

CHAPTER 1

Alan Wilde was supposed to die at 8 p.m. on October 17, 2007. It was right there, on my agenda, and I am nothing if not precise about my schedule, even if it only exists in my head.

I was lying on a cliff overlooking docks. The sign called it a marina. Having seen actual marinas, I'd disagree. It was a collection of battered and rotted wharfs mooring a collection of battered and rusted boats. The boats might not have been yachts, but they were all someone's pride and joy, with names like *Buoys & Gulls* and *Seas the Day*. Owned by folks who'd dreamed of retiring "up north" and spending lazy days pretending to fish.

Wilde's boat was not meant for fishing. Or relaxing. From what I'd seen in my two days of surveillance, it was meant for racing up and down the coastline, setting canoeists and kayakers cursing as they struggled against the boat's wake. Tonight he was due to arrive at eight with his girlfriend, having told his wife he was going for a moonlight ride alone.

So at 7:50 I was settled in, lying on my stomach, sniper rifle at the ready. The docks were quiet. This was Michigan cottage country, and it was too late in the year for tourists, too late in the day for locals. When a car pulled in, I expected Wilde's Mustang. Instead it was his winter-beater—an ancient Corolla. The Mustang must have been out of

commission. Not surprising given that I'd seen him fussing with it yesterday.

Then a second set of headlights turned into the tiny parking lot. Alan Wilde's bright yellow Mustang. The Corolla driver's door opened and out climbed Mrs. Wilde.

The Mustang paused at the edge of the lot. Mrs. Wilde didn't notice the hesitation. She was pulling her seat forward to get their three-year-old daughter, Hannah, out of her booster.

Wilde had time for a getaway. *Whoops, I didn't see you there, honey. I realized I'd left something at the shop and went back.*

He wouldn't even need to worry about his wife phoning and telling him she was there. Rose Wilde no longer had a cell phone. He'd taken it away after their last fight, when he'd dragged her out of the car, ten miles from town, and left her there. She had used her phone to call her father to come get her, which completely defeated the purpose of the lesson. So Wilde confiscated it.

That meant he could get away. But after a moment's pause, he continued into the lot. Through my binoculars, I could see his girlfriend in the passenger seat. He knew his wife would, too. He just didn't care. He roared up beside the Corolla and threw open the car door.

"What the hell are you doing here with the baby?" he shouted. I could hear him even without my earpiece amplifier "Do you know what time it is?"

"Sh-she's sick," Rose said, still standing by her back door. "She's running a fever, and I wanted to know if I can take her to the doctor."

"Bullshit! You snuck out here—"

"She's burning up, Alan. I don't give a damn about you and your whores—"

The girlfriend got out. "Who you calling a whore, bitch?"

Rose ignored her and tried talking to her husband. The girl kept yelling at her. Wilde did, too.

I watched through the scope. Wilde hadn't moved since he got out of the car. I had a perfect line on him. A clean shot, with no chance of hitting the girlfriend or Rose. Just a squeeze of the trigger and . . .

And I'd shoot a man in front of his wife and child.

I could argue that Rose would be happy to see her husband dead. It was her only way out of this marriage. She'd tried to leave twice. The first time, he kidnapped their daughter. The second time, she'd been pregnant and when he found her, he'd punched her in the stomach and she'd lost the baby. Going to the police hadn't helped. When he was released from custody, he beat her so badly she needed painkillers for weeks, which he soon replaced with higher octane ones. He got her hooked, then convinced her that her addiction would mean she'd never get custody of Hannah.

Yes, when it came to abusive husbands, you couldn't get much worse than Alan Wilde. Which is why I agreed to the job. Rose wasn't the one who'd hired me—her father had—but I'd seen nothing to suggest that Alan's death wouldn't be the best thing that ever happened to her. That did not mean she'd actually want to witness it. And she sure as hell wouldn't want their daughter to.

So I waited. Finally, Rose strapped Hannah back into her booster and got into the driver's seat. "I'm taking her to the doctor," she said.

"The hell you are!" Wilde stormed toward her car. "How the fuck are you going to pay for it? Call your daddy? If you do, I swear—"

The car leapt back, tires squealing. Wilde barely got out of the way in time.

"You bitch!" he yelled. "Don't you dare . . ."

I didn't catch the rest of the threat. I was busy lining up my shot, waiting for the moment when Rose's car was out of sight. Just another few seconds . . .

The girlfriend walked over to Wilde, trying to calm him—and stepped right into my line of fire. Wilde pushed her aside and headed for the driver's door. She followed, staying between me and him.

I could make the shot, but there was a chance I'd hit her instead. I remained in position, hoping she'd move. But she kept pace until he got to the driver's door. Then he got inside and peeled away, leaving her in the parking lot.

CHAPTER 2

I'd missed my hit. It happened. Not often, thankfully, but no amount of planning can cover every contingency. I'd need to stay in Michigan to finish the job, so as I walked the two miles to my rental car, I called home.

Home for me is a wilderness lodge northeast of Toronto. I'm the owner, operator, backcountry guide, shooting-range instructor, and entertainment director. Hell, some days I'm even the busboy and chambermaid. It's that kind of business.

In October, we rarely have guests off-weekend, which is why I'd picked midweek for the job. Ostensibly, I'm taking a little personal R&R. Do my caretakers, the Waldens, believe that? They've been with me long enough to know I don't do R&R, as much as they would like me to, but they just wish me a good trip and assure me everything will be fine in my absence.

Now I called to say that I'd be gone a little longer. Emma answered the phone. Her husband, Owen, never does—telephones require talking, and the only man I know who talks less is my mentor, Jack.

"I'm thinking of taking a couple of extra days," I said. "How are the bookings?"

"Same as they were when you called last night, Nadia. Three rooms, seven guests. Not one has requested range access or shooting lessons or rock climbing or white-water

canoeing, probably because they're all over sixty and have learned common sense. It's past Thanksgiving. Everyone who wanted a fall-colors getaway did it on the long weekend. Also, they're forecasting snow."

"Already?"

"I'm sure it'll just be a sprinkling, but I wouldn't be surprised if we have cancellations. You know what idiots drivers are in a first snow. Go enjoy your vacation."

"I will. And don't spoil Scout too much. Last time I came back, I thought she'd swallowed a beach ball."

"That's Owen," she said. "Damned fool's a sucker for sad puppy-dog eyes."

"Maybe you should try it on him."

She laughed, and we ran over a few business items, then I reached the car and signed off.

One call down. One to go. I took a different phone from the glove box. It was a toy from a hitman friend, Felix—the same guy who gave me the amplifier. The phone is a sweet piece of tech and probably damned expensive. It was untraceable, of course, but also came with built-in voice modulation, GPS blocking, interception alert, and number randomizer. In short, it was perfect for calling to report a failed hit.

I wasn't phoning the client. I had no contact with him. I work exclusively for Paul Tomassini, nephew to the don of a New York Mafia family. This wasn't their job, but one that came to Paul himself, as a special request from a connected friend whom Rose Wilde's father had contacted. Paul knew it was my kind of work, so he'd put me on it.

"It's Dee," I said when he answered.

That's my professional name. Jack's idea, proving that the guy has not an iota of imagination. His own *nom de guerre*? Jack.

Paul did know my real name. He'd been a regular at the lodge when he invited me into my side business, knowing I

was good with a gun and, at the time, I'd really needed cash.

"It was a bust," I said, phrasing it carefully. "His better half showed up, with the little one."

"Shit." A brief pause. "You trying again?"

"Of course."

"Good. I'll let him know."

"Can you tell him he should check in on her, too? There was a bit of a scene." I explained what had happened.

"What the fuck? Wife needs permission to take the kid to the doctor?"

"She needs permission for everything. She doesn't have her own cell phone, car, credit cards, access to the bank account . . ."

He let out a string of profanity. "And he waved his side dish in her face? Fucking bastard."

"You'll let your friend know? If hubby is pissed off with her . . ."

"He might beat the shit outta her again. Yeah, I'll call now. Make sure he knows what's up."

In any job, it's nice to have colleagues you can call for a postmortem when things go wrong. A shoulder to whine on doesn't hurt, either. That's one thing I'd loved about my former career as a cop. There were always guys I could talk to.

There's no support group for hitmen.

I was lucky. I had a network. Very small, of course—this is a career that caters to loners. There's Jack, of course . . . who'd be the last person I'd call for a pick-me-up. In person, yes. On the phone, I might as well talk to myself.

Then there's Jack's mentor, Evelyn. I could imagine her response. "Why the hell didn't you take the damned shot?" My reluctance to traumatize the wife and child would be silly sentimentality to her. I was paid to kill, so I should have killed.

There was only one person I could talk this out with. Quinn. A U.S. marshal who moonlights as a vigilante

hitman. Quinn understands the ex-cop part of me that Jack doesn't really get, just as Jack understands the part of me that isn't like Quinn, the part still bleeding from my cousin's murder twenty years ago.

If this happened a month ago Quinn would expect me to call. He'd be pissed if I didn't. Now I'd probably get as far as "hello" before he hung up.

After a year of flirting and circling each other, Quinn and I started dating six months ago. It had been good. Better than good. It made me wonder why the hell I'd put him off so long. It was a long-distance relationship—he lived in Virginia—but we got together at least one weekend a month.

Six weeks ago, he'd asked me to his cousin's wedding. I shouldn't have been surprised. For months, he'd been joking about dragging me to this family dinner or that family party. I realized now it'd been the kind of fake joking where you're hoping for an encouraging response. Anyway, I missed the signals so I'd said no to the wedding. It escalated to a fight. He wanted more; I wasn't ready to give more and wasn't sure I ever would be. He hung up.

A week later, he came to the lodge. He'd done that once before, and Jack tore a strip out of him. Quinn knew better than to show up there when I hadn't introduced him to that part of my world. Obviously waylaying me at home had not smoothed things over. We fought. He accused me of wanting nothing more than friendship with sex. It got ugly. He said we were through and stormed out.

The hard truth? He wasn't wrong. I did want friendship. I did want sex. That's it. We led separate lives, and as happy as I was with him, I didn't see that ever changing for me. I didn't want to meet his family, because I knew how close he was to them and I knew that was the first step onto a road I wasn't willing to travel.

It wasn't really the hackneyed "friends with benefits." There was more. It just wasn't what he wanted.

After that, he went silent. No calls, no e-mail, not even a text. I phoned a couple of times. He didn't answer. It was over. So there was no calling him tonight. There was no calling anyone.

Normally, I'm up by dawn and out for my jog, but after a rough night, I needed my rest, so I turned off my alarm and dozed fitfully until nine. I ran fifteen kilometers after that, working off excess work frustration. Then I brought breakfast back to my motel room and waited to start tracking Wilde again. By midafternoon he'd leave work for the day, and I'd be waiting to follow him, figure out when and how to finish this.

When my "work" phone rang just past noon, it was Paul Tomassini, which was odd. That's one advantage of working for the mob. They don't panic and pester you for updates. I wondered if the client was having second thoughts. Damn I hoped not. As a cop, I'd seen enough domestic violence to know it was only a matter of time before Rose was lying on a morgue slab. I'd much rather see him there.

"It's me," Paul said when I answered. "Thought I'd hear from you."

Ah, so, the client was just getting antsy. "Tell him it's under control. I can't promise it today, but it'll get done this week."

Silence. Then, "Have you read the paper this morning, Dee?"

My hand clenched the phone. "No. Why?"

"Go read it. Call me back."

The story made the front page of the regional paper: "Local Businessman Kills Wife, Self." The subheading: "Preschool Daughter in Intensive Care."

Alan Wilde had caught up with Rose and Hannah. He'd cornered them in the hospital parking garage. People had

heard them fighting. They heard it and hurried on their way, not wanting to get involved.

Wilde had tried to stop Rose from taking Hannah inside. He'd threatened her. Then there'd been a gun. Rose's gun—that's what the paper claimed, quoting an anonymous source who said her father bought it for her after the last incident. No one knew exactly what happened, but I could figure it out. She'd pulled the gun and told Wilde she was taking their daughter to see a doctor. He'd wrested the gun away and used it on her. According to the article, he'd shot Rose point-blank. In front of their daughter. That's when, according to some who heard the shot, the little girl started to scream. Another shot. Hannah stopped crying.

The person who heard called 911, then ran to notify a security guard. By the time help arrived, Wilde had turned the gun on himself.

Rose Wilde was dead. Her daughter was clinging to life. It was my fault.

When Paul Tomassini called back, I let it ring. He hung up and tried again. I continued ignoring it until someone pounded on my motel door, telling me to answer my god-damned phone. I turned it off and tucked it into my bag. Then I walked out the door, turned toward the highway, and kept going.

CHAPTER 3

I walked for hours. Dusk came as a shock, and I snapped out of my stupor long enough to stare, disbelieving, at the sunset. But it was like rousing from sleep just long enough to check the clock before falling under again.

During the day, a few cars had slowed to offer me a lift. I'd waved them off. After sunset, when another one rumbled along the gravel behind me, I stepped onto the grassy shoulder. It pulled up alongside me, passenger window rolling down.

"Get in the car."

My hand instinctively slid under my jacket to my gun.

"Get in the fucking car."

I heard the faint brogue and stopped walking.

The car was a nondescript economy model, the cheapest kind you can rent. Through the lowered passenger window, I caught the smell of cigarette smoke, a familiar brand, and I thought . . . *you're not supposed to smoke in a rental car.* Quite possibly the stupidest, most irrelevant thing I could worry about at the moment.

"Nadia?" The door slammed. "Get the fuck in the car."

I glanced over, my mind still swimming upward toward full consciousness. I saw a man. A couple inches under six feet. Average build. Angular features. Wavy black hair, threaded with silver.

"Jack?"

I stepped backward.

"Nadia . . ." His voice was low. Telling me not to bolt. Warning me he sure as hell didn't want to have to run after me, not after he'd come from god-knows-where to find me.

You're not real, I thought. You can't be. I'm hallucinating.

His hand caught my elbow, holding me still, dark eyes boring into mine, the faint smell of cigarette smoke riding a soft sigh.

"Fuck." Another sigh. "Nadia? Can you hear me?"

He took me by the shoulders and steered me to the car. The next thing I knew, I was in the passenger seat and he was pulling the car back onto the road.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The tires chirped as the car lurched off the shoulder. "Things went south last night? Should have called."

"I didn't want to bother you." I looked out at the passing scenery and hiccuped a short laugh. "Which I suppose would have been a lot less bother than this. I'm sorry." I paused. "Was it Paul?"

"Paul called Evelyn. She called me."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that." A hard look my way. "What the fuck were you thinking? Didn't even tell Quinn."

"Evelyn called Quinn?"

"I did."

"I'm sor—"

He cut me off with another look. I *was* sorry, for this, of course, and especially for him having to call Quinn. I'll be generous and just say they don't get along.

"Why didn't *you* call Quinn?" Jack said. "Thought you and him—"

"Not anymore."

He looked over sharply. "Since when?"

I shrugged. "About a month ago."

"Fuck." He gripped the steering wheel tighter. "Didn't

know about that. Don't know about this. Never even knew you had a hit. Why?"

"Didn't think—" I stopped myself and started again, trying not to copy his speech pattern. "I'd have told you about Quinn the next time you called. As for the hit, it seemed straightforward."

"And last night? After it went south. You didn't think to call?"

Yes, I did think to call. You're the first person I thought to call. But getting in touch with you isn't like just picking up the phone and dialing. It's a process. Call, leave a message, wait—sometimes days—for you to get your damned messages. And even then, I might as well be talking to voice mail. I'd tell you the hit went bad and you'd say, "Not your fault." Three words. That would be the entirety of the conversation, and I'd hang up feeling foolish, like I'd bothered you.

A half hour later, the car turned and I looked up to see we were pulling into a roadside motel.

"Oh," I said. "This isn't my—"

"Yeah. Found yours. Twenty fucking miles back. Brought your stuff."

"I hid my passport—"

"Got it." He nodded at the motel. "Gonna check in. You need rest. I come back, you'll be here?"

"I wasn't trying to run away from you before, Jack. I was confused." I rubbed my face. "I don't need to rest. I should head home. If you can just take me back to my rental car—"

"Car's gone. Phoned it in."

"Then I'll rent another and—"

"You'll stay here while I check in. You bolt . . . ?"

Normally, I'd joke, "You'll shoot me?" and he'd make some wry retort. He glanced at me, as if waiting. When I said nothing, he reached over and opened the glove box, then tossed a pack of cigarettes onto my lap.

"Have one. Won't be long." He opened the door, then glanced back. "Can smoke in here. Already did."

I fingered the package of cigarettes. Jack's brand. Irish imports. I used to wonder if it really was his brand, or an affectation, like the slight brogue, presenting a fake background. He really is Irish, originally, at least. The brogue only comes out with those he trusts. Same as the cigarettes.

He's also usually careful about doing things like smoking in rental cars. It makes him memorable, like the cigarette brand. If Jack had a hitman motto, it would be "Stay invisible." With fewer syllables, and maybe a "fuck" thrown in for good measure.

So smoking in the car meant something. So did the plastic drink cup lid overflowing with butts—he's been down to a cigarette or so a day since I've known him. Jack was stressed. Worried I'd gone off the rails and now I'd do something stupid and put him at risk. He'd been driving around for hours, looking for me and working his way through a pack of cigarettes.

I emptied the makeshift ashtray. I'm not good with messes. When I'm already anxious, I'm really not good with them. As I returned from the garbage, he was coming back.

"I really should go home," I said as he approached. "I'm fine. Crisis averted. If you'll just take me to—"

"Room twelve. Go."

I leaned on the car roof, looking at him. "I'm serious, Jack. I know you have better things to—"

"Nope. Got nothing. Room twelve. Go."

Once inside I took off my jacket. Jack noticed my gun with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Yes, even during a meltdown, I don't wander empty roads unarmed." I sat on the end of the bed. "I know you don't want me to keep telling you I'm sorry, but I don't know what else to say. You shouldn't have had to do this."

“Didn’t have to. Chose to. Owed you anyway. You did it for me.”

“At least you had the sense to stay in your motel room.”

“No choice. Wouldn’t have gotten far.”

Last May, I’d been the one getting a call from Evelyn. Jack had broken his ankle on a job and was holed up in a motel outside Buffalo. He was too stubborn to ask for help, so she wanted me to fetch him back to my lodge to recuperate. I’d walked into a room full of cigarette smoke, and thought something had gone wrong on a hit. It hadn’t. Jack only hurt his ankle in the escape.

The problem was what it meant: that this was a job for young men and he was almost fifty. Retirement was coming. That was tough. A contact of his had retired too late, his reputation shot to shit by the time he went. Jack didn’t want that. Yet he understood the impulse to keep working. This was his life. There wasn’t a retirement plan.

“So we’re even.” He pulled a chair toward the bed. “Wanna talk about it?”

I shook my head.

“Too bad.” He settled in. “You didn’t do anything wrong. What happened to his wife and little girl? His fault. Wilde’s. Not yours.”

“I could have taken the shot. It was a failure of nerve—”

“Not in front of the kid. Even at my worst, I wouldn’t have done that.”

“I could have shot him after they left. If I hit the girlfriend, well, that’s her own fault for hooking up with a guy like Wilde.”

He gave me a hard look that said he wouldn’t dignify that with a response. I would never have taken that shot.

“I didn’t even call Paul until I was back to the car,” I said. “I phoned Emma first, and chatted away about the lodge while Wilde was going after his wife and child. Her father could have gotten there and saved her—”

“Never left the house.”

I frowned at him.

“Paul called the father,” he said. “Told him what happened. Father phoned his daughter’s house. Left a message. That’s it. Wouldn’t have mattered *when* you called. Never left his goddamned house.”

“Which means I didn’t explain the situation clearly enough.”

“What situation? Same shit Wilde’s been pulling for years. Father knew that. You want to blame someone? Blame the idiot who gave her the weapon. *Here’s a fucking gun*. No lessons. No instructions.” He shook his head.

“I still feel—”

“Like you could have saved her. You couldn’t.”

I pulled up my legs and sat cross-legged. After a few minutes of silence, he walked to the door.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, get my shit together or I can mope alone, right?”

He glanced at me, frowning slightly. “No. Not that. Just getting something. Be back.”

CHAPTER 4

Jack was gone about twenty minutes. When he returned, he was carrying two steaming cardboard cups.

“Coffee,” I said. “You’re a mind reader.”

“Not coffee. Not for you.”

He handed me a cup. The smell of chocolate wafted out. I smiled.

“You need sleep,” he said. “Figured you wouldn’t take pills.”

My dad used to make me hot chocolate when I couldn’t fall asleep. I’d mentioned it once to Jack and he’d never forgotten. I wonder sometimes if that’s how he sees me. His student, his protégée, his surrogate daughter.

How *do* I see Jack? Definitely not as a father figure, no matter how many times he brings me hot chocolate. I see him as a mentor. As a friend. And, as I realized this spring, as someone I’d like to be more than a friend. But there’s never been a hint of reciprocation, and it’s for the best. Jack is not dating material in any way, shape, or form. That’s one of the reasons I’d stopped circling Quinn and given it a shot. Which had gone so well . . .

Except it *had* gone well with Quinn. I’d screwed that up, too. I’d been a disappointment to someone I really hadn’t wanted to disappoint.

“Nadia?”

“Thank you, for this.” I managed a smile for him as I lifted the cup, then took a deep drink. “Mmm.”

“Still warm?”

I nodded and scooted back on the bed and motioned for him to sit on the edge, which he did.

“How’s Scout?” he asked.

I smiled, genuine now. Jack had given me Scout last spring, as a thank-you for his stay at the lodge. Also because he’d been wanting me to have a dog for years for protection. He knew I wasn’t opposed to the idea. I’d taken in a stray when I was a kid, only to come home and find my mother had made it disappear. I’d wanted a dog; I just didn’t feel my life was stable enough for one. It was and he knew that.

I told Jack a few Scout stories, including her encounter with a “black-and-white kitty” last month. That relaxed me, along with the hot chocolate. Soon I was crawling under the covers. He kept me talking, about the dog, the lodge, anything not related to Wilde and last night, until I finally drifted off.

I dreamed of Rose and Alan Wilde. And of my cousin Amy and her killer, Drew Aldrich. I dreamed that Amy and Drew *were* Rose and Alan, a version of them, the two stories merging. I was at the marina, arguing with Amy, telling her Aldrich was dangerous. She laughed and said I was being silly, I was always being silly.

Then Drew came with another girl and they fought and Amy drove off. Drew went after her. I didn’t try to stop him. I just headed to my car, telling myself it was nothing, they always fought, no big deal. Then Paul Tomassini called and told me Amy was dead. And I knew it was my fault.

It had always been my fault.

I half woke and heard Jack’s distant voice, telling me it was okay, everything was okay, go back to sleep.

When I did, I fell into a memory. I was thirteen, walking home from the train station with Amy. We’d spent the day at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, and Amy’s dad was supposed to pick us up at the station, but he wasn’t there.

I'd wanted to wait. She'd started walking, so I had to walk, too, had to stay with her, keep her safe. That was my job.

Amy was a year older than me, but reckless, impetuous. Her dad had told me to keep an eye on her that day, knowing I would.

We were still walking when Drew Aldrich drove up and offered us a ride. I said no. Drew was twenty-four, and I didn't like the way he looked at Amy. Didn't like the way she looked back, either.

Drew wanted to take us to his cabin for "some fun." I was sure—absolutely sure—that Amy would refuse. As wild and impulsive as she was, she was still a cop's daughter, like me. She knew better.

When she said yes, I freaked out. She begged. She really liked him and if I was there, it would be fine. We could talk. Maybe smoke a joint. I didn't have to, of course, but she wanted to try it. Just once. We'd go for an hour. That was it. One joint. One hour.

I was furious. Yet I didn't feel that I had a choice. If I refused, she'd go alone. So I had to go and keep her safe. Later, I'd make sure she never did anything this stupid again.

There was no later. Not for Amy.

I dreamed I was back in that cabin. That horrible cabin, stinking of rotten wood and mildew and dirt. I could hear Amy in the next room. Crying. Telling Aldrich no, please no, please stop.

He'd left me tied up, but I got free. I should have gone in there and saved her. Instead, I did what my father and my uncle had taught me from the time I was old enough to walk to school alone. If there's trouble, don't try to handle it yourself. Just run. Get help.

So I ran.

In real life, I'd raced to the station, where my dad and Amy's father were on duty. They'd jumped into their cars and taken off to that cabin. I stayed with the dispatcher.

That wasn't what happened in the dream. When I got to the station and told my dad and Uncle Eddie, we all ran back to the cabin on foot, tearing through the forest, me in the lead, running so fast I thought my chest would explode. I could hear Amy. Screaming. The faster I ran, the farther away the cabin got. I shouted for her to wait, just wait, we were coming. She just kept screaming, horrible, terrible screams.

And then she stopped.

She stopped screaming and the cabin was suddenly right in front of me. I looked back for my father, but he was still in the woods, so far away I could barely see him.

I threw open the door. The smell hit me. The stink of rotten wood and mildew and something else, something sharp and acrid that I didn't recognize. And when I smelled that, I froze. I felt a cord around my wrists, a cold blade at my throat, hot breath on my neck, fingers digging into my thighs, rough clothing rasping against my bare skin, Drew Aldrich's voice in my ear.

"Nadia. Pretty, sweet little Nadia."

I could hear Amy whimpering and crying in the next room and I knew I had to get to her, but I was frozen there, hearing Aldrich whispering in my ear.

Except none of that happened. Not to me. It was Amy he'd raped. I needed to snap out of it, save her.

Finally, I forced my feet to move. One step, then another, leaving those false memories behind as I walked into the next room where—

Amy was there. Naked. Sprawled on the floor. Covered in stab wounds. Blood pooled around her. Dead eyes staring up at the ceiling. Then, slowly, her head turned my way, eyes still wide and unseeing.

"You did this, Nadia," her voice came out on a raspy whisper. "You ran away. You left me. You killed me."

I started to scream.



I was still screaming when someone started pounding on the cabin door.

“Shut the hell up!” a voice boomed.

“Nadia?” a second voice, closer. Hands gripping my elbows. Shaking me gently. “Nadia?”

I bolted out of sleep to find myself staring at Jack. I was sitting up, and he had me by the elbows, steadying me.

More pounding at the door. Jack strode over and opened it, chain still engaged.

“What the hell is going—?” a man’s voice began.

“A nightmare. It’s over.”

“It better be or I’ll have the goddamned manager . . .”

Jack didn’t throw open the door. He didn’t snarl at the man. He just unlatched the door and eased it open. Silence. Then the man backed off, mumbling and stomped away.

Jack waited until he was gone. Then closed the door and shook his head.

“Woman’s screaming. Not gonna call 911. Not even gonna make sure she’s okay. Just complain about the fucking noise.”

I sat there, clutching the sheets, throat raw, breath rasping. Jack walked to the bed and sat on the edge near me.

“Was it Amy?” He paused and shook his head. “Dumb fucking question. You think you got that woman killed? You’re gonna dream about Amy.”

“I froze up. I heard Amy in the cabin, still alive, and I was so close and . . .” I squeezed my eyes shut. “Which is not how it happened. Sorry. I’m confused.” I rubbed my face.

“What happened? In the dream?”

I shook my head. “I get things confused. Nightmares aren’t supposed to make sense.”

“What happened this time?”

“I dreamed I was the one who found Amy. That she was

still alive when I got there, but I froze up. I started thinking about Aldrich, that he'd attacked me, too, and . . ."

My heart thudded so hard I struggled for breath. I rubbed my throat, fingers touching the paper-thin scar there. Jack's gaze followed.

"How'd you get that scar again?" he asked.

I pulled my hand away. "Chain-link fence."

"Right."

I could feel his gaze on me, as if he expected more.

"You've dreamed Aldrich attacked you before," he said finally.

I shrugged. "I've also dreamed he killed me, which disproves that old saw about not being able to die in your dreams—"

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Divert. Digress. Make jokes." He twisted to face me. "We need to talk. About this. The dreams. You say Aldrich never—"

"He didn't."

A long pause. "You sure?"

"About what? Whether Drew Aldrich attacked me? Check the damned records, Jack. If you think I'd lie about it—"

"Course not."

"Drew Aldrich walked free. Do you know why? Because Amy was the kind of girl who wore short skirts and flirted with boys and drank at parties. People believed she had it coming. She went to his cabin and, while I waited in the next room, they had rough sex, and she died. Any evidence to the contrary was clearly planted by her father and uncle, who were first on the scene."

"I know the story. You don't need to—"

"Yes, I do, because you don't understand what you're saying. Sometimes I *wish* he'd attacked me. At least I wish I'd lied and said he did. Because then he'd have gone to jail.

I was the good girl. If I was hurt, they'd have put him away. But I wasn't."

"Okay."

"The dreams are a fucked-up version of what happened. Look at tonight's—I didn't find Amy's body. She wasn't stabbed. *That* was Dawn Collins—the girl killed by Wayne Franco, the guy I shot. The shooting that got me kicked off the police force. A nightmare takes bits and pieces from different memories."

I got out of bed. "I appreciate what you did, but there's no reason for me to stay in Michigan, and certainly no reason for you to baby-sit me. I promise not to have a breakdown on the highway."

He handed me my jacket and gun. "In the car."

"I can call—"

"Get in the car."

CHAPTER 5

We'd been driving for an hour. I felt like an idiot, which is my usual postmeltdown reaction. Most times it's a minor and temporary derailment—a nightmare, an anxiety attack, a day where I'm just not my usual perky self. An actual meltdown, like tonight's, is very rare. Poor Jack has been there for the last three, which all happened when I felt like I failed to save someone. First, when a serial killer we were stalking took another victim. Then when the guy who killed my teenage employee did the same. Now this.

These breakdowns shamed me. Amy died twenty years ago. I killed Wayne Franco and lost my job seven years ago. My life has hit rock bottom twice and I'm still standing, and I'm damned proud of that. Then it all goes to hell and I'm wandering along highways and screaming in motel rooms.

"You'll need to take the next exit," I said when I saw the signs for Detroit. "I didn't fly—I drove. I'll rent a car and cross at the bridge."

He grunted and drove right past the exit.

"Um, Jack? I need to—"

"Not going home. Got something else."

"But I need to go—"

"You told Emma not to expect you, right?"

"Yes, but I really should—"

"Not yet." He glanced over. "You insist? I'll take you."

Can't kidnap you." His tone said that was regrettable. "You trust me?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts. You trust me? Want to take you someplace. Drive you home tomorrow."

I drifted off and woke in Ohio. I wondered if Jack was taking me to Evelyn's place in Fort Worth. I hoped not. She wouldn't understand my guilt over Rose Wilde's death. The concept of caring about a stranger is unfathomable to her. It's enough of a stretch for her to give a damn about people she actually knows. Yet while Evelyn wasn't good at empathy, she *was* very good at using situations to her advantage. She'd pounce on my guilt to entice me to check out the Contrapasso Fellowship again.

The fellowship was a legend among both cops and hitmen. An urban legend, most said. It derives its name from a region in Dante's *Inferno* where the punishment of souls fits their crimes in life. It's said to be a "club" composed of former judges, lawyers, and law-enforcement officers who hire assassins to right judicial wrongs. Organized vigilantism. Evelyn says it exists and tried to get me interested. I'd be perfect, she said, and it might help me get over Amy. Not that she gave a shit about my mental health, but if I joined she'd earn a tidy sum as my middleman. Ultimately, I'd said no.

I shifted forward in my seat, reading signs to get my bearings. We were headed east. Indiana—and Evelyn—were west.

"What's in Ohio?" I asked.

"Not much."

I gave him a look. He took a drag on a cigarette. I glanced at the lid he was still using as an ashtray. There were two new butts in it. I resisted the urge to dump them.

"Lose the battle?" I said, gesturing at the makeshift ashtray.

“Nah.” He stubbed out the cigarette. “Back-to-back jobs. Went a few weeks cold turkey. Never cures me. Just catch up later.”

“Jobs go—” I cleared my throat and switched to full sentences, before we were reduced to exchanging grunts. “Did the jobs go all right?”

“Yeah. Routine.”

That was all I was getting. If something was bothering him, he wasn’t sharing. Nor was he telling me our destination.

Though Jack wasn’t talking about anything he didn’t wish to talk about, he was up for conversation. Or what usually passes for conversation when we’re together on long trip—me talking and him listening.

I talked about the lodge. It’s not just a business; it’s a never-ending project. I bought it after my professional disgrace, shooting Wayne Franco. Three years ago, I’d been about to lose the lodge through bankruptcy. That’s when I started working for the Tomassinis. A few jobs a year for them doesn’t just keep the lodge afloat; it gives me the money I need to turn it into my dream business. Of course, I can’t just pull a hundred grand out of my stash and go crazy with the renovations. It has to be a slow, measured withdrawal, weighing cost against income potential. With the work I’ve done so far, the lodge is breaking even. One day, it might even make a profit.

Little things do make a difference. Extras, I call them. Amenities is the business term. I don’t allow hunting on my property—yes, hypocritical, I know—which means I can’t court the market that doesn’t give a shit about hot tubs and groomed hiking trails. I need to appeal to everything from wilderness sports enthusiasts to honeymooning couples to church ladies on retreat. The amenities are what draws them.

“So the ATVs are a big hit,” I said. “Thanks to you.”

Jack shrugged. He'd been the one who'd saved the secondhand—or probably twelfth-hand—vehicles from being a money pit, after my caretaker bought them and discovered new spark plugs weren't quite enough to get them running.

"No problems?" he said.

"Just wear and tear, and I've got a kid from town who handles that. I'm not a fan of things with motors racing around the forest, but with restrictions on where and when they can be used, I'll admit they worked out better than I expected. Which now has Owen eying a few used snowmobiles that 'just need a little work.'"

"You want them? I'll fix 'em. Thinking about coming up this winter. Couple weeks maybe. If that's okay."

"It's always okay, and while you don't need the snowmobiles as an excuse, I know that your idea of a vacation doesn't mean sitting around ice fishing. I'll take you up on that offer if you're serious."

"I am. Only tell Owen I'll find the machines. He doesn't know shit about motors."

I grinned over at him. "I'll tell him the first part and skip the last."

Jack took the exit for Cleveland.

"Is this our destination?" I asked.

"Yeah."

After a minute of silence, I said, "I'd love to ask what we're doing here, but apparently, I'm not getting that. Just as long as there isn't a surprise party at the end." I paused. "Actually, I'd be okay with a party. Just no clowns. I hate clowns."

Jack didn't even acknowledge the lame joke. He kept his gaze fixed forward, his face tense. He drove down two more streets before pulling into a mall parking lot. I was about to get out when I realized he'd stopped to make a cell phone call. I motioned to ask if he wanted privacy, but he shook his head.

His voice took on a flat midwestern accent as he asked to speak to David Miller. His gaze slid my way, as if checking to see if I recognized the name. I didn't.

"Yeah, I figured he was on duty today," Jack said. "Can I leave a message? Tell him Ted called. He's got my number."

A pause. Then, "Thanks. Oh, and when does his shift end? It's kinda urgent."

He waited for a reply, then thanked the person on the other end again and hung up. When he did, he sat there a moment, staring out the windshield.

"Is that someone we need to talk to? A cop?"

"Yeah. Don't need to talk to him. Just making sure he's at work. I'm sure he knows a Ted." A pause, then, "Speaking of names. David? Most popular male name for a guy his age. Miller? Fourth most common surname in the U.S. Put them together? Fifteen thousand Americans named David Miller."

"That's . . . fascinating. Either you've taken up a new hobby or this is a roundabout way of telling me it's fake."

"Yeah."

"A fake name for a cop in Cleveland? That's not easy to pull off."

"Works in a small town nearby. He just lives here."

I nodded. "It's easier to get past background checks on a small force, but it's easier to live anonymously in a big city. Still, becoming a cop with a false identity isn't easy. I'm presuming there *are* cops named David Miller somewhere. Probably dozens of them, which would make it an easy identity to steal."

"Especially if you've done it a few times."

"So we have a serial identity thief posing as a small-town cop in Ohio. Intriguing." I glanced over at him. "You have a job for me, don't you? A mission to take my mind off Michigan."

He didn't turn from the windshield. "Something like that," he said and backed from the parking spot.

CHAPTER 6

Jack drove us to a section of townhouse complexes that looked like exactly the kind of place I'd find a single, middle-aged beat cop. Older, well-kept buildings with gardens and bikes in the front yards and five-year-old cars in the drives.

"Which place is Miller's?" I said.

Jack gave a vague wave down the road as he pulled over. "Is this a break-in or just reconnaissance work?"

A shrug.

I turned to him. "Okay, Jack, I need more here. Presuming this is a job, is it something you want *me* to do or am I helping *you*?"

He tapped his fingers on the wheel. Then he reached under his seat, withdrew a folder, and held it out.

"It's your job, then," I said. "You wouldn't be this prepared if it was a spur-of-the-moment suggestion for me."

"Not mine," he said. "Just brought it. In case."

I set the folder on my lap. When I went to open it, he reached out, his fingers holding the file closed.

"If you don't want me to see this, Jack—"

"I do. You should. It's just . . ." He looked me in the eye. "If I fucked up—I'm not trying—" He exhaled. "Fuck." He pulled his hand away.

"Let me interpret," I said. "You've brought me file—a job, a case, something—and you aren't sure how I'll take it."

“Yeah.”

“But you meant well.”

“Yeah.”

I looked at him. “I know that, Jack. You don’t need to explain.”

“I might.” He waved at the folder. “Open it.”

I did. There were photos on top. Surveillance shots of a guy in a patrol officer’s uniform. Getting into his car, talking with a girl on the street, then walking into one of these townhouses. All I could make out was that he had dark hair, was of average height and hefty build.

I turned to the next photo. It was a full-face shot, taken with a telephoto lens. Bushy brows. Thin mouth. There were lines around his mouth and gray at his temples, but I looked at that photo and I didn’t see a forty-five-year-old man. I saw one half that age. It didn’t matter if I hadn’t seen this face in nearly twenty years—my gut seized and I heaved for breath.

“Fuck,” Jack said. “Hold on. Just hold on.”

He slammed the car into drive.

“No!” I slapped my hand down on his, still holding the gear shift. “No. Don’t. Just . . .” I struggled to breathe. “I’m okay.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Fuck. I’m sorry. I—”

“I know.”

“I didn’t—”

“Just . . . give me a minute.”

I lifted my gaze to the road, staring at a yard with no flowers, no bikes, just an empty planter. The photo from the pictures, the house he’d been walking into. I thought of him sauntering up that drive and—

My stomach clenched.

“Let’s go,” Jack said.

“No, just . . . just wait. Please.”

I took a few deep breaths, then lifted the photos, now

scattered at my feet. I set them on my lap and stared down at the pile.

“David Miller is Drew Aldrich.” I said.

Jack nodded. I clenched my fists and fought for calm. When I found enough of it, I said, “I looked for him. After I became a cop. I don’t know what I planned to do.” I paused. “No, I’m pretty sure I know what I planned to do, even if I told myself I just wanted to keep an eye on him, wanted to make sure he didn’t hurt anyone else. But I couldn’t find him.”

“Wasn’t easy. Took me—”

I cut him off. “You said this isn’t his first alias. How many?”

“Four.”

“After the trial, he moved to the States. That should have been enough. So why take on an alias? Something else happened, didn’t it.”

Jack was silent for a moment, then said, “Your uncle went after him. Tracked him down. Beat the shit out of him. Someone intervened. Saved his fucking life. Unfortunately.”

“I never heard . . . They didn’t talk . . .” After Aldrich walked, I hadn’t heard another word about it. His name became taboo in our family. I thought they’d put it aside and moved on. I should have known better.

“So after Uncle Eddie went after Aldrich, he decided to change his name. But then he *kept* changing it. When did he become David Miller?”

“Not important. Point is, he’s Miller.”

I flipped through the file and found what I was looking for.

“David Miller joined the Newport police force four years ago,” I said. “My uncle has been dead for ten years. My dad died eight years ago. He wasn’t running from them.”

Silence.

“Did they ever find him after the first time?” I asked.

Jack exhaled. "Don't see why—"

"You know why." Anger shot through me. "Do you think I'm too stupid to figure out why he had to keep changing his name? Amy was just the first. He got away with it, so he didn't stop. There were other girls."

"Investigations, yeah. Statutory rape. Unlawful restraint. Always took off before he got charged. Ran. Changed his name."

"Did any of those girls disappear?"

"No. Charges were filed by parents."

"Who found out he was sleeping with their underage daughters, which doesn't mean he *wasn't* doing anything worse—just that he learned to hide it better."

Jack opened his mouth then shut it again. There was no way to know, without a doubt, that he'd never killed again.

I fingered the folder. "He wanted to become a cop. My dad said he'd come around the station, asking if they had any openings. He even volunteered, thinking you could do that, like with firefighters. No one at the station would have anything to do with him. So now he's fulfilled his dream."

"Seems so."

I felt a flash of anger. Aldrich should never have gotten a single thing he wanted from his life after he'd taken my cousin's. But that's not how it works.

"So he's a cop," I said. "That makes him even more dangerous. He can use his position to get close to teenage girls. And he can use it to make them keep their mouths shut."

"Yeah."

"So you brought me here to investigate him."

He slanted a look my way. "You think so?"

I glanced at Aldrich's townhouse again and my heart started to pound. Jack restarted the car.

"No," I said. "Not yet."

"Nothing more to see. Just wanted to . . ." He seemed to

struggle for words. “Ease you into it. Didn’t know how to bring it up. Guess coming here . . .” He shrugged. “No point in it. Just . . .”

I lifted the folder. “What do you expect me to do with it, Jack?”

“What you want to do. What he deserves. Doesn’t matter if he’s a saint now. Still killed Amy.”

“And now you expect me to kill him,” I said, looking out the window.

“You can. I can. Whatever you want.”

He said it so matter-of-factly, like deciding who was going to drive. It really was that simple for him.

I glanced down at the cup lid full of cigarette butts. This is what had been stressing him—bringing me here, telling me about Aldrich, not knowing how I’d react. The actual killing? That was easy.

How did I feel about Jack finding Aldrich for me? Confused. I suppose a firmer reaction would come later, but it wouldn’t be anger. We’d been dealing with this issue for years. To Jack, Amy’s death was a problem, and a problem needed a solution.

Why did he feel the need to solve it? Was he worried that this was my one weakness and had to be mended before I imploded and he got caught in the fallout? If that was his motive, did it sting? Not really. He could have just walked away. Instead he chose to stay and fix the problem.

“Should go,” he said. “Start surveillance tonight. You want to do shifts?”

“Jack, I don’t think—”

“Yeah, should take shifts. You need sleep. Could use some, too.”

“I don’t think I can—”

“Find a motel. No, a *hotel*. Nice place.”

It’s tough to babble when your sentences rarely exceed four words, but Jack was managing quite nicely.

"Jack, stop. I'm not killing Aldrich. That crosses a line—"

"Don't need to cross it. I will."

"You'll cross it for *me*, which is the same, if not worse—"

"Then tell me not to. Forbid me. He dies? Not your fault?"

I looked sharply at him. "I hope you're joking."

He shrugged. "Up to you."

"Then yes, you are joking. The only thing that would make me feel worse than asking you to kill Aldrich for me is pretending I don't want you to, while hoping you'll do it. I'm not a coward, Jack—"

"Not cowardice. Misguided morality. Misplaced ethics."

I fought a lick of anger. "That's my choice."

"Yeah? You know what's *not* your choice? How you'll feel when Aldrich goes after another girl. He will and now you'll know it. You'll be watching now. Something will happen. You'll blame yourself."

"I'm not walking away from this, Jack. I'm going to investigate and when I find something, I'll turn him over—No, I don't even need to do that. I can turn him in now. I'll contact the police departments that were looking for him under other names, and I'll tell them where to find him." I leaned back in my seat. "That's what I'll do."

"That'll be enough?"

"It'll have to be. I can't justify killing him."

Jack drummed the steering wheel. Then he put the car in gear, tires chirping as he swerved from the curb.

Jack was pissed. And I felt terrible, because I'd refused his gift. Yes, that sounds fucked up, calling it a gift. But it was. He'd given me Drew Aldrich on a platter. I couldn't imagine how much work he'd done to find him and now I was going to turn Aldrich over to the police, as if he was just some random guy seducing underage girls. Jack had given me a chance for real justice, and I'd rejected it.

We drove around a bit after that. I told Jack to take me to a car rental so he could go home. He didn't answer. When the silence got awkward, I checked my phone and immediately wished I hadn't. There were two voice messages and three texts from Quinn. I jammed the phone into my pocket, messages unplayed, texts unopened.

"Problem?" Jack said.

"No."

"Lodge?"

"No."

"Quinn?"

I said no again, but this time, there was enough hesitation to give me away.

"Fuck," Jack muttered, and I wished I'd been faster denying it. Even at the best of times, Quinn wasn't a subject Jack liked to discuss.

Professionally, Jack was fine with Quinn. He'd even brought him in on the job where we'd met. Personally, though, the less time they spent together, the happier they both were. For Jack's part, I think it could have been a simple case of "he's not someone I'd choose to hang out with." Quinn was too volatile, too brash, too sure of himself. Jack didn't "get" Quinn's vigilantism, but it didn't affect him, so it didn't bother him. To each his own. Except Quinn didn't see things like that. To him, Jack was a murdering thug. Quinn could grit his teeth and work with him, but he made no secret of the fact that he was gritting his teeth. And like anyone with an ounce of self-respect, Jack didn't take kindly to that. Quinn treated Jack with contempt, so Jack returned the favor.

Now Jack rubbed his hand over his mouth, then looked at me. "Didn't mean to call him. Figured he was in the loop. Didn't know . . . You two . . ."

"If I'd foreseen any chance you'd call him for anything, I would have told you, but under normal circumstances,

you'd rather cut off a limb than talk about me and Quinn."

"Yeah. Still . . . Would have liked to know. So . . . everything okay?"

I nodded. "He's just checking up on me, a little freaked out by your call and wanting to know what's going on. I'll send him a text."

"Not what I meant."

I paused, then said, "He hasn't sworn vengeance and vowed to expose either of us. So there's no potential security breach."

"Fuck. You think that's what I'm worried about?"

"It *was* what you were worried about six months ago. You said I shouldn't get involved with Quinn because mixing my job and my personal life was a security risk."

He gave something like a sigh. "Yeah. Then. Not now. I just . . . Want to make sure you're okay. With the . . . ending."

I forced a wry smile. "You mean, did he break my heart? No. I'm . . . I'm hurt and bewildered but—"

"What'd he do?"

"Nothing. We just—"

"You said you're hurt. He did something. Fuck, if he—"

"Jack, I'm fine. It was just normal relationship issues. You start seeing someone and realize you have different expectations, and it doesn't work out. It hurts, but there's nothing that can be done about that. Part of life." I met his gaze. "A part that I don't need you to fix for me."

Silence. Another five minutes of driving with no apparent destination in mind.

"Jack, just drop me off and I'll—"

"Gotta talk," he said.

I sighed. "If your plan was drive until I'm ready to talk about Aldrich again—"

"Won't say a word about Aldrich. Or Amy. Or even Quinn. Just me."

"You?"

“Yeah. Gonna talk about me.” He glanced over. “That a problem?”

“Of course not. If there’s something I can help you with, you know you only need to ask.”

He grunted something unintelligible and kept driving.