage tried to help her hold on to the memory. "What happened to Barry? What did the light do?"

"It's hurting him! Tearing him apart!" she cried.

"It's tearing him?" Gage's eyes drew wide.

"I felt it. The light didn't like him. He wasn't supposed to be there, in the tunnel."

"The light didn't like him?"

She nodded. "And then he was gone. Oh, Gage, he's gone!" she suddenly burst bawling into tears. Gage immediately took hold of her, holding her tightly as the tears erupted from within her. "He's gone—oh, my God, Gage, he's gone." She wept bitterly.

"It's okay, Savannah." Gage rocked her softly in his arms. "You're safe now. It's okay."

She held as tightly as she could to him.

With Savannah in his arms Gage could feel the turmoil of her soul within himself. He felt her horror. And then without realizing, he sank his own feelings deeply into hers, calming her, soothing away the pain and turmoil she'd bottled-up inside herself from the terrible memory. He hoped in her present state of mind she wouldn't see or feel how he was able

to do the things he was doing; but right now he just didn't care if she noticed or not. Savannah needed him. And right now, with her in his arms, somehow he was beginning to feel that maybe he needed her as well.

5

You bumbling fools! Do you have any idea how much time and resources we've invested in this over the past century!?"

"I don't know who the hell you think you're talking to but I don't have to take that kind of talk from some dumbass fed!" Judge Walker shot back, now standing over the conference room table.

"Oh, you'll take it, and you'll like it!" the man fired back, already angrily standing.

"Like hell! Your high and mighty agency couldn't keep a lid on the kid; so don't come onto my turf and start giving me what-for when your own people couldn't keep him contained for more than five minutes either!" Walker glared, not taking his eyes off the special DHS agent.

The momentary silence was palpable as the two men glared at each other. None of the other assembled people dared to say a word—until a calm, deeper voice broke in.

"If you two, pricks, are finished," Brad calmly interjected, "perhaps we can get down business."

Both men now turned their glares toward him. The fact was, neither of them really knew who he was or even why he was here.

"Fine!" the DHS agent fumed and retook his chair at the table. Walker retook his as well.

"So now that we all hate each other," Brad continued, "I need to know more about these two subjects."

"Subjects?" Judge Walker raised his eyebrow at Brad.

"Yes, Mr. Walker, we need to know when, exactly, was the last time the subjects were in your possession and how."

"These people aren't targets, Mr. —"

"It's just Brad, Mr. Walker."

"—Brad. We need them alive."

"That's not your decision at this point, gentlemen. I'm being paid to assess the situation, provide a resource analysis and, if necessary, intervene."

"Intervene? What the hell does that mean?" the DHS agent asserted. "Homeland Security is in charge here."

"Of course you are. But if there are more of these mishaps, I've been brought in simply for—insurance purposes."

* * * * *

The new bright red Corvette moved easily along the highway that paralleled the Columbia River past a place called Rocky Reach. A large dam with a lot of power lines leading away from it spilled huge sprays of water downstream. Sitting next to Gage, Savannah looked on at the massive hydroelectric structure as he drove the beefy sports car along the highway at just under the speed limit.

"I still don't get it. The police are out looking for you, they have your picture on every news site and milk carton in four

counties and we're driving in *this*? Doesn't this just scream 'arrest me now'?"

"We're wearing sunglasses." Gage grinned, checking his mirrors for any signs of a tail.

"Oh, because that's reassuring."

"It's just basic psychology, Savannah. Do exactly what the police don't think you will be doing. They won't be flagging a car like this as a getaway vehicle. They also won't really be too focused on this county; they'll think we've fled."

"What happens if we get caught?"

Gage scowled behind his dark designer Oakley's.

"That bad, huh?"

"That bad."

Savannah had never been to Lake Chelan. She stared out the window, entranced by the wide river bordered by leafless orchards, as their car moved past the entrance of the Eniat valley.

"You kind of make me nervous, Gage Cameron. Just so you know."

"Oh, why's that?"

"I'm still trying to figure out if I'm in the hands of the good guys or the bad guys."

"And which one am I?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe you should think about it this way, I'm not the one trying to kidnap and kill you."

"True, but you're not exactly what I expected. First you're a poor high school kid with flat tires on a classic car; but your trailer home is decorated like a magazine. You get arrested and thrown in jail and then suddenly you're rescuing *me* from a house full of police."

"They weren't *all* police."

"See! That's what I mean; you know and can spot an officer a mile a way."

"You're probably just Stockholmed."

"You're not helping."

He looked over and grinned at her.

"And those dimples of yours are slaying me—just so you know," she added.

"Well, you're not exactly hard on the eyes yourself, Savannah. That cute little accent of yours is really beginning to grow on me. I think I'm actually starting to like it."

"What's not to like about being from the South?"

Gage snickered at the way she said 'laaaahhk'. "I guess it's just because it's different. I wasn't raised in the South."

"Yank," she grinned.

"Yea, I suppose." Gage checked his mirrors again.

Their car easily climbed the steep hill heading for a tunnel.

"You look like you're a million miles away right now." Savannah idly twisted her fingers together in her lap. "What's in your bubble?"

"My what?"

"Your 'thought bubble', like in a comic book."

"Oh." Gage paused. He wasn't sure he wanted to discuss any of the things Savannah had been through. She'd had a couple of days to rest and recuperate after the ordeal, but he didn't want to keep reminding her of the bad memory again and again. A change of subjects was in order.

"So what is a beautiful Southern belle like you doing a tourist-trap town like Leavenworth? Seems a little out of place for someone like you."

"Daddy's an investor in the new LIFE21 Project."

Gage nodded. "Right, they want to like double the size of the town, make it into a kind of Bavarian theme park."

"I guess that's kind of what we do. Our family helped develop places like Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg; and we helped build Dollywood."

"Dollywood?"

"Sure, you know, Dolly Parton, the country singer?"

"She has her own theme park, named 'Dollywood'," he deadpanned.

"You don't get out much, do you?"

Gage rolled his eyes. "Apparently not."

Their car rounded a corner in the highway bringing the beauty and majesty of Lake Chelan into full view.

"Oh, my God, Gage, it's beautiful!"

Gage nodded and smiled as he watched Savannah take in the splendor of the massive deep mountain lake. It made him glad that he could at least take her mind off of the gravity of their situation, if only for a few minutes.

"So where are going?"

"A place called Twenty-Five Mile. The lake is fifty miles long, so this place marks the halfway point. You need a boat or a seaplane to get any further. I know someone with a lake house up here. We'll be able to relax and think better without all of this police nonsense."

"You don't really believe that—that this is all just nonsense." Her voice shook a little.

"No. No, it was just a figure of speech."

"What do you think is really going on, with Judge Walker, I mean?" She lowered her glasses. Her green eyes were serious.

"I'm not really sure yet, Savannah. It seems like he's trying to pin the disappearances of people on me—or someone. Maybe to kind of sweep under the rug whatever is in that mine. I'm still trying to figure out if I was just a convenient choice or if maybe there's some other reason."

Savannah nodded. She stared out the window and the glistening frigid waters and icy shore. "You know Christmas is next week." "I've never been away from my folks during the holidays, ever."

Gage reached out his hand to hers and squeezed it. "I don't know what's going to happen, Savannah. Whether or not this

thing blows over in the next couple of days or weeks or not. But I'll celebrate Christmas with you. That is, if you don't mind celebrating with the 'bad guys.'"

She squeezed his hand with a misty smile.

6

You're running out of time, Brad. How much longer is your team going to take?" Harlan's voice was emphatic but still polite over the phone.

"As long as necessary, Mr. Harlan. Poor planning on your part does not necessitate an emergency on mine. These things can take time to work themselves out. Be patient."

"Yea, well, you're not the one who has to deliver a constant stream of bad news to *mein Fuhrer*."

"Again—" Brad began.

"Yea, yea, 'not your monkeys, not your circus'. I get it."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, just please call me the second something drops."

"Good day, Mr. Harlan."

Brad tapped his phone off and looked at the faces of his team working busily in their private conference area that had been transformed into a kind of high-tech war room.

A tall woman dressed in a nicely fitted black business suit approached. She moved close and wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders.

"There's a storm moving in." She got him to offer a rare smile.

"I know. I feel it."

"I know you can. You like storms."

He nodded imperceptibly.

* * * * *

Savannah awoke warmly, slowly. For the first time in the last several nights she was free from the nightmares of being underground and running from a light she knew was trying to kill her. The twin bed was covered with a soft and fluffy duvet that kept her warm in the cold air of her small bedroom. She wondered if Gage was up yet. He typically liked to sleep in after being up late at night doing whatever he did while on the phone; speaking in some foreign language that sounded maybe like Russian.

She got up and dressed in some warm, soft white and pink sweats that Gage had found for her at one of the boutiques while the both of them clandestinely shopped in Chelan a few days earlier.

The small lake house had been slightly set into the steep bank of the lake with most of it actually built on pylons that set it out over the water. A large front deck would have been great for parties in the summer. But as Savannah emerged from her room into the home's singular great room, she could see snow falling thickly, covering the deck and furniture outside. It reminded her of home and the snow she'd seen often when the

family had vacationed in the mountains. It was beautiful how it fell silently across the near glassy stillness of the lake.

His room's door slightly ajar, Savannah peeked in to see Gage laying quietly on top of the covers, shirtless and barefoot but still in his jeans from the night before. As cold as the room was, he always seemed to like to sleep without covers in just his jeans. Savannah found that odd—didn't he feel how chilly it was?

The teenager made some coffee in a drip coffee maker and then rekindled the fire in the fireplace from the night before. Gage had already stacked plenty of wood for her to use now that he knew she liked a warm morning fire to sit by to have her coffee or cocoa.

The small house warmed and the smell of fresh coffee filled it as Savannah sat curled up on the sofa looking at their modest tree and the miniature lit-up Christmas town he'd bought for her. The two of them had spent hours having fun setting it up on the fireplace mantle. Looking at its slowly scintillating lights and lavish details gave her a warm Christmassy feeling inside.

She heard his door open and then watched him quietly as he moved still shirtless and barefoot to the coffee pot and poured himself a mugful. She watched as he sat down next to her on the small sofa and warmed his hands on the large mug.

"Hey, Merry Christmas, there, mister," she offered, smiling at the stunning guy as he moved his fingers through his pillow hair trying to smooth it.

"Merry Christmas," he smiled back. "It's snowing, finally. You got your wish."

"I did!" For a moment, her beautiful smile took his breath away.

"Your Christmas spirit is ridiculously infectious. I can't believe you actually had me singing Christmas carols with you last night." He grinned at her over the top of his cup.

"You have a magical voice, Mr. Cameron. You could be up front in our church or even on a talent show, you know. You'd win in a heartbeat."

"Yea? In another time and another place, maybe." He took a sip of his coffee.

"I bet you're dying to know what I got you!"

"The thought has crossed my mind." Gage grinned. The remorse he felt at spending this first Christmas without his mom was easily softened by the company of his exuberantly cheerful and adorable guest. It was obvious that Savannah loved Christmas and over the past several days he'd made it his mission to give her, if not a huge celebration, at least a celebration that would be cozy, warm and memorable.

"Do you want to open your presents now? Or wait?" Savannah's, green eyes were sparkling.

Gage grinned. "Wait for what? Let's open them now." He nodded toward their tree.

7

This isn't working, Mr. Rigel. With all due respect, I can't keep tossing people into this mine with nothing but hopes that they're going to come out alive. These disappearances are beginning to attract some attention. The authorities we can handle, but the townspeople and especially the business owners, they're starting to ask questions—and get nervous. I'm beginning to hear all kinds of conspiracy theories. If this catches the attention of the media, I won't be able to keep putting the blame on some kid whom no one has seen in weeks."

"Yes, yes, of course, Judge Walker. We do need to play this a bit closer to the vest than what we have been. We don't need to inadvertently attract the attention of our adversaries. That would be disastrous at this point. It's just that we're so very close."

"I agree."

"Very well. However, the Scotlands are an unfortunate necessity at this point."

"I agree. If we can't find Savannah, Georgia Scotland may be our only link."

"I see. We may need to fall back on Mrs. Scotland if the situation doesn't improve. Have we really no leads on the whereabouts of her daughter?"

"We do have DHS's resources fully engaged, and the contract team as well. They're being very thorough."

"Yes, they are very good, but unfortunately, I can see that I am going to have to bring in someone who is just a little bit better."

Walker had already seen the efficiency of DHS and the impressive display of technology that Brad's contract team had assembled. He had his doubts that NASA itself could have assembled better surveillance equipment.

"You can stand down your teams for now, Judge Walker. Patch things up with the locals as best you can. We'll handle things a bit more quietly from here on out."

* * * * *

"Savannah, wake up!" The urgent whisper that intruded through her dreams brought the girl instantly awake to see Gage hovering over her in the dimness of her room.

"What! What's going on?"

"Get dressed, we have to leave. Now." His voice low and emphatic.

Savannah didn't argue. She quickly tossed on her clothes from the day before and took up the day bag that Gage had asked her to keep prepared many weeks ago. His own go bag was already in his hand. Savannah was still zipping up her warm jacket and slipping on gloves while Gage led her outside

and then down a path to the docks in the dead of the winter night.

A light snow fell past the dock's one streetlight as Gage quietly uncovered and then stepped into an inflated skiff with a small battery-powered trolling motor. He helped Savannah into the raft and then pushed off, quietly heading them up the lake along the icy shore. They silently passed by the ice-covered pylons of the small lake house that had been their home for these past several weeks. Someone was already in the house; the lights were on and Savanna could make out shadows of quite a number of people moving inside as they trolled quietly by over the dark water in their small boat.

A tall handsome man with weathered skin looked unhappily at the DHS agents still mulling about the home.

"There's no one here, Sir."

"I think I can bloody see that," his thick Aussie accent not hiding his sudden frustration. "How long?"

"No more than twenty minutes. We're still getting a faint heat signature from one of the bedrooms."

"Bloody Christ," he swore under his breath and then pushed his way outside and onto the snow-covered deck of the house. He went to the deck railing that overlooked the water below and through gifted vision scanned the shore for as far as he could see in all directions for signs of anyone. But all he was able to perceive were the frigid waves lapping the rocky shore on the starless night.

"Dammit!" Rowan struck the railing with his fist in frustration, deeply cracking the large timber.

Savannah could hardly see a thing in the cold night air, but at least she'd dressed warmly. She said nothing but just trusted

Gage to guide their small skiff along the shore or wherever they were going.

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