

The background of the cover is a vibrant, high-contrast photograph of a coastal town. In the foreground, there's a body of water with a blue-green hue. The middle ground shows a small town with white buildings and a marina. The background is dominated by a dense forest of evergreen trees, with snow-capped mountains rising behind them under a clear blue sky.

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FBI MYSTERY THRILLER

THE
SILENT
THREAT

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FBI MYSTERY THRILLER



THE
SILENT
THREAT

The Silent Threat
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PROLOGUE

Miller's Scrap & Salvage Yard; Spellman, WA

The day was overcast, and a cool wind blew in from off the ocean west of them. Thunder rumbled in the distance, promising it would be a cold, wet night. Toby West held the chain-link fence up so his friend Dante Morales could slip through the gap. When Dante had wiggled through, he held it up for Toby. They both knew it was dangerous and that they could get in big trouble for sneaking into the scrap yard to play—Sheriff Garrity had warned them just last week—but Toby didn't think there was a more fun place to play in town.

Toby had found all kinds of cool things in the scrap yard. They even sometimes found money in the old cars. A few weeks back, he'd found a twenty-dollar bill in a wrecked-out Toyota that had been brought in. All the blood in the car's interior had been gross, but he'd been willing to deal with it for the payday. He was always on the hunt for things he could carry out easily to either keep or sell. And, of course, loose cash.

"You don't think Sheriff Garrity will be watching the place to make sure we don't sneak in, do you?" Dante asked.

“What? No,” Toby said confidently. “He’s got more important stuff to do than watch this place just in case we show up. Trust me.”

“I just don’t want to get in trouble with my mom and dad,” Dante said. “I would be grounded until high school.”

“Don’t be a baby,” Toby told him. “All the workers have already gone home for the day, and the sheriff ain’t here.”

“All right. If you say so,” Dante said.

“I do. Now stop being such a little girl and let’s go.”

The boys walked between a row of rusted-out, beat-up cars, most of which looked like they’d been in accidents. Toby led Dante to the section of the scrap yard that held the newest cars. People came to Miller’s to pull parts off the wrecks they needed for their own cars, so they tended to get picked over pretty quickly. Toby had learned to time their forays into the salvage yard with the arrival of fresh wreckage.

“Everything looks the same,” Dante complained.

“What are you talking about? There’s tons of new cars!”

Toby scampered over to the remains of a Range Rover that had been towed in. The front end was crushed and pushed back so badly, the engine block had broken through the compartment and was partially in the cabin.

“Dude, check this out,” Toby called back excitedly.

Dante leaned into the car and grimaced. Dried blood coated the cracked and shattered windshield on the driver’s side. More dark crimson stains had soaked into the driver’s side seat as well as the carpet below it. Toby looked at all the blood with fascination, a ghoulish smile on his face. He turned to his friend and nudged him with his elbow.

“That’s so gnarly!” he exclaimed.

“That’s so gross,” Dante said.

“Somebody didn’t make it out of this thing alive, man,” Toby said.

“Probably not,” Dante replied. “And laughing about it isn’t very respectful.”

Toby rolled his eyes. “Give me a break. When did you get to be so uptight, dude?”

“I’m not uptight. I just don’t think there’s anything funny about people dying.”

“You never used to be like this. You used to like looking at the wrecks with me,” Toby said. “What’s going on with you, man? What’s changed?”

Dante shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I just don’t think blood and gore are cool anymore.”

“Then we’re going to need to figure out if we can still be friends because I think blood and gore are awesome,” Toby said.

His friend looked at him with an expression of shock on his face, making Toby burst into laughter. He doubled over, laughing so hard he couldn’t catch his breath. When he stopped wheezing and stood upright again, his stomach hurt from laughing as hard as he had. The smile slipped though when he saw the stricken expression on Dante’s face.

“Dude, I’m kidding,” Toby said, suddenly feeling awful.

It was Dante’s turn to erupt with laughter. He playfully punched Toby in the shoulder as he howled. Toby put his hands on his hips with a sour look on his face as shook his head, feeling like an idiot for falling for it.

“Dude, you’re such a dick,” Dante said once he stopped laughing.

“And you’re such an ass.”

Dante snorted. “And that’s why we make good friends.”

“That’s probably true.”

“But I still don’t think it’s cool to laugh about somebody dying,” Dante said.

“I’m not laughing at them dying, dude,” Toby replied. “I just think blood and gore is cool. It’s like a real-life slasher flick. And you know I love those things.”

“Yeah, I know. But you should be more respectful.”

“I’ll do my best,” Toby promised. “Scout’s honor.”

Dante deadpanned him. “Dude, you were never a Scout.”

“Shut up,” Toby laughed. “Come on, we’ve got more stuff to check out.”

Still chuckling and teasing each other, Toby led Dante through the maze of the salvage yard. They poked through old cars and old appliances. There were several new refrigerators that the previous owners apparently hadn't cleaned out, given the green, fuzzy things growing inside and the horrendous stench that emanated from them.

"Check this out," Toby said.

They stopped at a Ford F-150 that was a recent addition to the yard. It was so mangled and chewed up, it looked like it had gone through a woodchipper. Toby stuck his head in through the passenger's side door and grimaced at the smell inside, but rifled through the glove box and the interior of the truck anyway.

"I found ten bucks!" he cried out triumphantly.

Toby turned around and waved the ten-dollar bill at Dante, a wide, victorious smile on his face. Dante rolled his eyes.

"I told you it pays to poke through these old wrecks," Toby said.

"For you, maybe," Dante replied. "All I found was three dollars' worth of quarters in that old Volkswagen back there."

"Hey, that's not nothin'," Toby said.

"Yeah, I guess."

They picked through a few other cars that were nearby but came up empty. Toby stood where he was with his hands on his hips, looking around for any other places they could explore.

"Hey, what's that?" Dante asked.

Toby turned and followed his friend's gaze. Behind a stack of cars that had been crushed and stacked one on top of the other, he noticed what looked like a giant steel box stashed behind it that he'd never seen before. In fact, he couldn't remember ever seeing anything like that in the salvage yard before.

"I don't know. But maybe there's something good inside," Toby exclaimed. "Let's go check it out and see what's in there."

Laughing and pushing each other as they ran, Toby and Dante circled around the stacks of crushed cars, coming to a stop in front of the large metal container. The big steel box had been painted a dull orange but was flaking off in spots, giving it a pattern that looked like weirdly colored camouflage. Toby looked at Dante, an excited smile on his face.

“It’s like one of those containers you see on those supermassive ships at sea,” Toby said.

“But what’s it doing here?”

Toby shrugged. “Who knows? But what do you think’s in there? Gold? Guns?”

Dante pursed his lips. “Probably nothing.”

“No way. I bet something cool is inside.”

“Dork, it wouldn’t be here if there was something inside,” Dante said. “That’s why it’s in a salvage yard. Duh.”

Toby rolled his eyes. “When did you become such a stick-in-the-mud, dude? Where did your sense of adventure go? You used to be fun.”

“Oh, shut up and open the container,” Dante said, laughing.

Toby walked to the container doors and looked down at the flimsy lock. Then he spotted a metal pole about the length of his forearm on the ground near his foot. Toby snatched it up and with a maniacal grin, he raised it above his head and then rained down a series of hard blows that pinged like a baseball hitting an aluminum bat. It sent sharp jolts up into his shoulders and took about a dozen strikes, but the lock eventually shattered. Breathing hard, he dropped the pole to the ground with a hard thud and turned to Dante.

“See? No problem.”

“Is that why you’re sweating and out of breath?”

“Shut up and help me with the doors,” Toby said with a grin.

Dante joined him at the container and Toby pulled up the latch, taking hold of the right-side door while his friend grabbed the left. The silence of the air around them was shattered by a sharp squeal as they pulled the doors open. Toby immediately clamped his hands over his mouth, his eyes suddenly wide and watering. Dante doubled over and started to dry heave.

“Oh, jeez, what the hell is that smell?” Toby gasped.

Dante shook his head. “Did something die in there?”

His hand still covering his nose and mouth, Toby turned, and as the doors of the shipping container swung wide open, his hands fell away, the stench forgotten. His legs were watery and rubbery, and he felt like they might give out under him at any moment. Toby’s

stomach roiled, and he tasted acidic bile in the back of his throat. He grew up loving horror films and slasher flicks, but as he stared at what lay before him, Toby knew he'd never see those movies the same way again.

And as the ambient light flooded into the shipping container, illuminating the scene before him, a flow of warmth ran down his leg as his bladder let loose. It was quickly followed by a blood-curdling scream that erupted from his mouth and echoed across the salvage yard.



CHAPTER ONE

First Care Medical Complex, Intensive Care Unit; Seattle, WA

Perched on the edge of the chair beside the bed, I watch Lucas sleeping as the machines he's connected to softly beep in a steady rhythm. He looks so weak lying beneath the sheets and blanket in that bed. His face is pale and drawn, and even asleep, he winces and grimaces like he's in pain. My heart feels heavier than it has in a long time. Lucas is in that bed because of me. Because I failed to properly assess the threat or take that threat seriously enough. Because I failed to protect my team. And Lucas paid the price.

A myriad of broken bones—hands, arms, legs, ribs. A fractured skull. Punctured lung. Lucas suffered blunt force trauma with an instrument that looked like a baseball bat. He'd endured multiple stab wounds. Interestingly enough, though, none of the stab wounds were overly serious. It's like the assailant either got incredibly lucky or has medical knowledge and knew where to slice and where to avoid. The sum total is, Lucas had to go through multiple surgeries because of a collection of wounds that very nearly took his life.

My eyes sting and well with tears that I angrily wipe away. I'm trying to keep from making this about me. This is about Lucas. All my focus and concern should be on him. And it is. At the same time, though, I have to acknowledge that my failures put him here; my failures nearly took Lucas's life. So, even though it's not about me, I can't help but take this personally. I can't not feel some sense of ownership and responsibility for Lucas's current condition.

"I'm sorry, Lucas," I say, my voice a harsh whisper. "I'm so sorry."

The good news is that he came out of the coma while I was down in Sweetwater Falls helping Sheriff Spenser Song with her case. The less good news is that his doctors are saying that although he's out of his coma, Lucas isn't completely out of the woods yet. They've cautioned us to temper our expectations. With the sort of severe head trauma he suffered, it's possible he could take a turn for the worse at any moment. They've also said, if and when he does get to a better place medically speaking, he will have a long, arduous road of rehabilitation and recovery ahead of him to look forward to.

"They told me it could be months before he's fit to get back to work."

I startle at the voice in the doorway behind me. I've been so consumed by my thoughts, I didn't even hear him walk in... which isn't very smart considering a psychopath who isn't afraid to get his hands dirty is stalking my team. Thankfully, though, it's only SAC Ayad behind me and not some creep with a baseball bat and a knife.

"There's a possibility he may not come back at all," I reply softly.

"I'm not going to lie, that's a definite possibility," he says. "But this isn't on you, Blake."

I sniff loudly and scrub my face with my hands. "I feel like it is. I didn't protect my team. I goaded this man on, and Lucas nearly paid the price for it."

"This isn't on anybody but the man who did this, Blake. He's responsible. Not you," he replies. "Where's Sydney?"

"I sent her home to get some rest," I say. "She's exhausted."

"She's going through a lot," Ayad says.

I nod but don't say anything. They only just got engaged, and Lucas was lit up like a Christmas tree about it. It was good to see that kind of joy—especially given the unrelenting darkness we're steeped in every single day. It's a good reminder to me that there is still happiness to be found out there. That sunlight can peek through the clouds and that the darkness only wins if I let it. That's a lesson I forget all too easily.

"Come on, let's grab some coffee," Ayad says. "We need to talk."

As a sense of cold dread settles down over me, I blow out a long breath as I get to my feet. Whatever conversation Ayad wants to have with me, I'm sure it can't be good. I follow him out of Lucas's room and give a nod to the two agents standing guard outside the door as I pass. Ayad leads me down to the cafeteria on the ground floor where we grab a couple cups of coffee and then take a seat at a table in the far corner. I wrap my hands around the cup, leeching the warmth from it as I wait. Ayad takes a sip and leans forward.

"I'm hearing some stories about you helping out with an investigation in a town down south of here... Sweetwater Falls, I think it's called? Any truth to those stories?" he starts.

"You shut my team down and sent us home," I say.

"I believe I ordered you and your team to stand down and lay low. To stay off the grid and stay out of sight of this psycho," Ayad replies. "Working an investigation isn't doing what I ordered you to do, Chief Wilder."

"You didn't specifically say I couldn't work a case," I counter. "You simply ordered me to stop working Black Cell cases—which I've done."

He runs a hand over his face and shakes his head. "You've heard that old saying about obeying the letter of the law but violating the spirit of it?"

"You can't expect me to sit at home just twiddling my thumbs, sir," I push back. "Yes, I helped work a case, but it was in a town well south of here, well out of sight of whoever attacked Lucas."

"How do you know, Blake?"

"I would have noticed if somebody was watching me, sir. That town isn't very big, and strangers tend to stand out."

“Blake, somebody is hunting your team—”

“And I’m going out of my mind because you won’t let us work this case.”

“You’re too close to it. You’re not able to be objective about this,” Ayad says.

“You’re damn right I’m not objective. Nor should I be,” I hiss. “That makes me extra motivated to close this case and to find out who attacked Lucas and who’s hunting us.”

“It will also cloud your judgment and lead you to make rash decisions. It’s why we don’t let agents work cases that involve friends and loved ones—or team members,” he says. “You know this already.”

I slump back in my seat feeling defeated. Everything he’s saying is correct. I know this. That doesn’t make him forbidding us from trying to find out who attacked Lucas any easier to swallow.

“Who’s working the case?” I ask.

“I assigned Koslowski and her team.”

I nod. It’s about as good as I could have hoped for under the circumstances. After she saved my ass—and my career—by going against Jacob Gathers when he tried to ruin me with fraudulent sexual harassment claims, Lisa has become an invaluable ally. Lisa put what was right over what might have been better for her personal ambitions. It not only makes me respect her; it also makes me trust her since I can’t be the one hunting this animal. And I still feel like I should be.

“I need to brief her,” I say. “There are things she needs to follow up on. The fact that this guy has given me two names—Abernetty and Eurus—is significant. I haven’t had time to run them down on my own just yet, but the changing persona could give us a sharp insight into how he views himself, which—”

“Blake, Lisa is an intelligent and talented investigator. She and her team will be just fine handling the case. I promise you.”

“Sir, I don’t disagree with that in the least. She’s very sharp and very talented,” I say. “But with all due respect, she’s not a trained profiler, nor does she hold a degree in psychology. When you’re tracking somebody like this, you have to be proactive and see the

things other people don't see. By nature, most investigators are somewhat more reactive and sometimes miss the subtle clues that are hiding in plain sight."

"And sometimes, investigators who are too close and too involved with a case can miss the same subtle clues that are hiding in plain sight," he counters.

My next words die in my mouth because deep down, I know he's right. God knows I've missed plenty of clues when I allowed myself to get too caught up in a situation. That annoying little voice in the back of my mind is whispering in my ear, telling me I'm the last person who should be preaching about objectivity. And I hate it all the more because that voice is right too.

"Blake, you and your team are the best we have. But you need to let Lisa and her team handle this. It's for the best," he says.

"No, it's really not," I reply. "If you were to ask anybody on my team, they'd tell you the best thing for them is to be working. To stay busy. And most of all, to figure out who in the hell did this to Lucas. Sitting around and hiding isn't doing any of us any favors."

"Well, that's the way it is for the moment. You're all still benched. Sorry," he says. "But, tell me what happened with the case you worked."

"Technically, I was only consulting on the case."

He rolls his eyes. "Let's not play word games, Blake. Just tell me about the case."

"I can tell you that it's not fully closed yet," I reply.

"It's not?"

I shake my head. "The case involves a human trafficking ring I first encountered back in New York. We believe it's run by a Japanese national—"

"You believe?"

"It's a complicated case, sir. There's a lot we don't know. But this case down in Sweetwater Falls filled in a few of the blanks," I tell him. "The Yokai Syndicate has been trafficking young girls for nearly twenty years now. I was part of a task force back in New York along with Spenser Song, who's now the local sheriff down in Sweetwater

Falls. She recognized some of the particular signatures of the Yokai Syndicate and called me for help.”

“So, you were effectively following up on an old case.”

I shrug. “Honestly, we never got close to unraveling that knot or making any arrests back in New York. With Sheriff Song’s help, though, we were able to get some names and make a few arrests.”

“I’ve heard of the Yokai Syndicate... they brand their girls, right?”

I nod. “A koi fish in a circle on the inside of the left wrist.”

“And you’re sure that’s who was behind the case you—consulted—on?”

“One hundred percent,” I tell him. “We had the regional manager in custody, and he was willing to flip. But he was... assassinated.”

“By who?”

“Officially, by a member of the Fire Street Tigers,” I say. “That’s an Asian street gang here in Seattle.”

Ayad frowns. “What’s a Seattle gangster doing down in a bedroom community like Sweetwater Falls?”

“That’s an excellent question,” I respond. “Which is why I’m putting my money on the head of the Yokai being behind it.”

“So, is the Yokai operating here in Seattle?”

I shake my head. “I have it on good authority that the Yokai Syndicate hasn’t set foot in Seattle for more than a decade. But they’ve been operating on the fringes of it,” I say. “And I have a feeling they’re starting to get bolder and mean to reclaim the city.”

“We should get Jonas up in OC in the loop on this.”

“Wouldn’t hurt. Though I doubt he’ll be able to do much. The Yokai don’t operate like a normal crime syndicate. It’s why we weren’t ever able to get a foothold,” I tell him.

“Well, if it’s all the same, I’m going to read him in on this. It never hurts to have more eyes on a given problem,” he replies.

“Fair enough,” I say. “Sir, I’d like to request then—”

“No.”

“You don’t even know what I was requesting.”

He levels me with a withering look. “You were going to ask to join OC for this.”

I sigh. “Okay, fine,” I relent. “But you can’t expect me to—”

“I can. And I do,” he says. “I’m not loaning you to OC for this. And you are ordered to steer clear of any involvement with... any case. You need to get that through your head. Deputy Director Church has ordered you to stand down. To take some time off.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t work for me.”

“It’s going to have to.”

My phone chimes with an incoming text message, so I slip it out of my pocket, and as I read it, the hair on the back of my neck stands up as I feel electricity surge through me, making my pulse start to race.

“Everything okay?” Ayad asks.

“Yeah. Fine,” I say. “But I need to go. A friend just texted me and needs some help.”

“Okay. Good. That’s good, Blake. Go see your friend,” Ayad says. “I’ll touch base in a few days, and we’ll see where we’re at.”

“Okay. Sure. I’ll talk to you then.”

I get to my feet and head out of the cafeteria. Once I’m out of Ayad’s eyesight, I start to run down the corridor and out to the parking lot. Here I am again, adhering to the letter of the law but violating the spirit of it. Look at me go. In my defense, though, Ayad should know me better than to think I’m going to sit on the sidelines and do nothing. Sitting idly by isn’t in my nature. So, the fact that he asked me no questions isn’t my fault.



CHAPTER TWO

Miller's Scrap & Salvage Yard; Spellman, WA

“**H**ey, I heard what was going on with that guy Gathers. What a dick,” she says. “Sorry you had to go through that mess.”

I join her in the shadow cast by a stack of crushed and mangled cars. “Thanks. It was close, but it all worked out.”

“What happened to him?”

I shrug. “He was fired. That much I know. And I hear they’re still deciding on whether to press charges against him or not.”

“Sounds like somebody effed around, and he’s about to find out.”

“Yeah, I’d love to see him be crucified,” I say. “But I’m not holding my breath.”

“Yeah, I totally hear that,” she says. “Anyway, thanks for coming. And here, you’re going to want some of this.”

Caitlyn Tanaka pulls a small jar of peppermint ointment out of her blazer pocket and hands it to me. I open the small jar and put a small dollop beneath each nostril. That done, I close the jar and hand it back to Caitlyn, who drops it into her pocket again. Five-five

with a slight, petite frame, Caitlyn is the living embodiment of the phrase 'small but mighty.' Her black hair is tied back into the same ponytail that's her signature look, and though her green eyes still sparkle, she looks a little tired.

"That bad, huh?" I ask.

"Probably worse than you're imagining right now."

"It's just like old times," I say.

"Right? I was just thinking that."

"I have to admit, though, I think it might be nice if we just went out for a drink instead of having our reunion over a body."

"Bodies," Caitlyn corrects me. "As in multiple. As in half a dozen to be specific."

I can feel my face falling even further. "Half a dozen?"

She nods. "Yes ma'am."

"Jesus," I mutter.

"Follow me," she says. "And thanks for coming."

"Like I'd turn down an invite to this party."

"If this is a party to you, I think you need to re-evaluate your social skills."

"You're not the first person to tell me that," I say.

"I'm not surprised," she says. "Let's go."

"Right behind you."

Caitlyn Tanaka and I worked on the task force together back in New York, so we know each other well. After we were rotated out of that task force, Caitlyn apparently couldn't get the bad taste of our failures back east out of her mouth. I suppose as a sort of penance, she joined the Missing Persons Unit out here in the Pacific Northwest and has devoted her life to it, turning down promotions and opting to stay right where she is.

She's had some tremendous success up and down the west coast and Southwest region, rescuing more girls than I can count and reuniting them with their families. The Bureau apparently realized they were not going to be able to force her to leave the task force given her status and the results she delivered, and since she kept refusing promotions and offers to head up other departments, she now commands the entire task force.

We come around a stack of crushed cars to find an old steel shipping container. The doors are standing wide open, and there is an army of forensic techs in blue coveralls standing idly by. They look anxious to get started.

“I had them all hold off on processing the scene,” she said. “I wanted you to have a pristine scene to look at.”

“I appreciate that.”

Even through the thick scent of peppermint, the air around the container is fetid. There is nothing quite as memorable as the scent of a decomposing body. I can recognize the smell a mile off. Even after all these years doing this work, I’m still not sure if that’s a skill or a talent. Whatever it is, though, it’s kind of a depressing ability to have.

The interior of the shipping container is filled with thick, inky shadows, but the ambient light outside illuminates enough for me to see. Six young women, somewhere in their mid-teens to twenties, lie on the floor of the container just inside the door, their skin waxy and pale, their eyes wide open and fixed on something in the next world. Their bodies are covered in bumps, bruises, and cuts. On five of them, I can see deep, ugly bruises around their necks, likely made either with hands or a ligature of some sort. The sixth has ragged cuts up both forearms, and on the ground inside the container, I can see the dim ambient light shimmering off a large, crimson pool.

“Looks like these girls all went through the wringer,” I say. “Five possibly strangled and the sixth with cuts on her wrists. Possibly suicide.”

“That was my read too. But we’ll have to wait for the ME’s official findings before we know anything for certain.”

“Of course.”

After snapping on a pair of black nitrile gloves, I squat down and take hold of the wrist of the girl nearest to me then turn it over. I stare at the circled koi brand burned into her flesh for a long moment, completely unsurprised to see it. I’m guessing it’s the reason Caitlyn called me out here in the first place.

“Dammit,” I mutter.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen one of these,” Caitlyn says. “I was actually with you the last time I saw one of these brands.”

“Yeah, I wish I could say the same thing,” I tell her.

A look of concern crosses her face. “What do you mean?”

I fill her in on the case I just worked on with Spenser. She listens, and it’s hard not to see her growing more concerned with every word I utter. When I’m finished, she puts her hands on her hips and looks off into the distance, silent for a long moment.

“You know, I haven’t seen one of these damn brands in so long, there was part of me hoping that maybe the Yokai just sort of fizzled out,” she finally says.

“No such luck.”

“So it would seem.”

“Did you get anything from this investment banker guy before he got popped?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. He refused to speak until the AUSA had an immunity grant drawn up and WitSec locked in.”

“Shrewd,” she says. “But it ultimately screws us.”

“Yep. They’ve always excelled in that.”

“What do you have on the shooter who took him out?”

“Not much,” I say. “He’s with the Fire Street Tigers. Twenty-four. Chinese. He’s been popped for a few criminal offenses but nothing even close to murder.”

“And you think the head of the Yokai is behind it.”

“Seems to fit,” I say. “I mean, why would a Seattle banger come down to Sweetwater Falls to make a hit if not for being promised something sweet for doing it?”

“Or being threatened with something big if he didn’t,” she offers.

“Yeah, or that,” I say.

“So, why do we think the Yokai dumped six girls here?” Caitlyn ponders. “They had to know they’d be found.”

Still staring at the bodies, I frown. “I think maybe they were counting on them being found.”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve found Yokai bodies.”

“Yeah, but we usually find them one at a time,” Caitlyn says. “We’ve never found more than two at a time. Not even back in New York. This just seems... different.”

She’s right. It does feel different. When we’ve found Yokai bodies in the past, we’ve always operated under the assumption they weren’t able to sell the girl or she was too troublesome for them to bother with. The Yokai show no hesitation to cut bait and move on. They certainly never have trouble replacing the ones they killed, which is why I think they’re so quick and unflinching when it comes to disposing of them.

But usually in the past, they’ve taken some measures to conceal the bodies. I’m certain there are far more Yokai victims out there than we’ve found simply because they tried to keep us from finding them. Successfully, I believe. But this—dumping six bodies in a shipping container and leaving it in a salvage yard—is brazen. It’s bold. And it tells me there’s been a change in operating philosophy at the top, which unsurprisingly coincides perfectly with the assassination of Daniel Aoki down in Sweetwater Falls.

“Agreed. And it’s even closer to Seattle than the body that was dropped in Sweetwater Falls,” I say. “I think they’re sending a message.”

“What’s the message?”

“That they’re going to reclaim Seattle.”

“I just assume they’ve always been here, lurking in the shadows,” Caitlyn says.

I shake my head. “No. Like you said, you haven’t found a body with that brand in so long, you thought they were gone.”

“What’s your point?”

“That they weren’t allowed to operate inside of Seattle,” I tell her.

“What makes you think that?”

“A man named Fish,” I say. “A long time ago, he went to war with them, drove them out, and has kept them out of Seattle.”

“Fish. I’ve heard of him before. But how do you know any of that for sure?” she asks. “How do you know those aren’t just the apocryphal stories of a crime boss looking to fluff up his own ego and reputation?”

“Let’s just say I have some unique knowledge of the situation and leave it at that,” I tell her. “I assure you, though; the stories are true.”

My longtime friend Huan Zhao, otherwise known as Fish, built a criminal empire in Seattle’s underbelly that he ruled with an iron fist for a couple of decades at least. He was ruthless. But there were lines he would never cross, such as the practice of peddling human flesh. Say what you want about Fish, but he’s always had a moral compass that may not be perfectly in line with a lot of us, but still tended toward the side of good.

That’s what people don’t understand about him. Yeah, he built his empire on the dark side of things, but he’s always used the proceeds of that to do good things for people in his community—especially at-risk women and children. It’s one of the reasons they’re so loyal to him. And rightly so. He’s sent more kids to college than a lot of the foundations specifically set up to do that very thing. He’s provided for more families than I can count. And he’s never called attention to himself for any of it. He just does it.

But now that he’s gone legit (for the most part)—having a seat on the city council as well as a number of legal business entities—and has stepped back from his activities on the wrong side of the law, I know there are some crews out there testing the boundaries. They are pushing the envelope to see what they can get away with. I know for a fact that Fish still has pieces in place to push back to keep relative peace on the streets and maintain the status quo.

Seeing how aggressive the Yokai are becoming now tells me things are about to get white hot. Fish won’t stand for their presence any more than I will. Things are in motion, and I have a bad feeling that they’ll be coming to a head soon enough. What that’s going to look like, or how it’s all going to play out, I have no idea yet.

“What are you thinking?” Caitlyn asks.

“That this container is a declaration of war.”

“That’s cheery.”

“Buckle up; it’s going to be a bumpy ride,” I say.

“Why don’t you sit shotgun with me?” she asks.

“I would if I could, but Ayad benched me,” I tell her.

“This about your man in the hospital?”

I nod. “Yep. And until the other team looking into this has a suspect in custody, Ayad and he says, Deputy Director Church, are going to keep us grounded.”

Caitlyn folds her arms over her chest and purses her lip, her eyes still focused on the dead girls in the container. Finally, she turns and looks at me.

“Do you want in on this?” she asks. “Or are you content to sit on the bench and watch?”

“What do you think?”

“I’ve got some favors I can call in,” she says.

“You sure you want to waste those on me?”

She scoffs. “Do you really need to ask me that?” she asks. “If you want in, let me know, and I’ll get you in on the action. God knows I can use your help with this mess.”

“If you’re sure you want to call in your favors, then go for it. I am absolutely at your disposal,” I tell her. “Put me in, coach.”

“Good. Then suit up.”



CHAPTER THREE

Office of SAC Bomani Ayad, FBI Field Office; Seattle, WA

“Helping a friend, huh?”

“In my defense, I’ve known Caitlyn for a long time, and yeah, she’s somebody I consider a good friend,” I reply simply.

He’s clearly not amused. Instead, Ayad leans back in his seat and scrubs his face with his hands, then stares up at the ceiling for a minute. He finally leans forward, his hands flat on his desk as he stares at me.

“So, I got a call from Deputy Director Church,” he says.

“Oh?”

He gives me a wry grin and shakes his head. “Seems she’s had a change of heart. She told me that Caitlyn Tanaka has requested that you join her on the task force that’s looking into the shipping container bodies because your experience and expertise would be invaluable,” he tells me. “She still wants you to stay well away from Lucas’s case, but she’s willing to let you consult on Tanaka’s case. With one stipulation... one I insisted on, actually.”

I frown, already knowing what the stipulation he forced out of Church is probably going to be, but he needs to tell me to maintain some semblance of control, so I gesture for him to go ahead.

“And what is the stipulation, sir?” I ask.

“That you’re never alone when you’re in the field,” he says. “That somebody is by your side at all times—”

“Sir, I don’t need a babysitter.”

“And I’m sure Lucas shared that same sentiment, Blake.”

My next words curdle on my tongue, and I look down at my hands as I wring them together in my lap. That one hit a little too close to home.

“I obviously can’t stop you from working this case with Agent Tanaka,” he says. “So, I’m going to assign somebody to watch your back while you’re in the field.”

“Sure, I’ll call Astra now.”

“Yeah, that’s not what I had in mind.”

“Sir, if you’re going to force me to have somebody watching my back out there, I’m not going to feel comfortable unless it’s somebody I know and trust,” I tell him. “I’m not going to feel safe if you assign some random agent to me, sir.”

“Blake, I don’t know if that’s the best idea. You’re both in the crosshairs—”

“All the more reason for Astra to work this case with me,” I cut in. “We’ll be able to watch each other’s backs.”

He lets out a dramatic sigh. “Fine.”

“Great,” I reply. “Now, I may also need Mo, Rick, and Nina in the shop—”

“Why would you need them?”

“Their expertise, sir,” I say. “And if you’re worried about their safety, name me a safer place than an FBI field office.”

He rubs his forehead in frustration. “What are you doing here, Blake?”

I cross one leg over the other, my hands still clasped together in my lap. Ayad is staring at me, expecting an answer. I’m sure I could do a little tap dancing and try to spin a good story for him. If I wanted to, I could baffle him with my BS and get him to agree to what I want.

But sometimes, the truth really is the best course of action. Telling him the truth from time to time also makes it easier to slip a lie past him on those rare occasions I need to step over that line.

“Look, I’ve talked to everybody, and they’re all bored, sir,” I tell him honestly. “They don’t like sitting at home any more than I do. And honestly, if I’m going to be working this case with Caitlyn, I’ll want the best backing me up.”

I’m not lying. I’ve put in calls to everybody just to check in with them, and they are as restless as I was until Spenser called and asked for my help. My team is bored. Frustrated. They’re itching to get back to work. All except for Rick, who seems content to get paid to spend his time playing Dungeons and Dragons with his friends. But he did say he’d be more than happy to come to the shop if I needed his help with anything, so there’s that.

“You know what it means when I tell you that your team is benched, right?” Ayad asks.

“They’re not going to be in the field with me, sir. But having their tech skills to fall back on would be ideal,” I tell him. “And they’re every bit as safe here at the field office as they are at home, if not more so. The man who attacked Lucas would think twice about coming after them here. He might not be as hesitant to go after them where they live—as evidenced by what happened to Lucas.”

I know I’m pushing him, but I want to get my team back into the field as soon as I can, and I think maybe normalizing them being in the shop can help my case. From a psychological perspective, if Ayad sees them every day and sees that nothing is happening to them, he may well unconsciously make the connection that things have calmed down enough that we can return to working on active cases.

And when we finally do get the green light to return to work, I plan on working on Lucas’s case. I don’t care that everybody and their uncle will tell us we can’t. One of our own—one of *my* own—was attacked and nearly killed, and I will not let that go unanswered. I will get justice for Lucas. And I will put this psychopath down once and for all. It’s a vow I made to myself the day I found out about Lucas. It’s a promise I made to him that I intend to keep. And

nobody, not Ayad, not Church, not even Director Holland himself, is going to stop me.

“Look, I get that you don’t want me in the field, and I appreciate that you’re trying to protect my team. I do,” I say. “But I need to work. I need to stay moving. As does my team. So, if you really want to ensure our safety, you’ll put us to work. Obviously, we won’t work Lucas’s case right now, but we can do other things. We *need* to do other things to keep our brains occupied. Otherwise, we’re going to sit here and dwell on what happened to Lucas, and honestly, what good is that going to do any of us? Seems like it’ll do more harm than good.”

Ayad pinches the bridge of his nose and looks like he’s trying to stave off a monster headache. He’s silent for a moment before raising his gaze to mine.

“Why is it so hard for you to follow orders, Blake? Why must you always push the boundaries?” he asks.

“Respectfully, sir, if this was your team, if that was your guy in the hospital, what would you do? Would you be all right just sitting on your hands? Would you be fine just sitting and waiting for somebody else to figure it all out?”

“This isn’t about me. This is about you,” he responds. “Specifically, I just want to know why it’s so difficult for you to not push back against orders.”

“Frankly, sir, I don’t think that’s a fair characterization. I follow ninety-nine percent of the orders you give without question or hesitation,” I tell him. “And that one percent I do push back on is usually for a reason.”

“Not all of your reasons are good reasons. You do understand that, don’t you?”

“Maybe not to you. But fighting for what I believe in is baked into my DNA, sir,” I reply. “And working for the Bureau has only strengthened my resolve to stand up for myself.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s not easy to be a woman working for the Bureau. It’s even harder for a woman in a position of authority. This is, in many ways, still a boy’s club, and women have to fight for every inch that’s freely

given to our male counterparts. Every day is a new battle here, sir. Every day, we have to come prepared to fight for advancement, to be taken seriously, and most of all, for respect. And believe me, sometimes no matter how hard we fight, we don't always get any of those things. But fighting is in the DNA of every woman who wears a badge, sir," I answer honestly.

He frowns and strokes his chin as he considers my words. I can tell by the look on his face that my words hit a nerve somewhere behind that impassive face. Ayad likely knows all too well what it's like, being a Middle Eastern man who came up in the Bureau during a horrible rash of xenophobia and racism. Of course, the specifics are different, but Ayad knows more than most what it's like to have doors shut in your face for something as fundamental as who you are as a person. It wasn't fair to him just as it isn't fair for women in the Bureau. It may seem cynical to point that out, but it's the truth.

"If not for Koslowski coming in with that recording, the OPR board was going to take my badge, sir," I tell him. "The automatic assumption was that Gathers was innocent and I was guilty. That's what I'm talking about. The fact that Gathers could make the sort of accusations that would have tanked my career, but the OPR board was putting *me* on trial. That's what I mean."

"And if it was a woman making those claims against a male agent—"

"Then she would be called on to substantiate them. Again, she would be put on trial and be forced to prove the man actually did what she claimed he did. I've seen that more times than I can count. And I know you have too, sir," I say.

To his credit, Ayad genuinely seems to be listening to me rather than letting my words go in one ear and out the other. He seems to be considering what I'm saying rather than brushing them off as the ranting of an angry woman. I think that says a lot about him.

"All right, look," he finally relents. "You can have your team in the shop. But other than Astra, they will not work *outside* of the shop. They will be allowed to come in to be your technical support and that's it. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

“And no more reasons for why you need them in the field. If you try to loophole me, I’m going to shut it all down and put you all back on the bench.”

“I hear you, sir.”

“I mean it, Blake.”

“I believe you,” I say.

He runs a hand over his face again and shakes his head knowing he just gave me everything I wanted. Again. He wants to argue, but the logic of my requests is sound, and he knows it. He doesn’t have a logical, reasonable reason to keep us all shut down like we have been. And that’s probably what burns his ass the most.

“All right. Go do your thing with Caitlyn and close this case,” he says.

“We’re going to do our best, sir. Thank you.”

I get to my feet and head for the door, but just as I’m about to open it, his voice stops me. I turn and look back at him.

“Regarding everything you just said, the Bureau is making progress, Blake.”

“We are,” I respond. “But we’ve still got a hell of a lot of work to do.”



CHAPTER FOUR

Black Cell Alpha Team Bullpen, FBI Field Office; Seattle, WA

“Welcome back, children,” I say.

I stand in my usual spot at the front of the room with Caitlyn standing next to me, watching my team filter into the shop. I almost feel like a teacher welcoming my class back after summer break. They all seem to be in good spirits, but I can see them casting surreptitious sidelong glances at Caitlyn. I was hoping she wouldn't notice, but Caitlyn rarely misses a thing.

“Sorry,” I say. “They're not fully socialized just yet.”

She offers me a smile. “As long as they're housebroken, it's all good.”

“That's debatable.”

“I know how insular teams can be,” she says quietly. “My team isn't very good with strangers either, so don't even sweat it.”

“Okay, listen up. This is Caitlyn Tanaka. She heads up the Missing Persons Unit here in the Pacific Northwest,” I start when everybody's seated and settled. “Astra, you didn't work the task force

with us, but you two know each other already. Caitlyn, that is Mo, Rick, and Nina.”

“Nice to meet you all,” she says.

“So, are we finally getting to come off the bench?” Astra asks. “It kind of seems like we’re going to be coming off the bench.”

“We are back in action,” I say. “In a limited capacity.”

“How limited?” Mo asks.

“As in, you, Rick, and Nina are going to be stuck in the field office doing all the tech and background work we need done,” I say.

The three of them exchange looks and then shrug. It’s a better reaction than I had been anticipating since nobody likes being stuck in the office. But like I’d told Ayad, they probably welcomed it since it puts them back in action—relatively speaking—and doing something useful.

“Better than sitting at home staring at the walls,” Nina says.

“You’re not lying,” Astra says. “As much as I love Benjamin, being stuck at home with the man twenty-four-seven is a nightmare.”

“Speak for yourselves. I was in the middle of a new campaign using my half-orc Artificer—”

“Nerd,” Astra shouts over him.

“Only half-orc? I would have thought you were full,” Nina laughs.

“Certainly hairy enough to be,” Mo adds.

Rick makes an obscene gesture at all of them, getting the room laughing, then sits back in his chair with his arms folded over his chest.

“This is voluntary, Rick. You don’t have to be here if you’d rather go do your thing until this whole situation blows over,” I tell him. “There is no pressure for you to be here.”

He chuckles. “Are you kidding? I can’t leave you on your quest without your trusty artificer. What if you need something really technically complex?”

“Yeah, I’m sitting right here,” Nina says.

“Oh yeah. I guess you are. Forgot about you. Sorry about that,” he says.

She laughs and matches the obscene gesture he’d just made. Caitlyn turns to me, a wide smile stretched across her lips. “I see

you've got them whipped into shape," she remarks.

"I ended up having to get the dog crate out for some of them, but you know how it is."

"What about me?" Astra asks. "I couldn't help but notice that you didn't call my name with them. So, does that mean I'm not tethered to the office?"

"In fact, you are not," I tell her. "You are going to be my babysitter. Ayad's orders."

"Babysitter?"

I nod and roll my eyes. "The only way he's going to let me out into the field again is if I have somebody chained to my hip and those three tied to their desks."

"Well, lucky me then," Astra says. "I may need to pop out and go by a lottery ticket."

"All right, I know we're all worried about Lucas. But I'm sure we all know by now that he's getting the absolute best care possible, and all we can do right now is keep him in our thoughts," I say. "But we've got a case to work. However, I need you all to be honest with me and with yourselves right now. If your head is not in the game and you can't be here putting in the work, tell me now. No judgment and no pressure. Like I told Rick, this is all strictly voluntary at this point. So, if your head isn't on straight, don't be afraid to head home. We'll all understand. I mean, this is a pretty crappy time. So, speak now or forever hold your peace."

Looking around the room, I give everybody a moment to consider my words and their position. When nobody speaks up, though, I know we're locked in.

"So, what's the case?" Mo asks.

"I recently consulted on a case with a local sheriff in a town south of here—"

"Wait, wait, wait," Astra cuts me off. "How is it you were out there working a case while the rest of us were sitting at home wrapped in bubble wrap?"

"Let's not be dramatic," I say with a laugh. "Somebody Caitlyn and I worked with on a task force back in New York called and asked me to consult. She's a sheriff in a small town now and had a body

turn up with the markings of a human trafficking ring we were hunting back east.”

“Markings?” Nina asked.

Using the small remote to turn on the monitors on the wall at the front of the bullpen, I pull up the pictures of the brand we found on the dead girl’s wrist. The white, raised flesh on her skin perfectly shows the Japanese koi in a circle. I give them all a minute to take it in.

“This is Daisy Simmons. She’s the girl we found in the river in Sweetwater Falls,” I say then push another button that splits the screen and brings up the pictures from the shipping container. “These are six more bodies Agent Tanaka found in a salvage yard out in Spellman, just on the southeastern fringe of Seattle. Notice anything unusual?”

“They’ve all got the same tattoo,” Mo notes.

“Brands,” Astra specifies. “Those are brands. That marking was burned into their flesh.”

“My God,” Nina gasps.

“Yeah, it’s ugly,” I say. “This is the work of the Yokai Syndicate, and these girls were their property. They abduct, torture, abuse, rape, and break them; then after all that, they sell these girls into slavery. Those girls they don’t kill anyway.”

“Who found the bodies?” Mo asks.

“A couple of twelve-year-old kids—Toby West and Dante Morales,” I respond. “Both have been questioned but are a dead end. They were just playing in the salvage yard, looking for cash and whatever in the wrecked cars.”

“And now they’ll be traumatized for life,” Rick says.

“Yeah, they’re going to need a lot of intense therapy to try and get those images out of their minds. For sure,” Nina adds.

“So, what’s the story here?” Astra asks. “What is the Yokai Syndicate?”

“I’ll let Caitlyn give you the particulars,” I say as I take a step back.

“Thank you, Blake,” she says. “Good morning, everybody. I won’t bore you with my personal details. We’ve been tracking the Yokai

Syndicate for years. They're an international human trafficking syndicate with cells operating in almost every major metropolitan area. We believe they are responsible for the disappearance of hundreds of girls and the murders of dozens over the nearly two decades they've been operating. I met Blake in the New York field office where we worked on the task force that was trying to break it up and shut it down for good. We failed."

"How have they been able to operate unrestrained for so long?" Astra asks.

"Trust me, it's not for lack of trying. It's because of how their organization is set up. There is one man at the top of the food chain. But below him, the Syndicate operates in cells. You take one cell down, another one pops up to take its place," Caitlyn explains. "Not that we've had a lot of success in taking cells down. But it's structured to provide insulation to the man at the top, and it makes it difficult to pin them down."

"We've also come to think aside from the man at the top, he has a few close, trusted advisors. A consigliere, if you will. Somebody who perhaps knows as much as he does," I add. "We believe Daniel Aoki was one of those consiglieres, and that's why he was killed."

"And why are we thinking that?" Mo asks.

"Because in all the years we've worked this case, we've never known the organization to put a hit out on one of their members before. That was something new," Caitlyn says.

"That tells us that they feared Aoki would flip, which suggests that he had a considerable amount of evidence he could have turned over to us if he'd lived and we were able to flip him," I add.

"But why have these consiglieres at all if it's so risky?" Rick asks.

"Because we believe it adds a layer of insulation between the head man and the crimes being committed at his direction," Caitlyn responds. "It also reinforces our belief that he's a Japanese national and, as such, does not live in this country full time. It would be critical that he has people he trusts overseeing his affairs when he's back in Japan."

"I'm curious about something," Astra starts. "We've not seen nor heard of this organization before this? I would think Seattle qualifies

as a major metropolitan area—”

“Fish,” I say simply.

“Fish?” she asks. “What does he have to do with this?”

“He went to war with the Yokai years ago. Drove them out and has kept them out ever since,” I tell her.

“And now that he’s a legit businessman, they think he’s distracted enough that they can make inroads back into the city,” Astra says.

“Bingo.”

“Okay, so what’s our play here then?” Mo asks.

“I am going to the ME’s office to see what I can find out about our victims in the shipping container,” Caitlyn says. “I’m hoping we have their identities. Blake, I’d like you to go speak with the man who killed Aoki. See what you can find out and how willing he is to spill the tea.”

“On it,” I say.

“What about us?” Nina asks.

“I want you to dig into Jin Li—he’s the man who killed Aoki,” I say. “Also, dig up everything you can on the Fire Street Tigers—they’re an Asian street gang here in town. And lastly, if Caitlyn can get the IDs of the six girls in the containers, I’m going to want you to do a deep dive into them as well. I also want everything you can find related to their disappearances.”

“Copy that,” Rick says.

“Okay good. We’ve got our marching orders,” I say. “Let’s start digging in.”



CHAPTER FIVE

King County Correctional Facility; Seattle, WA

Astra and I are sitting at one of the steel tables in the cafeteria waiting for Jin Li to be brought over to us. The cinder block walls are all painted the same uniform shade of gray, the ground beneath our feet is sealed concrete, and the tabletops are all scratched, nicked, and battered from years of abuse. The benches we're sitting on are bolted to the ground, and the windows that line the western wall are narrow and covered by bars.

"Is there a more depressing place to be than this?" I wonder aloud.

"If there is, I hope to never see it," Astra replies.

We're the only people sitting in the otherwise empty visitor's room, so even our hushed voices seem extra loud. A guard sits reading a magazine behind the thick plexiglass windows of his observation booth. I pull out my phone and take another peek through the quick and dirty dossier on Jin Li that Nina had sent while

we were en route to the jail. There isn't much in there. Certainly nothing we can use as leverage.

Li's story is all too familiar. He's a kid who grew up rough and fell into gang life early, joining the Fire Street Tigers when he was just sixteen. He's got several arrests for petty things and hasn't done much jail time, which makes him so brazenly gunning down Daniel Aoki all the more perplexing; to me, it clearly points to the involvement of the head of the Yokai. He ordered the hit, and Li either volunteered or was coerced into doing the deed and taking the fall.

A sharp buzz and the clang of a door opening draw my attention. I turn to see Li shuffling in, his ankles bound by shackles with a short chain between them and his wrists attached to the belly chain at his waist. He's not a big man. Five-seven at the most, with a slight, lean figure. The stubble on his head is dark as are his eyes, his complexion smooth and his face youthful. He almost looks like a kid. A scared kid.

The guard guides him over to our table, giving him a light shove in the small of his back to keep him moving. Because of the chain, Li's got a stumbling, almost clumsy gait. I almost tell the guard to lay off, but this isn't my world, and he's bound to take me telling him how to do his job badly. COs tend to be a little territorial. And since he's not outright abusing the prisoner, it's probably not my place to intervene. Then the burly corrections officer grabs Li by the shoulder and forces him down onto the bench, sitting directly across from us.

"Thank you, CO," I say. "We appreciate you bringing him to us."

"No sweat, ladies," he says. "I'll be right over there against the wall. He gives you any trouble, just give me the word, and I'll put a stop to it."

"Thank you again," I tell him. "I don't anticipate any problems. Right, Jin?"

The man keeps staring at his hands and says nothing. The CO chuffs, then turns and walks to the other side of the room and leans against the wall, folding his thick, beefy arms over his equally thick, beefy chest. The man just looks like he'd been carved out of a block of granite. When we're alone again, I lean forward.

“Jin?” I ask. “I’m Unit Chief Blake Wilder with the FBI. This is SSA Astra Russo. We’d like to ask you some questions, if you don’t mind.”

“I got nothin’ to say to you,” he growls.

“Jin, you’re in some serious trouble here, and you’re going to do some time in prison. There’s nothing I can do about that,” I tell him. “But if you talk to us, we can speak to the Assistant US Attorney handling your case and let them know you cooperated. We might be able to shave a little time off your sentence or get you better accommodations—”

“Can you get me to a prison on another planet? ‘Cause if they find out I talked to you, I’m as good as dead, and there ain’t nothin’ you can do to protect me from that. They’ll get me in whatever hole you guys stick me in,” he says.

“Who are ‘they,’ Jin?” Astra presses. “You keep saying ‘they.’ Tell us who ‘they’ are.”

“I got nothin’ to tell you. You two hard of hearin’ or somethin’?”

We knew coming in that it was going to be a battle to get him to tell us anything. Especially when we have nothing to leverage him with. But that doesn’t mean we aren’t going to double down and keep pressing him to give us something.

“We can protect you, Jin,” Astra tells him.

He looks at her like she’s stupid. “You really can’t. Like I said, lady, there ain’t a prison in this country—maybe even on the whole damn planet—where they can’t get me.”

My phone buzzes, and as Astra continues to fence with him, I discreetly check my phone. It’s a text message from Nina, and when I click on what she’s sent me, I feel an intense bolt of lightning shoot through me. I say a silent word of thanks to Nina, then raise my eyes to Jin’s.

“We can protect you, Jin,” I tell him, and hold up my finger when he opens his mouth to cut me off. “But more importantly, we can protect your daughter. Camila, isn’t it?”

His body stiffens as his eyes widen in surprise. Jin licks his lips nervously and looks around like somebody’s hovering behind him, even though we’re all alone. Astra glances at me, so I hand my

phone to her under the table and let her read what Nina sent along. It's a cheap ploy, and I almost feel bad for leveraging his daughter against him; but we're desperate for leads, so I'm going to pull out all the stops. Plus, my word is good. We will get his girlfriend and daughter into WitSec if he agrees to help us build a case.

"How do you know about her? I took steps to make sure my girl and my daughter were off the grid. Nobody knew about them," he asks, his tone tight.

It's my turn to return the look he gave Astra. "We're the FBI, Jin. We're very good at what we do," I tell him. "And if you help us, we can protect Camila and her mother, Graciela."

He raises his hands and scrubs his face, sniffing loudly as he shakes his head. "Nobody knew about them. Nobody," he mutters to himself. "But if you found them, it's only a matter of time before they do. This can't be happening. It just can't."

"And yet, it is," I say. "We need your help, Jin. Graciela and Camila need your help too. If you want to make sure they're safe, you need to talk to us."

"Our people are good at finding what people don't want to be found. They're excellent, actually. But you are right to be concerned. If we found them, it's only a matter of time before they—whoever they are—do as well," Astra points out. "Especially when word gets out that you had a private meeting with a couple of FBI agents. What do you imagine people are going to think we talked about in here? Fashion? Maybe we traded a few recipes? Probably not."

She's pouring it on thick, but I don't stop her because I can see the cracks forming in the dam of his will. There's no way we'd leak word about meeting with him. We took extra precautions to ensure this meeting was and is kept private. Nor would we put word about his girl and his baby out there either. There are lines we would never dream of crossing. But he doesn't know us and doesn't know just how far we would or wouldn't go when trying to make a case. That's why I'm fine with putting it all out there, letting him make his own assumptions, and letting those worms of doubt and fear eat away at his mind and his resolve.

He looks up at us with desperation in his eyes. “I don’t know nothin’. I was just told to do a job, and I did it—”

“Knowing you’d go to prison,” I say.

He shrugs. “It’s how I was gonna make my bones. How I was gonna move up,” he says. “I don’t have a serious record, and I’d probably get ten or fifteen years. Do half that with good behavior. And when I got out, I’d be set.”

“You’re seriously willing to throw away at least seven or eight years of your life just to make your bones with the Tigers?” Astra asks.

“It’s how things work on the streets, lady. When I get out, I’m a boss and have some pull in the gang. That’s when I start earnin’ for real and have my own foot soldiers doin’ my bidding for a change. I’d be set up for life,” he says, his tone very matter-of-fact.

“For as long as your life lasts when you’re running a street gang,” Astra notes dryly.

“Whatever. My life has risks. I accept that,” he says. “But my baby girl didn’t accept no risks. I kept her out of the life for that very reason. So, you draggin’ her into this—”

“It’s not something we want to do, Jin,” I tell him. “But we need your help.”

“I told you—I don’t know nothin’.”

“Who gave you the order to murder Daniel Aoki?” I ask.

He grimaces and makes a small groaning sound. “Come on. You’re putting me in a bad spot,” he says. “You’re going to get me killed. Worse, you’re going to get my family killed.”

“I told you—we can protect you,” I tell him.

His chains clink and rattle as he raises his hands and scrubs his face again. “You just don’t get it.”

“We do get it. But if you want to make sure everybody you love is safe, I need to know who gave you the order to kill Aoki,” I repeat.

“I was a foot soldier. I had no choice but to follow orders,” he says.

“That’s fine. Who gave you the order, Jin?” I press harder, my tone firm. “Think hard. Think like the lives of your family depend on your answer.”

His face blanches, and he swallows hard. "You swear you can protect my family? And move me to a prison where they won't be able to find me?"

"You have my word," I tell him.

Jin lets out a sigh. "Eddie," he says. "His name is Eddie Kim. He's the shot caller for the L Park set of the Fire Street Tigers."

"Great. And who gave him the order?" Astra asks.

"How would I know? I wasn't a shot caller, lady. I did what I was told," he snaps. "Haven't you listened to a damn thing I've said?"

Astra glances at me and shrugs. "It was worth a shot."

"You won't get an argument from me," I say then turn to Jin. "Is there anything else you can offer us? Anything else you remember? Something you might have overheard?"

He shakes his head. "Eddie didn't talk to me unless he had to or was giving me an order," he says. But then his face lights up as he seems to remember something else. "I do remember right before he told me to go smoke that dude that he got a call. I can't say the two things were related or anything, but I know it was a chick he was talkin' to."

"How do you know that?" Astra asks.

"He had her on speaker for a minute," he replies. "I heard her voice."

"But you didn't get a name or anything?" Astra presses.

He shakes his head. "Nah. I didn't. That's all I got," he says. "So, you're going to talk to the lawyer, right? You're going to get me and my family that deal?"

"I'll speak with the AUSA. I give you my word," I tell him.

"One last thing," Astra says. "Where can we find Eddie?"

"He usually hangs out at the Sichuan Blossom. It's in Chinatown," he answers.

"Thank you, Jin," I say.

"Don't thank me. Just do what you said you'd do," he tells me. "Because if you don't, the blood of my little girl's gonna be on your hands. Remember that."

"I will," I say. "And trust me. My word is good."

"Yeah, I guess we'll see."



CHAPTER SIX

The Sichuan Blossom, Chinatown-International District; Seattle, WA

“So, you, Caitlyn, and this Spenser all worked the task force back in New York together?” Astra asks, a strange note in her tone.

“We did,” I reply.

“Wow. It’s like a girl’s club.”

I flash her a mischievous grin. “Jealous?”

“Shut up,” she says with a laugh. “But how is it you and Caitlyn climbed the ladder within the Bureau and this Spenser is now a small-town sheriff?”

“You’d have to ask her that,” I tell her. “We only worked together for a short time.”

“Why’s that?”

“You sure do ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s part of my job,” she replies. “Plus, I know it annoys you, so let’s hear it.”

“Because I had her removed after she screwed up and got her CI killed,” I tell her.

“Ouch,” she says. “So, why’d she call you to come help her? I can’t imagine you’re at the top of her Christmas card list.”

“Probably not. But she knows that aside from Caitlyn, I know more about the Yokai than anybody. For whatever reason, though, she felt more comfortable calling me than Caitlyn.”

“That had to be a bitter pill for her to swallow,” Astra says.

“I imagine it was. But she did it anyway,” I say. “She put the case and the victims before her personal feelings. I have to respect that.”

“Absolutely,” she says. “And how’d things between you two go down there?”

“Tense. At first anyway,” I tell her. “By the end, though, I think we found ourselves in a better place. She’s good at her job and being the sheriff—the one making all the decisions suits her. I think leaving the Bureau has let her flourish.”

“The FBI ain’t for everybody,” Astra says.

“It most certainly is not.”

We fall silent as we resume our vigil, which has thus far, been entirely fruitless. We’ve been sitting in a parking lot across from the Sichuan Blossom for nearly an hour, just watching the comings and goings. And judging by what we’ve seen, the restaurant is the favored hangout of the L Park set. Either that or the chow mein is really, really good.

“He’s not going to talk to us,” Astra finally breaks the silence.

“Probably not.”

“Then why are we here?”

“I just want to get a look at him,” I say. “He’s a piece of the puzzle. I want to know who gave him the order to kill Aoki. Whoever that was could lead to the man at the top.”

“And I want a private tropical island of my own somewhere in the Caribbean.”

“Meh,” I reply. “Too many hurricanes.”

“You always manage to find the exact opposite of a silver lining.”

“We all have our gifts.”

Astra laughs and leans back in her seat.

“So, no leverage and nothing to barter with,” Astra says. “What’s our play here?”

“We’ll just have to be creative,” I reply.

“Have I ever mentioned how much it stresses me out when you get creative?” she says. “Unpredictable Blake is scary, stress-inducing Blake. I never know if we’re going to need to run or shoot our way out of trouble.”

“Which is why it’s always good to be prepared for anything,” I reply with a wide smile. “Come on. I’m hungry, and I’m as tired of sitting out here as you are.”

“Unpredictable Blake strikes again,” she mutters.

Astra gets out with a dramatic sigh and follows me across the street to the restaurant, then holds the door open for me. The interior is brighter than I expected. The wallpaper is white and embossed with Chinese characters in gold. The room is lush with bright flowers, and there are several large paintings of tigers, dragons, and temples hanging on the walls. Large, red lacquered pots scattered around the restaurant hold bamboo trees. White Chinese lanterns hang from the ceiling, and booths run along the left and right walls while the middle of the floor is open and holds plenty of tables.

“It smells amazing in here,” I say as I deeply inhale the mélange of aromas.

“Welcome, welcome. Please, sit anywhere you like,” an older Chinese woman says with a smile, her English carrying a slight accent.

“Thank you,” I say.

I see them sitting in a booth near the back the moment I step through the door. Eddie Kim and three of his friends are sitting, laughing, and talking with one another like they don’t have a care in the world. I lead Astra to a table that’s close to the booth and gives me a good, unobstructed view. Other than Eddie and his friends, Astra and I are the only other people in the whole place. But it’s still early. I’m sure the dinner rush won’t be in for a few hours. The older woman drops off water and tea, then hands us both menus and offers us a warm, welcoming smile. Astra and I go through the motions and put in our orders.

“You’ll want to make that to order to go, Biyu,” Eddie says as he steps to our table.

The older woman's face darkens, and her smile drops away completely. She gives us a small, apologetic bow then turns and scurries away, disappearing through the swinging door and into the kitchen. I turn and look at the man. He's surprisingly young for a street gang leader—or maybe it's just the flat-brimmed hat he's got perched at an odd angle and the flashy tennis shoes and streetwear that make him look younger than the late-thirties he must actually be. Five-ten with close-cropped hair and narrow, dark eyes, Eddie Kim looks at us with an air of amusement about him. He's a heavy man, almost as wide as he is tall. Even still, he's an imposing figure. Despite his girth, I don't have trouble believing he can handle himself in a scrap.

"I appreciate the attempt at efficiency and all, but we kind of wanted to have a leisurely lunch today," I reply.

The corner of his mouth twitches as he lowers his bulk into a seat at the table with us. His three boys stand behind him just close enough to let us know they've got his back in case we were starting to feel a little frisky. All three of them are young, and though they're all looking at us with cocky expressions on their faces, I find myself questioning how many times they've been in a fight. I like to think that with our training and experience, Astra and I could put all three of them down without too much of a hassle.

"Like I said, you'll be takin' your food to go," he says.

"And why is that?" I ask.

"Because we don't serve your kind here," he replies.

"Our kind?" I ask.

He scoffs. "Please. I ain't stupid."

"That remains to be seen," I say.

His expression darkens as he narrows his gaze at me, the corner of his eye twitching. "I smelled bacon the second you two walked in."

Astra bursts out with the most obnoxious and obvious fake laugh I've ever heard, slapping the table in her faux mirth.

"Bacon... because we're pigs. Bacon... I get it. That's clever, Eddie. So clever," she says, then stops laughing and gives him a

deadpan look of annoyance. "Gee, I haven't heard that one a thousand times before. Good one."

He frowns and clenches his jaw as he stares holes through Astra. The three behind him all cover their mouths with their hands, doing their best to stifle their laughter, probably knowing that would go very badly for them with their boss.

"You should teach your girl some manners," he grumbles.

"I tried. It didn't stick," I reply. "I've never been much of a teacher."

"You two got smart mouths, don't you?" he says as he leans forward.

"I think it's one of my best features, actually," Astra says.

"Around here a smart mouth can have some bad consequences," he says. "Real bad consequences, if you catch my drift."

"I do catch your drift, and it sounds a lot like you're threatening the lives of two federal agents. And hey, did you know that threatening the lives of federal agents has consequences too? We can run you in right now if we want to," Astra fires right back with a saccharine-sweet smile.

"Pfft," he sneers. "Do what you got to do."

"It's not worth the paperwork," I say.

"That's what I thought," he spits. "What do you pigs want here anyway? You ain't got no business here."

"That's where you're wrong, Eddie. We do have business here," Astra says.

"What business?" he asks.

"I think you're smart enough to conclude that if we're sitting here, in your so-called office, and we know your name, then you're our business. At least, I hope you're smart enough to put that all together. Blake has her doubts, but I'm pulling for you, Eddie," Astra says.

The door to the restaurant opens, and a couple of young men walk in. They stop in their tracks when they spot us, nervous expressions on both of their faces. With a wicked little grin on my

face, I pull out my badge and hold it up, making sure they get a good look at it.

“Hi! We’re with the FBI,” I call out. “Were you here to buy some drugs? Or maybe you were looking for an illegal gun?”

The pair turn around and quickly walk out of the restaurant. I turn back to Eddie to find him glaring at me, his jaw clenched and his hands sitting on top of the table balled into fists. I’m half-convinced he’s about to come over the table at me or order one of his boys to pull a weapon and start a gunfight. To my surprise, though, he closes his eyes and lets out a long, shaky breath, then sits back and unclenches his fists, putting his hands palm down on the table in front of him. His lips are moving as he seems to be silently counting to ten. When he’s finished, he finally opens his eyes again and focuses on me.

“That was real funny,” he says.

“Thanks. I thought so.”

“What in the hell do you want?” he growls.

“I want to know who ordered the hit on Daniel Aoki.”

“Who?”

“Daniel Aoki,” I repeat. “You know. Investment banker living down in Sweetwater Falls?”

“Ain’t never heard of him. Sorry. Can’t help you,” he says.

“Really? That’s odd,” I say. “Because your guy, what’s his name?”

“Jin Li,” Astra provides.

“That’s right. Jin Li,” I say.

“Who?”

“Come on, Eddie,” I say. “Don’t play dumb with us. Treat us with respect and give us honesty, and we’ll do the same for you.”

“Just you being here is hurtin’ my business. It tends to put people off to see a couple of damn Feds sittin’ at my table,” he says.

“Well, the sooner you tell us the truth, the sooner we’ll be out of your hair,” Astra says.

“I got nothin’ to say to you,” he hisses.

I turn and look at Astra. “Looks like we’re going to have dinner here too.”

“That’s fine,” she replies with a shrug. “You know me. I can eat Chinese morning, noon, and night. Can’t get enough of it.”

Eddie shifts uncomfortably in his chair and cuts a glance back at his boys. They all shrug, none of them knowing what to do any more than he does.

“What are you hasslin’ me for? I didn’t pull the trigger,” he says.

“No, but we’re smart enough to know that nobody does anything without your say-so,” Astra says, her tone cold and hard.

He shrugs. “That dude went down there and shot that other fool up on his own. I don’t know what you want me to do about it.”

“Don’t play us like we’re idiots, Eddie. We know how this game is played,” I say. “You’re the set’s shot caller. Nothing happens without your green light.”

“Can you prove that?” he says with a smirk.

“Not at the moment,” I say. “But how about I have agents come down here and rip your life apart? How about we tear through anything and everything you’re connected to and turn your entire world upside down? How would you like me to leave agents posted up outside? How do you think your business will do with the FBI firmly up your backside?”

He chuckles. “You can do that. But you ain’t finding anything,” he says. “Besides, to do all that, you need warrants. And to get warrants, you have to have probable cause. What’s your probable cause to turn my life upside down? There ain’t no outstanding warrants on me. I don’t have so much as a damn unpaid parking ticket. So, what else you got, sweetheart?”

“Call me sweetheart one more time and let’s see how many teeth I decide to leave you,” I hiss, angry that he’s not wrong about anything he just said.

Astra and I share a glance, and she arches an eyebrow as if to silently say, “I told you so.” She’s right, of course. We’re never going to get Eddie to willingly talk to us. I’ve only got one card to play, but I’m reluctant to throw it, since I don’t want him to have to deal with the fallout and any potential blowback. I don’t seem to have any other choice though. I’m never going to get Kim to cooperate unless I put the fear of God into him.

“Look, you’ve been in Chinatown long enough to know who the real power here is, right?” I ask. “You do know who Fish is, yes?”

He scowls. “Everybody knows Fish. You think I’m stupid?”

“We’ll see,” I say, earning a dark glower from him. “Fish and I have been good friends for years, Eddie. Very good friends. If you won’t talk to us, you’re going to leave me no choice but to give him a call, and you can explain yourself to him. Is that what you want?”

For the first time since we walked in, I see a bit of that cocky swagger fall away, and a nervous expression flits across his face. He licks his lips and shifts in his seat again.

“Listen, I don’t want no trouble with Fish—”

“Then I suggest you get me the name of the person who green-lit Daniel Aoki.”

“He just calls me, man. Come on. He calls me, gives me a job he needs done, and sends me cash in the mail,” he cries. “It ain’t like we ever meet face to face or nothin’. We don’t do business like that.”

“How long have you been doing work for this guy?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. A few years maybe. And I swear to God, I ain’t never met him. He’s a voice on the phone, and that’s it, lady.”

I consider his words for a minute. It makes sense they’d do business that way. It’s neat. Clean. And if Eddie doesn’t know his name, he can’t flip on him. It makes sense. But then I nod to myself as an idea strikes me. It’s not the perfect solution, but it’s a solution.

“Give me the phone you use,” I demand.

“What?”

“Are you deaf?” I growl. “Give me the phone you use to make contact with this guy.”

He lowers his gaze to the tabletop, a reticent expression crossing his face. Eddie swallows hard, runs a hand over his cap, and looks everywhere but at me, which tells me he’s about to lie to me.

“I ain’t got it,” he says weakly.

I get to my feet and stare down at him with the coldest, most evil expression I can manage. He looks up at me, then quickly turns away.

“You’ve got twenty-four hours to either get me a name or that phone, otherwise I will have no other choice but to call Fish. Do you understand me?” I state.

He nods weakly. “I got you.”

“Twenty-four hours,” I reiterate.

Astra and I turn and walk out of the restaurant, and I can sense her uneasiness. Once we’re across the street and heading for the SUV, she glances over at me.

“You threaten to put Jin’s kid in play, and now you threaten to bring Fish down on that guy’s head. This is unlike you, Blake,” she says. “I’m usually the one who makes the threats.”

“This case is personal to me,” I say. “Besides, it’s not like I’d really do those things.”

“Are you sure about that?”

I shrug. “That’s what I have you for. You’re my emergency pressure release valve just in case. You’ll keep me from doing something I’ll regret.”

She blows out a breath. “Yeah, this is going to be fun,” she says. “Am I going to get hazard pay out of this babysitting gig?”

“Shut up and get in the car, Russo,” I say with a grin.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Emerald Lounge; Downtown Seattle

“Thanks for meeting with me,” Caitlyn says.

“Yeah, of course,” I reply. “Everything okay?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure.”

“What’s going on, Caitlyn?”

“How’s your guy in the hospital?” she asks instead of answering my question.

“Lucas. His name is Lucas,” I say. “And he’s still critical. Out of the coma, thank God, but still not out of the woods. His fiancée is climbing the walls with worry.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine what she’s going through.”

“Neither can I.”

We both fall silent and look away from each other. The unspoken sentiment being that neither of us can relate to what Sydney is going through because neither of us has ever been fortunate enough to find somebody who cares for us that much. We’re both married to the job. Our careers get the sort of undivided attention a significant

other would expect us to give them. The sort of undivided attention neither of us has to give.

“Here you go, ladies,” our usual waitress Sylvie says as she drops off our drinks. “Good to see you, Blake.”

“Thanks, Sylvie.”

Sylvie smiles at us before turning and heading off. Caitlyn picks up her martini and downs half of it in one swig. She’s on edge and tense about something. But it looks like the wheels in her head are still turning. She looks like she’s still processing whatever is running through her mind, so I don’t press her on it; I’ll let her tell me in her own time. Trying to force somebody to talk to me when they’re not ready to open up usually blows up in my face.

Filled with the exquisite sound of mellow jazz music wafting over the red brick and well-polished, light oak, the Emerald has an easygoing, comfortable vibe. The drinks are good without being overpriced, and the service is always friendly and attentive. Plus, it’s only a few blocks away from the shop, so it’s convenient. It’s been our go-to spot to grab a drink for a while now. So, when Caitlyn called me after our meeting with Eddie saying she needed to talk, meeting up with her at the Emerald seemed like a natural fit.

It was getting late, so I sent my team home for the day with the admonition to watch their backs. We haven’t heard from the man who attacked Lucas yet. No calls to gloat, no cryptic messages, and thankfully, no more body parts in boxes for me to find. He’s just gone radio silent, which worries me. It worries me a lot. I have no idea what he’s got planned next. Nor do I have any idea if Koslowski’s team is making any headway on the case. I tried calling, but she’s under orders from Ayad to keep me out of the loop.

“How did things go in Chinatown?” she asks.

“About as well as expected. Mr. Kim didn’t want to talk to us, so I had to incentivize him.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Incentivize him, huh?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I reply. “We should be getting either the name of the person who gave the order or his burner phone within the next day.”

“And you believe he’ll be honest with you?”

I take a sip of my scotch and nod. "I do. Like I said, I gave him the right motivation to give us what we want... and to be honest."

She smirks. "I've always loved your optimism, Blake."

"What can I say? I believe in the power of positive thinking," I reply. "How'd things go down at the ME's office?"

"They didn't," she says with a note of irritation. "They're backlogged with cases and needed more time with our bodies."

"They always are. We'll give them a little more time, then put the squeeze on them."

"That sounds like a plan," she says.

"One thing I'm still trying to figure out is why they killed all those girls," I say. "It's unusual, and I can't figure it out."

She shrugs. "Maybe they put up a fuss. I mean, they had been worked over pretty good," she says. "Or maybe they didn't sell at one of their auctions."

"It's possible," I admit. "But something is bothering me about that. I mean, all six girls were young. They were pretty. Those kinds of girls usually sell. And let's not discount the fact that we've never found six bodies at once."

"I don't know what it means either," she says. "I'm also not convinced it means anything as dire as you're thinking."

"Dire? And here I thought you said you loved my sunny optimism."

She smiles and then takes a sip of her martini. Her face is clouded over, and there's a troubled gleam in her eye. But she still doesn't seem ready to talk about it.

"Okay, if you're not convinced it means something bigger and darker, what are you thinking such a big body dump means?"

"Like I said, it's possible the girls were putting up a fight and our bad guy couldn't afford to keep them around. Or maybe they'd beaten them so badly, they weren't viable for sale."

"That's possible," I say.

"Or maybe, our bad guys decided to cut bait and get out of Seattle?"

I shake my head. "The Yokai are a lot of things, but wasteful isn't one of them. Killing and dumping six girls is excessive. It's wasteful,"

I state. “I also don’t think they’re looking to get out of Seattle. They’re only just getting started here. Fish has locked them out of this city for so many years; I can only imagine they’re salivating at the chance to get back into it.”

“We’ve got too many maybes and what-ifs,” Caitlyn grouched.

“On that much, we agree.”

“Tell me more about this Fish character. More specifically, I’m curious how you got mixed up with some shadowy crime lord,” she asks.

I drain the last of my scotch then laugh softly. “Maybe he was that in another life. But today, he’s a legit businessman—for the most part. He sits on the city council and has several philanthropic endeavors that provide support for those in need—mostly women and children,” I say. “And yes, once upon a time, he was a shadowy crime lord, as you call him. But he worked with me when I first started with the Bureau. He helped me make some of the busts that I built the foundation of my career on—”

“While at the same time, taking down some of his biggest rivals, allowing him to build the foundation of his criminal career,” she finishes.

“That’s true. I’m not going to say otherwise,” I reply. “What I will say, though, is that by doing what he did by working with me, rather than going to war, kept a lot of blood out of the streets. He was tactical and precise. And once he established himself as the power in the city, a lot of the normal violence we saw dropped.”

“I think adding hundreds of new officers helped,” she says.

“To some extent, sure. But let’s not fool ourselves into thinking law enforcement was the only reason for the decline in crime,” I say. “For meaningful change, you need to have some stability on the streets. And Fish has been that stabilizing force for a long time now.”

Sylvie drops off a fresh round, and we both take a moment to sip our drinks. Caitlyn isn’t the only person to ever question my relationship with Fish. Spenser had questioned me pretty aggressively about it too. I know it seems like an unlikely friendship at best, and a problematic one that could indicate corruption to most

—the FBI agent and the crime boss. I understand that. But very few understand him like I do.

Most of the time, I'll ignore the question. The way I see things, our relationship is mutually beneficial: he's never asked me to abuse my authority, and I know myself well enough to know I never would. As far as I'm concerned, it's nobody's business but my own. But there are a few people I respect enough that I'll offer up an explanation. Caitlyn is one of them. And much to my surprise, apparently, Spenser is too.

"You're so loyal to him," Caitlyn finally says.

"I am."

"But why?" she asks. "I mean, you have to know how it would look to certain people."

"Because frankly, I don't care how it looks. To anybody."

"Where does this loyalty to him come from, Blake?" she asks. "I mean, if it got out that you were hanging out with a crime boss—"

"He's a city councilman and has become a respected philanthropist and businessman," I correct her. "Money and good works can wash away a lot of sin."

A small smile touches her lips. "Fair enough. And you're not wrong," she says. "But if it got out you were running with him back in his crime lord heyday, it could sink your career."

"I've never hidden my association with him. And nobody's asked," I tell her. "And if they want to start looking into my past—and his past—let them. They can open an investigation if they want. I have nothing to hide. I've never done anything shady and have been nothing but above board through my entire career."

"I have no doubt about that. None. And if you ever need a character witness, I'm your girl," she says.

"I hope that day never comes," I reply.

"Me too," she replies. "But you still haven't explained where that loyalty comes from."

I take a sip of my drink and set the glass back down, a frown on my lips. "Fish has done more for me than anybody in my life ever has. He's saved my life and the lives of my team more times than I can count. But even more than that, he saved my sister's life. He

watched out for her when nobody else would. Not even the Bureau,” I say. “He’s done it all and has never asked me for a thing other than for my friendship—for my respect. And let me tell you—he’s earned both of those things a thousand times over. So, yeah, maybe I helped him build his empire by taking his rivals off the board. But he provided stability on the streets. And for everything he’s so willingly given me, I’d help him build his empire a thousand times more. He’s been good to me and mine, Caitlyn. That’s where my loyalty to him comes from.”

Caitlyn leans back in her seat and takes a minute to process everything I just told her. She lifts her glass to her lips and takes another drink, then sets it back down, taking a few moments before she raises her eyes to mine.

“I’m not going to say I’d be comfortable being as close to somebody with the sort of background he has, but I’m not in your position, so I can’t say I wouldn’t be either,” she says. “I thought it was going to be something complicated that skirted the edges of a quid pro quo type situation. But listening to you speak, it sounds pretty simple. It sounds like—”

“Family,” I interrupt. “He’s part of my family.”

She nods. “Fair enough.”

“Now that I’ve bared my soul, are you going to tell me what’s going on with you?” I ask.

I know my track record when I push people to open up isn’t a good one, but if I don’t push, I’m not sure she’s going to let herself go there with me. She’s always played things close to the vest, but this feels different. By asking me about my relationship with Fish, it almost felt like she was trying to get me to open up and reveal a secret to her, perhaps with the hope that if I did, it might give her the strength to reveal whatever’s bothering her.

Caitlyn drains the last of her drink and then signals for another round. She stares into the bottom of her glass, pursing her lips, her expression troubled. After Sylvie drops off our drinks and takes away our empties, Caitlyn takes a slow drink and seems to be considering her words. She finally sets her glass down and looks up at me.

“I think I’ve got a mole on my team,” she says.

“Are you sure?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not sure. Not one hundred percent. But my gut is telling me it’s true, and my gut rarely steers me wrong.”

“What makes you think you’ve got a mole? What happened?”

“One of our CIs was murdered. Adam Huang had been working with us for about two years and had made some inroads with an organization he said was running girls,” she tells me. “Anyway, Adam was supposed to meet with somebody who could give him some intel on the organization, and the next day, he turned up in a parking lot. He’d been severely beaten, had his tongue cut out, then had his throat cut.”

“Jesus,” I mutter.

“The only people who knew he was a CI were on my team,” I say. “We put his papers on a secure server. I checked, and nobody had accessed it.”

“Are you sure about that? People can cover their tracks.”

“As sure as I can be,” she says.

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to have my techs look at that server,” I tell her. “They’ll be able to tell us definitively if somebody had been in the server and covered their tracks.”

“That’s fine. That’s good,” she says. “I’ll make sure they have access.”

“Any idea who it could be?”

She shakes her head. “No clue. And that’s what’s shaking me the most right now. I’ve possibly got a mole running around right under my nose, and I never saw it. Never even suspected they were there until Adam turned up dead. He may have been our best lead into the Yokai—”

“If he was actually meeting somebody with the Yokai.”

“It had to be,” she says. “They’re kind of the only game in town right now.”

“Well, it’s something we’re going to need to look into.”

“I need help with this, Blake. If I can’t trust my team, I’m going to have to lean on yours.”

“You know I’ve got your back.”

“Thank you,” she says.

I reach across the table and take her hand, then give it a gentle squeeze. "We're going to figure this out, Caitlyn. I give you my word."

Making promises about an outcome is not something I usually do because there are so many variables I can't control, things can go sideways in a hurry. I always caution my team to avoid the practice since it usually leads to nothing but frustration, heartache, and anger for everybody involved. Which is why, as I heard the words leaving my mouth, I cringed inwardly and resisted the urge to slap myself.

I made a promise. And it's one I really hope I'm able to keep.



CHAPTER EIGHT

King County Medical Examiner's Office; Downtown Seattle

“We haven’t been able to complete all six autopsies just yet, but the four we’ve done have shown consistent results.”

Dr. Luther Donald is a tall man, easily standing six-three. He’s lean but athletic with warm, espresso-toned skin, dark eyes, sharp features, and a strong jawline. He reminds me of a younger version of the actor, Djimon Hounsou. In all the years I’ve known Dr. Donald, I don’t know that I’ve ever seen the man smile or laugh though. He’s like the exact opposite of my good friend Beks who also works here at the Medical Examiner’s office: he’s always all business, all the time. He doesn’t do hyperbole, and his demeanor is usually coldly logical. But he’s incredibly good at his job; he’s meticulous and precise about everything. If he tells you something about your corpse, you can take it to the bank that he’s right.

“And what are the consistent results?” I ask.

Donald walks across the gleaming white tiles of the autopsy suite to a desk that sits in the corner, leaving Astra, Caitlyn, and me

standing in front of the stainless-steel table holding the body of one of our victims. Rose Withers. Sixteen years old. Her fair skin is marred by deep, ugly purple and black bruises, and ragged lacerations crisscrossing other parts of her body.

Astra points to a small, round bruise in the crook of her elbow. "Track marks."

"Could be," I say through gritted teeth.

With her eyes closed and her face smooth, Rose looks peaceful, almost like she's sleeping. It's a slumber she'll never wake from, her future and her entire life stolen from her. I ball my hands into fists as the rage flows through me. The murder of an innocent always gets to me, but none angers me more than the killing of a child.

"No, it definitely is a track mark," Donald confirms.

He stands on the other side of the table from us and lays the open file folder down on top of Rose's body. Before I can speak a word, Astra subtly grabs my hand and squeezes it hard, and I manage to swallow down the vitriol that nearly burst from my mouth. I think working on top of this girl's dead, naked body is well beyond disrespectful. But I silently remind myself that this is Dr. Donald's suite, and his rules apply on his home court. Getting in his face about my own discomfort is likely only going to strain the somewhat frosty, utilitarian relationship we have.

From past conversations, I know that Dr. Donald doesn't have the same sort of feelings or attachment for our bodies that I do. And when we die, he sees them as empty husks. I know he's not a sentimental guy, but resting the file on her lifeless body just seems especially cold. To me, it seems antisocial and perhaps even bordering on sociopathic. But I silently tell myself for about the ten thousandth time that Dr. Donald is entitled to his beliefs and opinions. If he chooses to believe we're nothing more than walking, talking, sentient sacks of meat, so be it. I just hate seeing him use this poor, dead girl like she's part of the damn table.

"I've gotten the bloodwork back from the four victims who have been autopsied. All four of them show they've got a lethal dose of fentanyl in their systems," he says.

"That can't be a coincidence," Astra says.

“Of course, it could be,” he replies. “These girls are all young—the oldest is seventeen. If they don’t know how to properly—”

“I think what she means, Doctor Donald,” I interrupt, “is that four girls, found dead together and thrown out like garbage, all having a lethal amount of fentanyl in their systems, is unusual. When we investigate crimes like this, coincidences are rare.”

He looks down at Rose, then back up at us again. “Yes. I see what you mean. I suppose then, that is a fair assessment.”

Caitlyn folds her arms over her chest. “So, they were held down and given a hot shot?”

“I find that unlikely. The bruises and lacerations you see on her body are days old. Perhaps even up to a week. Same with the other girls,” Donald says. “My best estimate is these girls have been dead for a few days at most. I also do not see anything that would indicate they were restrained while being given the shot that killed them.”

“So, they took these hot shots voluntarily?” Caitlyn asks.

“Maybe they didn’t know they were being given a lethal dose,” Astra says.

“Again, that is something you typically see among novice drug users,” Donald says, “especially with a drug as potentially lethal as fentanyl. As a nation, we saw almost seventy thousand fentanyl-related deaths in 2021. I fear the statistics for last year, when they’re finally published, will be even worse. It’s an epidemic.”

“No argument from me about it being an epidemic, but something about this doesn’t feel accidental to me,” I say.

“What makes you say that?” Caitlyn asks.

“One, maybe two, I could buy being an accidental OD,” I say. “But all of them? Once the first girl or two started to OD, I can’t see the others taking the shot anyway.”

“What are you thinking?” Astra asks.

I frown and fold my arms over my chest as a thought forms in my head and starts to bloom into a theory—or at least, the beginning of a theory. But there are just too many things not adding up for me, and I’m having a hard time believing this was an accidental overdose—actually six accidental overdoses.

“Doctor Donald, did you find any fentanyl in the girl who cut her wrists?” I ask.

He flips through the pages in his folder, and I turn away, still irritated by the sight of him using this poor girl’s dead body as a workspace. When I turn back, I see a troubled look on the man’s face as he reads through the file.

“Strangely enough, no,” he says in that deep, rumbling baritone. “There was no fentanyl found in the sixth girl’s system. There were no drugs in her system at all. Whitney Wright is her name, and she died of exsanguination: massive blood loss due to the severing of her radial and ulnar arteries.”

“So, she bleeds out while the other five OD,” Caitlyn notes. “I have no idea what to think about any of that. It doesn’t make sense.”

“I think it does. Sort of,” I say. “It tells me that Whitney administered the fatal doses to the other five girls and then took her own life.”

“She’s right. It doesn’t make sense though,” Caitlyn says. “Why give everybody else a hot shot, then slash her own wrists? It makes for a confusing scene.”

“I don’t know. Maybe she didn’t have enough for herself. Maybe she just doesn’t like needles. There could be a hundred reasons,” I say. “But this scene is telling me that the girls knew what was waiting for them if they let themselves be broken. They resisted and stayed strong—strong enough to take their own lives rather than let themselves be sold. This was their final act of defiance. A final screw you to the Yokai.”

“Damn,” Caitlyn says softly. “I didn’t see it like that. That... makes sense.”

“I can’t imagine being in a position like that. And I don’t know that I’d have the strength or courage to do what they did,” Astra says.

“Yeah, neither do I,” I reply.

“I don’t see how that factors into anything though,” Caitlyn says. “I mean... what does it mean that they possibly killed themselves?”

“I’m not sure yet. Maybe nothing. But maybe everything. We won’t know until we get to know these girls,” I say. “Caitlyn, is that

something your team can do? Can you have your people start doing deep dives on these six girls?"

"Yeah. Of course," she replies.

"Good. We need to know everything there is to know about these girls. I mean everything."

"I'll put them on it. No problem," she says.

I've been looking for a feasible reason to sideline Caitlyn's team ever since she told me she thinks she's got a mole inside her unit. I just hadn't come up with anything that wasn't too obvious until now. Ordinarily, I'd give the assignment to Rick and Nina. With their skills, they'd be able to work up thorough dossiers on all six girls relatively quickly. Caitlyn's field agents aren't going to have the same skills and will have to do a lot of legwork to get what I'm looking for. And that will take some time, which effectively sidelines them.

I didn't have time to run my idea by Caitlyn since it just occurred to me, but she seems to understand what I'm doing and seems fine going along with it. I have no doubt her team will be pissed they're on background duty, but she'll be able to sell it as my idea, thus putting the blame squarely on my shoulders. So, when they complain, she can make me out to be the bad guy. And since I don't care if they're upset with me, that makes it a win-win.

"All right, what's our play then?" Astra asks.

"Well, while Caitlyn is handing out her marching orders, you and I have a date with Eddie Kim to keep," I say. "He texted and is ready to hand over his phone."

"Well, there's a bit of good news," she says.

"Will you be needing me for anything else, ladies?"

The deep, rumbling voice cuts into my thoughts, and I turn to see Donald looking at us with an expression of annoyance on his face. I was so caught up in my head, I forgot he was even standing there.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Dr. Donald," I say. "Yeah, we'll get out of your hair. Can you please forward me all the autopsy reports when you're finished?"

"Of course," he says.

“Great. Thank you,” I reply, then turn to Astra and Caitlyn. “All right. Let’s get to work.”



CHAPTER NINE

The Sichuan Blossom, Chinatown-International District; Seattle, WA

“**W**hat in the hell is going on here?” I mutter.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say whatever the hell is going on over there, it’s nothing good,” Astra replies.

We park in the lot across the street from the Sichuan Blossom we’d used before and stare at the half-dozen squad cars, ambulances, and other emergency vehicles in front of the place. The tape line is being set up, and there’s already a healthy crowd behind it, their phones up and recording as they jostle for position to get the best shot. We get out of our SUV, then walk across the street to the scene and are stopped by a Seattle PD patrolman at the tape line.

“Sorry, nobody beyond this line,” he says in an authoritative voice. “Especially reporters.”

Astra and I exchange a glance before I turn back to him. “Do we look like reporters to you?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. Kind of.”

When we both flash our badges, his eyes widen, and he shifts on his feet. The patrolman glances to his left like he'd rather be anywhere but here right now.

"Agents Wilder and Russo. FBI," I say. "Who's the incident commander?"

"That would be Lieutenant Gage. He's right over there in the dark suit," he says.

"Great. We're going to need to talk to him," I reply.

"Yeah. Sure thing," the patrolman says, then holds up the tape for us.

We duck under it, then walk over to the man in the dark suit he'd pointed out. He's about six-one and moves with an easy grace. He's got warm, ebony skin and dark, intense eyes. When he looks at you, it just feels like he's dissecting you. Gage has broad shoulders and the frame of an athlete, but his short, gray hair tells me he's somewhere in his fifties and is developing a slight paunch around the middle. He looks like a man who still works out, but maybe not quite as vigorously as he once did.

"Two questions," he starts. "Who are you, and why are you on my scene?"

Gage's voice is a little higher pitched than I expected. For some reason, when I see a big man, I always expect him to have a deep, sonorous voice, which makes it a bit jarring to hear a voice so high and smooth coming from his mouth. I quickly gather myself and badge him.

"Agents Wilder and Russo, FBI," I repeat. "And we're on your scene because we were supposed to be meeting a CI here."

"You have a CI? Here?" he asks incredulously.

"We do. A very reluctant one, but yes," I reply. "Why do you sound so shocked?"

"Because finding somebody in Chinatown who will work with cops—especially white cops—is like finding a unicorn in the wild," he chuckles. "Ladies, I suggest you both go buy lottery tickets or play the ponies."

"We didn't give him much of a choice," I say, then gesture to the restaurant. "What happened in there?"

“Nothing good,” he says.

“Told you,” Astra chimes in.

“The animals are eating their own. Happens from time to time. I guess we should probably thank them for taking the trash out for us though,” he says. “A guy came in with an AR and sprayed the place. If your CI is in there, I’m afraid he’s not going to be doing much talking.”

“Damn,” I mutter.

“Yeah, it’s not pretty,” Gage says.

“How long ago?” Astra asks.

“We’ve been on scene for about twenty minutes,” he replies. “Shooting went down about thirty minutes ago.”

“Mind if we take a look?” I ask.

“Do your thing,” he says.

“Thanks, Lieutenant.”

Astra leads me into the restaurant, and the first thing I see is the kind older woman who’d greeted us when we stopped by before. She’s on her back next to the hostess stand, her eyes wide open and staring at some point beyond this world. Her mouth is hanging open, and a thick rivulet of dark blood spills from the corner of her mouth. Her shirt has at least half a dozen ragged holes from the bullets that punched their way into her body and is saturated with so much blood, I can’t even tell what the original color of it was.

The walls near the back corner booth—Eddie’s booth—are riddled with holes. Large chunks of plaster have been torn out, the ground covered in a white powder, and only ragged stumps remain in the pots, the bullets having mowed through them all. Two of Eddie’s men are face down in pools of their own blood, dark and viscous, on the old, red carpet. Handguns—nine-millimeters by the look of them—are next to the bodies. They’d obviously gotten up and were attempting to return fire to protect their boss when they were cut down.

Eddie himself is still wedged into the booth looking like he was showered in buckets of blood. His bulk appears to have kept him from sliding out and making a run for it, and there are at least a dozen rounds punched into his chest. One tore through his left

cheek, and another one passed right through his forehead, exploding out the back. The wall behind him is covered in a thick fan of blood and tissue, and for a moment, I can't look away from the long, red streaks that are running down the wall behind him.

Somehow in all the carnage, his off-kilter hat managed to remain firmly planted on his head. It would be funny if it weren't so horrific.

"Gage was right," Astra says. "It's not pretty in here."

"It's not."

"Gang hit?"

"Maybe. But I doubt it," I reply.

"Why's that?"

"The two guards and even the older woman—they look like they were all killed quickly and efficiently. Eddie has more bullet holes in him than I can count right now. The shooter wanted to make sure he was not just dead, but *dead* dead," I say. "That sort of overkill tells me he was the target, and the rest of the people are all just collateral damage. Wrong place, wrong time."

Astra puts her hands on her hips and looks around. "Yeah. Maybe," she says. "But that also sounds like it could be the head of some rival set coming in and finishing some beef they had with Eddie. I mean, these streets..."

I shrug. "Like I said, it's possible."

"You're not convinced."

I arch an eyebrow at her. "Not in the least," I say. "I mean, what are the odds that the day we're supposed to meet with Eddie to get that phone from him some random gunman walks in and puts a thousand bullets into him?"

"It's a coincidence, for sure—"

"I don't like coincidences."

"You don't say," Astra says with a grin. "Okay, but riddle me this, my friend. How would the Yokai know we were talking to Eddie? There's no way he would have let them know he was going to hand over evidence that could let us find them."

Gnawing on my bottom lip, I frown. "Caitlyn thinks she's got a mole in her unit."

"What? Are you serious?"

“She’s not sure and has no proof. But she thinks she does, yeah. She told me she had a CI murdered, and the only people who could have gotten his information were on her team. Or somebody higher up the command chain, obviously,” I say. “The trick is proving it. I’ve got Rick and Nina quietly checking the MPU’s secure servers, looking for evidence that somebody had accessed the information and then covered their tracks. And now, I’m going to have to have them check our servers too.”

“Jesus, Blake,” she says. “If our servers have been compromised—”

“Yeah. Don’t worry; I’ve already taken precautions. I had Rick and Nina move everything but the reports from this case to another server and had them lock it down,” I say. “But Eddie being shot up proves to me that we’ve got a rat problem. I don’t buy for a second this is a random gang hit. Not with the way the shooter made sure Eddie didn’t survive his wounds.”

“I hear you, but we have to have some actual proof.”

“We do,” I say.

There are half a dozen techs in dark blue coveralls processing the crime scene. I finally tear my eyes away from Eddie’s body and watch them marking and then picking up what seems like dozens of brass shell casings that glitter in the light cast by the Chinese lanterns overhead. I step over to one, a woman with dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and dark, almond-shaped eyes behind her safety glasses.

“Excuse me. Did you happen to find that man’s phone?” I ask, gesturing to Eddie’s corpse.

She looks down and taps at the screen of her table, then shakes her head. “No, we didn’t find any phones at all. Nobody had one on them. Weird, huh? Everybody’s got a phone.”

I turn to Astra. “That can’t be a coincidence either.”

“Yeah, maybe not,” she says. “But how are we going to prove it one way or the other?”

“I’m working on that.”

“Okay, so no phone, no witness, no nothing. That leaves us exactly nowhere.”

“Yeah. The thought crossed my mind.”

I watch the techs going about their business, collecting and cataloging evidence with the hope it will all be used to put away a bad guy at some point in the not-too-distant future. At the moment, though, I’m not feeling too optimistic about anything really. My phone buzzes, so I pull it out of my pocket.

“It’s Rick,” I say as I connect the call and press the phone to my ear. “Please tell me you have good news for me.”

I listen to what he has to say and feel the smoldering embers of hope within me spring back to life as Rick gives them some much-needed oxygen.

“Fantastic. Thank you,” I say then disconnect the call. “We’ve got another lead. Let’s roll.”



CHAPTER TEN

Platinum Luxury Motor Rentals; Downtown Seattle

I park the car in the lot and shut the engine down, then check the name of the business and its address against the text Rick sent me.

“Looks like the place,” I say.

Astra takes a quick glance and nods. “Well, let’s go have a chat with the boss then.”

“Lead the way.”

We get out of the SUV and walk to the office. I hold the door open and follow Astra into the cool, well-appointed office. Everything is done in soothing, neutral colors, and the furniture is all plush and comfortable. Soft, instrumental plays from hidden speakers, and pieces of modern, abstract art hang on the walls. To our right, a credenza holds a Keurig coffee maker as well as a tray of pastries that look fresh. And delicious. My stomach rumbles so loud, Astra glances at me, doing her best to stifle a laugh.

“What?” I say softly. “I’m hungry.”

“Apparently.”

“Can I help you, ladies?”

The man standing behind the chest-high counter across from the front door is average height and has sandy blond hair, vivid green eyes, and a long face that’s sharp and angular. His name tag says “Dylan,” and he looks like he’d be more comfortable on the back of a surfboard than he is behind the counter. But we all have to pay the bills. When we badge him, the guy has absolutely no reaction, which takes me aback. We usually get a flicker of fear, some hint of trepidation, or something, but he just sits there staring at us with zero expression on his face. The man is completely blissed out on something.

“Agents Wilder and Russo. FBI,” I say. “Are you the manager here?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. That’d be Tomio.”

“Great. Can we speak with him?”

“Yeah, sure thing. Let me go get him for you.”

Dylan disappears through a door behind the desk, and I turn to Astra. “I guess drug testing isn’t a required part of the job.”

“Apparently not.”

A moment later, the door opens again, and another man steps out. He’s five-nine at most and has a stocky build. His dark hair is flecked with gray, and he stares at us in silence for a moment with dark, almond-shaped eyes. Wearing a nicely tailored, charcoal gray, pinstriped suit with a white shirt and black tie beneath a darker gray vest, and a red square sticking out of his breast pocket, I’d say he’s a pretty natty dresser. I don’t like the way he’s looking at us though. He’s got a smug and almost imperious look on his face that just rubs me the wrong way. He steps through a swinging gate on the right side of the counter, then steps over to us.

“I am Tomio Masuda. I am the manager,” he says. “What can I help you with, Agents?”

“Agents Wilder and Russo,” I introduce us again. “We need to take a look at one of your SUVs, Mr. Masuda. License plate number F-R-Q-3-4-1-5, to be specific.”

“May I ask why you need to do that?”

“Because we have information that it may have been used in the commission of a crime.”

He shakes his head and gives us a patient smile. “I assure you that cannot be true. We keep a very strict inventory of our vehicles. None get out without our notice.”

“All right, then we need to know when and where this vehicle was for the last two weeks.”

I pull a slip of paper out of my pocket and hand it over to him. Masuda reads the number scrawled on the page, his frown deepening. He finally raises his gaze to me.

“It was rented,” he says simply. “I believe it was returned yesterday.”

“We’re going to need those rental records, Mr. Masuda,” I tell him.

“Do you have a warrant, Agents?”

“Not at the moment. We were hoping that you would willingly cooperate with us, but we can certainly get one,” Astra says. “Of course, we are going to need to shut you down while we get that. And if you make us do that, I can promise you a few very long days. Or you could just make this easy on everybody and cooperate with us.”

“I do not appreciate these coercive tactics, Agents,” he says.

“Oh, that wasn’t coercive,” Astra replies. “That was just laying out the facts of what can and will happen. Now, you still absolutely have the right to stonewall if you’d like. I just wanted to let you know what would happen if you did. That’s all.”

His lips are a tight slash across his face, and his expression bristles with irritation and disapproval. “Come with me,” he snaps.

He turns and we follow him through the gate then through the door in the back. He neither looks back nor engages us in conversation as we make our way through the hallways that cut through the office. We eventually step through a door and find ourselves in a cavernous garage. There are cars and SUVs up on lifts being worked on, and the air around us is filled with the sound of men shouting to one another, music, and laughter, as well as power tools being used to work on their fleet of vehicles.

Masuda snatches a tablet off a nearby bench and motions for us to follow him. We step out of the garage and into the patchy sunlight of the partially overcast afternoon. Still pointedly ignoring us, Masuda consults his tablet, stabbing it with his fingertip.

“This way,” he says brusquely.

We wind our way through a field of luxury cars, finding our way to a large, covered structure that holds their in-house car washing station. Masuda points to a black Cadillac Escalade at the end of the line, awaiting its turn. I check the license plate against the one Rick gave me over the phone just to confirm.

“That’s the one,” I say.

“I don’t understand,” Masuda says. “What is this all about?”

“That Escalade was caught on street surveillance cameras outside of a salvage yard where six bodies were found,” I tell him. “I’m going to need to take this one out of service so we can have a team come down and check it out.”

“This is absurd,” he says.

“Astra, do me a favor and get me a telephonic warrant and then get a forensics unit rolling out this way,” I say.

“Copy that.”

As she steps away to make the calls, I turn back to Masuda. He looks like he’s about to burst a blood vessel and stroke out on me. I pull out my phone and call up the video Rick sent me. He and Nina found it on the street cam footage they’ve been scrubbing. I turn it so the man can see it, then hit play and watch him closely as he views it. On the screen, the Escalade is parked across the street from the salvage yard. The windows are tinted so we can’t get an angle on the driver or the passenger, but they seem to be waiting for something.

A couple of minutes later, a large flatbed truck, the type that’s large enough to haul shipping containers, rumbles out of the salvage yard, turns right, and eventually disappears from the screen. The Escalade pulls away from the curb just after that and heads off in the same direction as the flatbed. It’s woefully thin. But it’s just enough to give us the probable cause we need to secure a warrant. Assuming we get the right judge anyway.

“I don’t know what this means,” he says. “Why are you showing me this?”

I tap the screen. “This is that Escalade. Your Escalade.”

“So?”

“Half an hour before this, that Escalade parked there as that flatbed went into the salvage yard loaded with a shipping container,” I tell him. “That container contained the bodies of six young girls. You see where I’m going with this?”

“This is preposterous,” he says.

“And yet, here we are,” I say. “The license plate on the Escalade in the video matches the one in that washing bay. Which, by the way, I’m going to insist you and your men do not touch for what I hope are obvious reasons.”

He shakes his head. “There has to be some sort of mistake here, Agent Wilder.”

“Mr. Masuda, who has access to these vehicles?”

He seems flustered, his mouth opening and closing with no words coming out for a minute. But then he clears his throat, gives himself a small shake, and stands up straight, lifting his chin and adopting that smug, imperious expression once more.

“Most of our staff has access to the vehicles,” he says. “Mechanics, washers, front of the house associates, managers—we all need to have access.”

“Fair enough. And how many employees do you have?”

“I believe it’s somewhere in the neighborhood of seventy-five or so,” he replies.

“Okay, I’m going to need a full roster—”

“Is that necessary?”

“Yes, Mr. Masuda, it’s very necessary,” I say, my tone hard. “Somebody who used that vehicle may have been involved with the murder of six teenage girls. What part of that are you not understanding?”

“The part where anybody who works here would do something like that,” he growls. “I interview everyone we hire personally. I like to think I’d be able to spot somebody who enjoys murdering young girls.”

He looks shaken and in a state of disbelief about everything going on. It's understandable. It's also understandable he's trying to do his best to spin and deflect, knowing the sort of bad press this will rain down on his company. That being said, somebody on his staff used that vehicle and very likely is somehow associated with the Yokai Syndicate and the murder of those six girls.

"We'd all like to think that," I say, trying to soften my tone. "The truth is, sociopaths can camouflage themselves very well. They can be completely undetectable."

"We've got our warrant, Blake," Astra says as she steps over to me. "And the forensics team is on the way."

"Mr. Masuda, we're going to have to isolate that car so our team can process it when they arrive," I say. "It's important you tell your men to stay away from it."

"Yes. Of course. Fine. I need to go and call the owner to let him know what is happening," he says, then rushes away.

"He seems pleasant. Totally not high-strung at all," Astra quips.

"And getting nicer with every passing minute," I say. "Anyway, we've got seventy-five people with access to every vehicle on this lot."

"That's fantastic. That should be fun."

"It's also possible somebody broke into the garage and boosted the keys," Astra offers.

"It's possible. We'll need to ask Masuda if there have been any break-ins recently."

"Probably a good idea," she replies.

Astra follows me over to the Escalade. We both pull a pair of black nitrile gloves out of our pockets and snap them on. I open the back passenger side door first, and the moment I do, I'm overcome by the stench of bleach that's so thick, it immediately makes my eyes water. Stepping back, I turn around and give myself a moment to let my eyes stop watering.

"Jesus," I mutter.

"I have a feeling the forensics team isn't going to get much out of there," Astra mutters.

Standing with my hands on my hips, I stare at the Escalade and shake my head. Whoever took it took great pains to scour and bleach the inside, trying to kill any bit of trace evidence that might have been inside. Astra's right; the forensics team is going to have a hell of a time finding anything in there. To this point, it seems like every time a door opens in this investigation, it gets slammed right in our faces. It's getting frustrating.

"Dammit," I growl.

"My sentiments exactly," she replies.

"Well, once the forensics team gets here, we need to take a ride."

"Where are we headed?"

"We're going back to the salvage yard," I say. "I want to check for security footage, but I also want to know who allowed that shipping container in and why."

"Didn't Seattle PD already question the salvage yard owners?"

"They did," I reply. "We're going to go back through to make sure it was done right."

"You have spent far too much time with Paxton. He's rubbed bias of his all over you."

"Is it biased if it's true?" I say with a laugh. "They're completely incompetent."

I'm painting with a broad brush, but I've had far too many promising leads slip through my fingers over the years thanks to the SPD's incompetence. Recent years have been much better, I'll grant. But like Lisa Koslowski, they're not trained psychologists or profilers. I just want to make sure they didn't miss anything. Plus, I'm getting desperate for a viable lead.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Miller's Scrap & Salvage Yard; Spellman, WA

“**E**van Miller?” I ask.

The large, burly man takes his gloves off and tucks them in his back pocket as he climbs down from the industrial forklift he was operating. He takes off his hard hat and sets it on the machine's treads, then runs a hand through his brown, curly locks. Roughly six feet tall with a warm, tawny complexion, Evan has broad shoulders and is thick through the chest. His biceps strain the sleeves of his long-sleeved T-shirt, and his chin and cheeks are covered in a few days' worth of growth that, while scruffy, still somehow looks fashionable.

“Nah. I'm Ross,” he says. “Evan was my dad—the one who started this place.”

“Agents Wilder and Russo, FBI,” I say as we badge him.

“This about those girls found in the shipping container?”

“It is.”

He frowns and shakes his head. "Damn shame," he says. "What a waste of life."

"Yes, it is," I reply. "But what we are interested in is how that shipping container got into your salvage yard to begin with."

"To be honest, I don't have the first clue. The first I knew of it was when the cops came crashing down on this place."

"Are you in the habit of letting people dump random things like steel shipping containers in your yard?" Astra asks.

A wry smile twists his lips. "Something specific you want to ask me, Agent Russo?"

"Nothing specific," she replies. "I'm just curious how that container got into your yard without your knowledge."

"Believe me, Agent Russo, I've been trying to figure that out since this whole mess started," he says. "We don't normally accept shipping containers. We can't crush them like we do with cars, and they tend to just sit for years."

"So, do you often have strange things just show up in your yard?" I ask.

He shrugs. "People sometimes sneak in and leave stuff after we've gone home for the day."

"So, this isn't the first shipping container you've found?" Astra presses.

"It is, to be honest," he replies. "When people leave stuff, it's wrecked-out cars or just garbage in general. Some of these jerks seem to think this is a landfill."

"Sounds like you need a better lock on your gates," Astra says.

He smirks at her. "Honestly, most of the time it's not a problem. Even wrecked-out cars have some value to somebody. I'm more than happy to part them out since that's pure profit. Can't argue with that."

"I suppose not," she says.

"What about this though?" I ask.

"What's that?"

Watching his reactions closely, I hold up my phone and show him the video of the truck bringing the container in and then leaving without the container. Miller watches it, confusion etched into his

features. When the video stops, he raises his gaze to me, looking as if he's at a loss for words.

"This was on the twenty-third," I say.

He gives me a look of relief and runs a hand across his face. "I was traveling with my family that day," he tells us. "We took our youngest to Disneyland for her twelfth birthday. We got back the day after that video was shot."

"And you can provide proof of that?" Astra asks.

"I can."

"All right, who was in charge while you were away?" I ask. "Who could have accepted the container, Mr. Miller?"

"Well... Randy Bowen is my number two here. Has been for years. He takes care of everything when I'm not around," he says. "But Randy is a good man. There's no way he can be involved in anything like this. I'm sure there has to be an explanation."

"We're going to need to speak to him," I say.

"There's no way he's involved, Agents. I'm telling you. I've known him for thirty years—"

"I understand that, Mr. Miller. But we're still going to need to speak with him."

Clenching and unclenching his jaw, Miller looks at us with an expression that makes him look like he's got a foul taste in his mouth. He's loyal, and I can tell Miller feels like he'll be betraying his friend by letting us talk to him.

"Mr. Miller, where is Mr. Bowen?" I press.

He sighs heavily. "He should be in his office."

"Great. We can find our way," I say.

"No. I'll take you to him."

With all the enthusiasm of a man making the walk to the execution chamber at San Quentin, Miller leads us through the yard to the low, squat building that houses the salvage yard's administrative offices. Though everything is dim and seems to have a permanent layer of grime ground into it, the offices are still surprisingly tidy. We pass by a receptionist who gives Miller a concerned look, but he ignores her and leads us down a long

hallway. He stops at an open doorway and looks over his shoulder at us before stepping inside.

The office is cramped. Astra and I are practically shoulder to shoulder when we step inside. We stand in front of Randy Bowen's desk, and he's seated behind it with Miller standing to his right. Bowen looks up at us with an expression of confusion on his face. He's not a large man. Five-nine, maybe five-ten at most, and rail thin. He's got light brown hair and hazel eyes; his features are sharp, and the stubble on his face doesn't seem quite as stylish as Miller's. Dressed in blue jeans and a blue flannel with a black T-shirt underneath it, Bowen just looks the part of a blue-collar, salt-of-the-earth kind of guy.

"Help you?" he asks skeptically.

"Agents Wilder and Russo, FBI," I reply as we badge him.

He looks over at his boss. "Ross, what in the hell is this?"

"These two Agents have some questions for you." He spat out the word agents like it was something sour in his mouth.

"Questions about what?" Bowen frowns.

"Just... answer their questions, Randy. It'll be fine," Miller replies. "They'll see they're barkin' up the wrong tree here soon enough."

The chair he's sitting in squeaks as Bowen leans back. His eye twitches as he looks at us and then licks his lips nervously. Bowen runs a hand through his hair, then throws a hand up.

"Fine," he says. "Ask your questions. Let's get this over with."

"Tell us about the shipping container," I start.

"What about it? It showed up here. Must have been after we closed," he says. "I don't know anything about it."

I exchange a glance with Astra before turning back to Bowen. "Are you sure about that?"

"We don't take shipping containers. So, yeah, I'm sure about that," he snaps. "Now, if there's nothing else, I've got some work to get back to."

Miller hangs his head, a distraught expression crossing his features. He raises his head again and scrubs his face with his hands. Bowen looks at his friend and then back at us.

"What?" he asks.

I cue up the video on my phone again, then set it down on the desk in front of Bowen and hit play. I watch as his face falls while it plays.

“This is from a pole cam down the street,” I tell him. “And correct me if I’m wrong, but that truck carrying the container in question—and then leaving without it thirty minutes later—entered the yard during normal business hours.”

“You can tell by the date and time stamp in the corner of the frame,” Astra adds. “And according to Mr. Miller, he was out of town that day—though we still need to confirm that.”

Miller flashes her an annoyed expression, then looks down at Bowen. “What’s going on here, Randy?” he asks. “I looked through the paperwork and didn’t see a container listed on the intake.”

Bowen shakes his head. “There has to be some mistake.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t, Mr. Bowen,” I say. “That container was taken in on the twenty-third when Mr. Miller was out of town, and you were in charge.”

“There’s a logical explanation for this,” Miller says. “Right, Randy?”

“Yeah, of course,” he says. “It was probably one of the other fellas who let it in—”

“Does that happen often?” Astra asks. “People just dropping things off like that without a single question being asked?”

The two men look at each other, and I can see Bowen practically silently pleading with Miller to cover for him. Miller, though, to his credit, seems to be picking up on the idea that something isn’t quite kosher, and his eyes narrow as his expression hardens.

“What’s going on here, Randy?” he asks.

“Let’s talk about this in private, huh?”

“Gentlemen, I shouldn’t have to remind you that the bodies of six young girls were found on your property,” I say. “Somebody will be held to account for this, and given that we have footage of the container being driven into the yard, we’re obviously looking hard at you, Mr. Bowen, since Mr. Miller was out of the state at the time.”

Bowen rounds on me with a snarl on his face. “How stupid do you think I am, lady?” he spits. “Do you really think I would have let

that container in if I knew—”

He bites off his words, realizing too late that he'd already said too much. Bowen looks down at the top of his desk, and I can see the wheels in his mind turning as he searches for a way to walk back everything he'd just blurted out. I don't believe Bowen is a member of the Yokai Syndicate. I do believe, though, that he's on their payroll somehow or other.

“Why did you let the container in, Mr. Bowen?” I ask. “Did somebody contact you and offer to pay you to look the other way?”

“Randy?” Miller asks.

“How much were you paid, Mr. Bowen?” Astra asks, her voice cold. “What was your price for letting the bodies of six young girls rot in this salvage yard?”

“Randy, if you know something, now's the time to tell them,” Miller presses.

Bowen's face turns beet red, and his eyes shimmer with tears that spill down his rough cheeks. He angrily wipes them away and sniffs loudly. The man seems to deflate and grow smaller as we stare at him. But then he runs a hand over his face and sits up again, seeming to be doing his best to keep his emotions at bay.

“I never would have agreed to let them bring the container in if I knew there were dead bodies in it,” he finally admits. “You have to believe me. I didn't know. And I sure as hell didn't have anything to do with those girls getting killed.”

Miller's face blanches, and he takes a step back, his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide. It's as if he hadn't even considered the possibility that his longtime friend and employee could be mixed up in all of this. He can't say I didn't try to warn him.

“Tell them—no, tell *me*—what in the hell is going on,” Miller demands.

Bowen lowers his eyes and stares down at his hands. He shakes his head and mutters softly to himself, and I can see him closing himself off. But then Miller slams his fist down on the desk with such force, it knocks over Bowen's pen cup, and a bottle of water, not to mention making me nearly jump straight out of my skin.

“Randy, we been friends for more than thirty years, and in that time, I’ve always known you to be a stand-up guy,” Miller says, his voice low and tight. “So, you need to tell these Agents what in the hell is going on and what your part in all this was. Now, Randy. Right now. You’re putting my freedom, livelihood, and the business my dad built at stake here. Now, speak up.”

He runs a hand through his hair and refuses to look me in the eye, keeping his gaze on his hands, which are sitting in his lap.

“Mr. Bowen,” I say. “We can sort this out here, or we can take you down to the field office for a more official chat if you prefer.”

“A few years ago, a man contacted me,” he says without looking up. “He offered me money to let him put a car in the compactor—”

“Randy, are you even kidding me right now—”

“Mr. Miller, please,” I say. “Go on, Mr. Bowen.”

“He gave me ten grand to crush the car. That was it,” he says. “And then every so often, he’ll call me, and we’ll do it again. Ten grand every time. I always made sure I did it at a time when Ross was already gone for the day, or on vacation, or somethin’.”

Miller’s face is red and twisted with rage as he stares at the man. “Randy—”

“I’m sorry, Ross,” he says. “But you know I got kids. You know I need the money.”

“What about this one, Mr. Bowen?” I say before he gets derailed by Miller’s fury. “You obviously couldn’t put that in the compactor.”

He shook his head. “About a week ago or so now, the man called me again. He said this one was going to be different. Needed me to hide that shipping container somewhere in the yard,” he says. “He wanted me to weld the doors shut. Gave me fifty grand this time. It was enough to put a little money away for my girls’ education. I couldn’t say no. I just didn’t get around to welding the doors before those damn nosy kids went pokin’ around.”

“You could have, Randy. You could have said no,” Miller says.

“I needed the money, man.”

“Why didn’t you ever come to me? Why didn’t you—”

“I can’t ask you for money, Ross. You know I can’t.”

“You could, but you were too ashamed and embarrassed,” he seethes. “You chose to let your pride lead you to do something that put everything *my* family has built at risk.”

“Tell me about this man,” I say. “What is his name? What does he look like?”

“I don’t know his name. We never used names, and we never met face to face,” he explains. “He would transfer money into an online e-bank account, and I would simply walk away when the car was brought in. Once they left, I would take the car to the compressor, crush it, then put it in with the other stacks of cars.”

“Can you tell us which cars you crushed for him?” Astra asks.

He shakes his head. “I can’t. I didn’t pay much attention to the cars. I just crushed then moved them,” he says. “I don’t remember the makes or models of a single one, to be honest.”

“And how many times would you say you’ve done this in the last few years you’ve been working for him?”

“I don’t know. Ten? Maybe twelve,” he replies. “Look, I was just getting rid of cars. I didn’t think anybody was getting hurt.”

Astra looks at him incredulously. “Somebody asks you to secretly crush cars, and you didn’t think anybody was getting hurt? The mental gymnastics you had to go through to land on that spot have to be breathtaking.”

It’s hard to keep the disgust I feel for him off my face. “Mr. Bowen, do you have the phone you used to communicate with this mystery man?”

“Yeah, it’s my personal—”

“Good, I’m going to need that,” I say. “Can you please hand it over?”

“It’s my phone. I can’t—”

“It’s evidence in six deaths,” I tell him. “You can either hand it over willingly, or I will get a court order to compel you to give it to me, as well as have you taken into custody for being an accomplice to these deaths.”

His eyes open comically wide. “Accomplice? I didn’t have nothing to do with it.”

“You facilitated the disposal of six corpses. That’s called being an accomplice,” I say. “Now, I believe you when you say you had no idea what was in the container. But willful ignorance is not a viable defense, Mr. Bowen. So, you can either hand over the phone and allow us to connect the final dots. Or you can roll the dice and see if you can weasel your way out of a conviction. The choice is yours, but you have about thirty seconds to decide.”

Bowen looks up at Miller, who’s staring back at him with a murderous gleam in his eye, forcing the man to quickly look away. His face is drawn and pale, his eyes narrowed with the strain of the stress he’s feeling. He finally looks up at me, his expression near panic.

“Tick-tock,” I say and tap my watch to emphasize my point.

“Fine,” he grumbles. “Fine. I’ll give you my damn phone.”

He reaches into his top drawer and pulls it out, then slides it across the desk to me. I pick it up, then tap on the screen to wake it only to be greeted by Bowen’s lock screen.

“What’s the passcode?” I ask.

“Eleven-Nineteen,” he replies glumly. “So, are we square now? Are we good?”

“For now,” I reply. “We’ll be in touch if we have any follow-up questions.”

Miller closes the door behind us as we exit the office, and halfway down the hall, I can hear his raised voice as he reads Bowen the riot act. Most of the words are muffled, but there are two I can make out easily enough: you’re fired. It’s unfortunate that a thirty-plus-year relationship has come to such a fiery end, but when you play stupid games, you win stupid prizes. And playing ball with a human trafficking network is the stupidest game of all.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Black Cell Alpha Team Bullpen, FBI Field Office; Seattle, WA

“**B**lake, this is Stephanie Burton. She’s... well, I guess she would be my Astra,” Caitlyn says with a small laugh. “She’s a whiz and the backbone of my team.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Stephanie,” I say, shaking her hand.

Standing no more than five-five and as petite as a preteen, Burton is diminutive, to say the least. Her auburn hair is tied back into a ponytail that falls to the middle of her back, and her big, doe eyes sparkle like polished emeralds. Burton has a smooth and cool, milky-white complexion. She’s got a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, giving her a very girl-next-door look. But there’s a sharp edge in her gaze that tells me she’s not somebody to be trifled with and is definitely not one to be underestimated.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Chief Wilder. SSA Tanaka has told me a lot about you,” Burton says, her voice soft. “I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Agent Burton,” I reply.

I take a minute to introduce her to the rest of the team, and as they get acquainted, I gesture for Caitlyn to follow me. I lead her into my office and shut the door behind me. She drops into one of the chairs in front of my desk as I perch on the corner of it.

“So, I think you’re right about having a mole in your unit,” I say.

She frowns, and her expression hardens as she folds her hands and sets them in her lap, taking a moment to digest my words.

“I haven’t had a chance to catch you up just yet, and I wasn’t comfortable putting anything on the servers,” I tell her. “But the CI who was going to hand over his phone to us, Eddie Kim, was shot to death along with his bodyguards and the woman who owned the restaurant in Chinatown he did business out of.”

“Jesus,” she groans.

“Yeah,” I reply. “It was supposed to look like a gang feud, but there were things that told me a different story. It was an execution, not a gang hit.”

“This isn’t good, Blake.”

“No, it’s not. That’s why I made the decision to keep everything off the servers for now,” I tell her. “Until we know who the mole is, I’m not comfortable with putting any information out there for anybody to see. I want it all contained.”

“I agree with that decision,” she says. “But we need to put something on the servers, or it’s going to tip the mole off that something’s amiss.”

“Agreed. That’s why I have Mo putting together a bunch of dummy reports and information sheets,” I tell her. “They’re going to look good enough to pass muster, but they won’t actually be saying anything useful.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“What about Burton?” I ask. “Can we trust her?”

“She’s been with me for years now, and I trust her completely. In fact, there’s nobody on my team I trust more,” she replies.

“That’s good to know. But I’m going to have my techs do deep backgrounds on all your team members. That includes Burton,” I say.

“And I assume that means me as well?”

I shrug and give her an awkward grin that makes her laugh.

“I take no offense,” she says. “If anything, I’m glad you’re turning over every rock. Dig as deep as you want—on all of us. I want this dirtbag found.”

“Do you have any suspects?” I ask. “Anybody you think might be the mole?”

She shakes her head. “I have no idea. I really thought my team was solid, Blake. Up and down the roster, I thought we were solid. How could I—”

“Hey, do not blame yourself.”

“I’m the head of the unit. I’m supposed to catch these things,” she goes on. “The buck has to stop with me. And if I’ve got a mole in my unit, it’s because I slipped up somewhere. I didn’t see it when I should have.”

“Beating yourself up about it isn’t going to help anything, Caitlyn,” I tell her. “Odds are, your initial read on your team was spot on. I’d be willing to bet the Yokai got their hooks into your person long after they’d joined your team when you weren’t looking at them as hard.”

“I know that’s supposed to make me feel better. It just doesn’t. I appreciate the effort though,” she said with a wan smile. “Anyway, enough with the self-pity. Where do we stand with everything so far? I figure I should ask you in person since I know that we’re putting fictitious garbage on the server.”

“And they say you’re nothing more than a pretty face.”

“Awww. They call me pretty. That’s sweet.”

I laugh softly. “Well, I can tell you that we’re not standing on solid ground right now,” I tell her. “I have Rick and Nina cracking Randy Bowen’s phone. They’re looking into the number that texted him, though I have doubts they’re going to get anywhere with that. The Yokai are careful to the point of being paranoid, and I can’t see them making a monumental mistake like using a phone that will lead us right back to them.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“That’s true. Just not on the Yokai case,” I say. “They’re the most tightly run, buttoned-up organization I’ve ever tried to crack. It would be impressive if it didn’t come at the cost it does.”

“Yeah, they’re no joke. I can’t think of another trafficking ring that’s been able to operate so freely for so many years—decades now.”

“It’s because they’re never afraid to cut bait and walk away. They’re not afraid of sacrificing the few for the good of the many. And they’re not afraid to shut down an entire cell on a moment’s notice,” I say. “They’re disciplined. Rigid. They adhere to the rules and don’t make mistakes.”

“Everybody makes mistakes. It’s just a matter of being there when they do, and so far, we haven’t been. Not to mention, they seem to recover very quickly,” she replies. “But that doesn’t mean that good fortune will remain on their side indefinitely—”

“Kind of feels like it might,” I say.

“It won’t. I promise you.”

“You shouldn’t make promises you might not be able to keep,” I say with a grin. “Anyway, I’m also having Rick, Nina, and Mo digging into the money transferred into Bowen’s account. If we can figure out who owns the account the payments were sent from, it might lead us back to the Yokai. Wishful thinking, I know. But no stone will be left unturned.”

“And that’s what I love about you, Blake. No matter the odds, you keep plugging away,” she says. “You just keep hammering at that wall until something breaks. Even if the thing that breaks is your hand.”

I chuckle. “Then so be it. I’d rather have a broken hand from trying to do something than a perfectly clean, well-manicured hand gotten from sitting on my ass and doing nothing.”

She laughs. “I heard that.”

Silence settles down over us as I look through the wall of windows in my office and watch my team laughing and joking around with each other and with Burton. I feel like I’ve been fortunate. I’ve never once had to question the loyalty of my team. I’ve never once had to suspect they might have been in bed with bad people or were compromising the integrity of our investigations. They’re solid—each and every one of them—and I trust them all with my life. More than that, I’d trust every one of them with my kid sister’s life.

My team is filled with good people, and I'm grateful for every single one of them. We've become more than a team. We've become a family. And I know what happened to Lucas is killing each of them inside as much as it's killing me. As distracted and emotional about it as we are, though, I also never have to worry that my people aren't going to do their job to their utmost ability. If something needs to be done, they'll get it done because that's just who they are and that's just what they do.

"So, what's our next move?" Caitlyn asks.

I watch as Astra takes a call, the smile slipping off her face as she listens. She says something, then disconnects the call and sets her phone down, then turns and makes a beeline straight for my office, her face showing her tension. I get to my feet and wait for her to burst through the door.

"I think we're about to find out what our next move is going to be," I say.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Seattle PD, Sector C, East Precinct, Madison Park District; Seattle, WA

There's already a mob of people standing outside the front doors of the precinct house when we pull into the lot and park. We sit and watch for a moment as uniformed patrolmen try to gently push the crowd back and set up a perimeter to keep the doors clear.

"Well, this looks like it's going to be fun," Astra remarks.

"Of course, it will be. This job is one big, never-ending party," I say.

"Remind me to not RSVP next time then," Caitlyn says from the back seat.

"And remind me to not be your plus-one next time," Burton chimes in.

There's no more use stalling. We all climb out of the SUV and head up the walk to the front doors of the precinct house. One of the uniforms had just set down a sawhorse to keep the crowd back and

puts his hand up when he spots us coming toward him, all of us walking with a purpose.

“Sorry, ladies,” he says. “You have to stay behind the line.”

All four of us badge the cop. “Agents Wilder, Russo, Tanaka, and Burton. FBI,” I say, making the introductions. “We need to speak with your commanding officer. Who would that be?”

“That would be Captain Art Ward,” he says with a sneer. “And he’s in with some very distraught parents right now, as I’m sure you can imagine. He doesn’t want to be disturbed right now... as I’m sure you can also imagine.”

The patrolman seems to be taking immense pleasure from inconveniencing us, proving the rift and rivalry between local LEOs and Feds is still very much alive and well.

“I can imagine. And that’s why we’re here—”

“Listen, ladies, those badges of yours don’t give you the right to come stompin’ around in our precinct whenever you feel like it. Now, if I were you—”

“Tommy, knock it off and let them through. Jesus.”

The patrolman’s face blanches, and he swallows hard as another man wearing sergeant’s stripes on his sleeves steps up beside him. The man looks to be a few years older than I am with dark hair, flinty gray eyes, and a strong jawline. He’s trim, fit, and obviously takes care of himself. He extends his hand and I shake it, noting his firm grip. Judging by his calloused hands and tawny complexion, I’d say he’s a man who’s used to working outdoors. A craftsman of some sort.

“Sergeant Bill Emory,” he says.

“Nice to meet you, Sergeant, I’m—”

“Blake Wilder. Yeah, I know who you are. I’m kind of friends with your buddy Paxton. Well, we’re on good terms, I should say. Our paths have crossed now and then,” he says. “He’s a bit arrogant and a handful at times, but I think deep down, he’s a good guy.”

I laugh. “He’s a very good guy. But yeah, you’re not wrong, Sergeant,” I say, then make all the introductions. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Pleasure’s mine, Agents,” he replies. “Why don’t y’all come on in with me? And please, Bill’s fine. I’m not one for a lot of pomp and ceremony. At least not from folks who aren’t my subordinates. Tommy, move the stupid sawhorse and let them in.”

“Yes, sir,” Tommy says quickly, avoiding all eye contact with us.

I fall into step beside the sergeant, and when we’re out of earshot, he looks at me and grins. Apparently, not all the locals hate us, which is nice to know. I’ve always believed in close relationships and cooperation between agencies, whether they be local, state, or federal. The way I see it, we’re all on the same team. As we approach the doors, Emory leans closer and pitches his voice low to avoid being overheard.

“Don’t take any offense. Tommy’s a good kid. Got a lot to learn—especially when it comes to working and playing well with others,” he says. “But we’ll get him housebroken in time.”

“I appreciate your help, Ser—Bill,” I say.

“The way I figure it, you Feds have a hell of a lot more resources than we do, and we are going to need some help with this one,” he says grimly. “I’m pretty sure Captain Ward is going to come to the same line of thinking soon enough. Just don’t take anything he says personally. He’s gruff and doesn’t have much of a filter.”

“Splendid,” I say. “I imagine he and Astra are going to get along famously then.”

“I heard that,” Astra says, making Bill chuckle.

He leads us into a conference room that falls silent the moment we step through the door. The man standing at the front of the room is massive. Six-five at least with a bulky, muscular frame that ripples beneath his uniform whenever he moves. His gray hair is cut into a flattop; he’s got a cool, pale complexion; and his blue eyes are so intense, I wouldn’t be surprised to see laser beams shoot out of them. He cuts an intimidating figure, to say the least. I imagine when he’s not doing police work, Captain Art Ward is competing for the title of Mr. Olympia.

“Bill, what is this?” he asks in a deep, rumbling voice that reminds me of a bear.

“Reinforcements, Cap. I figure we can use them,” he replies, then gestures to me.

“I’m Unit Chief Blake Wilder,” I say. “This is SSA Astra Russo, SSA Caitlyn Tanaka, head of the Missing Persons Unit, and her second, SSA Stephanie Burton. We received word that you had three girls abducted, and we believe it may fold into a case we’re currently working, so we thought we’d come talk to you and see what we have.”

“A case you’re currently working. So, that means you’re here to take over?” Ward asks.

“Not at all, sir,” I reply. “We’re here to help. I believe we can help each other.”

Lost in all the introductions and posturing is the fact that six people—three couples, actually—are sitting at the long conference table that sits in the middle of the room. All six of them are wearing identical expressions of fear tinged with grief, looking as if they’ve already lost hope that their daughters will ever be found alive. As they watch the exchange between me and Captain Ward, though, I see their apprehension growing.

Ward studies me for a moment, then nods. “All right. More hands and eyes on this couldn’t hurt. Thank you for coming out,” he says. “This is Jack and Eileen Cavanaugh—they’re Riley’s parents. Aaron and Violet Franks are Petra’s folks, and this is Greg and Morgan Savitts. They’re Claire’s mom and dad.”

For a moment, I stand there feeling more than a little stunned and completely speechless. After Emory braced us for what I thought was going to be an uphill fight to get Ward to see reason, the fact that he’s accepted our presence and assistance so easily leaves me feeling a bit off balance. It feels almost like climbing a staircase and expecting to find another step up, only to discover that you’ve already reached the top.

I clear my throat and quickly recover, turning my attention to the six people seated around the table. “I’m sorry we have to meet under such difficult circumstances,” I start, then gesture to the women standing behind me. “But we’re here to help, and we are going to do

everything in our power to get your girls back home safely and unharmed. Now, what can you tell us?”

Ward tucks his thumbs into his gun belt. “Their girls—Claire, Petra, and Riley—were supposed to walk to the Cavanaugh’s after school for a sleepover,” he explains. “They never showed up. We talked to the folks at school—we’ve seen video footage of them leaving campus—and talked to a bunch of people already, but nobody’s seen hide nor hair of them. They just vanished. It’s like they just fell off the face of the damn earth.”

I have to physically keep myself from cringing as I listen to the big captain speak. He’s blunt, direct, and not very polished. Personally, I probably wouldn’t keep hammering the point that the girls are missing as hard as he is. The parents are already shifting in their seats, and the air is crackling with the tension of their discomfort; I suspect they’re barely hanging on to control of their emotions right now.

“We all got our wires crossed. We screwed up,” Jack Cavanaugh says, his voice rough and scratchy. “We all thought they were at one of the other two houses. It wasn’t until this morning that we realized they weren’t at anybody’s house.”

“This is all our fault,” Morgan Savitts moans, then buries her face in her hands. “My fault. I was supposed to confirm the plans—”

“This is nobody’s fault, Mrs. Savitts,” I assure her. “You are not to blame. The only one to blame is whoever who took your daughters.”

Morgan chokes back a harsh sob, so her husband puts his arm around her shoulders comfortingly and pulls her close. The pain on their faces is heartbreaking to see. It’s something I’ve seen in this line of work all too often. But it’s a hazard of the job.

“Captain Ward, we’ve probably gotten all the information we can from these folks, don’t you think?” I ask. “I’m sure being down here is stressful enough for them with everything else going on. We can probably cut them loose, right?”

Ward glowers at me for a moment, clearly not happy with me asserting myself in his sandbox. I give him an apologetic smile, and he nods.

“Chief Wilder is right,” Ward says. “Folks, I’m sorry for keeping you down here so long and causing you any more stress than you’re already feeling. We’ll get to work on this and keep you in the loop every step of the way. I give you my word.”

“What can we do in the meantime, Captain?” Violet Franks asks.

He shakes his head. “Nothing. It would really be for the best if you folks just steered clear and let us do our jobs. As Chief Wilder said, we promise that we’re going to do everything in our power to bring your girls home.”

“Before you go, I do have one more thing,” I say. “I know exactly how difficult this is for you, and I know you have people you lean on for support. But please, I implore you not to tell anybody what’s going on. It’s imperative we keep this between us and out of the press. It’s critical.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea? The press is often helpful,” Captain Ward asks.

“Believe me, I’ve been doing this for a long time,” Caitlyn tells him. “The longer we can keep complete informational control, the better.”

Ward looks uneasy but nods. “Fair enough,” he says, then turns to the parents. “Please, do as these agents are asking and keep a lid on this. They’re the best there is at this, and if they say it’ll help bring your girls home, I believe them.”

The endorsement from Captain Ward surprises me. But I’m thankful for the trust and assistance in trying to keep this as low profile as we can. None of the parents seem particularly thrilled to be told to keep quiet and then be dismissed with no instructions, no bits of wisdom, and worst of all, no hope. But they all get to their feet and shuffle out of the conference room anyway. Emory closes the door behind them and then turns to us.

“Sorry, Captain Ward,” I say. “I didn’t mean to step on your toes. I’m just conditioned to assert myself and—”

“Don’t worry about it, Chief,” he replies. “We’ve got three missing girls. That means there’s no room for ego here. We’re all fighting for the same thing.”

“We are. And our only goal is to bring them home safely,” I say.

“I agree. Now, what is this case you’re working on? And how does it overlap with this?”

“Human trafficking,” I tell him. “That’s what I think happened to the girls.”

“Good God,” he whispers.

“We might want to sit down. We’ve got a lot to tell you,” I say. “But before we begin, I need to ask that you two gentlemen keep this in the strictest confidence. Nobody outside this room can know what’s really going on. Not yet. If it gets out, it very well might compromise our investigation—and if that happens, we’ll never see those girls again. Guaranteed.”

“You have our word, Chief. What you tell us does not leave this room,” Ward says.

He and Emory both nod solemnly and without hesitation, and as I look into their eyes, I see their sincerity and earnestness. I believe their word is good. So, after we all take a seat, we go around the table, each of my team explaining different parts of the case we’ve been working. And when we’re done, both Ward and Emory look wrung out.

“That’s quite the story,” he says. “And you think these three girls got caught up in this trafficking network?”

I nod. “I do. Which, if we’re right, means we have about a week to find them before they’re moved to the next phase and broken in.”

Emory runs a hand over his face. “This is unbelievable.”

“Horrific,” Ward adds. “All right, where do we start?”

“For now, you and Sergeant Emory can work your investigation from your angle. It’s possible their disappearance has nothing to do with our case,” I tell him. “We’ll start working it from our end and see what we come up with. We’ll need to stay in constant contact to share intel, Captain. That means we’re going to need to trust each other.”

“Understood,” he replies. “No ego on this, remember? I just want to find them.”

“Same,” I say.

“So, where are you going to begin?” he asks.

“I’d like to know what you have so far,” I tell him.

“It’s not much. We’re just getting started.”

“That’s fine, Captain,” I say. “We will take whatever you have.”

Ward was right—they don’t have much. What he has is mostly background on the girls, which is helpful in its own right. To find them, we’re going to need to know them. When he’s done, he gives me a sheepish grin and a shrug.

“Told you it wasn’t much,” he said.

“It was perfect,” I say.

“So, what’s next?”

“We’re going to walk the route the girls took home. See what we can find along the way.”

“I’ve already had my men drive that route. They didn’t see anything,” he says.

“All the same, and no offense intended—but I’m a profiler, and we tend to see things differently,” I tell him. “I’d like to see it for myself. It might give me some sort of a connection to these girls. And that can be important in a case like this.”

“Never hurts to try,” he says. “All right then. Let’s get to work.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth, Captain Ward.”

He flashes me a grin that looks so awkward, I can tell it’s uncharacteristic of him. It’s a sign to me that he’s doing his best to work together harmoniously.

“Stay in touch, Chief. Open communication goes two ways,” he says.

“You have my word.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Morton Neighborhood Greenspace, Madison Park District; Seattle, WA

“Are we in the right place?” Caitlyn asks.

I look down at my phone to confirm. “This is where Nina dropped the pin, yeah,” I reply. “This is where the girls’ phones are pinging.”

After leaving the precinct, I immediately had Rick and Nina get up on the girls’ phones to get us the last location where they pinged. I’m sure Captain Ward and his crew had already done it, but like I told him, I tend to see things differently and would like to see it all for myself. When I spoke with Nina, I was surprised to hear the girls’ phones are still active. Surprised and more than a little worried about what we’re going to find. It also has me briefly wondering if the three of them ran into something other than the Yokai, since they normally shut off or destroy the phones of the girls they abduct as a safety precaution.

Now we’re standing at a trailhead that branches off in two different directions. The map shows it’s one trail that’s just a big loop

through the trees that eventually winds up back here at the parking lot. It's a fairly long circuit through some densely packed woods, but those phones are out there. And for the first time, I find myself not wanting to find the girls out there since that would mean something very bad happened to them.

"All right, let's go," I say. "Caitlyn, you and Burton take the left fork. We'll take the right, and we'll all meet up in the middle. Keep your eyes peeled and be careful out there."

"Will do," Caitlyn nods and holds up her radio. "We'll be on channel two."

"Copy that," I reply and make sure my radio is on the right channel.

As we all set off, Astra and I walk slowly and deliberately, looking incredibly closely at the trees and bushes all around us. The track is a lot longer and runs a lot deeper than I anticipated, and with every step we take, the feeling of apprehension that's settled down over me seems to get a little bit heavier.

"Have you ever known these Yokai guys to snatch multiple girls at once?" Astra asks.

"It's exceedingly rare. I can only remember it happening once the whole time I was working on the task force," I reply.

"So, why now? Are they trying to replace the dead girls in the container?"

"I think that's probably part of it," I say. "But I also think they saw three young, pretty girls, and couldn't pass up the opportunity. I think that's what this is—a crime of opportunity."

"What makes you think they weren't tracking these girls for a while?"

"I don't know that they weren't. Not for sure. Not yet anyway. It's just what my gut is telling me," I say. "These girls weren't social outcasts. They weren't runaways or trying to escape their situations. They were well-liked and popular. They came from good homes."

"Even girls from good homes get targeted though."

"That's true. But with the Yokai, they look for those girls from dysfunctional homes. Those kinds of girls are a lot easier to bend to

their will. To make them the living dolls the Yokai—and their buyers—want them to be.”

“That’s... disgusting. That’s just awful,” she says.

“Welcome to the world of human trafficking. The Yokai are just more specific, a lot colder, and a lot more brutal and calculating than most,” I reply. “That’s why this one feels different to me. It seems impulsive since it doesn’t stick to their usual script. And I’m willing to bet that once we get their electronics, we’re going to find they weren’t being groomed like most of the other girls the Yokai have taken over the years.”

My mind drifts back to Talia Webb and Daisy Simmons—the two girls down in Sweetwater Falls who were victims of the Yokai. Both of them fit the usual pattern—broken girls from dysfunctional homes. Both had been groomed in online chat rooms. They’d been built up. Made to feel special. Made to feel loved and adored. And then, when they’d been given the confidence and had agreed to meet their online suitor, they’d been ripped away from their lives. They were abused. Tortured. Raped. They’d been broken in a thousand different ways, their personalities torn down to the studs as their Yokai handlers built a perfectly docile and compliant sex slave.

What we’re looking into right now, and these three girls specifically, doesn’t feel like that. The girls are bright. Confident. They have families who build them up, support them, and encourage them. Granted, I don’t know them too well yet, but based on everything I’ve gleaned about these three girls to this point, these are strong, independent young women. They’re the exact opposite of the sort of girls the Yokai normally target. It’s an anomaly that stands out... and bothers me.

“So, do you have any word yet on who the mole might be?” Astra asks.

I shake my head. “Not yet. But I’ve got Mo, Rick, and Nina digging deep. The sooner we find this creep, the better.”

“Agreed,” she says. “Hey, what’s that?”

I follow Astra’s finger as she points to something in the bushes. The branches and leaves are thick, so it’s hard to make out what it is, but I can see it’s a bright splash of color.

“Yeah, that doesn’t belong here,” I say.

We push our way through the bushes and find ourselves standing in a small clearing between the wide trunks of a few trees. In the clearing, though, sits a battered old tent that’s covered in duct tape, presumably to seal the holes. There’s a small firepit dug into the ground that’s ringed with rocks, and an old wooden crate sitting up on its side as if it’s being used as a stool.

“I’d say we’re not alone out here,” Astra says.

“You think?”

Sitting on the ground just outside the tent flaps sit three backpacks that are all very feminine in color. A couple of hoodies sit on top of the packs, and a gym bag with the logo of the high school and the word “Cheer” stitched into the fabric sits next to them.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say I don’t think our missing girls are the rugged, outdoorsy types,” Astra says.

“I don’t think you’re wrong—”

I bite off my words and wheel around, my hand automatically dropping to my hip as the brush to our right rustles. A large man bursts out of the bush, and my eyes immediately focus on the long, steel machete in his hand. Acting on pure instinct, I shove Astra out of the way then dive backward, the blade slicing through the air we’d occupied just a moment before. I hit the ground with a grunt and grit my teeth as my elbow lands on a small stone that sends electric bolts of pain shooting up my arm.

The man’s momentum carries him forward a few stumbling steps, but he recovers quickly and rounds on Astra, who’s just starting to get back up. She fumbles for the weapon on her hip but abandons the idea and throws herself to the right as the maniac brings the machete down again. It bites into the soft earth beneath him, but he yanks it free. He turns to me, his eyes filled with rage and his lips curled back, exposing his brown and rotting teeth.

“That’s my stuff,” he hisses. “Nobody touches my stuff.”

“Easy,” I yell. “Nobody’s here to touch your things—”

With a snarl that sounds like a wild boar, he rushes me, his machete brandished high. As the man closes in, I roll to my left and piston my legs out, catching him in the side of the knee with the ball

of my foot. He squeals and falls awkwardly, his machete flying out of his reach as he hits the ground hard. For being such a large, ungainly man, he's quick and is back on his feet and is already rounding on me as I stand up.

The man charges at me again and throws a haymaker with his right hand. I swivel to the side, but the blow comes so close, I can feel the wind of his fist on my skin. I'm so busy trying to avoid having my head taken off my shoulders that I don't account for his left, and when it crashes into my side, it feels like a sledgehammer. A loud, raspy croak escapes my mouth as it drives the air from my lungs. With my vision wavering, I collapse to the ground and gasp wildly for air.

The man takes another step toward me, his face twisted with rage, but the sharp crack of a gunshot draws both our attention, and I manage to crane my neck enough to see Astra standing about five yards away, her weapon pointed in the air and a look of fury on her face.

"Step back and get down on your knees," she orders.

The man hesitates, cutting a glance at me before looking back at Astra. She's lowered her weapon, the barrel of it level with the man's head. He narrows his eyes, glaring at her balefully.

"I swear to God, if you make one move that isn't a step back and you getting on your knees, I'm going to put a bullet through your face," she growls.

The man stands there another moment, glowering at her, before deciding that Astra is serious, and he backs down. He takes a step back and grimaces as he gingerly lowers himself to his knees and puts his hands behind his head and interlaces his fingers.

"Looks like you've done this before," I grumble as I lurch to my feet.

"Yeah. You people are always on my ass about somethin'. It's gettin' to be so a man can't do nothin' without somebody comin' down on him," he growls.

"Blake, are you good?" Astra asks.

"I don't know that I'd use that word, but I'm on my feet," I say between gasps.

“Cuff him,” she says. “I’ve got you covered.”

I shamble over to him and do as she says, cuffing his hands behind his back. After that, I get him to his feet and walk him over to his makeshift stool and push him down onto it. He glares at me then at Astra. The bushes rustle again, and she spins, her weapon at the ready, but lets out a hard breath of relief when we see it’s just Caitlyn and Burton who burst out of it, their weapons up and at the ready. When they see us, though, they quickly lower and holster their weapons.

“We heard the shot,” Caitlyn says. “Is everything all right?”

“Astra handled it,” I say.

“Nice work, Astra,” Burton says.

Astra smiles at her, and I laugh to myself. Burton almost seems a little starstruck and in awe of Astra. Not that I can really blame her though. Astra is a badass.

“Who’s our new friend?” Caitlyn asks.

“That’s what we’re hoping to find out,” I say and gesture to the backpacks.

“I see,” she says.

We exchange a look, and I can tell that she’s thinking the same thing I am—this guy is not Yokai-affiliated. He’s a big man—six-two or so, with long, greasy, dark silver hair and sallow skin. His dark eyes are red and rheumy, and he’s got spiderwebs crisscrossing the tip of his nose. He’s heavysset, jowly, and with the dirt caked under his nails and ground into his skin, it appears he hasn’t been close to a shower in weeks. Maybe longer. Now that I’m getting a look at him, it’s obvious the man is homeless. A scavenger, not a predator. That tells me those bags came into his possession by chance and opportunity. But I’m hoping he can tell us more.

“What the hell is this all about?” the man snaps. “Who the hell are you all?”

I badge him. “We’re all FBI. And what is your name?”

He stares at my badge for a long moment, and I see his features soften slightly. But then his face clouds over as he seems to realize what he’s done and how much trouble he’s in.

“Carl Gibson,” he says.

Astra and Burton walk over to the backpacks and kneel. Gibson lets out a bunch of grunts and grumbles as he watches them open the bags and start to rifle through them.

“This ain’t right,” he says. “A man should have some expectation of privacy in his own space. But you march in here like the Gestapo and just do what you want.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Gibson, this is a public park,” I say. “There is no legal expectation of privacy in a public space.”

“This is my space. Been here for over a year now. I got squatter’s rights or somethin’.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Caitlyn put a hand over her mouth to hide the grin that’s stretching her lips wide. The situation isn’t funny, but at the same time, it is. Gibson is so earnest in asserting his rights—rights that don’t actually exist anywhere in American jurisprudence. Astra waves to get my attention, and when I glance over at her, I see that she’s holding up three phones and three school IDs—one set from each backpack. There’s no question now that the bags belong to our missing girls.

“Where did you get these backpacks, Mr. Gibson?” I ask.

“I ain’t got to tell you that.”

“You’re right. You don’t,” I say. “And if that’s your position, we can just run you down and throw you into a cell right now.”

“I didn’t do nothin’!”

“Actually, you assaulted a federal officer,” Astra calls. “That’s some serious time you’re looking at, Carl.”

He opens his mouth to fire back but closes it without saying a word. Instead, he looks at the ground beneath his feet and shifts uncomfortably on the box he’s perched on. He looks up at me, his eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched.

“If I tell you about them bags, what are you going to do for me?” he asks.

“You’re looking at charges of assaulting a federal officer,” Caitlyn says. “You’re not bargaining from a position of strength, Carl.”

“Actually, he’ll be looking at charges of assaulting a federal officer and the attempted murder of two federal officers,” I say.

“What?” Carl exclaims. “You’re just makin’ stuff up now. You’re trying to railroad me!”

I walk over and pick up the machete by the tip of the blade. “Tell me again how we’re trying to railroad you, Carl? As best I recall, you came out swinging that thing like a headsman.”

He quiets down and lowers his gaze again, the dim light of hope inside of him fading completely knowing we’ve got him boxed in. The thing is, I don’t want to hassle this man. I’m sure I’m going to have a nice bruise on my ribs, but I’m fine otherwise. It was close, but there was no real harm done. The last thing I want to do is run him in and throw him in a cell. Carl’s life is obviously already hard enough as it is. But I need him to think I’m serious about charging him.

“Ticktock, Carl. What are you going to do? Are you going to hold your tongue and get thrown into prison over this? Is it really worth it to you?”

He lets out a heavy sigh. “What do you want from me, lady?”

“I want you to tell me about those backpacks,” I say. “How did you end up with them?”

Still refusing to meet my eyes, Gibson shakes his head and mutters to himself under his breath, and I realize this is one of those times when you need to give a little to get a little. Not that I’m giving him anything I don’t want to give in the first place.

“Okay, listen,” I say. “Answer our questions, and we’ll call it even. I have no real desire to drag you down to the field office and book you—I will, but I don’t want to. So, tell us what we want to know, and we’ll cut you loose.”

He raises his gaze to me. “How do I know I can believe you? I mean, it ain’t like you cops haven’t lied to me before.”

Behind me, I hear the others groan and mumble under their breath. Gibson glances at them then back to me. He doesn’t seem to understand the fact that he has no leverage here. Either that, or he’s just got a giant pair of stones.

“You’ll have to take me at my word, Mr. Gibson,” I say. “But I do promise that if you answer our questions, we’ll walk away. No harm, no foul.”

He gnaws on his bottom lip for a moment, then nods. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

“I want to know how those bags came to be in your possession.”

“Found them.”

“Found them where?”

“Up by the trailhead,” he says.

“And did you see the girls who were carrying those bags?” I ask.

“Sort of.”

“What does that mean, Mr. Gibson?” I ask.

“It means I saw them girls. Three of ‘em,” he says. “But I saw two guys in a black van too.”

My stomach lurches, and I glance over at Caitlyn to see the same expression of excitement on her face I’m sure is on mine. I quickly tamp it down and turn back to the homeless man.

“And what happened then, Mr. Gibson?”

“The men in the van—they was all in black and had those masks that only let you see their eyes—they jumped out and hit them poor girls with a stun gun. Put ‘em all straight out,” he says. “Then they tied the girls up, threw ‘em into their van, tossed their bags into the bushes, and then drove away. That’s it. That’s what happened, and that’s how I found these bags.”

“And you didn’t try to help those girls?” Astra asks.

“Lady, I ain’t tryin’ to get myself killed. I know killers, and those men in black meant business. If I stuck my nose into it, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now,” he snaps angrily.

“Okay, let’s get back to the van,” I say, trying to keep this conversation from going off the rails. “Did you happen to get the license plate?”

“Part of it. I wasn’t lookin’ all that hard. I try to mind my own business,” he replies.

“Do you remember what it was?”

“I just said I knew part of it, didn’t I?”

“You did,” I say. “And what was it?”

He scrunches up his face and thinks. “All I got was J-F-C-Six,” he says. “I didn’t get nothin’ else.”

“That’s great, Mr. Gibson,” I say, not caring if the relief is obvious on my face. “That’s helpful.”

“Then are we done here?”

I glance over at Caitlyn, and she nods. “Yeah. I think we’re done here.”

“Great. Can you uncuff me then? We had a deal, and I done kept my part of it.”

“You have,” I say. “You absolutely have.”

The others tense up, their hands hovering near their weapons as I do as he asks and set him free. He gets to his feet and rubs his wrists, still glowering at us. It doesn’t seem like he’s going to make a move on us, though, so everybody seems to relax.

“Okay, well, thank you for your help, Mr. Gibson. We appreciate it.”

“I’ll appreciate it if you get out of my livin’ area.”

“Fair enough,” I say.

Astra and Burton pick up all the bags and sling them over their shoulders. Gibson lets out a disgruntled snort.

“Come on, those are mine,” he complains.

“They’re not,” Astra says coldly. “They belong to three teenage girls.”

He looks at me as I head out of the clearing, doing a double take. “Hey,” he says. “What about my machete?”

“Sorry, but these are illegal to have,” I say. “Especially in a public park.”

“I ain’t going to do anything to nobody,” he argues.

“Sorry, Mr. Gibson.”

“We had a deal!”

“We did. And I held up my end. I cut you loose, and I’m not dragging you down to the field office to be booked,” I shrug. “I’m just not going to leave this in your possession. You almost took our heads off with it!”

As we walk out of the clearing, leaving him alone, he lets out a string of curses, calling us every name in the book—and a few from a book I clearly don’t know. The story he told us, though, paints a dire picture. It does seem to confirm the involvement of the Yokai. It

was a well-executed plan. It was smooth. Efficient. But they stepped outside of their usual way of doing things. It was also impulsive. Opportunistic. And therein lies the mistake they made. The first mistake I can ever remember them making.

And thanks to Carl Gibson, we now have our first solid lead to finding them.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Black Cell Alpha Team Bullpen, FBI Field Office; Seattle, WA

The doors slide open with a pneumatic hiss as we step through and into the bullpen. Rick is leaning back in his chair, his feet up on his desk, snacking on Cheetos. Nina is staring intently at her computer screen, and Mo looks harried as she alternates looking between her computer screen and the stack of papers on her desk. They all look up at us with curious expressions on their faces.

“So, Blake, is it true that dude almost turned you into Ichabod Crane?” Rick asks.

“Rick, if you’d pick up a book now and then, you’d know that Ichabod wasn’t beheaded... he simply vanished after encountering the Headless Horseman,” I correct him. “Most believe his romantic rival for Katrina van Tassel’s hand, Abraham van Brunt, or Brom Bones, used Ichabod’s belief in the supernatural and the Headless Horseman, in particular, to drive him away.”

“Wait. That was a book?” he asks, his tone mischievous, drawing a laugh from the room.

“How on earth do you have time to read, Blake?” Mo asks.

“I take a lot of long bubble baths,” I reply.

“So, what happened out there?” Nina asks. “It sounds like it got pretty hairy. Are you okay?”

“I’ll have a bruise for a bit, but I’ll live. Besides, it wasn’t anything Astra couldn’t handle. She put the guy down before he could take my head off like it was nothing,” I say.

Astra stands and takes a bow to the applause of everybody else in the shop. I perch on the edge of the desk at the front of the room I normally use and wait for the applause to die down, letting Astra have her well-deserved moment.

“Guys, how are all those backgrounds going?” I ask once everyone’s turned back to me.

“Good,” Nina offers up. “We’ve been able to discard half the pile so far.”

“Yeah, nothing unusual or worrying has popped up yet,” Mo adds.

“That’s good. Keep at it,” I reply. “Time is of the essence.”

“We’re on it,” Nina says.

Caitlyn’s unit has two dozen members, and I divided them up among Rick, Mo, and Nina. I know I’ve got them doing a lot already, but after explaining the situation, I told them to put this on top of the “to-be-done” pile. I told them it’s a priority. I also told them to make sure nobody knew what they were doing. It was to be kept among us. Not even Burton, Caitlyn’s second, knows that we’re screening all her teammates, searching for the mole. Until we have a firm handle on that, our entire investigation could be compromised.

“Also, a Captain Ward from the SPD stopped by and dropped off a box of laptops and other electronics that belong to the three girls,” Rick tells me. “Says the parents gave them to him, and he opted to turn them over to us since we’ve got better toys. We’ve just started trying to analyze it all.”

“Good,” I say. “That’s good. But I want those backgrounds to remain the priority, so maybe one of you can analyze the electronics and the other two stay on backgrounds.”

“I’ll take them then,” Rick offers. “I already took a quick, preliminary look through the laptops when he dropped them off. I didn’t find that secret message board or chat function we found on that Sweetwater Falls girl’s computer on any of these three.”

“So, do you have confirmation the three girls who were abducted were taken by the Yokai Syndicate?” Mo asks.

“Rock-solid proof? No,” I say. But combined with the lack of digital trail tells me this either isn’t the Yokai or that they were rushed and just took the girls on an impulse born of desperation.”

“Or, it could just be a random pervert,” Burton offers.

“I don’t think so. There are subtle differences, but this is the Yokai’s MO,” Caitlyn adds. “And I think they took these three to help offset the six they lost in the shipping container.”

“That’s very possible,” Astra says.

“That also tells us that if this is the Yokai, then they’re gearing up for something,” I say. “I’m hoping those laptops will be able to give us something more.”

“What do you mean?” Burton asks.

“I have a feeling that if they’re replenishing their stock, for lack of a more tasteful word, they’ve got a sale on the horizon,” I say. “It’s just a hunch right now, but I don’t know that they’d run the risk of snatching three girls like those unless they were up against it.”

“What do you mean ‘girls like those’?” Mo asks.

“Low-risk lifestyles. All came from loving, supportive homes,” I say. “Unlike most of their marks, these ones were pretty well-adjusted and normal when they snatched them. They tend to prey on the kind of girls who are already at risk to go missing for one reason or another.”

“My God, that’s disgusting and cynical,” Nina mutters. “The more I hear about these creeps, the worse it seems to get.”

“I honestly don’t know it can get much worse after hearing they traffic teenage girls,” Astra notes.

“Yeah. I guess not,” Nina says, sounding slightly distraught.

“So, we had a witness out there,” I say. “He saw the abduction —”

“And didn’t try to stop it?” Mo asks.

“Yeah, he’s not exactly the hero type,” Burton says.

“To be fair, the guy is homeless, in his sixties, and doesn’t look to be in peak physical shape or health. I can’t blame him for not jumping in against younger, stronger men,” Caitlyn chimes in.

“Men? So, there was more than one?” Mo asks.

“According to our friend with the machete, there were two men in black wearing balaclavas in the parking lot waiting for the girls,” I say. “They hit them all with a stun gun, then threw them in the van and took off.”

“That explains how they were able to handle all three of them,” Mo says.

“And he was able to give us a partial plate,” I say. “Nina, can you give me a rundown on it, please?”

“You got it. What’s the partial?”

“It’s J-F-C-Six,” I reply. “And we want to match that to a black panel van.”

“I’m on it.”

As Burton and Astra cozy up, talking and giggling like a couple of schoolgirls, Caitlyn perches on the corner of the desk next to me. She’s gnawing on her bottom lip, her expression pensive and her body tight with tension.

“Out with it,” I press. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“You mentioned you thought the Yokai were going to be holding an auction,” she says.

I nod. “That’s what I think. That’s why I believe they snatched those girls without any of the usual grooming. They grabbed them to go straight into breaking them in,” I tell her. “They need to get them compliant and ready for sale as quickly as possible.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Honestly, I’m not. Not one hundred percent anyway,” I say. “But it kind of lines up. They weren’t wooed online like the others. They were simply grabbed.”

“That’s bold,” she replies. “With what you told me about Fish and all...”

Her voice trails off, but she doesn’t need to finish the statement since I already know where she’s going with it.

“Fish isn’t that guy anymore. Yeah, he still has a finger in that world, but it’s hard for me to see him, as he is today, ordering his people to wipe out the Yokai,” I say. “Until I approached him for help when I was with Spenser, he didn’t even realize the Yokai were encroaching on his territory again—or what used to be his territory. Honestly, now that he’s legit, I don’t know where he draws the lines or what he’s willing to do.”

“Given what you’ve told me about him, I can’t believe he isn’t willing to turn his back on a situation like this if it means keeping the peace—and keeping an organization like the Yokai from gaining a foothold in Seattle,” she says.

“I have a hard time believing that too,” I admit. “But I’m also afraid to talk to him about it too much. He’s worked so hard to get out of that life and to become a better man; I fear that if he even dips a toe back into that water, something will reach up and pull him back in. I know he doesn’t want to be ‘Fish the crime boss’ anymore. He wants his legacy to be better than that. And I don’t want to ruin that for him.”

“If he loves this city as much as you say he does, though, he may not be able to stay out of this. Not if he wants to keep the Yokai from setting up shop here,” she says.

“I know. That’s what I’m afraid of,” I say quietly. “I’ve always had a soft spot for the guy. But seeing what he’s becoming—seeing the man he’s transforming himself into and all the good he’s doing—it just makes me like him that much more.”

“He takes his legacy seriously. And to leave that criminal past behind him and transform himself into something bigger, better, and best of all, legit, takes a lot of strength.”

“It does.”

“Then I have a feeling that even if he has to get his hands a little dirty to keep an organization like the Yokai from gaining traction here, he’ll be able to do it without everything he’s built crashing down around him.”

I hate to admit it, but she’s got a point. “I know. But I’d rather not test that theory.”

“We may not be able to avoid it. We may need to speak with him sooner, rather than later.”

“That’s a bridge we’ll cross when we come to it,” I respond. “For now, I want to believe we can deal with this on our own.”

She laughs softly. “It’s good to be optimistic.”

“I do my best.”

“Hey, Boss,” Nina calls out. “I think I got something.”

“Lay it on me, Nina.”

“I ran the partial and cross-referenced it to black panel vans like you asked,” she said.

“And I’m guessing that you’ve found something,” I say.

“I did,” she says triumphantly. “And you are not going to believe who that van belongs to.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Platinum Luxury Motor Rentals; Downtown Seattle

“**W**hat are the odds?” I ask.

“Not very good, I’d wager,” Astra replies.

“Your team is good, Blake,” Caitlyn says as she steps to the front of the SUV where we’re standing. “They’ve already got the telephonic warrant and a crime scene tech team already en route.”

“That’s why I keep ‘em around. They’re efficient,” I say. “What’s the ETA on the techs?”

“Twenty minutes out,” Caitlyn responds.

“Good.”

“Your team is going to have to teach me how to get warrants so quickly,” Burton says.

“Yeah, me too,” I say with a laugh. “Okay, everybody put your ugly Bureau-issued windbreaker on, and let’s roll.”

I settle the dark blue windbreaker with “FBI” in bright yellow letters all over it down over the Kevlar vest I’m wearing. I don’t anticipate any gunplay, but between the shooting in Chinatown and

the incident out at the park with Carl Gibson, I'm not taking any chances either. Almost kill me once, shame on you; almost kill me twice, shame on me.

Burton holds the door open for the rest of us. The same guy we'd spoken to before is sitting behind the desk. His eyes are red and glassy, and he's swaying in his seat as he gives us an awkward, lopsided smile.

"Hey, I remember you two," he says then points to Caitlyn and Burton with a shaky finger and a strange giggle. "Don't know you two though."

"Wow, you got into the good stuff today, didn't you, Dylan?" Astra asks.

That weird giggle and a shrug is his reply, which makes Astra shake her head, doing her best to hide the amused smirk on her lips.

"Listen up, Dylan," I say and snap my fingers in front of his face to get his attention. "We need to speak with your boss. Go get Mr. Masuda for us, please."

"Yeah, sure," he says. "Don't need to yell at me though."

"I'm not—" I start, then bite off my words. "Please just go get Mr. Masuda for us."

"Okay, okay, I'll get him. Settle down now," he says with that same silly grin on his face.

"He's really trying my patience," I mutter to Astra.

"He's amusing me."

"I hate you."

"I know," she says.

Dylan gets off his stool, then heads toward the door that leads to the back. Before he gets there, though, it opens, and out comes Masuda, wearing a light gray three-piece suit, stylish and well-tailored. His eyes are narrow, and a sour expression is on his face. I'm starting to think it's just stuck that way. Rather than wait around, Dylan slips through the door and into the back of the office.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asks. "You are making a scene —"

"We have a warrant, Mr. Masuda," I state. "We are authorized to search your offices and impound a black panel van, license plate

number J-F-C-6-4-3-1—”

“Warrant? What is this all about?”

“That van was used in an abduction, Mr. Masuda—”

“Impossible. There is no way any of our fleet—”

“Yes, there is. We have an eyewitness who puts that van and the two men driving it at the scene of the abduction,” I cut him off.

He folds his arms over his chest and shakes his head. “This is absurd, Agents,” he snaps. “I will not cooperate, and I refuse to give you entry.”

“That’s fine. You don’t have to cooperate with us. That is your right, after all, Mr. Masuda. However, if you refuse us entry when we have a legal warrant, we will simply arrest you for obstructing justice, interfering with a federal investigation, and whatever the hell else strikes my fancy. How does that sound?” Caitlyn says simply.

Astra leans closer to me. “Sometimes, she reminds me of you. The resemblance is uncanny.”

“She gets things done,” I reply. “Can’t argue with that.”

“This is absurd,” he says again.

“Mr. Masuda, what’s absurd is that you expect us to believe that two of your vehicles have been used in the commission of two very serious crimes, and you know nothing about it. That strains credulity well beyond the breaking point,” I say.

“It is the truth. I know nothing about it,” he says.

“So, what you’re saying is that your employees routinely sneak cars off your lot, right under your nose without your knowledge, then run around the city, abducting and murdering people, and you know nothing about it?” Astra says. “Is that about right?”

His face reddens with frustration. “That is not what I am saying either.”

“Then what exactly are you saying, Mr. Masuda?”

He takes a moment and looks at the plush carpeting beneath his feet. Masuda’s expression softens as he composes himself, and when he raises his head and looks at me again, it’s like I’m looking at an entirely different person. His face is smooth, all the lines of consternation gone along with any trace of emotion. It’s like he’s wearing a carefully crafted mask of neutrality. His eyes, though,

capture my attention. They're cold. Calculating. Harder than diamonds. He looks like a man who would not just kill me but would enjoy doing it.

The change is so sudden and startling, I almost suspect I just witnessed a dissociative identity switch—what some folks call split personalities. But Masuda displays no other outward symptoms of having the disorder. The fact that he can go from boiling with anger to absolutely serene in the blink of an eye is disturbing. But then, maybe it's because I can't master my emotions that well or that quickly, and I feel some bit of jealousy about it. I'm not sure.

"Conduct your search," he says, his voice as calm and emotionless as his face. "You will see we have nothing to hide here."

"Great. We'll do that," I say. "In the meantime, you and I need to talk."

"Shall I call my attorney? I do assume I still have rights," he asks.

Injecting lawyers into the mix does nothing but muddy the waters and keep me from getting to the heart of the matter. Yes, a suspect does have the right to an attorney. But I hate talking through a mouthpiece whose only goal is to throw a wrench into the machinery when the person I need to speak with is sitting right in front of me.

"Do you think you're going to need a lawyer?" I counter.

I do my best to keep the cringe off my face as I speak. Masuda seems to notice it anyway, though, and a small, cold smirk curls the corners of his mouth upward. There's something predatory about his gaze and expression. It's chilling.

"Not right now. Perhaps later though," he says.

"Great," I reply, trying to hide my discomfort. "Do you have an office where we can speak in private, Mr. Masuda?"

"Yes. Come with me."

"One moment. I need to deploy my team," I tell him.

I step over to Astra and see the concern plastered across her face. She cuts a glance over at Masuda, obviously having seen the switch in him that has me so rattled.

"You good?" she asks, pitching her voice low.

"Yeah. All good," I say. "Caitlyn, when the tech teams get here, have them search everything. And I mean everything. Back rooms.

Utility closets. Computers. Trash cans. Tool sheds. Tire wells of the actual cars. Also, sequester all the employees on site right now. We're going to need to speak with them individually."

"On it," Caitlyn says.

"I think I should go with you," Astra says.

"It's fine," I respond. "There's a ton that needs to be done out here, and we need all the bodies we can get."

"I'm supposed to be watching your back," she whispers. "And that guy is giving me a seriously creepy vibe right now."

"Me too. But I don't think he's going to murder me in front of a busload of federal agents. He's creepy, but he's smart."

She glances at him for a moment again, then turns back to me and lets out a long breath. "Fine. But if there is even a hint of something sideways about to happen, you call out, Blake. Use that big ol' voice of yours. You hear me?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Big ol' voice?"

"I mean it, Blake."

Astra and Caitlyn walk up to the front to begin organizing the troops as the crime scene techs roll in. Half a dozen SUVs come to a stop in the lot, and tech as well as armed agents come pouring out of the vehicles. When I turn back, Burton steps over to me.

"Chief Wilder, would you mind me sitting in on this interview?" she asks. "I'd like to pick up some tricks and tips—"

"I appreciate that, Agent Burton, but I'm going to need you out here with the rest of the team," I tell her. "There's a lot to do."

"But I think I can learn some really valuable insights from you."

"I don't know about that. You've got a pretty good mentor in Caitlyn. She's one of the absolute best I've ever seen," I tell her. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"But Chief Wilder—"

Although I admire her passion, her insistence on joining me, when I've already given her orders, is irritating.

"Agent Burton," I say as firmly as I can without sounding like a jerk. "I've given you your orders. Please see to your duties. I've got this."

Without waiting for a reply, I turn and follow Masuda through the back door and down a long hallway to his office. He stands aside and lets me go in first. I don't necessarily like having him behind me, so I move in quickly and sit down in one of the chairs before his desk. His office is thoroughly modern and obsessively clean. Everything is glass and stainless steel, and the furnishings are black. His desk is a thick sheet of glass on four steel legs with a laptop sitting atop a blotter; there are several piles of papers neatly stacked, a pen cup, and a telephone. It is all coldly efficient, just like the man sitting in the chair across from me.

"So, Mr. Masuda, you have some explaining to do," I start. "Two separate vehicles from this lot were taken and used to commit two separate crimes. How do you explain that?"

"I have nothing to explain since I am not involved with these crimes," he says. "And neither is anybody who works for me."

"You seem pretty certain of that."

"I am."

"Video evidence as well as eyewitness testimony says otherwise," I say.

"And tell me, Agent Wilder, when you searched the SUV earlier, did you find anything? Did you find any evidence?" he asks.

"No," I say. "It had been thoroughly cleaned by the time we arrived."

"Then it seems safe to say you were wrong in assuming that vehicle was used."

A wry laugh bursts from my throat. "We have it on video, Mr. Masuda."

"Perhaps it was the last person who rented it—"

"We've spoken with him already, and the car was returned a day before the video was taken. Your own records corroborate that, Mr. Masuda," I tell him. "It wasn't the person who rented the vehicle in the video."

"Well, the issue remains that you found no evidence in the vehicle," he says. "And perhaps your eyewitness was mistaken in what they saw."

“We will find out when we process the van,” I say. “Assuming that, too, hasn’t been cleaned out already as well.”

That small, creepy grin quirks one side of his mouth upward again. There’s a knowing glint in his eye that, combined with that smirk, feels as if Masuda knows that I know he’s involved with the Yokai but can’t prove it.

“Is there something specific you would like to ask me, Agent Wilder?” he asks.

“Yes. I’d like to know how it is that two vehicles that belong to the company you work for have now been implicated in two very serious crimes,” I say.

“I really couldn’t tell you,” he says smoothly.

“Who is your boss, Mr. Masuda?” I asked. “This company is registered under the name of a different corporate entity.”

“I’m afraid my employer wishes to remain anonymous. Hence the reason this company is registered to a corporate entity,” he says.

“I’m afraid we’ll need to speak with him.”

“My employer is out of the country,” he says. “That will, unfortunately, not be possible.”

“You’re going to need to make that happen, Mr. Masuda.”

He sighs dramatically. “The best I can do is put in a call, Agent Wilder. I cannot guarantee my employer will return it. But I will do my best to cooperate with you, if for no other reason than to show you that neither I, nor my employer, nor anybody who works here could have been involved with a murder or the abduction of three teenage girls.”

Before I can process what he said and reply to it, my cell phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and am surprised to see the name on my screen. I’m getting nowhere with Masuda and don’t expect to. He’s disciplined, focused, and intent on protecting his company—as well as, what I believe, are his connections with the Yokai.

I get to my feet. “I need to take this. But please do put a call in to your employer, Mr. Masuda. Impress upon him the urgency of my request for a callback.”

“I will do my best,” he replies with a slight bow of his head.

I walk out of his office, making sure to close the door behind me, then connect the call and press the phone to my ear.

“Spenser, hey,” I say. “I was going to call you, actually...”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Cobalt Lounge, Beacon Hill District; Seattle, WA

“Thanks for meeting me,” I say.

“Not a problem. But what’s with all the cloak and dagger?” she asks. “Why not just meet at the field office?”

“There’s a lot going on down there right now,” I say. “So, until I’m sure of a few things, I’d rather keep you in the shadows.”

“Kind of like a secret weapon, huh?”

“Exactly like that,” I say with a small laugh.

The Cobalt Lounge is an out-of-the-way place where I don’t have to worry very much about being seen. It’s not a very big place, and the lighting is fairly dim. The tables and booths are all crafted from light-colored wood and deep blue-colored cushions. The bar runs along the left wall of the building. The wall behind it is lined with frosted glass shelves, lit from below and filled with liquor bottles. Deep, rich blue neon lighting lines the top of the walls, and Bob Seger’s “Mainstreet” plays at an acceptable level from speakers mounted all around the place.

It's off the beaten path and is a place I've met CIs before because it's usually frequented by regulars, and outsiders tend to stand out. It's not too difficult to pick out the people who don't belong here. It's why I asked Spenser to meet me here when she called and told me she was in town and that she needed to talk. So, after we finished up at Masuda's shop, I slipped away to meet her clandestinely. Astra didn't like the idea of me going alone, but I pulled rank and told her to go home for the night and that I'd catch her up on it all in the morning.

She brushes her thick, black hair over her shoulder, and her jade-green eyes flit back and forth around the room as she takes a drink of her Manhattan. Spenser is tall and athletic. And with her olive-colored skin and almond-shaped eyes, she's got an exotic and somewhat mysterious look about her that I'm sure most men find appealing. She and Astra could probably stage a beauty contest on their own.

I take a sip of my drink and get her up to speed about what's going on down at the field office. I tell her all about Caitlyn's mole and our need for secrecy. She listens to everything without interrupting, and when I'm done, she puts her glass down and nods.

"Well, it sounds like you have a lot going on up here," she says.

"Yeah, you could say that."

"And you're sure this Masuda guy is involved?"

"I'm positive. One hundred percent positive," I say.

"Why are you so sure?"

"Aside from the fact that both cars used in these crimes were from his lot?"

She nods. "Aside from that, since, by your own admission, you found zero trace evidence in the SUV and the van," she says. "Speaking of which, have you found anything on his employees that indicate their involvement?"

"Nothing," I admit.

"Okay, so back to my original question," she says. "How do you know this Masuda character is involved? And that he's part of the Yokai?"

“I can’t prove he’s part of the Yokai. Yet,” I say. “But I know he’s involved with the abduction of the girls because he told me.”

Spenser arches one of her perfectly manicured eyebrows at me. “He told you.”

“He did. We have a clamp on information regarding their abduction. It hasn’t run on any television news channel, nor the local paper,” I tell her. “Yet somehow, Masuda knew it was three teenage girls who were snatched. There isn’t any way he could have known that unless he had a hand in them being taken.”

Spenser sits back in the booth and gnaws on her bottom lip for a long moment, processing what I just told her. She takes a sip of her drink, then sets the glass back down.

“And you’re sure there’s no other way he could have found out?” she asks.

I shake my head. “None. I checked with Astra and Caitlyn, and they said it had never been brought up around him. That means he knows because he’s involved.”

“He can’t be the head of the Syndicate though,” she says.

I shake my head. “No, but I believe he ordered the hit on Daniel Aoki down your way,” I say. “Maybe that was an order from the man at the top who feared Aoki might flip. Or maybe Masuda had Aoki killed to create the opening that allowed him to move into that consigliere slot. One way or the other, I’m almost positive he’s got Aoki’s blood on his hands.”

“So, what are we going to do?”

“I believe they’re gearing up for an auction and that’s why they snatched the girls.”

“That’s bold,” she says. “Given what you told me about Fish and all.”

“Yeah, that’s a complicated situation, and I don’t want to involve him if we can help it,” I tell her. “Right now, I just want to focus on finding a way to get Masuda. He’s not the head of the snake, but if we cut it off, it’s going to throw a wrench in their plans.”

“We may not have a choice.”

“We?” I ask. “Are you here for the duration?”

“I’m here as long as you need me, Blake,” she says. “For what they did back east and now in my town, I want to crush the Syndicate if we can.”

“What about your department?”

“Amanda’s in charge,” she tells me. “If anything goes down, she’ll call me. I’m only an hour or so from home. I’m pretty confident nothing’s going to pop off while I’m gone though.”

“Good. I’m glad to have you here. I can use your help.”

A wan smile touches her lips as she raises her glass. “We’ve come a long way.”

I pick up my glass and tap it against hers. “We certainly have. And I’m glad for that.”

“Me too.”

We both take a sip of our drink and enjoy a moment of companionable silence. It’s a place I never thought I’d be with Spenser—at peace. Getting along. And even finding a mutual respect between us. But working that case with her showed me something new from Spenser: she’s grown from her experiences in New York, and I suppose I have too. I’m glad we’ve been able to come together and find this place.

“Anyway, what brought you up here?” I ask. “You sounded pretty urgent on the phone.”

She nods. “The initial search of Aoki’s didn’t turn up much of anything,” she says. “But then I had an idea, so I went back and started looking deeper and found a hidden compartment in his office —”

“What gave you the idea to do that?”

She laughs softly. “Honestly? A movie I was watching. Spy flick. The hero found a hidden compartment with some missing files.”

I laugh. “You just never know where you’re going to find clues.”

“You do not,” she says.

“So, what did you find?”

“A pair of ledgers that have tons of numbers that look like a record of payments that began just about two years ago,” she tells me. “But the ledgers are coded, so we have no idea who those payments were going to.”

“I suspect they’re payoffs to city officials, cops, judges—anybody in a position to help them expand their presence in the city,” I say. “And the timing seems to coincide with when Fish started moving toward a legit life and loosening his hold on the underworld.”

“Aoki was pretty bold in keeping those ledgers.”

“Smart too,” I reply. “He knew you’ve got to have insurance.”

“Didn’t stop him from being taken out,” she says.

I chuckle bitterly. “Ain’t that a pain. But we need to find the key to cracking the code in those ledgers.”

“We do. I’ve got my team down there working on it. They will hopefully be able to tell us if they’re able to decipher anything. I also brought copies for your team to look at. I figure the more eyes we have on this, the better,” she says.

“That’s a good thought. I’ll turn them over to my team too,” I say.

“But for now, how are we going to go about proving that Masuda is tied to the Yokai?”

“I’ve been trying to figure that out since he slipped up and said what he said.”

“Oh, there’s one thing I found that you should know,” she says. “I don’t know if it means anything, but I always recall you saying even the smallest things can have a massive impact.”

“I still believe that,” I say. “What do you have?”

“They call the head of the Yokai, *Enenra*. It was in some of the papers Aoki left behind.”

I sound out the word slowly. “Enenra?”

“The Enenra is a Japanese monster that’s made of smoke and shadows,” she tells me.

“Well, if nothing else, it’s another link to Japan. We’ve always thought the head of the Syndicate was a Japanese national,” I say.

“Does being a fancy profiler give you any insight into who he is based on that name?”

Our waitress drops off a fresh round of drinks, and I purse my lips, letting my eyes drift around the lounge as I take a moment to consider her question. The truth is, I don’t have nearly enough information to give her an informed profile. But I can certainly make a few assumptions.

“I’d need to do a little more research, but offhand, I’d guess that relating to a creature made of smoke and shadows means he believes we can’t catch him. That no matter how hard we try, he will slip right through our fingers. Just like smoke and shadows would. I believe that makes him feel powerful. Perhaps even invincible,” I say.

“Wow. That’s kind of deep.”

I shrug. “Or it could mean nothing, and they chose the name because they thought it sounded cool,” I reply. “It’s impossible for me to know for sure without talking to him and getting into his head.”

“You’re sharp, Blake. I have a feeling you’re more inside his head than you realize.”

“I hope so,” I reply. “If we’re ever going to catch this prick, I need to be.”

“So, what are our next steps? Where do we go from here?” Spenser asks. “We can’t prove this Masuda guy is involved, or even part of the Yokai. And we don’t have any leads on where those three girls are being held.”

“Nope. We’ve got nothing right now,” I say. “And even worse, I don’t even know where to start right now. Masuda just seems to be one step ahead of us. It’s frustrating as hell.”

I lean back in the booth and stare up at the ceiling for a moment, trying to figure out how we’re going to go about finding these girls and proving Masuda is part of the Yokai. Based on what I saw while I was there, I’m not overly optimistic that we’re going to find anything down at the rental car shop. The man is careful. He’s clever. And if I had to guess, I’d say he’s very well versed in keeping his, as well as his employer’s, secrets.

“What about this auction you think is happening?” Spenser asks. “If we can find a way to get into that event, that might be our in. It might help us crack this whole damn thing wide open.”

I chew on her words for a moment and realize she’s right. If we can somehow corroborate there is indeed an auction happening and then find a way to finagle our way into it, we could crack this thing and maybe, just maybe, bring down the organization we’ve been trying to break for so long. To do that, though, I know I’d have to do something I’m incredibly loath to do.

“Do you have a place to stay?” I ask.

“I was going to check in to a hotel after we finish up here.”

I reach into my bag, grab my key ring, then slide the keys for my condo off and slide them across the table to her.

“I’ve got a spare room you can use,” I tell her. “*Mi casa es su casa*. Just stay out of sight and keep a low profile.”

“Really?” she asks with an expression of confusion on her face.

“Yes, really. I’ve got an idea—or at least the beginning of an idea. But we’re going to need to keep your presence here a secret until I can put everything together,” I tell her.

“I’m intrigued,” she replies.

“Towels are in the hall cabinets, and the wine is in the rack next to the refrigerator. Make yourself at home,” I say. “I need to get to the shop to start putting some things in motion, so I’ll probably be home late.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jade Pearl Billiards House, Chinatown-International District; Seattle, WA

I can tell Caitlyn's uneasy as we step into the billiards house-slash-illegal gambling den that Fish uses as a home base. It's here that he's able to keep an eye on his community as well as maintain a presence to let any potential rivals know that despite his nascent career in legitimate public service, he is still the power in Seattle.

We walk through the dimly lit, smoke-filled lower level of the billiards hall. I see the usual crowd of young guys standing around, puffing away on their cancer sticks, laughing and talking with one another. And as usual, I feel the eyes on us. Chinatown is an insular community that doesn't exactly embrace outsiders. They've gotten used to me coming around, for the most part, but aside from Fish and a few of his people, nobody has ever really made me feel welcome.

"This is quite the place," Caitlyn says dryly.

“Wait until you see the upstairs,” I reply with a laugh. “But you need to remember, we’re not here in an official capacity, Caitlyn. We’re not gathering intel, and we do not report what we see. You’re sure you can handle that?”

“What are they doing upstairs? Human sacrifice?”

I stop and turn to her, my expression serious. “Cait. I need your word that nothing you see going on here is going to end up in a report or a warrant authorizing a raid on this place.”

She holds her hands up to chest height, her palms facing me. “You don’t need to worry about me. I work missing persons cases, and unless there are missing persons here, I don’t much care what goes on within these walls. Unless they’re practicing human sacrifice.”

A wry laugh bubbles out of my mouth. “There is no human sacrifice going on here. Just the wanton and silly sacrifice of money.”

“Fair enough. You won’t get any trouble from me then.”

“Good. Then let’s go,” I say.

I lead her through the swinging door that opens to a long hallway. We follow it down to where the mountain with legs known as An Chu is sitting on his usual stool watching the staircase that leads up to the real club inside the Jade Pearl. When he sees me coming, An hauls his six-foot-six tall and equally wide frame off the stool and offers me a wide, warm smile.

“Hey there, Blake,” he says. “And I see you’ve got another beautiful friend with you today?”

I grin. “You cut it out, mister.”

An holds up his hands and gives a sheepish expression. “Couldn’t help it. And to whom do I have the pleasure?”

Caitlyn is standing stock still, her eyes wide, looking at An with something like awe blended with fear on her face, making him laugh. Bald as the day he was born and with a long, thick Fu Manchu mustache that hangs well below his chin, he cuts an imposing figure that leaves a lot of people looking like Caitlyn is right now. He looks mean and like he can literally tear your limbs off your body—and perhaps has at some point, I’ve never asked—but the man is a gentle giant.

I nudge Caitlyn in the side with my elbow. “An, this is Caitlyn Tanaka,” I say. “You’ll have to forgive her. We don’t let her out much.”

“No sweat,” he says, then strikes a funny pose. “I just assume she’s never seen this much gorgeous man before.”

That shakes Caitlyn out of her paralysis, drawing a long, hard laugh from her. An smiles at me, and I just grin at him as I shake my head.

“Anyway, Fish is up in his office,” An says. “Go on up. Good to see you, Blake. And nice to meet you, Caitlyn.”

“You too,” she says, still chuckling to herself.

We climb the narrow staircase, then walk down the short hallway to the ornately carved doors at the end of it. One of the two serious-looking men standing beside the doors opens it as we approach, allowing us to walk inside without any banter or jokes. We walk into the large gambling house Fish owns and operates above the billiards hall, and from the corner of my eye, I see Caitlyn looking around with a surprised expression on her face.

“How long has this place been here?” she asks in a low voice.

“A pretty long time.”

“And you’ve never—”

“No. I haven’t,” I say. “As far as I’m concerned, this place is off-limits. Everybody you see here is here voluntarily, and nobody’s being hurt. So, it hurts nobody if I look the other way.”

“They’re still breaking the law though.”

“Not my circus, not my monkeys, as far as I’m concerned,” I shrug. “Besides, this place has been around so long, it’s pretty much an open secret. If SPD can’t be bothered to raid the place, why should we worry about it?”

She considers my words for a moment then shrugs. “That’s a fair point, I guess.”

“Come on, let’s go talk to Fish,” I say. “And for the love of God, don’t get all weird and stare at him too.”

“Is he the size of Godzilla too?”

“No.”

“Then I think I’ll be good.”

Laughing to myself, I lead her through Fish's casino and over to his office. A man standing beside the door gives me a nod of recognition, then opens the door, letting us step inside. We've only just crossed the threshold, but Fish is already on his feet and is stepping around his desk with a warm smile on his face. He embraces me warmly.

Today, his suit is light green and metallic, shimmering under the soft lighting in his office. The vest beneath his jacket is a shade darker, and his dark green tie pops against the white shirt beneath. And, of course, he finished out his ensemble with a pocket square that matches his tie. Fish is nothing if not well-put together.

"Always lovely to see you, Blake. How are you?" he asks. "How is your condo? Is there anything that needs to be addressed?"

"I'm good, Fish. Always good to see you. And the condo is... amazing. It really is. It's perfect. No issues with it at all. And thank you again. It was more than generous," I say.

"I sleep better knowing you are safe," he says. "So, really, it was for my own benefit. It was a bit selfish, actually."

"Hardly," I say with a laugh, then motion to his suit. "This is tame for you."

"Ah, yes. Unfortunately, my new duties as a city councilman require a more, quote, unquote, 'professional' wardrobe. Stuff and boring, I say. So, I'm easing it in slowly."

He laughs, making the corners of his eyes crinkle—otherwise, Fish's smile lights up his face and makes him look almost boyish. His complexion has always been smooth and for the most part, unlined, making it impossible to tell his age. I've asked him once or twice, but he's always laughed me off and said age is just a number that he refuses to abide by. Eventually, I decided that he's simply ageless and stopped asking.

"Fish, this is Caitlyn Tanaka," I say. "We worked together back in New York, and she heads up the missing persons unit out here. She's one of the good ones."

He takes her hand in his and places a gentle kiss on the back of it. "It is lovely to meet you, Agent Tanaka. Any friend of Blake's is a friend of mine."

“It’s nice to meet you too,” she replies. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

His eyes sparkle mischievously as he laughs. “Hopefully from Blake and not from your organized crime unit.”

“Honestly, from both,” she says. “But Blake sings your praises, and I trust her.”

“Blake is and always has been exceedingly kind,” he says. “Please, have a seat.”

We sit down in the pair of chairs positioned in front of his desk as Fish walks back around and drops into the chair behind it.

“Would you two care for something to eat or drink?” he asks.

“No, we’re all right,” I tell him.

“Straight to business then.”

“Unfortunately,” I reply. “I apologize in advance for being so brusque. But we’re kind of up against a clock.”

“The unfortunate nature of government work, as I am discovering myself,” he says. “So, how may I help you?”

“It’s about the Yokai Syndicate,” I start.

He nods, a frown creasing his lips. “Yes. I started putting feelers out when you and Spenser brought them to my attention. They must be flying well below the radar because I have not found anything definitive.”

“They’re here. Without a doubt,” I say.

“How do you know this with such certainty, Blake?”

I fill him in on everything we’ve learned to this point, making sure to emphasize the discovery of the bodies in the shipping container. Caitlyn looks uncertain about the fact that I am sharing sensitive information about an ongoing case with Fish, but she holds her tongue. She even jumps in now and then to offer some details or clarification on one point or another. By the time we’re done telling our story, almost half an hour has gone by. Fish listened to it all, never interrupting. He simply absorbed everything we had to say.

As we unrolled our story, though, I could see his expression darkening and his face tightening. Fish is a man who mastered his emotions long ago. He always puts on a bright and cheery face for

people, but because I know him so well, I can always tell when he's suppressing his feelings. And I know right now that he's pissed.

"So, that's where we stand right now," I finish up.

"This is... most troubling," he says.

"There are still a lot of gaps that need to be filled and boxes that need to be checked," Caitlyn says. "But the theory seems pretty sound."

"I agree," he replies. "That's why this is so upsetting. I do not know how this could have happened right beneath my nose."

"Fish, like I told you before, this is not your fault," I say. "They've been moving in the shadows, and you have a lot on your plate these days. A lot."

"There was a time when I knew everything happening in the shadows. There was a time when nothing got past my notice. Certainly nothing like this," he says. "But this is not the time for self-recrimination. That will come with reflection. What I need to know now is, how can I help you, Blake? What can I do?"

"We believe the auction is coming soon," I tell him. "We desperately need you to reach out to anybody you know who might be able to get us an invite to this auction."

"Blake, you know I never dealt with that sort of thing. You know that I did everything I could to discourage that sort of crime in this city," Fish replies.

"I know. But I'm also aware you know some of the more unsavory people in the city," I press. "People who might look to take advantage of a situation if they thought they could get away with it. The Yokai obviously feel empowered to make moves because they think you're not paying attention. Others might seek to follow in their footsteps."

He nods. "That makes sense. And you are right; I may know of some people who stay in line simply because they fear me. They may not hesitate to make moves if they believed they could get away with it without my notice. I will make some quiet inquiries and see what I can find out."

"Thank you, Fish," I say.

He gives a slight smile. "I cannot promise I will be able to get you what you need, but I will do my very best."

"I know you will. And I appreciate all you do."

He inclines his head. "Of course. You know I am at your disposal, my dear," he says.

Fish stands as we get to our feet and comes around his desk, pulling me into another warm embrace. He steps back and shakes hands with Caitlyn, who surprisingly, seems a little more comfortable in his presence than she did when we walked in. After saying our goodbyes to him, we leave Fish's office and head back toward the parking lot.

"He seems... nice," Caitlyn finally says. "Definitely not the big, bad boogeyman some folks I've talked to make him out to be."

"He's not. I mean, back in the day, I understand why people thought he was the boogeyman. And it was a reputation he rightly earned," I say. "But people also misunderstood him as well as his motives. Most people didn't understand he was trying to make the city safer. In his own way."

As we get to the car, she looks over at me. "Not everything is as it seems with him."

"Not even close, Caitlyn," I reply. "Not even close."



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Private Residence, Central District; Seattle, WA

“Are you sure about this?” Caitlyn asks.

Burton nods. “Positive.”

Caitlyn glances over at me, and I shrug, not sure what to think of it myself. The tension in the back of the van is high, and I feel beads of sweat rolling down my back, making my shirt stick to my skin. I shift my body and pull down on the tactical vest, trying to settle it on my shoulders.

“This is your call, Cait,” I say.

She gnaws on her thumbnail, her eyes fixed on the house on the computer screens in front of us. Burton came hustling into the shop this morning like her hair was on fire, telling us that she’d gotten a tip from a CI about the girls. This CI had told her they are being held in a house here in the Central District, one of Seattle’s toughest and most crime-riddled neighborhoods. It’s such a rough and violent place, SPD doesn’t send a lot of patrols through here. Which, if you were looking for a place to stash three teenage girls, this would be it.

People in this neighborhood never see or hear a thing, and they never, ever work with the cops.

“Is your CI reliable, Steph?” Caitlyn asks.

“Always has been. They’ve never steered me wrong in the past,” she replies. “You remember the Hibbard boy we rescued? That was because of a tip from this CI.”

I remember the story about the Hibbard boy. The abduction of a six-year-old from an ice cream shop was one of the biggest stories in Seattle for the better part of a year until he was found. And if they found him because of a tip from Burton’s CI, I’d say that’s a pretty strong vote in favor of the intel she received.

The house where Burton’s CI said the girls are being kept is just up the street from where we’re sheltered in one of our undercover surveillance vans. We’ve got a tac team staged in a vacant lot about half a mile from here, waiting on our word to go in. Like the rest of the homes on this street, our target house is slightly run-down. Made of chipped and cracked red brick and white clapboard that’s dull and faded, it looks like a working-class house in a working-class neighborhood. If that’s where they’re stashing the girls they snatch, it’s the perfect camouflage.

Blackout curtains have been drawn across all the windows, but light is peeking through at the edges, telling me there are people in there. What I don’t know is whether the people inside the house are the girls we’re looking for.

“Caitlyn?” I ask. “What’s your call?”

She hesitates, gnawing on her lower lip as the wheels in her head turn. As long as I’ve known her, Caitlyn has always been bold. Decisive. She has always been able to quickly assess a situation, then come up with a plan of action. To see her so hesitant and uncertain is a bit jarring and makes me wonder what’s going through her head.

“Cait?” I press.

She gives herself a small shake and seems to come back to the moment. Caitlyn runs a hand through her hair, then turns and gives me a nod.

“We’re a go,” she says, then picks up the comm. “Alpha team, move to position one and get ready. Operation is a go. Stand by and wait for my command to breach.”

“Copy that. Alpha team en route.”

I key open my comm. “Blue one, come in.”

“Go for one, blue actual,” Astra’s voice comes back. “Do we have eyes in the sky?”

“Copy that. Eyes in position.”

“Go to thermal and report.”

“Copy that, blue actual. Stand by,” she says.

Astra is with the drone team down the street getting eyes on the house. I wait for Astra’s report and see Caitlyn looking at the computer monitors, watching the house closely. My stomach tightens as I wait for the tac team to get into position. And until we have an idea of who’s in the house and how many, we won’t know if we’re walking into an ambush—or taking another step on a wild-goose chase. I’m always a little keyed up before ops like this, but there’s just something about this one that has my stomach clenching and goosebumps marching up and down my body. Something doesn’t feel right.

“Blue one for blue actual,” Astra’s voice comes through my earpiece.

“Go for actual,” I reply.

“Thermal shows we’ve got eight bogeys in the house,” she reports. “Five in the front room and three in the back room.”

“Eight fighters?” Caitlyn asks. “Are we walking into a trap?”

“My CI is absolutely certain the girls are in that house, Caitlyn,” Burton supplies.

“That means five fighters,” Caitlyn says. “Unless we’re walking into an ambush.”

“I don’t think that’s the case. I believe my CI, Boss. If they say the girls are in that house, then they’re in that house,” Burton insists.

“Blue one,” I say into my comm as a thought occurs to me. “What is the position of the three in the back room?”

“Come again, actual?”

“Are they spread out? Or are they huddled together?” I ask.

“Stand by,” Astra says. A minute or two passes in tense silence before she comes back. “They appear to be huddled together.”

“Those are the girls. They have to be.” I turn to Caitlyn. “Those are five Yokai fighters in the front room.”

A smile finally crosses her face, and she lets out a breath of relief. Burton gives me a smile and a nod, then turns back to the computers, tightening the focus on the house, and watches it closely. Caitlyn’s radio crackles, then a husky, masculine voice comes on the line.

“Alpha team in position at the front. Ready to breach,” he reports.

“Beta team in the alley behind the target. Ready to breach,” comes a second voice.

Caitlyn’s mouth is a tight slash across her face, sweat dots her brow, and she taps her foot on the floor of the van.

“Hold,” I say. “I want to go in through the front with Alpha team.”

“Are you sure?” she asks.

I tug on my vest and give her a crooked smile. “I didn’t get all dressed up just to sit on the sidelines while the game goes on without me.”

“Be careful, Blake.”

“Count on it.”

I grab a long gun off the rack on the wall, then open the back door of the van and step out into the cold night air. Clouds blanket the sky, blotting out the light of the moon and the stars above, and a cool breeze sends a parade of leaves skittering down the street.

“Seriously, Blake. Watch your back,” Caitlyn says as she leans out of the van. “You know how dangerous these guys are.”

“I do. And I’ll be fine,” I reply. “I’ll see you when this is over.”

“Copy you,” she says, then ducks back in and closes the door behind her.

I key my comm. “Blue one, come in.”

“Go for blue one,” she says.

“I’m moving to alpha team position one,” I say. “You’re welcome to join the party.”

“On my way, actual,” she says without hesitation. “We’ll rendezvous at position one.”

“Copy that.”

Moving low and fast, I race down the street and hustle over to the position where Captain Roland Holder’s tac team has set up. When I get to them, I drop to a knee beside Holder. He’s a large, athletic man anyway, but his pads and tactical gear make Holder look even bigger. With a strong jawline and a thick, six-foot frame, Holder is rugged and intimidating. He pulls a helmet down over his salt-and-pepper hair and looks at me with startlingly blue eyes.

He flashes me a smile. “Going to get your hands dirty tonight, Chief?”

I return his smile. “You know me. I can never resist getting into a good fight.”

“You should really consider getting a new hobby,” he says.

“Why? This one suits me just fine.”

“You need some help, Chief.”

“You’re not the first person to tell me that.”

“I’m not shocked.”

Astra drops down beside me. “Hey, Roland.”

“Well, there goes the neighborhood,” he says with a dramatic sigh. “And in this neighborhood, that’s saying something.”

“Awww, you say the sweetest things,” Astra chirps.

“I do my best,” he rumbles. “Okay, we’re ready. You two stay behind my men and follow us in. We breach first. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” I say, then switch channels and key my comm. “Red actual, this is blue team leader, standing by for your green light.”

My stomach is roiling as my pulse races. My body is slicked with sweat, and I swallow hard. We’ve got a team of ten—twelve if I’m counting me and Astra—theoretically doubling the number of bad guys in the house. In theory, we should be able to overwhelm them with sheer numbers. I’ve learned, though, you can never take anything for granted. The house could be wired and ready to blow the minute we step across the threshold. Any number of things could go wrong. All we can do is stay alert, on our toes, and hope to God nothing goes sideways on us.

The comm crackles in my ear. "You have the green light," Caitlyn says. "You may breach on your ready."

Holder looks at me. "Behind us."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time," I reply.

"Hard experience has taught me that you hearing me and doing what I say are two very different things," he says. "So, do what I say."

"Yes, sir."

Astra and I hang back as Holder's team moves ahead, slowly getting into position. I switch my comm to the tac frequency as we fall into step behind him. I'm not crazy. Being first through the door isn't my idea of a good time. But I also don't like being relegated to being a bit player as the action gets hot and heavy.

We close in on the house, and I watch as Holder's men quietly creep up the stairs to the porch and position themselves on either side of the door. His whispered voice comes through the comm in my ear.

"Alpha team in position," he says softly. "Beta team report."

"Beta team in position," comes the equally quiet reply.

"Breach on three," Holder says. "One..."

I tighten my grip on the handle of my AR-15 and hunch down. The muscles in my legs are burning from squatting for so long, but I grit my teeth and bear it.

"Two..."

Laughter and the sound of glass shattering come from inside the house. That's followed by raised voices and more laughing as well as the sound of muffled music. It sounds like they're having a party inside.

"Three... breach," Holder says.

His man beside the door shouts, "FBI!" and a split-second later, the door blows inward in a spray of shattered wood and hinges as he slams the hand-held ram into it. Holder throws a pair of flash-bangs into the house and ducks back as they detonate with a hard thud and a flash of blinding light. I hear the sound of the men inside screaming followed by the sharp chatter of gunfire. Holder's men pour into the house like water rushing through a break in the dam, adding to the cacophony of shouting voices and gunfire.

“Three bogeys down,” Holder’s voice crackles through my comm. “Two in custody.”

“Beta team has cleared the back end of the house,” comes the voice of Henry Cone, Holder’s right-hand man. “We are code four. Situation under control.”

I switch my comm again. “Red actual, this is blue team leader.”

“Go for red actual,” Caitlyn says.

“Roll the buses. We’ve got wounded.”

“Copy you,” she replies. “Buses are already en route.”

Astra and I get to our feet and move into the house quickly. A couple of men are bringing the three girls out of the back bedroom. They’re all wearing matching expressions of absolute terror. They look shell-shocked and shuffle along with their arms wrapped around themselves, drawn in, and hunched over. They’ve all got that look I’ve seen on the faces of people who are shocked they survived whatever trauma they’d endured. Astra and I walk over and drop to a knee in front of them. They recoil, but I put a hand up to show I’m not a threat.

“Riley, Petra, and Claire, right?” I ask.

They nod in unison but don’t say anything. They’ve got a few abrasions and bruises on their faces, and when I glance at the insides of their wrists, I see they haven’t been branded yet. On the whole, they are in surprisingly good shape. They’re disheveled and look exhausted, but it doesn’t look like the bastards holding them had started to break them in just yet. Thank God.

“Your parents are going to be so happy to see you,” I say.

As if the mention of their parents was the key to making them realize their ordeal was over, all three girls burst into tears. They’re clinging to each other like they’re lost at sea and their other friends are life preservers. In the distance, I hear the wail and warble of the sirens approaching us.

“Watch them a minute,” I say.

Astra nods as I get to my feet, then walk into the main room where I see three of the Yokai soldiers lying face down on the ground in pools of their own blood. Their weapons are still leaning up against the wall. The attack had been so swift, they hadn’t even had

the time to arm themselves. The other two are sitting on their butts with their hands zip-tied behind their backs. They glare at me with pure hate in their eyes.

All five look to be of Japanese descent, and all five have the Yokai symbol—the koi fish in a circle—tattooed on the backs of their hands. In rescuing the girls, we seem to have dealt a blow to this Enenra's Pacific Northwest cell. It was quick, clean, and efficient.

And it was entirely too easy for my liking.



CHAPTER TWENTY

*The Lotus Luxury Apartments, Chinatown-International District;
Seattle, WA*

“Take the win, Blake,” Spenser says.

“Yeah. I know. We got the girls home to their families,” I say. “That’s a win. I should be happy—I *am* happy.”

“Are you though?”

We’re sitting on the balcony of my condo that overlooks a quiet area inside Chinatown. The night is cool, and the sky is still choked with slate-gray clouds, but I couldn’t bear to sit inside. I felt cooped up and needed the fresh air. I pick up the bottle of wine I opened when I got home and refill my glass, then refill Spenser’s.

“This is a really nice place,” Spenser comments. “I definitely think I’m going to need to ask for a raise when I get back to Sweetwater.”

I laugh. “It hasn’t been that long since you left the Bureau. You don’t think they stepped up and started paying us this well, do you?”

“Then how’d you come by a place that is not only more luxurious than a five-star hotel but more well-guarded and secure than Fort Knox? Inquiring minds want to know.”

“Fish,” I say with a shrug.

“Fish, huh?”

She gives me a knowing smirk, and I can already read her thoughts. Before she can open her mouth, I hold a finger up to stop her from saying anything.

“Aside from everything else that happened in my old place, when Fish found out my new friend started sending me body parts, he got worried. So, he waited until I was off on a case and had his people come in and move me out of my old place and into this one,” I say. “Being that it’s in Chinatown, and he’s so wired into the place—and like you said, the place has security that rivals Fort Knox—he felt it would be safer. That I would be safer.”

“That’s a little invasive,” she says.

I nod as I take a sip of my wine. “It is. But his heart was in the right place, and I’m grateful,” I say. “It’s not like I was attached to my old place anyway. And hey, this place has a gym, pool, steam showers—it’s got its own dog park.”

“You don’t even have a dog.”

“I know. But I was thinking about your Annabelle. She’s a sweet girl.”

She chuckles. “Great Danes usually are.”

“You have someone watching her while you’re up here?”

“Yeah, my friend Ryker usually takes care of her when I’m not there.” She pulls out her phone to show me a picture. “She’s got a big dog run, but Ryker likes to walk her and let Annabelle play with his dog, Mocha, during the day when I’m at work.”

With her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth, Annabelle looks happy and seems to be smiling as she stands beside a slightly smaller chocolate lab. What catches my attention, though, is the tall, rugged man holding the leashes of both dogs with an electric smile of his own on his face. I’m kind of flabbergasted by how casually handsome he is.

I give her a sly smile. “That’s your friend Ryker?”

Spenser clears her throat and pulls her phone away suddenly. “Yep,” she says, almost sounding embarrassed.

I decide not to press the issue, and we both sit back in our chairs and sip our wine in companionable silence. Getting a dog might be nice. Having somebody to greet me with nothing but unconditional love when I get home doesn’t sound half bad. Not to mention the fact that a dog like a Dane would likely deter anybody who doesn’t belong here from coming through the door. It’s something I’m going to have to give some serious thought to.

“What is with you two? You and Fish, I mean,” Spenser asks. “I remember you telling me all he’s done for you and this symbiotic relationship and career arc you both have. But the way you talk about him just makes me think there’s more there.”

A wan smile touches my lips as I take another drink. “I’ve asked myself that a million times. On paper, we shouldn’t click like we do. He was a criminal; I’m a cop,” I say. “But there’s more depth to him than that. A lot more.”

“Okay, but that still doesn’t answer my question.”

“I guess on some level, I almost think of him as a father figure. I was so young when my mom and dad were murdered that I never had that sort of influence or guidance in my life. I always tried to be tough and said I didn’t need it—that I could always take care of myself and didn’t need a man’s influence in my life. And that was true. I took care of myself—built myself into what I am today,” I tell her. “But when Fish came into my life, he just started letting me lean on him. He started trying to take care of me and kind of filled a void in my life I never knew existed. And I think for him, I did the same thing. He never had children even though he loves kids. So, I became a de facto daughter to him, and our relationship has just grown like that.”

“So... it was your daddy issues that brought you two together,” she says with a smirk.

“You wound me, Song,” I reply with a laugh. “But yeah, probably.”

We sip our wine in silence and stare out at the darkening city. My mind is whirling a thousand miles a minute, and I can’t shake this

feeling of unease that's settled down over me. Something just seems... off.

"You can't let it go, can you?" Spenser says.

"You ever have a case that, after you close it, you can't stop thinking about it? And you can't stop thinking about it because something doesn't feel right? That maybe you missed something?"

She nods. "Sure. I've had plenty of cases like that. Most of the time, though, I found that I was just being a nitpicky perfectionist and that not all the I's were meant to be dotted, nor all the T's were meant to be crossed. Sometimes, not everything lines up, Blake. Not everything in this world is going to make perfect sense."

"No, I know. I get that more than most," I reply. "But..."

"But what?"

"This case... it just felt too easy."

She arches an eyebrow. "Too easy?"

"Yeah. Too easy."

"Your tac team had to kill three of the five bad guys in what you said was some intense fighting," she points out. "I wouldn't call that a walk in the park exactly."

"No, not exactly. I mean... it's just..."

"Spit it out."

"It just feels like that raid was staged and the girls were served up to us on a silver platter—"

"Wait, why would the Yokai sacrifice their own guys and serve up the girls they'd just snatched? That doesn't make sense," she says.

"To get us thinking we'd broken them," I say.

"Come again?"

"Think about it. What would be the best way for the Yokai to get us off their backs and stop chasing them?" I ask.

Spenser frowns. "To make you think you'd won."

"Exactly."

"Okay, so who served you up the intel for the raid?" she asks.

"Stephanie Burton," I reply. "Caitlyn's number two."

"It could be that she got bad intel."

"That's entirely possible. But she vouched for the CI she got the tip from," I say with a nod. "A CI she said helped them make big

saves in the past.”

“And because it’s Burton’s CI, it’s not like you can demand the name to vet the intel.”

“Exactly right.”

“Wow,” Spenser says. “This is getting deep.”

“Right?” I say. “But to be fair, it’s also possible the CI was fed the intel that Burton passed on to us. She could be innocent.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I don’t know. Caitlyn trusts Burton implicitly,” I say. “I find it hard to believe Burton could be moonlighting for the Yokai right under her nose like that. Caitlyn’s sharp.”

“You said Fish was upset the Yokai were operating right under his nose,” she counters. “This syndicate seems to have a very sneaky, subtle way about them. They seem to have a knack for making moves in the shadows without being seen.”

As I think back to the look of frustration on Fish’s face, I know she’s got a solid point. The Yokai seem to be masters at working behind the scenes, making it just as possible that if Burton is working with them, she’s just as adept at it. She very well could be feeding the Yokai intel and making moves on their behalf without Caitlyn knowing. Fish is one of the sharpest people I know, and if he had no idea they were making inroads, it’s just as possible Caitlyn doesn’t know either.

“So, what’s our next move?” Spenser asks.

“The first thing we need to do is dig deep into Stephanie Burton,” I say. “We need to prove the link between her and the Yokai. And if we can’t find one, we push her for the name of her CI, then grill them.”

“And then?”

“Then, we continue on like we have been. We keep coming straight at the Yokai until we can bring them down,” I say.

Spenser purses her lips. “If I could offer a suggestion?”

“Please. I’m all ears.”

“We’re going to need to be subtle. Very delicate,” she says. “Something that’s not in your wheelhouse.”

She pauses to wait for my rejoinder, but I merely shrug in acknowledgment. It's true. Astra's told me before that I can be about as subtle as a sledgehammer to the face.

"Even if we find out that Burton is in their pocket, I would suggest not tipping her off that we know. If the Yokai believe we took their bait and are satisfied that we won, we can operate more freely," she continues.

"It's a good point," I reply with a nod. "But that means we can't even tell Caitlyn what we suspect because it might tip Burton off."

"Exactly."

"Okay. I see where you're going with this."

"Until we know if Burton is involved, I would suggest a total information blackout," Spenser says. "Tell nobody anything but move behind the scenes like they do. Use their tactics against them for a change."

I give her a small smile. "You're actually pretty good at this."

"Yeah, well, don't be getting a big head or anything, but I learned a lot from you and Caitlyn during that brief time I was with the task force out in New York," she says.

"Oh, that's definitely going to come up again in conversation. As often as I can manage to squeeze it in, as a matter of fact."

"I knew I shouldn't have said anything," she says with a funny grimace.

"Too late to take it back now."

"Any word on getting an invite to the auction?" she asks.

"Not yet. But I know Fish will come through," I say. "If there's an invite to be had, he'll find a way to get it for us."

"Assuming there's an invite to be had and you're able to get one, how are we going to work that with a potential mole in your office?"

"I've been giving it some thought as we've been sitting here."

"And? What brilliant insights have you come up with?"

"Not so sure I've come up with anything brilliant," I say.

"But you have come up with something."

"Maybe."

"Elaborate," Spenser says.

“You’re right in that we need to be subtle. We need to be surgical to avoid the wrong people finding out we’re moving against them,” I say. “But we also need to know if we can trust our own team in all this.”

“Correct.”

“Well, then simply put, we need to see about smoking out the mole,” I say. “We need to see if we can trust Burton or not.”

“And how are we going to do that?”

A slow grin curls the corner of my mouth upward. “I think I have an idea.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gilson Gallery of Modern Art, Fremont District; Seattle, WA

“I don’t think I’m ever going to understand modern art,” Astra says.

We’re standing in front of a canvas that’s predominantly white but has three blue lines down the left side, two red lines across the bottom, and a green circle in the top right corner. According to the engraved bronze tag to the right, the name of the painting is, “Apocalypse,” and the artist’s name is Disario. Despite failing to see anything apocalyptic or dystopian about it, I think it’s kind of striking. Minimalistic, but still striking.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I kind of like it.”

“You would.”

“I bet Benjamin would like it too,” I say.

She pulls a face and then points to the small tag below it. “I’m betting he wouldn’t like it for ten thousand dollars.”

“Ten grand? Wow,” I say.

“Right? I can just go down to the art supply store and make my own for thirty bucks.”

I laugh as we move on to the next painting. This one has broad, roughly textured brush strokes across the canvas in sharply gradated shades of blue and purple, and according to its tag, this painting is called “Nighttime on the Sea,” by Nena.

“This is one I’d hang in my place,” I say. “It’s beautiful.”

“Don’t any of these artists have two names? Is only having one name supposed to make you more mysterious and artistic?” Astra asks.

“I mean, it works for Beyoncé.”

She gives me a look. “This is no Beyoncé.”

Laughing softly, I glance around the gallery floor, searching for the person we’re supposed to be meeting. The Fremont District is well known around Seattle for its artistic and vibrant flair, as well as for having a strong, counterculture vibe. That’s something I’ve always found to be a humorous contradiction given that the Fremont District is home to some of the country’s biggest corporate entities—Google and Adobe, just to name a couple. Aside from companies like that, though, there are a lot of mom-and-pop shops, high-end boutiques, and an inordinate number of art galleries and coffee houses.

I’d gotten a text from Fish this morning telling me he had what I was looking for, but he would send a representative to meet me at this art gallery today. Initially, it struck me as an odd place to have a meeting. But then I remembered that this is Fish and normal just isn’t in his vocabulary. We’ve been wandering around this gallery for an hour now and are running out of pieces to look at, but we’re still waiting for Fish to turn up. And the fact that he hasn’t has me a little bit worried, to be perfectly honest.

“You sure this is the place?” Astra asks.

“This is where Fish said to meet his guy.”

“He’s sending a guy?”

“Apparently so.”

“Why is he not coming himself?”

I shrug. “Probably because he’s got guys to do these things for him.”

“I’m jealous. I think I need a guy,” Astra says. “I’d have him do my grocery shopping, do my laundry, clean my house—”

“I don’t do windows, I’m afraid.”

The posh British accent behind us gives me a start, and I wheel around to find myself looking into the face of a man I don’t know. As if my body is acting on reflex, my hand slides down toward the Glock on my hip. The older man laughs softly.

“I am unarmed,” he says.

“Are you though?” I ask, pointing to the hard bulge at his hip beneath his tweed sport coat.

He gives me a sly grin. The man looks to be in his early sixties. He’s got a thick bush of white hair atop his head, a pale complexion, and lines etched deep into his face. But his blue eyes are still youthful and glimmer with mischief. His smile is warm and engaging, and honestly, if not for the lines, I’d swear he was in his forties. He’s got a slight, thin frame and is a few inches shorter than I am but still somehow projects himself as larger than he is. It’s something Astra can do with ease and is a skill that to this day, I’ve failed to learn how to master.

“A man can never be too careful, eh?” he teases.

“I’m sorry, but who are you?” I ask.

“Straight to business, eh?” he says in that crisp British accent.

“Mr. Zhao said you were a little too serious sometimes.”

“You’re Fish’s proxy?” I ask.

“My name is Thomas Wolcott, and I am here representing Mr. Zhao’s interests, yes.”

Astra and I exchange a glance. I’ve never seen this guy in my life, and a small, thin, older white man is the last person I would have ever expected to be one of Fish’s fixers, armed or not. He cocks his head, and as if reading my thoughts, an amused smile crosses his thin lips.

“I apologize,” I say. “It’s just, we’ve never met, and no offense intended, but you don’t seem like one of Fish’s guys.”

“No offense taken. And we may have never met, but I have seen you many a time. I just tend to blend in well,” he says with that mischievous twinkle in his eye. “That is especially useful when Mr.

Zhao has business interests of a delicate nature that need to be addressed... discreetly.”

He is definitely right. He blends in very well and has the sort of plain, nondescript appearance that allows him to be almost invisible. He seems to be a nice man but is entirely forgettable. The sort of guy you’d completely forget ever meeting five minutes after he walked away. I honestly doubt I’m going to remember his name an hour from now. I used to enjoy watching Dr. Who, and Wolcott seems to be a lot like one of the big villains—the Silence—creatures you only perceive when you see them and completely forget about their existence when you don’t. Which, as Wolcott said, is a useful trait to possess in his line of work.

“I thought I’d met all of Fish’s fixers already,” I say.

“I prefer the term ‘advisor’,” he replies. “Fixer just has such an ugly connotation.”

“Fair enough,” I say with a chuckle.

“Mr. Zhao asked me to deliver what I have to you because he is in a very delicate position in this matter and cannot afford to have his fingerprints on or near this at all. It cannot be known that he managed to provide you with this for reasons related to his old career as well as his new one... as I’m sure you understand,” Wolcott says.

“I do. Very much so,” I reply.

“Good.”

“What I want to know is why we’re in an art gallery in one of the parts of the city known for being a hipster paradise, Mr. Wolcott?” Astra asks.

He theatrically looks around the gallery then turns back to us. “Do you happen to see anybody of Asian descent who appear as if they might be affiliated with one of the street gangs or certain human trafficking syndicates?”

Like idiots, Astra and I both look around the gallery, then exchange a look and shake our heads, grinning at each other.

“No,” I admit. “We don’t.”

“Well then, there is the answer to your question, Agent Russo,” he says. “And I have to believe such a person would stand out in a

setting such as this.”

I flash him a rueful smile. “Touché, Mr. Wolcott. Touché.”

“I am quite good at what I do, I assure you.”

“I have no doubt,” I say.

“What I want to know is, how do you know who I am?” Astra asks.

“I know all of Agent Wilder’s associates,” he replies. “In my line of work, information and knowledge allow one to perform their duties with maximum efficiency.”

“Hopefully you’re not out there selling our information to international murder syndicates or anything,” Astra quips.

His lips twitch with a quick smile. “I mean no disrespect, Agent Russo, but as talented as you are, I doubt there is much of a market for your information. Most of the international murder syndicates tend to want the information of people higher up the governmental food chain.”

Her mouth falls open. “Ouch!”

He offers her a brief, apologetic smile. “As I said, I mean no disrespect.”

“None taken,” I say. “We’re small fish; I know. But we certainly know how to make big waves when we want to.”

“Ah yes. That you do. That you have from what I gather,” he says.

“We do our best.”

“I’m quite certain that is true,” he says. “Anyway, I am here to deliver this to you.”

He reaches into his inside coat pocket, then produces a black envelope and hands it to me. I open it and pull out the white card stock inside of it, look at it, then look at Wolcott questioningly.

“What is this?” I ask.

“This is what you asked Mr. Zhao about, I would presume,” he says.

I look at the card again, and all I see is a web address, though it’s unlike any web address I’ve ever seen. I hand the card to Astra, then turn back to Wolcott.

“This is the invite to the auction?” I ask.

“Again, I would presume it is whatever you discussed with Mr. Zhao,” he says. “He didn’t give me the particulars but said you would know it for what it is.”

“Blake.”

I turn to see Astra still holding the card, but she’s turned it around to show me the circled koi fish in black that’s been embossed onto the back of it.

“I guess that answers all my questions,” I say.

“Excellent,” Wolcott says. “Then I shall take my leave.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wolcott.”

“My pleasure, Agents Wilder and Russo,” he says. “Have a wonderful day. Oh, and Mr. Zhao has asked me to pass on his request that you both be very careful and watch each other’s backs.”

“Tell Fish that I owe him one,” I say. “Or rather, another one.”

Wolcott smiles. “I shall convey your message. Good day, Agents.”

We watch him walk out of the gallery, then Astra hands the card back to me. I slip it back into the envelope, then slide that into the inside pocket of my jacket.

“So, what are we going to do with that?” she asks.

“Hand it over to Rick and let him figure it out,” I reply.

“And what are we going to do?”

“Figure out how to smoke out our mole,” I say. “Let’s get back to the shop.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Black Cell Alpha Team Bullpen, FBI Field Office; Seattle, WA

“**W**hat is it?” I ask.

“I can’t say for certain without proceeding to the prompts, but if I had to guess, I’d say it’s a registration portal,” Rick replies. “And I don’t want to go any further with it until we know for sure what we’re doing, otherwise it could permanently lock us out of the portal.”

“Good thinking,” I say.

“Yeah, I have my moments,” he replies.

“So does a busted clock,” Astra says. “Twice a day.”

“You are cordially invited to pucker up and kiss my backside, Agent Russo.”

“That’s SSA Russo to you, plebe,” she says, and they both share a laugh.

We’re standing behind Rick watching over his shoulder as he sits at his workstation, and as I look at the image on the screen, I cross my arms over my chest. The image is a black envelope like the one Wolcott gave me in the art gallery, and in the center is a green,

stylized wax seal—the circled koi, of course. And in the lower right-hand corner of the screen, a clock is ticking down. It currently stands at seventy-one hours and forty-eight minutes.

“Do we think that’s the clock to the auction?” Rick asks.

I shake my head. “I think that might be the countdown to register. I have a feeling we’ll only get the time and location of the auction when that clock runs out.”

“Makes sense,” Rick says.

“Why does the web address look so weird?” Astra asks.

“Because it’s on the dark web,” he says.

Astra looks at me. “So, this has to be the invite to the auction then, right?”

“That’s my guess.”

“Oh, this was in the envelope too,” Rick says and hands me a slip of paper.

“What is it?” Astra asks.

It’s written in Fish’s neat, tight script, but it makes no sense to me. I stare at it blankly for a moment, hoping that something comes to me, but nothing does.

“It’s just a seven-digit number. I’ve got no idea what it means,” I say.

I hand the slip of paper to Astra who frowns as she reads it. “Maybe it’s a phone number?”

“Rick—”

“On it,” he says abruptly.

He bangs away at his keys, doing a reverse directory search on the phone number, but shakes his head when nothing comes up.

“Nope. It is not a phone number, my friends,” he says. “At least, not in the Seattle area. Let me expand the search—”

“It’s a registration number,” I say. “Once we open the online invitation, I think we’re going to need this number to RSVP.”

“Are you sure about that, Boss?” Rick asks. “I mean, once we crack the seal on that envelope, we may not get another shot at this.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not sure about this. It is the only thing that makes sense though. But before we do anything else, I need to

make a call.”

“Fish?” Astra asks.

“I doubt he’s going to know what to do with it because he doesn’t move in that world, but if he tells us who this invitation belonged to originally, they might be able to tell us,” I tell them. “So, before we do anything, let me get this figured out.”

I look up to see Caitlyn and Burton coming through the doors and exchange a look with Astra. I tap Rick on the shoulder, and he quickly minimizes the screen with the invitation envelope on it, then brings up a screen of financial transactions he’s been looking into for me.

“Showtime,” Astra mutters.

“Keep digging into everything,” I say quietly to Rick. “I need you and Nina both to find something that’s conclusive. We need to be bulletproof here.”

“You got it, Boss,” he replies.

“Thank you,” I say, then lead Astra across the bullpen to intercept Caitlyn and Burton.

“Good morning, everybody,” Caitlyn chirps.

“Morning,” I reply. “You seem like you’re feeling pretty good.”

“We got those three girls home, so I’m feeling great,” she says. “Not that there isn’t still a lot of work to do and a lot of missing people to find, but I’ll take the wins when we get them.”

“In this business, we take so many Ls, it’s nice to celebrate the wins when we can,” I agree, doing my best to sound upbeat and chipper.

I cut a glance at Mo and give her a subtle nod. She looks away and shuffles some papers on her workstation, then grabs her phone; I watch as she furtively keys in a text message, then turns back to Caitlyn and Burton.

“So, where are we at with everything?” Caitlyn asks. “What are your next steps?”

“As far as I’m concerned, we’re not done,” I say.

“What do you mean? We brought the girls home.”

“But we haven’t broken the Yokai,” I point out.

She arches an eyebrow and grins. “Somebody smells blood in the water.”

“If it’s bleeding, it’s the perfect opportunity to strike,” I say.

Caitlyn purses her lips. “I just get so tired of swinging and missing whenever we go at those guys. I’m tired of putting in all the time and energy and coming up empty when we can be putting all that attention into cases we actually can close.”

“So do I. But just because we’re sick of losing, we shouldn’t stop going at them,” I say.

“I agree with Chief Wilder,” Burton says. “If there’s any chance at all of dismantling this organization, I think we need to take it.”

“We’ve gotten some solid intel and some pretty strong leads to follow out of that house we hit,” I tell them. “Do you two want to stick around? We’ve got—”

“Hold that thought,” Caitlyn says as she looks at her phone and frowns. “Ayad wants to see me. I’ll be back in a few, and we can talk about what comes next.”

“Good. We’ll be here when you get back,” I say.

Caitlyn nods then hustles out of the bullpen, leaving Burton there with us. I walk over to the coffee station we’ve got set up in the far corner of the bullpen and fix myself a cup. From the corner of my eye, I watch Burton and see that she’s getting antsy. I can tell she’s dying to know what we have and what our steps moving forward are going to be. I take my time, but when I’m done, I walk back to my workstation and take a sip as I perch on the corner of the desk.

“So, what kind of intel did you develop from the house?” Burton finally asks.

Suppressing a satisfied smile, I look over at her. “I think we should probably wait until Caitlyn comes back before we brief you guys—”

“I can brief her later,” she says. “That’s usually how we operate back in the MPU—I filter out the information, then give her a concise briefing. After that, we map out a course of action.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say. “We can do things your way. I’m kind of anxious to get the ball rolling on everything anyway. That work for you, Astra?”

“Absolutely,” she says. “Caitlyn can catch up on the fly. I’m more than ready to start throwing these animals into cages.”

“Good,” I say. “One of the survivors of the raid flipped. He gave Masuda up. Said he’s the head of the Yokai in this area and ordered the abduction of the girls. So, we are in the process of securing warrants for his business and home that we’re going to execute once we have tac and evidence teams up and ready to roll with us.”

“Warrants? You’re that far along already?” Burton frowns. “On the word of one of the men who was holding the girls?”

“Well, we’ve also got the two cars of his used in the murders and the abduction,” I point out. “It wasn’t hard to get a judge to sign off on the warrants with that evidence.”

“Good. That’s good,” she says, though the quiver in her voice tells me she doesn’t really think it is. “We may have a solid chance to take this guy down.”

“That’s the plan,” Astra says.

“I can’t believe you got one of those guys to flip,” Burton says. “I heard the foot soldiers never flip on their Yokai bosses.”

“Well, we’re pretty talented interrogators,” Astra says.

“Clearly,” Burton says with a small laugh.

“It’s not coming without a cost though,” Astra grouses. “The dirtbag we got to flip is going to skate on charges and get a brand spanking new life, courtesy of the US government.”

“Small price to pay if we can roll up the syndicate,” I say.

“That’s true. But I long to live in a world where we don’t have to cut deals with scumbags like that guy,” Astra says.

“I hear you. But I think on the whole, if we can shut down the Yokai once and for all, we’ll be coming out ahead. Way ahead,” I say.

“Yeah. That’s true. I’m just greedy and want it all,” Astra replies.

“How long until the tac and evidence teams are ready to roll?” Burton asks.

“Oh, it’s going,” I say. “Hopefully by tonight.”

“Good. Then I have time to put on some more sensible shoes,” she says. “Let me go get changed, and I’ll be back.”

“We’ll be here,” I reply.

I watch as Burton scurries out of the bullpen, and when the doors slide closed behind her, I look over to Astra and give her a knowing smile.

“The trap’s been set,” Astra says. “Let’s see if the bait gets taken.”

“It will be. I guarantee it,” I say.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FBI Safe House, Lake Union District; Seattle, WA

“**H**ow in the hell did this happen?” I growl.

The two agents who’d been assigned to protect Masuda, Joshua Gibbs and Ty Rivers, both ten-plus year veterans with the Bureau, stand in front of me, matching shell-shocked expressions on their faces. Ty looks at his partner, seeming to be hoping Joshua has the answers he doesn’t. But neither of them seems to know how to answer my very basic, very simple question. In fact, neither of them seems to be able to speak. If I were in their place, looking at one of the most colossal screwups in Bureau history, I might have lost the power of speech as well.

“Well? What in the hell happened?” I say, my voice louder and harder. “Walk me through the evening.”

“Everything was quiet and there was nobody around,” Rivers starts. “We had some food brought in about seven-thirty, and we were posted up out here. He was inside watching TV. Everything seemed normal.”

“When did you realize everything wasn’t, in fact, normal?” I grumble.

“About four this morning,” Gibbs says. “I noticed the back door was ajar, so I pulled my weapon and went inside thinking the wit had bolted. He obviously hadn’t.”

“No, I guess he hadn’t,” I say.

I shake my head and run a hand across my face, biting back the torrent of scathing replies that are sitting on the tip of my tongue. They screwed the pooch in the worst way possible. But screaming at them isn’t going to fix their blunder.

“How could you let this happen?” I say.

“We... we’re not sure, Chief Wilder,” Gibbs stammers. “We were stationed out front and doing sweeps every thirty minutes—”

“The bastard must have snuck in between sweeps,” Rivers interrupts.

“You think?” I snarl. “Wow. That is some keen investigative insight right there, boys. Really. Fantastic job here. Just outstanding.”

“Hey, we did our job according to protocols—”

“If you two had done your job, our wit wouldn’t be laying in the house in a pool of his own blood, now would he?” I snap. “Did you guys fall asleep out here?”

“What? No!” Gibbs protests.

Something about his tone raises a red flag in the back of my head, so I stare at him more directly, letting my gaze pierce his.

“Did you fall asleep on duty?” I ask again.

This time neither of them says a word, and they look down at the ground instead, confirming that my worst fear had, in fact, come true. Sickened by the mere sight of them, I turn and walk to the edge of the property, put my hands on my hips, and stare out at the lake beyond, doing everything in my power to keep from screaming in rage and frustration. The sun has just started to rise, casting the sky above and the water below it in fiery shades of red and orange. A gentle breeze stirs the branches of the trees around me and cools my skin, which feels so hot with anger, I’m half surprised my entire head isn’t engulfed in flames.

Behind me, the driveway of the small house is clogged with emergency vehicles, unmarked Bureau cars, and people milling around, all of them waiting for me to give the word to put them all in motion. I'm nowhere near ready yet. I need to see the scene first, and until some of the fury in me has dissipated and I'm thinking clearly again, I can't trust myself to look at it all objectively. If I go in there right now feeling like I do, I very well may miss something. And this is such a colossal screwup already, I can't afford to miss anything.

Before setting our plan to trap Burton in motion, I briefed Ayad on everything we have to this point and our plan moving forward. I'd secured his approval and the paperwork necessary to lay my trap. We'd told Burton that we were still waiting for the warrants to come through. But the truth was that we had already secured them and had scooped up Masuda and stuck him in this safe house in a quiet neighborhood at the edge of Lake Union. Ayad had handpicked a two-man team to watch the house and protect Masuda. They'd obviously failed.

"Blake."

I turn to see Astra standing there. "What is it?"

"We need to release the scene and let everybody do their jobs," she replies.

"Yeah, I know," I mutter.

"What do you want me to do with Rivers and Gibbs?" she asks.

"Tell them to wait by their car," I say. "Ayad is on his way, and he's going to want to speak with them both."

"That's a conversation I wouldn't want to be having," she says.

"Nope. Me neither," I say. "Go talk to them, and I'll head in and check out the scene."

"Copy that."

I turn away from the lake, then walk to the back door in the small, two-room bungalow and step inside. I'm immediately hit by the odor of death. I can smell the blood that fills the air in the room as well as the stench of the man's bowels that were evacuated when he was killed. It's a thick, cloying miasma in the air. You'd think with as long as I've been doing this job and how many crime scenes I've

walked, it would get easier. That I'd notice it less. It doesn't, and I don't. Every single crime scene I've been on has sucked as much as the one that came before it.

I pass through the small kitchen and see the Chinese take-out boxes sitting on the small table at the window along with three bottles of beer. When I see the food and beer, I can't help but think it played a role in what happened here. It's something I'm going to need to look into. Turning away from the table, I continue into the living room to find Masuda on the floor, his eyes and mouth both wide open in that familiar rictus of death. His face is covered in streaks and spatters of blood, his visage a nightmare to see.

The front of Masuda's custom-tailored, white, button-down shirt is a mass of stab wounds and blood. Some of the cuts are so deep and vicious, his entrails are poking out through the holes. I won't know the exact count until the ME does his thing, but I can already tell there are more than two dozen stab wounds to Masuda's torso. I'm willing to bet, though, that the cause of death is going to be the clean and precise slash across his neck. The cut is so smooth, it looks like it was done with a straight razor.

"What do you see?" Astra asks.

My heart thumps hard inside my chest when I glance over to see her standing in the rounded archway that leads to the kitchen.

"Throat was slashed. I'm thinking that was first since the cut is so deep, it severed his vocal cords, keeping him from screaming," I say.

"Jesus," she says.

"Then we've got a frenzy of stab wounds—likely to send a message to anybody who is even thinking about flipping on Enenra."

"But Masuda likely wasn't going to flip."

"Probably not," I reply. "But I was holding out hope that he'd have a change of heart."

"Well, it's a good thing we didn't build our entire case around him."

"Yeah, lucky us," I say.

I squat down and look at his forearms. The sleeves of his shirt had been rolled up, exposing an intricate and strangely beautiful network of interconnected tattoos. Judging by what I can see, the

man is fully sleeved on both sides. And on the inside of his right forearm is the familiar black circle with the color photo-realistic koi fish inside of it.

“I guess there’s no question whether he was Yokai-affiliated now or not,” I say.

“Guess not,” she says.

“I’m also kind of thinking that he was Yakuza-affiliated as well,” I add, referring to Japanese organized crime. “Or maybe the Yokai are run by the Yakuza.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The tattoos. It’s common for Yakuza to have their entire bodies tatted up,” I explain. “We’d need to see his whole body and look for specific tattoos, but I’m willing to put some money on the idea that Masuda here—and Enenra—are Yakuza.”

“Possible. Likely, actually,” she says. “But how does that help us?”

“If we can narrow down who the Japanese crime bosses are, it might help us figure out who in the hell Enenra actually is,” I say.

“Oh, it’s that simple? Just track down every Japanese crime boss out there?”

“It’s that simple.”

The front door to the bungalow opens, and the frame is filled with Ayad’s tall, lean body. With his hands on his hips, he looks down at the mess on the living room floor and shakes his head.

“Jesus,” he mutters. “What an absolute clusterfu—”

“It was a professional job,” I say. “I’m thinking the hitter came in disguised as the food delivery person. Dropped it off, used a blade to minimize the noise, then walked right back out again without tipping off Rivers and Gibbs.”

Ayad runs a hand through his hair and glances outside before turning his gaze back to me. “This is a nightmare. An absolute nightmare,” he says. “To have a witness murdered in one of our safe houses. Rivers and Gibbs are going to catch hell for this. OPR is already blowing up my phones about it.”

“I’m sure the sanctions are going to be heavy,” Astra says.

“They’re going to be lottery-winner lucky if they can keep their jobs. The same might go for us too,” he growls.

“Wait, we’re in trouble for this too?” I ask incredulously.

“It was our op, and a witness died in our custody,” Ayad states. “Yeah, we’re going to face some questions about it. Guaranteed.”

“Wonderful,” Astra says.

“Oh good, I just got out of that barrel, and I’m going right back in,” I muse. “They should just go ahead and name the OPR panel room after me.”

“How in the hell did this happen, Blake?” Ayad asks.

I shake my head as my thoughts continue racing around in my head, swirling like a whirlpool, and I can’t seem to get hold of any one particular thing. Closing my eyes, I silently count to ten, doing my best to quell the storm raging inside my skull. But then a thought occurs to me out of the blue. It’s so sudden that it’s jarring, and still squatting down on my haunches, it almost knocks me over. I look from Ayad back to Masuda.

“That’s the wrong question to be asking,” I say.

“Then what is the right question?” Ayad asks.

“It’s how they knew Masuda would be here at the safe house,” I reply.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Astra says. “How did they know?”

“They had to have tracked him,” I say.

“But we confiscated all his electronics and shut them all down. Rick disabled them all. There’s no way he could have been tracked,” Astra argues.

“They wouldn’t need to track him through his electronics if they put a tracker *inside* him,” I say.

“*Inside* him?” Ayad asks.

I nod. “In him. Maybe it’s in his clothing or his shoes. Hell, maybe it’s even a subdermal tracker—we’re going to need the ME to search everywhere to see if he’s got a device under his skin. In the meantime, have the forensics techs sweep his clothing—make sure they check his shoes. That tracker has to be somewhere.”

“*If* there’s a tracker,” Ayad says.

“There is. I guarantee it,” I tell them. “It’s just a matter of finding it —”

“And if we do, we might be able to trace it back to its source,” Astra says.

“Bingo. That tracker is going to tell us a lot.”

“Again, assuming there is a tracker,” Ayad reminds us.

“There’s a tracker, sir.”

“You can’t know that. You’re hoping there is,” he says.

“Fine. *If* there’s a tracker,” I acknowledge. “As screwed up as this situation is, though, at least now we know we are on the right path.”

Ayad scrubs his face with his hands, his expression frustrated and angry. “Blake, I signed off on this fishing expedition with the hope that you’d be able to produce something tangible—”

“Sir, with all due respect, you signed off on this op because you know our intel is good—that our case is good, and our instincts are better—and we’ve always produced solid results,” I cut him off. “Nothing has changed.”

“The fact that we’re standing in the middle of a bloodbath suggests otherwise,” he says. “Everything has changed. And somebody is going to be held to account for this.”

“I hate to say it, but if Rivers and Gibbs had done their jobs, Masuda would still be alive,” I say. “They were briefed and were given the protocols. They failed. They fell asleep on the job, sir.”

“Excuse me?”

“They fell asleep on duty,” I repeat. “Ask them.”

“Before it gets lost in all the reprimands, investigations, and recriminations,” Astra says, “let’s not overlook the fact that the Yokai sending a hitter out here is proof positive they’ve got a mole inside the Bureau. More specifically, inside the MPU.”

“Bingo.”

Ayad looks down at the body. “This is a pretty steep price to pay to confirm your theory.”

“Astra’s right; he likely wasn’t going to give us anything in life anyway,” I say. “In death, he’s helping make our case for us.”

“At least he’s useful for something,” Astra adds.

“Fine. Go scoop her up and sweat the hell out of her,” Ayad says. “I want every last stitch of information you can get from her. You hear me? Every last stitch. We need everything we can get our hands on to clean up this damn mess.”

“We will,” I say. “But there’s one stop we need to make on the way first.”

“Make it fast, Blake. I want her off the streets as soon as possible. She’s done enough damage as it is,” Ayad growls.

“Yes, sir,” I say, then turn to Astra. “Let’s roll.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

First Care Medical Complex, Intensive Care Unit; Seattle, WA

“I’m going to pop in and see how Lucas is doing,” Astra says quietly as we step off the elevator. “See if Sydney needs anything.”

I nod. “Good. I’ll stop by when I’m done here.”

“Okay.”

Astra turns right at the junction as I go left. Just down the hallway from where Lucas is still lying, slipping in and out of consciousness, are the three teenage girls we rescued from the supposed Yokai stash house. They’ve all been a little banged up but didn’t suffer the same sort of abuse the other Yokai girls have—I’m assuming because they didn’t have them long enough. All three girls were given pretty big doses of barbiturates, likely to keep them docile and compliant. Because of that, the hospital decided to keep them for a few days to let the drugs run their course and to also monitor them for any side effects.

It’s likely they didn’t hear or see much that will be helpful given that they hadn’t been in the hands of their Yokai handlers for very

long. I'm hoping for something different though. I'm hoping they will have some useful intel. As I walk, I try to focus—to get my head back in the game. The scene out at the safe house—and Ayad was right to call it a bloodbath—has me rattled to the core. It never should have happened. I thought we'd taken adequate measures to prevent it from happening, and Masuda should be alive right now. I guess I was wrong.

I never should have thrown Gibbs and Rivers under the bus like that. I should have kept the fact that they'd fallen asleep on duty to myself and let OPR sort it all out. I all but pounded the final nail into the coffin of their careers myself. They're good agents—veteran agents who could always be relied on to put in a good effort. Or I guess I should say, they could usually be counted on. The fact that they'd done something so careless and so stupid shook me. And I was just so shocked and pissed when Ayad was grilling me about what happened out at that safe house that I let it slip without thinking.

On the other hand, though, screwups don't get more monumental than that. As veterans, they should have known better than to do something so stupid. I mean, I understand they didn't do it intentionally... I hope to God they didn't do it intentionally anyway. But they've been on enough overnight stakeouts that something like this should never have happened. Never in a million years. But it did happen, and now they're going to have to pay the price. And it's going to be a steep one, I'm sure. All the same, I probably should have better controlled my own emotions and not piled on by giving them up like that. I shouldn't have done OPR's job for them.

I give myself a shake and try to focus on the here and now. I stop at Claire Savitts's room to see that she's sleeping. Ditto that with Riley Cavanaugh. But when I get to Petra Franks's room, I see her sitting up in bed taking selfies.

“Hospital room selfies? Those will get you a lot of clicks,” I say.

Petra is startled and nearly drops her phone but manages to recover quickly. “Have to keep up with my followers,” she admits sheepishly. “And yeah, our hospital room selfies are getting a lot of

likes. A few of them have gone viral. My follower count totally blew up after the story about us came out in the news and everything.”

“Wow. Good job,” I say.

Just sixteen years old, Petra Franks looks like she should be a model. Five-nine and slender but with feminine curves that look too old for her actual age, she’s got long, platinum-blond hair and startling gray eyes and a light smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Even sitting in that bed, a thin sheet covering a garish green printed hospital gown, without her hair or makeup done, Petra still somehow looks stunning. I can only imagine the hell her father must go through having a daughter as gorgeous as she is. I don’t envy him for having to fend off all the creeps.

Petra looks at me closely, her full, pouty lips pursed. It takes her a moment, but I see the light of recognition slowly dawn on her face. Her eyes widen, and her lips curl back into a smile.

“You were at the house—you’re the one who pulled us out of there and saved us from those pigs. All they did was tell us the things they were going to do as soon as they got the okay from their bosses. It was gross. And scary,” she says and shudders.

“I was there,” I reply. “There were quite a few of us who got you out of that house. Afraid I can’t take all the credit.”

“I was so scared—and then I heard all the shouting and the gunshots, and I got even more scared,” she says, her voice trembling with the memory. “Even still, the thought that those men might come through the door terrifies me.”

I walk into the room and gesture to the corner of the bed. “May I?”

She nods. “Yes. Of course.”

“Thank you,” I say and perch on the edge. “That must have been terrifying for you from the start to the finish.”

“I hope I never have to go through something like that again.”

“I hope you never do either,” I say. “And I’m sorry you had to live through that at all.”

“Thanks,” she replies.

We sit there for a long moment just staring at one another. Petra finally cocks her head and gives me an awkward smile.

“I’m sorry, I know you probably already told me, but... who are you?”

“Sorry. I... I wasn’t even thinking,” I reply with a laugh. “I’m Unit Chief Blake Wilder of the FBI. I was hoping I could ask you some questions.”

“FBI. You? Really?”

I laugh. “Yes, really. Is that so surprising?”

“I just didn’t think that beautiful women in the FBI existed outside of TV or the movies.”

A small bark of laughter bursts from my mouth. “I think it’s the lighting in this room. Or maybe it’s the drugs still in your system.”

“Nah. I’m clearheaded,” she says. “You don’t take compliments very well, do you?”

I clear my throat and sit upright, doing my best to keep the embarrassed heat I feel coursing through my body turning my face bright red.

“May I ask you a few questions, Petra?”

“Sure,” she replies. “I don’t know how much help I’ll be though. They had us on so many drugs, I was pretty out of it. We all were.”

“Understood. But did they happen to mention anything about an auction? Or maybe about any other girls they were holding?”

“Well, I mean, I don’t know for sure, but I remember hearing them saying something about how we weren’t going to be put up with the others. I don’t know what it means or who they were talking about or anything. But I do remember hearing them say ‘the others’ a few times.”

Though her memory is sketchy, it does seem to confirm my belief that the girls were served up to us with the hope that we’d take the win and ride off into the sunset.

“Petra, did you happen to overhear where they might be keeping the others?”

She screws up her face and thinks for a moment, then shakes her head. “No. Not that I remember. I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry about, hon. You’re doing great,” I tell her. “Did you happen to hear any other names mentioned?”

She takes another moment to think about it, then shakes her head again. “No. I don’t remember hearing anybody mention names. Not even the guys who were holding us referred to each other by name. And they always wore those masks around us. It was super creepy.”

“They probably didn’t want you to be able to identify them,” I say.

I drum my fingers on my thigh and think. Given her impairment, I don’t think Petra is going to be a wealth of information. Maybe more memories will come back to her in time, so I make a mental note to circle back and get to my feet, then pause.

“Petra, is there anything you recall that struck you as weird or out of the ordinary?”

She purses her lips, and I think I see a glimmer in her eyes as she remembers something. Petra takes a moment to sort it out in her head, then looks up at me.

“Right after we were first taken, we were pretty doped up, so I don’t know if this memory is like, real or not...”

“That’s all right. We can sort it out,” I tell her. “What is it?”

“It’s just... I remember feeling like we were on a boat. You know how the waves go up and down? I remember feeling like that,” she tells me. “We were given more drugs, and I blacked out. It was after that, when I woke up again, that I remember being in the house and hearing the men talking about the others and that we weren’t to be put up with them.”

I nod encouragingly. “That’s great, Petra. That’s a really good job.”

“And then...”

“Then what, sweetie?”

“I don’t know. One of the guys just kept talking about something called Endless Blue. I don’t know what that means though,” she says.

“Petra, that is fantastic. That’s great information,” I say, making notes in my notebook.

“Really?”

I nod. “You did great, sweetie. I’m going to let you get some rest, but thank you for helping me. I really appreciate it.”

She smiles at me. "I think when I get older, I want to be an FBI agent like you."

I reach down and give her hand a squeeze. "And I bet you would be amazing at it. Study hard, keep your nose clean, and when the time comes, I'll give you a personal recommendation letter to get you into Quantico."

"Really?"

I nod. "Really."

"Thank you, Chief Wilder."

"You're more than welcome. And thank you."

I head for the door, but her voice stops me, and I turn around. She flashes me a million-dollar smile I'm sure stops the heart of any boy who sees it.

"Will you follow me on IG?" she asks almost shyly.

"You bet I will."

She squeals with delight, making me laugh as I turn and walk out of the room to see Lucas and fetch Astra. We've got a rat to catch.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Missing Persons Unit Bullpen, FBI Field Office; Seattle, WA

After checking in at our bullpen and making sure all our ducks are in a row, Astra and I head off to the other side of campus to where the MPU is located. We wind our way through the corridors, having to bob and weave around people who have their heads so far up their backsides, they don't have the courtesy to watch for others in the corridor.

"This is exactly why I'm so glad we aren't bound to the field office day in and day out," I say, and not too quietly. "There are just too many people here."

"Say it a little louder," Astra says. "I don't think they heard you at Quantico."

I flash her a grin but don't miss some of the hard side-eyes I get from people passing us by. I guess this is what people always mean when they say I don't politic very well.

"Hey, tell me something," I say.

"Fire away."

“What’s IG?”

“What do you mean?”

“IG,” I repeat. “What is it?”

“Are—are you serious? Blake, you’re not that old.”

“When I was leaving Petra at the hospital earlier, she said something about following her,” I say. “I said sure, of course, I would. But I have no idea what it is. I mean, I’m not stupid. I’m pretty sure it’s one of those social media sites. I just don’t know which one it is.”

Astra laughs and shakes her head. “It’s Instagram, Blake. You’ve used it before.”

“Ahhh,” I say, the light of recognition finally dawning. “Only for cases though.” I correct her. “I don’t have one.”

“Then why in the hell did you say you’d follow her?”

“Because she kind of looked up to me, and it kind of seemed like a big deal to her. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint her.”

As we come around the corner and proceed down the hallway that will take us to the MPU, the mood darkens as what we’re about to do settles down over us. This is not going to win us any points in the FO’s popularity polls. As much as it is taboo to investigate other cops within a police department, it’s just as frowned upon by the rank and file in the Bureau to do the same. It’s why OPR investigators are as despised as they are. Yet it’s sometimes necessary for the police to police their own. If you allow corruption to take root, it makes it even harder to yank out later on. And that’s what we’re here to do: root out corruption.

The doors slide open with that familiar pneumatic hiss, and we step into a bullpen that’s very similar in design to ours. There are about two dozen in the MPU in all, and the moment we come through the doors, all eyes turn our way. A few people recognize us and give us a friendly wave; others don’t know us and simply turn back to their work without so much as a nod of greeting. That’s fine though; we’re not here for a social call.

“Is it me, or is their furniture and equipment nicer than ours?” Astra asks quietly.

“It’s not you,” I reply. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

“Right behind you.”

We cross the bullpen to Caitlyn's office which sits directly across from the main doors. Like my office, the front wall is all glass, giving her an unobstructed view of her bullpen. She's sitting behind her desk, and Burton is sitting in one of the chairs in front. Caitlyn smiles and waves us in when she sees us, and I see Burton glance over her shoulder, her face instantly tightening. We step into Caitlyn's office, and Astra closes the door, drawing an incredulous look from Caitlyn.

"What's going on, Blake? You look so serious," she says. "Did something happen?"

"Something's about to happen," Astra mutters.

Caitlyn cocks her head. "What do you mean?"

I look down at Burton and see the woman with her head down, studiously avoiding my eyes. Instead, she's pretending to look at her phone, as if she'd just gotten a text message and was responding to it.

"Stephanie Burton, on your feet, please," I say. "You are under arrest."

Caitlyn's face blanches, and she jumps up. "Now just you wait a minute," she growls. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Your number two has a secret she's been keeping," I say. "Do you want to tell her, or should I, Stephanie?"

Caitlyn's eyes dart from me to Astra to Stephanie and back again, the confusion on her face deepening as well as the anger. For her part, Burton continues to remain seated, her gaze fixed firmly on the tops of her shoes. She's trembling, though, and when I catch a glimpse of the side of her face, I can see her eyes welling with tears. She knows exactly why we're here and what's happening.

"What is going on here, Blake?" Caitlyn snarls. "I demand you tell me right now."

"It seems that your number two here has been moonlighting," Astra replies.

"Moonlighting?"

"She works for the Yokai, Cait," I tell her.

Caitlyn's face blanches, and her mouth falls open. She looks at me and shakes her head in utter disbelief.

“That’s not true. That can’t be right,” she says. “Stephanie, tell them they’re wrong.”

“On your feet, Ms. Burton,” Astra says. “Or I’m going to pull you out of that chair and drag you through your bullpen and down the hallways of the field office. Am I clear? You have until the count of five. One…”

“Blake, why are you doing this?” Caitlyn asks.

“Because she is the mole, Cait.”

“Two…”

“Tell them they’re wrong, Stephanie. Blake, you have this wrong.”

“We don’t,” I reply coldly.

“Three…”

“Stephanie, please,” Caitlyn pleads.

“Four…”

Stephanie finally rises and puts her hands behind her back for us.

“I wasn’t going to cuff you,” I tell her.

“Do what you have to do, Chief,” she says glumly.

“I’d rather spare you the spectacle—”

“Do you think I care at this point?” she snaps.

I shrug, then move in and put the cuffs on her. Once that’s done, Astra and I lead her out of Caitlyn’s office. All eyes in the bullpen turn toward us, and the whispers start immediately as we escort her out of the MPU. Caitlyn follows us down the corridor, continuing to tell me quietly that we have this wrong—that there is no way Stephanie could be involved with the Yokai. Stephanie, though, remains completely silent.

The four of us step into an elevator car, and I push the button for the sixth floor, where all the interrogation suites live. Nobody says a word as we ascend, but the air inside that elevator car is crackling with a hundred different emotions, all of them thick and charged. After getting off the elevator, Astra takes Stephanie into one of the interrogation rooms while I escort Caitlyn into the observation pod. Through the western window, I see active interrogation in progress,

so we've already got an audio-visual tech in the room, which is good. We can get right to it.

Through the window in the eastern wall, we watch as Astra brings Burton into the room and sits her down. Astra uncuffs her but spares the soon-to-be-disgraced agent the indignity of being shackled to the table like a normal perp, then takes a seat across from her. Burton hangs her head and looks down.

"Explain this to me, Blake," Caitlyn demands through gritted teeth.

I hand her the file I brought with me and give her a moment to flip through it all. She's shaking her head as if she doesn't understand what she's looking at, then raises her gaze to me.

"What is this?" she asks.

"Proof that Burton is working for the Yokai and has been for some time."

"Impossible."

"It's unfortunately not," I counter.

"You don't know her like I know her, Blake."

"We'll see how well you really know her," I reply.

"I want to be in the room—"

"You know you can't," I cut her off. "I'm allowing you to watch from the pod, but that's as far as it goes, Cait. I'm sorry. I am. I wish it wasn't going down this way. But this is the job, and you know we follow the evidence."

She crosses her arms over her chest, refusing to look at me, a stubborn expression I recognize all too well on her face. She thinks we're wrong. I understand where she's coming from, and I hate that we're about to show her she doesn't know her protégé as well as she thought. I really do. But this is the job.

I turn to the A/V tech. "Start rolling in room two please."

"Rolling," he replies.

I open the door and step into the room, closing it behind me, then walk to the table and sit down beside Astra. I set the file down, then open it, and Burton finally raises her head.

"Can you please confirm for the record, that you've been advised of your rights?" I start.

She nods. "I have been so advised."

"Would you like us to wait until your attorney or union rep arrives?" Astra asks.

"I waive my right to counsel," she says.

"Are you certain?" Astra presses.

"I'm certain."

"All right then," I say. "Before we begin, is there anything you are unclear about or any questions you have?"

She shakes her head. "Let's just get this over with."

"Very well," I say. "How long have you been working for the human trafficking network known as the Yokai Syndicate?"

"Three years," she says.

I feel like I just got sucker punched and had the wind driven out of my lungs. Astra and I exchange a glance and see she's wearing the same dumbfounded expression that I am. Neither of us expected that she would actually admit to it, and we're both left feeling off-kilter by the confession. She's been an agent for a while and knows how to play the game. She could have dragged this out for a while with all the legal maneuvering and games lawyers like to play.

As I look at Burton, though, I realize the expression on her face is one of relief. She's even got a small, rueful smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. More than that, her entire body seems more relaxed than I've ever seen her. She looks like somebody who just had a thousand-pound weight lifted off her shoulders. I guess they're right—confession really is good for the soul. The truth, it seems, has set her free.

Astra sits up in her chair, the first of us to recover. "Agent Burton, let me remind you again that you have the right to—"

"A lawyer isn't going to be able to do a thing for me. There's no deal to be had here, Agents," she says. "I don't have anything to bargain with. Nothing."

"Are you sure about that?"

"The nature of my employment was outgoing, not incoming. They didn't consult me about anything or give me inside information. They gave me a monthly stipend to provide them with information when and if the name of their organization arose. And believe me, I

got a lot more from them than they got from me since nobody had stumbled onto them until recently,” she says. “The money was placed into a secret account—an account I’m sure your people have already discovered and flagged. I meant it when I said you had a world-class team, Chief Wilder. I sort of figured it was only a matter of time before all this was uncovered.”

“And when you say them, who specifically are you speaking about?” I ask.

“Tomio Masuda,” I say. “He was my point of contact.”

“Do you know the identity of the person called Enenra?” Astra asks.

She shakes her head. “I don’t. But he did contact me when he began to have concerns about Masuda with all the heat he was bringing down on the organization,” she said. “Enenra asked that I provide him with information directly.”

“Did you meet him?” I ask.

“No. At the start of each week, I was provided with a clean burner phone to conduct business,” she says. “The old phones were destroyed. It was on that phone that Enenra contacted me. That phone is in my service locker here, though I suspect you’ve already discovered and scrubbed that. I doubt you’ll glean much from it. Enenra is very careful. The phones are virtually untraceable. Not even your techs will be able to crack them.”

I sit back in my seat and shake my head. It’s still difficult to believe that she’s being so forthcoming with us. She’s so cold and matter-of-fact about everything.

“Did you murder Tomio Masuda?” I ask.

“I did not,” she replies. “But I did provide Enenra with the information that you were going to arrest Masuda. I assume he tasked somebody with doing the job.”

“What is Endless Blue?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I have no idea.”

“Where are they keeping the other girls?” Astra asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Where are they holding the auction?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she replies. “Look, like I keep telling you, my role was informational only. They didn’t loop me into their operations at all. I was their canary in the coal mine. That’s it.”

“Why are you admitting to everything?” Astra asks. “I mean, you do realize you’re talking your way into a very long prison sentence, right?”

She nods. “I do. But as I said, I have nothing to barter with. I also... I’m ashamed of everything I’ve done. All the lies I told and the people who I’m indirectly responsible for hurting—and the people I directly hurt and betrayed.”

As she delivers that line, Burton turns and looks at the mirror. It doesn’t take a psychologist or a clairvoyant to understand she’s speaking about—and to—Caitlyn.

“Honestly, I probably deserve worse than going to prison,” she says softly.

I sit back in my chair and stare at her for a long moment. She’s a dry hole information-wise. When she says she knows nothing, I tend to believe her. I feel like she’s being honest with us, and when I glance at Astra, I can see by the look on her face that she believes it too. If nothing else, at least we were able to plug our leak. Enea and the Yokai will now be flying blind.

“Tell me one thing,” I say. “Why? Why did you get into bed with them in the first place?”

She sighs and looks down at her hands for a moment, and I can see that she’s struggling with her emotions.

“A few years back, my little sister got sick. Really sick. I needed money for her treatments,” she says. “One day, a man approached me and said he had friends who could help me with my sister’s bills, and all I needed to do was give them a heads up if anything was coming their way. That was it. They didn’t ask me to steal evidence or tank cases. They didn’t ask me to do anything other than warn them if we were closing in. And until those six girls in the shipping container showed up, I never had to call them. Not once.”

It’s not a unique story by any means. I can’t count the number of people I’ve known who have gotten into bad trouble with worse people because they were in dire straits for one reason or another.

And while I'm not without some bit of sympathy, Burton should have known better. She took an oath. She might be able to justify it to herself that in the last few years, she hasn't done anything for the Yokai, but that doesn't mitigate what she's done since the girls in the container turned up. Not in the least.

"I understand why you did what you did, Burton. I understand better than maybe anybody, because God knows I've pushed some boundaries when it came to protecting my little sister," I tell her. "But never once did I ever violate the oath I took. Never once did I betray the Bureau or anybody in it. People are dead because of what you've done."

"Chief," she says. "There is nothing you can say that I haven't already said to myself. I broke the law, betrayed my family, and I'll pay the consequences. I'm fine with that. I deserve it."

"You will," I say. "And you do."

I close the file and pick it up as I get to my feet. If I'd known coming into this that she was going to confess without equivocation, I would have spared Rick and Nina the time they took to unravel her financials and dig up all her phone records, and kept them on other important tasks. Astra stands as well, glowering at Burton.

"Good luck, Ms. Burton," I say.

Astra and I walk out of the interview room and into the observation pod; not surprisingly, Caitlyn is not there, obviously having seen enough.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Black Cell Alpha Team Bullpen, FBI Field Office; Seattle, WA

“**S**o, you’re the infamous Spenser Song,” Astra says.

“Oh, I don’t know about infamous,” she replies.

“Notorious then?”

“Yeah, I’ll take that,” Spenser says with a chuckle.

With the mole rooted out and the hole plugged, I thought it was safe to bring Spenser in from the cold to let her meet the rest of the team. There’s still a lot that we have to figure out if we’re going to have any chance at shutting down this auction—and we’ve got to figure it out quickly.

“So, where are we at with everything?” Spenser asks.

“We’re starting from square one,” I tell her. “We’ve got a lot of bits and piecest but we’re not quite sure how it all fits together yet.”

“With Burton out of the picture, though, we might be able to start making some headway and focusing on the actual case instead of running around trying to put out dozens of smaller fires,” Astra remarks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Between the abducted girls and even Masuda’s murder, Enebra has been working overtime to throw up smokescreens and distractions.”

“Well, it sounds like the field is clear now,” Spenser says. “Good job cutting through all the noise and getting down to it.”

“With Burton off the board, though, won’t the Yokai know we’re starting to close in on them?” Mo asks.

“I doubt it. She was informational only and has no knowledge of their operations,” I say. “She can’t tell us how many other girls they’re holding or where the auction is going to be.”

“All right, so now that we know what we don’t have, what do we have?” Spenser asks.

“We’ve still got the invitation to the auction,” I say. “We haven’t done anything with it yet.”

“Do I want to know how you obtained this invitation?” Spenser asks.

“Probably not,” I reply.

“Okay, moving on,” she says. “Why haven’t you done anything with it yet?”

“We needed to plug the hole in the office before we moved forward with it. We didn’t want the Yokai tipped off that we have it,” I tell her. “We also needed to understand more about it. That’s why I talked to Fish this morning.”

“What did he tell you?” Astra asks.

“That he didn’t know anything about it,” I reply with a laugh. “But he put me in contact with the original invitee—Luoyong ‘Louie’ Qian.”

“What do we know about this clown?” Astra asks.

Nina’s fingers are flying across her keyboard, and she seems to be racing Rick—a race that she wins because she claps her hands, drawing a glower from him.

“Louie, here, is not a good guy. He’s got a lengthy rap sheet for things ranging from assault, armed robbery, more assault, grand theft—he has dealt in guns and drugs, and he’s been a pimp,” she reads from her computer screen. “He’s forty-six years old and somehow, he’s managed to do less than nine years total in prison, despite his career arc on the dark side.”

“I can answer that,” Rick says. “He’s Triad-affiliated, and as we all know, organized crime people always get the best legal representation.”

“As do celebrity murderers and politicians,” Mo says.

“That’s because they all come from the same pool of sharks,” Astra says.

“That’s great information and all, but how is it relevant to the matter at hand?” Spenser asks.

“It’s not, but they seemed to be rolling, so I didn’t want to interrupt,” I say.

“I assume we’re building up to something though?” Spenser asks.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Astra adds.

“Don’t listen to her. Of course, we’re building up to something—”

“We’re just taking the scenic route to get there,” Astra interrupts.

I laugh and give her a decidedly unladylike gesture. “The point I was coming to is that I spoke with Louie. Fish and I paid him a visit, and he was a regular chatterbox.”

“Gee, I wonder why that is,” Astra says.

“I’m going to vote for a certain former Chinese mobster leaning hard on him,” Rick says.

“However it came to be doesn’t interest me. What does interest me, though, is that he told me our instinct was correct: the seven-digit code is how we register for the event,” I say. “But there is a secondary code we’ll need to enter once we’re in the registration portal to authenticate it—”

“Wait, so he left that part out the first time Fish persuaded him to give up the invite?” Astra asks. “That takes some serious stones.”

“That’s also probably why he was so chatty the second time around,” Mo offers.

“Can’t say I blame him,” Nina says.

“Right?” Astra asks.

“Anyway, once registration is authenticated, we can designate a proxy for Qian,” I say. “That’s our way into the auction. Easy-peasy.”

“Blake, you should know by now that nothing for this team is ever easy-peasy, so thanks for jinxing us,” Astra says.

“Great job, boss,” Rick piles on.

“Shut it,” I say with a laugh.

“My question is, who is going to be the proxy?” Mo asks. “If Burton was reporting to Masuda and this Enenra about us, they’re going to know who we are. If we show up there, we’re going to end up in a steel drum at the bottom of Puget Sound.”

I turn to Spenser and see her eyes widen slightly; a devious grin crosses her full lips as she realizes what her part in this play is going to be.

“I get to be the bad guy,” she says. “That’s awesome. I’ve always wanted to play a villain.”

“Rick, can you put the invite up on the main screens?” I ask.

The monitors on the wall at the front of the bullpen come to life. With a couple of keystrokes from Rick, we find ourselves looking at the black envelope with the green circled koi. The clock in the lower right-hand corner continues its relentless march to zero, and for the first time, I start feeling the pressure of the time crunch we’re in pressing down on me. There is a hell of a lot to do and not much time left to do it in.

“What is that countdown clock?” Spenser asks.

“It’s the time until registration for the auction closes. We’ve got just over sixteen hours until it closes, so we need to start moving,” I reply. “Rick and Nina, I need you to drop whatever else you’re doing right now and focus on this... we need a cover for Spenser. I need you to give it a solid backstop too—the Yokai people will surely be checking. Make it as bulletproof as you can.”

“On it,” they say and immediately set to work.

“Once we have Spenser’s cover secured, we’ll hit the registration portal and get her all signed up to be a human trafficker for a day,” I say. “According to Louie Qian, Spenser is allowed to bring a second to this little soiree. He says it’s how they maintain order.”

“Mutually assured destruction. Nice,” Astra says. “This should be fun.”

“You’re not going in,” I say. “I am.”

“What? You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, but I am.”

“Blake, you are the head of this unit. One, we can’t afford to be without you,” Astra argues. “Two, they’ll recognize you from a mile off and then it’ll be that whole barrel at the bottom of the Sound thing we talked about for you.”

“I have to agree with her, Boss,” Mo chimes in. “You’re practically the face of the FBI these days. The chances of them not knowing who you are hover right around zero.”

I reach into the bag sitting next to me and pull out a wig and put it on. It’s a short, black bob cut that I think looks kind of cute on me. After that, I pull out a pair of glasses and slip them on. My disguise donned, I stand up and step to the front of the room and spin around with my arms out, letting them take it in. And instead of the approving nods and looks I expected to see, I’m met with a lot of open skepticism instead.

“You still look like you,” Astra says.

“Yeah. It’s not quite the radical transformation you seem to think it is. Sorry,” Nina says.

“I don’t know,” Rick says thoughtfully. “If it’s a dark, moonless night, you stay out of direct lighting, and oh yeah, everybody’s blind, I think you can pass.”

I look to Spenser, hoping she’ll throw me a lifeline. But she screws up her face and gives me a slight shrug of her shoulders.

“I hate to say it, but you don’t look much different,” she says.

“That’s because you all know me and watched me put this disguise on,” I tell them.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not it,” Mo says.

“Well, I’m going to add some different clothes and some makeup. Trust me, it’ll be fine.”

“Will it though?” Astra asks.

“It’s going to have to be because I’m going as Spenser’s plus-one,” I say.

“Blake, I really think it should be me,” Astra presses.

“Thanks, but I got this. Trust me.”

“It’s not you who I don’t trust.”

“Blake, I think they might be right,” Spenser adds.

“Enough. I’m going,” I snap, a little harsher than I intended to.

The room falls silent, and nobody moves to fill it with mindless chatter. When I was putting this plan together, I had the same thoughts about potentially being recognized and sending Astra in my place. But then images of Lucas in his hospital bed, so frail, weak, and hovering near the edge of death, filled my mind, and I couldn’t get them out. I thought of his fiancée, Sydney, and everything she must be feeling.

I thought about it all and decided that I’m not going to put anybody else at risk. I’m not going to ask somebody to do something that can get them hurt. Or worse. I refuse to see another one of my team in the hospital, and I sure as hell don’t plan on attending one of their funerals anytime soon. No, this needs to be done. And it is going to be done by me. I will not put any of them in the line of fire. Not against these animals. I’ve seen what they can do and know what they’re capable of.

Mo clears her throat, breaking the tense silence in the room. “I assume that once we register through the portal, that’s when we get the location of the auction?”

I nod. “According to Louie, yes.”

“It would be great from a tactical standpoint if we could scout the position earlier,” Astra says. “If you’re foolishly insisting on going in, we need to be able to provide support. Did I mention I think what you’re doing is foolish, by the way?”

“You might have mentioned it,” I say with a small smile.

She’s not wrong though. Being able to advance scout the location of the auction would give us a tactical advantage—an advantage that might keep me from getting my head blown off. Fish and I pressed Louie hard, but he didn’t know. The person he was in contact with told him that information would be given after registration, which doesn’t help us.

As I cross my arms over my chest and begin to pace the room, my conversation with Petra Franks echoes through my mind. At first, I don’t know why I’m recalling the chat I had with her in her hospital room. I stop in my tracks and gnaw on my bottom lip for a minute, taking a minute to think it through. And as I replay the conversation,

the reason my subconscious pulled that out of my memory banks becomes clear.

“Mo, do me a favor and check harbor manifests. I want to know if there is a ship called the Endless Blue anywhere to be found,” I say and mentally cross my fingers.

Mo goes to work, her fingers banging away on the keyboard as my stomach churns. And when she looks up at me with a quizzical expression on her face, the hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

“Yeah, there’s a yacht docked down at the Bell Harbor Marina by that name. It’s flying a Japanese flag and is registered to a company called Divine Wind Incorporated out of Tokyo,” she says. “How did you know?”

“Petra Franks told me she and the other two girls were taken to a boat briefly before being taken to the house where we found them,” I explain. “I just put two and two together and hoped they didn’t add up to five.”

“That’s got to be where the auction is being held, right?” Astra asks.

“It’s very possible,” I say. “But we don’t have a lot of time to waste on wild goose chases.”

“Blake, this is about gaining a tactical advantage and making sure you and Spenser get off that boat alive and in one piece,” Astra says.

The doors to the bullpen open with a whoosh, and I turn, surprised to see Caitlyn walking through them. She sees Spenser standing there, and a momentary flash of surprise crosses her face. She recovers quickly though and gives her a nod of recognition.

“It’s good to see you, Spenser,” she says.

“You too, Caitlyn.”

I don’t think either of them mean it, but then, I wasn’t overly thrilled when Spenser and I reconnected too. It just took a little time and an open mind. Maybe that can happen for them as well. Caitlyn looks wrung out, and I have no doubt she’s been beating herself senseless about Burton, wondering how she missed the signs—how she couldn’t have known she had a mole right under her nose the

whole time. I'm sure those questions are going to haunt her for a very long time, but for the moment, she seems content to put them aside and focus on the task at hand. And for that, I respect her all the more.

"So," she says. "What are we doing to take down the Yokai?"

"At the moment, we're going to do some surveillance."

"Good. All right," she says. "Put me in, coach. I'm ready to come off the bench."

"Good to have you back," I reply. "Let's go."



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Bell Harbor Marina, Downtown District; Seattle, WA

“**W**ith a yacht that size, you have to think it’s a classic case of overcompensation,” Astra quips. “Like those guys who drive the massive trucks.”

“God, I hate those guys,” Caitlyn says, seeming to finally be warming up a bit.

The four of us are standing on the patio of an ice cream parlor in the historic Pike Place Market, across from the marina, doing our best to blend in with the throngs of tourists who fill the place up. From where we are, we can see the two-hundred-and-seventy-five-foot Endless Blue, a superyacht too large to dock inside the marina, so it’s moored just outside the seawall. There is a helicopter on a pad at the rear of the ship, its rotors tied down, and a Japanese flag—the Rising Sun style—flying from a pole just outside the bridge.

“The way it’s moored out there makes a quick getaway pretty easy,” Spenser notes.

I nod. “I had the same thought.”

I pull a pair of binoculars out of my bag and take a closer look at the massive yacht. I scan the ship from stem to stern, watching the crew on the deck moving about. None are moving with any urgency, but all are moving with a purpose as they clean the boat, seeming to be getting it ready. What they're readying for is the question, but I think we all know already. We can't prove it just yet, but my gut is telling me this is where it's going to happen.

"Anything?" Astra asks.

"Nothing," I say. "Wait... I see two men standing just outside the bridge—"

"What are they doing?"

"Talking. Smoking," I say. "But they both have AR-15s on slings across their backs."

"And if you can see two, I bet you they're like cockroaches—there are a hundred you can't see. Not by the light of day anyway," Caitlyn growls.

"Yeah, I think you're probably right," I reply. "I'm pretty sure there are more guards on that ship, which means there's something worth protecting."

"Like maybe girls they've abducted?" Astra asks.

"It seems a good bet."

"So, this is where they're going to auction those girls off," Spenser says. "In a place as public as this, right under everybody's noses."

"Hiding in plain sight," I say. "You have to give them credit though. It not only takes massive stones, but it's also kind of brilliant. Disgusting, but clever. I mean, who's going to suspect they're selling teenage girls on that ship?"

"They'll hold the auction below decks. I can guarantee that," Caitlyn says. "But they're going to need cover for the people coming and going from the ship. How will they explain that?"

"I think I have the answer to that," I say.

"What is it?" Astra asks.

I hand her the binoculars and point out the white van sitting in the parking lot. "They're going to throw a party," I say. "I see a Japanese man speaking with a caterer."

“Party up top, human flesh sale down below. That’s ballsy,” Astra says. “That caterer looks fancy too. Don’t forget to bring me a doggie bag, ladies.”

Spenser and I share a smile, and even Caitlyn chuckles but then quickly sobers again. She clears her throat and takes a bite of her ice cream, leaning against the table we’re standing at.

“Are we sure that caterer is meeting with our people?” she asks.

“The guy’s jacket has a company logo and a Japanese flag below it on his right breast,” Astra says. “Somebody look up this Divine Wind Incorporated.”

Spenser pulls out her phone and quickly searches for the company. When she has it, she scrolls to the logo and blows it up, then slides it across the table to Astra who lowers the binoculars and looks down, then nods.

“That’s the logo,” she says. “The Yokai are definitely having a caterer brought in.”

“What does Divine Wind do?” I ask.

“That’s the umbrella company,” Spenser says as she reads from her phone. “They have divisions in arms manufacturing, automobile manufacturing—hybrids and electric primarily. They have a division devoted to sports equipment. They have a lot of public faces.”

“I’m guessing they aren’t displaying their Teen Girl Trafficking division?” Caitlyn asks.

“Unfortunately, no. Definitely not being displayed,” Spenser says.

I lean over, moving closer to Caitlyn, and pitch my voice low. “You doing okay?”

She nods. “As well as can be expected,” she replies. “I mean, how good can you be when you realize you’ve been fostering a traitor for the last few years?”

“You know this isn’t your fault, right? There is no way you could have known,” I press.

“I should have though. I should have seen the signs.”

“Because you’re Wonder Woman?”

“I should be,” she says. “Or I should at least know my team well enough to know when something is off with one of them. Like you.”

Having watched you with your team, I have no doubts you'd know if something was off with them."

I laugh. "There's something off with all of them."

"Don't be leaving yourself out of that," Astra chimes in. "You're the nuttiest one in the whole fruitcake, my friend."

That gets everybody laughing, and that good, honest laughter seems to break some of the tension that's been so thick in the air around us all day. It's a good thing.

"Honestly, Cait. You can't beat yourself up for this," I press.

"Maybe one day I'll stop," she replies. "I just... she was a friend. That's what hurts the most. I had a friend betray me. She stuck a knife right in my back."

"Well, you've still got us," I tell her.

Astra nods. "Yeah. You do."

Spenser gives her an encouraging smile. "Absolutely."

Her eyes shimmer with tears, and she quickly wipes them away and sniffs, getting herself under control. But she can't stop the smile that creeps across her face.

"Thanks, guys. I appreciate that," she says, then laughs. "Now, can we stop talking about our feelings like a bunch of chicks and game this out?"

"Thank God," Astra says. "I didn't know how much of that I had left in me."

We all take a few moments to gather ourselves before shifting our brains back to the task in front of us. From where I'm standing, I can already tell this isn't going to be easy.

"This is a tactical nightmare," Spenser says, giving words to my thoughts. "There is no path to the ship where a tac team isn't going to be seen."

"That could work to our advantage though," I say.

"How so?" Caitlyn asks.

"Where they're moored, it looks like there's only one way in. Which means, there's only one way out. If we crash the party with force, everybody on that ship is going to be trapped between our guns and the water," I say. "There's no way off that boat once our tac teams come on board."

“And if they try to make a run for it, we can loop in the Coast Guard,” Spenser says. “They can have a cutter and air support standing by to stop them from making open water.”

“You’re forgetting one thing,” Astra says.

“What’s that?”

“The Yokai don’t hesitate to cut their losses. It’s entirely reasonable to think if we crash the party, they’ll open up and start killing people just to create so much chaos and confusion, we won’t be able to nab the ringleaders,” Astra says. “And let’s not forget you two would almost certainly be caught in the crossfire.”

“She’s right,” Caitlyn says. “I’m starting to think this is going to be too risky to pull off.”

“It will be riskier than you think,” comes a familiar voice behind us.

We all turn around, and I smile when I see Fish standing there. He’s wearing an electric blue three-piece suit with a metallic blue tie, a white shirt beneath his vest, and a dark blue pocket square rounding out his day’s ensemble. I take his hand and give it a firm squeeze and offer him a smile as Astra steps forward and gives him a warm hug.

“Speaking of things that don’t come out by the light of day,” I say.

“Long time, Fish,” Astra says.

“It is always a pleasure to see you, my dear Agent Russo,” he replies, then nods to Caitlyn and Spenser. “I was beginning to think Blake had fostered you off for Sheriff Song and Agent Takada. Though it is an unexpected delight to see you as well.”

Astra laughs, but Caitlyn and Spenser simply give polite smiles. They’re both still uncertain of him—though I’ll give them credit for not being nearly as stiff and cold when they shake his hand and greet him as they were before. Fish gives me a look that sends goosebumps crawling across my body and stands the hair on the back of my neck up. He’s worried. And he’s never worried. Which makes me worry about a hundred times as much.

“Fish, what are you doing here?” I ask.

“Looking for you.”

“How’d you know where we were?”

He offers me a grin that says the answer to my question should be obvious. “I am a man who knows things, my dear. You should know that by now.”

“Of course, you are,” I reply. “I should have known.”

“Yes, you should have.”

“So, you said it will be riskier than we think,” I say. “What did you mean?”

He steps closer to us, his eyes darting left and right. Two of his men—not nearly as large as An, but the sort who look like they can handle their business—stand a bit behind him, watching the crowd. Their presence is so intimidating, people go out of their way to walk around us, leaving us in a protective bubble of sorts.

“I needed to find you and stop you from going to that auction,” he says lowly.

“You know we can’t do that. There are girls—”

“And it is an unfortunate situation,” he cuts me off. “But I have been looking into the Yokai closely ever since you and Sheriff Song came to me before. And I have it on good authority that your lives are in danger.”

I give him a small smile. “Our lives are always in danger, Fish. It’s the nature of our jobs.”

“You don’t understand,” he replies. “Enenra is enraged that he had to kill Tomio Masuda because of you. Masuda was being groomed to take on the title of Enenra once this one retires.”

“Wait, so Enenra is a title and not just a name he made up?”

“Yes, yes. It is a title passed on to each successive leader of the Yokai—I was told this iteration of the Enenra is a man named Kazu Uchimura. Passing on the title is how there has been such stability and continuity in that organization for decades. But that is not what is important right now,” Fish says irritably. “What is important is that you and your team have stripped the organization of its next leader. Masuda was Enenra’s right-hand man. And because of your investigation, he was forced to kill him. Now, he’s vowed that he will kill you and everybody on your team as the blood debt you owe him.”

“I owe him nothing,” I say. “And he can’t get us if we get him first.”

“Enenra does not see it that way.”

“Honestly, I don’t care how he sees it—”

“Blake, what he does is reprehensible. Monstrous. And we both know he is an evil man. A cruel and vindictive man. We have seen what he has done—as have Sheriff Song and Agent Tanaka. They know this to be true as well,” Fish says. “But he is also relentless. Determined. And when he is owed a blood debt, he does not stop until that account has been settled. I know you want to save those girls. But by trying to do so, you will most assuredly lose your life. And that is something I cannot bear. Please do not ask me to.”

I exchange glances with the others and see the same look of trepidation and concern on all their faces. Fish is not one to blow things out of proportion or exaggerate. If he says the danger is real, you can take it to the bank. But I’m also not one to back down from a fight. I know that what I do is dangerous, and I sometimes put myself in bad situations. But that’s part of the job. I knew that the first day I set foot in Quantico. The girls the Yokai are holding are innocent, and it is my job to save their lives, without thought to what it will cost me.

“You can’t ask me to abandon those girls, Fish. You can’t ask me to turn my back on them when they need us most,” I say.

“I can. And because I fear it will cost you your life to save them, that is exactly what I am asking you to do. As terrible as it is, and as cowardly as I know it makes me sound, I cannot bear the thought of losing you, Blake. You are my family. My only true family,” he says.

I’ve never seen Fish this emotional before, and I’d be lying if I said it didn’t rattle me. There’s part of me that wants to turn and run like he’s asking me to. This is an army of professional killers we’re going up against, and they outclass us in every way imaginable. I’m not naïve. I know we’re walking into a chainsaw. I know if they recognize me, I’m going to be chum in the water. Even knowing that, though, I can’t turn a blind eye to the pain and suffering those girls are enduring on that ship.

Reaching out, I take Fish’s hand and give it a gentle squeeze. He purses his lips and looks at the ground beneath his feet, seeming to already know what I’m about to say.

“I can’t look away or forget what I already know, Fish. You know that about me,” I say.

“I do. You are the one who runs toward the bullets while everybody else runs away.”

“Because there are people who need to be protected who can’t protect themselves.”

“It is one of the qualities I love most about you, Blake,” he says. “It is also one of the qualities I hate the most.”

“I’ve got three of the bravest, smartest, and strongest women I’ve ever known at my back,” I tell him. “Everything is going to be fine. I promise.”

“You have always told me to not make promises I cannot keep. I would ask you to do the same,” he says a little sadly.

“Fine,” I say. “I feel absolutely certain everything is going to be fine.”

Fish studies me closely for a long minute, and I can see the concern in his eyes. I can see just how worried he is. Though he is doing his best to remain as stoic as he usually is, I can see that he’s struggling to control his emotions. It’s so unusual to see from him that it’s jarring as hell.

“There is something else you should know,” he says. “I have been told that Enenra himself will be at the auction. Without Masuda to run things, Enenra is here to oversee the auction and to oversee the hunt for your team himself. He has made it known in certain circles that he wishes to watch each of you die personally.”

“That’s charming,” Astra says.

“He’s going to be here?” I ask quietly.

Fish nods. “He will be. And I wish you wouldn’t be.”

I turn my head and look at both Caitlyn and Spenser. “He’s going to be here,” I say with a little heat in my voice. “We can cut the head off the snake. This will be our one shot to cripple the organization once and for all. If we take him out, the Yokai fall.”

“Even if you do, they will reform, Blake,” Fish says. “They are like a hydra—cut the head off one, it will grow back.”

“But at least for a while, they’ll be out of play,” I say. “And who knows? Maybe if they do try to reincarnate, they’ll be easier to

smash.”

A wan smile touches Fish’s lips. “I have always admired your optimism, Blake.”

He takes my hand and gives it a squeeze, looking at me like it’s the last time he’s ever going to see me. And seeing the fear in his eyes sends a jagged shard of pain through my own heart.

“Hey,” I say. “When this is over, you and I will go out for that dinner we keep talking about having. I give you my word.”

“I will hold you to that, Blake Wilder.”

“You do that,” I say. “And I will see you when this is over.”

“Yes. You will,” he says, though his tone sounds like a man who doesn’t believe it.

I watch as Fish turns and walks away, his men falling into step behind him. When he melts into the crowd, I turn back to my team and see the worry on all their faces. And I can’t say I blame them. We are going to be potentially walking into a buzzsaw where a thousand things could go wrong and a lot of people—including us—get killed. This isn’t something I can order anybody to do. It would be reckless and irresponsible.

“Okay, you guys. I know Fish just upped the stakes on us, and that’s fine,” I say. “This op is likely going to get a little bit hairy.”

“A little bit?” Astra quips.

“I’m not going to walk anybody into something they don’t want to do,” I go on. “This op is strictly voluntary. I don’t want any of you there if you’re not one hundred percent committed. If you have the slightest doubt about what we’re doing, you can pull the plug. Nobody is going to judge you or think ill of you. I give you my word. I appreciate all you’ve done to this point, but if you want off this train, now is the time.”

I look around and see the resolve hardening on all their faces. Caitlyn grabs my hand and squeezes it.

“This is the first time we’re going to get a crack at Enenra. Do you really think I’m going to pass up the chance to put my foot on the back of that prick’s neck as we shatter his entire organization and reduce it to ashes?” Caitlyn says.

“You’re going to have to since my foot is already going to be there,” Spenser adds.

I look over at Astra, and she shrugs. “There’s your answer.”

“What about you?”

She scoffs. “You know I’m always ready for a fight,” she says. “And besides, didn’t Ayad assign me to watch your back?”

I look around the table one more time, feeling my heart swell with pride, and I know it’s because of these women that we’re going to win this fight. Or we’ll die trying. Either way, I know we’re all going to put up one hell of a fight.

“All right,” I say. “Let’s go see about bagging us a monster.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Bell Harbor Marina, Downtown District; Seattle, WA

The night is dark, and a slate-gray blanket of clouds has been pulled over the sky. Thunder rumbles in the distance, and patches of clouds out over the Sound light up as lightning dances behind the veil. It's not raining here yet, but it's coming. I park the bright yellow Lotus we borrowed from impound in the lot designated for the party aboard the Endless Blue, and we climb out. I look back at the car admiringly and brush my fingertips over the hood.

"I think I love this car. This is such a sweet ride," I say.

"Did you have to pick something so flashy?" Spenser asks.

"What did you expect?" I ask. "That we'd roll up in here in a minivan?"

"I'm just not a big fan of sports cars," she replies. "Or your driving. You're a maniac."

"Hey, you're an international madame, and I am the loyal, death-defying bodyguard," I say. "We have to look and play the part."

“Next time I’m playing the bodyguard,” Astra’s voice comes through the bud in my ear. “I never get to drive cars like that.”

“Because you are a maniac,” I say.

“You’re both maniacs,” Spenser says.

After making sure my wig is sitting right and isn’t slipping off, I look down at myself and frown at how rumpled I look. I smooth the wrinkles out of my black jacket, then pull the sleeves down. I look at my reflection in the car’s window and smooth the collar of the white dress shirt I’m wearing and straighten the blood-red tie. That done, I slide the sunglasses out of my inner jacket pocket and put them on.

“How do I look?” I ask.

“You look like the lovechild of John Wick and Trinity from *The Matrix*,” Astra cracks.

“Funny,” I reply.

“She’s kind of right,” Spenser agrees.

Spenser is wearing a black patterned skirt that flares out at the bottom with black leggings beneath it. She’s got a white button-down shirt and a red velvet half-coat with a matching crossover tie, and a kerchief over her hair. She pulls a pair of sunglasses out of her clutch and slips them on, then turns to me.

“What do you think?” she asks.

“I think you look like a cross between a European madame and a soccer mom,” Astra says.

“I wasn’t asking you,” Spenser replies.

“She’s right again,” I say.

“I hate you both.”

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Kyung Rhee. I am from Seoul originally, but moved to Prague as a child where I began operating a brothel called Club 21, so named because none of my hostesses are over the age of twenty-one,” she says. “The first club was so successful, I have opened branches in several other countries and am looking now to expand into the US and need new stock for my new club.”

“Very good,” I say. “But you need to speak with a little more attitude. You need to speak to these people like they’re beneath you. Like you think they’re dirt.”

“Just pattern your speech after the way Blake speaks to most everybody,” Astra says.

“She’s on fire tonight,” I say. “A joke for every occasion.”

“Gotta keep things light,” she says.

I look in the direction I know she and the tac team are posted up and shoot her the finger. Her laughter comes through my earpiece.

“More attitude,” Spenser says.

“More attitude,” I say. “You got this.”

She nods and draws in a long, shuddering breath. “I do. I got this.”

Spenser has never done a lot of undercover work—or any that I’m aware of, come to think of it. Combine that with having mere hours to get her fully briefed and into character, and as we’re about to enter the ship where we believe the girls are being held, we are now in what some people refer to as pucker time.

“You guys got this,” Astra says. “It’s going to be good. Just act naturally and do your thing, ladies. Bring those girls home.”

“Astra, is the drone up and ready?” I ask.

“Five hundred feet of the starboard sign of the stern, waiting for you to find a place where you can grab the package,” she replies.

“Good. Stand by.”

“Copy that.”

I turn to Spenser. “It’s showtime. You good?”

She nods. “Let’s do this.”

We head out of the parking lot, bound for the line forming at the gangway that leads to the deck of the Endless Blue. And as we walk, I watch as Spenser transforms from a former FBI Agent and current small-town sheriff into an international madame and all-around badass. Her spine stiffens, and she holds her head high, chin tilted up slightly, adopting a haughty air about her and an arrogant set to her blood-red lips.

I walk slightly behind and to the right of her, keeping an eye on our surroundings and the people we encounter. Most are people invited to the party on the upper decks of the yacht—social media influencers, a few minor celebrities, athletes, and some of Seattle’s bigger socialites and business moguls—there to ostensibly give this

party a little clout and legitimacy. The party, as it turns out, is being put on to tout a new business deal struck between one of the Divine Wind's sports enterprises and a group looking to bring an NBA team back to the Emerald City. This party is the launch of that endeavor.

It's a terrific cover, to be honest. We looked into it, of course, and the above deck party is legit. The enterprise is real. The group honking for an NBA team has been looking for a big-money backer for a while, and Divine Wind Inc. fits that bill. Because it's legit, it provides the perfect façade to the other party—the one below deck. And as I scan the crowd, I see a few faces I recognize as some of Seattle's seedier citizens. Nobody I've busted, but faces I've seen in briefings on organized crime and gang activity. Those are the people headed below deck.

We wait in line, and I watch as the four men posted up at the gangway check invitations and IDs, scan fingerprints, and wand people to ensure no weapons are being brought on board. I notice as a trio of bubbly, giggly blondes in line in front of us go through the security checks and are given red wristbands before being ushered up the gangway. And as Spenser and I step up for our turn in the barrel, I hold my breath, hoping against hope that everything goes right and goes smoothly for us.

"Invitation," the first man says.

All four men are in matching monochromatic black suits, the only splash of color on them is their ruby-red ties. They're all Japanese, have shaved heads, and though they're lean with broad shoulders and thick necks, I can tell they're well-equipped to handle themselves in a fight. Though I'm sure the Glocks in the shoulder rigs beneath their jackets help.

Spenser calls up the invitation on her phone and holds it out for them. They hit the QR code with a hand scanner that chirps and flashes a green light.

"ID," he demands.

Spenser holds out the ID card we made for her under her assumed identity, and the man hits it with the scanner too. It again beeps and flashes a green light, and he checks it against the tablet in his hand and nods to himself. So far, so good.

“This your plus-one?” he asks.

“Yes. She’s in my employ,” Spenser says haughtily.

“ID,” he says.

I hand him the ID Rick and Nina made for me, and he scans it... and nothing happens. I swallow hard, my body tensing as the man hits the ID card with the scanner again. A long couple of seconds later, the scanner chirps and flashes green, and I silently let out a long breath as he double-checks his work on the tablet.

“Hold out your left wrists,” he orders.

We do as he says, and as the first man turns to the next couple in line, a second man steps forward and wraps a green bracelet around our wrists. Once he has them secure, he gives us a nod.

“You want to go to stateroom thirty-two in...” he starts then checks his watch. “Forty-five minutes. Do not be late or you will be denied admittance. Enjoy the party.”

“Thank you,” Spenser says.

I follow her up the gangway, my heart thundering in my chest like I just ran a marathon. We get to the deck and look around. The crowd is lively, the music loud, and the alcohol is flowing generously.

“Lead me to the bar. I need a drink,” I say.

“Is that wise?”

“I just need a seltzer water,” I say. “Though, with you being so uptight, I might splurge and go for a Shirley Temple.”

Her lips quiver as she suppresses a grin. “Smartass.”

We go to the bar and both get a seltzer water, then walk around the deck of the massive, elegant yacht decorated with fashionable and obviously extremely pricey furniture.

“I could probably live on this and be happy,” I say.

“Between this and the Lotus, I never knew you had such champagne taste, Blake.”

“It’s new to me, too, but I think maybe I’m meant to be pampered and spoiled.”

“You’re not. You’d hate being a kept woman, and you know it,” Astra’s voice cuts in. “You have a brief window on the starboard side of the deck you’re on, Blake. Go. Now.”

“Hold this,” I say and thrust my glass into Spenser’s hands.

Moving quickly, I find a doorway and step through it, finding myself standing alone on a walkway between the side of the ship and the railing that's overlooking the Sound. A throaty peal of thunder rumbles, and lightning flares in the distance. The storm is getting closer.

"Step to the rail," Astra says.

I do as she says and am immediately met by the drone that's hovering about head high to me. It drops the package, and I snatch it out of mid-air and stuff it beneath my jacket as the drone lifts off and disappears into the night.

"What are you doing out here?" asks a voice behind me, just a moment later.

I turn and see another bald Japanese man in a black suit and blood-red tie standing behind me. He's looking at me suspiciously, his eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched.

"I needed a little air," I tell him. "I'm not used to being on boats and I tend to get a little—"

"Show me your wrist," he demands.

I show him the wrist with the green band, and he frowns. "You are not supposed to leave your primary. You are to be by their side all night. Do you understand?"

"Relax. Like I said, I just needed some air."

"Find your primary, or you will both be escorted off the ship, and your evening will be over," he hisses. "Am I understood?"

"You are."

Holding the package to my side beneath my jacket, I walk back through the hatchway and find Spenser. I turn to the man and shrug.

"Happy? I found my primary," I say.

"Heed my warning," he says. "Do not leave her side again."

I snap him a quick salute. "Aye, aye, Captain."

He glowers at me as he turns and stalks away, muttering under his breath as he goes.

"Making friends and influencing people, I see," she says.

"Always. That is my forte," I reply. "Now, let's find a bathroom."

We weave our way through the crowd and find a bathroom and step inside. I lock the door behind us, then slip the package out of

my jacket and pull open the drawstring on the bag. Reaching in, I pull out Spenser's Glock and then my own.

"Two spare mags," I say. "Make your shots count."

"Won't need to," she says. "I'm going to get my hands on one of the ARs the guards have."

"I haven't seen any of them yet," I reply. "They're probably all below."

"No doubt."

I check my weapon, chamber a round, then put on the safety and slip it into the holster sewn into my pants at the small of my back. After that, I slide the two spare mags into my pocket and then turn to see her finishing hiding her weapon and spare mags. We both take a moment to relax and focus, getting our heads fully in the game. This is where the proverbial rubber meets the road, and to be honest, I've never felt more exposed than I do right now. Fish's words echo through my head, ratcheting my nerves up even higher. But then Spenser puts a hand on my arm and gives it a gentle squeeze while offering me an encouraging smile.

"You've got less than thirty minutes," she tells me.

"Copy that."

"We got this," she says.

I nod. "We do."

"You ready?" she asks.

I nod. "Let's get this party started for real."



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Endless Blue Subdecks; Bell Harbor Marina; Seattle, WA.

Spenser engages with a group of bubbleheaded social media influencers, allowing me to slip away and blend in with the crowd. As I go, I keep my eye out for bald, Japanese men in black suits knowing they spell trouble. I'm just glad they made it so easy for me to spot them. At the edge of the crowd, I see a hallway that's been cordoned off with a red velvet rope and a sign that reads, "Do not enter." Never one to obey the rules, I quickly hop over the rope and hustle down the hallway, eager to get out of sight.

"Red actual, this is red one. Do you read?" I report into the mic implanted in my coat sleeve.

"This is actual," Astra responds. "Read you loud and clear, one."

"I'm in the restricted area of the ship, looking for an access point to the lower decks of the boat," I say. "I don't know how comms will hold up, but let's see what happens anyway. How's the situation outside?"

“Watch your back, one,” she says. “Situation outside is clear. Good to go.”

“Copy that.”

My stomach roiling and sweat cascading down my back, I follow the corridors through the ship. Most of the rooms I pass are staterooms and supply closets. But then I find a hatchway that has “Engine Room” stenciled onto it in black block lettering.

“Actual, I’ve found my access point,” I say. “Situation clear. Heading down now.”

“Copy you, one. Be safe.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Do better.”

A small grin curls the corner of my mouth upward as I brace myself, then slowly open the door. Beyond it lies a metal grate and a metal staircase leading down into the belly of the ship. I quickly slip inside, then close the hatch behind me and pull my weapon out, holding it down at my side as I descend the two flights of switchback stairs that take me down into the belly of the ship. Once my feet hit the ground floor, I hunker down and wait, listening and waiting for my ears to adjust to the ambient hum.

Even though the engines aren’t running, there is a lot of noise down below. It’s loud, but not loud enough for me to not hear the sound of voices echoing from somewhere to my right. I lean out from the hatchway and see a pair of men in dark blue coveralls walking away from me.

“Actual, this is one. Do you read?” I say in a harsh whisper.

“One, this is actual. Copy you, but there’s some interference on the line.”

“Copy that. I’m in the belly, moving on now,” I report.

“Head on a swivel, one.”

“Copy you, actual.”

I creep down the corridor, my eyes darting left then right then left again. The room I’m cutting through is filled with machinery that I assume helps power the ship. It’s quiet, but the air is still thick and humid. Sweat beads on my brow, and rivulets run down my face. As

I continue through this damn sauna, I feel gross and like I need a shower to wash away all the sweat.

On the other side of the room is another hatchway, and I press my ear to it, hoping to be able to hear something. But the metal is too thick to hear through, so I grit my teeth and slowly open it. I grimace and stop moving when the hinges squeal. But I don't hear a thing on the other side of the hatch, so I push through and find myself in a long corridor. The floor here is all metal grating, just like it was back in the engine room, but there is no machinery in here.

Licking my lips nervously, I wipe the sweat from my face with the sleeve of my coat and try to quell the storm churning in my belly. I push the door behind me closed as quietly as I can, then proceed down the corridor.

"Actual, this is one," I say. "Engine room clear, moving on."

"Copy... break... interfere...report..." comes Astra's voice, crackling in the static that suddenly fills the line.

"Dammit," I mutter.

I glance at my watch and see that I've got fifteen minutes left. The plan is for Spenser to locate Kazu Uchimura upstairs while I locate the girls downstairs. Once I find them, I'm supposed to signal in for the cavalry. The tac team will storm the ship, overwhelming the Yokai guards with a little shock and awe, while the Coast Guard will move their cutters in to prevent the Endless Blue from unmooring and getting away. But if I don't find the girls before Spenser is supposed to report into the auction room, Uchimura will know something is amiss and everything will be blown. And once everything starts to go sideways, I have no idea what will happen. The only thing I'm relatively sure of is that a lot of innocent people will die.

I turn right at the next junction and find myself in a corridor that looks exactly like the one I just left. But when I make another right, I see there are doors in this one. My pulse starts to race as I move down the corridor, trying doors. The first three are locked, but the fourth door opens. It surprises me, and I stumble as I push it inward. I manage to catch myself and keep my feet, but when I straighten up and look around, a gasp bursts from my throat.

“Jesus,” I whisper.

The room holds eight cages, and in those cages are girls. Young girls. All of them have been cleaned, made up, and dressed in skimpy, lacy, and disgustingly inappropriate outfits—a schoolgirl, an angel, a devil, and so on. They look like they were dressed by somebody who works in an S&M sex shop. My heart breaks for them. One girl—the schoolgirl, maybe sixteen at most—steps to the bars in her cage, her bright blue eyes fixed on mine. She’s got red hair in pigtails, and she’s wearing a plaid skirt, white thigh highs, a white button-down, and Mary Janes, and she looks at me with something akin to hope on her face.

“Who are you?” she asks.

“My name is Blake Wilder,” I say. “I’m with the FBI, and—”

Immediately, the girls start to speak as one, their voices growing louder and echoing off the bulkheads. My heart thundering inside of me, I hold my finger to my lips, trying to quiet them down. But it’s the schoolgirl who hisses, telling them all to shut up—and they do.

“I need you girls to be very quiet,” I say. “We can’t afford to alert anybody that I’m here. Can you do that for me? Can you keep really quiet?”

They all nod, staring at me through eyes that shimmer with tears. I turn to the schoolgirl since she seems to be in charge.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Daphne,” she answers. “Daphne Hill.”

“Okay, Daphne. Do you know if there are any other girls down here?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’ve heard other voices—but I don’t know how many.”

“Okay, good. That’s good,” I say.

To my right, I see a door I hadn’t noticed before. There’s a small porthole in it, so I dart over and peer through. The room is set up just like this one, with eight more cages, and I can see girls in them—the one I spy doesn’t look like she could be more than eight or nine. My stomach turning with disgust, I turn around and find myself staring into the face of a tall, bulky Japanese man. He’s dressed just like all the others, save for the red pocket square in his breast pocket. And

even though he's got the barrel of his weapon a hair's breadth from the tip of my nose, I find myself wondering if that pocket square signifies anything. Like rank or something. Good God, I think of the stupidest things at the stupidest times.

With a snarl on his lips, he leans forward and snatches my Glock then tucks it into his waistband, never once taking his weapon away from my face. His arm is like solid steel, completely unwavering.

"Hi," I say. "I'm lost, and I was hoping—"

"Shut up," he growls. "Who are you?"

"Like I said, I was looking for a restroom—"

"Shut up," he snaps.

"It makes it exceedingly difficult to answer your questions if you keep telling me to shut up," I say. "I'm just saying."

The man reaches into his pocket and starts to pull his radio out but drops it. The unit hits the metal grating on the floor with a loud clang and skitters away a couple of feet. Grumbling under his breath, he squats down to grab it but gropes around with his large, meaty hand, unable to locate it since his eyes are focused directly on me. That's when he makes his biggest mistake. He turns his head to find the radio and like a coiled snake, I strike.

Grabbing hold of his wrist, I wrench his hand back at an awkward angle, making him grunt. His weapon hits the metal grating with a metallic clang while at the same time, I drive my leg upward with all the force I can muster. My knee connects with his nose, and I hear the crunch as his head snaps backward, sending a torrent of blood flowing down his face almost immediately. The man stumbles backward but keeps his balance, then launches himself straight at me with a howling snarl of pure rage and malevolence.

I manage to dodge his initial rush, but he delivers a back-kick that catches me in the knee. I cry out and crumple to the ground, my leg feeling like it's been set on fire. The throbbing in my knee radiates up to my hip, but I know if I don't move, I'm going to die. The girls in the cages are all shrieking, terrified of the gladiatorial match taking place right in front of them. The man rushes me again and throws a wild right cross that glances off my cheek as I duck. Proving that I never learn my lesson, though, I didn't account for his left

hand, which comes up with such force that when it connects with the bottom of my chin, it lifts me off the ground.

My mouth filled with blood and more of it streaming down my nose, rage coursing through my veins like lightning, I launch myself at the man, throwing a haymaker with my left that he deflects easily enough. But like me, he doesn't account for my knee coming straight up and connecting with his groin. The man's eyes grow comically wide, and his mouth falls open as a choked gasp bursts from his throat.

He doubles over as I deliver another groin shot, this one with even more force; then I drive my fist down on the side of his head. A sharp, jarring pain radiates up my arm and into my shoulder as I connect the punch, but he goes down and curls into a ball, cupping his injured groin. Reaching down, I pull my Glock out of his waistband then deliver a vicious pistol whip that puts him out cold. The girls are all crying, screaming, and begging me to let them out. Swaying on my feet and seeing stars, I hold a finger up for them to wait as I key open my comm.

"Red actual, this is one," I slur. "Girls located. Breach. Breach! Do you copy?"

There's a burst of static and brief snatches of Astra's voice on the line, but I have no idea if she's even hearing me. Being this far down in the bowels of the ship is screwing with my comms. Obviously. All I can hope is that my message got through. Moving quickly, I open the cages and let all the girls out.

"You need to stay with me. Do not wander off. Do you understand?" I tell them.

"You heard her," Daphne said. "Stay behind me, and I'll stay behind her. Don't go off on your own, or they will find and kill you."

It's a pretty harsh and blunt thing to say, but it seems to do the trick as the girls all fall silent then fall into line, so I'm not going to complain. We move into the next room and release the girls in there—and Daphne delivers the same warning to this group. In all, there are four rooms with eight girls in each. Thirty-two girls who would have been sold to some depraved, disgusting degenerate. I lead

them back through the corridors to the engine room, and just as I'm ushering them inside, I hear shouting voices behind me.

"Daphne, get them in there and away from the door. Move!" I shout.

She moves quickly, getting the last of the girls through the door as I spin around and fire two quick shots at the oncoming men in black. I watch as a bullet punches through the first man's chest. He jerks and falls backward, hitting the ground with a wet, meaty thud. The second one gets off a round that ricochets off the bulkhead with a high-pitched whine, causing me to grunt in pain as the ricochet grazes my arm.

I feel the warm, sticky blood running down my skin as I raise my weapon and fire again. The first two shots make him flinch and duck to the side, missing him badly, but the third round tears through his stomach. He crumples to the floor, grabbing his midsection and groaning in pain. Hearing more voices coming, I jump to my feet. I dart into the engine room and slam the door shut behind me, cranking the wheel and engaging the lock, then key open my comm.

"Red actual, this is one. Come in. Come in," I shout.

"Blake, where the hell are you?" Astra comes back.

"I've got the girls," I tell her. "What's going on?"

"All hell broke loose, Blake. Get up top, Spenser's in trouble. She needs help," Astra says. "Get up here!"

I turn to the girls, all of them crying and terrified. From above us, I hear a host of dull thuds—it's the sound of muffled gunfire.

"Daphne, I need your help," I say. "I need you to keep the girls down here. I need you to keep them calm."

"I want to go home," one of the young girls wails.

"I know, honey. It's dangerous up top right now. That's why I need you all to stay down here," I tell her. "We'll get you home just as soon as it's safe. I promise you."

"I'll take care of them," Daphne says. "I'll make sure they stay down here."

"Good. Thank you."

I turn and dash to the stairs, taking them two at a time until I reach the top. Opening the door slowly, I peek through the crack but

find the hallway beyond empty. But the sound of a pitched gunfight rings in my ears. Stepping into the corridor, I close the door behind me, then run for the decks where the party had been happening. When I round the corner, though, the sight before me leaves me speechless and rooted to my spot for a moment. It's empty of people, but there are bodies everywhere—partygoers, Yokai soldiers, and FBI tac team members. The wooden floor is slicked with blood, and the air is redolent with the stench of gunpowder.

I run to the railing and look at the docks below. I see some of the people who'd been at the party running away, most of them heading into Pike Place across the way, the sound of their terrified screaming echoing through the darkness. More bodies are strewn about down on the docks below, and Yokai soldiers are engaged with members of the tac team. The hand-to-hand combat is fierce. My heart hammering in my chest, I look around, searching for Astra, and let out a sigh of relief when I see her and Caitlyn down there with a group of FBI troops putting some of the Yokai soldiers down and cuffing them.

“Spenser!” I call out.

The crack of a gunshot on the deck above me draws my attention, and before I even know what I'm doing, I run to the staircase and take them two at a time. I emerge onto the top deck of the superyacht and see Spenser fighting with a pair of the Yokai soldiers. She delivers a hard punch to the jaw of the one on her left but the one on her right moves in quickly and drives a foot into her midsection. I hear her grunt as she stumbles backward and goes down hard.

As the first man recovers from the blow she'd delivered, he pulls a weapon from beneath his jacket and starts to take aim at her. Acting on instinct, I raise my Glock and fire two shots, then pivot to the second man and fire two more. Both men drop instantly. Before I can celebrate, though, the high-pitched whine of a helicopter being started fills my ears. I see Spenser yelling at me, but the sound of the helicopter warming up drowns her out, and I can't hear her.

I see the silhouette of a man in the passenger's seat and the pilot jumping into his seat. I run to Spenser and fall to a knee. She's

bloodied and bruised, but otherwise seems okay.

“Are you all right?” I shout to be heard.

“That’s Enenra!” she screams. “That’s him! Go get him!”

My body is in motion instantly, and as the helicopter begins lifting off its pad, I raise my weapon and start squeezing off shots. I see the sparks of my bullets bouncing off the copter’s hull, but it continues to rise. I eject my empty mag and jam in another one. But before I can take aim again, the copter powers forward and speeds away into the darkness of the night.

“No!” I scream.

My heart racing as fast as my mind, I look around, trying to figure out what to do. We can’t let him get away. This is our one chance to cut the head off the snake, and I’ll be damned if I let him get away.

“Can you walk?” I shout at Spenser.

She gets to her feet. “Yeah. I’m good.”

“Let’s go. Run!”

We sprint off the upper deck and pound down the stairs. Spenser is right on my tail as we race through the empty lounge, the music thumping and lights flashing like the party is still in full swing. There are three Yokai soldiers at the foot of the gangway below us, sheltering behind an overturned table, firing at the tac team in the parking lot. Without giving myself time to think about it, I raise my Glock and put bullets in each of them, sprinting by as their bodies slump to the ground. I ignore the shouts of the tac team as Spenser and I race to the Lotus.

“Where the hell are we going?” she asks.

“That copter isn’t built for long-range flights,” I tell her. “It’s got to be taking Enenra to a private airfield. The closest field is Axelwell. It’s fifteen minutes from here, so get in, we’re going.”

“Blake—”

“Get in or stay here,” I snap as I jump in behind the wheel and fire up the engine.

Spenser manages to get in just before I lay down a trail of rubber as the Lotus screams out of the parking lot. She lets out a short gasp as I turn out onto the street and floor it.

“Look out,” Spenser screeches.

I cut the wheel and swerve around a slow-moving SUV, drawing a blast of their horn. Spenser has a hand on the dashboard and grips the handle above the door like her life depends on it as I weave in and out of traffic. My stomach is tight, and my throat is as dry as the Sahara as I drive like a bat out of hell, racing the helicopter to the airfield.

“Spenser, call the shop,” I say. “Get Rick or Nina on the line and put it on speaker.”

She does as I ask, and the line rings once before Nina picks up. “How’s the party going?”

“Nina, I need you to find Enenra’s plane,” I say. “Check the manifests at Axelwell Airfield. Find the plane registered to Divine Wind Inc. Do it fast!”

“Standby,” she says, and, in the background, I hear her fingers flying over her keyboard. “Here. Got it. It’s a G650ER, tail number Q422ELB.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

Spenser disconnects the call as I finally break out of the traffic on the main arteries through town and find some clearer driving on the side streets. Gritting my teeth, I stomp on the gas, trying to keep from watching the needle on the speedometer as it gets close to triple digits. The way I’m driving is reckless and dangerous—I know. But Enenra is so close that the thought of letting him slip through our fingers is enough to drive me mad. I’d rather go out in a ball of fire and twisted metal than let him get away from us.

We take a right so fast, I feel the two outside wheels start to lift. We manage to stay four wheels down, though, and speed along a straightaway. One more turn and we’re on the long straight road that leads to the airfield. I stomp on the accelerator and blow past the fences at nearly one hundred miles an hour. I follow the service road that leads around to the taxiway and the airstrips set well behind the airfield’s buildings, swerving around baggage cars and a security cart.

“No, no, no,” I say.

On the taxiway in front of us is a Learjet G650 moving toward the airstrip.

“Can you see the tail numbers, Spenser?” I screech.

She leans forward, straining her eyes. “It’s Q422ELB. That’s Enenra!”

I stomp on the accelerator again, racing up the taxiway in pursuit of the jet. But it starts to move as it gains steam, preparing for takeoff.

“Blake, it’s gone. You’re not going to catch it,” Spenser says.

The speedometer is over one hundred now, and we’re not getting any closer to it. The jet pulls away and races down the airstrip. I watch in horror and disgust as its nose lifts and it breaks the bonds of gravity, slicing upward and piercing the thick veil of clouds overhead. Feeling despondent, I take my foot off the gas and let the car slow, then come to a stop in the middle of the runway. I throw it into park and fling the door open in rage and disgust, then climb out.

“Dammit!” I shout so loud it hurts my throat.

With my hands on my hips, I walk in a circle, furious that Enenra slipped through our fingers. Enraged that he’s still out there. Sickened that I’ve failed. Again.

“It’s not your fault, Blake,” Spenser says.

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not,” she says. “He’s gone. Nothing we can do about that. But we can get back to the marina and see if they need help mopping up Enenra’s men.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “Yeah, we can do that.”

We climb back into the car, and Spenser looks over at me. “You know we won tonight, right? I mean, we scored a major W.”

“If you say so.”

I start the car and turn it around, then race back to the marina, my disgust and that sick, bitter feeling of failure only growing stronger inside of me with each passing mile.



CHAPTER THIRTY

First Care Medical Complex, Intensive Care Unit; Seattle, WA

“I thought I’d find you here.”

A wan smile touches my lips as Spenser steps into the darkened hospital room. I’m sitting in a chair beside Lucas’s bed, watching over him, the astringent smell of the hospital filling my nose and the beeping of the machines he’s connected to ringing in my ears. After everything down at the marina got sorted out and cleaned up, and the girls all got to the field office to begin the process of contacting their families and getting them home, those of us who needed it came down for some treatment. Many of us are bruised and bloodied, and some of us got it worse and are checked into rooms down the hall.

Once we got patched up, my team left and headed for the bar. I told them I’d meet them there. But first I came down to check on Lucas, and then I decided to stay a while. The dim, gloomy room seems to fit my mood perfectly right now.

“Everybody’s down at the bar having a drink to celebrate,” Spenser says. “Everybody’s asking about you.”

“I didn’t feel much like celebrating tonight.”

“Come on. Let’s go get a crappy cup of coffee from the machine down the hall. My treat,” Spenser says with a crooked smile.

“You trying to make me feel worse?”

“Judging by that look on your face, I’m not sure that’s possible,” she says.

I get to my feet, though, and we walk down the hushed hallway. At this time of night, with visiting hours over, the place is practically deserted. The late-night shift is little more than a skeleton crew, so our footsteps echo heavily off the walls of the corridor. We make our way into a small waiting area and walk over to the coffee machine. I pull a couple dollars out of my pocket, but Spenser waves me off.

“I told you it was on me,” she says with a smile.

“Thank you.”

She gets us our coffee, which is as bad as advertised, but we make do with it and sit down at a small table in the corner of the room. The walls are a bright yellow that’s supposed to be cheery and encourage positive thinking, according to some psychological studies. All it inspires in me is a migraine. The pair of televisions bolted to the wall and facing opposite directions are off, and other than the soft hum of the drink machines, the room is otherwise silent.

“You heading back down to Sweetwater Falls?” I ask.

“I am. It’s no international trafficking ring and all, but there is policing that needs to be done even in a sleepy little town like mine,” she says. “But I wanted to make sure I said goodbye before I got on the road.”

“Well, thank you for all your help, Spenser. We wouldn’t have broken this case without you, so I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“I was just as invested in this one as you,” she tells me. “I should be thanking you for letting me help out up here.”

“We’re even since you did me a favor by letting me help you in Sweetwater.”

“We’re even. I’m good with that.”

We sit in a companionable silence for a few moments, each of us seems to be caught up in our own heads. I, of course, am still obsessing over Uchimura getting away.

“Listen, I understand where you’re coming from, Blake. But we saved thirty-two girls. We shut down a human trafficking network—one of the most notorious in the world,” she says. “Any way you slice it, that’s a massive win for us. Absolutely massive.”

“Yeah, except Enenra got away,” I say. “More than that, the raid at the boat cost four dead partygoers, sixteen wounded, two dead SWAT members, four wounded—not to mention that you and I are beat to hell.”

“We’ll heal. And we’re alive,” she says. “But Uchimura—Enenra—he’s done, Blake. Done.”

“Guys like him are never done,” I reply. “He’ll pop back up somewhere.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” she says. “And if that day ever comes, we’ll be ready for him.”

“I wish I had your confidence, Spenser.”

“We have Uchimura’s identity now, and everything is being forwarded to Interpol as well,” she counters. “He is going to be the most hunted man on the planet. He’s not going to be able to re-establish his network. He’s done, Blake. We finally shut him down. After all these years, we finally broke the Yokai Syndicate. That’s something that should be celebrated.”

“Yeah, I guess. I just keep thinking back to what Fish said about the Enenra being a hydra... Uchimura may be gone, but somebody’s likely to take his place,” I grouse.

“It’s possible. Hell, it’s likely. But you know that somebody, be it the Yokai or somebody else, will rise to fill that void,” she says. “Nature abhors a vacuum, and I think that’s twice as true about the criminal world. That’s nothing new. If it weren’t true, you and I probably wouldn’t have the jobs we do right now.”

I grimace as a sour, bitter taste fills my mouth. I know she’s right. About everything. Somebody will step up to fill Enenra’s place. Another organization will step up to fill the spot the Yokai inhabited. It’s all a matter of time. That’s just the way of the world in our little

slice of the universe. I know this. But that's not what has me so out of sorts tonight.

"You're right. It's nothing new," I admit. "It's just... we had him. We *had* him. And he slipped through our fingers. Again. It makes me sick. It makes me furious."

"It pisses me off too," she says. "But like we said before, we have to celebrate the wins where we can because they're often so few and far between."

"Yeah. I know," I say. "Don't mind me... I'm just feeling a little salty tonight."

"I've been there. I've been in that mindset where nothing seems good enough. Where it's almost impossible to see the good in anything. Trust me; that's my whole deal," she tells me.

"Yeah, that's pretty much it," I tell her. "I know how much good we did tonight, but the areas where we failed overwhelm those. It makes it almost impossible to see the good."

"For now," she tells me. "In time, you'll get over this feeling and see how much good we did tonight."

"You're right. And I'll get there. But for now, to our wins," I say, raising my coffee cup.

She laughs and taps her cup against mine. "To our wins."

"How are things going with your husband's case?" I ask. "Any movement on that?"

"Not a lot. I keep calling, and they keep telling me there's been a delay, but they'll get back to me just as soon as they have anything," she tells me.

"What do you think?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. I know my old partner is involved somehow. I just don't know how. The one thing I'm sure of is that he did not pull the trigger that night."

"How do you know?"

"It's hard to quantify, but I was partners with Derrick for a long time. I know how he moves. I know his build," she says. "Although the build was similar, the guy who pulled the trigger didn't move like Derrick."

"Have you tried—"

“I have,” she cuts me off with a weary smile. “I’ve shouted it from the rooftops, but nobody wants to listen. The brass is more worried about the optics and political considerations of it all than they are about finding out who really killed Trevor.”

“That is awful. But not surprising,” I say. “Something I’m learning is that the higher one ascends the ladder within the Bureau directly correlates to how well one can cover one’s ass.”

“You’re not lying,” she says with a rueful laugh.

I might be one of the few people who understand what she’s saying. When you work so closely with somebody in a job like this for so long, you know their body and the way they move their body almost as well as you know yourself. I can recognize Astra in the dark from a mile off. So, if Spenser says the man who shot her husband didn’t move like her partner, then I believe her. Unfortunately, knowing how your partner moves is not counted as conclusive evidence.

She and I relate on another level too... we’ve both had loved ones murdered. I think that’s why she and I got along so well in the beginning—and maybe why we’ve managed to put the past to bed and come back together as friends. Or at least, something closer to it than we have been in a long time. Spenser and I understand each other in a number of ways that other people may sympathize with but can’t relate to. Not really.

“So, what are you going to do?” I ask.

“I’m going to keep digging. The Bureau may be content with sending somebody to prison for a crime they didn’t commit, but I’m not,” she says. “Yeah, I want Derrick prosecuted for whatever his role in what happened was, but he’s not the shooter. I know that down in my bones.”

“Well, if there’s anything I can do or anything you need me to look into, I’m here for you. Whatever you need,” I tell her.

“Thank you, Blake. That means a lot,” she says.

“Not a problem at all.”

“You know, when I asked you to come down to my town to help, I never thought we’d get back to this point,” she says.

“Neither did I,” I reply. “But I’m glad we did.”

“Me too.”

We both fall silent for a moment and take a sip of our woefully substandard coffee. But then she puts her cup down and looks at me.

“What are you going to do about Lucas?” she asks gently.

“I don’t know. I mean, given the injuries he sustained in the attack, he’s got a long road to recovery in front of him still,” I say. “I honestly don’t know if he’s ever going to come back. I wouldn’t blame him if he decided not to.”

“What about the guy who did it?”

A sound of pure disgust falls from my mouth. “We’re still sidelined and have been told to stay away from the case.”

The corner of her mouth curls upward in a grin. “Since when did you start listening to orders? That’s not like the Blake Wilder I know.”

I laugh softly. “Believe it or not, I do try.”

“You’re just not very good at it,” she says with a laugh. “Do you even have any leads on the piece of garbage who did that to your guy in there?”

“Nothing concrete. He’s a moving target right now,” I tell her. “Even his name changes... or at least, the name he’s given me anyway. But I think that’s because he believes he’s evolving.”

“His name’s changed?”

I nod. “It’s gone from Abernetty to Eurus. The switch is significant to him... I just don’t know how yet. I feel like finding that might open some doors.”

“Well, I can tell you that your boy is a Holmes fan,” she says.

“As in Sherlock Holmes?”

“Do you know another?”

I grin at her. “Smartass.”

“I’ve learned from the best,” she says. “Anyway, Abernetty was a minor character not of any real importance. Eurus is the sister of Mycroft and Sherlock—”

I sit up in my chair as something tickles the back of my mind. “I’m no Holmes expert, but I don’t recall ever reading about a sister.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” she says with a laugh. “It’s the TV show—the one with Benedict Cumberbatch? I don’t watch much TV, but that’s a

guilty pleasure—”

“Spenser, tell me about the sister.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Sorry. Eurus is a genius—smarter than even her brothers. But she’s crazy and dark. Manipulative and lacks feeling. She’s sociopathic,” she says. “Does any of that mean something to you?”

I nod as the light bulb in my head goes off and my stomach starts to churn while my pulse begins to race. The picture that’s been sitting in the back of my mind, opaque and completely inaccessible is starting to clear, giving me a look at the monstrosity behind it.

“Yeah. It means everything,” I say and shoot to my feet. “Thank you, Spenser. For everything. But I need to get back to the shop.”

“Yeah, go. Do what you have to do,” she says as she gets to her feet. “I hope we can see each other again. Just maybe without as much murder happening.”

“I’d like that,” I say and pull her into an embrace that surprises her as much as it surprises me. And yet, it somehow feels right.

“Thanks, Spenser,” I say as I dash away. “Get home safe!”

I sprint through the hospital and out to the parking lot as pieces of this puzzle start falling into place and that inescapable rush of motion and momentum sweeps over me. I finally think I know what this is all about.

The doors open with a hiss of air as I burst into the shop, then pull up short, surprised to see I’m not the only one there.

“Nina,” I say. “What are you doing here so late? Why aren’t you out with the others?”

“I’ve never been much of a party girl. But I went and had a drink with them, so I wasn’t totally unsocial. But I wanted to get a little work in while it was quiet down here, you know?” she asks. “And I couldn’t help but notice that you didn’t make an appearance. We closed a big case... why weren’t you there to celebrate?”

“I stopped by to see Lucas... and I just wasn’t feeling like celebrating tonight.”

“Fair enough,” she says. “What can I do for you, Boss? You need help with something?”

“I do, actually,” I say.

“Name it. Your wish is my command,” she says.

“I need you to pull up the names of all the victims of Alvin Perry,” I say. “In chronological order, if you could please.”

“Alvin Perry. There’s a blast from the past,” she says. “What got you onto him?”

“Because I think he’s somehow involved in what happened to Lucas.”

“Uhhh... he’s been dead for a while now? Beaten to death in prison? You might have seen it on the news?”

“I know,” I say with a chuckle. “I’m thinking it’s one of his groupies though.”

“Yeah, that makes more sense. Give me just a minute.”

As she bangs away at her keyboard, I walk over and perch on the corner of her desk, letting my mind play this out. It doesn’t surprise me that a guy like Perry would have a disciple. Scumbags like that guy always seem to draw like-minded scumbags into their orbit, then somehow convince them to carry on their work. It’s the same principle at play as a cult leader—the weakest and most damaged people are just drawn to guys like Perry and see them as some sort of godlike figure. They worship and revere them.

“Here you go,” Nina says as she hands me a sheet of paper.

I scan the list—more than twenty names in all—but it’s the first two that catch my attention that ties this whole theory together: I worked with my friend Paxton to help bring Alvin Perry to justice in what feels like another lifetime already; but he’s back, thus proving that not even his own death will stop him from killing.



EPILOGUE

*The Lotus Luxury Apartments, Chinatown-International District;
Seattle, WA*

With the soft saxophone sound of Paul Atherton’s “Summer Song” playing inside, I stand at the railing of the balcony, glass of wine in hand, looking out over my view of Chinatown. Somewhere in the distance, the sound of a siren drifts through the air, and I can hear people laughing and talking as they walk by on the street. Everything seems so peaceful. Normal. But, of course, nothing is either peaceful or normal right now.

I take a sip of my wine, then set the glass down on the table beside me and pull my phone out of my pocket. I stare at it for a long moment, not sure how to proceed. Some small part of me not wanting to. Once I open this door, I’m going to have no choice but to go through it, and nobody—not Ayad, not Deputy Director Church, not even the president himself—is going to stop me. Disobeying a direct order to stand down might cost me. But I can no more live with not trying to track down the man who nearly killed one of my teammates than I could have lived with turning my back on the thirty-two girls aboard the *Endless Blue*. That’s just not how I’m wired.

“Screw it. It’s time to finish what I started,” I mutter.

I start the recording device to tape this call so I can have a record to analyze later. That done, I punch in the number I committed to memory a while ago, then press the phone to my ear and wait as it rings once. Then twice. And then the call is connected as it rings a third time. In the background, I hear Soft Cell’s “Tainted Love” playing.

“Chief Wilder,” he says in that high, musical voice I’ve come to hate. “So, I finally have your attention.”

“You apparently do.”

“I simply must admit, I have goosebumps right now.”

“I don’t. But you know what I do have?” I ask.

“I’d love it if you told me,” he replies, his voice as smooth as the soft jazz I’m listening to.

“I have questions.”

“Oh, don’t we all though?” he asks. “Curiosity is one of humanity’s defining traits, I’ve found. I’ve always admired that desire to seek knowledge. To seek truth. I imagine that’s why you do what you do... to seek the truth. Am I right, Chief Wilder?”

“Tell me something,” I say. “Were you a disciple of Alvin Perry’s before or after I helped send him to prison?”

His laughter is light and soft. Almost musical. “So, you’ve finally made the connection. Bravo, Chief Wilder. Bravo,” he replies. “And to answer your question, I was never a disciple of Alvin Perry. But I was a fan of his work. He was an artist, that man. And I always find beauty in works of art.”

“You do know that your name will be on the prison logs. It’s not going to be very hard for us to track you down,” I tell him.

“You assume that I visited him in prison,” he says. “Let me spare you the work... I did not. I never once visited him in that dreary place. He did not want me to see him in those conditions.”

I pick up my glass of wine and take a sip, then wander back into my place and sit down on the couch as I absorb his words.

“So, how is it you came to be a fan of his work, Eurus?”

“If I told you, that would be giving the game away. And that is something I’m not going to do. It’s way too fun to let the great game

play out, don't you think?"

"Why me?" I ask. "Why did you pick me to play this game with you? Why not Paxton?"

"My, my, my," he says. "You are just chock full of questions, aren't you?"

"It's my nature. So is demanding answers."

"Well, how about I just say, you are one of the finest minds the Bureau has ever produced. Or, so they say," he replies. "Perhaps I just feel like putting that to the test."

"The last time we spoke, you said I took something from you and that's why you were going to take something from me," I say. "Tell me, Eurus, what did I take from you?"

A high-pitched, almost girlish giggle comes through the phone. It's such an eerie sound that it sends chills racing across my skin.

"Telling you would be giving the game away, and we won't be doing that. Oh, no we won't," he says in a childish, sing-song voice.

"Tell me what you want," I say.

"I want you to chase me. To find me," he says, his voice suddenly cold and masculine. "And then I want you to die. Slowly. Painfully. I want you to die knowing that you are not the smartest or the best at what you do. I want you to know that I am better and that you are dying because I beat you in the great game."

The shift in his tone and temperament is jarring. And that he can go from so childlike and almost giddy to so brutally cold in the blink of an eye like that is disturbing. But his ranting does tell me a little more about him than I knew before, so that's something. What is very clear to me, though, is this man is dangerous. He's lethal. He's unhinged. He's also highly intelligent, patient, and methodical, and believes he's got a purpose. A mission.

And that is a very bad combination of traits because those are most often the toughest killers to catch. Those are most often the ones who kill their pursuers rather than the other way around. This is his game, and he knows all the rules. If I make just one misstep, he will put me in the ground. I've got the tiger by the tail now, and all I can do is try to kill it before it kills me.

"Let's make a deal, Eurus."

“I’m not a big fan of deals, but let’s hear what you want.”

“You’ve got my attention now. My full, complete, and undivided attention,” I say. “So, how about you stop killing people while I look for you? There’s no need to take innocent lives—”

“Innocent? That is a joke, right?” he scoffs. “These people are hardly innocent. Daniel West was a drug addict and a blight on polite society. Colt Rafferty liked to hurt women and sometimes children too. He was a killer. The world is a better place without them. No, Chief Wilder, I do not kill innocent people.”

“Lucas was innocent.”

“And he’s not dead, is he?” he snaps. “And no, I will not stop doing my work. Just think of this as my incentivizing you to find me.”

“I am going to find you, Eurus. And let me be perfectly clear about something—”

“Oh, your voice is so stern. So serious. I have goosebumps all over again, Chief Wilder,” he says. “I think I may just be twitterpated with you.”

“If you come anywhere near my team or anybody I care about again, I will put you down,” I tell him, my voice harder than granite. “I won’t even think twice about it. I will put you in a hole in the ground. Do you understand me?”

“I love it when you’re so forceful. It’s just so sexy to me,” he purrs. His words are followed by that eerie giggling again, and the music in the background, “Don’t You Forget About Me,” by Simple Minds, suddenly gets louder.

“I am so excited for this, Chief Wilder,” he says. “The game is now *officially* afoot. I’ll see you soon.”

The line goes dead in my hand, and I shudder. For the first time in my career, I feel like I’m on the defensive from the start, woefully unprepared, and perhaps facing an adversary who’s smarter than I am.

The game is, indeed, afoot.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for embarking on another heart-pumping journey with Blake Wilder in *The Silent Threat*, book 18 in the *Blake Wilder FBI Mystery Thriller* series! As you may know, Blake recently made a special appearance in the book, [The Girls in the Falls](#), which is part of my Sweetwater Falls series. So, I couldn't resist bringing Spenser Song, the beloved protagonist of that series, into this book.

This was another exciting opportunity to merge these two worlds and give my readers a treat they deserve. I know you've fallen in love with Blake and quickly became enamored with Spenser, and I just had to give them a chance to work together again. If Spenser's character captured your heart in this book, I highly encourage you to explore the [Sweetwater Falls Mystery](#) series. You'll be charmed by the unique cast of characters and the picturesque small town that conceals dark secrets and mysteries.

If you found yourself on the edge of your seat throughout this book, I'm thrilled! My intention is to take you on a gripping adventure and provide an entertaining escape with each and every book. Being an indie writer isn't easy, but with your support, I've been able to continue bringing you thrilling stories despite the lack of a big budget or fancy marketing techniques.

With that in mind, all I kindly ask is that if you enjoyed this book, please take a moment of your time and leave me a review, and maybe recommend it to a fellow book lover or two. This way, I can continue to write all day and night and bring you more adventures with Blake Wilder.

By the way, if you find any typos or want to reach out to me, feel free to email me at egray@ellegraybooks.com

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