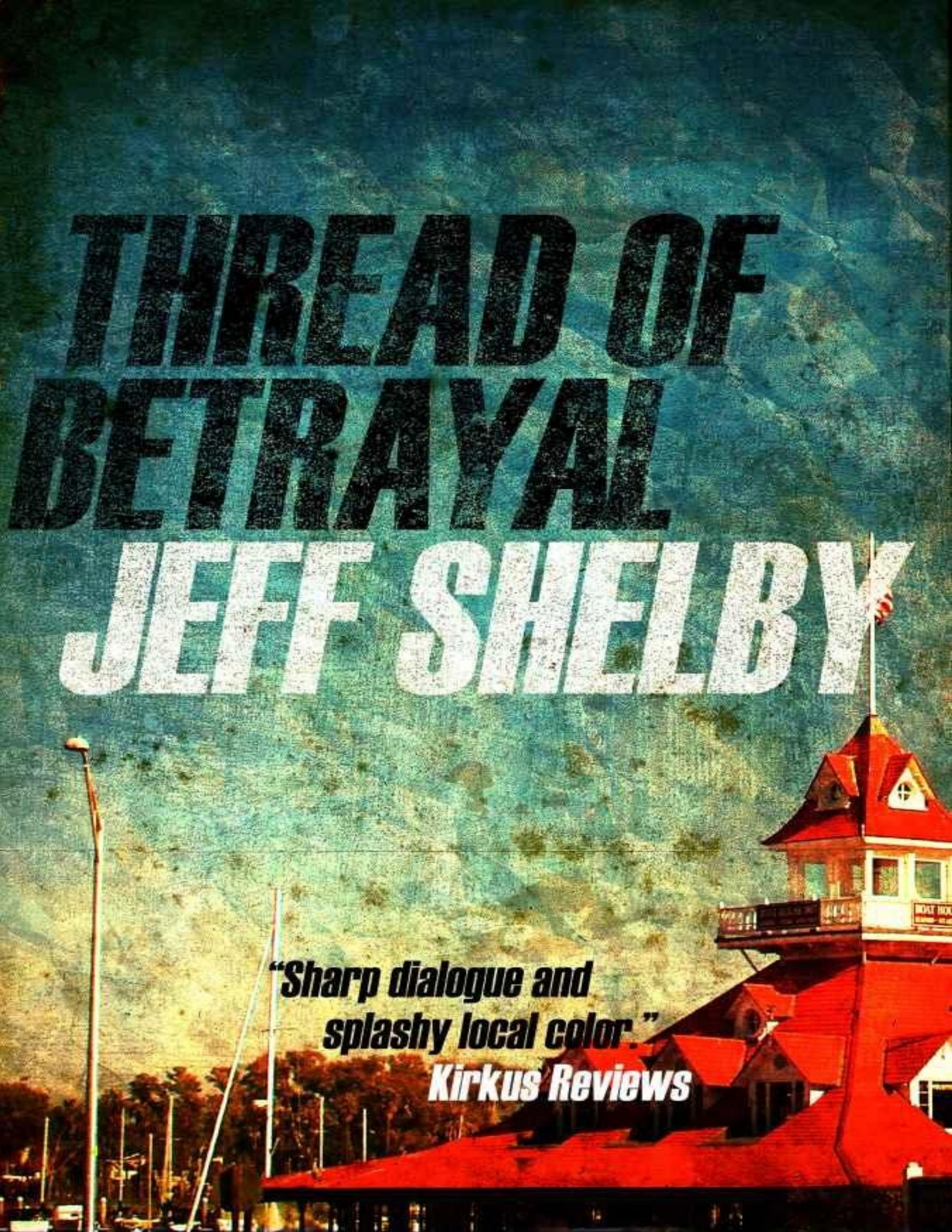
THREAD OF BETRAYAL

JEFF SHELBY



"Sharp dialogue and splashy local color."
Kirkus Reviews

Thread of Betrayal

Jeff Shelby
(2013)

Rating: ★★★★☆
Tags: Literature & Fiction, Mystery; Thriller & Suspense, Mystery, Hard-Boiled

So close...

Joe Tyler is close to finding his daughter.

After a narrow miss in Minnesota, Joe follows a money trail to Denver, hoping to finally find Elizabeth, the daughter who was stolen from him nearly a decade earlier. Accompanied by his ex-wife Lauren, he enlists the reluctant help of Elizabeth's friends, only to find that he's missed her. Again.

Armed with new information, Joe races to California, desperate to find his daughter. Stymied by roadblocks and dead-ends, Joe soldiers on with his search, realizing there is more than a reunion at stake. He just might be saving his daughter's life.

With time ticking and no clear answers in sight, Joe focuses on the one thing he's always held on to – the thread of hope that he'll finally reunite with his daughter and bring her back where she belongs.

Home.

Thread of Betrayal

by

Jeff Shelby

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

THREAD OF BETRAYAL

All rights reserved.

Copyright ©2013 by Jeff Shelby

Cover design by JT Lindroos

This book is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. Any reproduction or unauthorized use of the material or artwork herein is prohibited without the expressed written consent of the author.

First Edition: February 2013

Books by Jeff Shelby

The Joe Tyler Novels

THREAD OF HOPE

THREAD OF SUSPICION

THREAD OF BETRAYAL

The Noah Braddock Novels

KILLER SWELL

WICKED BREAK

LIQUID SMOKE

DRIFT AWAY

The Deuce Winters Novels (Under the pseudonym Jeffrey Allen)

STAY AT HOME DEAD

POPPED OFF

FATHERS KNOWS DEATH **(June 2013)**

Short Story Collections

OUT OF TIME

ONE

Elizabeth was down there somewhere.

I focused on this as the plane began its descent. The snow-covered Rockies stood sentry out the window to our right, the city of Denver pocketed against them like a tiny winter village. The brilliant blue sky hung like a backdrop against the jagged mountain edges and the sun reflected off the wing of the plane, forcing me to squint into the early morning sunlight.

Lauren and I had driven straight to the airport after our visit with Rodney. Still reeling from the news he'd shared, we'd raced to ticketing, only to find there were no scheduled outbound flights to Colorado that evening. We'd been forced to wait until daybreak and had spent the night stretched out across several uncomfortable chairs, waiting at our gate. To the people around us, we probably looked like people who had missed their flight and were simply stuck waiting for the next one. But the truth was we were too impatient and didn't dare leave the airport for fear of missing the earliest flight out.

Neither of us slept, but we didn't really talk, either. We sat next to one another, both of us caught up in our own thoughts and worries. By the time they called our flight and we boarded, Lauren had collapsed from exhaustion and slept with her head on my shoulder the entire way. I'd stared out the window, waiting for us to get to right where we were, so I could look down and know that the daughter I hadn't seen in eight years was down there somewhere.

Lauren stirred against my shoulder and lifted her head up. "We're here?"

"Almost. Descending now."

She straightened in her seat and ran a hand through her hair. Her auburn strands were mussed from sleep, her eyes half-lidded, and she stifled a yawn. "You sleep?"

"No."

She tugged at the seatbelt across her lap. "I never understood how you could operate on so little sleep."

"A gift."

"Or a curse," she said. She leaned across me to get a look out the window. "It's pretty."

I nodded. I'd been to Colorado twice before and both times were for fun. Once to ski when I'd been in college and once when I was a kid, a road trip stop on the way to visit relatives in Missouri. I didn't remember much from the trip as a kid, but the college vacation was seared into my memory. We skied in T-shirts and drank beer on the outside deck, watching other skiers fly down the mountain. There were far worse places to spend the winter.

Lauren reached over and touched the window. "It's cold. Even with all that sun."

"Wait until we get out and you can't breathe," I said.

"Thin air?"

I nodded.

"Great." She stared out the window, her fingers tracing an invisible pattern on the glass. "She's down there, Joe. She's down there."

"I was thinking the same thing."

She moved her eyes from the window to me. "Are we going to find her?"

The landing gear kicked to life beneath us and the flight attendant announced our final descent as the plane leaned downward toward Denver.

"Yes," I said. "We're going to find Elizabeth."

TWO

We took the underground trains to the transportation area and then were shuttled out to the rental car lot on the west side of the sprawling airport. While Lauren had slept on the plane, I'd hooked my phone to the inflight Wi-Fi and pulled up the address of the hotel that had come through on the credit card alert. I punched it into the GPS in the rental car which told us it would take thirty minutes to get to an area called Lakewood over in the foothills.

Lauren drove as I stared out the window. It took seemingly forever to actually get out of the airport and hit Interstate 70. Sunlight glinted off the fresh layer of snow covering the trees and ground. Industrial buildings littered the highway, giving way to an old Purina factory and the stockyards. The GPS swung us southward on Interstate 25 and we passed the massive Invesco Field, a glittering expensive shrine to the city's football team. We turned west again, venturing out into the foothill suburbs, the tires of the rental car crunching against the layer of gravel and sand that coated the highway. My stomach started to tighten as we got closer.

"What are we going to do when we get there?" Lauren asked, her eyes glued to the road.

"I'm working on that."

"Good to know. GPS says you have ten minutes."

It actually took nine for us to exit the highway, head south over the rolling hills and pull into the parking lot of a small chain hotel on the corner of a busy intersection. Lauren shut off the engine and we sat in the parking lot for a long moment.

"You figure it out?" she asked.

"Not really," I said.

"Well, we're here."

"I can see that."

The hotel was a gray, four-story rectangle. A business hotel, most likely, that housed salespeople in town for the week and sat empty on the weekends. The parking lot was filled with rental cars.

I pulled out my phone, punched the hotel into my browser and waited for it to bring up a phone number. I touched the number and held the phone to my ear.

“We aren’t just going in?” Lauren asked, annoyed. “Why can’t we just go in?”

I held up my finger to silence her.

A friendly voice answered, asking how to direct my call.

“I’m trying to reach a guest,” I said. “Bryce Ponder?”

“Do you have the room number, sir?”

“Ah, yeah, somewhere,” I lied. “Hang on. I have it written down here.” I glanced at the hotel again. “I think it was the third floor. Sorry. My car is a mess, but I know I have it here somewhere. I apologize. My son called me when he checked in last night and I scribbled it down in a hurry when he called me.”

Lauren looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

The girl on the other end laughed. “Close. Fourth floor. Four-thirty-two.”

“I knew there was a three in there somewhere,” I said.

“I’ll connect you now.”

“Thank you.”

I waited for the line to go quiet, then covered the phone with my hand. “Remember four-thirty-two.”

She nodded.

The line buzzed and my stomach jumped.

So close.

After five rings, the girl came back on the line. “Sir, I’m sorry. There’s no answer on that line. Can I connect you to the voicemail for that room?”

“Sure, that would be fine,” I said.

“One moment.”

I waited until the automated voice came on, then hung up.

“What the hell was that all about?” Lauren demanded.

I held out my hand in warning, telling her to chill out. “Easy. We go marching in there without any info and just start asking for names, it would go nowhere in a hurry. It doesn’t look good and the desk is trained to protect their guests’ privacy. They won’t give us the time of day.”

Lauren didn’t say anything.

“The phone is easier,” I explained. “They’re supposed to get the room number from you so they can verify you know who you’re calling, but it’s an easy bluff. Most desk clerks just want to transfer the phone call and if you’re nice to them, they’ll put you through.” I nodded at the phone. “And sometimes you get lucky and they give you the room number without thinking because you sound like a confused dad.”

She nodded slowly. “Why did you say the third floor?”

“The hotel only has four floors,” I said. “Look at the windows.”

She did.

“I had a twenty-five-percent chance of getting it right and an even better chance of there being a three in the number,” I said. “It’s like those TV psychics. I made her think I had more information than I actually had.”

“How’d you know she’d do that?”

“I didn’t,” I said. “She could’ve stonewalled me and not connected me. But I’ve done it enough times to know it usually works. It was a bonus that she said the number without thinking. People want to help. I was nice to her. She gave it to me without even thinking.” I shrugged. “We caught a break.”

“Okay,” Lauren said. “So now what?”

“Now I want to walk the lot,” I said, opening my door. “Look for Minnesota plates.”

The morning air was cold and dry and my nostrils tingled when I breathed in. The snow had been shoveled from the parking lot and pushed to the sides, dirty mounds surrounding the lot. I walked slowly between the aisles of cars, checking the plates of each one. Lots of Colorados, a bunch of Nebraskas, a few from Kansas and a couple from Florida. I did not see any blue and white Minnesota plates.

I glanced at Lauren, who was walking the aisle next to me.

She shook her head. “I don’t see any from Minnesota.”

Which meant one of two things. They’d driven a car with plates from a different state or they weren’t there.

I didn’t think they’d driven a car with different plates. They were probably in Ponder’s. But if they’d checked out, the desk clerk would’ve told me.

We needed to go inside.

Or, rather, Lauren did.

“You need to go knock on the door,” I said.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I don’t want to go in yet, in case they aren’t there,” I said.

“Why?”

“Just trust me.”

She sighed, exasperated. The tension was wearing on her.

“What do I do?” she asked.

“Call me,” I said. “When you get to the fourth floor, call me and leave your phone on. Just hold it in your hand so I can hear. Knock on the door. If someone answers, just stand there.”

“Just stand there? Like a mute?”

“You can do whatever you want. Act like you got the wrong room. Start yelling at him. Whatever. But it’ll take me less than two minutes to get up there if I hear someone answer. If no one answers, just come back outside.”

“Okay,” she said. “But I still don’t understand why…”

“I know,” I said, cutting her off. “Just trust me.”

She was still shaking her head when the glass sliding doors opened and she disappeared into the hotel.

I blew on my hands, the cold starting to do its thing on my fingers. I pulled my phone from my pocket and held it so I wouldn’t miss Lauren’s call. I walked quickly toward the front door and sat on the stone bench a few feet from the entrance, making sure whomever was at the front desk couldn’t see me. My heart rate was accelerating and I kept reminding myself to settle down, to stay in control, to keep thinking logically.

The phone buzzed in my hand and I held it to my ear. “Hey.”

“I’m on the floor,” she said, quietly, breathing a little harder than normal.

“Okay. Just get to the door and hold the phone in your hand at your side,” I said. “I’ll be able to hear you.”

“Almost there,” she said. “Hang on.”

There was a rustling over the line and I listened closely.

A moment later, Lauren’s fist knocking on the door echoed through the phone.

I held my breath and listened.

She knocked again.

I exhaled and listened.

The rustling crackled through the line again.

“No answer,” Lauren said.

“Put your ear to the door,” I said. “See if you hear anything. TV, hair dryer, whatever.”

After a moment, she said, “I don’t hear anything.”

I exhaled again. The parking lot was right. They weren’t there.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going in to talk to the front desk. When you come down, ignore me. Just walk out. I’ll meet you outside at the car.”

“Joe, I don’t…”

“I know,” I said, standing. “I know you don’t understand. I’ll explain when I come out. I’m trying not to waste time, alright? You need to trust me.”

The line buzzed for a moment.

“I do,” she said. “I’ll meet you outside.”

THREE

The girl behind the desk, the same one I'd spoken to on the phone, smiled at me as I approached. The narrow brass pin on her shirt told me her name was Kelly. She was short and stout, with dirty-blonde hair cut in a bob. The smile on her face looked like it was ever-present.

"Good morning," she said. "Can I help you?"

"Well, I'm not sure," I said. "I think we just spoke on the phone a little bit ago? I'm trying to reach my son?"

Recognition flashed through her eyes. "Oh, sure."

"I was driving here when I called," I said. "That's why I was having trouble finding Bryce's room number."

She nodded sympathetically.

"Anyway, I got here quicker than I thought I would," I continued. "I was wondering if you'd seen him come back yet? Since he didn't answer the phone and his cell went right to voicemail when I tried that."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not. You're the first person to come through since I spoke to you."

I nodded, expecting that. I saw Lauren out of the corner of my eye. She didn't glance in my direction and walked quickly out the front doors.

I glanced at my watch. "Just happens that he and I are both here on the same day and we were hoping to catch up before my meeting later today. Would you have any idea if he went to breakfast or anything? He's not from here, either. Just wondering if he might've asked for a recommendation or something."

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't think I talked to him. But hang on a sec. Let me ask someone here in the back." She stepped away from the desk and disappeared around a corner.

I tapped my fingers on the countertop, waiting. I wondered if Elizabeth had stood in the same spot at the counter, waiting to check in.

Kelly returned, shaking her head. "No, I don't think he talked to anyone. I'm sorry."

“Oh, that’s OK,” I said. “Let me ask you one more question and I’ll get out of your hair. Are there any breakfast places close by? Or coffee shops? I might see if I can catch him.”

“There’s a Starbucks about four blocks to the north,” she said, gesturing in the general direction. “And a bagel shop next to that. And a diner another block up the road. The diner actually advertises in our room information guides, so it’s possible he might’ve seen that and headed there.”

“That’s great,” I said. “I’ll take a look and see if I can find him at one of those. Thank you so much.”

“Oh, you’re welcome,” Kelly said. Her smile grew bigger. “Did you want to leave a message or anything? I’ll be sure to get it to him if you miss him.”

“No, that’s alright, but thank you,” I said. “I left him those voicemails. That should be good. We’ll run into each other here soon enough. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome,” she said again. “Hope you find him!”

As I exited the lobby, so did I.

FOUR

The black pick-up truck with Minnesota license plates was parked right in front of the diner.

We'd stopped at the Starbucks and bagel place first. I'd walked into each, scanned the faces and didn't see anyone who looked familiar. Lauren checked the parking lot and came up empty.

But I saw the truck before we even turned into the diner's lot. Front and center, the blue and white plates flashing like a neon sign. I had the door open before Lauren even got the car parked.

I breathed in the icy air, let it sting my lungs for a moment, then exhaled a small, cold cloud. My heart thumped against my rib cage. I rolled my shoulders, trying to shake out the tension in my muscles.

Lauren got out and stood next to me in the lot. "Has to be it, right?"

I nodded and walked toward the truck. I saw a GPS on the seat, an empty soda bottle in the holder and a few loose papers on the floorboards. The doors were locked.

"Jesus, Joe," Lauren whispered. "This is it."

"Maybe," I said, trying not to get too confident. But I knew what I was thinking, what I was feeling.

I was sure that was the truck.

The empty leads, the cases I'd worked to pass the time until I found the next hint that might help me find my daughter—all of those things had led me right to this moment. Standing outside of a diner in a Denver suburb, the wind biting my cheeks and hands as I reached for the door handle. Every thought I'd ever had about reuniting with Elizabeth collided in my chest as my fingers connected with the metal handle.

This was it.

I held the door open for Lauren and we stepped into the small shop. The warm air inside enveloped us, smelling of toasted bread and strong coffee. A line about six deep snaked next to the counter and several of the small tables were occupied by people reading the newspaper and sipping coffee.

Except for the one next to the front window.

That table was occupied by a tall, thin kid, staring absently at the bagel on his plate, picking at it with his fingers. His dirty-blond hair was uncombed and brushed forward and I couldn't tell if he'd styled it that way on purpose. The purple, Minnesota Vikings hooded sweatshirt he wore looked too big for him.

The chair across from him was empty.

We stood there for a moment and I scanned all of the faces again.

None belonged to Elizabeth.

"Go check the bathroom," I said to Lauren.

She nodded wordlessly and walked to a small door near the pick-up end of the counter. She opened it, peered inside and shut it. She turned to me, her face the color of chalk, and shook her head.

Nothing.

I shrugged off the disappointment welling up in my gut and zeroed in on the guy in the Vikings sweatshirt.

I slid into the chair across from him and he looked up at me, startled. Dark brown eyes, a couple days worth of stubble and a small gap between his upper front teeth.

"Yeah?" he asked, both irritated and confused.

"Bryce?" I asked.

He sat up straighter and his gaze flickered to Lauren as she approached. She stood next to us, her hand on her purse, her expression anxious.

"Bryce Ponder, right?" I said.

He glanced at me. He didn't need to answer. Just the way he'd tensed up when I'd said his name told me we'd found Elizabeth's boyfriend.

"Who are you?" he asked, glancing around, unsure what to do.

I ignored his question. "Where's your girlfriend?"

His suspicion ratcheted up another notch and he sat back in the chair. "What?"

I looked at Lauren. Her eyes were moving all around the diner, still looking at people and faces. Still looking for Elizabeth.

"Where's your girlfriend?" I repeated.

He didn’t say anything.

“Ellie Corzine?” I said, the name tasting sour as it came off my tongue. “Your girlfriend?”

Anger flared in his eyes. “Who the hell are you?”

“If I have to ask you again where she is, you’re going to have a difficult time answering with a broken jaw,” I said, leveling my eyes at him. “You’ll have to write it down.”

He glared at me and folded his arms across his chest.

Lauren rested her hand on my shoulder. Her signal to stay under control.

I was trying. Sort of.

“I don’t know who you are,” he said. “And I don’t have to talk to you.”

A waitress stopped by the table. Her eyes were tired, ringed with dark circles, like she’d gotten in early or pulled the late night shift.

“You folks need anything?” she asked, nodding her graying head toward me and Lauren.

“No, we’re good,” I said.

She nodded again and leaned over to refill Bryce’s coffee mug. It was still three-quarters full.

The waitress left and Lauren spoke. “We’re her parents. Ellie’s parents.”

He stared at her, no recognition in his face. “No, you’re not.”

“Yeah, we are,” she said. “And, trust me, I can only hold him off for so long.” She inclined her head in my direction. “It might not be your jaw but he’ll break some part of you if you don’t talk. So if I were you, I’d start answering the questions.”

He sat there silently, a muscle in his jaw twitching as he looked back and forth between us.

“Her name is Elizabeth Tyler,” I said, unable to stand his silence. “She was taken from us. Years ago. She ended up with the Corzines. And you were helping her run away. Any of this sound familiar?”

Something flashed through his eyes and he leaned forward, placing his hands on the table as if to balance himself. “Holy shit.”

“Pretty much.”

He sagged in his chair. “I…I thought she was exaggerating,” he said, staring down at his hands. “I didn’t think…”

“Where is she?” I asked again. “Is she with you?”

“Yeah,” he said, then shook his head. “I mean, no. She was. But she left.”

Another kick to the stomach. Lauren’s hand tightened on my shoulder. “Where is she?”

Bryce was still staring at his hands. “Man. I didn’t think it was true.” He looked at me, then Lauren. “You’re really her parents?”

We both nodded.

“Do her parents know?” he asked, then his face flushed. “I mean, her other parents. Or whatever.”

“They know,” Lauren said. “It’s how we found you here. They directed us to your house. We talked to your parents, too.”

His eyes narrowed. “You talked to my parents?”

Lauren nodded.

“But they didn’t even know we were coming here,” he said. He brushed at his hair, then let it fall back against his forehead. “Hell, I didn’t know we were coming here.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my patience wearing thin.

“What did my parents say?” he asked. Before either of us could respond, he smirked and said, “Let me guess. ‘Bryce sucks’?”

I took a deep breath. “If you don’t stop answering my questions with your own, I’m going to walk you outside and break your jaw like I promised.”

He frowned, more annoyed than afraid. “Yeah, okay. Sorry.” He rubbed at the stubble on his chin. “I didn’t know we were coming here. Ellie just said she wanted to get out of Minnesota. That she was pissed at her parents. That she was adopted.” He looked at each of us. “But I thought she was just upset, you know? I didn’t think she actually was. Adopted, I mean. I thought she meant it to be funny or something. An excuse. Just something to get out of town.”

I glanced around the restaurant again. Older faces. Small children. No Elizabeth,

though. He wasn’t talking fast enough and we were losing time.

“So, she said she wanted to get out,” Bryce said, then shrugged. “I was cool with that. But she said she just wanted to go. No plan or anything.”

“So you just started driving?” Lauren asked.

“Sort of,” he said. “She messed with the GPS. Told me where to go. I thought we were on a road trip.” He looked at each of us again. “How did you find me?”

“Credit card,” Lauren said.

His face flushed. “Shit. My mom’s gonna be pissed. And so’s my dad.”

“They already are,” I told him. I drummed my fingers on the linoleum table. “So, where is Elizabeth? She’s not at the hotel.”

“You’ve been to the hotel?” he asked, his voice disbelieving.

“Credit card,” Lauren said again.

“Oh, right,” he said, shaking his head. “No, she’s not there. She bailed this morning.”

I stopped drumming, my fingers gripping the edge of the table instead. “What do you mean bailed?”

He shifted in his chair. “She woke me up. She was already dressed. Said she was leaving. I tried to get up to go with but she said no. She was leaving and I couldn’t go with her.” His face fell. “She broke up with me.”

His story wasn’t making sense and I was aggravated. Lauren must’ve sensed it because she clamped her hand down tightly on my shoulder.

“She broke up with you?” Lauren asked. “This morning?”

He slumped a little lower in the chair and nodded. “Yeah. Woke me up. Said she had to go but I couldn’t come with. Then said she was sorry but she had to break up with me. She thanked me for bringing her here but said that I should go home to Minnesota. I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn’t listen. She’s so goddamn stubborn sometimes.”

I had a weird flash of pride hearing that. She may not have been with Lauren or myself for the last decade, but she’d clearly inherited some of our personality traits.

“I don’t know why she’d bring me here and then just bail on me, you know?” he said, his voice cracking a little. “Totally not like her. At all.”

“Where did she go?” Lauren asked.

He frowned and shook his head. “Some friend of hers came to pick her up.”

“A friend?” I asked. “From here?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “Someone she already knew. She said she was coming to pick her up at the hotel. I stayed in the room for a few minutes after she left. I was pissed, you know? And then I went downstairs because I was mad. I was going to yell at her, tell her it wasn’t fair.” His face fell again. “But she was already gone when I got down to the lobby.”

“Who was the friend?” I asked.

He shrugged like he didn’t care. “I don’t know, man.”

“Think,” I said. “She had to have talked about her before.”

He shrugged again, his eyes cast downward.

“Hey,” I said.

He lifted his eyes from the table.

“You brought an underage kid about eight-hundred miles away from her home,” I said. “You’re legal. You’re responsible here. And we already know you’ve got a record.”

His face darkened.

“So unless you want to spend the rest of the day with a bunch of cops here in Denver, I’d suggest you try and remember a few things,” I said.

He turned away from me and stared out the window.

We waited him out.

“I think her name is Morgan,” he finally said.

“First or last?”

“First,” he answered. “Last name is Thompson. Or Thompkins. I’m not sure.”

“How did she know her?”

He thought for a moment. “I’m not sure, but I think a while back she mentioned a friend of hers from middle school moved to Colorado. So I guess from Minnesota? I don’t know. Ellie, she doesn’t talk a whole lot about herself.”

I wasn’t sure why, but that stung me. “What do you mean?”

“It takes awhile to get to know her,” Bryce said. “She’s not quiet, but she asks a lot of questions. But the questions are about whoever she’s talking to. Like she wants to know everything about you. But then you ask about her and she’s just sort of…I don’t know. Vague? I don’t know.”

I wondered why that was. Because she couldn’t remember who she was? Or because she could remember, but didn’t want to?

“It’s not like I know all of her friends,” he said. “I don’t even know a lot of her friends from school.”

I didn’t care about her friends at school. All I cared about was finding the one person who would help me find my daughter.

“Any idea where Morgan lives?” I asked.

He tapped his fingers on the table, thinking. I wanted to slam my fist down on his hand. “I don’t know for sure,” he said. “But we were driving yesterday. Somewhere in Wyoming. And she was looking at a map. We bought one at a gas station. I’m pretty sure she marked something on the map. I asked her why she was drawing on it, just like teasing her or whatever. But she got all annoyed and folded up the map and never answered.”

“So you never saw it?” I asked.

He stopped tapping his fingers and looked across the table at me. “No. But I’m pretty sure it’s still on the chair in the hotel room.”

FIVE

The clerk at the hotel was busy with a guest checking out when the three of us walked in. I moved us quickly past the front desk so we wouldn't have to go through the charade of explaining why we were together. We rode the elevator in silence. Bryce had his hands shoved inside the pockets of his sweatshirt and kept his eyes glued to the elevator door. I watched him. He seemed genuinely broken up that Elizabeth had left him and I didn't think it was just about ego. There was a look on his face that said it was more than that.

I was pretty sure he loved my daughter.

The door opened and we followed him down the hall to his room. He shoved the keycard in the slot on the door, the light blinked green and he pushed the door open. The room was hot, warm air pulsing out of the wall-mounted heater. The thick brocade curtains were drawn closed, a sliver of sunlight slicing through where the two panels met. The king-sized bed was unmade, the gold-colored comforter pushed to the edge of the bed. A small duffle bag sat on the dresser next to the television, unzipped, clothes spilling out of it. The small table in the corner was cluttered with several half-empty bottles, soda and juice and water. Spare change and a couple of receipts were spread out between the bottles.

And there was a folded-up map on the chair next to the table.

Bryce walked over to the chair, picked up the map and sat down. He unfolded it, stared at it for a minute, then poked at it with his finger. "Here. She circled it. Castle Rock."

I crossed the room, my hand outstretched, and he held the map out to me. I took it and stared, my eyes drawn to the circle my daughter had drawn. I studied it, my eyes focused on the circle alone and not the surrounding area on the map. When I finally expanded my view, I saw it was south of where we were. Eyeballing it on the map, it looked to be maybe thirty miles from the hotel.

Lauren came up next to me. "She write anything else?"

I scanned the map, flipping it over, but saw nothing. "No."

She looked at Bryce. "Have you tried calling her?"

"She turned her phone off when we left Minnesota," he said. "I think so her parents couldn't track it." His cheeks flushed pink. "Or whoever they are, I mean."

“Can you give me the number?” Lauren asked. “Just in case.”

He pulled a phone out of his pocket, scrolled through numbers on his screen, then recited a number. Lauren typed it into her phone.

I looked around the room. There was nothing that I could see that belonged to Elizabeth. “She took everything with her?”

Bryce nodded. “Yeah. She told me to go home.”

“Are you going to?” I asked. “Go home?”

He shrugged. “I guess. I don’t know. Not sure what else to do.”

I grabbed a notepad from the dresser, a thin white pad with the hotel logo. I scribbled my number on it and held it out to him. “My cell. If she calls you, I’d like for you to call me.”

He took the paper, studied it for a minute and then shoved it in his pocket. “She’s not gonna call me. Ellie does what she says she’s gonna do. We aren’t going to be getting back together.”

“I understand. But just in case.” I hesitated. “You need money? To get home?”

He shook his head. “I got the credit card. As long as my mom hasn’t canceled it.”

“I’ll call your parents,” I said. “Tell them you’re okay and that you were helpful. You should call them, too.”

He nodded, unenthusiastically.

I knew we needed to go, to track down Morgan, but I sat down on the edge of the bed instead. “Can I ask how you met her?”

“At a party during the summer.” He leaned back in the chair. “We were just talking that night, then she needed a ride home. Her friend left without telling her. I gave her a ride home. I got her number. We went to the movies.” He shrugged. “That was it.”

“You’re older than she is,” I said.

“So?”

“I’m just making an observation.”

He gave a half-eye roll. “I liked her. She liked me.”

“She ever mention being adopted?” Lauren asked.

“Only recently,” he said. “But like I told you before, she didn’t talk a whole lot about herself. I thought she was exaggerating when we took off. So, no. She didn’t really mention it.”

I nodded. I believed him. I didn’t think he had much to offer. And much of my curiosity felt like it was simply from wondering what Elizabeth had been doing rather than gathering information that might be useful in finding her.

“We should go,” Lauren said, glancing at me.

I stood up, the map of Colorado clutched tight in my hand. Elizabeth may have left, but she was still within reach. We didn’t want to miss her again.

“You hear from her, please call,” I reminded him.

He nodded, a frown creasing his face. He was another person on the list. Another person missing Elizabeth, another person who’d lost her.

SIX

“Can’t you call Mike?” Lauren asked. “Ask him to run names in Castle Rock or whatever he does to help you find people?”

We sat in the rental car at the parking lot of the hotel, the heater slowly coming to life, taking the edge off the interior of the car. The lot had emptied considerably since we’d first arrived; we were only one of half a dozen cars still parked at the hotel.

I put my hands on the cold wheel. “No.”

“Why not?” she asked. “You were all weirded out when we left the hospital room in Minneapolis, but you didn’t explain anything. What exactly is going on?”

She was right. I hadn’t explained anything. We’d flown to Colorado in near silence, both of us lost in a world of memory and fear and excitement as we flew to Denver, hoping to find Elizabeth. But I’d had one other thing on my mind, too.

The man who helped me in Minnesota, Rodney Gorman, had inadvertently opened my eyes to something I’d never seen before regarding Elizabeth’s abduction. The picture of my daughter had been sent to the police department in Coronado years earlier. Most likely it had been sent to someone who should’ve followed up on it immediately or, at the very least, passed it on to me. I’d never trusted Lieutenant Bazer, but I’d never thought he’d withhold evidence from me. I never thought he might somehow be tied to my daughter’s disappearance.

And I’d always trusted Mike Lorenzo. Always. He’d been the person I’d confided in the most, the one that helped me do the digging on Elizabeth’s case, the one who worked it like I did. Not in a million years would I have ever thought he could somehow be tied to Elizabeth being missing. But after a brief conversation with Rodney?

Now I felt like I knew nothing.

And I trusted no one.

“I can’t call Mike,” I said.

“Why not?”

“You won’t believe me.”

Lauren shifted in her seat. She took a deep breath, exhaled, and leveled her eyes at me. “Joe. You and I have had a lot of disagreements over the years. About a lot of

crap. And especially since she's been gone. But not once have I ever said to you or even hinted that I didn't believe anything you've ever told me. And if I had? I wouldn't be sitting in this car with you right now."

I hated when she put her lawyer voice on. When she sounded calm, cool and reasonable, as if there was no possible way to argue with what she was saying. It made me feel dumb and incompetent and, more often than not, wrong.

Which she had just very succinctly pointed out.

I put my gloveless hands in front of the vent, trying to warm them. "You're going to think I'm nuts."

"Maybe," she said. "But I won't dismiss what you tell me, especially if it's somehow tied to Elizabeth."

I considered my words carefully before I spoke. "I don't trust Mike right now," I said slowly. She looked at me, her eyes questioning, and I continued. "The old guy in the hospital in Minneapolis? He told me something that makes me think it's possible Mike could've had a hand in Elizabeth's disappearance. Or is covering it up. Or something."

She digested this, blinking several times, then nodded. "Okay. Explain."

The car continued idling while I told her about my conversation with Rodney and why it had left me so unsettled. She listened closely, not interrupting, not calling me crazy.

"So it's not just Mike," she said when I was done. "Could've been anyone in the department. Bazer, anyone."

I nodded. "Yeah."

She leaned back in her seat, crossed her arms across her chest and stared straight ahead. Her mouth was set in a firm line. "You know, it's always bothered me."

"What has?"

"The idea that she would've gone with someone she didn't know," she said. "I told you that the first night."

She had. I remembered it clearly. We'd been sitting at the kitchen table, both of us numb, staring at the phone, waiting for it to ring, for someone to tell us that she'd been found.

"She wouldn't have gotten in someone's car she didn't know," she'd said, her

hands flat against the kitchen table, her fingers trembling. “Never. We’ve talked about it with her.”

“Safeside Super Chick,” I’d whispered.

Lauren nodded, a ghost of a smile on her face. It was a DVD that had come home from school about safety, about identifying who the ‘safe’ people in your life were. Parents. Relatives. Friends your parents told you were safe. The narrator was this ridiculously costumed super-hero girl and she was accompanied by hokey scenarios and horrific music. Elizabeth loved the DVD and even after we’d gone through it with her, she’d insisted on watching it over and over because she loved Super Chick. She’d gone as Super Chick for Halloween that year.

She knew who her safe people were.

“We’ve called everyone we know,” Lauren had said, her voice breaking.

“So it’s not someone we know. It can’t be.” I said it for me than for Lauren, trying to convince myself.

We’d continued staring at the phone, but it had never rang and now, nearly ten years later, I could remember that conversation like it had just happened.

“I’ve thought about it so many times,” Lauren said now. “How did we not hear something? Did someone she recognize pull up at the curb and pretend to ask directions? Did they use chloroform?” She shook her head, her entire body shuddering. “I’ve thought about it so much it makes me ill. But I’ve never thought she would’ve gone with a stranger or walk up to a car with someone in it that she didn’t know.”

“She would’ve come running in,” I said, gripping the wheel.

Lauren nodded. “To get one of us. To tell us someone needed directions or had a question or whatever. She would’ve. She wouldn’t have been careless.”

We’d had the same conversation multiple times over the years. I agreed with everything she said. It never made sense. All of our friends, acquaintances, they’d all been interviewed, they’d all been checked out. We’d listed everyone; no one had been excluded from the list. We’d put them all down on paper and turned them over. They’d all been cleared. Everyone we knew had been cleared. But Lauren and I had always believed we’d forgotten someone or overlooked someone.

And now I had to wonder if we’d overlooked the most obvious people on the planet.

“She would’ve known Mike,” Lauren said, her voice shaky.

“And Bazer.”

“And any CPD,” she said. “She probably would’ve trusted anyone who wore the same uniform as you. I think we probably told her they were safe.”

I nodded, thinking the same thing. I could almost recall saying the words that the police were always safe, but I couldn’t pull the details of the conversation. I was sure we’d said it, though. My stomach tightened at the thought.

“Wow,” Lauren said. “Okay.”

“We’re on our own,” I told her, closing my eyes briefly. “I don’t want to risk calling him. Maybe I’m overreacting and maybe it’ll be something else. But when Rodney told me about sending the picture, it felt like a few things didn’t fit.” The heat blew strong and I pulled my hand away from the vent. “I’ll figure it out when we find her, but I don’t trust anyone right now.”

“You don’t have any other contacts?” Lauren asked.

“I have about a thousand contacts,” I said. “But I don’t trust anyone right now.”

“You need to think,” she said. “We’re going to need some help. And there have to be people that you know that aren’t connected to Mike.”

She was right. I needed to think.

I put the car into reverse and backed out of the slot. “Okay. I’ll think.”

I drove to the edge of the lot, waiting for an opening in traffic so we could pull out.

“Joe?”

I looked over at her.

She laid her hand on my arm. “I believe you. And I don’t think your nuts.”

SEVEN

There were four Thompsons and two Thompkins listed for Castle Rock, Colorado.

As I drove south, Lauren worked on her phone, searching names and tapping into several databases that she had access to through her law firm. Twenty minutes later, just as we hit C-470 and headed east, she had six names and the addresses and was mapping them out.

C-470 was a wide open highway that cut through several cookie-cutter suburbs filled with big-box homes sitting amidst gently rolling hills. A massive shopping mall that looked very similar to a ski lodge rose up on our right, its lots nearing capacity with morning shoppers. We made the interchange to Interstate 25 and went south. The highway rose up and then descended slowly into a mammoth valley of pines and plains. The foothills of the Rockies were visible out to the west, beyond the scores of homes that looked like LEGOS in the distance. The road cut through the massive pines and Lauren gave me the exit to take and we descended down into the valley of Castle Rock.

The four Thompson homes were washouts. Two were elderly couples in tiny homes in what looked to be the older part of the town. Both seemed annoyed that we'd knocked on their door. Another was a young couple that had just gotten married and moved to Castle Rock. They were sympathetic, but offered no help. And the last was actually a doctor's office at the end of Main Street, a pediatric practice where Dr. Andrew Thompson was the practitioner. I'd gone in to talk to him, only to learn that he was divorced, childless and lived in another suburb to the south.

Two fruitless hours of looking and we were left with the Thompkins addresses.

We drove back over the highway and headed out into the valley of LEGOS. The first address was a sprawling home in a subdivision named Soaring Eagle Estates, homes perched on a hill with panoramic views of the Rockies. A small putting green snaked next to the long driveway, the home a rambling, newer structure that ran the length of the double-sized lot. Snow had melted in patches in the front yard, revealing a perfectly manicured, albeit dormant, front lawn.

Unfortunately, no one answered the door.

I'd walked around the back of the home, down a long slope, to find a covered in-ground pool, a patio the size of a small country, and a deck nearly the same size. The sliding doors both on the deck and below were covered by hanging blinds and I

couldn’t see much inside, except that no one seemed to be home.

I walked back to the front and climbed back into the car. “No one.”

Lauren sighed, her frustration and impatience showing. “Great.”

“We’ll check the other one,” I said. “Then come back if we need to and wait until someone shows up.”

She didn’t say anything, just played with a loose strand of hair.

The last Thompkins’ house on our list was about four minutes away, in a smaller subdivision that I missed the name of. A two-story house with light-green siding and a long front porch nestled at the end of a cul-de-sac. Two bikes lay on their sides in the half-melted snow on the lawn and the garage door was open, showing off a minivan and a Toyota Camry.

At least someone was home.

Lauren got out with me and she was first to the door. She pushed the doorbell and then, before anyone could answer, rapped on the door.

Footsteps padded down the hall and the door opened. A friendly-looking woman about our age smiled at us. “Hello.”

Lauren deferred to me. I took a deep breath. Our daughter could be there. Somewhere inside that house.

“My name is Joe Tyler,” I said. “This is Lauren. We’re trying to locate a girl named Morgan Thompkins. Does she by any chance live here?”

Her smiled stayed, but she shook her head. “Afraid not. Right last name, but no one with that first name.”

Lauren’s shoulders sagged and I felt the familiar stab of disappointment in my chest. The woman noticed our dismay, her expression worried as her gaze moved from me to Lauren.

“We haven’t lived here very long,” the woman said, as if this explained why Morgan didn’t live there. She was dressed in a thin, long-sleeved t-shirt and she wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the chill. “I’m afraid we don’t know many of our neighbors. My kids are still getting adjusted to the schools. Moved here from Wyoming.”

I returned her smile. “Ah, okay. Saw the bikes in the snow.”

A fake frown crossed her face. “Yes. I’ve been trying to get them to bring them

in for two days now, but they're so happy to see the sun, even in the cold. You don't see the sun as much in Wyoming."

"I'm sure," I said. "Can I ask how old your kids are? The reason I'm asking is that the Morgan Thompkins we're looking for is a teenager."

She nodded again, wanting to be helpful. "Oh. I have three. A nine year old, an eleven year old and a seventeen year old." She hesitated. "Do you live around here?"

"No," I said. "We're actually here trying to track down our own daughter. She was abducted from us about ten years ago and we think we're really close to finding her. We think Morgan Thompkins might be able to help us."

Her eyes widened in horror. "Oh wow," she said, shaking her head. "I'm so sorry. That is…I don't know what to say."

"It's okay," I said.

And it was. That was always the reaction. People immediately felt horrible and then immediately worried about their own kids. It made me feel guilty for worrying them. But I couldn't change it.

"Can you wait here for just a sec?" she asked. "Let me…I'll be right back."

I nodded and she closed the door, disappearing back into the home.

"This isn't it," Lauren said, annoyed. "Why are we waiting?"

"Because I think she's trying to help us," I said.

"How?"

"Let's just see."

She frowned again, shaking her head, and looked away from me.

A moment later, the door opened and the woman was back.

With her teenage daughter.

The girl looked timid, her eyes a bit downcast, her shoulders slumped. She wore an oversized-red sweatshirt and sweatpants so long that they covered her feet. Her long blond hair was pulled together in a messy pony tail and her hands were tucked inside the pocket of the sweatshirt.

"This is my daughter, Jenny," the woman said, her hands on her daughter's shoulders. "And I'm sorry, I'm Nadine."

Jenny managed a half-smile and I nodded.

“Jen, these people are looking for another girl with our last name,” Nadine said, then glanced at me. “Morgan, correct?”

I nodded again.

“I wondered if you might know her from school,” Nadine said, her gaze moving back to her daughter.

Jenny Thompkins studied me warily. “She’s in my math class. Our teacher gets us mixed up, like, every day.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?” The flicker of hope was back.

The girl nodded. “Which is, like, ridiculous because we look nothing alike. But I guess the last name thing is too hard for him.”

Nadine frowned at her daughter’s scornful tone but didn’t say anything.

“She’s a cheerleader,” Jenny said, rolling her eyes. “I am not.”

The way she said it told me she was glad about that.

“But you know her?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Sure. Everyone knows her. She’s popular. And she’s nice. For a cheerleader.”

“You know where she lives?”

“Yeah,” Jenny said. “Her parents are gone all the time so she’s always having parties at her house.” She glanced up quickly at her mother. “But I haven’t gone to any. She invited me to one but I didn’t go.”

Nadine patted her shoulder and nodded, letting her daughter know she wasn’t in any kind of trouble.

“She lives in The Bird,” Jenny said.

“The Bird?” Lauren asked.

“It’s like two minutes from here,” Jenny answered. “Her neighborhood is named after a bird so everyone calls it The Bird. Really big houses. Her dad is some Internet guy or something. Pretty rich.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Soaring Eagle? That’s her neighborhood?”

Jenny nodded. “Yep. That’s it.”

EIGHT

Ten minutes later, Lauren and I were back in front of the home with the putting green in Soaring Eagle. I'd knocked on the door again, got no answer, and went back to the car. I slipped back behind the wheel and shoved my hands in front of the heater.

"Now what?" Lauren asked from the passenger seat.

I turned the heat down to a lower setting. "We wait. Nothing else to do."

She sighed and leaned back in the seat. "Great."

I understood her frustration. Our daughter, the daughter we'd been missing, the daughter I'd been searching for for nearly ten years, was with this girl. Morgan. I wanted to rip the town apart, call out an APB, do anything I could to locate them. But I couldn't. The only thing either of could do was wait.

"If we leave, we might miss her," I said. "If we…"

She held up a hand. "I got it. I don't need an explanation."

I pushed the button on the side of the driver's seat and it complied, reclining slightly.

"Sorry," Lauren said after a few minutes. "Didn't mean to cut you off."

"It's okay."

"I'm just frustrated."

"I know." I was, too. But I was used to it.

"I know there's nothing else to do," she said. "I'm just worn down from this chase. Or whatever you want to call it."

"I know."

"Is this how it always is?" she asked. She didn't look at me, just played with her fingers, picking at her nails, rubbing her thumb over her knuckles.

I shrugged. "Sometimes. Sometimes it's easier."

"How is it ever easier?" she said, shaking her head. "I don't see that."

I stared at the house for a long moment.

“I was in Dallas, maybe two years ago,” I said. “I can’t even remember why I was there initially, but I ended up helping this woman find her son. He was a college kid. All she knew was that he’d had a fight with his girlfriend. Hadn’t checked in with his mom in a couple of days and she was freaked out. Understandably. I went and talked to the girlfriend. He wanted her to come home with him for the summer. She wasn’t sure her parents would be okay with that. It was a fight over nothing. But she knew when he got frustrated he’d go up to this lake in Oklahoma and camp by himself, just to get away. And they had a deal. If she ever really needed to get ahold of him, an emergency or something, she could text him with a code word and he’d call. She texted him. He called back in about thirty seconds. She told him his mother was worried, that I was looking for him. He felt terrible, apologized to her, to me and immediately called his mom.” I shrugged. “That was pretty damn easy.”

“They weren’t all like that,” she said. She didn’t pose this as a question, just stated it like something she knew to be true.

“No. But some were. You just never know.”

“I wish we had a secret code,” she said, her voice wistful.

I reached out and briefly touched her hand. “Me, too,” I said. “Me, too.”

She smiled at me, a sad smile that tore at my heart. As much as I wanted to find Elizabeth for me, I wanted to find her for Lauren, too. For both of us. I glanced out the front window, my eyes scanning the road. Every car that passed us on the street gave me a little twinge, wondering if it was the one that might be carrying Elizabeth. But each one continued by, either headed toward another gigantic house or out of the subdivision.

“Was that night in San Diego weird for you?” Lauren asked, shifting in her seat.

“Which night?”

“Me and you,” she said. “The hotel.”

I’d been in San Diego two weeks prior, helping out an old friend, when I’d gotten the photo of Elizabeth that set this entire search in motion. In the middle of helping my friend, Lauren and I spent the night together in the hotel where I was staying. It was the first time we’d been together since the divorce. And there hadn’t been time to discuss it.

“Weird?” I asked, then shook my head. “No. It was the opposite of that.”

“Opposite?”

“Familiar,” I said. “Comfortable. Right. I don’t know how to explain it.” I

paused. “We got divorced because we went different ways. Not because we didn’t love each other. At least, that’s how I’ve always looked at it.”

She nodded in agreement. “Me, too. And I’m not trying to rehash any of the old stuff. We’ve done that.” A faint smile drifted on to her face. “And it felt the same way for me. Familiar. In a good way. I needed it.”

I smiled back, unsure what else to say. At that moment, I’d needed it, too. Needed to be comforted and loved and with her. Not someone random, but her.

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like if we were still together?” she asked. “Like, if we’d gotten through her disappearance somehow and managed to stay together?”

“Yeah. Sure. I’ve thought about it. Probably wished for it.” I traced my finger along the steering wheel. “My anger hasn’t always been about Elizabeth being taken. It was also about what her being gone did to you and me. Whoever took our daughter also took our marriage.”

Her lips pursed. “Yeah. Yeah.”

“I will always be angry about that,” I said. “No one can give us that back, you know?”

Lauren started to say something, then stopped. Then she turned to me. “You think we’d have had another child?”

My smile was genuine. Instantaneous. “Yeah. Without a doubt. We said we always wanted two. And that we wanted some space in between them, to enjoy them. So, yeah. I think so.”

The smile found her face again. “Yeah.” She started to say something else, but her eyes shifted past me and the smile disappeared. “Car. In the driveway.”

I turned to see a white Ford Explorer stop just short of the garage door. I could see a driver.

And no one else.

I pushed my door open, the warm air of the car interior replaced by a cold, sharp wind. I stepped onto the sidewalk and Lauren was right behind me.

The girl wore black yoga pants and a hot-pink thermal vest over a long-sleeve black T-shirt. Her long black hair was expertly woven into a tight French braid and adorned with a thick hot-pink headband. She scurried around the front end of the Explorer, heading to the front door of the house. She froze when she saw us.

I held up a hand. “Hi. Are you Morgan?”

Her bright green eyes regarded us. “Who are you?”

“I’m Joe,” I said. “This is Lauren. Are you Morgan?”

“Do I know you?” she asked, taking another step toward the front door.

“No. But you know our daughter. Elizabeth. Or Ellie. Corzine.”

She looked from me to Lauren, then back to me, her hands fidgeting inside the pockets of her vest. “Who?”

“Ellie Corzine,” I said. “I think you picked her up at a hotel earlier this morning?”

Her already pink cheeks flushed brighter. “You’re her parents?” Her tone was derisive. “From Minnesota?”

I knew she didn’t believe us. If she’d been friends with Elizabeth back in Minnesota, she would have met the Corzines. Known them. We were complete strangers to this girl.

“No,” Lauren said slowly, her voice shaking. “We’re her real parents. Who she was taken from.”

The color drained out of her face. “Holy shit.” Just as quickly, a flush of color returned to her cheeks. “I mean, sorry.”

I looked at the car again. “She’s not with you?”

“I, uh…I…”

“Morgan,” I said, sharply. “Morgan Thompkins. I think you were friends with her back in Minnesota. She called you. She ran away because she found out she was adopted. Only guess what? She wasn’t. She was taken from us. And she was with you this morning, I’m pretty sure of it.” I paused. “Please. I’m begging you. We’ve been looking for her for years. And we came here from Minnesota. We need to find her. Where is she?”

She pulled a phone from her pocket, punched a number and held it to her ear.

“Morgan?” I asked again. “Where is she?”

She held up a finger.

I waited.

“Shit,” she muttered under her breath. She didn’t apologize this time.

“What?” I asked.

“She’s at the airport,” Morgan said.

NINE

“She called me three days ago,” Morgan said. “Asked if I could meet her and loan her some money.”

We were inside Morgan’s house. She’d continued to try and call Elizabeth, but even I knew it was useless. Bryce had said she’d turned off her phone. My gut was churning more than it ever had. I couldn’t rationalize how we could be so close, yet so far away. It wasn’t fair.

“I moved here two years ago,” Morgan said, shedding the vest and kicking off her shoes, still clutching her phone. “We went to the same school in Minnesota. We were best friends. But my dad got some stupid job here and we had to move.”

She moved out of the entryway toward the kitchen.

“We talk every week,” she continued. “We’re still best friends. Or just like best friends. Or whatever. We text. We email. Facebook. But we talk every Sunday night on the phone for sure. Two years, we haven’t missed a Sunday night.”

I nodded.

“So it was weird to see her number pop up on a non-Sunday,” Morgan said. “Like, I knew something was wrong. I just knew. And she told me how she found a paper or something that said she was adopted.”

“How was she?” Lauren asked. “I mean, how did she feel about that?”

“She was confused,” Morgan said, setting the phone down on a massive stone island in the middle of the kitchen. “And hurt. And pissed. I tried to talk her down, get her to chill, but she was beyond pissed. She felt like her whole life was a lie.”

“Had she ever said anything before about being adopted?” I asked.

Morgan shook her head, the braid swinging back and forth. “Nope. But she always was kinda weird about when she was a kid.”

“What do you mean?” I wanted to sit down and pore over every detail she could give me. It was irrational and there wasn’t time for that but it didn’t keep me from wanting it.

Morgan glanced at her phone, frowned. “Like, she couldn’t remember a lot. And she didn’t tell people that because she couldn’t figure out why.”

Lauren and I exchanged glances. I'd often daydreamed that Elizabeth was alive and I'd wondered what she'd remember. If she would remember being taken. Or Coronado. Or us. Lauren had always maintained that if she was alive and the abduction wasn't violent, she probably had blocked out a lot of the details. She'd done hours of reading and research in the days and weeks following her disappearance, digging into the psychology of kidnapped children. Many missing kids blocked out the traumatic details of suddenly losing one life and being thrust into another. They would accept a fictional history rather than deal with the reality of having been ripped from loved ones.

"Why did she come here?" I asked. "To Denver. I mean, if she wasn't planning on staying?"

Morgan raised her eyebrows at me like the answer was simple. "Because of me."

"You."

"She knew she could trust me," she said. "She knew I'd help her."

I leaned against the breakfast bar. "What did she need?"

"Money," she said. "A new phone. A ride away from her dork of a boyfriend."

I felt a little pang of sympathy for Bryce, the slighted boyfriend, but quickly put it aside. "And you took her to the airport?"

She glanced down at her phone again. "Yeah. But she won't answer."

"The new phone?" I asked. "The one you gave her?"

She nodded.

"Why the airport?" I asked. "Where is she going?"

"She's trying to figure out what happened," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Small details," she said. "Small details are coming back. Or she's seeing them. When she found the paper that said she was adopted, I think it freaked her out. But she couldn't sleep. For days. And she said she kept seeing things."

"Like?" Lauren asked.

"The beach," she said. "Palm trees. Ocean."

My pulse quickened. "Coronado."

“What?”

“Coronado,” I repeated. “Where she lived. Where we lived.”

Morgan rubbed her hands together. “I don’t know. But she decided she wanted to go see if she could see anything else that might help her remember.”

“So she’s going to San Diego?” I asked, the hope sparking again.

“No,” Morgan said, extinguishing the spark. “Los Angeles.”

“Why L.A.?”

Morgan shrugged. “I don’t know. She felt like she needed to go somewhere. We looked at a map. It seemed to make sense.”

“Sending a kid to L.A. by herself made sense?” I asked, incensed. “Really?”

Lauren put a hand on my arm, but I shook it off.

“Are you serious?” I said. I didn’t care that Morgan was just a kid herself as I unleashed all of my anger and frustration. “She’s never been there before. She’s going there alone. And you think it makes sense to let her go? What the hell kind of friend are you?”

Morgan’s shoulders slumped and her eyes drifted to the floor. I didn’t care if she felt bad. I did care that she was apparently stupid.

“Joe,” Lauren said, her voice sharp as her nails dug into my arm.

I shrugged her off.

“So you bought her a ticket?” Lauren asked Morgan. “Is that why she came to you?”

“I gave her money for a ticket,” Morgan said, still staring at the floor. “And some extra because she’s almost out. For hotel or whatever. She’s supposed to call me when she gets to L.A. so that I know…”

“What time’s the flight?” I interrupted. “And what airline?”

Morgan hesitated.

“What time?” I yelled.

She winced, then glanced at the clock on the microwave. “She was looking at one that left at one-thirty. I don’t know the airline.”

I looked at Lauren. “Stay here with her. Get as much info as you can. Keep calling the number. Call her parents. But stay with her and don’t let her out of your sight.” I jogged toward the front door.

“Where are you going?” Lauren yelled.

“Airport,” I said, and, before she could stop me, I opened the door and ran into the cold, cold wind.

TEN

Denver International Airport was located east of the city, out on the plains before you hit the Kansas border. I'd driven to the airport once before—I couldn't recall why—but as I sped down the roads that left the highway and pointed me toward the airport, I recognized the giant, white, tent-like structure as it grew larger.

I flew past the rental car center and, unsure of which airline she might be trying to get on, chose the east terminal because it looked like I could get there quickest. I momentarily flirted with the idea of pulling into the parking garage, then changed my mind. If I was able to stop her, there was going to be all kinds of chaos and the least of my worries would be a rental car parked in a pick-up zone.

I found an open spot in the pick-up area and slid in behind a gray SUV. I got out and without looking around, hustled into the airport. No one stopped me. I found a screen listing the departing flights and scanned it quickly. I spotted one flight leaving for Los Angeles at one-thirty.

Which was in exactly nine minutes.

I had to make a decision. Find the airline counter and try to get them to stop the flight or try to get to the gate myself.

I took the latter.

I found a kiosk for the nearest airline and did a quick search of flights for the day. I bought the cheapest I could find—one bound for Topeka, Kansas. I had no intention of going to Topeka, but the boarding pass would get me to the gate.

I went down the escalator, two steps at a time and cut under the empty security line ropes. The stations were nearly deserted at mid-day and I quickly had my shoes and jacket off and was through the x-rays in less than three minutes.

I checked my watch.

I had four minutes.

I jammed my feet into my shoes, grabbed my jacket and sprinted toward the trains to the gates. I slipped into one just as it closed and grabbed the metal pole to keep my balance as it took off.

It couldn't go fast enough.

The train car pulled to a stop at the terminal and I was yanking on the doors

before they finally slid open. I sprinted up the stairs, saw the directions to the gates and ran harder toward the gate the plane was leaving from. I was at Gate 20.

She was at 46.

The numbers escalated as I ran.

26.

32.

40.

And finally 46.

I stood there for a moment, my chest heaving. The seats in the gate area were empty.

And the door to the jetway was closed.

The woman dressed in the navy and white uniform of the airline punched a numerical code in the door and walked toward the podium.

“Wait,” I said, waving at her. “Wait.”

She looked at me, but kept walking toward the podium.

“Wait!” I yelled.

“Were you scheduled to be on this flight, sir?” she asked, glancing at me as she stepped behind the counter.

“Yes,” I said, trying to catch my breath. I glanced out the window. The plane was still at the end of the jetway. “I mean, no.”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Sir?”

“My daughter,” I said. “She’s on that plane. She can’t go. It can’t go.”

“Sir, if she’s ticketed…”

“Open the door. Call them. You need to stop it.”

“Sir, I can’t…”

“Call them!” I yelled. “She can’t go!”

She hesitated, then looked at her screen. “What is her last name?”

“Tyler,” I said, then shut my eyes. “No. Sorry. Corzine. It’s Corzine.”

She glanced at me again. “She’s your daughter?”

“It’s Ellie Corzine,” I said, looking at the window again.

The plane was still there.

The woman stared at her monitor. “Do you have I.D.?”

I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket and flipped it open. “My name is Joe Tyler.”

“But you told me your daughter’s name is Corzine,” she said.

“I can’t explain,” I said. “Just stop the plane.”

She stared at me for a long moment, then picked up the phone next to her computer.

I turned again to the window.

It was still there.

I started to relax.

“This is Elaine down at B 46,” the woman said into the phone. “I need some help down here with a guest.”

I swiveled back to her. “Call the plane. Please.”

“Yes,” she said, averting her eyes. “A guest here at the podium.”

I sprinted over to the door to the jetway and yanked on it.

It wouldn’t budge.

I pounded on the door.

I pushed all of the numbers on the keypad.

I turned back to Elaine, who had stepped out from behind the podium, still on the phone, her eyes widened in alarm.

“Open the fucking door!” I screamed at her. “Right fucking now!”

People were coming closer to the podium now, watching me, approaching cautiously. I knew what it looked like. I knew what happened in airports if you made a disturbance.

But I didn’t care.

“Open it!” I screamed again.

Elaine was talking urgently into the phone.

Jet engines whirred behind me.

I spun around.

The plane was pulling away from the jetway.

I rushed back to the podium.

Elaine backed away from me. “Sir, please. Calm…”

“Call them,” I said. “Call them right now and tell them to stop.”

“Sir, I cannot…”

I reached and snatched the phone from her. I put it to my ear, but heard nothing.

I pushed her out of the way and looked at the phone console and started hitting random buttons.

“Hey, buddy,” a guy said from my left. “You can’t just go back there. You need to calm down.” He put his hand on my arm. “Put the phone down and…”

I shoved him hard with the arm he had ahold of. He toppled over backward into the group of people standing behind him.

I looked at Elaine, tears in my eyes. “Please. Call them back. It’s my daughter. Please.”

She started to say something, then her eyes swept past me and relief filled her face.

And I knew what was coming.

“Step away from the counter,” a voice commanded.

I turned around.

There were four police officers, all with their weapons drawn, pointed squarely at me.

“Stop the plane,” I said. “Please.”

“Put your hands on your head,” the one in the middle said. “Now.”

“Stop it,” I said. “Please. Don’t let her go.”

“Hands on your head,” the officer repeated. “Now.”

I looked around. There were now hundreds of people gathered around, watching.

I dropped the phone and put my hands on my head.

“Turn around and back up toward my voice,” the officer said. “Slowly.”

I did as he said and watched as several other officers arrived, running at us.

Hands grabbed at me from behind and I was shoved to the ground, a knee in the small of my back, the hands patting me down.

I twisted my head toward the window.

The plane was already gone.

ELEVEN

“I told you to stay with that Morgan girl,” I said.

“Well, I didn’t know you were going to shut down a fucking airport,” Lauren said, shaking her head and looking away from me.

We were in a holding area somewhere in the airport. A small, square windowless room with gray walls. A single table and several chairs.

I rubbed at my wrists, the bright red lines from the handcuffs beginning to fade. “Either did I.”

The officers had pulled me up from the ground and marched me quickly out of the terminal. I’d kept my mouth shut. The plane was gone. There was nothing to fight at that point. They’d brought me to the holding area and questioned me. I’d told them my daughter was on the plane and she didn’t have my permission to travel. They were more concerned with the fact that I’d bought a ticket not thirty minutes earlier for a trip I didn’t plan to take and then proceeded to disrupt the entire gate area while threatening a gate agent.

My story didn’t make sense to them. My daughter had a different last name. With a Minnesota address. I resided in California. And we were in Colorado. Was this a custody battle? Some sort of lover’s quarrel? Did I plan to harm her? Did I plan to harm the plane? The passengers?

I finally shut up and said I wanted my lawyer. They assured me that would just make it worse. I assured them no one could make my life worse at that moment and I wanted my lawyer. After thirty minutes of silence, I was allowed to call my lawyer.

Lauren showed up an hour later.

And now we were in the holding area and she looked like she wanted to take my head off.

“So fucking stupid, Joe,” she said.

“I know.”

“Then why’d you do it?”

“Because she was on the plane.”

She stared at me, dead-eyed. “And acting like a maniac was going to help?”

“The door was closed,” I said. “I asked the gate agent to stop it.”

“Jesus Christ,” she said, sinking into the chair across from me. “You sound like those idiots in the security line who haven’t traveled since 9/11. You know what airports are like. You can’t go off half-cocked. You *know* that.”

I stared down at the table. “I asked her to stop it. Nicely.”

“Yeah and then you apparently started trying to rip the door down and knocking people over on their asses,” she said. “Well done.”

I rubbed at my wrists some more, but didn’t say anything. She was right, of course. I didn’t have any good answers and any slim chance I’d had of stopping the plane had disappeared the moment I started screaming and banging on that door. But I knew what was going to happen if they didn’t stop the plane.

I’d lose Elizabeth again.

And, like always, nothing else mattered.

Not even making it worse.

“So now what?” I asked.

Lauren took a deep breath and drummed her fingers on the table. “Now, we need to wait and see what they come back with. They’re running background on you. That should be okay. And you need to make a decision.”

“A decision?”

“Do you want to involve them?” she asked. “Do you want to try to bring in federal authorities right now? I honestly don’t know whether they’ll give a crap at this point, given your performance out there. These guys are trained to worry about air travel and air travel only. So I’m not sure they’ll care. But if you want to bring in help, this is the time to speak up. Probably take them some time to get someone here, but we might be able to convince them that you aren’t just some raving lunatic and there was some legitimacy to what you did.”

I folded my arms across my chest. It had been almost three hours since the plane had left. It would take some time to get any federal agent out there to help us, if they were inclined to do so.

Elizabeth was probably already on the ground. Somewhere in Los Angeles. Alone.

And bringing in feds right at that moment might also mean involving my old

colleagues in Coronado. I wasn't ready to do that.

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

If she disagreed, she didn't show it. "Okay. Then I'm going to go out there, tell them you're extremely sorry, that you got carried away and hope they just want to fine you some ridiculous amount of money rather than lock you up."

I nodded and watched her leave.

I wanted to pace, to burn off all of the nervous energy raging in my body, but I knew better than to get up and start moving. Yeah, the door was locked, but I knew that a windowless room didn't mean that I wasn't being watched. If I started moving around, they'd get anxious. I'd already done enough to get their attention, so I stayed in my seat.

I laid my hands flat on the table and stared at the faint red circles around my wrists. I didn't think Lauren was right. I didn't think that anything I did would've gotten them to stop the plane. I could've been calm and collected and polite and the gate agent still would've read from the script that the door had been closed and there was nothing she could do. But at least then I wouldn't have lost more time and turned the entire afternoon into a gigantic mess.

I wasn't used to getting so close, though. I'd spent so many years trying to find Elizabeth, then failing, that the urgency had been muted. I'd worked with a calm intensity, following leads until they turned dead, then walked away from them, looking for the next. I preached to families to remain reasonable, sensible, level-headed, that not doing so could result in them missing something.

But I'd finally gotten close to Elizabeth and I'd imploded. I'd ignored my own advice. I was now stuck in a mess where I had only myself to blame. My daughter was somewhere in California and I was no closer to reuniting with her.

The door clicked opened and Lauren stepped back into the room. She came to the table and leaned down, exhaling, resting her hands on the table.

"What?" I asked.

Her eyes were tired. "Good news is they aren't going to hold you," she said. She rubbed her temples. "We'll probably be out of here in about another hour after they do the paperwork. They are going to issue you a citation for interfering with airline personnel and there's going to be a hefty fine. Probably around five thousand bucks." She paused. "You'll have to appear back here in federal court, but they'll basically admonish you, take your money and send you on your way."

“Okay,” I said. “I can handle that. What’s the bad news?”

She bit her lip for a moment, then shook her head.

“What?” I asked.

“You can’t go near an airport or get on a plane or buy a ticket for a month,” she said, leveling her eyes with mine. “You’re on the no-fly list for the next thirty days.”

TWELVE

“You aren’t speaking with my daughter,” Lawrence Thompkins said, standing just outside of his home.

After a mountain of paperwork and a few more questions, I was finally set free at the airport. We’d gone back to Castle Rock to try to speak with Morgan Thompkins again, but her father had apparently gotten wind of our earlier visit and was throwing up a roadblock.

He was tall and skinny, dressed in gray slacks and a white button down with a tie loosened at his neck. His hair, more salt than pepper, was thinning and he had the same green eyes as his daughter.

“I have no idea who you are,” he said. He stood in the doorway, blocking our view of the inside of the house. “And I’ve told Morgan to remain inside,” he said. “She informed me of your earlier visit.”

“Then you know we’re looking for our daughter,” Lauren said.

“I don’t know anything,” he said, his eyes narrowed. “The only thing I know is that two strangers showed up unannounced at my house and interrogated my kid.”

“We didn’t interrogate her,” I said.

Lauren shot me a look. She’d instructed me to keep my mouth shut under all circumstances.

She should’ve known better.

“Call it what you want, but you aren’t talking to her again.” He crossed his arms and glared at me. “She’s a minor. You didn’t have my permission to speak to her and you won’t receive it now.”

“She’s a friend of our daughter’s,” Lauren said. “She saw her this morning and loaned her money.”

“I don’t care,” Thompkins said. “I’m asking you to leave now.”

“You have no interest in helping us find our daughter?” Lauren asked.

“I don’t know anything about you or your daughter,” he replied. “The only thing I have an interest in is having you leave.”

“Would you prefer I call the police and ask them to come over so I can let them

know your daughter assisted our missing child? Who, by the way, is also a minor?” Lauren said.

“I don’t care who you call,” he said, not budging. “But you aren’t talking to my daughter and I’m asking you to leave. Now.”

Lauren looked about ready to explode.

A flurry of movement behind Thompkins caught my eye. A curtain in the front window.

Morgan.

I watched her for a moment, then nodded.

Neither Lawrence Thompkins nor Lauren saw her, too intent on staring each other down.

I touched her elbow. “Come on.”

She jerked her arm away from me, stared at Thompkins for a long moment, then turned and headed for the car.

He stood in the doorway, still watching us as we got in the car.

“What an asshole,” Lauren barked, glaring at him through the window.

I shoved the key in the ignition and turned over the engine. “And I thought I was the one who lost my temper.”

She made a hissing sound. “Whatever.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it?” she said, whipping her head in my direction. “Don’t worry about it? Seriously? He won’t let us talk to the one person who we know can communicate with our daughter.”

“We don’t need him to communicate with her,” I said, pulling away from the curb.

Thompkins stood there and watched us go. He was still in my rearview mirror as I turned the corner and headed out of the neighborhood.

“What do you mean we don’t need him?” Lauren asked.

“We don’t need him.”

“What are you talking about, Joe?” Her voice was impatient.

“Morgan’s going to call us,” I said.

“She’s what?”

“She’s going to call us,” I repeated. “She was in the window while you were baring your teeth at her father. She’s going to call us in half an hour.”

THIRTEEN

We were headed west on I-70, just up into the foothills, outside of a city called Genessee. Lauren was getting impatient.

She checked her phone. “It’s been thirty minutes.”

“She’ll call.”

“Maybe her father took her phone away.”

“She said she’d call,” I repeated.

Lauren was doubtful. “Maybe you misunderstood.”

I hadn’t misunderstood. She’d held the phone up in the window. Pointed at it, then at me. Then held up three fingers and a fist. Then disappeared.

I hadn’t misunderstood.

“She’ll call,” I said.

She made a dismissive sound and shifted in the seat.

“What did you talk about with her after I left?” I asked.

Lauren shrugged. “Nothing special. She told me a little about her time with Elizabeth in Minnesota. But she was guarded. She didn’t give up too much.”

“Anything else about L.A.?”

“Just that Elizabeth is supposed to call her at some point when she gets there,” she said. “To let her know she’s okay.”

“Did you get the phone number? Of the cell she has?”

Lauren nodded. “Yeah, but Morgan was adamant that Elizabeth wouldn’t answer. She didn’t discourage me from calling but she was certain that Elizabeth would only answer if the number was Morgan’s.”

The highway twisted as we climbed higher, jagged rock formations jutting out over the highway before giving way to narrow valleys of massive pine trees.

“You should call the rental company,” I said. “Let them know we’re keeping the car for longer and that it will be dropped elsewhere.”

“I’m not getting on this phone until that kid calls us,” Lauren said.

“You don’t have call waiting on your cell?”

“I don’t want to miss the call,” she said. “It can wait.” She gestured at the windshield. “Not like we aren’t going to be driving for the next two days since we can’t even look at an airport.”

“You could’ve flown,” I said. “I’m the one that can’t.”

She rolled her eyes and leaned against the door. “Right. Sure. Just let you drive all the way to California by yourself.”

“I’ve driven further.”

“Oh, yes,” she snapped. “All of your mysterious travels. I’m sure you’ve like driven across the Sahara or something, right? To save some kid in peril? Or was it in Siberia?”

I didn’t say anything, just focused on the road.

After ten minutes, Lauren said, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Long day.”

She reached out, touching her hand to my forearm. “You didn’t deserve that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“I just want to find her, Joe,” she said. “I just want to hug her and say hi and tell her I missed her.” Her voice caught and I knew she was fighting back tears.

“Me, too.”

“I feel like I’m riding your coattails,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

She stretched her legs out in front of her. “All this time, you’ve been chasing. Devoted your life to finding her. I grieved, then basically gave up.” She paused. “Maybe not gave up, but I let it go. I didn’t chase. You did. In some ways, I feel like I don’t deserve to be here with you.”

“Stop.” She was being ridiculous. “You’re her mother.”

“But I gave up,” she said. “I let her go. Let you go. You were the one who pursued, the one who actually thought we’d get to this moment.” She shook her head.

“I didn’t. I just didn’t.”

I wasn’t sure what she wanted me to say. We’d long ago come to terms that we’d needed to handle Elizabeth’s disappearance in different ways. It had broken our marriage, but we had made peace with the idea that we needed to deal with it differently. But I didn’t begrudge Lauren that at all. And I certainly didn’t begrudge the fact that she was with me. I was glad. I’d been alone for a long time.

I needed her.

Before I could say anything, Lauren’s phone chimed and she answered it before the chime finished playing. “Morgan. I’m putting you on speaker.” She touched the screen and then held it between us. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, I can hear you,” Morgan said. “I don’t have much time, though.”

“Why not?” Lauren asked.

“My dad’s in the shower,” she said. “He won’t be long and he hasn’t let me out of his sight. I’m sorry about how he acted earlier. He’s just like that.”

I didn’t care what her father was like. “Have you heard from Elizabeth?”

“No,” she said. “That’s why I’m late calling. I was hoping I’d hear from her. But she hasn’t called. I’ve tried her a couple of times, but she hasn’t answered.”

I shifted lanes to let a fast-moving semi-truck pass.

“She should’ve been down awhile ago if the flight left at one thirty,” she said, concerned. “I made her promise to call me. She always keeps her promises.”

Lauren glanced at me, her eyebrows furrowed with worry.

“Okay,” I said. “We’re in the car and we’ll be driving for awhile.”

“Why aren’t you flying to California?”

“Long story,” I said. “But we’re going to be driving. Lauren said she gave you both of our numbers. You have them both, yes?”

“Uh huh.”

“Call us as soon as you hear from her,” I said. “If we need to call you, Lauren will text you first. If you can’t call back right away, that’s okay. But let us know. Text her back.”

“Alright. My dad goes to bed early so nighttime won’t be a problem.”

“And we don’t want to get you in trouble, Morgan,” I said. “We really don’t. But we appreciate your help.”

The line buzzed for a moment.

“She’d do the same for me,” Morgan finally said. “She’s always been a good friend to me. She’d help me if I needed help.” She paused. “Is she gonna be okay?”

“She’ll be okay,” I said. She had to be. We were so close. “Just call us when you hear from her.”

She said goodbye and hung up.

We drove for a few minutes, the snow packs growing heavier on the mountainsides as we entered ski country. The sun had shifted low in the western sky, its intensity muted by a thin blanket of clouds.

“What happens if she doesn’t call Morgan?” Lauren asked.

I didn’t answer because I wasn’t sure.

FOURTEEN

We were in Utah and my eyes were getting heavy. The taillights of the cars in front of us glowed a blurry red.

“Lauren,” I said. “Hey.”

She started in the passenger seat and jerked herself up. “What?”

“I gotta pull over and rest for a bit,” I said. “It’s after midnight and I’m tired.”

“I can drive,” she said, trying to straighten herself in her seat.

“You’ve been out cold for an hour,” I said. “We’re both wiped. I’m gonna find a motel. We both need to rest.”

She started to protest but I stopped her. “Just for a little bit. Then we’ll jump back in the car.”

She didn’t argue, just nodded, yawning. “Phone didn’t ring?” she asked, grabbing it from the middle console.

I shook my head. “I texted Morgan half an hour ago. She still hadn’t heard anything.”

My gut tightened even as I said the words. I could come up with several plausible excuses as to why she hadn’t called—lost her phone, delayed flight, just forgot—but none of them felt right. Judging by Lauren’s silence, I wasn’t alone in my thinking that something was wrong.

“Should be something here in just a minute,” I said, scanning the road in front of us. “I just need a couple hours. And so do you.”

She nodded silently.

The next exit lit up the darkness like a Christmas tree, several hotels, gas stations and fast-food restaurants rising up out of the night. I pulled into the first chain motel, parked the car and ten minutes later we were in a small but clean motel room.

I dropped on to the bed closest to the window, flat on my back. Lauren went to the bathroom and I could hear the water running. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to sleep because I was worried that we hadn’t heard anything, but I knew I needed the rest. Neither of us would be any good if we were exhausted, and we still had a lot of driving in front of us.

The water shut off and the bathroom door opened. Lauren's hair was pulled back and her face freshly washed. She shed her coat and sat down on the edge of the other bed. She folded her hands in her lap and looked around the room.

"What?" I asked.

"What what?" she said.

"What's wrong?"

She rubbed her eyes. "Just worried."

"Me, too. But nothing we can do. We need sleep and then we'll get back on the road."

She nodded, staring at her hands. Then she turned to me. "I don't wanna sleep by myself."

I scooted over on the bed and motioned for her to come over. She sank down on the bed and curled up against me, my arm beneath her and her head on my shoulder. It wasn't strange or awkward or uncomfortable.

It was familiar.

She put her hand on my chest. "I hope she's okay."

I pulled her tighter to me. "Me, too."

"I don't think I can lose her again, Joe."

I reached up and flipped off the light switch, the darkness drifting over us like a blanket.

I knew she wanted to hear something comforting from me, something that would put her mind at ease, something that would assure her that Elizabeth was, indeed, okay. She wanted to be able to close her eyes and know that she could wake up with the knowledge that our daughter was safe, wherever she was.

But I didn't have that to offer. It wasn't a promise I could make. There wasn't anything I could say.

So instead, we laid there quietly, until we both drifted off to sleep.

FIFTEEN

“Joe,” a voice said. “Joe. Wake up.”

I forced my eyes open. The room was still dark, but dim streaks of daylight fought their way into the room around the curtains at the window.

“You need to see this,” Lauren said.

Her hair was brushed and it looked like she’d been awake for a little bit. She sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes glued to the TV.

I pushed myself up on my elbows. “Huh?”

She pointed the remote at the TV. “Listen.”

It was a cable newscast.

“…the retired Minneapolis detective worked countless missing persons cases during his time with the department and even now, he’s still having some success,” the reporter said.

A picture of Rodney flashed on the screen.

And then he was talking.

He rambled for a moment about his years in law enforcement and then said, “The itch to find, to help, doesn’t go away. Two days ago, I learned that a girl I’ve been interested in for years was right here in Minnesota. Elizabeth Tyler. Her father Joe was here looking for her and it looks like he may have located her.”

I sat up straighter as the reporter cut to some old film showing Rodney at a desk, telling viewers about his career. The reporter read off several accolades that Rodney had accumulated over the years, then cut back to him in the present again.

“You can’t give up hope on anyone,” he said. “I never gave up on Elizabeth Tyler and neither did her father. She’s out there somewhere and if he hasn’t located her yet, hopefully someone might see this and help us out.”

The reporter than read off a few standard facts related to Elizabeth’s disappearance. The date. The place. The ensuing search. The lack of hope.

And then a picture of Elizabeth from right around the time she was abducted. Her third grade picture. Smiling. Happy.

That had to have been taken from her case file.

“Shit,” I said. “Shit.”

Lauren looked at me. “What? Isn’t this good? Maybe someone will see her. It’s cable. It’s national. I don’t know how he got this on TV, but…”

I sprang from the bed. I’d fallen asleep fully clothed. “We need to go. Now.”

“Okay,” she said, frowning at me. “But why is this bad? How can this not help?”

I grabbed the car keys from the top of the dresser. “That picture is from her case file,” I said. “We gave it to them during the initial investigation.”

“I know,” Lauren said. “I remember.”

“Which means they talked to Coronado PD,” I said. “Probably Bazer and probably Mike.”

Recognition flashed through her eyes.

“So if I’m right about someone there having something to do with her abduction,” I said, then stopped and took a deep breath. “If I’m right, they now know I’m close to finding her. And they won’t want that.”

Lauren stared at the TV, processing what I’d said. She shut it off with the remote. “Why would he go talk to a reporter then?”

“He doesn’t know about that connection,” I said. “Probably thinks he’s helping by getting the word out about her, by getting her name and picture out there.”

I shoved my wallet back in my pocket and pulled on my jacket. “But all he really did was just put a bullseye on all of us.”

SIXTEEN

We hit the highway with no food, no coffee and a whole lot of anxiety.

The red sand of the Utah desert was nearly pink in the early morning sunlight. With few other cars on the road at that early hour, I wasn't sure I'd ever felt more alone and isolated amidst the rocky outcroppings and wide stretches of desert as we drove.

I replayed my last conversation with Rodney over in my head, getting the details right. I'd definitely told him about the Corzines, the family that had adopted Elizabeth. I'd told him about her running away. But I hadn't told him where we were headed because we hadn't known at that point. We hadn't gotten the information about Denver until after I'd left his hospital room. So he wouldn't have known where we'd headed off to or where Elizabeth actually was.

But I'd given him the Corzines name and the fact that she was on the run.

That would be a pretty huge first step for anyone that wanted to find her.

Or me.

Interview the Corzines. Get the boyfriend's name. Talk to his family. Maybe talk to him if he was already back in Minnesota. Learn about Denver.

It was a fairly easy trail to follow.

And not one that would take much time if someone was serious about following it.

"You're flying," Lauren said, snapping me out of my reverie. "Limit is seventy-five. You're doing almost ninety."

I eased my foot off the pedal. "Sorry."

"It's okay," she said. "Just didn't want to get stopped."

"Yeah."

"You're worried," she said.

I nodded.

"Do I want to ask why?"

I shook my head.

“Great.”

“Nothing we can control at this point,” I said. “We can only do what we can do.”

“That’s encouraging.”

“Well, it’s the truth,” I said. “Yeah, I’m worried. But I don’t know if it’s legitimate or not. The only thing we can do right this second is keep driving until we get to California.”

“And then?”

“And then I’m not sure.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she said, sarcasm flavoring her voice.

“It’s not. But it’s all we have.”

She opened her mouth to say something else, but her phone rang and she grabbed it from the console. “It’s Morgan.” She tapped the screen twice. “Hi, Morgan.”

“Hi,” her voice said from the speaker. “She called.”

My fingers wrapped tighter around the wheel.

“When?” Lauren said.

“Like twenty minutes ago.”

“Why not yesterday?” I asked. “Like she promised.”

Morgan didn’t answer right away. “Uh, well. It went kinda bad.”

I took a deep breath, trying to prepare myself. “Bad how?”

“When she got off the plane in L.A., she went to use the bathroom,” Morgan said, her voice low. “And her purse was stolen.”

Lauren’s shoulders sagged.

“She hung it on the stall door. Someone reached over and grabbed it. By the time she got out of the stall, the bathroom was empty and when she went outside, she didn’t see anyone with it. No one running or anything.”

“Everything was in there?” I asked.

“She has a backpack with clothes,” Morgan said. “But her wallet, her money and

her phone were in the purse.”

My foot was pressing hard again on the accelerator and I forced myself to lift my foot. “How is she?”

“Scared to death,” Morgan answered. “She spent the night in the airport. She never left the gate area, so that was at least good. She knew she was screwed, but she knew she could at least spend the night in the airport.”

“Is she still there?” I asked.

The line buzzed. “No.”

“Why not? Where the hell did she go?”

“I just wired her money,” Morgan said. “So she can eat, get another phone and find a place to stay.”

“Call her back and tell her to stay put,” I said. “We can get someone to her.”

The line buzzed again. “I tried that. But it freaked her out.”

“What freaked her out?” Lauren asked, her head in her hands.

“You guys,” she said.

Lauren and I exchanged looks. She knew. Elizabeth knew about us.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I told her that you were here,” she said. “That you were looking for her. And that you were probably right now on your way to L.A. to try and find her.”

“Why did that freak her out?”

The line buzzed, crackling and popping from the poor connection. “I don’t know that it should be me that tells you guys this stuff, okay?”

“Hey, Morgan,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “You’re the only connection we have to her right now. We need you. And in order to help her, we need to know exactly what’s going on with her.”

“I get that. But I just feel like it’s all between you guys and it’s not my place to tell you everything.”

“But we can’t talk to her right now,” I pointed out. “You’re all we’ve got and if she’s in trouble or whatever, we need to know. Why is she freaked out about us?”

The line was quiet for a long time.

“Morgan. You still there?”

“It’s just like I told you,” she finally said. “She only remembers bits and pieces from before. And she was mad about finding out she was adopted. She feels like everyone lied to her.”

“I think that’s normal,” I said. I glanced at Lauren for confirmation but her head was still in her hands and I couldn’t see her expression.

“And she doesn’t know you,” Morgan continued. “And right now she’s totally freaked about meeting you.”

I think it was the word meet that stung me the most. As if I’d never known her. It wasn’t her fault that she felt that way. But it hurt nearly as bad as anything else I’d ever experienced.

I shoved the feeling aside. “But she needs help,” I said. “She’s in a bad spot and it was a bad idea to go out there.”

“I know that,” Morgan said. “But she’s there. And she didn’t even want me to call you. But I’m worried about her.”

“Thank you,” I said. “It was the right decision. I promise you we just want to help her.”

“She’s just scared. I would be, too.”

And that made sense. Elizabeth felt alone. On all fronts. Yes, she’d made a rash decision to run away from her home. It wasn’t the smartest thing to do. But she was a teenager. And she was hurting. She felt like she had nowhere to turn.

And that made everything worse.

“So what’s the plan with her?” I said. “You said you wired her money.”

“Yeah,” Morgan said. “And I just saw the email on my screen. She picked it up at the airport.”

“She didn’t say where she was going?”

“No. I think she was worried that I’d tell you.”

Lauren sat back in her seat, her eyes red, shaking her head.

I swallowed a sigh. “Okay. What about calling you?”

“That’s the one thing I got from her,” she said. “I made her promise to call me as soon as she got another phone. I’m not sure if she’ll tell me where she is, but I do think she’ll call me.”

“Good,” I said. “Make sure you get the number. If she calls from a blocked line or whatever, make sure you get the number from her.”

“I’ll try.”

“You can do it,” I said. “Just be her friend. More than anything, that’s what she needs right now.”

“What do I tell her about you?” Morgan asked.

I looked at Lauren. She was turned away from me, staring out the window.

“Don’t tell her you talked to us,” I said. “That’s what she wanted, right?”

“Right.”

“So just leave it alone. Don’t tell her we spoke.”

“Are you still going?” Morgan asked. “To California?”

I hesitated. “I don’t know.”

Lauren’s head whipped around, her eyes wide.

I put a finger to my lips.

“Okay,” Morgan said. “I’m not sure what she’d do if you showed up out there. You know? I think she just needs to think about it for awhile.”

“Right,” I said. “We don’t want to scare her. So just tell her you haven’t spoken to us and when you hear from her, call us and let us know. And make sure to get the number.”

“I will.”

“And Morgan?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” I said. “Very much.”

“I just want her to be okay,” she said and hung up.

SEVENTEEN

“We’re going to California, Joe,” Lauren said as soon as the line was dead. “We’re going.”

“I know we are.”

“Then why’d you tell her you weren’t sure?”

The sun was high in the sky behind us, a bright orb in my rearview mirror, and the desert sand and rock had changed over from pink to red.

“Because she might crack and tell Elizabeth she talked to us,” I said. “If Elizabeth is really freaked about us, the last thing we want is her running further away. This way if she does crack, Morgan will tell her that she doesn’t think we’re coming. It’ll take the edge off for Elizabeth.”

“But we are going?” Lauren pressed. “Right?”

“I’m headed west, aren’t I?”

“Please don’t mess with me.”

I re-gripped the wheel. “Yes. We’re going to California.”

“Even though she apparently doesn’t want to see us?” She sounded defeated.

“What she wants is sort of irrelevant right now,” I said.

She waved a hand in the air, a dismissive gesture. “You say so.”

Lauren was tired, worried and anxious. She was looking for a fight to burn off the nervous energy, but I wasn’t going to give it to her. I wasn’t going to fight just to fight. I hadn’t done it when we were married and I wasn’t going to do it right then.

And I believed what I said. What Elizabeth wanted was irrelevant at that moment. She may not have wanted to meet her biological parents and hear the story of her history, but she was alone. She needed help. So I may have had ulterior motives in trying to find her, but the bottom line was that she was wading into dangerous territory and she wasn’t equipped to handle it on her own. She wasn’t equipped to be alone.

She needed us.

My phone vibrated in my jacket pocket and I pulled it out. I glanced at the

screen. “Shit.”

“What?” Lauren asked, turning in the seat.

I held up the phone. “It’s Mike.”

She stared at the phone as it continued to buzz. “Answer it.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not ready to talk to him yet.”

“You think he saw the news story?”

The phone stopped buzzing. “I think it’s sure as hell possible.” I set it down on the console between our seats. “I need to think about what I want to say to him.”

“Maybe he’s just calling to follow up with you,” she said. “You said you talked to him in Minnesota, that he knew you thought you’d found her. Maybe he’s just following up.”

“Maybe.”

She shifted in her seat, adjusted the vent in front of her on the dash. “Wouldn’t it be better to know what he wants? So we know?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t sure. I was still spooked by the notion that he could possibly have been involved with taking Elizabeth. Maybe it was unfair to put him on the list, but from what Rodney had told me about the picture, there was nowhere else to put him. And if he did know that I was close to finding Elizabeth and that it might put him in jeopardy, then all hell could break loose at any moment.

“Maybe,” I said again.

“I think it would be.”

“Tell me why.”

“Because we’d know,” she said. “We’d know. And we don’t have to tell him where we are or where she is. Or we could tell him she’s in Maine. See what he does with that. I don’t know. It just seems to me like finding out what he knows puts us in a better spot.”

I glanced down at the phone. He hadn’t left a voicemail.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s say he saw the news report. What do I tell him?”

The phone began buzzing again. I glanced down.

Mike again.

Lauren picked it up and held it out to me. “I don’t know. But you’ll think of something.”

EIGHTEEN

I touched the screen and held the phone to my ear. “Mike. What’s going on?”

“I might ask you the same question,” he said through the line.

“Oh, yeah. Why’s that?”

“Because I just saw some crazy news report about you almost finding Elizabeth,” he said. “Some retired cop in Minnesota.”

“You saw that?”

“Not live,” he said. “But the link showed up in my email ten minutes ago and I just finished watching it. What the hell is going on, Joe?”

Lauren was staring at me, craning her head toward me, trying to listen. It made me uncomfortable.

I looked away from her, out my side of the windshield, trying to focus my thoughts. “It’s been kind of crazy. I haven’t had a chance to call.”

“Catch me up.”

The wheels were spinning in my head. “I’m in the middle of something so I gotta be quick. I found the family in Minneapolis. The family that she ended up with.”

He let out a low whistle. “Wow. Yeah, I think I saw that in the news clip, but I was in such a rush to call you, I think I rushed through it.”

“Right,” I said, realizing this was the first time I had ever talked to him and not believed every word he said to me. “Bazer see it?”

“No idea,” Mike said. “I haven’t seen him yet this morning. Why?”

“Just curious,” I said quickly. “Anyway. I talked to the family. But she’s gone.”

“Gone?” he asked. “What do you mean?”

I hesitated. “She ran. From the family. Before I got there.”

“Dammit,” he said. “Why did she take off?”

I hesitated again. “I’m not sure yet. I’m still trying to find that out.”

“What’s the story on the family? You never said…”

“I can’t talk about it right now,” I said.

I glanced at Lauren. She widened her eyes at me.

“Hang on,” I mouthed.

“Okay.” Mike hesitated. “Any idea where she went? Can I help?”

“We’re still trying to figure out where she went,” I said, still looking at Lauren. “Hoping we can piece it together here today. And I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll do anything you need,” he said. “I’ll run traces on anything you want. I’ll hop on a plane. I’ll call in favors. You name it, I’ll do it.”

“Thanks, Mike,” I told him. “Look, I gotta run. I’ll let you know.”

I hung up and squeezed the phone for a moment before setting it down on the console again.

“You look like you want to throw up,” Lauren observed.

“That’s pretty accurate, yeah.”

“Why?”

“I’ve relied on him all these years,” I said, changing lanes to get around a slow pick-up. “He was my rock. I could bounce anything off of him. I trusted every word he said. I thought he was on my side.”

“He still might be, Joe.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I hate the doubt. I can’t count on him until I know for sure. And let’s say he isn’t involved. Then I’ve totally undercut our friendship and his help. All that trust? Gone.”

“You don’t think he’d understand?” she countered. “If he isn’t a part of it and you explain to him what you learned and why you had to be cautious, you don’t think he’d understand?”

“I don’t know. But it feels awful.”

“So what exactly did he say?”

I relayed our conversation word for word, as best as I could remember.

She thought about it for a minute before she said anything. “I just can’t believe he’d take Elizabeth.”

I nodded. The same thought was gnawing at me. I knew Mike. I *knew* him. And I'd seen too many things to forget that you never knew as much as you thought you did about people. But it was so difficult for me to look at Mike and think he played some role in my daughter's disappearance. I wanted to tell him we were on our way to California and to have him make calls and have him go to L.A. and start looking before we got there.

But I just couldn't take that risk.

"All he saw was the report?" Lauren asked.

"That's what he said."

"And he said he hadn't talked to Bazer?"

I nodded.

"So then one of two things is going to happen," she said, knocking her fist lightly against the window. "One, he either sits tight and waits for you to call back. Which to me means he's clean and on our side. Or, two, he digs into the report and finds the Corzines pretty easily. Because that's where it would start, right? If you had seen that report, that's where it would have taken you."

I nodded again. "I'd track the source which would take me to Rodney, who would have no reason not to tell me about the Corzines. So yeah. One or two."

"I'll call them," she said. "Tell them to notify us if they're contacted by anyone."

"You think they will?"

"I think you scared the hell out of them and they'll do whatever we ask at this point," she said, reaching for her phone. "So I'll call them and we'll wait to see what happens."

I stared at the long stretch of highway in front of us. The red rocks were getting taller and we were close to the Nevada border. Then we'd cruise through Las Vegas and into the high desert of California. Then head toward the ocean and Los Angeles.

We had plenty of time to wait.

NINETEEN

The red rocks in Utah gave way to wide open deserts and then the massive hotels in Las Vegas. After the city, a vast expanse of nothingness greeted us. We drove further, approaching the gateway into the part of California that didn't look like California. Flat, brown and sandy. Baker and Barstow were about as un-Southern California as you could get, working class cities that housed the people who couldn't afford the homes closer to the ocean. I'd been through Barstow numerous times in my life, but the only place I'd stopped was the McDonald's housed in an old passenger train. It was a place you passed through, not a place you stayed and I held to that rule, pushing the rental up to eighty as we flew down the highway.

Our phones stayed silent and that was the most disconcerting part. Sure, no one was calling us with bad news, but no one was calling us with good news, either. We tried small talk, but Lauren and I were both wound too tightly at that point to even fake it so we kept our mouths closed for most of the drive.

We stopped once for food and once more for gas and by late afternoon, our highway speed dropped drastically as we became entwined in the gridlock that was Los Angeles traffic. The wide open deserts morphed into tight pockets of homes, long strip malls and not much open space. Despite having lived in San Diego for most of my life, I hadn't spent much time in L.A. and it still felt like a foreign city to me. There was a vibe I'd never been able to identify, as if everyone else knew what it was and I was just looking around, clueless as to what I was missing out on.

"I don't know where to go," I said.

Lauren stretched in her seat. "I was just gonna ask."

"We could go to the airport," I said. "But according to Morgan, she's already gone."

She nodded. "She probably is."

"So where?"

"Where would you go?" she said. "If you were her. You'd never been here before, your money is limited and transportation is probably limited to a taxi or a bus. Where would you go?"

I thought. And thought some more. I tried to think in terms of someone else, try to think about a different missing kid, to somehow distance myself and be able to

come up with a rational thought, a plan of attack. But all I could think of was Elizabeth. My daughter. Alone.

“I honestly have no idea,” I finally said.

The traffic crept along slowly, marching us closer to the coast and the Pacific Ocean.

“Maybe I should call Mike back,” I said. It was the last thing I wanted to do but I was stuck. “Ask him for some help. Manpower to search, check surveillance at the airport. Rather than just take shots in the dark and drive around randomly.”

Lauren nodded hesitantly. “I guess.”

I glanced at her. “What?”

She waited a moment. “You’ve planted the seed with me. I don’t trust him. And I feel like bringing him in might jeopardize her safety. I mean, if he really was involved in taking her, there’s no incentive to find her. There’s actually incentive to make sure we don’t find her.”

“Unless he thinks finding her would completely erase any doubt there might be that he helped take her,” I countered. “Be the hero. No one looks at the hero.”

Lauren thought for a moment, then shook her head. “I don’t think so. He doesn’t know that she doesn’t apparently remember much. If you were the guy that took her, you’d operate under the idea that she would tell everyone what happened and implicate you.”

“She hasn’t thus far.”

“But seeing him might trigger it for her,” she said. “I think the person who took her would do everything in their power to keep her away from us. Anything and everything.”

That thought chilled the interior of the car even in the California sunshine. And while I was trying to play devil’s advocate, I agreed with her. Anyone involved in the abduction would be paranoid that they would be exposed. If they were cold enough to take a child and sell her, they were cold enough to do whatever it took to protect their identity.

Which was just as unsettling as not knowing where Elizabeth was.

“There has to be something to do here other than just chase our tail,” she said. “We can’t just wait for Morgan to call us with updates. We don’t even know for sure that she will anymore.”

“Right,” I said. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel.

“There has to be someone that can help us, someone who could do some of the things Mike might be able to do,” Lauren said, leaning against the window. “Another cop you know? Another investigator?”

I thought for a moment, then reached for my phone. “Maybe there is.”

Lauren turned to look at me. “Yeah? Who?”

“Hang on,” I said.

“Great. I love suspense.”

I thumbed through the contacts on my phone until I found the name I wanted. I let my thumb hover over it for a moment, then touched the screen. I watched the number pop up on the screen as the phone dialed it. It was worth a shot.

It rang one time before it was answered.

“Mr. Tyler,” John Anchor said on the other end. “Good to hear from you.”

Several days prior in Minneapolis, I’d helped Peter Codaselli reunite with his son. Codaselli was a reputed leader of organized crime in the area and his right hand man was John Anchor, a man who dressed more like an investment banker than an assassin. They had been grateful for my help and they knew about my search for my daughter. Anchor offered up any assistance in order to return the favor of finding Codaselli’s son.

He was worth a shot.

“Yeah,” I said into the phone. “Thanks. Mr. Codaselli doing alright?”

“He is,” Anchor responded. “He and Marc have spent a significant amount of time together the last two days. It’s going well and I think it has all helped keep his illness at bay.”

Codaselli was a late-stage cancer patient, one of the many reasons he’d been in a hurry to repair his damaged relationship with his son. Anchor had intimated to me that he didn’t have much time left.

“Good,” I said. “That’s good to hear.”

“Mr. Codaselli is enormously grateful,” Anchor said. “He credits you.”

“He should credit his son.”

“Perhaps. But he knows you were influential in getting Marc home. He’s very

appreciative.”

I didn’t say anything.

“And we saw the news report this morning,” he continued. “We weren’t sure what to make of it, but we were hoping it was accurate.”

“Well, yes and no,” I said. “That’s why I’m calling.”

“The offer stands, Mr. Tyler,” Anchor said, as if he was reading my mind. “If we can help in any way, we’d be happy to. It’s the least we can do.”

“You have a few minutes?” I asked. “I can lay out where I’m at and why I’m calling?”

“I have as many minutes as you need, Mr. Tyler.”

As the traffic inched along on the freeway, I detailed what had occurred since I’d said goodbye to him in Codaselli’s building. I shared everything except my concern about who might’ve had a hand in her abduction. Lauren stared straight ahead as I talked, but I knew she was listening, probably wondering who the hell I was talking to. I just figured if there was anyone I could trust right at that moment, it was Anchor. It felt strange, but as I always said, you used the resources you had.

Anchor was a resource.

“Do you have the number from the phone that was stolen?” Anchor asked. “Or the number for the phone she purchased after the initial one was stolen?”

“I know we have the original number,” I said. “But not the second one yet. We’re hoping to get that soon.”

“Could I have the original number?”

“One sec,” I said, then motioned at Lauren. “Give me the number that Morgan gave you for Elizabeth.”

“Who are you talking to?” she asked, but she had her phone in her hands and was looking.

“Tell you when I’m done.”

She recited the number and I repeated it to Anchor.

“And do you have the flight information for the flight she was on? Out of Denver, you said, correct?”

“Yeah, Denver,” I answered and gave him the flight info.

“I’ll start with these and see what I can come up with,” Anchor said. “It’ll take a bit of time, at least a few hours, but I’ll get back to you.”

“Thanks.”

“And if you obtain any other pertinent details, don’t hesitate to call me back. I’ll be available.”

“Will do. Thanks, John.”

We hung up.

Traffic started to thin and our speed picked up. I set the phone down on the console.

“So?” Lauren said.

“So the kid I found in Minneapolis?” I told her. “The son of the mob guy?”

“Right.”

“That was the mob guy’s lieutenant. Or assistant. I don’t know what you call him.”

“Okay.”

I switched lanes and I could see the highrises in downtown L.A. start to pop up on the horizon. “They owe me. I called in the favor.”

“You called in a hit man to help us find our daughter?” she asked, her mouth open in disbelief. “That was the best you could do?”

I switched lanes again so we were now in the fastest moving lane on the freeway, almost up to the speed limit, the brownish smog breaking away into high white clouds in the bright blue sky hanging over the ocean.

“Yeah,” I said. “And I think he might be the best there is. Period.”

TWENTY

I wanted a shower.

We'd finally navigated our way out of the snarled traffic and we were both tired, hungry and in need of some rest after the long haul from the motel in Utah. With nothing to do but wait, neither of us felt like driving around randomly. Both of us were worried that it would just lead to more frustration and anxiety on our part, so we found a hotel near the airport and checked in, unsure of how long we'd be there.

I jumped into the shower first, Lauren wanting to check her work email and see if there was anything that needed a response. The hot water stung my shoulders and I tucked my chin into my chest, letting it pelt my neck. My muscles were stiff and sore from having sat in the car for so long, not to mention the tension I knew I was carrying in my entire body. I shut my eyes and stood there for awhile, rolling my shoulders, trying to let some of that tension wash out of me. After twenty minutes of standing there comatose, I grabbed the bar of soap and the shampoo, cleaned myself up and turned off the water.

The warm steam in the small bathroom felt good on my skin and exhaustion settled into me. It felt as if I hadn't slept in days and my body was begging for a rest. I toweled off, pulled on my boxers and jeans and walked out into the room, still rubbing the towel through my hair.

Lauren was stretched out on the bed, staring at her phone. "Thought you fell asleep in there."

"Almost."

"I'm tired, too."

I pointed at the phone. "Anything?"

She sat up. "Nope."

I nodded, expecting that answer. "Okay. Bathroom's all yours."

She looked at me for a moment. "What are you gonna do?"

"Turn the TV on," I said. "Lay down on that bed."

She stood from the bed, laid a hand on my chest and kissed my cheek. "Okay. I won't be long."

It was an odd gesture, the kiss on the cheek. It wasn't like her. Not that she'd ever been unaffectionate, but small things like that weren't her. Or maybe I'd just forgotten them, it had been so long. She was strong and independent and those were two things I'd always loved about her. She could be defiant, stubborn, even more so than me at times. We'd always had a good balance in our relationship, but she'd never been dependent. And maybe that wasn't what the kiss was, but it caught me by surprise and I wasn't sure what to make of it.

I grabbed the remote, moved my phone to the nightstand right by my head and punched a button to turn on the TV. I flopped back on to the bed, my wet head sinking into the large, overstuffed pillows.

But I couldn't sleep. As I flipped through the channels, I couldn't stop thinking about Elizabeth and where she was. It was a helpless feeling to know we were so close but had no idea where to look. I couldn't shut off my thoughts.

I flipped through the channels for a few more minutes before the bathroom door opened. Lauren came out, a towel wrapped around her, her hair dripping wet. "Can I have your towel? I couldn't find another one."

I held it out to her and she came over to the bed. She tucked in the towel around her body, holding it in place and she took my towel. She gathered up her long, wet locks and rubbed them vigorously, absorbing the excess water. Goose pimples formed on her arms and bare thighs.

She pulled the towel from her hair and hugged it to her chest. "Thanks."

"Any time," I said.

"Can I lay with you?" she asked.

I scooted over, making room for her. She laid down, curling up to me much like she had when we'd stopped in Utah.

Her hand slid onto my bare chest. "Joe."

I looked at her.

"I don't want to sleep alone again," she said.

"Okay."

"And, I don't feel like sleeping," she said.

My pulse quickened.

She leaned forward and kissed me, softly at first, then with more urgency. I

turned into her and pulled her closer, kissing her back. She tugged on her towel, letting it fall away, her warm skin pressing up against mine. Her lips moved to my neck and my hands found her back. She arched into me and looked at me, her eyes searching.

“I just want to feel good for awhile,” she whispered. “Okay?”

I didn’t say anything, just plunged my hands into her wet hair and pulled her tight against me.

I knew exactly what she needed.

It was what I needed, too.

TWENTY-ONE

My phone was ringing and I couldn’t reach it.

My eyes were sealed shut and I’d forced them open when I heard the ring. The light in the room was dim and Lauren’s naked body was entwined with mine, her hair a tangled mess on my chest. I reached out with my left arm for the phone but couldn’t reach it. I shifted underneath and she stirred.

“The phone,” I said. “It’s ringing.”

She sat up and I slid myself to the side and snatched it off the nightstand. “Hello?”

“Mr. Tyler, it’s John Anchor. Is this a good time?”

“Yeah absolutely,” I said, then mouthed “Anchor” to Lauren, as she pulled the blankets over herself.

“Have you by any chance gotten the new number that your daughter is using?” he asked.

“No. Not yet.”

“Alright,” he said. “Not a problem. I’ve got a few things for you to look at. Where could I meet you?”

“Meet me?”

“Yes, sir, if that’s alright.”

“Here in L.A.?” I asked.

Lauren looked at me, confused.

“Yes,” he said. “Mr. Codaselli insisted that I use his plane to come and assist you personally. He thought I might be of greater use to you in person than at a distance. I’m walking through LAX right now.”

“Okay,” I said and told him where we were staying. “We can meet you down in the lobby.”

“I should be there in about twenty minutes,” he said and hung up.

I looked at Lauren. “Anchor is here.”

“At the hotel?” she said, her eyes wide.

“He’ll be here in twenty minutes,” I said. “He said he has some things to show us.”

“He just got on a plane and flew here?”

“That’s what he said.” I didn’t mention the private plane.

“Wow,” she said. “I guess his boss is really grateful.”

“I guess.”

“And I guess we should put some clothes on.”

“Probably.”

We scrambled for a few minutes, getting dressed and making ourselves look presentable. We’d only slept for a couple of hours but we both looked disheveled and disoriented. Lauren took another few minutes to brush out her hair and I sat on the edge of the bed, waiting, still shocked that Anchor was in Los Angeles. When she was ready, we took the elevator downstairs and had just sat down on a small sofa in the lobby when Anchor strode through the entrance.

His short blond hair was combed neatly above the same black-framed glasses he always wore. His dark navy suit looked expensive and perfectly tailored. Light blue dress shirt beneath it with a tie that was close in color to the suit. The shiny black shoes that clicked against the marble floor as he walked looked more expensive than the suit.

He smiled as I stood. “Mr. Tyler. Wish the circumstances were better, but it’s nice to see you again.”

“Likewise,” I said, as we shook hands. I motioned at Lauren as she stood next to me. “This is Elizabeth’s mother, Lauren Tyler.”

“My pleasure,” Anchor said as they shook hands. He waited for us to sit before he took a seat in the arm chair across from us. “Again, I’m sorry we’re meeting under these circumstances. Have you been here long?”

I shook my head. “We pulled in this afternoon.”

“You drove from Minneapolis?”

“From Denver,” I said. “We flew to Denver from Minneapolis. Then we had an issue in Denver so we drove.”

“You should’ve called me,” he said grimly. “I would’ve been happy to assist in getting you a flight.”

I wondered if he could’ve convinced TSA to let me fly. My gut said no, but I still had to wonder.

“It’s okay,” I said.

He reached inside his suit and extracted several papers, folded neatly and crisply. “I was able to do a little work and I have a few things that might help us.” He glanced at me. “Mr. Codaselli has instructed me to see this through until you feel you no longer need me. Hence, the ‘us’.”

“Alright,” I said. “Thank you.”

He nodded and unfolded the first sheet. “The cell number you gave me. I was able to track it. It was turned on at the airport, apparently, when she landed. There was a call made from it, but given the time difference from when she landed and when it was probably taken from her, I don’t believe it was her that used it.” He peered at me over his glasses. “My associate is currently in the process of recovering the phone and your daughter’s other belongings.”

“You located the phone?” Lauren asked.

“We were able to triangulate the location and, yes, I believe we’ve located it.”

“Where?” Lauren asked, incredulous.

Anchor smiled at her. “Nearby. We should have confirmation soon.”

I wanted to ask questions, but I no longer doubted the decision to call him. He was better than any cop I could’ve called.

Anchor unfolded the other two sheets and laid them out on the table in front of us. “I was also able to obtain these surveillance photos from the airport. I wanted to confirm her presence here in Los Angeles in order to make sure we didn’t need to move our search to another location.” He paused. “I’m fairly certain this is her, but if you’d take a look and confirm, then we’ll know for sure.”

I picked up both sheets from the table and handed one to Lauren. There were six square black and white photos on each sheet. Still shots from security cameras with time and date stamps. On my sheet, I could see Elizabeth exiting the jetway, entering the restroom, leaving the restroom, asleep on a chair, on a pay phone and walking through the concourse. Each photo was taken from an above angle, but I could see that she was wearing leggings, short winter boots, a long sweater and that her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She had Lauren’s hair. The definition in the photos wasn’t

good enough to see the expression on her face, but there was no doubt that it was her.

And the one major difference in the six photos I was looking at was that she had a backpack and a purse getting off the plane and entering the restroom, but leaving the restroom, she only had the backpack.

I took a deep breath.

It was her.

She was in Los Angeles.

I handed my sheet to Lauren and she handed me hers.

“How did you get these?” Lauren asked.

“Mr. Codaselli has many different contacts in many different industries,” he said, smiling at her. “Those contacts were more than happy to assist.”

She stared at him for a long moment, then shook her head and stared at the sheet I’d traded her.

I looked at mine. Another series of six still shots from the security cameras within the airport. Elizabeth walking through the luggage area. Sitting in a food court. Two more of her walking through the terminal. Another down in the luggage area. And then one of her at the curb outside the airport.

“Have you done anything with these?” I asked.

Anchor shook his head and adjusted his glasses. “Not yet. As I said, I wanted to confirm with you before proceeding in any way.”

I tapped the paper. “This one. Her at the curb.”

I showed it to him.

“Yes,” he said. “She’s outside. Looks like Terminal C. I’m sure we can figure out exactly which camera that was shot from.”

“Not what I’m talking about,” I said. “Look at the cab pulling into the frame. Her hand is up. It’s about to stop in front of her.”

He leaned in tighter and Lauren leaned over, too.

“If we could get some better resolution on this, we can pull the number off the taxi,” I said.

Anchor nodded and stood. “Give me a moment. Excuse me.” He pulled out his

phone, put it to his ear and walked away from us.

“That guy scares the shit out of me,” Lauren said quietly.

“That guy is helping us,” I said. “You don’t always get to choose who you work with. You take what you get.”

“Do you know how hard it is to get this stuff?” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Like, you need court orders and acts of God to get these. And even then, Homeland Security screens them and doesn’t let you walk away with them.”

I shrugged. “What do you want me to say? Would you rather not have the photos?”

“Of course not,” she said, frowning at me. “But if they can pull this stuff this fast and do it off the grid, I can’t imagine what else they’re capable of.”

“Then don’t imagine,” I said. “Just focus on the pictures and on Elizabeth. And be glad he’s on our side.”

Anchor walked back to us, his phone still in his hand. “We should have it within five minutes. The enlarged and improved photo is being forwarded to my phone.”

“Good,” I said. “We should be able to find out exactly which taxi took her and where they went. They have to record their rides from the airport.”

Anchor nodded in agreement, then looked at his phone. He studied it for a moment. Then he looked at us. “My associate is outside. With your daughter’s belongings. And the person who took them.” He smiled at each of us. “Care to walk outside with me?”

TWENTY-TWO

We followed Anchor outside and around the side of the hotel. I'd put on the same pants and long-sleeve t-shirt I'd been wearing earlier and I pushed the sleeves up, the night air still warm. Lauren pressed close to me as we walked and at some point, I realized that her hand had grabbed onto mine.

A shiny black Escalade idled at the curb. Next to it, a man with coffee-colored skin and a suit similar to Anchor's stood with his hands in his pockets. Broad shoulders and an athletic frame. Mirrored aviator glasses rested on top of his bald head. He smiled and nodded at us as we approached.

"Mr. and Ms. Tyler," Anchor said. "This is Ellis Kitting. He is also employed by Mr. Codaselli."

"Pleasure," Kitting said, shaking both of our hands and continuing to smile.

Anchor looked at him. "So."

"I have one male and one female," Kitting explained. "Located at a home twenty minutes from here. They were in possession of the bag and I did recover the phone and ID."

"Excellent," Anchor said.

"They weren't immediately forthcoming about what occurred and were hesitant to provide details," Kitting said, looking at me, then glancing at Anchor. "I encouraged them to cooperate."

Anchor nodded and Kitting opened the rear passenger door to the Escalade.

Inside, I saw a young man and a young woman, both in their early twenties. The girl was in skinny jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt covered in glitter and sparkles. Long black hair pulled back with a glitter-encrusted headband. The guy had on jeans and a gray hoodie and was sporting a left eye that was swollen shut. A small cut decorated the corner of his mouth.

Both looked terrified.

Anchor stared at them for a long moment and they both seemed to shrink under his gaze. "Good evening."

Neither said anything.

“I’ll make this very clear as it appears you did not understand my associate’s explanation the first time around,” Anchor said. “If you cooperate and are truthful with us, this will be quick and my associate will return you to your home shortly, without any further action. If you don’t wish to cooperate or choose to lie…then this will take as long as necessary to convince you to cooperate. I can make no promises as to where my associate will take you afterward or the condition you’ll be in.” He looked at each of them carefully. “Everyone understand the rules?”

The way he explained it in such simple terms was more chilling than if he’d put a gun to their heads.

The girl was quick to nod and the guy, after a moment’s hesitation and a long stare from Anchor, followed suit.

“Great,” Anchor said, then pointed at the girl. “Please exit the vehicle toward us.”

The girl crawled out over the guy, giving him a quick glance. She hopped out of the car and stood nervously on the sidewalk, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Kitting shut the door behind her.

Anchor nodded at me.

“You took the purse?” I asked.

She wore heavy black eyeliner and it was smudged at the corners, possibly from tears. “Yeah.”

“Tell me how.”

“I already told that scary motherfucker over there.”

I assumed she meant Kitting. “I wasn’t there, so tell me now.”

She started to object again, but Anchor tilted his head thoughtfully and it was enough to stop her cold.

She cleared her throat. “We run it all the time. Me and Mikey. We buy cheap tickets, usually to like Oakland or San Diego, just to get to the gate side. Then we wait and watch. Find someone who we for sure can tell isn’t from here, maybe isn’t paying attention or whatever. Wait for them to go into the bathroom. Then…you know. When we rip a girl, Mikey follows to make sure the girl doesn’t chase or whatever. When it’s a dude, I follow.”

“You stole our daughter’s purse,” I said.

She frowned. “So?”

Before I could say anything else, Anchor put a hand on her shoulder and leaned down to whisper in her ear. The girl’s face went white and she looked to be on the verge of tears when he was done whispering. She was shaking.

“I mean,” she stammered, her eyes darting between Anchor and myself. “I mean, I’m sorry.”

“Tell me exactly what happened,” I said. “With her.”

She was trying to catch her breath. Whatever Anchor said to her had terrified her. He stood there, smiling at her.

“Mikey picked her right away,” she said. “I followed her in. She went to the back stall, the one for wheelchairs. No one else was in there. I just reached over, grabbed it and left.”

“She say anything?”

“No.”

I glanced at Lauren. She was staring at the girl, who was still watching Anchor.

“Then what?” I asked. “You take off with the stuff? See what you scored?”

“We do two or three,” she said. “Cover the cost of our tickets. She was our last. So yeah. We bailed.”

“Where’s the purse?”

Kitting opened the front passenger door and retrieved the purse. He handed it to Anchor who handed it to me.

It was strange holding something that belonged to Elizabeth. It was a large cloth bag with a single strap, faded purple, like she’d had it for a long time. I couldn’t bring myself to look into it, as if her face might be in there, peering back at me.

I handed it to Lauren.

She held it gingerly, as if it were fragile, and opened it up, rummaging around. She pulled out a hot pink leather wallet. She unsnapped the clasp and I saw her swallow hard. “It’s hers. Elizabeth’s.”

I didn’t say anything.

Lauren searched through the wallet. “There should be cash in here.”

Anchor looked at the girl.

“Mikey has it,” she said quickly. “He’s in charge of the money. The whole thing, really.”

“Anything else for her?” Anchor asked me.

I shook my head.

Anchor opened the passenger door. “Get in, please.” He waited for her to climb over Mikey. “Your turn, friend. Step out of the vehicle, please.”

Mikey slid out of his seat, his hands stuffed in the front pocket of the hoodie. He had close cropped black hair and a small diamond stud in his left earlobe. He was slightly taller than Anchor, with a heavy build, but he somehow seemed small standing next to him.

Kitting edged a little closer behind him.

“Your friend has explained your game,” Anchor said. “But we’d like to hear your version.”

Mikey’s right eye looked like it had a golf ball underneath it, the lid red and completely closed over the ball. But his left eye looked angry.

“If she told you, why I gotta tell you?” he said, glancing at Anchor.

“Because I asked. And take your hands out of your sweatshirt.”

Mikey sighed, but took his hands out. “Game is, we look for tourists and rip a bag when they’re in the can. If it’s a chick, Jessica follows them in. If it’s a dude, I follow them in. Then the other person waits for the chick or dude to come out of the can, runs interference if they got to, makes sure they don’t follow the one that did the rip, just to make sure it’s cool.” He shrugged. “That’s it.”

Anchor looked at me.

“So after Jessica took my daughter’s purse, you waited for her to come out?” I asked.

He nodded.

“What did she do?” I asked. “Where did she go?”

“I don’t know, dude.”

Kitting cleared his throat and edged closer to Mikey.

Mikey's lips twisted for a moment, then he shrugged again, full of arrogance and disinterest. "Yo, she was like all of them. A little freaked out, but not sure what to do. She was crying. Looking around. Some go looking for a cop or a rent-a-cop. She didn't."

Anger percolated in my gut. His ambivalence toward her was maddening. I knew he didn't know the full story, but he was the kind of asshole who wouldn't have cared, anyway. He was just looking for the quick score and didn't care what the result was.

"Where'd she go then?" I asked.

"Shit, I don't know, dude," he said, rolling his one good eye. "I just had to make sure Jess got clear. I didn't babysit the bitch."

My right fist struck his left eye flush, my knuckles cracking against his eye socket. He stumbled backward and fell against the car, then down to the curb.

Lauren touched my arm and Kitting dropped the shades from his head to his eyes, but no one else moved.

"Get up," Anchor said.

Mikey lolled around for a moment, caught between the car and the curb. He pushed himself to his knees and got up slowly. The good eye, the one that I'd hit, was now swelling and there was another cut on the bridge of his nose, a slow trickle of blood dancing out of it.

"I believe a question was asked. Where did Mr. Tyler's daughter go after she exited the restroom?" Anchor asked, staring at Mikey.

The arrogance was gone from Mikey, his shoulders slumped, his posture sagging, his bottom lip quivering. He wasn't nearly as tough as he wanted to be.

"She stood outside the bathroom for a minute," he said quietly. "Then she walked toward security. Then she turned around and went back toward the bathroom. She sat down at a table at the donut place. She was still crying. She put her head down on the table. That's when I bolted."

The image of Elizabeth, alone and crying by herself at a table in some food court, pierced me and it took a moment to catch my breath. If I'd been alone with Mikey, he wouldn't have walked away. I was ready to empty every ounce of my anger into him.

"The money," Anchor said. "You have the money from the purse."

Mikey started to reach for his back pocket, then stopped. "It's in my pocket. I can

reach for it?”

Anchor nodded.

Mikey pulled a wad of cash out of his back pocket and held it out to Anchor. Anchor nodded at me and Mikey frowned, then held it out to me.

I took it and counted it out. Four hundred bucks.

“Take anything else out of it?” I asked, handing the money to Lauren. “Credit card? Anything?”

He shook his head. “Cash only. I don’t mess with credit cards. And there wasn’t nothing else in there to take.”

I looked at Lauren. She dropped the money in the bag and closed it up, then put it over her shoulder.

“Why’d you use the phone?” I said.

He scowled, his entire face wrinkling up with irritation. “I didn’t. Jess did. Which we don’t ever do. But she had to call her friend and tell her about the score.” The irritation faded. “Four hundred was biggest score in awhile. She was bragging.”

Anchor tilted his head toward Kitting.

“That’s accurate,” Kitting said. “Girl confirmed and I checked with the friend. Nothing there.”

Anchor nodded, then looked at me. “Anything else?”

I shook my head.

Anchor opened the door and Mikey slinked back into the car. Anchor closed the door behind him, then walked over to Kitting. They exchanged several words, Kitting nodded and headed for the driver’s side of the Escalade. We stood there silently as the SUV pulled away from the curb.

“I’m sorry there wasn’t more information to be had,” Anchor said. “But at least you have her belongings back.”

I nodded.

“Can I ask a question?” Lauren said.

“Certainly.”

“Do I want to know what your guy is going do with them now?” she asked.

Anchor chuckled, pulled his phone from his pocket and began thumbing away at the screen. “You make it sound so sinister.”

“In some ways, it sort of feels like it is,” she answered.

Anchor made a non-committal shrug. “Perhaps.” He put the phone back in his pocket. “They served their purpose. We have no further interest in them and we don’t need to draw any attention their way or ours. Ellis will return them home safely.”

Lauren exhaled.

“But they will be reminded that they never saw us or met us or had this conversation,” Anchor added.

“How does that happen?” Lauren asked.

Anchor smiled. “You don’t want to know, Ms. Tyler.”

TWENTY-THREE

“Do you want to see what’s in here?” Lauren asked.

We were sitting in the hotel bar. It was late and most of the tables were empty. A group of businessmen sat at the bar, nursing drinks and watching ESPN on the TV mounted on the wall. Anchor had excused himself and told us he’d be back in an hour. He didn’t say where he was going and we didn’t ask. We’d gone to the bar, both of us claiming to be hungry, but judging by the picked over food on our plates, we weren’t starving.

Now, she had Elizabeth’s bag open.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“There’s nothing crazy in here.”

“That’s fine. But I don’t think so.”

She set the bag on her lap. “Why not?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It just freaks me out.”

“Why?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. I picked up a French fry but didn’t eat it. “I just don’t want to see. It doesn’t feel good to me.”

She stared across the table at me. “It makes me feel closer to her. To see what’s in here. To see her driver’s license, her lipstick. Brings her to me.”

I nodded. “Good. I’m glad. It’s just different for me.”

She nodded, but I wasn’t sure she understood. I wasn’t sure I did, either, but I thought it was tied to getting my hopes up. I’d been burned too many times before and I wasn’t going to let the thread of hope I was clinging to morph into anything more. Not yet. I needed to keep some distance.

“Anchor scares the shit out of me,” Lauren said. “If I hadn’t already mentioned that.”

“He’s on our side,” I reminded her. “That’s all that matters.”

She toyed with her fork, moving around pieces of lettuce in her salad bowl. “You think he would’ve killed that guy if he’d lied to us?”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Are you okay with that? With working with someone like that?”

I pulled my napkin from my lap and tossed it on my plate. “Being okay with it has nothing to do with it. He can help us. That’s all I care about.”

“So if he had intimated he was going to kill that guy, you would’ve let it go?” she asked.

“It’s irrelevant,” I said. “He’s not going to kill him. Probably going to kick the crap out of him. Scare him. But that’s it. So it’s irrelevant.”

“I’m asking hypothetically.”

I leaned over the table. “Look, that kid was a scumbag. Who knows what else he’s done to people? He had zero problem stealing from our daughter and leaving her high and dry. He wasn’t sorry, even with Anchor and Kitting standing there. He didn’t care and he’ll run the same game tomorrow. And all I care about is getting Elizabeth back safely. Anchor can help us do that. So do I give a shit if Mikey or some guy like him ends up being collateral damage? No. I don’t. All I care about is finding Elizabeth. That’s it.”

My words came out sharper than I intended, but I meant everything I said. I didn’t care about anyone else, especially some piece of crap thief. And I didn’t have a problem working with Anchor or Kitting, as long as they could get me closer to Elizabeth. I’d come too far to start worrying about the gray ethical areas we might or might not have been entering.

Lauren laid her own napkin on the table. “Okay.”

“Hey, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bite your head off,” I said. “But she’s the only thing I care about.”

She pursed her lips. “I could never care about just one thing.”

“I know that.”

She started to say something, then stopped. Then she looked at her watch. “He’s going to be back soon. Can we run back up to the room really quick?”

I nodded. “Sure.” I signed my name to the check and we headed to the elevator on the other side of the lobby. We stepped into the car and she punched the number of our floor and the doors closed.

She circled her arm around mine. “I’m not judging. I swear I’m not. This is just a

different world for me, Joe.”

“I know that.”

“And I’m glad you’re the way you are,” she said, looking at me. “You’re the reason we’re going to find her. I don’t need to understand it all. As long as you do, I’ll be alright with everything.”

The doors opened and we walked down the long hallway to the room. I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t sure what to say. I wasn’t sure there was anything *to* say.

Lauren slid the key card into the door, the lock clicked and she pushed on the door.

There was a loud beeping noise that we both heard immediately.

Her hands went to her pockets. “Jesus. That’s my phone. I left it in here when we were hurrying to get out of here.” She strode across the dark room while I fumbled with the light switch. The phone was laying on the table and she picked it up.

“It’s Morgan. A text.”

Blood pulsed in my ears.

Lauren touched the screen. “She has a number.”

“Did she send it?”

“She says to call her.”

“Do it. Now.”

She already had the phone to her ear. “Morgan, it’s Lauren Tyler. Can you talk?” She pulled the phone from her ear and touched the screen. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, I can,” Morgan said. “I texted you like half an hour ago.”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said. “I left my phone in a hotel room.” She shook her head in disgust, like she couldn’t believe she’d been so careless.

“You have a number, Morgan?” I asked.

“She got another phone,” Morgan said. “One of those pay-as-you-go thingies. I don’t know how they work.”

“Give us the number,” I said, grabbing the small scratch pad and pen from the table.

Morgan recited it and I wrote it down.

“Did she say where she was?” I asked.

“No,” she said, the tone of her voice changing.

“Why not?”

“I tried to reason with her,” she said. “I told her I talked to you guys.”

I winced. “Okay.”

“And I think she was afraid I’d tell you. And she was totally serious. She doesn’t want to see you right now.”

My stomach sank.

“There’s something else,” Morgan said.

Lauren and I stayed silent, staring at the phone.

“She saw a postcard,” Morgan said. “In a drugstore or something. Of some blue bridge in San Diego.”

A chill ran down my spine.

“She thinks she’s supposed to go there,” she said. “She said it felt familiar.”

“Was she going there? Tonight?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “She kept saying tomorrow.”

Lauren sat down on the foot of the bed, steadying herself with her hands.

“And she wouldn’t say where she is tonight?”

“No.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s alright. This is all good. Is she going to call you back?”

“Yeah,” Morgan said. “I made her promise.”

I made a fist. “Good. When?”

“Before she goes to sleep,” she said. “Tonight. I told her that I needed to know she had a place to sleep for the night and the only way I wouldn’t call you guys was if she promised to call me.”

“That’s great, Morgan,” I said. “That’s a great job.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Her voice faltered a bit. “I don’t like lying to her.”

“You’re helping her. Think of it that way.”

“I guess.”

“Here’s the deal,” I said. “Stay close to your phone. We’re going to try and track down the phone. We might need your help. I’ll call you back. If you haven’t heard from me by the time she calls, make sure you call us the second you hang up with her. And if you can find out where she’s at, even better.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

“I’ll talk to you soon,” I said, and we hung up.

Lauren was sitting ramrod straight on the bed.

I set the phone down on the table. “You okay?”

She shook her head. “No. Not really.”

I sat down next to her. “Talk to me.”

“I’m scared,” she said. “Scared what’s going to happen to her. Scared she’s in danger. Scared she’s going to think all of this is our fault. Scared she won’t love us anymore.”

“It’ll be okay,” I said, putting my arm around her.

She rested her head on my shoulder. “You don’t know that, Joe. You don’t know that.”

She was right. I didn’t know that.

But I wanted to believe it.

TWENTY-FOUR

“I have the number,” I said to Anchor.

I’d sat with Lauren for a few moments, then dialed Anchor.

“Can you give it to me?” he asked.

I read the number off the paper.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m on my way back to you now. I’ll go to work on this as I drive. I’ll pick you and Ms. Tyler up in front of the hotel in twenty-five minutes.”

We hung up.

“He’s on his way,” I said. “He wants us to meet him downstairs in a little bit.”

“Let’s go down now,” she said, standing from the bed. “It feels claustrophobic up here.”

We went back downstairs and sat down on a bench outside the front entrance. The air had cooled a little, a breeze blowing in from the ocean, and I breathed in the salty air. Jet fuel drifted in the air from the planes, and, even at that late hour, cars traveled quickly up and down the airport road, either trying to get to, or away, from LAX.

“Where are we going when he gets here?” Lauren asked.

“He didn’t say.”

“Where was he?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Lovely.

“I feel like I should call the Corzines,” I said. “See if anyone’s made contact with them.”

“You mean Mike?”

“Or anyone else. At least we’d know if there was anyone on our heels.”

“We’re this close,” Lauren said. “I’m not sure anyone could beat us to her at this point.”

“But if she finds her way to Coronado…”

“…we can get there, too.”

“I suppose,” I said. “I’d just like to know.”

We sat there for a few minutes, watching the late-night traffic. A hotel shuttle pulled up and a couple with a little girl stepped off. They looked weary, jet-lagged, but the mother still offered a small smile as they walked past us on their way toward the entrance to the hotel’s lobby. I couldn’t take my eyes off the girl. She looked liked Elizabeth.

She disappeared through the double doors of the hotel, trailing a Disney suitcase behind her. I felt my stomach clench. We’d never gone anywhere on a plane as a family. We’d stayed close to San Diego. She’d never been on a late-night adventure, exhausted and excited like the little girl I’d just seen. I shook my head. One more memory that had been robbed from us before we could even make it.

“What’s wrong?” Lauren asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

A dark red sedan pulled into the lot and crawled slowly through the registration area and I was grateful for the distraction.

“This might be Anchor,” I said.

The tinted windows didn’t allow us to see inside.

The car pulled to a halt in front of us.

We both stood.

The driver’s side door opened.

And my blood ran cold.

“Joe, Lauren,” Lieutenant Leonard Bazer said. “Nice to see you.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Even at that late hour, Bazer was in uniform. The joke around the station was that he didn't own anything else to wear, as no one had ever seen him in anything but the uniform of the Coronado Police Department. His pale gray eyes surveyed us, no expression on his face. Tall, still not an ounce of fat on him, and a clean shaven head. He hadn't aged a day in the decade since I'd last told him to go to hell.

He held out his hand to me. "Joe."

I kept my hands at my sides. "Hey, Len."

He cracked a smile, but I knew he didn't think it was funny. He didn't like to be addressed as anything other than Lieutenant. But he was no longer my lieutenant. He hadn't been since the day he'd hung me out to dry and fed me to the media as a suspect in my own daughter's disappearance.

"Lauren," he said, turning to her. "It's been awhile."

She nodded, but didn't say anything.

He dropped his unwanted hand. "You two look well."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I asked, unable to contain my anger at seeing him again. My antennae were up, on guard. Forget the fact that I hated his guts. I was more concerned as to how he'd found us.

And what he wanted.

"I saw the report," Bazer said. "About Elizabeth."

"Did you?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. This morning."

"And then you just magically found us?" I asked. "Showed up here at the curb?"

His mouth set in a flat line. "No, no magic. I saw the report. I made some calls. Heard you had some trouble in Denver. Made a few more calls. Led me here."

"Bullshit," I said, shaking my head. "A couple of phone calls doesn't get you right here."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "I was able to obtain Elizabeth's name. I was able to check the flight manifests. I figured if she was here in Los Angeles, you

weren’t far behind.”

“And then you called every neighboring hotel near LAX?” Lauren asked. “Really?”

“Took us nine hotels to find you,” he said, a grin spreading across his face. “I was a detective once, Lauren. I still remember how to do the work.”

It wasn’t the how that bothered me. It was the why.

“So why are you here?” I said. “Because I know you aren’t here to just check on our well-being. You don’t have that in you.”

He licked his lips, stuck his hands on his hips. “I thought you might need help.”

I stared at him for a long moment, then turned to Lauren. “I don’t know whether to laugh or kick his ass.”

She was still staring at Bazer. “He’d arrest you before your fist got near his mouth. He doesn’t play fair, remember?”

A bored expression crossed Bazer’s face. “Alright. You wanna take your shots at me, let’s get them out of the way. Say everything you’ve ever wanted to say to me.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you,” I said. “Not worth my time.”

“Then let’s end the standoff here, alright?” he said, his voice colder now. “I’m here to help you find your daughter.”

“We don’t want your help,” I said. “Not now. Not ever.”

He stared at me for a long time, the gray eyes icing over. His famous stare. He used it to intimidate suspects and subordinates and politicians. Once upon a time, it had worked on me. But it lost it’s heat when I saw him for what he really was—a guy who cared more about his own reputation than solving a crime.

“Elizabeth’s disappearance is still an open case,” he said.

“Yeah. An open federal case,” I said. “Over which you have no authority. Zero.”

“Happened on my watch,” he said. “It’ll always be my case.”

The bile in my stomach threatened to rise up. “Happened on your watch and all you cared about was making sure your department looked clean, which meant tossing me to the wolves and hanging suspicion on me. Fucking up my entire life.” I stepped closer to him, his breath hot on my face. “So fuck you and fuck your help.”

He stood his ground and stared me down.

I stared back.

“I can help, Joe,” he said. “You may hate me, but I can help. I have resources you don’t have access to.”

“Why?” I growled. “Why do you want to help now? You were happy to wash it out of Coronado, let it go away. And now all of a sudden you care?” I shook my head. “What’s in it for you?”

“I just want to find your daughter,” he said. “Happened on my watch.”

“Or maybe you played a part,” I said, watching for a reaction.

He frowned. “What?”

“Maybe you need to find her before we do,” I said. My eyes locked with his. “Maybe there’s a reason you drove your ass up here in the middle of the night. As soon as you found out she was back in California. Maybe you played a part.”

Bazer stood there for a moment, silent. Then he took a step back, turned, and walked around the front of his car. He paused at the driver’s door and looked across the roof at me.

“If you’re insinuating that I had something to do with your daughter’s disappearance, you are wrong,” he said. “Wrong. I can understand how you might say something like that because of what you believe I did to you. But I came up here to help. To find your daughter.”

“And to make sure you look like some goddamn hero,” Lauren spat. “You are a joke.” She pulled on my arm. “Let’s go.”

I followed her gaze and saw Anchor standing near a white Escalade on the other side of the lot. He watched our exchange with Bazer, his arms folded loosely across his chest. I knew if we signaled in any way, he’d come. We started walking that way.

“Where are you going?” Bazer asked.

“To a resource you don’t have access to,” I said, leaving him there at his car.

He was still standing there when we drove out of the lot with Anchor, staring at us as we drove past.

TWENTY-SIX

“Not a friend?” Anchor asked.

Lauren and I were in the backseat of the new Escalade. Kitting was driving and Anchor was in the passenger seat. I had no clue as to what had happened to the black Escalade from earlier.

“No,” I said. “Definitely not a friend. My former boss.”

Anchor twisted his head to the side. “A police officer?”

“From San Diego,” I said, staring out the window as the buildings blurred past.

“What was he doing here?”

“I have no idea.”

Anchor tilted his head. “Interesting.”

I thought seeing Elizabeth pull up to the curb would’ve surprised me less than seeing Bazer. And it heightened my suspicion. I didn’t believe for a second that he was there to help find Elizabeth out of the goodness of his heart. He didn’t have a heart. He cared about one person and one person only. Himself.

But I wasn’t sold on the idea that he’d go through the trouble of tracking us down just to clear his name. Yes, that was definitely all he cared about. He’d go to great lengths to keep the department’s reputation clean, even if that meant burning bridges. Because that meant his reputation remained sparkling. But I was having a hard time believing that he’d kept his finger on the pulse of Elizabeth’s disappearance and as soon as he saw the television report, he’d leapt into action. The sad fact was that most people had forgotten about her disappearance. It wasn’t like it was hanging over the department or anyone else. People weren’t clamoring for the case to be solved. So I wasn’t buying his story.

It didn’t feel right and the more I thought about it, the more I started to believe that he absolutely had something to do with Elizabeth’s disappearance.

“Joe?”

I turned toward Lauren’s voice. Her hand was on my arm. “Yeah?”

“He was talking to you.”

I looked over the seat at Anchor. “Sorry. What?”

“I was asking about the girl in Colorado,” Anchor said. “How cooperative would she be?”

“What do you mean?”

“If we could get her to work with us, we should be able to get you on the phone with your daughter.”

I rolled my shoulders, trying to shake some of the tension. “How?”

“If we could use her mobile number for a bit, we could forward her calls to your phone,” he said. “It would require accessing the girl’s account, but it would be simple to do and would eliminate a middle person.”

I wondered what hearing my daughter’s voice would do to me. And I wondered what it might do to her. I wasn’t sure either of us was ready for that. But eliminating Morgan might get us to Elizabeth quicker.

“I think we could get her to cooperate,” I said. “You want me to call her now?”

“No,” Anchor answered. “I’ll need a few minutes to set it up and we are nearly at the taxi company now.” He turned to Kitting. “You’ll start the process while we are interviewing inside?”

Kitting nodded.

We were on the east side of I-5, somewhere in Inglewood. Strip malls were plentiful, filled with check-cashing joints, pawn shops and restaurants that appeared to be on their last legs. We passed the old fabulous Forum which looked anything but fabulous and then the area went industrial—large parking lots and buildings behind chain-link fences, giving the illusion of security.

Kitting turned the SUV into one of the lots, pulling to a stop at a guard house and yellow gates. A guy leaned out of the house, looked at Kitting, then nodded at him and the gate rose up. We parked in a slot near a long, low-slung building with ugly metal siding.

The dark lot was filled with white and green taxis of all makes and models—minivans, sedans, even a pick-up truck. Most of the cars were newer, but there were a few that looked like they had seen better days.

We followed Anchor toward the building while Kitting stayed in the car. Anchor opened the door and let us in ahead of him.

The yellow tinted lights made the room seem dingy. Two dispatchers sat behind a long counter, wearing headphones and talking into handheld receivers. Several old

battered chairs lined the wall.

One dispatcher, a woman with gray hair and too much makeup, held up a finger to Anchor as he leaned on the counter. She mumbled into the handheld, shook her head, then mumbled again. Her thumb pressed a button on the receiver and she looked at Anchor. “You’re the one here for Ernie?”

Anchor nodded.

“Hang on,” she said and went back to mumbling into the receiver.

I wasn’t entirely sure why we were there. It seemed to me that we could get any of the information we wanted over the phone. I was also starting to get antsy. It felt like we’d been doing too much standing around and not enough looking. I knew that things took time and that sometimes there was nothing to do but wait for information, but standing around wasn’t comfortable, especially when we thought Elizabeth was close.

A short, squat man waddled out behind the counter. Thinning black hair, a bushy mustache and a shirt unbuttoned at the collar exposing a nest of chest hair. He frowned at Lauren and me, then looked at Anchor. “You’re the guy?”

“I’m the guy,” Anchor replied, more amused than anything else.

“He’s back here,” he said, then motioned for us to follow him.

We walked through a couple of swinging doors next to the counter and followed him around the corner and down a hallway with cheap artwork and dirty carpeting. He stopped and held out his arm, directing us into a room off the hallway. “All yours.”

The room looked like a small classroom, with several tables pushed together to form one big square table and white boards on the walls. Someone had attempted to clean the boards, but faint lines in multiple colors were still visible.

A young man, maybe late twenties, was sitting on the opposite side of the square, flipping through a magazine, turning the pages out of boredom more than interest. He glanced up when we entered, big tired eyes peering up at us. He wore a gray long-sleeve T-shirt and his curly dark hair looked like it needed to be cut.

Our escort motioned at him. “Tell them whatever they wanna know, got it?”

The man glanced at his watch. “Hey, Ernie, I gotta get to my other job…”

“Answer them quick then, D.J., and we’ll get you out of here,” Ernie said, cutting him off. He looked at Anchor. “All yours.” He exited.

Anchor smiled at D.J. “I promise, we’ll be brief and get you off to wherever you need to be.”

D.J. looked annoyed, but nodded.

Anchor looked at me.

“You picked up a girl earlier today at LAX,” I said.

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“Do you remember?”

“I haven’t slept in two days, man,” he said. “I’m trying to make sure I grab enough fares to cover winter tuition. I go to UCLA. So I’m a little foggy.”

“I hear you,” I said. “But can you think for a minute. Girl, sixteen years old. Long brown hair.”

“I rarely pick up anywhere else,” he said. “People don’t use cabs out here unless they’re leaving the airport and I don’t go over to Hollywood because it’s too dicey. Never know who wants a ride.”

“Sure,” I said and slid the black-and-white still Anchor had given me in front of him. “The girl. She would’ve been alone, I think. And no bags. Maybe a little rattled.”

He looked down at the picture, blinked several times. “Oh, yeah. She had no idea where she wanted to go. She was crying a little, too.”

I glanced at Lauren. She was standing against the wall, her arms folded across her chest, her eyes on D.J.

“I asked her what was wrong,” he said. “But she didn’t want to talk. So I asked where she needed to go. And she said she didn’t know.”

I nodded.

“I told her it was gonna be hard for me to take her anywhere then,” he continued. “And I told her she either needed to pick a place or get out because I couldn’t just sit in the taxi line at the airport.”

A muscle worked in my jaw. “And?”

“And she said she didn’t know where she needed to go,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Then she asked how far San Diego was. I told her too far.”

“So where did you take her?” I asked, frustrated and running out of patience.

“She asked me to take her in the direction of San Diego,” he said. “I said I’d go twenty minutes max. That was it.”

“Where did you take her?” Anchor asked, sensing my frustration. “Specifically.”

“We went PCH,” D.J. said. “405 was jammed and we wouldn’t have gone anywhere. So we got to Redondo.”

“And then what?” I asked. “You dropped her at the beach? A mall? What?”

“Hotel,” he said. “She picked out a couple of crappy ones, but I told her they weren’t good ideas.”

Anchor had his phone out, poking at the screen and scrolling.

“So I dropped her at the Crowne Plaza,” he said.

“Did you wait on her?” I asked. “Make sure she got in?”

He shook his head. “No. I needed to get back for my next fare. I ran a bunch more before I got called here. And I still don’t get why. Are you gonna tell me?”

“She’d be under Corzine, correct?” Anchor asked, putting the phone to his ear.

“Yeah,” Lauren said, heading for the door. “Ellie Corzine.”

They walked out together and I followed them.

“So no one’s gonna tell me?” D.J. yelled. “That’s it?”

That was it.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“If she’s not there, why are we going?” Lauren asked.

We were back in the SUV, heading south on the freeway. Even at that hour, the roads were clogged with traffic. Anchor had called the hotel. No one was registered under the name Ellie Corzine.

“She could be using another name,” I said. “Maybe someone will remember her. It’s following the trail.”

Anchor nodded from the front passenger seat.

Lauren sighed and leaned her head back against the seat.

Finding someone almost always came from following a trail, any trail. The work was in the minute details. Phone calls, emails, interviewing. Talking to people who had talked to whomever you were looking for. Tracking down anything related to the missing person, no matter how small. It was boring, it was tiring and it was tedious. But that was how you found people. You didn’t pass on any opportunities. Because you never knew what you’d find.

We rode in silence and I stared out the window, watching the traffic and the buildings, trying to orient myself to once again being in Southern California. With the freeways and buildings stacked right next to each other, it felt nearly claustrophobic after driving through Utah and Nevada. There was no room to move or breathe.

Kitting directed the car off the freeway and leaned over, whispering something to Anchor. Anchor nodded, glanced in his rearview mirror and nodded again.

The side streets were empty compared to the freeway, the traffic lights creating an uncomfortable ebb and flow as we worked our way westward. The industrial buildings began to give way to bungalow homes, trendy restaurants and coffee shops. We hit PCH and turned south into Redondo Beach and the only glimpse I could get of the Pacific made it look like a massive black pool.

The Crowne Plaza was off North Harbor Drive, an impressive five-story structure surrounded by palm trees. Kitting pulled the SUV under the arches and a bellhop immediately opened Anchor’s door, then mine and Lauren’s. Kitting stayed put.

The bellhop was young, probably college-aged, sporting blond hair, blue eyes and an affable smile. “Checking in, folks?”

“We’ll let you know,” Anchor said, brushing past him.

His smile faded and Lauren and I followed Anchor into an expansive lobby lined with columns and potted palm trees. The white floor tiles were polished smooth.

“I need to make a call,” Anchor said. “Excuse me for a moment.”

I nodded and headed for the check-in desk, where another blonde haired, blue-eyed male smiled at me. “Welcome, folks. Checking in?”

“We’re actually looking for a guest,” I said. “Ellie Corzine.”

“Do you have a room number, sir?” he asked.

“I do not,” I said. “And I actually don’t think she’s staying here.”

He squinted at me. “Excuse me?”

There was no story I could give him other than the truth, so I told him why we were there.

“I just came on an hour ago,” he said when I was done. “I work the overnights. So I don’t think I saw her. Let me grab my manager. Excuse me for just a second.”

He disappeared through a door behind the counter.

I scanned the lobby. Anchor was lounging against one of the columns, talking into his phone.

Lauren was looking around, too. “It’s weird to think she was just here.”

“It is, I agree.”

“Like I can almost feel her here, you know?”

I nodded. It was how I’d felt, standing at the registration desk at the hotel in Denver.

“I mean, I know that sounds stupid,” Lauren said. “But it’s like I can feel her here. Like she was standing right here, the exact same place.” She shook her head. “So strange.”

“Sir?” a voice said behind me.

I turned back to the counter. A woman around my age, dressed in a maroon business suit smiled at me. Large gold earrings hung from her ears and her face was covered with a thick sheen of makeup.

“Sir, I’m Valerie Beltran,” she said. “I’m the night manager here at the Crowne Plaza.”

I introduced myself and Lauren and repeated why we were there.

She nodded thoughtfully. “I checked our guest register. We don’t show anyone listed by that name. And I think I can tell you why.”

“Why?”

“She would’ve needed to provide identification,” Beltran said. “Given what you’ve told me, we would’ve been unable to provide her with a room because she’s under the age of eighteen. That’s our policy.”

“No exceptions?”

“None. Ever.” She shook her head, emphatic. “It’s corporate policy and I can tell you we adhere to it. We regularly have high-school-aged students come here, looking to stay the night for a dance or other activity. Unless there is an adult over the age of eighteen, we cannot and will not accommodate them.”

That made sense. It was a liability issue as well as smart business. If teenagers were trying to snag a hotel room, more than likely, it meant they were looking to do things that might get them in trouble if they tried to do them at home.

“Do you have a policy as to how you handle any minors looking to check-in?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. Generally, we just politely decline them. If they get angry, we remind them that we can call the authorities. That’s usually all it takes.”

“But if a teenage girl shows up here all alone?” Lauren asked. “With no one else and no belongings? You’d just send her away?”

Beltran pursed her lips, then nodded. “Yes. We would. It’s not our place to police. And while I’m not passing judgment on the young girl you’re looking for, you’d be surprised at what kids will attempt to do to obtain a room. They’ll claim to be alone, when they’ve got six friends outside. They’ll claim that their parent is on their way, or that their parents made the reservation. They’ll try to pull every scam you can think of in order to get in here.” She shook her head again. “They can be very resourceful. But our policy is to decline, plain and simple. We don’t police because we can’t.”

Lauren looked away, not bothering to hide her disgust.

I understood what Beltran was saying, though. Elizabeth was the exception

rather than the rule. What the front desk saw was a bunch of spoiled teenagers trying to sneak into a room. They didn't need help or to be policed. They just needed to be sent away. They couldn't be expected to investigate every kid that walked in and wanted a room.

"Is it possible to find out who she spoke to at the desk?" I asked. "To see if anything was said or if she might've said where she was going to go instead?"

Beltran frowned. "I'm not sure we could be of any help."

"Still. You never know," I said.

"And I'm not sure the hotel should be involved."

Lauren turned back to her. "Are you fucking kidding me, lady? We're asking to talk to an employee about a girl who has been missing for nearly ten years who came to your hotel and you turned her away because of policy. We aren't looking to tarnish your reputation." Her eyes narrowed. "And if you don't let us talk to whomever turned her away, I can guarantee you, I'll personally call every local TV station and hit every Internet site I can find, letting people know she was here and you dismissed her and then wouldn't grant a simple interview. What do you think *that* will do to your occupancy rate?"

I couldn't have said it better myself.

Beltran looked stuck, unsure what to do. She pulled nervously at her earring.

We waited.

"Give me just a moment," she said, then disappeared through the same door the original desk clerk had gone through.

"Well done," I said.

"Idiot," she said, shaking her head. "I'm surprised you haven't punched out more people."

"Bail gets expensive."

"I would've wired it to you," she said.

I glanced across the lobby. Anchor was still on the phone, but he was standing, looking out one of the front windows.

Beltran reappeared. "I've located the employee that spoke to the young woman. He'll be here momentarily."

“Thank you,” I said.

She nodded. “If we could have you perhaps move over there to the chairs, he’d be happy to speak with you and answer anything he can.”

I nodded and we walked over to where Anchor was standing. He pulled the phone from his ear and punched it off.

He looked at me. “Any luck?”

“We’re waiting to speak with someone who spoke to her,” I said. “But she’s not here.”

“Alright,” he said. “I need to run outside for a moment and chat with Ellis. I’ll be back.” He excused himself and headed out the main entrance.

“What’s his deal now?” Lauren asked.

“No clue,” I answered.

Beltran approached us, accompanied by another college-aged kid, this one stocky, with thick black hair and nervous eyes.

“Mr. Tyler, this is Will Thorton, one of our front desk agents,” she said. “I believe he was the one who had contact with your daughter. He’ll be happy to answer what he can.”

I offered my hand and he shook it unenthusiastically. He nodded at Lauren. She just stared back.

“Young girl was in here just a few hours ago,” I said. “You recall?”

“Yeah,” he said, his expression flat, showing me nothing. “I remember.”

“I assume she was here looking for a room?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. But she didn’t have ID.”

“She give you her name?”

He shook his head.

Lauren pulled out a photo she’d taken from Elizabeth’s room in Minneapolis. “This was her, though?”

He looked at it, waited, then nodded. “Yeah, that was her.”

“So, when she couldn’t produce ID, what happened?” I asked.

Will glanced at Beltran, then looked at me. “Nothing, really. I told her she couldn’t have a room without ID.”

I waited.

He stayed quiet.

“And that was it?” I asked. “She just turned and walked out?”

He glanced again at Beltran, then shrugged. “Yeah, pretty much.”

We all stood there silent. Beer bottles clanked in the bar behind us. A phone rang behind the counter. A horn honked outside.

“Will, I’m going to be very direct,” I said, staring at him. “I think you’re lying your ass off here.”

His face immediately colored and his eyes danced everywhere except near mine. “What? No, I’m not. Really. I don’t…”

“Here’s what I think is happening,” I said, interrupting him. “I think there was more to your interaction with our daughter. I’m not sure what, but I’m pretty sure she didn’t just turn and walk out. See, we know more about what happened to her right before she walked in here and I’m pretty confident she didn’t just say thanks a lot and walk.”

Will chewed hard on his bottom lip.

“And I’m starting to think that whatever you did, it might get you in trouble with your boss here,” I said, glancing at Beltran. “I think you’re worried about saying something in front of her. Because you look like you’ve got spiders crawling up and down your legs, you’re so nervous.”

Will glanced again at Beltran, who was staring at him, her eyebrows raised, waiting on him.

“And here’s the deal,” I continued. “I get it. You don’t want to get in trouble. But let me explain something to you. Outside, there are two guys who brought us here. They like lying even less than we do. And they’ll sit out there and wait for you to leave the hotel and then they’ll insist that you talk to them and you won’t have a choice because they won’t give you one. You’ll tell the truth and believe me when I tell you that it’ll be far worse than anything that Ms. Beltran can do to you.”

Will’s cheeks flushed again and both he and Beltran looked past us, toward the entrance. I knew they didn’t see anyone and they were probably trying to decide if I was lying or not. He was going to be in a world of hurt if he didn’t believe me

because I'd turn Anchor loose if that's what it was going to take.

"Will, if there's more to say here, I think you should," Beltran said.

Will caught his lower lip between his teeth, biting down so hard I thought he might draw blood. His eyes shifted between me, Beltran and the big glass doors at the entrance, like he couldn't figure out which battle he wanted to fight.

He expelled a deep breath. "I passed her to Aaron."

"Aaron?" I asked.

Beltran's face soured. "Aaron Simmons?"

Will nodded.

"Who is Aaron and what do you mean passed her?" I asked.

Will shoved his hands in his pockets and went back to chewing on his lip.

"Mr. Simmons is a former employee here," Beltran said. "He was relieved of his duties about a month ago."

I nodded, still watching Will Thorton.

He finally sighed. "Okay, alright. Aaron and I have a deal."

"A deal," I repeated.

"Girls show up here, I call him," he explained. "Just give him a shout if they're single or looking to hook up or whatever. They gotta be hot."

Beltran's face was growing redder with each word.

"So when that girl came in here and I told her we couldn't give her a room, she got pretty upset," Will continued. "Not like mad, but just upset. Said she had nowhere to go. So I told her I had a friend who might be able to help her out."

"Jesus," Beltran whispered, her mouth set in a hard, angry line.

I took a deep breath. "So he came and picked her up or what?"

Will shifted his weight, the imaginary spiders still crawling up his legs. "Yeah. She said okay. I called him and he got here in maybe ten minutes."

"And she just went with him?" Lauren asked, incredulous.

Will shrugged. "Yeah."

“So then what happens?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” Will asked.

“You call him,” I said. “Tell him there’s a girl. He comes over and meets them or picks them up or whatever. Then what happens?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and rolled his shoulders. “They just go to his place, I guess. I don’t really know.”

“And what do you get out of this?” I asked.

Will sighed. “Fifty bucks. Hundred if he hooks up.”

Lauren’s fist shot out and caught Will Thornton square in the mouth. He stumbled backward and Anchor was immediately at her side.

“You little asshole,” Lauren hissed. “Pimping her out.”

Will’s hands were at his mouth, his expression more surprised than hurt.

“You’re fired,” Beltran said, quietly. “You’re done.”

Will frowned, but didn’t seem all that surprised.

“Address,” I said. “I want an address for this guy.”

“I don’t know his exact address,” Will said, dropping his hands from his mouth.

“But you know where he lives,” I said.

“Yeah, pretty much,” he said.

“I can get an address out of his file,” Beltran said. “I’ll be right back.”

She hustled across the lobby.

“He should accompany us,” Anchor said. “Just to make sure we find it.”

“I agree,” I said.

“Look, man, I’m not going anywhere,” Will said, shaking his head. “I just…”

Anchor was next to him, his hand gripping Will’s arm, whispering into his ear. The color drained from Will’s face and, after a frozen moment, he gave a short, curt nod. Anchor released his arm and patted him on the shoulder.

“He’ll be coming with us,” Anchor said, smiling at me.

TWENTY-EIGHT

“We have a small complication,” Anchor said from the passenger seat.

We were idling in front of the hotel. Will Thorton sat pressed into between Lauren and myself in the back with Ellis behind the wheel.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Seems someone is following us,” Anchor said.

Lauren glanced at me across a hunched down Will Thorton.

“Who?” I asked.

“Not sure,” Anchor said. “But we’re going to find out. So just bear with us for a moment, please.”

I wasn’t sure what other choice we had.

Ellis pulled the SUV away from the curb slowly, then made a U-turn at the end of the parking lot. We passed the front entrance and made a left out onto the street in front of the hotel. We drove maybe twenty-five feet before Ellis jerked the wheel, crossed the double yellow line and screeched to a diagonal halt in front of a car parked at the curb. Both he and Anchor were out of the car before we’d seemingly come to a halt.

“What the hell is going on?” Lauren asked.

“No clue,” I said, staring out the window.

Anchor and Ellis were flanking a late model American sedan—Ford, Chevy, I wasn’t sure—but it looked like a rental to me. Anchor was on the driver’s side and Ellis was on the passenger’s side, perched on the sidewalk, eyes riveted to the car. I didn’t see weapons, but I was certain they were there and could get them out quicker than whomever was in the car that had apparently been tailing us.

Ellis moved closer to the car and his hand snaked around to the small of his back.

Anchor was in tight on the driver’s side window, his hand on the door.

The door opened.

Lauren and I both saw who it was at the same time, but she said it before I could. “What the hell?”

I slid out of my seat, opened the door, walked around the front end of the car and said to Bryce Ponder “What the hell are you doing here?”

Bryce was wearing the same clothes he’d had on in Denver and his chest was puffed out. “Looking for Ellie.”

Anchor glanced at me. “You know him?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but he’s supposed to be back in Minnesota.” I switched my gaze back to Bryce. “I told you to go home.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” he said, lifting his chin.

“The hell I can’t,” I said. “We told you. You took an unaccompanied minor across state lines. I guess I need to make that call now. I didn’t think you were this stupid.”

The air left his chest and his shoulders slumped. “You can’t call the cops, man.”

“Really? I can’t?”

“Let me interrupt for a moment,” Anchor said, then motioning at Kitting. Kitting nodded and went back to the SUV. “I’m going to give you two a couple of minutes to get this figured out.” He looked at me. “Handle it however you’d like and let me know if you need assistance.” Then he turned to Bryce. “And I’ll say this one time. Do not follow us when we leave. Do not follow us again. I will see you. If I do, you won’t be able to follow anyone again for a very long time. In a car or in any other manner.” Anchor retreated to the car.

Bryce Ponder swallowed hard, watching Anchor as he walked back to the SUV.

“He’s not kidding,” I said. “And either am I.” I pulled out my phone.

“Please don’t call the cops, man,” he said. “I just want to help find her.”

I scrolled through my contacts and found the number I wanted, then punched it. “I’m not calling the cops.”

Relief swept through him. “Thanks.”

“I’m calling your parents.”

His eyes went wide. “What? No, you…”

The line clicked over and Ed Ponder said, “Hello?”

“Mr. Ponder, this is Joe Tyler,” I said, staring at Bryce. “I’m going to put you on speaker for a moment.”

I pulled the receiver from my ear and touched the screen. “Can you hear me alright?”

“Yeah, I can hear you.”

“I’m standing here with Bryce,” I said. “And I need your help.”

“You’re with Bryce?” Ed Ponder asked. “In Colorado?”

“No,” I said. “We’re in California.”

“California?”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at Bryce. Briefly, I recounted how we’d met up with Bryce in Denver and how he’d then followed us to California despite our telling him to return home.

Ed Ponder muttered something under his breath. I couldn’t make out the words but they weren’t pleasant.

“So, here’s my dilemma,” I said. “I can’t have him out here, getting in the way. It’s not going to work. He told us he’d head back to Minnesota and he didn’t. My inclination is to call the authorities now. But I promised you I would do everything I could to avoid getting him in trouble with his probation. I’d like to keep that promise. So, I’m calling you.”

A long sigh came through the phone. “I’m nearly inclined to tell you just to call the cops.”

Bryce frowned and shook his head, chewing on his thumbnail.

“But I guess I’d rather you not,” Ed said. “Everything being even, I’d rather you not.”

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“He’s there? He can hear me?” Ed asked. “Bryce you there?”

I looked at Bryce.

“I’m here, Dad,” Bryce mumbled.

“I have no idea what you’re doing,” Ed Ponder said. “None. But it sounds like Mr. Tyler is willing to cut you a break if you’ll do the right thing for a change. We know you have the credit card your mother arranged for you. You still have it, right?”

Bryce shuffled his feet. “Yeah.”

“Go to the airport. Now,” Ed said. “Buy a ticket home. We’ll pick you up.”

“My truck’s in Denver,” Bryce said.

“We’ll worry about that later. Go to the airport and buy a ticket. If you can’t get a flight until morning, you spend the night there at the airport. You wanna do anything else, you’re on your own.”

Bryce’s hands were balled up and I knew he wanted to lash out. Hit me, hit something. But he didn’t. He took a deep breath. “Alright.”

“Call me when you get to the airport,” Ed said. “Mr. Tyler?”

“I’m here,” I said.

“Thank you,” he replied. “For calling and for giving him another chance to save his own rear end. My wife and I both appreciate it. You need anything else from us, please let me know.”

“Will do,” I said and we hung up.

Bryce and I stood on the sidewalk for a moment.

“I wasn’t trying to cause trouble,” he said. “I really wasn’t.”

“I believe you.”

His eyes clouded over. “I’m just worried about her.”

“Me, too. But the best way for you to help is to go home.”

He nodded. “I will. But can I give you something?”

“Give me something?”

He fished in the pocket of his jeans for a moment, then pulled his hand out and extended it to me. A small silver bracelet was in his palm and I took it. There were several small charms attached. A moon, a sun and a small cat.

“I gave it to her for her birthday,” he said. “I found it on the counter in the bathroom in the hotel in Denver. I think she forgot it. Would you give it to her when you find her?”

I fingered the charms for a moment, wondering what they meant to Elizabeth. Wondering how it had looked on her wrist. Wondering if she’d meant to leave it behind or if it had been a mistake. Wondering what other kinds of jewelry she liked to wear.

I folded it up carefully and put it in my pocket. “I’ll get it to her.”

“Thanks,” Bryce said.

“You can find your way back to the airport?”

He nodded. “Yeah. And when you find her?”

I waited.

“Ask her to call me,” Bryce said. “Just whenever she can. Ask her to call me.”

He slid into the driver’s seat of his car and I watched him pull away from the curb.

I still wasn’t sure why he’d followed us to Los Angeles, but I didn’t think he’d meant any harm. I thought he was a kid who missed his girlfriend and couldn’t figure out why she’d cut him out of this part of her life. He was confused, sad, frustrated.

And I hoped I’d have the opportunity to ask her to call him at some point.

TWENTY-NINE

I got back into the car and Lauren was on her phone for a moment before punching it off.

She looked at me. “That was Morgan. Her calls are going to be forwarded to your phone.” She nodded at the front seat. “They got what they needed from her, she said okay and they set it up.” She paused. “So if she calls Morgan…”

“My phone will ring,” I said. “John, is that every call that goes to Morgan’s phone or just from my daughter’s?”

“Every call,” Anchor said, turning around. “We did an entire forward from her system. So any number that calls the girl in Colorado will ring through to you. We should be able to recognize the number, though. Should have a Southern California area code. But I’d say we answer everything, just to be safe.”

I nodded, staring at my phone for a moment. I wasn’t exactly sure how I’d handle hearing my daughter’s voice. I didn’t think there was any way to prepare for the moment.

“Nothing on triangulating her number?” I asked.

Anchor shook his head. “The phone hasn’t been used. We’re still watching. If she makes a call, we’ll see it.”

I nodded again.

“Can anyone tell me what exactly we’re doing?” Will Thorton asked in the seat next to me.

“No,” Lauren said. “Shut up.”

Thorton shrunk in his seat.

Kitting navigated the neighborhood streets in Redondo, passing through narrow streets of upright homes with multiple stories, each trying to get a glimpse of the Pacific out to the west. He pulled to the curb, the big car idling in front of a two-story stucco with a brown garage door and a gate barely hanging on one hinge. An old VW bug was in the driveway, the shiny chrome exhaust pipes at odds with the faded orange paint on the rest of the vehicle. A small, portable fire pit was near the garage door, along with several empty beer cans.

Kitting twisted his head towards us. “This it, kid?”

Thorton nodded, still sulking. “Yeah. He has a roommate, too. But that’s his car.”

Kitting nodded and looked at Anchor.

“You want me to go get him?” Anchor asked.

I opened my door. “No. I’ve got it. She might still be here.”

“I’m coming, too,” Lauren said, her door already open.

“We’ll be here,” Anchor said.

My stomach knotted as Lauren and I walked to the door. We weren’t too far behind Elizabeth. There was a good chance that she was there, behind the door, and that we’d come face to face with her for the first time in nearly a decade. I didn’t know if she’d recognize me or even if she did, how she’d react. I wasn’t sure how I’d react. For so long, I’d committed myself to a search without an ending, a search that only ran into dead-ends. These last couple of days were the first time I’d ever let myself get caught up in thinking that I was close to finding her. That I was going to find her.

And I told myself I was. Even if she wasn’t at this house, we knew she was nearby. Close enough to catch.

Close enough to finally see.

I knocked on the door and heard the knock echo behind it.

We waited.

Footsteps shuffled behind the door and it opened.

A guy in his twenties wearing board shorts, no shirt and sporting a barbwire tattoo around his fairly sizable right bicep stood there, looking at us. “Yeah?”

“You Aaron Simmons?” I asked.

He looked me up and down, then did the same to Lauren. “Maybe. Who are you?”

“We’re looking for the girl you picked up from the Crowne Plaza earlier,” I said. “She here?”

He looked bored. “Not sure what you’re talking about, man, and it’s late to be knocking on my door.”

“Yeah, you do,” I said, then motioned at the car. “Your buddy Will is in there and he brought us here.”

If that fazed him, he didn’t show it. “No idea what you’re talking about, dude,” he repeated. “And I was just about to go to bed so thanks for stopping by.”

He went to close the door but I wedged my shoulder against it. “We’re not done.”

His arms arched at his sides and he thrust his chest out. “Get off my door, dude.”

“We’re not done,” I repeated.

He stared at me, giving me a stare that I’m sure he thought was hard, intimidating, a stare he thought might scare me off. Then he turned to Lauren.

“You’re welcome to come in, though, sweetheart,” he said, casting a leering grin in her direction. “I’ll stay up for you. In a couple of ways.”

I put my hand on his throat and pinned him to the doorframe. He grabbed at my wrist, then tried to swing at me. I pulled my head back and pressed my fingers tighter around his neck.

Lauren stepped off the small step, but didn’t intervene.

He gave up trying to hit me and focused on my hand that was cutting off his air supply. Both of his hands clawed at my forearm as his eyes tried to stay calm. He was strong and I was having trouble maintaining my grip.

I stepped forward and drove my knee upward between his legs. His hands fell to his sides and his entire body sagged. I let go of his throat and let him fall to the ground.

He writhed on the concrete, one hand on his neck, the other folded in between his legs.

I bent down. “There are two guys in that car over there who are far scarier than me. If I go ask them, they’ll come over here and start taking off your fingers, one at a time. We’ll just drop them in a trash can. You’ll beg them to stop. And all because you didn’t want to answer my questions about the girl you picked up earlier. Seems kind of stupid, doesn’t it?”

Beads of sweat popped on his forehead. Red circles sprouted on his neck where my fingers had been.

I waited.

“Fuck you, dude,” he rasped, his eyes darting at me.

Before I could move, Lauren’s foot smashed into his mouth. She pulled it away, exposing a mess of scarlet teeth. Aaron’s eyes were closed tight in pain.

We waited.

He rolled onto his back and eventually opened his eyes. He swallowed several times, probably more blood than saliva, then pushed himself into a sitting position.

He wiped at his mouth with his forearm. “What about her?” he spat.

“You picked her up at the hotel?” I asked.

“Yeah. Will called. It’s our thing. At least, since that bitch fired me.”

“Right. You picked her up. Tell me exactly what happened.”

He leaned back on his hands. “Will told her I could give her a place to stay, a ride, whatever she needed. I went to the hotel. Met her outside. She didn’t really wanna get in the car, but I guess she decided I didn’t bite.” He shrugged. “I told her she could crash at my place.”

I glanced at the front door. “So she’s here?”

He shook his head. “No. We drove for like five minutes and she changed her mind.”

The tiny tendril of hope in my gut disintegrated. I knew better, but I couldn’t help hoping she was somewhere in this dirtbag’s house.

“She just changed her mind?” Lauren asked, frowning. “Just like that?”

He wouldn’t look at her and he rubbed at his jaw. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Or maybe you hit on her or told her she was gonna need to sleep in your bed if she needed a bed to sleep in,” Lauren said.

He stared at her, then shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t remember.”

“Right,” she said, returning his stare.

Lauren was probably right and a small bubble of anger formed inside of me. But beating the crap out of this guy wasn’t going to get us closer to Elizabeth. We needed to focus and not get distracted by his crap.

“She changed her mind,” I said. “Then what?”

“She said she didn’t wanna go,” he said, moving his eyes from Lauren to me. “She asked if I could just drop her off at another hotel.”

“So you took her to another hotel?”

His mouth twisted and he looked away from me. “I told her no.”

“No?”

“Told her I didn’t have time to take her anywhere else,” he said. “It was my place or nothing.”

The anger inside of me grew. “So you just kicked her out of the car?”

He ran his tongue over his teeth, turning them from red to pink. “I pulled over. She was kinda mad.”

“No kidding,” Lauren said, shaking her head.

“I’m not a taxi service,” Aaron said.

“Yeah. You’re just an asshole,” Lauren said. “An asshole who drops girls off in the middle of nowhere. In the middle of the night.”

He started to say something back, then glanced at me and thought better of it. He leaned back on his hands. “I pulled over. She got out. That was it.”

He took a deep breath. I was frustrated with him, but also with Elizabeth. She was playing a dangerous game, getting into cars with strangers, then changing her plans. She was lucky that Aaron was just a jerk and kicked her out of the car. He could’ve done far worse.

“Where did you let her out?” I asked.

“Halfway between here and the hotel,” he said, then shrugged again.

“Where exactly?”

“I wasn’t paying attention.”

I glanced at the cars. “I’m serious. Each finger. They will take each finger off and won’t stop until they are all gone.”

He tried to act like he wasn’t afraid, but his eyes had darted to the SUV and he was swallowing hard.

“Probably about six blocks from here,” he said and then named the cross streets.

“She say anything about where she was going?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nope, and I didn’t ask.”

“You see which way she went?”

“No. She shut the door and I was gone. That was it, man. Didn’t even check the mirror.”

I reminded myself that Elizabeth had gotten herself this far. She may have been afraid, but she wasn’t dumb. She’d made it all the way from Minnesota to California and that didn’t happen by mistake. She may have made some errors in judgment, but she had gotten herself all the way to the coast by herself. That told me she could take care of herself. She wasn’t going to walk out in traffic or sleep in a crack house.

It was a small consolation.

I looked at Lauren. “Let’s go.”

Lauren stood still, staring at Aaron. I’d seen that look before. I knew she wanted another shot at him.

“Not worth it,” I said. “Come on.”

She stayed for a moment, then shook her head and walked past him.

Then she whirled and drove her foot right under his chin, snapping his head back and buckling his arms as he hit the driveway.

She turned back to me. “Totally worth it.”

THIRTY

We were driving in circles.

We'd relayed the info to Kitting and Anchor that we'd gotten from Aaron Simmons and we'd gone to the intersection where Elizabeth had exited Simmons' car. There was no smoking gun, no giant clue, no arrow pointing in the direction she'd gone.

It was simply a deserted intersection just before dawn in a coastal town.

So we drove. We dropped Will Thorton back at the Crowne Plaza and returned to the intersection, trying to replicate every possible route, seeing if they led anywhere that might give us some indication as to where Elizabeth might've gone. But the longer we drove, the more frustrating it became. The houses in the neighborhoods looked more foreign, the fast-food restaurants more generic and the faces of the people in the middle of the night walking the streets less like Elizabeth's.

I was tired of staring out the window. My head hurt. It was almost dawn. I hadn't slept for more than a couple of hours since the chase had begun. Wherever she'd gone, it wasn't where we were looking. We weren't going to find her.

And then my phone rang.

The ring tone was that of an old rotary telephone, a shrill bell that sounded like it was coming from a phone hung on a wall in a kitchen with a long cord, before the days of cordless phones and cells. The number flashed large on the screen, the entire interior of the car illuminating as the screen lit up. A number with an L.A. area code.

"Right number?" Anchor asked.

I nodded, letting the bells ring in my ears. "Yeah."

"Wait three seconds, then answer," he said.

Lauren's fingers dug into the leather seats.

The seconds ticked away in my head.

One.

Two.

Three.

“Okay, answer,” Anchor said.

I took a deep breath, but couldn’t find any air.

I stuck my finger on the answer button, then touched the speaker button.

I tried to speak, but nothing came out.

“Morgan?” the voice said. “It’s me. Are you there?”

I hadn’t heard her voice in almost a decade, but there was no doubt in my mind that it was Elizabeth’s voice. I knew it as if I’d been speaking to her every day for her entire life. In some ways, maybe I had. But hearing her voice right at that moment confirmed something for me that I’d never, ever let myself believe one hundred percent.

She was alive.

“Morgan? Can you hear me?”

“Elizabeth?” I said, my voice sounding strange and foreign in the interior of the car.

She didn’t say anything.

“Elizabeth, please don’t hang up,” I said. “Morgan is worried about you.”

“Who is this?” she asked, her voice quieter, suspicious.

The answer was so simple. It had never changed for me. But I had to wonder if she would agree with it and I had to force the words out of my mouth.

“I’m your dad,” I said, my eyes blurring. “And I’m here with your mom.”

Anchor reached over the seat and gestured with his hand to keep talking.

“I know you have a million questions,” I said, spitting the words out, not sure I was making sense. “We talked to the Corzines in Minneapolis. We talked to Bryce. We’ve been trying to catch up to you. We’re here in Los Angeles.”

“You’ve been following me?” she asked.

Of all the questions I expected, that wasn’t one I was prepared for and I opened my mouth and nothing came.

“Elizabeth, can you tell us where you are?” Lauren said, her voice taut, hanging by a thread. “We just want to help. You don’t have to be alone.”

“I don’t know you,” she said. “I don’t know you.”

Lauren looked at me, lost as to what to say.

“The Corzines said you found papers about your adoption,” I said. “You weren’t adopted. You were taken from us.”

“What?” Her voice was high-pitched. A little hysterical. “What are you talking about?”

There was no roadmap for this conversation. There were no guidelines. I was afraid of saying the wrong thing, but more afraid to say nothing. I knew she might’ve blocked out whatever had happened to her. I knew it might be hard for her to recall and that maybe she couldn’t. But I also knew we’d spent years trying to get her back and now we had her on the phone and it felt like we could reach out and touch her.

“You weren’t adopted,” I repeated. “You were taken from us. And you may not remember all of it. We still aren’t sure what happened. And right now, it doesn’t matter. What matters is making sure you are safe. We want to help you.”

Anchor again spun his finger in the air, encouraging us to keep her on the line.

“Can you tell us where you are?” I asked. “You shouldn’t be alone out here. We can get you to a hotel. We don’t want to…”

“I was taken from you?” she asked and it sounded like she was crying.

My fingers dug into my thigh. “Yes. From our front yard. Almost ten years ago.”

“Was it here? In California?”

“Yes.”

The line buzzed and I felt like I couldn’t catch my breath.

“I thought something happened to you,” she said, her voice breaking. “Or that you gave me away.”

Tears raced down my face and I steadied myself against the car door. “We didn’t, Elizabeth. We didn’t. We wouldn’t. I’ve spent the entire time looking for you. The entire time.”

“I thought you gave me away,” she said again, the words ragged.

“We didn’t. I promise you, we didn’t.”

“I called Morgan,” she said, ignoring what I was telling her. “Why did you answer? You said you were here in California. But she’s in Colorado. How did you

answer her phone?”

“We didn’t,” I said, frustrated that I couldn’t give her answers to assure her. “The call was forwarded. Let us come to you. I swear we can explain everything. Let us come get you. We’ll come right now.”

She didn’t say anything. Lauren’s head was thrown back against the head rest, her bottom lip tucked into her mouth, her body shaking as she cried.

“This is…it’s too much,” Elizabeth said.

“Elizabeth, if…”

“My name’s Ellie,” she said, and for the first time I heard anger.

But I couldn’t call her that. It wasn’t the name I’d given her. It had been given to her by people who had ripped her out of our lives. I couldn’t get it to come out of my mouth.

“Just tell us where you are,” I said. “We can take you back to Minneapolis if you want. Whatever you want. But you can’t be out here alone. Let us help you. Please.”

“No,” she said. “No.”

The line went dead.

THIRTY-ONE

“We didn’t get an exact location,” Anchor said.

Lauren and I were sitting there, neither of us moving, both of us still in different stages of shock. At least I was. I couldn’t say for certain for Lauren, but looking at her, her eyes staring straight ahead, her shoulders slumped over, a numb expression on her face, told me we were in similar spots.

Having her hang up might have been the most excruciating moment I’d experienced since the actual day she’d been taken. Like she’d been given back to me, then taken away again. I’d expected her to be confused and wary, but I think that I was convinced I could persuade her to let us come to her. As if there’d be some magical connection between us that would allow her to trust me and all would go back to normal.

Not so much.

“The signal is coming from an area about an hour south of us,” Anchor said, glancing back at his phone. “Sixty miles or so. South Orange County, maybe moving toward San Diego.”

I nodded, if for no other reason than to acknowledge that I hear him.

“You call back, she might answer,” he said.

“She won’t.”

“You don’t wanna try?”

I picked my phone up off my thigh and hit redial. It immediately went to voicemail. I dialed it again and it did the same thing.

I laid it back down on my thigh. “She won’t answer.”

Anchor nodded. “What do you want to do?”

What did I want to do? Quit. Give up. She was never coming back to me. I didn’t want to have my heart ripped out again. She didn’t want to see us. She didn’t believe us. It had all been for naught and maybe doing anything else was just going to make it worse.

But I’d vowed to not quit until I found her, one way or another, and while having her hang up on us was brutal, I didn’t want that to be my last memory of her or the

last time I heard her voice. If she really didn't want anything to do with me, she could tell me to my face.

"Let's go," I said. "To wherever the signal is. We'll just keep following."

Anchor nodded and started to say something, but Kitting reached over and tapped his arm. Anchor looked at him and Kitting held his phone out. Anchor took it from him and studied the screen for a moment.

Anchor turned and offered Kitting's phone to me over the seat. "You should see this."

I stared at him blankly.

He gestured with the phone.

I took it from him.

The screen was open to a news alert. An AMBER Alert.

For Ellie Corzine aka Elizabeth Tyler.

I squeezed the phone tighter.

The alert gave skeleton details on her initial disappearance years ago and focused on the fact that she had been spotted in Los Angeles, specifically LAX. It was active in every Southern California county. Her old photo was attached, along with a more recent photograph, one of her in front of a Christmas tree. My stomach clenched. Anyone spotting her or having information was encouraged to contact the Coronado Police Department, the reporting agency.

"What?" Lauren asked.

"Bazer," I said through gritted teeth. I handed her the phone.

She stared at it, then looked at me. "Maybe this is good. Maybe this is what we should've done before. More eyes and more resources."

I shook my head and turned to the window. "No."

"Why not?" she asked. "She hung up on us. We might as well be four states away."

I laughed and shook my head. "No."

"Joe? Why not?"

"Because every goddamn law enforcement agency, every goddamn loser home

watching TV tonight, every single goddamn person that sees or hears this is now looking for her. And guess what?" I said, looking around the car at each of them. "They aren't fucking calling us. They're calling Bazer."

Anchor and Kitting were stoic in the front seat, showing nothing in their expressions.

Lauren just looked at me like she had no idea what I was talking about. "Yeah. More eyes. More help. We know she's here. This helps, doesn't it?"

My phone rang.

I looked down at my leg.

Mike Lorenzo.

I laughed again. Perfect. Just perfect.

I held the phone up for her. "It's Mike."

She looked at me like I was crazy. "So? Answer it?"

"Don't you get it?" I said, my voice rising. "She's in more danger now. More than ever."

The phone continued to ring, sounding louder than normal in the interior of the car.

"If I'm right," I said. "If I'm right about Mike and or Bazer? If they were involved in taking her? Then guess what? They're looking for her, too. And if they find her first?" I held up the phone and thrust it in her face. "Then she's in more danger now than ever before."

THIRTY-TWO

“Answer it,” Anchor said. “Let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

“What?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “I already know what I’m dealing with.”

“Just answer,” he said. “Let’s figure out the what-ifs afterward.”

I shook my head, doubtful that I’d ever see my daughter again.

“Just do it, Joe,” Lauren said.

The ringing pierced the air.

I stabbed my finger at the phone screen and kept it on speaker. “Hi, Mike.”

“Joe, what the hell is going on?” Mike Lorenzo asked. “Bazer had an AMBER Alert issued, claiming Elizabeth’s here in California. What the hell?”

I considered everything for a moment. I’d purposely avoided him for several days, ever since we’d found her. I didn’t trust him anymore, the one person other than Lauren I’d always trusted. I felt like I was talking to a stranger. I’d been purposely vague during our one conversation since we’d left Minneapolis. But I wasn’t sure that there was anything left to protect. If he was involved, then he was just playing me for more information. At that moment, I didn’t have any more than he probably did. If he wasn’t, then he might be able to help us.

“She’s here,” I said. “And so am I.”

“Where? In San Diego? What the hell is going on, Joe?”

“Here’s what I know,” I said.

I told him about tracking her to Denver and then to Los Angeles. I told him where we’d been and who we’d talked to in L.A. I told him about Bazer showing up out of the blue. I told him about talking to her. I told him about having just seen the AMBER Alert.

I hoped I wouldn’t regret it.

“Wow,” he said when I finished. “That’s incredible. Okay.”

I wasn’t sure what to say so I didn’t say anything.

“What can I do?” he asked. “How can I help?”

“I don’t really know,” I said. “Look for her, I guess.”

“Well, of course, Joe,” he said. “I guess I just wanted to know if you needed anything. If I can help you.”

“No. Don’t think so.”

“You don’t sound right, Joe.”

“I don’t?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

The line crackled.

“Was it Bazer showing up?” he asked.

“Didn’t help,” I replied. “Didn’t feel right having him show up out of the blue.”

“I wish he’d told me,” Mike said. “I would’ve come up, too. Run interference.”

“He didn’t call you? At all?”

“Joe, first thing I heard of any of this was when the alert just hit. I did a double-take, read it a third time, then called you. I haven’t heard a word from him.”

I stared out the window. If Mike was telling me the truth, it was Bazer. I wanted to trust him. I really did. But there was still the picture from the file that set this all in motion and I couldn’t get past that.

“That’s odd,” I said.

“Yeah. But I’m gonna call him. Now. See what the hell he knows. Then I’ll get back to you. That okay?”

“Sure,” I said.

It was quiet for a moment.

“I know you’re worried, Joe,” Mike finally said. “But if she’s here, we’ll find her. We’ll get her back to both you and Lauren.”

I said thanks and hung up.

Anchor turned around and set his eyes on me. “You trust him?”

“I’m not sure.”

“It’s Mike,” Lauren said, shaking her head. “I still refuse to believe he had anything to do with this. I trust him. I know you don’t, but I do. I don’t think he’d ever do anything like this.”

I didn’t say anything. She was right. It was still hard to think that Mike could have had any involvement in her disappearance, but I wasn’t willing to give anyone the benefit of the doubt. Not anymore.

Anchor nodded. “Alright. What would you like to do now?”

“I think you need to know something.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Whoever took our daughter,” I said. “They might’ve been in law enforcement.”

Anchor didn’t say anything, just waited for me to elaborate.

“The man on the phone might’ve been involved,” I continued. “The officer that found us at the hotel earlier might’ve been involved. There may be others. I’m not sure.”

Anchor remained quiet.

“If they get in the way before I get to my daughter or if it all comes out at once,” I said, then paused. “It might get bad. Because I don’t care who they are. If I find out they were responsible, I’ll take them out. And I mean that exactly the way it sounds.” I paused again. “I’m not sure that’s something you’ll want to be involved with and I understand if you don’t.”

Anchor stared at me for a long moment, then turned to Kitting. “Ellis, you have a problem taking out a police officer who kidnapped a young girl?”

“None,” Kitting said.

Anchor nodded, as if that was the answer he expected, then he turned back to me. “I appreciate your candor, Mr. Tyler. But neither Ellis nor myself have a problem with continuing to assist you. Mr. Codaselli has made it very clear that he wishes to repay your help in any way necessary. Whatever you need us to do in order to help you reunite with your daughter we’re happy to do. And we’ll do so to the best of our capabilities.” He smiled and there was a coldness in his eyes that made me thankful he was on our side. “And I mean that exactly the way it sounds.”

THIRTY-THREE

“Sixty miles south of here puts us where?” Lauren asked.

Kitting was navigating the car out of Redondo and back toward the interstate.

“San Clemente, maybe?” I said. “Capistrano?”

Anchor nodded in front of us. “I’m seeing Capistrano on my map.”

“How’d she get there?” Lauren asked, then shook her head. “Stupid question. How’d she get anywhere?”

I nodded, laid my head back against the headrest and turned my eyes to the window. The sun was rising out to the east, the city just coming to life. Cars appeared on the road, early commuters hoping to beat the rush in to work.

And all I could picture was Elizabeth walking by herself in the early morning hours, unsure of where to go or what to do.

I was second guessing the decision to have Morgan’s calls forwarded to my phone. If Elizabeth had gotten to talk to Morgan, maybe her friend could’ve gotten more information from her. Found out where she was, where she planned to stay for the night. Her friend could’ve at the very least comforted her. But I’d given her nothing and probably only scared her more than she already was. An unfamiliar voice looking to shake up her world in one more way.

I’d failed her again.

Lauren shifted in the seat next to me and I turned to her. Her eyes were closed, her mouth slightly open. She’d dozed off. Not surprising. We were close to running on empty.

Kitting found the onramp to the interstate and propelled us south. The sky was a dusky pink as we made our way onto the freeway. The refineries in Carson shone brightly in the early morning sun, the gray smoke snaking upward into the air. Planes descended into Long Beach airport, gliding over the freeway; and the gray retaining walls grew higher the further south we went, protecting the neighboring cities from the noise of the nearly ever present traffic.

We hit Orange County, signs written in Vietnamese greeting us, a testament to the immigrant-heavy populations in Westminster and Garden Grove. Orange County started to look more like the Orange County that was portrayed on TV as we entered

Costa Mesa and then Irvine: sterile buildings and homes that spoke of money, but no personality, a soulless area nearly devoid of everything but dollar signs. There was no defining characteristic that told you you'd entered Irvine—you were just there and it just existed.

Irvine gave way to the rolling hills and canyons of Laguna and Mission Viejo, homes perched on the hillsides, thumbing their noses at fires and mudslides. The traffic thickened as the 405 rounded the bend into Mission Viejo, brake lights lighting up as people hit their brakes to slow. Northbound traffic was at a virtual standstill and I was glad we were at least moving.

We crested the hill at the south end of Mission Viejo and Kitting took the exit at Ortega Highway before we hit the curve that would drop us into Dana Point. San Juan Capistrano was a small beach community sandwiched between Mission Viejo and San Clemente. I'd only been there once as a kid, when my mother had taken us to visit the mission. I couldn't recall much else about it, other than I'd passed through it about a hundred times.

Kitting turned right at the stoplight at the bottom of the off ramp and then pulled to the curb, the engine idling softly.

Anchor turned around. "I don't have an exact location. The signal was somewhere in this area. That's about all we have to go on right now."

I nodded. "Okay. Maybe we just drive around, see what we see then."

Anchor nodded in agreement. "It's a small area. We should be able to navigate it pretty efficiently."

He turned to Kitting and whispered something I couldn't hear, then made a hand motion that looked like he was telling him to move back and forth. My guess was he wanted to cover the streets in a grid so that we didn't miss anything.

We were on the west side of the freeway and we drove up and down the narrow streets lined with small box homes and local restaurants. It was a sleepy beach town that had refused to give in to the urban sprawl that had smothered so much of Southern California. I thought it probably didn't look that much different from the way it had fifty years before.

The sidewalks were mostly empty, but the streets were filling up with traffic as we moved up and down, covering each street, unsure of what we were looking for. I don't think we expected to see a teenage girl, sitting and waiting for us on the curb, but that almost felt like what we were doing. I'd done the same thing many times before, looking for other kids, not knowing exactly what I was looking for, but hoping

I’d know it when I saw it.

And, like many times before, I did.

“There,” I said, tapping Anchor on the shoulder. “To the right. Sign says it’s a block away.”

Anchor turned his head, then nodded. Kitting turned right without being told.

The Capistrano was a domed building, an old Spanish-styled miniature mission, housing both buses and the Metrolink train that ran the coast between Los Angeles and San Diego. The parking lot was already half-full, the tall street lamps in the parking lot still lit.

I got out quietly, letting Lauren sleep, shutting my door softly. Anchor did the same.

We crossed the parking lot, our shadows growing taller as we walked.

“I sent out several messages,” Anchor said. “We should be able to track any movement on the alert. If they get anything solid, we should get it at the same time.”

“You guys really do have people everywhere, I guess.”

Anchor nodded. “You don’t ascend to Mr. Codaselli’s position without making friends in many places.”

I wondered just what making friends meant. Coercion? Bribery? Blackmail? It didn’t really matter to me right then, I was just curious.

“I’ve also made inquiries on your associates,” Anchor said.

We came up to the depot. “My associates?”

“The officers you used to work with. The ones you no longer trust.”

I nodded. If anyone was going to be able to dig up information, it seemed like Anchor was the guy.

People milled about the outside of the station, mostly men and women in business suits, briefcases tucked under their arms, phones in their hands. The coaster trains were primarily used by commuters between San Diego, Orange County and Los Angeles. They were a too-little, too-late attempt to curb the stifling traffic on the overcrowded highways. Some people had taken to them, but many still sat in their expensive foreign cars in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Letting go of their cars and embracing mass transportation was just too much of a change in lifestyle.

I stepped inside. Several benches, a ticket counter and not much else. It was small which made sense. San Juan Capistrano wasn't a huge pick-up or drop-off point. They didn't need a ton of space and they probably didn't run a full schedule.

Anchor pointed to the wall. "Schedule here."

I joined him. A faded map of the train routes was encased in a rectangular glass window. The route times were listed on the right of the map. I put my finger on the glass and slid it downward, looking at the times.

"Last one from here was just before midnight," I said. "And it would've gotten her as far as Oceanside."

"If she got on last night," he said.

"She did." I didn't know how I knew, but I did. She would have been tired of waiting, tired of being stymied by circumstance.

"You think she went south?"

"She told her friend that she was remembering some things about San Diego," I said. "And she's gone south since the airport. It's just a guess. But I'm not sure what else we have to go on."

"I could see about obtaining a passenger list," Anchor said, eyeing the ticket counter.

I shook my head. "Don't think it would do any good. You can buy cash tickets from the kiosks. They might've checked I.D. getting on, but I don't think it would've been recorded for her to travel."

He nodded. "Alright. I can check on that pretty quickly, but that makes sense."

He made his way quickly to the ticket counter, taking his place in line behind a woman in a tailored navy blue suit. I turned around slowly, taking everything in. We didn't have an exact location, but I couldn't imagine where else she would've gone. I had no idea how she'd gotten from Redondo to Capistrano, but that almost seemed irrelevant now. We knew she'd been to Capistrano, based on the cellular signal. And I couldn't imagine why else she would've gone there. She didn't know anyone and there was no destination she was familiar with. She was flying blind.

Anchor returned. "No passenger list. Do you think she would she have drawn any attention as a teenager on the train?"

I shook my head. "I doubt it. So even trying to track down anyone who was here might be a waste of time. Not all that unusual to see a kid getting on the commuter

trains.”

Anchor nodded, lines in his forehead creased, thinking.

I turned around to look at the schedule again. The train would’ve taken her as far as Oceanside, the northern most point in San Diego County. But when she got to Oceanside, she would’ve had the option to jump on another train to get further in to San Diego. But where would she have gone? She made no mention to Morgan about Coronado. But was her memory coming back? Was it being triggered by the fact that she was in Southern California now? Maybe triggered by our speaking to one another? I had no idea and like always, that was the hardest part.

I had no idea.

“I think the best thing to do is to head to San Diego,” I said. “We can stop in Oceanside and see what the train schedule is there. I don’t really have a better idea.”

Anchor nodded. “I thought of something else that I might offer to you.”

“What’s that?”

“The two men who you are not sure about?”

“Bazer. And Mike.”

Anchor nodded again. “I know that you’re concerned that they are a danger to your daughter. What if we put something in place to draw them out?”

“I’m not following.”

“If we fed them false information that let them believe we knew her whereabouts, it might…give us a more accurate picture of whom you can trust. And who has lied to you.”

“So, what? A sting?”

“For lack of a better word, yes.”

“How?”

“I’m not entirely sure yet,” Anchor said. “And I don’t want to do anything to endanger your daughter. But if you’re open to the idea, I can go about finding a way to put it together.”

I stared at the deserted train tracks. At some point, I was going to want to know which of them had played a part in her disappearance. And I would deal with them. At that moment, though, the thing I cared about most was finding Elizabeth and keeping

her safe. Punishing anyone who was involved would have to wait and I didn’t want to get bogged down thinking about those things.

But I didn’t see any harm in having Anchor do a little preliminary work.

“Start working on it,” I said.

THIRTY-FOUR

“Can we stop at a drugstore or something?” Lauren asked. “I feel like crap.”

We were nearly to Oceanside, a straight shot down the interstate from San Juan Capistrano, past the power plant in San Onofre and the marine base in Camp Pendleton. To my right, the ocean hugged the coast, choppy waves crashing in to the shoreline as we flew past.

“Sick?” I asked.

She made a face. “Probably just hungry. I don’t know.”

I nodded.

“We’ll pull off at the next exit,” Anchor said from the front.

We passed the harbor and the old Holiday Inn and then took a cloverleaf exit and parked in front of a twenty-four hour drugstore.

“Be right back,” Lauren said, getting out.

“I made a phone call,” Anchor said. “No passenger lists on the commuter trains.”

I frowned. I wasn’t sure how I’d missed hearing him on the phone, unless I’d dozed a little, too. “Yeah. Figured.”

“ I think I’m getting access to video surveillance,” he said.

“What?”

“I saw cameras at the depot,” Anchor said. “Monitored ticket and boarding areas.”

“You can tap in?”

He shook his head. “No. Having recorded feeds sent to me for download. And from this Oceanside station we’re heading to. If your daughter was on there, we’ll have a good idea of where to go.”

I should’ve been surprised, but I wasn’t. Anchor had shown an incredible ability to get nearly anything we needed and was able to do it quickly. I’d stopped wondering how he was getting it and how powerful Codaselli really was and instead wished I’d run into him the day after Elizabeth had disappeared from Coronado.

“I should have it by the time we get to the depot,” Anchor said. “We can take a look at it there.”

I nodded.

“And I’ve made some initial inquiries about your former colleagues and what we talked about,” he said. “I’ll know more in a bit.”

“Do you ever sleep?” I asked.

Anchor chuckled. “Mr. Codaselli pays me extremely well to not sleep.”

“How long have you worked for him?”

“As long as I can remember,” he answered. He nodded at Kitting. “Ellis, too. People tend not to leave Mr. Codaselli’s employ.” He turned in the seat to face me and adjusted his glasses. “And that isn’t sordid in anyway. Mr. Codaselli is generous and looks out for the people who are loyal to him. We’re treated incredibly well and it would be difficult to match his employment elsewhere.”

Kitting nodded in agreement behind the wheel.

“Mr. Codaselli has a long memory,” Anchor continued. “If you do a good job for him, he doesn’t forget. And he believes in rewarding people who do well for him. Not just large things, either. Whatever your job is, if you do it well, he recognizes that.” He paused. “It’s why I’m here. It’s why Ellis is here. What you did for Mr. Codaselli? He won’t forget that.” He smiled. “Ever.”

The neon lights above the store flickered.

“You said his health was alright,” I asked. “How’s he really doing?”

“He’s managing,” Anchor said. “He’s a very tough old man.”

“Cancer is usually tougher than most.”

Anchor nodded. “Certainly. But he’s probably already lasted longer than he should have. He tends to will his way through life.”

He made it sound like Codaselli was some sort of noble benefactor who was the world’s greatest employer. While I was grateful for the help he was providing, I knew better. Codaselli may have been generous to those in his favor, but he was probably ruthless to those who were not.

I was glad I was in his favor.

Lauren emerged from the store, looking a little more awake and wide-eyed. She

climbed back into the car.

“Where’s the medicine?” I asked, noticing her empty hands.

She looked at her hands. “Oh. I took it in there. Just got one of those travel packages for a buck.” She looked at me. “Just some stuff to settle my stomach.”

“You alright?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

Kitting caught my eye in the rearview mirror. “We good?”

I nodded and he directed the car out of the parking lot and back down the freeway. We took the Mission Avenue exit and headed west toward the Pacific.

The transit center was a couple blocks from the ocean, in a redeveloped part of Oceanside. The city had long been the ugly stepsister of San Diego, known for not much more than housing Camp Pendleton and gangs. But the city had attempted to clean itself up and revitalized the areas closer to the beach, hoping to draw tourists to the shore and condos along the water. The transit center was a part of that revitalization, a hub to connect visitors with San Diego and make it easier to travel back and forth and avoid the snarl of standstill traffic that had become Interstate 5.

The center was a stark white building with Spanish accents and arched walkways, paying homage both to the area’s heritage and the fact that what was old was new again. Save for a couple of homeless guys on the curb passing a paper bag back and forth, the lot was empty. Kitting pulled into a slot right near the tracks.

“You talk to them,” Anchor said to Kitting. “Mr. Tyler and I will walk the building.”

“And Ms. Tyler,” Lauren said, annoyed.

“Apologies, Ms. Tyler,” he said quickly. “Wasn’t sure how you were feeling.”

“I’m fine,” Lauren said, getting out.

Kitting headed toward the homeless guys. The three of us walked the perimeter of the building. Like always, I half-expected to see Elizabeth sitting right there, waiting for us, wondering what took so long. But, like always, she wasn’t. There was no trace of her.

Five minutes of walking around the building and peering in the windows gave us nothing else.

But Kitting was walking back toward us with one of the homeless guys.

The man was somewhere between forty and sixty, an overgrown gray beard hiding brown, wrinkled skin. A black knit watchman's cap covered his head, long gray tresses spilling out of the sides. His jeans were dirty and torn and he had a brown field coat over several layers of shirts. His work boots were covered in sand.

He stood up straight next to Kitting, eyeing each of us.

"This is Ben," Kitting said to Anchor. "He might be able to help us."

"Ben, my name is John," Anchor said, then gestured at Lauren and me. "These two people are looking for their daughter. We think she may have been here. Might you have seen her?"

Ben looked us over, then cleared his throat. "I might have."

"Might have," Anchor repeated. "Can you elaborate?"

Ben tugged on his coat, pulled it tighter around him. "Probably could, yes sir."

Anchor reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of bills and peeled two off. Twenties. He handed them to Ben. "I'd like to do this without the dance, Ben. If you're able to help us, we'll be happy to compensate you accordingly."

Ben took the twenties and deposited them into a coat pocket. He glanced at Kitting. "The girl he described. Think I saw her a few hours ago. Not sure when cause I don't wear a watch. But woulda been a few hours ago.

That would've made sense if she'd ridden down from Capistrano. The timing worked.

"She was alone?" I asked.

"At first, yeah," Ben said, nodding, then clearing his throat again. "She was inside the station. Only reason I noticed was cuz of me and Jesse." He nodded back toward his friend on the curb who was watching us intently. "Me and Jesse kinda keep an eye on things around here."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"We been around awhile," he said, shrugging. "Try not to bother nobody, but it's kind of our home. So we look out for folks, I guess. Sometimes some folks show up who oughta not be here. Bangers sometimes. Kids looking to take advantage of tourists." He shrugged again. "So we keep an eye on things. Anybody looks like they got a bad idea, we let 'em know it's not the place. We can handle ourselves."

I nodded, letting him continue.

“So if a teenage girl who looks a little lost shows up, we notice,” Ben said. “Didn’t try to talk to her or nothin’ because we probably woulda just scared her. But we saw her—think Jesse saw her first—and we kept an eye on her to make sure she was alright. Made sure no one took a run at her or nothin’.”

“What was she wearing?” Lauren asked.

Ben eyed her for a moment, then cleared his throat. “I know what you’re getting at ma’am and I don’t blame you. But I’m not so drunk that I’m making up the only teenage girl to come through here tonight.” He fished the money out of his pocket and held it out to her. “I ain’t doin’ this just for the money. She was here and if I can help you, I will.” He shook his head. “Little girl shouldn’t be riding trains by herself.”

Lauren hesitated. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…I’m sorry.”

He put the money back in his pocket. “Had a daughter once. No idea where she is now, but I hope she’s doin’ better than me. And I hope she’s safe.”

Lauren nodded, clearly wishing she hadn’t said anything.

“Anyway,” Ben said, looking back to me. “She was here alone and the station was kinda empty last night. It was late. Not much goin’ on. So she was alone for most of the time.”

“Most of the time?” I asked.

He made a face. “Couple of local girls got with her after a bit. But they didn’t hassle her or nothin’. Seemed like they were just talkin’ her up. Or maybe she was askin’ them for directions. I dunno.”

It was strange seeing Elizabeth through someone else’s lens. I was trying to picture her sitting at the station, how she sat, what her voice sounded like in person, what she would’ve talked to those girls about. It was like watching a movie that wasn’t in focus. I could make out pieces of it, but not the whole.

“So we didn’t pay her much attention then,” Ben continued. “Thought she might just be settling in and waiting for a ride or something.” He frowned and brushed the greasy strands of hair away from his face. “But then Netty showed up.”

“Netty?” I asked.

Ben nodded. “Local girl. Runs with some of the bangers. Likes to try and hassle me and Jesse when she’s bored. Goes out of her way to drive through puddles if she sees us sittin’ on the curb and thinks she can soak us.” He shook his head. “Crap like that.”

“Lovely,” Anchor said.

Ben nodded again. “Yeah. Some people, they’re just like that, I guess. Anyway, Netty showed up and she knew the two girls with the girl you’re lookin’ for. And she was all friendly and everything, but I’m tellin’ you. There ain’t nothin’ friendly about Netty.”

A cloud passed in front of the sun, momentarily dimming the sky. A soft breeze blew across the lot and I shivered harder than I should have.

“Train pulls in,” he said. “Southbound. Jesse elbows me. All four of ‘em got on. They were on before we could get across the street to ‘em. If we’d been watchin’ more, we might’ve been able to get to ‘em before they got on. But we weren’t.” The lines around his mouth deepened. “I woulda liked to warn that girl that goin’ anywhere with Netty was probably a bad idea. Not sure if she woulda listened to an old man like me, but I woulda tried.” He winced and shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

Lauren sighed audibly. Kitting’s eyes scanned the area. Anchor looked at me.

“It’s okay, Ben,” I said. “Not your fault. And you’ve given us more than we would’ve had if we hadn’t talked to you. So thanks.”

He nodded. “Just sorry I didn’t know someone was lookin’ for her.”

“You know Netty’s last name?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. Just Netty. And I only know that because one of her friends yelled at her to knock it off one time when she was trying to soak us. Locked it away so I wouldn’t forget it.” He thought for a moment. “But she’s always got all of this jewelry hanging from her ears. Feathers, hoops, you name it, she’s worn it.”

I nodded. “Okay. Thanks for your help, Ben. Appreciate it.”

Ben nodded.

Anchor offered his hand to Ben. “Thank you. To both you and Jesse.”

Ben took his hand and held on for just a moment, then pulled his hand away.

I spotted the thick fold of bills Anchor passed him before he shoved the wad in his pocket.

Ben looked at me. “I hope you find her.”

I pulled a card from my pocket and handed it to him. “Me, too. And if you ever want to find your daughter, give me a call.”

Ben studied the card for a moment, then looked at me. “You do this a lot? Look for kids?”

I smiled at Ben, truly grateful we’d run into him. “More than I’d like to, Ben. More than I’d like to.”

THIRTY-FIVE

“That’s her,” I said, staring at the iPad screen. “At the ticket window.”

We were back in the car and the AC was filtering into the backseat from the front vents. Anchor had taken a minute to boot up the iPad, then passed it over the seat to me.

A black and white closed-circuit feed showed a split screen at the Capistrano terminal: left side the ticket window, the right side a long shot of the boarding platform. Military time ticked away in white numbers on the bottom. Elizabeth was standing at the ticket window.

Lauren leaned in closer to me, up against my shoulder. “Yeah. Definitely.”

She passed several bills across the metal counter to the cashier behind the glass partition. There was no audio but they appeared to be talking a little bit. Elizabeth gave a nervous laugh, then tried to smile, but it came off as something masquerading as a smile. The woman behind the partition passed a small white piece of paper back to her and then Elizabeth stepped away, out of the view of the camera.

I watched the left side for another minute. No one else stepped to the window.

I switched my gaze to the right side. The platform was mostly empty. An older lady stood with a small roller bag next to her. A man was on the far side of her and I couldn’t see his face.

Then Elizabeth appeared between the woman and the camera. A small backpack hung on her shoulder. Her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail. She was too far from the camera and the footage was too grainy to get a good look at her face, to see any emotion in her expression. She sighed noticeably a couple of times, her shoulders rising and falling. She looked around quite a bit, her head rotating from side to side. I couldn’t tell if that was because she was scared or bored.

Finally, the train came and she followed the old couple up the portable stairs and disappeared from the camera.

I handed the iPad back to Anchor. “Absolutely her.”

He nodded. “Hang on. The other feed from here in Oceanside should be ready now.”

“You got it already?” Lauren asked.

Anchor nodded, staring down at the screen.

She looked at me. I just shrugged. She shook her head, looked away.

Anchor passed the iPad back over the seat and Lauren leaned in to watch with me.

The screen looked nearly identical, split in half with a ticket window on the left, the platform on the right and the military time down in the bottom right corner. The window side again showed Elizabeth buying a ticket, but it appeared as if she barely spoke to the cashier this time. No nervous laughter, no half-smiles. She stepped out of view of the camera.

I waited for her to show up on the right side.

She finally did, a girl about her age talking animatedly to her, two others trailing behind her. Her hands were tight on the strap of the backpack, as if she was worried it might get taken from her and she was listening to the girl next to her, whose mouth was still running. The girl had long, curly black hair, multiple piercings in her ears and wore tight skinny jeans and a gray hoodie. The two girls behind them were dressed similarly and appeared maybe a bit younger than Elizabeth and the girl she was talking with.

“That’s Netty,” Lauren said. “The one she’s talking to. The earrings.”

I nodded and watched.

The train came quickly and Elizabeth took a step back from the steps, almost like she was changing her mind about going.

The two girls behind her stepped in closer, crowding her.

Netty’s face went from animated to…hard. No smile, no expression. Her mouth was still moving.

She put her hand on Elizabeth’s elbow. Elizabeth started to move it but Netty kept her hand on it and Elizabeth winced.

They all paused for a long moment.

Then Elizabeth nodded and went up the stairs.

Netty followed close behind her and the other two girls boarded behind them.

Then the train pulled out and they were gone.

I touched the rewind button and watched it play again. Then I touched it again

and watched it one more time.

I handed it back to Anchor. He raised an eyebrow at me.

“She didn’t want to go,” I said, glancing at Lauren. “I think she was changing her mind. Those girls forced her on.”

“Alright. So we head to the downtown depot?” Anchor asked.

I stared out the window. We were so close, but we couldn’t catch her. And it seemed like each time we missed her, things got a little worse. The mugging. Aaron Simmons. The AMBER Alert. Now these girls. I wasn’t sure how many more chances we were going to get to catch her.

“Yeah,” I said. “Hurry.”

THIRTY-SIX

The clouds had cleared and the sun sat directly in front of us as we drove southward. The northern part of San Diego County had exploded since I'd last spent any real time there, nearly every empty space filled with homes, businesses and people. What used to be considered a place that you only went when you had to was now where many San Diego residents called home. And with the surge in population in the northern counties, the southbound traffic on I-5 had snarled even further and even in the middle of the day, we were doing less than the speed limit, stopping and surging every few minutes.

Lauren clung to my arm in the back seat, her arm snaked around mine as she stared out the window. Something had changed in her body language and I couldn't read it. I assumed it was just the tension of knowing that it seemed likely that Elizabeth had been strong-armed into boarding the train in Oceanside. It had unnerved me, too. It was one thing to think of all the terrible things that could happen to her when I didn't know where she was or what she was doing. It was entirely different to actually see it on video, to see her alive and see something uncomfortable happen to her and be powerless to stop it from occurring.

We cut through the canyons south of Del Mar and the hillsides disappeared, the bay and the beach communities appearing like they'd suddenly been dropped there. A thin layer of afternoon fog hung over the water, shrouding everything in a damp white haze.

The old Santa Fe Depot was in the northwest corner of the downtown area and had remained the same for as long I could remember. Huge Spanish arches, dark wooden benches, homeless people with full shopping carts skirting the building. When I was a kid, we'd taken the train up to Los Angeles several times to see my grandparents, my father thinking it would be more fun than driving, and there was always something exciting about walking into the depot and knowing you were going to board a train. It was different than the airport. It felt like stepping back in time and that the possibilities of where you might end up and what you might see were far more exciting.

Kitting parked the Escalade in the blacktop lot and stayed in the car while Anchor walked with Lauren and me into the depot. The long, narrow building was nearly empty, a few passengers spread out amongst the wooden benches, looking tired and worn out. Each of them glanced our way, then went back to being tired.

"I'm going to go see what I can find out about security cameras," Anchor said.

He headed for the ticket window.

“I don’t see her,” Lauren said.

“I didn’t think she’d be here.”

“Me, either. Just stating the obvious.”

We meandered through the benches, more to kill time than thinking that we were going to find anything. I stopped at the vending machine and bought a cup of coffee. Lauren shook her head no when I asked if she wanted one.

I blew on the surface of the coffee as we walked outside toward the tracks and boarding area. A few more people were scattered along the platform areas, sitting on roller bags, staring to the north, wondering where their ride was.

Lauren’s hand touched my elbow, then gripped it tightly. “Look.”

I followed her gaze up the tracks. Sitting on a bench, back away from the platform and up against the building, were the two girls we’d seen on the security footage from Oceanside. They were tucked close to one another, one of them holding a bag of chips that the other had her hand in.

“Stay right here,” I said. “I’ll go talk to them. If they try to run, I’ll send them this way.”

“I’ll get Anchor,” she said, ducking back into the depot.

I walked slowly toward the girls, not wanting them to be spooked by my approach before I was close enough to corral them. But if they noticed me, they didn’t show it, munching on the chips and chatting between themselves until I parked myself in front of them.

“Hi,” I said.

They both looked at me in the way only indifferent, arrogant teens can, with slight distaste and a mountain of condescension. Both had long black ringlets of hair and light brown skin. Heavy eye make-up in an attempt to make them appear older than they were. The one on the left might’ve been older, bright green eyes and a tiny diamond stud in her nose. The one on the right had hazel eyes and a tiny scar on her chin. They both had on black skinny jeans and gray hoodies, the only difference being that the one with the pierced nose had a faint purple design on the front of her sweatshirt. Both had on black canvas sneakers. Maybe sisters, maybe cousins.

They both stared for a moment, then went back to their chips.

“Where’s Netty?” I asked.

That got their attention.

Pierced Nose raised her chin at me. “You know Netty?”

“Yeah. Where is she?”

“How you know Netty?”

I shrugged. “Don’t remember. She here?”

The younger one squinted at me. “He don’t know Netty.”

“You two enjoy your ride down here from Oceanside?” I asked, looking at each of them.

They exchanged anxious glances.

“How’d you know that?” the younger one asked.

Pierced Nose grabbed her by the arm. “Shut your mouth, Luz.” Then she looked at me. “You a cop?”

“Nope,” I said. “Far worse.”

“Worse than a cop?” she said with a frown. “Doubt that.”

I squatted down like a catcher, looking at each of them carefully. “I’m going to give you one chance here. So listen carefully.” I nodded down toward the direction I’d come from. “See the dude down there?”

They both looked. Anchor was standing there with Lauren, staring back at us.

“That dude is most definitely not a cop,” I explained. “He’s like the anti-cop. And if I wave at him, he’ll come down here and take you both away to someplace where no one will ever find you. Take a good look at him. Because if you don’t give me the answers I want, he’ll be the last thing you ever see.”

The younger one visibly tensed up and the older one swung her eyes back to me. “Who the hell are you?”

“Just a guy with a couple questions,” I said. “Feel like answering?”

“We don’t have to do shit,” Pierced Nose said, giving me a sour look.

I shrugged and looked at the other one. “How about you? Feel like talking? Or you wanna go for a ride with my friend?”

She was still staring at Anchor, who was returning the stare with a dead face.

“Let’s go, Luz,” Pierced Nose said, starting to stand up.

I crowded her and she sat back down on the bench. “Asshole.”

“You have no idea,” I said, then tapped the other girl on the knee. “Hey. You.”

She whipped her head to me. No time to hide the fear in her eyes.

“What?” she said.

“Shut up, Luz,” Pierced Nose snapped. “You don’t have to say nothin’.”

“You shut up, Blanca,” Luz snapped back. “That white dude looks crazy.”

Anchor did, in fact, look a little crazy.

I focused on Luz. “You rode down here with Netty and another girl. Where are they?”

“Who are you?” Luz asked, but her tone was different from Blanca’s. Not defiant. More worried.

Which was good.

“My name’s Joe,” I said. “And I’m looking for the girl with Netty. All I want is to know where she is. Not looking to hurt you or your friend here or Netty. Just looking for the other girl.”

Blanca kicked out at me, her foot striking my knee, but I was ready. She came off the bench and I was already up. I caught her by the arm and shoved her roughly back down on the bench.

“Bad idea,” I said. “You get up again, I’m bringing my friend down here.”

Blanca’s defiance lost a little bit of strength and she looked away from me, her chest heaving.

I turned back to Luz. “The girl. Where is she?”

“She went with Netty,” Luz said.

“She is gonna cut you,” Blanca whispered.

Luz ignored her. “Your girl is with her.”

“You forced her on the train in Oceanside,” I said. “Why?”

Luz's lips twisted for a moment. "Girl didn't wanna go. Netty told her she didn't have no choice."

"Why?"

"Cuz that's Netty," she said, shrugging. "She wants somethin', she gets it."

"Okay, but why did she want her to go with you guys?"

Luz shifted uncomfortably on the bench and said nothing

I tried a different approach. "And the girl you were with? She didn't want to go. Why?

Luz stared down at her feet. "Scared, I guess."

No doubt, I thought. Three girls approach you in an unfamiliar place and force you to go with them and you don't know where or why. I had zero doubt that Elizabeth was scared.

"Why did you force her to go with you?" I asked again. "This some game you guys run? Rip her off? What's the game?"

Luz glanced at Blanca.

"I ain't sayin' shit," Blanca said, shaking her head. "You're on your own."

Luz blinked several times, then stared at me. "You gonna tell Netty it was me?"

"All I'm interested in is finding the other girl," I said.

"Liar," Blanca hissed.

"How about this?" I said, still looking at Luz. "You answer my questions and when I get to Netty, I'll tell her Blanca was the one who talked to me. I'll tell her I never saw you."

Blanca's eyes went wide and Luz bit back a small smile.

I glanced at Blanca. "Don't think I won't. I don't give a shit about either of you. I'm looking for the other girl. You wanna run your little shakedown here and do Netty's errands, be my guest. I don't care one bit. I'm just looking for the girl."

Luz looked at Blanca. "I'm tired of doin' everything she says anyway."

Blanca didn't say anything, her eyes staring down at Anchor now.

"Any girl shows up," Luz said. "We pick 'em up."

“What do you mean?”

“Girls show up alone for whatever,” Luz said. “Maybe runnin’ away, maybe just travelin’. Whatever. They alone, we go talk to them.”

“And?”

She glanced at Blanca. “And we call Netty. She calls Alex.”

“Who’s Alex?”

“Netty’s brother,” Luz said. “We take the girls to him.”

Another knot formed in my gut. I glanced around. A few more people were gathering on the platform, waiting on the first train of the morning.

I looked back at Luz. “Why?”

She tugged on her sleeves and folded her arms across her chest. “Bunch of reasons.”

“Name them.”

Blanca just shook her head, still disagreeing with Luz’s confessions.

“He might make them work for him,” Luz said, avoiding my eyes. “Deliver stuff. I dunno. Or he might make them do…other stuff.”

“What? Pimp them out?”

Luz shook her head. “Nah. He just keeps them for himself. If they pretty.”

The knot tightened. “So Netty took the girl to Alex’s.”

Luz nodded.

“Netty and Alex,” I said. “What’s their last name?”

“Moreno.”

“I want an address.”

Luz looked at Blanca. “I never been there.”

“You got the address?” I said to Blanca.

She squirmed on the bench.

I let her squirm.

“I ain’t sure I know it,” she mumbled.

“Cut the crap,” I said. “Either give it to me or I’m calling my friend over. Right now. I’m done jerking around with you.”

She stared at Anchor one more time, then slowly recited an address.

I looked at Luz.

“Sounds right,” she said. “Other side of downtown.”

A train pulled in behind us, heading northbound. The brakes squeaked in the air and a voice over the loudspeaker announced its arrival.

“I’ll find you,” I said, standing up.

Blanca looked up at me. “What?”

“Anything either of you told me is a lie,” I said, staring at each of them, as people walked past us to board the train. “I’ll find you. And you won’t tell another lie again.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

I hurried back to Lauren and Anchor.

“I have an address.” I rattled it off.

“They said that’s where they took her?” Anchor asked.

“That’s what they said.”

“You believe them.” He said it as a statement, not a question.

“Yeah. Made it clear that lying would be a mistake.”

Anchor nodded. “Alright.”

Lauren’s face was a mask of anxiety and concern.

I took her hand and squeezed it. “It’s alright. We’re going to get her.”

She nodded, but didn’t say anything.

We got to the car and Anchor opened the rear door for us to get in. Lauren’s purse was on the seat and it tumbled to the pavement, the contents spilling on to the blacktop.

“Shit,” she muttered. She crouched down and started shoving things back into her bag.

I leaned down to help, handing her a tube of lipstick and a gray leather checkbook. The breeze picked up a piece of paper and I snatched it before it could float away. A receipt. I glanced at it before handing it to her.

It was from the drug store we’d stopped at earlier.

For a pregnancy test.

Lauren reached for it, her face pale as she realized what it was.

“I…” she stopped, then turned to Anchor. “Can you give us a minute?”

He nodded, closed the door and slid into the passenger side of the vehicle, pulling the door closed behind him.

Lauren was staring past me, chewing on her lip, almost as if she was in pain.

“Look, you don’t need to tell me anything,” I said. She didn’t. As shocked as I

was to see what she'd bought, I wasn't in a position to judge. And I had no right to care. "It's none of my business."

She shifted her gaze back to me and refocused. "I'm pregnant."

I swallowed. "Okay." I forced a smile. "Congratulations?"

She shook her head, frowning. "You don't get it. I'm pregnant. *We're* pregnant."

It took me at least a minute to respond. "Pregnant?" I repeated, the words sounding funny as they came out of my mouth.

She nodded. "I was feeling crappy. Just…off. There were a couple of indicators for me. So when we stopped at the Wal-Green's? I bought a pregnancy test and went to the bathroom." She paused. "I'm pregnant. Probably the night in the hotel in San Diego when you first came back."

Of all the things she could've said to me, that was absolutely the last thing I expected to hear. I wasn't sure what to say because it was like being hit in the face with a brick and being asked if you were okay.

"Okay," I said. "You're pregnant."

"I didn't want to tell you right now," she said quickly. "That's why I didn't say anything. I mean, we're so close to finding Elizabeth. She's the one we need to focus on. Finding her. Finding the child we already have." Her eyes filled with tears. "I was going to tell you. When the time was right."

I didn't know if there would have ever been a right time.

She wiped a stray tear that had trickled down her cheek. "Part of me wanted to tell you now. You always think there'll be time but we know better. We know how time gets taken away. " She sighed. "I don't know what I'm saying. I'm sorry."

I nodded, slowly, trying to process. "Yeah. Right. No. I mean, I'm glad I know. And we'll figure it out."

"I won't ask for you to help or support or decide or anything," she said. "I'm not trying to trap you."

"Lauren. Come on. I know that."

She shrugged.

I put my arms around her and hugged her because I wasn't sure what else to do. It wasn't the right time to address it, not with Elizabeth so close. Not with Elizabeth in danger.

“We’ll figure it out,” I whispered, planting a kiss on the top of her head. “I promise.”

She nodded. I opened the door and she climbed into the car, clutching her purse. I followed her in.

“We’re still going?” Anchor asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Ellis believes we have a tail again,” Anchor said. “We’re going to do a little maneuver here just to find out if he’s correct. Just so you know we aren’t lost or going the wrong way.”

Instinctively, I turned around to look out the back window. The parking lot was mostly empty.

“Car’s back on the street,” Kitting said, glancing in the rearview mirror and catching my eye. “Late model sedan. Gray. He’s actually pretty good. Think he was there for awhile before I saw him.”

Lauren sighed and shook her head, like she couldn’t believe all of this was still going on, like she just wanted to be done with it. I couldn’t blame her. We were sleep deprived and a thousand miles away from where we started.

But we were close. I had to keep reminding myself of that. We were closer than ever and we needed to get her back.

We were going to get her back.

Kitting got us out of the lot and we did a slow crawl through a four-block area in downtown. I didn’t see the car at first as we worked our way in a square through the gridded streets. When we took our third right, I caught a glance of the gray sedan, just turning right two blocks behind us.

“I see him,” I said.

Kitting nodded. “Yeah. He’s on us.”

“We’re going to let him tail for a bit,” Anchor said. “Then we’ll see what he wants.”

We headed east through downtown, past the high rises. A few pedestrians milled about but the sidewalks were mostly empty. We reached the edge of downtown and then turned south. We cut under the interstate and weaved our way through neighborhoods that seemed to fall apart as we drove. We were moving from

civilization into gang territory and knowing Elizabeth might be somewhere in that area kept me shifting uncomfortably in my seat.

We stopped at a red light, the car idling quietly.

And then all hell broke loose.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Blue and red lights converged on us from all sides, seemingly pouring out of every single street that we could see. Two police cars blocked our path, another parked alongside of us and two more wedged in behind us, effectively boxing us in. Officers emptied out of the vehicles, weapons still holstered, their hands hovering at their hips. All eyes were trained on us.

“Well, this is interesting,” Anchor said, as if we’d just pulled up to an ice cream shop we didn’t know about.

One officer stepped forward and rapped on the driver’s window. Kitting pressed a button and dropped the window halfway.

“We’re going to need all of you to exit the vehicle,” the officer said.

Anchor leaned over. “Why’s that, sir?”

“Because I said so,” he growled. “Now.”

“Can you tell us why we were stopped?” Anchor asked.

“When you get out, sure,” the cop said, glancing at the backseat. “All of you.”

Anchor considered that for a moment. “Are we under arrest?”

“You need to get out of…”

“You are required to notify us if we are under arrest,” Anchor said sharply.

Lauren gripped my arm.

The officer stepped from the window for just a moment, then came back. “You are not under arrest. But you all need to exit the vehicle right now or…”

“Can you tell us why we’ve been stopped, Officer?” Anchor asked, smiling. “And I’m sure you understand that you’re required to answer that as well, if you’d like us to vacate the vehicle.”

The officer’s face tightened. He stepped away from the window again, then returned. “This vehicle has been stopped because it’s been reported to be involved with an active AMBER Alert in the area. Exit the vehicle. Now.” He stepped back from the window before Anchor could say anything else.

“Close the doors after you get out,” Anchor said. “Do not leave them open.”

“Why?” Lauren asked.

“Leaving them open is an invitation to search,” Anchor said. “Closing them means they have to ask to search.” He smiled. “And I will say no. Let’s go.”

I pushed the door open and was immediately greeted by another unsmiling officer. I didn’t say anything and quickly shut the door behind me. The cop directed me to the back of the vehicle.

By my count, I saw seven cars, plus the gray unmarked sedan that had been following us, and ten cops. Their lights were still on and it looked to me as if the side streets had been blocked off with traffic being redirected.

They separated us and I was directed toward the sidewalk, where I was patted down thoroughly. I saw Lauren getting the same treatment across the street, with Kitting and Anchor down the street about twenty-five yards on opposite sides of the road. I wasn’t worried about any of them. Lauren knew enough as a lawyer to give as little info as possible and it seemed that this absolutely wasn’t the first time Kitting and Anchor had been pulled over.

“You got I.D.?” a short, squat officer wearing mirrored shades and named Lasko asked me.

“Rear pocket, right side,” I said.

He stepped around me and pulled out my wallet. He unfolded it. “Joseph Tyler?”

I nodded.

“Any idea why you’ve been stopped?”

“I heard what the officer who approached the car said,” I responded. “That’s all I know.”

“Mind if we take a look in the vehicle?”

“Not mine. Can’t give you permission.”

“And who does it belong to?”

“Have to ask one of those two guys,” I said, nodding toward Kitting and Anchor.

The officer flicked his chin in that direction and two of the officers behind him trotted down that way.

He stared at me from behind the glasses. “So.”

I didn’t say anything.

“We have an active AMBER Alert for this area,” he said. “This vehicle was seen in the area where the missing child disappeared from. Know anything about that?”

“Who reported the vehicle?” I asked.

“I asked you about the alert, Mr. Tyler,” he said. “Please answer the question.”

“I know about the alert, yes.”

“Know anything about the missing child?”

“More than you.”

That caught him off guard and he stood a little straighter. “Excuse me?”

“The missing girl is my daughter,” I said. “She’s been gone for almost ten years. Elizabeth Tyler, currently going by Ellie Corzine. So I know more than you.”

Lasko started to say something, then closed his mouth.

“And this stop on us?” I said, shaking my head. “It’s total bullshit. Whoever called it in is trying to keep me from her. We’ve been on her trail for two days. So think carefully about what you do here, Officer. Because I’m not lying to you. You can verify my name and hers in about forty-five seconds with a call. But this is a bullshit stop. You’re being played.”

Lasko adjusted the sunglasses and looked away for a moment. I looked across the street. Lauren’s arms were folded across her chest and she was stone-facing the officer questioning her.

Lasko looked at my license again, stared at it for a long moment.

“Check it,” I said. “My name should be somewhere in the alert. I’m former Coronado P.D. Woman across the street is my ex-wife and our daughter’s mother. Other two are helping us look for her.” I paused. “Look it up.”

“Be right back,” Lasko said, then walked briskly to his car. He leaned in the window, pulled out his radio and turned away from me.

I knew what he was doing. He was calling in my I.D. He’d see that everything I’d just told him was true. Then he’d wonder just what the hell was going on.

I had a pretty good idea, but I wasn’t going to take the time to explain it to him.

I stood at the curb and waited. Watching the other conversations, I could see that the same confusion that I’d thrown at Lasko was making its way through the rest of the officers. Several walked down and joined Lasko at his vehicle, glancing at me

when they got there.

I stood and waited.

After a few minutes on the radio and some words with the other officers, Lasko made his way back to me.

He held out my wallet. I took it and shoved it back in my pocket.

“I’m not sure what’s going on,” Lasko said. “But you check out.”

“I know I do,” I said. “And I don’t know what’s going on either.”

“We got a call,” he said. “Your vehicle was identified with the girl in it.”

“She’s not.”

He nodded. “Got that. Just not sure what’s going on.”

I had a fair idea, but again, I wasn’t going to hash it out with him.

“We free to go?” I asked.

He adjusted the glasses, then turned around, put his fingers to his lips and cut loose a whistle. Everyone turned.

“Cut ‘em loose,” he yelled. “They are free to go.”

There were some exchanged glances and a few confused looks.

“Now!” Lasko yelled.

Anchor and Kitting headed back toward me and Lauren was already crossing the street.

“Anything else pop on the alert?” I asked. “Besides the I.D. on our car?”

Lasko shook his head. “Nothing. This was it. Said the girl was spotted getting into your vehicle leaving the train station and we got a head on your location. Called in all available units to make the stop.”

“Not your fault,” I said.

“I’m aware of that,” Lasko said. “But I don’t like anyone pulling my chain.”

“You know Bazer? Coronado P.D.?” I asked.

Lasko thought for a moment, then shook his head.

Lauren was at the car and Anchor and Kitting walked past us, ready to go.

“Look him up,” I said, turning and heading for the car. “Pretty sure he’s the chain puller.”

THIRTY-NINE

I grabbed my phone as soon as we got back in the car.

“Who are you calling?” Lauren asked.

I punched the screen, but didn’t answer her.

“Should we wait?” Anchor asked.

I nodded.

Mike Lorenzo answered on the first ring. “Joe. Where…”

“Listen to me,” I said, cutting him off. “Bazer issued the alert, correct?”

“Yeah, but…”

“Can you find out if he just put out a stop on a white Escalade, east side of downtown?” I said. “Supposedly I.D.’d with Elizabeth?”

“What are…”

“Can you find out, Mike?” I asked, my patience gone. “Yes or no?”

The line buzzed for a moment. “Yeah. I can find out.”

“How long will it take?”

“Gimme a few minutes.”

“Call me back when you find out.”

“Okay, but…”

I hung up.

“You think Mike’s clean then?” Lauren asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know what I think, but it’s irrelevant now. One of them is not right, but at this point, they both know we’re here. If Mike calls back, then we’ll assume he’s on our side. If he doesn’t, we won’t.”

And that was about all we could do. If either of them were involved, then they were just as close as we were and there wasn’t anything I could do about it. I couldn’t stop them. They were police officers and could do nearly anything they wanted.

We just needed to find her first.

“My guess is we’re going to be tailed from here on out,” I said.

“We’re already on it,” Anchor said. “We’ve called in a little help.”

“A little help?”

“Just a couple cars that might inadvertently get in the way,” Anchor said smiling.

I nodded and the phone vibrated on my leg.

I grabbed it without looking at the screen. “Who called it in, Mike?”

The line hummed for a few seconds. “I need help.”

The female voice surprised me.

The fact that it was Elizabeth’s floored me.

I glanced at the screen, saw Morgan’s Colorado number and put the phone back to my ear. I tapped Anchor’s seat and pointed at the phone frantically. He nodded and he and Kitting immediately started working their phones.

“Elizabeth?” I asked. “Where are you?”

“No, Ellie. I mean, yes,” she whispered. “It’s me.”

“Where are you?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice shaky and it sounded like she was crying. “I’m scared.”

“Are you alone?” I asked.

“I’m in a bathroom,” she said. “I only have a second. Help me. Please.”

“You’re with a girl named Netty, right?”

“How did you…”

“Don’t say more than you need to,” I said, banging on Anchor’s seat, begging him to grab the locale.

He made a motion to keep talking.

“And a guy named Alex?” I said. “Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“Did you drive far from the train station?”

“No.”

There was some rustling in the background. “They know you have your phone?”

“No. Don’t think so.”

“Are there other people there?”

“Yes. Five maybe? Six? I don’t know. I’m scared.”

“I know you are. I’m coming for you, though, okay? So you need to stay calm.” I took a deep breath and realized that Lauren was pressed up against me, trying to listen. “Any idea what they want with you? Are they taking you anywhere?”

“I don’t know,” she said. There was a loud knocking through the phone and a muffled voice. “I have to go.”

“I’m coming, Elizabeth. I’m coming.”

“Please, hurry,” she said and there was no doubt she was crying. “Please. I’m so…”

The line went dead.

FORTY

“Think we got it,” Kitting said. “About ten minutes away.”

“Go,” I said. “It doesn’t sound good.”

“Any idea of what we’re looking at?” Anchor said.

“She said five, maybe six other people there,” I told him. “But she didn’t sound certain.”

Anchor nodded and stared straight ahead as we drove.

I looked at Lauren. “I should’ve put her on speaker. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Lauren said, her voice tight and hoarse. “She’s scared.”

I nodded.

The phone vibrated again. I looked at the screen first this time before I answered. “Mike.”

“Joe, I don’t know where it came from,” Mike said. “It was an anonymous number.”

I stared at the window, watching the drab houses go by. “No idea who the caller was or where they called in from?”

“Blocked number,” he said. “I’ve got someone working on it but it’s gonna take awhile to find the origin.”

“Okay. Where’s Bazer?”

“Bazer? I don’t know. Why? You want his help?”

“Hell no,” I said. “Just curious.”

“Last I knew, he was out patrolling. He rolled all units into San Diego, based on the alert.”

I nodded.

“Where are you?” Mike asked. “Why aren’t you telling me what’s going on?”

“Because I don’t know.”

“But you know where you are, right?”

“A neighborhood in Southeast,” I said. “Not exactly sure where. We may have a location.”

“A location?”

“On Elizabeth. Where she’s at.”

“Tell me where. I’ll get there.”

“It’s complicated, Mike,” I said. “I’m not sure of anything at the moment.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means I’ll call you when I know more.” I hung up.

“Location’s a warehouse,” Kitting said over his shoulder, holding steady on the wheel.

I nodded.

Anchor turned around. “I assume you aren’t adverse to going in armed?”

“Whatever we need to do to get my daughter.”

Anchor shifted his gaze to Lauren. “Ma’am?”

“I’ve never fired a gun,” Lauren said.

“Not a problem,” Anchor answered. “We’re going to park the car a ways away. We’ll rely on you to keep it at the ready and stay in communication with you.”

“So I’m like the getaway driver?” she asked, looking at me and then him.

“Probably won’t be anything to get away from,” Anchor said. “We’ll just call you when it’s safe to come pick us all up, including your daughter.”

Lauren took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Alright.”

“And our help has worked,” Anchor said. “We are going in without a tail. They intercepted.”

I nodded.

“We’ll be parked in two minutes,” Anchor said, twisting back around in his seat.

I stared out the window, but couldn’t focus on the houses and buildings out there. All I could see was Elizabeth. I felt like we were at the end of the road. Like we were going to finally see her. I still didn’t know what had happened all those years ago or who was responsible, but there was a calm settling over me. The car slowed and

Kitting moved to the curb.

I was ready to get my daughter back.

FORTY-ONE

“We’re three blocks away,” Anchor said to Lauren as she settled into the front seat. “You see any reason to leave, do so. We’ll worry about catching up with you after we’ve recovered your daughter. Questions?”

Lauren shook her head.

He pushed a button next to her seat. “Give us just a minute in the trunk.”

He and Kitting headed in that direction and I lingered for a moment.

“You alright with this?” I asked.

“Just get her back, Joe,” she said, her voice drained, her eyes ringed with dark circles. “Get her back and I’ll be fine.”

I nodded and walked to the back of the car.

The floor panel was up, revealing a small arsenal that glistened in the afternoon sun.

“What are you most comfortable with?” Anchor asked.

I peered in closer and put my hands on a handgun that resembled the 9mm Beretta I’d carried as a cop. “This.”

Anchor lifted out a similar looking weapon and Kitting armed himself with something that looked to me like it was semi-automatic. He slung it over his shoulder and it disappeared inside his coat.

Anchor placed the gun at the small of his back and closed the trunk. He walked to the front of the car, spoke a few words to Lauren, then came back to us. “Let’s talk as we walk.”

We were in an industrial area, just outside of the dying residential neighborhoods, most of the warehouse parking lots eerily empty. Either empty or abandoned.

“You’re the one that needs to get to her,” Anchor said to me. “She won’t recognize myself or Ellis. So it’s going to have to be you that gets to her.”

I nodded, stepped over broken concrete and overgrown weeds.

“My guess is this isn’t terribly sophisticated,” Anchor continued. “Based on what

we saw online, it's a small building, not a whole lot of square footage. Maybe a holding or transfer area. Front and rear entrance, one story. Best case, we can go in with minimal fire and everyone walks out healthy."

"And worst case?" I asked.

Anchor shrugged. "They don't want worst case."

We crossed the street in a faded crosswalk. The road was deserted and it reminded me of a post-apocalyptic scene. We could have been the only people on the planet at that moment. But I knew better. I knew Elizabeth was there. Within reach.

"Ellis will go in the back. You and I will take the front. Only goal is to get you to your daughter and then get out and back to the car," Anchor said. "I'll take care of communication with Ms. Tyler and direct her as to where to meet us." He paused. "Any questions?"

"Nope," Kitting said, staring straight ahead.

I shook my head.

We walked for another few minutes before Kitting peeled off and crossed to the other side of the street. We came to a four-way intersection and he disappeared down the side street, behind a single-story building looking like nothing more than a storage unit to me.

"That's it," Anchor said, nodding at the building Kitting disappeared behind. "Not crazy about that glass door."

The front entrance was a single glass door, no writing or numbers on it.

"Let's walk past, then come back," Anchor said.

We walked past it, still on the opposite side of the street and it took everything I had in me to not stare at the building. When we were a block beyond, we crossed the street and headed back.

"Probably work best if you're first in and I cover you," Anchor said. "You okay with that?"

"Yeah."

"Forgive me for saying this, Mr. Tyler," he said. "I imagine it's going to be emotional when you get to your daughter. But we should exit as quickly as possible."

"I know. I'll get her and we'll go."

He nodded.

I took several deep breaths, steadying my nerves and getting my head right. Anchor was right. I didn't want to get in there and just break down completely when I saw her. There'd be time for breaking down later. I needed to get to her, secure her and get the hell out of there safely.

I took another deep breath as we sidestepped toward the building moving along the wall of the building, maybe thirty feet from the door. Anchor was right in behind me.

"Straight in?" I asked, pulling the gun from my waistband.

"Straight in," he said. "Ellis will be in position and will move when he needs to."

I took another breath and pressed up next to the building, the gun heavy in my hand. It had been a long time since I'd held a weapon, much less fired one. I tried to clear my head, to focus.

We paused at the door.

"Ready?" Anchor asked.

I nodded. "Ready."

"I'll follow you then," he said. "On your mark."

I pressed my ear to the wall, heard nothing.

Took another deep breath.

Reached for the rectangular metal handle on the door, cold to the touch.

"Go," I said, yanking the door open.

FORTY-TWO

Two teenagers were sitting on a green sofa, staring at their phones.

I aimed at the one on the left. “Don’t move.”

Both sat there, frozen as we moved into the room. Anchor floated off to my left, his gun trained on the sofa.

“Who the fuck are you?” said the one on the left. He was eighteen or nineteen. Thin, Hispanic, shaved head, a gold crucifix dangling from his neck.

“Shut up,” I said. “Keep your mouth closed.”

“Room’s clear,” Anchor said.

“On the ground,” I said. “Both of you. Now.”

They looked at each other, then slowly moved to the floor, staring at us.

But not scared.

“Flat,” I said, as they both rested on their hands and knees.

They both flattened themselves to the floor.

I took a quick look around the room. It was an office area. The sofa they were on. A desk off to the left. A couple of generic metal cabinets. A clock on the wall near an empty bulletin board. An open doorway in the back left corner.

“Clear them,” Anchor said. “I’ve got the door.”

I patted down the one closest to me. He was thicker and younger than the one with the crucifix. I ran my hands over his flannel shirt and baggy jeans, checked his ankles near the top of his stark white sneakers. Removed a handgun from his waist and a knife from the ankle. I threw both on the sofa behind me.

“Clear,” I said.

I moved behind them to the one wearing the crucifix. As soon as I bent down to check him, he rolled and tried to back hand me. His hand caught my arm and I drove the butt of the gun into his head, just above his ear. His head fell to the floor, unconscious. I checked him the same way I had the first. I pulled a nearly identical handgun from his jeans and tossed it on the sofa with the others.

“Clear,” I said.

I stepped in front of them and squatted down next to the one who was awake. “A girl was brought here earlier. Where is she?”

“Fuck you, asshole.”

“Take the door,” Anchor said quickly.

I stood and switched positions with him, covering the door at the back of the room.

“Spread your hands on the floor,” Anchor said to him. “Out in front of you.”

The guy hesitated, then did as he was told.

Anchor bent down, pressed the barrel of his gun into the center of the guy’s hand and covered his mouth with his free hand. “One more chance. You fail this one, I will put a hole right in your hand. Then I’ll do the other.” The guy squirmed as Anchor drove the gun harder into his hand. “We clear?”

The guy grimaced and managed a nod.

Anchor pulled his hand away from the guy’s mouth.

“In the back,” he said. “There’s a room at the back of the warehouse.”

“How many others in the building?” Anchor asked.

He hesitated and Anchor twitched like he was about to pull the trigger.

But the guy was just counting in his head. “Six, I think. Plus the girl.”

“Guns?”

The guy nodded.

“Thanks,” Anchor said, then hit him with his gun the same way I’d done the first guy.

The guy’s head dropped to the floor with a thud.

Anchor took the two guns on the sofa and put one in his waistband. He tossed me the other and I did the same with that one. He took the knife and dropped it in his pocket.

I edged toward the door at the back of the room. I pressed up against the wall and took a quick look into the warehouse.

About a dozen rows of floor-to-ceiling metal racks. It was quiet. I didn’t see anyone.

I turned to Anchor and shook my head.

He nodded, pointed at me and held up one finger, pointed at himself and held up two fingers.

I nodded, took a deep breath and stepped into the warehouse, low, my eyes cutting to the right. Anchor stepped in behind me and took the left side. The racks were mostly empty, save for a few boxes. There was a middle aisle about five-feet wide, dividing the room in half.

Anchor and I each kept to our sides, staying low and next to the end racks.

I still didn’t hear anything.

We reached the back of the warehouse and the back wall.

We listened.

Voices toward the far left side.

I pointed in that direction and Anchor nodded.

I went past him and he stayed behind me. A few more steps and I could make out distinct voices. We came to the end of the back wall, but the far side of the building extended back. I stopped at the corner and ducked my head around the corner.

There was a large rectangular office, a room within a room, with a large window, pulled dark with blinds. In front of the office, I counted five people. One female, four males. All in chairs, all in various stages of lounging, save for one guy on the end, a tall, lanky kid in a white T-shirt and black jeans with short black hair and a hard scowl.

The female was without a doubt Netty.

I pulled my head back. “Five in front. Another room behind them.”

Anchor nodded.

A cell phone rang back in the direction of where they were all sitting. I craned my neck as close to the corner as I could get without exposing myself.

“Fuck,” a voice said. “Someone’s here. Jay saw them come in.”

Feet scurried on the ground.

I looked at Anchor.

“Let’s go,” Anchor said. “You take the right. I’ve got the left.”

I spun into the open area and they were all on their feet, maybe a hundred feet away.

I locked eyes with the kid with the hard scowl. “Nobody move.”

For a moment, they froze, staring back at us.

And then they unfroze.

Guns flashed as they all moved and I took a deep breath. I squeezed the trigger and the one kid to the left of the hard scowl dropped. Another one on the other side dropped thanks to Anchor. They all scattered in opposite directions. We held where we were.

Then we heard rapid fire from somewhere behind the room at the back of the warehouse.

“Go,” Anchor said. “Ellis is in. I’m behind you and will cover. Go.”

I stayed low and moved as quickly as I could toward the door, moving my eyes back and forth. I saw a quick flash out to my right and as I turned, felt a burning sensation as a bullet pierced my shoulder. I stumbled, but continued moving forward, a hail of bullets from behind me in the direction of my shooter. The hard scowl fell to the ground, his back soaked in red.

More gunfire behind the room, some yelling off to my left.

I focused on the door.

I got to it, reached for it—ignoring the burning in my shoulder—yanked it open and slid inside.

A thick Hispanic man, early twenties, was standing next to a cot, trying to get his pants up. His black T-shirt was wrinkled across his massive chest and his hair was disheveled, two angry red stripes on one of his cheeks.

Elizabeth was on the cot, on her back, staring at me, eyes wide, her mouth frozen in an oval.

The guy stiffened when he saw me, slowly getting his hands up. “Yo. We’re cool.”

“Don’t fucking move,” I said. “Don’t fucking move.”

“Yo, I got you. I’m not movin’, dude.”

More gunfire exploded outside the room. Elizabeth jerked on the bed, startled by the noise.

I rose out of my crouch slowly, looking at her. “Are you…”

The guy’s foot crashed into my gun hand and the gun clattered to the floor. I stumbled backward against the wall, pain searing through my shoulder as it hit. The guy came at me, snarling, his fists coming fast at my face.

I ducked under the blows, grabbed him around the waist and took him to the floor, dumping him on his back. We hit the ground hard and white heat burned through my shoulder. He was flailing at me with his fists. I found his neck with my hands and squeezed as hard as I could, pushing myself off of him.

Elizabeth was still on the cot, watching us, apparently unable to move, and I had no idea if it was because of me or the man I was fighting with or the gunshots or everything.

The guy clawed at my arms, then started banging away at my shoulder, each strike feeling like a spear into my back. But I kept my hands on his neck and leaned down, his face growing redder.

Elizabeth finally pushed herself up. I could see that her jeans were undone at the waist and her shirt was pushed up.

I looked down at the man beneath me and squeezed harder, the muscles in his neck pulsating against my hands as I cut off his air supply.

No one was going to hurt my daughter again.

Elizabeth scrambled on the bed, fixing her jeans and pulling down her shirt, tears running down her face. “He was going to…”

I tuned her out, focused on the son of a bitch I was choking to death.

His arms started to fall, his hands sliding down my arms, gagging, his eyes fluttering.

The door slammed open behind me.

Anchor stood in the doorway. “We’re clear.”

I squeezed harder.

“If you want him dead, he’s almost there,” Anchor said softly.

Elizabeth was crying, her hands covering her nose and mouth, shaking her head.

Anchor touched my good shoulder. “It’s over, Mr. Tyler. You don’t have to do it.”

My body shook, my hands cramping around the man’s neck. He symbolized everything that had gone wrong for so long. Everyone and everything that had taken part in keeping my daughter from me. I wanted to extinguish it, make it go away forever.

His body started to go limp beneath me.

Anchor put his hand on my wrists. “Let go, Mr. Tyler. You don’t want your daughter to see this.”

Sweat dripped down the back of my neck and I looked at Elizabeth. She was crying, shaking, watching me.

I loosened my grip on his throat, then moved my hands off of him, sitting back.

The room tilted a little.

I reached out to Elizabeth.

“I’m sorry,” I said, the words fat and heavy on my tongue.

She hesitated for a moment, then reached out, her own hand quivering as it touched mine.

I wrapped my fingers around hers.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “No one will ever hurt you again, Elizabeth.”

She nodded, tears streaming down her face.

“I’m so sorry,” I said one more time before the room tilted to the side and everything went black.

FORTY-THREE

“The question, then, Elizabeth is…what would you like to do?”

We were sitting in a conference room on the fourth floor of the FBI field office, a four-story rectangular building in an office park near Montgomery Field and Kearney Mesa. Lauren and I were on one side of a large glass-covered oak table and Elizabeth was sitting on the other. Special Agent Dorothy Blundell was at the end of the table, smiling sympathetically at my daughter.

Anchor and Kitting had gotten us out of the warehouse. I came to in the parking lot and by that time, there were sirens and lights and all kinds of noise around us. I’d lost a fair amount of blood, but the wound in my shoulder was nothing more than a pretty deep cut. I’d refused transportation to a hospital and they’d patched me up as well as they could on the scene.

As I sat on the curb near the ambulance, I watched everything. Cops brought out the people in the warehouse. Lasko, the officer who’d stopped us, seemed to be running the scene and he gave me a nod at some point. I nodded back.

Anchor apparently called Lauren because she was there, next to Elizabeth, her arm around her, on the opposite side of the lot. Elizabeth looked scared, unsure, completely confused by everything around here.

I didn’t blame her.

Mike Lorenzo showed up, checked to make sure I was okay, then went about calling the people that needed to be called, including federal agents. Technically, abducted children fell under their jurisdiction and he knew that he had to involve them in order to get Elizabeth back to us. So he’d made the calls and got them to the scene.

I saw Bazer momentarily and wondered why he was there. Then realized that because he was tied to the AMBER Alert, he’d come to the scene. Or maybe Mike had called him. I didn’t know.

I stared at him while his eyes surveyed the scene. He finally saw me and stopped.

We stared at each other for a moment, but his expression gave away nothing.

Then he nodded at me and I lost him in the chaos.

Anchor and Kitting were over in another corner of the lot, answering questions. I wasn’t worried about them. They could handle themselves. I’d thank them another

day.

After an hour or so, Blundell came over, introduced herself and suggested that we all go into the office to sort things out. She asked again if I wanted to go to the hospital and I told her no.

“I just want to be with my daughter,” I told her.

So Lauren, Elizabeth and myself rode with her and two other agents back up to Kearney Mesa, a silent drive that felt awkward and odd and nothing like what I’d imagined it would be in all the times I’d thought about reuniting with Elizabeth. Lauren sat with me in the back row of the SUV, her fingers intertwined with mine, her eyes transfixed on Elizabeth. Elizabeth sat up in the row in front of us with another agent, her head leaning against the window. Blundell was in the passenger seat and the third agent drove.

And after another hour of sitting and waiting while Blundell presumably tracked down the details of the entire story, she came back into the room and told us that everything did, indeed, check out.

She was Elizabeth Tyler and we were her parents.

Blundell said “The question, then, is Elizabeth…what would you like to do?”

Elizabeth shifted in her seat, chewing on her lip for a long moment. “What do you mean?”

Blundell leaned forward on the table. She had short blond hair and a kind face, not what you’d expect from a federal agent. “I mean that a lot has been thrown at you today. For the last few days, actually. The most important thing here is how you feel and what you want to do.”

Elizabeth stared at her hands. They were folded in front of her on the table and I wanted to reach out and cover them with mine. But I didn’t. And she didn’t say anything.

“We can do one of three things,” Blundell said, her voice soft. “And we’ll leave the choice to you.”

I shifted in my chair, my shoulder reminding me that it hurt.

“One, because you’re a minor we can put you in custodial care,” Blundell said. “That would mean a temporary stay with a foster family. While I’m not sure that’s what I’d recommend, it is an option.”

Elizabeth was still staring at her hands. She looked so much like a younger

version of Lauren. So much more grown up.

“Two, we can return you to the Corzine family, temporarily,” Blundell continued. “They have been your family of record for some time, you know them as your family and you are entitled to go back to them if you choose.” Blundell glanced at us. “Because Elizabeth is sixteen, while still a minor, she can choose to go back to them, even if that stay is only temporary while the legal details are worked out.”

My stomach churned. My shoulder throbbed.

Blundell turned back Elizabeth. “Or you may choose to stay here with the Tylers. From everything we’ve seen, they are your legal parents and you were abducted from them here in San Diego. I see no reason that, after the legalities are worked through, that you won’t be returned to them.”

Lauren’s knuckles were white on the arm of her chair.

Blundell unfolded and refolded her hands. “Elizabeth, I know you’ve been through a lot. And there are going to be a lot more questions. People are going to want to talk to you about what happened. What you’ve been through. And I’m not going to lie to you. Some of that might not be very fun for you…most of it, probably. But I want you to have a voice in this. I don’t want to just force all of this on you. So I think it’s important to find out what you’d like to do.”

Elizabeth was still staring at her hands, her head down, but she gave a little nod.

Lauren glanced at me. I just shrugged, the tape on my shoulder blade pulling at my skin. I knew what I wanted Elizabeth to say. I knew what Lauren wanted her to say. We both had a million questions. But, Blundell was right. Elizabeth needed to have a voice in this.

Elizabeth finally lifted her head, looked at Blundell. “Can I call my….” She stopped, glanced at us, then looked back to Blundell. “Can I call home? To Minnesota?”

My stomach sank and I knew Lauren’s did, too.

Blundell nodded. “Of course. They’re aware you’re here and I’m sure they’d like to talk to you. Would you like some privacy?”

Elizabeth hesitated for just a moment, then nodded. “Yeah. Please.”

Blundell stood and swung her gaze toward us. “Mr. and Mrs. Tyler. Why don’t we step out for a few minutes and grab some coffee?”

Lauren and I both stood. My shoulder hurt, but the pain in my chest and stomach

hurt more. I didn't want to walk out of the room. I didn't want to let Elizabeth out of my sight.

"I'm going to get her set up on the phone and then I'll be out," Blundell said, opening the door.

Lauren and I walked out like prisoners to an execution. Blundell closed the door behind us.

"I'm not letting her go anywhere," Lauren whispered, tears in her eyes. "I'm not. I'll follow her back to Minnesota if I have to. I don't care."

I nodded. "I know."

"I don't care what that woman says," Lauren said, cutting her eyes to the door. "I won't let her go."

"She's right," I said. "She should have a voice."

"Bullshit," Lauren hissed at me. "She's our kid. She doesn't belong to that family in Minnesota or anyone else."

Before I could say anything else, the door opened and Blundell stepped into the hallway.

She ran a hand through her hair. "I'm sorry. I'm sure that was uncomfortable."

"You think?" Lauren asked.

Blundell pursed her lips. "Yes. I'm sure it was. But I think it's important to let her make some decisions here."

"She's our daughter," Lauren said, folding her arms across her chest. "Period."

"I agree," Blundell said. "I was pretty thorough in checking everything through. I'm sorry for what you've had to endure." She looked at each of us carefully. "But I think it's important to consider her feelings right now. The trauma she's gone through is nothing short of devastating. She clearly has some memory gaps, probably self-induced to protect herself after the abduction. Right now, she isn't sure of anything. Forcing her to do anything might be counterproductive."

She wasn't saying anything I hadn't said to families in the past. She was right. But it was harder to hear being on the other side.

"Legally, there's no question she's going to end up with you," Blundell said. "None. But she's a sixteen-year-old girl and she's scared and confused. Let's give her some breathing room. It will make things easier for her. And she really is the most

important person in all of this.”

Lauren gave a disgusted sigh and stared at the ground.

But I knew Blundell was right.

Even if it made me want to scream.

Blundell started to say something else, but stopped when the doorknob turned behind her. She stepped out of the way.

The door opened slowly and Elizabeth timidly stuck her head out into the hallway. “I’m done.”

Blundell smiled at her. As difficult as everything was, I liked Blundell. She was smart and doing her best to make Elizabeth feel comfortable.

“Were you able to reach the Corzines?” Blundell asked.

Elizabeth nodded. “Yeah. I talked to them.”

We all waited for more.

Elizabeth looked first at Lauren, then at me, maybe sizing us up, maybe trying to remember us. I wasn’t sure.

“I told them I needed to do something,” she said, looking at me. “With you guys.”

I let out a sigh and it felt as if I’d been holding my breath forever. I felt Lauren do the same next to me.

“Anything,” I said, my voice hoarse, my throat dry and tight. “We can do anything you want.”

“Can we go see…” Tears welled in her eyes. “Can we go see the house?”

FORTY-FOUR

Agent Blundell arranged a loaner Bureau vehicle for us.

Lauren drove, as my shoulder was stiffening up and I wasn't sure I could turn the wheel. Elizabeth sat in the front seat next to her and I was in the back.

We headed down I-15, southward out of Kearney Mesa, then cut through Mission Valley on Interstate 8 before we joined up with the slow-going I-5 again. Traffic wasn't as knotted as it might have been. We passed all of the San Diego landmarks—the Chargers stadium, Old Town, the airport, downtown—and I couldn't help but wonder if Elizabeth remembered any of them.

Lauren moved over as we swung past downtown and took the exit for the bridge, taking us high over the bay. Elizabeth was looking out her window, at the water down below, back toward the downtown skyline. I tried to recall the first time I'd driven over the bridge with her as a kid, but couldn't pull the memory.

"It's an island," Elizabeth said quietly and it wasn't a question.

"It is," Lauren answered. "We've always lived here."

Elizabeth didn't say anything.

Lauren navigated the narrow streets of Coronado, turned the corner into the neighborhood and pulled slowly into the driveway. The last time I'd been there I'd nearly collapsed in the drive, overwhelmed by the memories after having been gone so long.

We all got out.

My shoulder ached as I stood there next to the car, squinting into the early evening sun. Lauren came around next to me. Elizabeth stayed close to the car, then stepped tentatively into the yard.

"I'm going to go inside," Lauren said. "I've been gone for a few days. Just to open up the doors and windows." She smiled faintly at Elizabeth. "So you can see your room again. Your home."

Elizabeth looked at her, tried to smile, then nodded.

We both watched her walk toward the house and disappear inside.

Elizabeth stared at the house. I stood next to her, unsure of what to say, what to

do. I shoved my hands in my pockets and felt something metal. The bracelet Bryce had given me. I fished it out and held it out to Elizabeth.

“Bryce asked me to give this to you,” I said.

She reached for it and our fingers touched. I wanted to grab her hand, pull her to me, wrap her in a hug and never let go. But I didn’t.

“Thanks,” she said, fingering the charms on the bracelet. She clenched it in her hand but didn’t put it on.

We were quiet for a few more minutes before she spoke. “Someone told me the house burned down. A woman, I think.”

“It didn’t,” I said. “It’s always been here.”

“She told me my parents died,” she said, still staring at the house. “I think she did, anyway. It’s all weird. In my head. Like, I haven’t thought about any of this in so long and now it’s showing up in my head.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “There are a lot of things to sort out. You don’t have to remember or force anything.”

Elizabeth took a few more steps into the yard, the grass fading from green to brown. Then she turned around.

“I was right about here,” she said to me.

Tears filled my eyes. I remembered it like it was yesterday. I nodded.

“You went inside, right?” she said. “We were doing Christmas decorations?”

I nodded again, my breath catching, my vision blurring.

“I didn’t want to go,” she said, her voice cracking.

I took a couple steps toward her.

“I didn’t think I’d ever get back,” she said, tears once again running down her cheeks.

I walked over to her, hesitated, then put my arms around her, pulled her close to me. Smelled her hair, felt it brush against my face. So much taller than when she’d been taken, but still so familiar.

“I didn’t think I’d ever get back,” she said, shaking against me. “I remembered wanting to be back with my Daddy. But she told me you were gone.”

That word. Daddy. That was the one that cut the tears loose in my eyes, the one that made my chest ache, made my heart flutter.

And told me we'd be okay.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"It's okay," she whispered back.

It wasn't. I still didn't know if Elizabeth wanted to be with us, if she'd choose to stay in San Diego or if she'd want to return to the Corzines. I still resented the fact that we'd missed almost a decade together, years that we could never, ever get back. And, more than anything, I still needed to know what happened. Who had taken her from right where we were standing.

And I would make sure that whoever had taken her, whoever had broken my family, whoever had played a part, I would make sure that they would pay.

I would be coming for them and they would pay.

But at that moment, all I wanted was to hold my daughter.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice broken.

"Nothing to be sorry for," I said. "Not one single thing. Nothing is your fault. Nothing."

She nodded and her tears soaked my shirt, wet against my chest.

We stood there for a long time.

Finally, she said, "Can we go inside? I…I want to see everything."

I gently pulled away from her, but kept my arms around her.

She looked up at me, her eyes red and tired.

I took my thumb and wiped it gently beneath her eye, pushing the tears out of the way.

She smiled at me.

My daughter smiled at me.

"Yeah," I said, smiling at her through my tears. "Let's go inside."

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As usual, there are lots and lots of people who helped make this book possible.

Thanks to ALL of the readers who have responded so enthusiastically to the Joe books and have taken the time to email me, message me and leave reviews. And, yes, there will be a fourth Joe book…

Thanks to my family and friends for all of their support and good humor and nagging to get the book done.

Thanks to Pam Applegate for cleaning this book up while she was on vacation.

Thanks to my daughter, Hannah, for always saying “Shouldn’t you be writing, Daddy?”

And thanks to Beth – I love you more than you know.

Table of Contents

Copyright
Other books
ONE
TWO
THREE
FOUR
FIVE
SIX
SEVEN
EIGHT
NINE
TEN
ELEVEN
TWELVE
THIRTEEN
FOURTEEN
FIFTEEN
SIXTEEN
SEVENTEEN
EIGHTEEN
NINETEEN
TWENTY
TWENTY-ONE
TWENTY-TWO
TWENTY-THREE
TWENTY-FOUR
TWENTY-FIVE
TWENTY-SIX
TWENTY-SEVEN
TWENTY-EIGHT
TWENTY-NINE
THIRTY
THIRTY-ONE
THIRTY-TWO
THIRTY-THREE
THIRTY-FOUR
THIRTY-FIVE

THIRTY-SIX
THIRTY-SEVEN
THIRTY-EIGHT
THIRTY-NINE
FORTY
FORTY-ONE
FORTY-TWO
FORTY-THREE
FORTY-FOUR
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS