

## Chapter One



“This is a secure building. How did you get in here?” Dr. Alexandra Van Zant reached into her lab coat pocket to press the panic button she carried at all times while at the facility.

“Your security isn’t great. I walked through the front door and wandered around until I found your office,” the female intruder answered arrogantly.

The woman standing in Alexandra’s office doorway was young, probably no more than twenty or twenty-one, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, porcelain-pale, pink-cheeked, petite, and round, very round, pregnant round, as in due-any-fucking-day-round...and she was also lying about how she had gotten in, but why would she lie? What point would it serve? Alexandra wanted to discount her as a threat, but when the security breach alarm didn’t sound, she started to panic just a little. The woman was obviously unstable, and even a very pregnant woman could be lethal under the right circumstances. She cautiously took a step back, knees shaking.

The intruder demanded, “Now what do you intend to do about our problem?”

“If by our problem, you’re referring to my lax security guards, and your ability to walk into my secure office without so much as a how-do-you-do, let alone without an appointment or security escort? That problem? I promise, *that* issue will be addressed immediately. Get out!” Alexandra pointed at the door—hating that her outstretched finger was shaking—and lifted her phone with the other hand, saying into the receiver, “Security? There is a trespasser in my office that I need removed! Now!”

The security officer explained, "We received the alarm, and we are attempting to get into your corridor, ma'am, but there seems to be a problem."

"Excuse me?"

The woman walked toward Alexandra's desk and took a seat in one of the upholstered chairs. "After your initial call, all the lines rerouted in a loop, and the corridor has been sealed off. They aren't going to be able to breach the privacy lock I put in place for us to have this little chat for another five minutes. As long as you're planning to address the security issues at AODH Genetic Research and Development after I leave, your IT guys leave a lot to be desired too."

Alexandra placed herself between the woman and the elevator to the lower-level, classified research labs while looking down at her watch. *Five minutes? Five fucking minutes?* "I need you to leave my office, now. This area is restricted. You are not safe here."

"I'm not letting you keep him," the woman stated coolly. "Although I'm really not sure why you would care if you kept him or not, because you're never home, and when you are home, you aren't exactly there for him as a wife, are you?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

The intruder met her gaze. "Rumor has it you're a lesbian. Is that it? The only reason you have a husband is for appearances, so you can remain in the closet? I mean, really, times have changed. If you're gay, be proud. Own it. Set him free."

"I'm not a lesbian, and my husband is Professor Terrance James Browning. You've obviously mistaken me for someone else." Alexandra hoped her voice wasn't trembling but knew it was.

"I think I know who the father of my child is," the woman replied sarcastically as she studied her manicure. Her face twisted with arrogance. "And I can assure you, he loves me...more than the moon and the stars and the sun...that's what he tells me." She chuckled. "It's so corny, but that's my Terry. So, now you understand why you must set

him free. He's old-fashioned, and he wants to do right by me and our child, you see, so we can raise our baby together."

This isn't happening.

Terry? *Terry*? No one called her husband Terry. It was either Professor, Terrance, or TJ, but definitely not Terry. That proved the girl was lying, didn't it?

*"I love you, Alexandra, more than the moon and the stars and the sun. I always will."*

It really was a corny line, and a popular one. Lots of men would use that very same line. So coincidence yes, but certainly not proof he even knew the woman standing before her. No, amend that, child. *A very pregnant child, who needed assistance.*

"I'm fairly certain, if my husband was involved with someone, let alone gotten a woman pregnant, he would have told me."

*Where the fuck is security?*

Alexandra demanded, "Why are you doing this? You're not getting a penny out of either of us if that's why you are here."

"I came here as a courtesy, because you are all kinds of oo-la-la important in this town, and I assumed you'd want to avoid an ugly, very public scandal. So give him up willingly, and I won't be forced to go to the dean and all the news outlets in a three-state radius with my story."

"Oh God, you're a student? You're one of my husband's computer science students?" Alexandra's knees threatened to buckle as the girl's intention became clear. "If you loved him as you say you do, why would you destroy his career?"

"His career? I have no intention of destroying his career, but I will have him, and if that means shaking up your sanctimonious world —"

"If you go to the dean, his career will suffer!"

"The university doesn't want bad press drawing attention to it any more than you want bad press drawing attention to you and your work here. I've done my homework."

"Your homework?"

“Let’s just say I know everyone’s Achilles heel.”

“Look, your threats don’t scare me. My facility is one of the most respected and acclaimed genetics research laboratories in the world.” Alexandra picked up her phone and rang security again, but no one answered.

“Are you so certain? What if there were questions raised about the methods practiced in your labs? Questions hinting at patent infringement, bordering on fraud? Proof that the human genetics research you claim will heal humans of disease is actually a cover story for the truth? Rumor has it your super human hybrids will be bigger, stronger, faster and longer lived, but only for those who can pay big.”

Alexandra gaped. *Who was is woman?*

The young woman narrowed her gaze and Alexandra saw a deep rooted fury born from some other source. “How long would your research be delayed if your donors were suddenly demanding audits?”

“I have nothing to hide here.”

“Maybe not, but would negative press benefit you, or burden you? If I started at the top of your donor chain, whispering doubts, would your loyal followers continue to be reliable supporters if they believed their names might be linked to any kind of scandal? It’s my understanding many of your highest donations were from anonymous sources. Seems likely they won’t want to be discovered.” The blonde flipped her hair behind her shoulder. “You have twenty-four hours to make a decision. All I want is Terry’s freedom from a loveless, passionless relationship...and for him to leave the marriage with enough money to make certain he can retain the level of lifestyle he deserves. So see? I don’t want a dime for myself or my baby. I only care about Terry and honestly, if it wasn’t for the damn *Forbes* spread about the 100 Most Powerful Women of the Year, he would have already demanded a divorce himself. That article changed everything.”

“What? You’re being ridiculous.”

“Money, sweetheart; it always boils down to who has the most. You won by a landslide. The *Forbes* spread alone more than tripled the donations toward your genetic

research, right? And let's face simple facts, your income and celebrity provides him with a lifestyle to which he has quickly becoming accustomed." The girl smoothed her shirt over her protruding belly. "Remember, twenty-four hours. This is your only warning. Divorce Terry immediately or I promise the consequences aren't something you are prepared to deal with."

Pushing out of the chair, the woman fled the office and turned right to go down the hallway.

*TJ has been having an affair. How did I not notice? Alexandra dropped hard into her office chair and buried her face in her shaking hands. Patent infringement? Fraud? Consequences? What the hell?*

Alexandra heard the corridor lockout's pressurized seal release. *Finally.*

"Dr. Van Zant?" A security officer barreled into her office. Three additional officers pushed in behind him. "Are you injured?"

"Five minutes! Do you know how much damage could happen at this facility in five minutes?" She stood up and smoothed her lab coat with shaking hands. "Find that woman! She went to the right when she exited my office. There are only three exits in that direction – the fire exit, the parking garage, and through the Eden Project. And figure out how she got in here."

Three officers left in pursuit. The first officer stayed behind, fawning over her. "Ma'am, you should stay seated until the medical team arrives to check you over."

Alexandra picked up her phone but remembered it wasn't working properly. She addressed the officer. "Larry Perkins, right?"

"Yes, Dr. Van Zant."

"Do you like working here?"

Larry Perkins snapped to attention. "Ma'am, yes, ma'am."

"I'm going into the lower-level labs. You will stand guard at the elevator until I return."

“Yes, ma’am.”

Alexandra entered the security code with a shaking hand, her fear having nothing to do with the woman who’d fled and everything to do with the viable samples below. The reinforced-steel door opened and she immediately stepped into a small foyer. The doors closed behind her. She prayed her husband’s mistress’s claims were indeed true, because if anyone had come through her emergency exit while she was distracted, Edward’s research could have been compromised and that would be disastrous. Once it would have been bad enough to merely fear the woman was intelligence, or a scout sent to confirm the discrepancies in her building’s actual floor plan from the floor plan filed with the city.

She’d known a day such as this would come, but she’d never feared a threat to the world would come from within her own lab, and Alexandra didn’t believe in coincidences.

Her hands were still trembling when she removed a folded letter from her lab coat pocket and reread the missive delivered by special courier yesterday morning.

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*My wife is dying, Dr. Van Zant. I planned to return to our home in Dublin and leave it at that. It would be so much easier to not confess, but I can’t just let you or, God forbid, someone else stumble unknowingly across the research I have hidden in my personal-notes folder. I hope you can understand and forgive me when I tell you, I made a big mistake, and my regret is agonizing.*

*I was approached, to trade research and specimens for an experimental medication for my wife. However, I never made the swap. I could not in good conscience turn my discovery over to the person who requested this trade. So, I lied, as you will soon discover. I said my research was incomplete, and the specimens unviable. It was in my wife’s irreversible turn for the worse that the universe proved to me what a fool I’ve been. I was taken in by my sheer desperation.*

*My daughter is only six months old, and as you know, she and my wife are my world. I would do anything for them. It is for this reason I ask you to not act on the information I am entrusting to you until you are contacted by my attorney upon my wife’s death. By then you will no doubt understand the full scope of why I chose you for this burden. And why you must report me to the proper authorities.*

*When my treachery is uncovered, I will never be permitted to see my daughter grow up. She will never hear stories of the great scientist I was, only the horrific traitor I became, but at least my wife will never know the truth. I am so ashamed.*

~

Alexandra refolded the note and stuck it back into her pocket. It didn't matter how many times she read and reread the words, it didn't change the hard-to-accept truth. Siobhan, her dearest friend, was dying, and her own heart was breaking because she couldn't race to Siobhan's side; and for all her genius acclaim, there was nothing she could do to save her. All she could do now was clean up the disastrous mess Edward left in her lap. She wasn't sure what hurt worse: learning Edward used her facility in his abject betrayal to humanity or knowing he purposely kept his wife's illness a secret from her to avoid being put on mandatory leave. The rule was a rule created to avoid secret or classified information being compromised by an at-risk-employee, whether they'd accrued a large gambling debt, committed a felony, or if they or a loved one were diagnosed with a terminal illness. "Siobhan is my friend, my soul sister, I should be there."

She caught the sob before it broke free. There was no more time for tears.

When she'd first read the letter she'd been so overwhelmed, she'd screamed with primal rage. She'd run until she couldn't breathe because there was no time to grieve. Not for Siobhan, whose life would be cut too short, or the infant Rowan, who would grow up without a mother. She must not grow up without her father. Alexandra owed him as much for his loyalty and honesty.

Seeing as yet no atrocities had been committed, she would find the answer to this current dilemma. Wasn't she best known among her peers as the one who would find the answer? Because regardless of the puzzle, there was always an answer, and what she needed most was time, time to figure out the answer to Edward's...big mistake, he'd called it. What a laughable misuse of language.

She'd made several attempts to reach Edward, but all her calls went to voice mail, and she dared not leave a message, fearing interception.

She'd worked all day and well into the next morning to discover the full extent of Edward's research. She'd tested the live specimens and confirmed the truth of his words. He'd created a highly lethal hybrid of Human Immunodeficiency Virus, combined with a hybrid of rabies, revving up the speed with which it would destroy the brain from a few weeks to a few days, then combined with a hybrid of influenza, which allowed the disease to be spread by fomites, germs on surfaces, aerosolization, by coughing or sneezing, and by transfer of body fluids. The genius of the biological weapon was beautifully mesmerizing to watch as the disease's cell walls mutated many generations before the lens of her sealed microscope, making it impossible to create a vaccine, because by the time the vaccine was made for Generation A, the disease would have already become Generation Z. There wasn't a Classification of Bioterrorism Agents level beyond Category A, but for this disease there would need to be one.

Released from the lab, human beings would be the endangered species. Worse, a bottlenecked species. Within a generation, humans would cease to exist and that was the outcome Edward had not seen coming. His Big Mistake.

Because even though she had several test generations and trial batches of vaccine, they each proved to be absolutely useless. The disease was mutating too quickly, and the live vaccines were incredibly dangerous to keep around, because a skilled scientist could reverse-engineer a variant disease from the specimens she had on hand. She'd believed she had more time, thinking the possibility anyone would come looking for was infinitely remote. The arrival of an intruder changed everything. She was no longer willing to take a chance on even the most unlikely statistical chance someone would come to her lab and steal the research and viable samples.

When the woman stood in her doorway, she'd determined her death would be an acceptable outcome if she were able to prevent Edward's big mistake from ever being discovered.

Walking a few steps to another set of doors, she scanned her iris. "*Good morning, Dr. Van Zant.*"



The computer system confirmed her identity with a voice recognition program when she answered, "Good morning, Áed," she used the phonetic pronunciation 'Ay' of the fire god, Aodh, for which her company was named.

*"Enter your security code, please."*

She entered a second code, and exhaled heavily as the second set of doors opened.

She stepped inside the elevator and pressed L-3.

The computerized voice responded, *"You have selected Lower Level Three, please confirm."*

She typed in a third set of security codes. A small door slid open, and she placed her hand on the sensor pad. Within a millisecond her DNA and heartbeat rhythm had been scanned for proof of identity. *"You are confirmed for entry, Dr. Van Zant."*

The elevator descended.

*Even if someone entered the elevator, without my iris scan, my unique heartbeat rhythm, my DNA, and my passwords, the elevator would literally become a prison. No one can get in here, except me. No one. So, why am I still so worried?*

She'd naively believed no one could get to her office too.

When the doors opened, she ran across the room to a main terminal and started accessing files, making sure they were secure, and then spent another hour programming even more safety precautions. Only she, Dr. Edward Chu, and three other scientists – Dr. Alicia Harper, Dr. Rodger Fredrick, and Dr. Diane Ning – had ever had access to this particular level, and in each instance, they could only use the access point which was through her office, and as of last night, all Level Three privileges were revoked until further notice, guaranteeing no one could enter Level Three except her. She sent interoffice memos to those involved so they would not be taken unaware on Monday morning. Hindsight now, but in the future the access would only be granted when she could directly supervise each project.

"I should have known something was wrong when you started logging more and more hours, Edward." But when she'd mentally reviewed all the projects she knew he

was involved in, no alarm bells went off. His behavior was directly explainable by work assigned. She stared at the monitor. *When did you have time to research and design this?*

He expected her to turn him over to the authorities, but if she turned him over to the authorities, who then would she trust his research results to for confirmation of a crime? It was a laughable situation because there wasn't a single soul she'd trust with the information, let alone the actual specimens. The disease hybrid he'd created was *that* dangerous. Closing her eyes, she inhaled a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled. But if she didn't turn him over, he could willingly or forcibly recreate his results –

*"I am Major Tyrone Davis, ma'am. May I have a word?"*

She shook her head, remembering an encounter years earlier. *Now? I'm remembering this now?* She seriously didn't understand her brain sometimes. Why would anyone summon a fox when the henhouse door lay open?

The memory was time-stamped a month prior to Brandon's death. A time in her life when isolation and routine didn't rule her every second. A time when she still made an effort to buy her own *venti* dark roast to enjoy on her walk to work, regardless of the weather. It was at her habitual coffee shop the major had cornered her, and *now*, in this moment when her greatest fear materialized, her mind chose to focus on what she'd at first considered merely an inconvenience, her day disrupted? Alexandra's memory of the event was clear, as if the meeting had only just happened



"You're wasting your time." She grabbed her dark roast and headed toward the café's exit. Major Tyrone Davis dogged her heels.

The tall, dark-skinned man was wearing his blue and white dress uniform, and he wore it very well. Even with the severe lines of the tailoring, the Marine beneath was obviously built of solid muscle. He respectfully held his hat tucked under his arm.

She tried to avoid the conversation by stating how busy she was, and she was already late for work, expected for a meeting she couldn't be late for, but he knew exactly what time she would go through the doors to her place of employment and exactly how

long her walk was from the coffee shop to its entrance. It was disconcerting, to discover he knew she stopped for fifteen minutes each day at a community park and sat on a bench directly between a pond – home to three varieties of mallard and two varieties of geese – and a playground, known for its scheduled play dates for area parents to gossip while toddlers socialized, and on any given day she might be staring wistfully in one direction or the other.

“All I ask is for those fifteen minutes and then my driver will drop you at work.”

Alexandra sat across from him at a table for two tucked against a corner. He spoke in a low voice, and she followed his lead once the direction of the conversation was revealed with one word, “Hypothetically –”

She listened politely to his proposal and promptly turned down his proposal.

“Let me get this straight, you’d decline to work with us, knowing it’s your civic responsibility as an American to answer a call of duty? You do realize you’d be directly refusing to work for the secretaries of Health and Human Services, the Department of Homeland Security, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *and* the president of the United States?”

“Wow, good thing you didn’t come here to offer me a job, Major Davis. That would be quite embarrassing, wouldn’t it?”

His eyes narrowed, and she knew he was trying to figure out what would motivate her. Money? Acclaim? “But if you did, you would be a valuable member of our science team, Dr. Van Zant. You would be on the cutting edge of progress. You would be working to create greater safety and security for our nation.”

Alexandra kept her head turned to the riverside view through the window. She knew he considered her failure to meet his gaze one of rudeness, but in truth, the window offered a perfect reflection of his body language, which he might have tried harder to mask had she in fact met his gaze. It also allowed her constantly working mind to solve problems – barge speeds, traffic statistics, coffee patron cost averages – so she wouldn’t

fidget excessively or drum her fingers against the table annoyingly. Given the choice of being perceived as rude or annoying, she always chose rude.

She sighed heavily and gave him a sideways glance. “What is your true objective to veil the truth so well?”

He started to deny the accusation, but she turned her head and met his gaze fully, finger raised. “The truth is your employers seek to prevent casualties on US soil in the event of a biological attack, but they also want to develop a biological weapon predictable enough to control outcomes.”

His mouth opened and closed, but she kept talking. “In all honesty, *you* do not need me for the task you described. Given enough time and enough money *any* scientist can whip up a batch of vaccine for all the likely disease threats that might be used for an attack on American soil. Any scientist can estimate statistics for exposure survivals versus casualties” –she shook her head disapprovingly – “unless your employers want *me* specifically for a reason you have yet to disclose?”

His silence told her more about the man than empty denials would have.

Alexandra took a deep breath. The distractingly handsome man sitting across from her was grim. He was too fine-looking to be so stressed, too young for the lines creasing his forehead. He seemed a man of integrity.

“Do you know what it’s like being identified as a savant in grade school?” A breathy, bitter chuckle punctuated her question. “The expectation that intelligence would somehow equip the child with innate abilities to navigate in an adult landscape, exhibit top performance at all times, and behave maturely when faced with impossible decisions. I chose to stay in high school, to keep some normalcy in my life, and even then I was away at speaking engagements more than in class. Did you know I was recruited by all of the Ivy League and most of the prestigious European universities before junior high?”

She didn’t wait for him to answer. “I negotiated the terms of a full scholarship to Stanford when I was twelve. Instead of summer camp, I spent my school breaks in the world’s best laboratories with the most prestigious and acclaimed scientists of our era.

By the time I was in high school, I was commanding as much for a single speaking engagement as my father earned in a year. As a result, I've learned to play the game a dozen moves ahead of anyone's expectations of me from sheer fear of failure, which meant I had to quickly anticipate everyone's needs, desires, and motivations."

"I really can't imagine," Major Davis admitted.

"I am *the expert* in the genomics of disease. My peers see me as a puzzle solver, and I am always available for a consult because I know diseases, inside and out, down to their basic molecular structure."

"This is exactly why you should use your expertise for the betterment of your nation. Advance your career in the finest labs of the country."

She crossed her legs so her foot could shake unrestrained.

"To do my nation's puppet master's bidding?" she asked with jaded accusation. "Creating vaccines bores me, and I don't do well when I am bored. I especially do not do well when I am forced into a team-player position. Simply accessing my academic and employment records would have provided both details, which make me especially unsuited for any position your employers would hypothetically offer. I am content where I am employed because my employers saw the wisdom of giving me an isolated lab space to pursue my research, my interests, and apply my knowledge to the causes that motivate and excite me."

"I'm afraid I can't leave this table without certain assurances," the major vowed.

Alexandra's eyes narrowed as she fought the rising anger she'd kept at bay by focusing on anything and everything she could to keep from fidgeting in her chair and drumming her fingers. "Assurances?"

"To answer your question I would have to divulge confidential intel, and I am not at liberty to disclose any information until you —"

Alexandra threw her head back and laughed theatrically...an inappropriate reaction, but one that kept her from pushing away from the table and walking out. Since her past moments of high drama and the annoying tendency to exaggerate when

offended, bored, or exuding sarcasm were highly publicized, she hoped he'd arrived prepared for a show. "Let me say this as simply as I can. Our government's impetus to recruit me is fear. A biological agent released in a highly populated community could reduce our nation's population by half within – what is our government's analysts' best guess these days – three months? A month?" She glanced about, whispering, "What if it were only days? And what if the population reduction was global?"

"Dr. Van Zant –"

She leaned over the table and wagged her finger at him. She spoke fast. "You had your seven point five minutes of hypothetical, now it's my turn to enlighten you with facts – cold, hard truths – and hopefully, you will enlighten our government officials, because they are woefully shortsighted. Superbugs and hybrids are the new frontier of biological warfare all nations are ill prepared to deal with. Recruited, I would be just a single molecular scientist in a single lab with a single idea of which DNA strands of which very specific diseases would combine to create something so lethal the enemy wouldn't see it coming, yet ideally could be contained quickly and easily if and when it was deemed necessary, and with the safety net of a select few assets in the target region vaccinated against its threat."

"Dr. Van Zant, I did not imply –"

Alexandra talked over him when he attempted to interrupt. "Hypothetically, there are hundreds of known scientists of known governments already working on thousands of variations of hybrids of all the known bacterial and viral outbreaks we've discovered, not even taking into account the diseases yet unnamed and yet to be found."

His gaze narrowed, but when her own gaze had leveled at him she knew it was a look daring him to interrupt one more time. She'd grown up with ten brothers and had been challenging the scientists in her field of study since she was twelve. She knew how to handle a man.

"Major Davis, technically, you did imply. The minute you announced who you were and who you worked for, I knew this was a recruitment call. Do you really imagine

it's my first? I choose to work alone, but I don't live under a rock. So, let me be clear, I want nothing to do with the creation of a biological agent that could be used in war. At this moment, I am solely interested in genetic engineering, which promotes a healthier, longer life." She paused and flattened her palms to the tabletop. "Anything else I say will be misinterpreted."

"Try me." He tapped the eraser end of his mechanical pencil on the table.

Alexandra took a deep breath, trying to quell the frustration riding high in her throat. "Can you acknowledge there is a universal consciousness evolving right now, accepting the potential for an extinction event during our lifetime?"

"Extinction event?"

Alexandra held up her finger, implying she wasn't done talking. "Admit that even the average Joe is thinking about it, planning for it, and the media panders to it?"

"I don't see what this —"

"Reality TV turns the once considered insane, apocalypse-driven survivalists into celebrities; prime time offers a dozen versions of the zombie takeover; ours and other governments are trying to prepare for a grand-scale bioterrorism attack for which there can be no antidote, no vaccine, because the agent used is and will be unknown until it is too late."

He tapped the eraser faster.

"The bogeyman is working harder and faster than all the rest of you put together, and doomsday is coming."

"That's it? That's your point?"

"No, my point, which you are refusing to comprehend, is the bogeyman may not be a government at all, and that you will be looking at a much bigger problem than you've ever expected to have in your lifetime when he reveals himself."

She knew he'd heard the rumors about her, saying her genius kept her on the edge of a precipice, balanced between sanity and not. She knew all he heard was conspiracy blathering from a person not quite fully in touch.

He shook his head. "I came to you in all seriousness because you are the best, and your government needs brilliant minds, but you mock me with ludicrous stories."

"Yes, you did, and yes, I am, so if you figure out which doomsday disease is coming, I'll be happy to find the answer for how to shut it down. Until that time—"

"I've wasted my time."

"I believe that was the first sentence that came out of my mouth, before you even introduced yourself."

Needless to say, the ride to her lab bore a resentful silence brewing between them.

"If you ever change your mind, the offer will always be open." As she exited the vehicle he tried to hand his business card to her, but she refused it, having already read the only necessary parts—name and contact number.

She leaned into the car. "Direct line, or your cell?"

"My direct line forwards to my cell."

"And when it doesn't?"

"It always forwards."

She tilted her head, took a deep breath in, and counted to ten. "For the sake of argument, Major Davis, what is your cell number?"

He started to take out a pen to write on the card.

She waved down his hand, dismissively, her voice a growl as she said, "Just say the number!"

He told her as he pushed his business card closer. She still didn't take the card. "I won't change my mind, so unless you tell me you have a sample of the Doomsday Disease you wish to create a vaccination against, don't call me; and hope I never call you because if I do, it's because the bogeyman is among us."





She hadn't seen him since.

"Major Davis, Major Davis, Major Davis," she repeated his name, almost as if she was willing him to appear in her lab. Opening her eyes, she was no calmer. *Doomsday is here. In my lab. Fuck.* She shook her head. "Can I trust you, Major Davis?"

Alexandra took a final look at the monitors. She'd done all she could do to make sure the research and specimens were never accessed, which would free her mind to deal with the problem at hand – the security breach.

Of all the days for this to happen. *Nothing is ever coincidence.*

Alexandra rode the elevator back to her office. Her armed guard stood at attention waiting. "Officer Perkins, I need to see the director of security immediately. Would you escort me?"

"Yes, ma'am. He called a half hour ago while you were below, asking for a meeting with you as well. As did the IT director."

"Fabulous. As long as we are all on the same page."



In a closed-door meeting Alexandra addressed both the security director and the IT director, "Director Rodriguez, Director Jones," and launched into a line of questioning, punctuated by wide, emphatic sweeps of her hands. "How did this happen?"

"We're looking into it, ma'am. We will have answers –" assured IT Director Jones.

"Not soon enough. That is when you will have answers. I was assured the facility was breach proof. I was assured a barrage of armed tanks could not breach the walls of this facility." She laughed sarcastically. "Yet a very pregnant woman was able to not only walk in through a door but make her way all the way into the inner sanctum of my office without being seen. We are all very lucky all she seemed to want was my husband." Alexandra's tone changed as she began to emphasize each word. "Her mere presence

puts my work in jeopardy because I cannot confirm or deny any of my research was or was not compromised.”

“It has been confirmed none of the actual labs’ security was compromised, and all of the research files and specimens are still secure,” assured Security Director Rodriguez. “The intrusion was unacceptable, and I take full responsibility for the breach, but I can promise you, only the public access was tampered with; the secured, isolated, and dark systems were not.”

“My office is in a secure part of the building, not public. Your theory is invalid. Tell me she left no trace, and you can pack your belongings and turn over your badge.”

IT Director Jones reported, “We’re still doing a complete systems’ check, ma’am. I’m sure we will find her signature in the coding, but my team guaranteed me the isolated and dark systems were not tampered with.”

“Guaranteed?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You stake your job on the assessment of your team?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And not tampered with because she didn’t have the skill? Or not tampered with because she had no interest? There is a difference.” Alexandra looked at the two men. “Figure it out. I hold you both accountable. I hold your entire teams accountable for not being thorough enough to identify potential weaknesses. Consider yourselves and your teams on notice.”

“Ma’am—”

“She walked into this building like she planned to take a stroll through a shopping mall! I will replace every single employee in this building, including all my top advisors. Everyone.” Rodriguez attempted to interrupt, but she lifted her hand to silence him. “Do not caution me I am being unreasonable. Think outside the box. Teach your team to do the same, or I will find people who can. Am I making myself clear?”

“Ma’am.” They both nodded.

“Good. This conversation will never take place again.”

“Yes, ma’am,” assured both men.

“Extra security will be posted until all systems are back online,” promised Director Rodriguez. “We can also put a personal security detail in place.”

“Yes!” she replied emphatically before thinking it through and immediately changing her answer to, “No, I don’t want or need bodyguards. Increased security for the complex, and no security detail for the house. I’m not worried about my safety. It’s the data. I’m on the brink of discovery, and I cannot afford any leaks, and I cannot expend the energy, worrying about how many people are trailing behind me, interrupting my thoughts with unnecessary questions or concerns.”

“Director Rodriguez, has the intruder been located?”

“No, ma’am; we contacted the Cincinnati Police Department, filed a report of trespassing, and provided them with security camera feeds as further proof of entry and threats made against you. Is there anything we can add to the report?”

Alexandra mulled over the current dilemma in her mind; if arrested, the woman could possibly give birth in jail, and she wouldn’t wish that as a life start for any infant, even the infant of an enemy; but left to meddle, the problems she would cause could cost her time, money, and duress. And even though the woman’s claims were baseless and absolutely ridiculous, she didn’t need anyone poking around the lab asking questions, and she certainly couldn’t afford to have her facility in the media spotlight as long as Edward’s *mistake* was in her secure lab. “Please add to the police report the woman could be in the company of Dr. Terrance James Browning.”

After the two men filed out of her office, she buried her face in her hands while she massaged her temples with her fingers to calm her mind.

“Xandra? Xandra, are you okay?”

Alexandra looked up to see her personal assistant – a dark garment bag in one hand, deli takeout bag in the other, purse slung over her body like a shield, and appearing highly flustered. She chuckled inwardly. *My hero.*

“I must have said your name a half dozen times. You were buried pretty deep in that brain of yours. What on earth was going on with the security detail? I thought for a moment they were actually going to *frisk me!*”

“Oh God, Karen! I should have called you immediately. There was an intruder.”

“Here?” she asked, sounding very alarmed. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“Yes! You should have called me!”

“I know. She got to my office, security was locked out, and the phone lines are still down. It’s been a disastrous morning.”

“The labs’ security detail needs to be doubled, minimum,” Karen suggested.

“Done.”

“And at the house? I don’t want you going home tonight without adequate protection!”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. She could have approached me at my home at any time.” *During the last nine months!* Alexandra shook her head as she read through lines of code, trying to figure out how the mystery woman had bypassed AODH security. “No, she wanted to send a very specific message. She has already stolen my husband. She has penetrated my fortress, but what does she want?”

“I know we’ve had this argument so many times,” Karen admitted. “But you are the prize. I field dozens of requests for your attendance to give talks all over the world, and their interest is not solely in your genetics research. You never know who might be living next to you or what their malevolent intentions might be.”

Alexandra didn’t look up from the lines of code. “You watch too many horror and sci-fi movies! I’m not the fucking POTUS! I’m a molecular biologist. *In Cincinnati.*”

“You are a world-renowned genius. You are your generation’s Einstein.”

“Alexandra? Alexandra!” Karen repeated her name more loudly each time she said it until she finally looked up and met her gaze. “Agree to two men at your residence, just until you figure out the intruder’s true motive. It isn’t asking too much for you to accept the protection of one man, front entrance, one man, rear entrance.”

“Two men are too many for my quaint little suburb in the hills. The neighbors *talk*.”

“Ask me if I care. You have no sense of self-preservation. Most people do. If they are starving, they will do anything to find food. If a man holds a gun to their head, they cower and plead for their life! You would do neither! *This* is why you pay me the big bucks, to keep you alive when you refuse to see danger.”

“I know. I also pay you to keep me on task, and in the commotion I completely forgot about tonight’s event. How much time do I have?”

“Time to eat,” Karen stated. She placed the carryout bag on Alexandra’s desk.

Lifting both hands, Alexandra shook her head. “I can’t eat, not today. I’m too stressed, and it won’t sit well.”

“Roasted veggies and pesto spread on a ciabatta roll.” Karen ignored her protestations and tried to tempt her, knowing it was one of her favorites. She lifted the garment bag she’d carried in a little higher. “Your suit, fresh from the dry cleaners, and if you dilly-dally over your food like you usually do, you will not have time for hair or makeup.”

Alexandra nodded her understanding, but she’d already gone back to the code in front of her. Karen hung the garment bag in an elaborately carved antique armoire near Alexandra’s desk and chair set, which was as equally dated and ornate, not typical business decor. Crossing back to Alexandra’s desk, Karen retrieved several pill bottles from Alexandra’s purse, dumped the nine different pills into her palm, and then placed them on her desk. “Swallow. Now. Then eat.”

“Thank you for reminding me. What would I do without you?” Alexandra picked up the pills and put them in her mouth. Karen handed her a bottle of water, which she

accepted. She swallowed the pills, then took a long drink. "I'll happily drink a dark roast, but I'm not willing to risk being unable to speak because I'm hanging over a toilet!"

"We really have to address your caffeine habit. These pills –"

"These pills allow my damaged heart to keep beating, even when I do forget to give it enough fuel, allow my pancreas to do its job without overtaxing it, allow me to control my ADHD long enough to deliver an entire speech, speaking at a normal speed and without using my hands while I am in front of a large audience, an audience, I might add, who by half do not understand anything I am talking about, but who believe it looks good for their careers to say they attended. They decrease the amount of acid in my stomach to keep my ulcers and acid reflux from returning, and they allow me to be functionally bipolar as long as I remain on an emotional even keel, and the rest trick my body into believing I take better care of myself nutritionally than I do. So, please, let my days be happily filled with dark roast."

"Xandra –"

"Please?"

"I'll go and get you a dark roast, but half of the sandwich better be gone when I get back, or we're going to have a serious talk, missy."

"Yeah, yeah." Alexandra waved her away. When Karen left, she looked in the bag, sniffed, grimaced, and pushed the bag away.

Karen poked her head back in. "Half the sandwich. I'm not messing around!"

"After, I promise I will eat, just not before giving a two-hour-long TED talk."

"I'm going to require a bonus if I continue to be forced to work over and above the hours we negotiated when I took this job. Just because you refuse to have a life outside this lab doesn't mean I don't need a life outside of this building." Karen winked. "I'll be right back with your dark roast."

"It's Friday night. You don't have to stay. Go do fun single stuff. Kick up your heels and throw back a few shots for me. I promise I'll eat, but right now I need to call TJ to

remind him to —” Seeing the expression on Karen’s face, she knew he wasn’t going to be there. “He called, didn’t he?”

“Just a few moments ago. He said to tell you something came up at the bar, some problem he personally had to deal with, and he’d meet you at the reception following.”

“Of course he did.” Alexandra made the not huge leap his problem had blonde hair and blue eyes. Even though she knew her presentation perfectly, she opened her laptop to go over her notes for the night’s speech.

## Chapter Two



The house was dark, because she hadn't bothered with the lights when she'd returned from the TED talk and reception, and TJ hadn't noticed her standing in the middle of the foyer, blocking his path to the kitchen. When he did see her, he jumped. "Jesus, Alexandra! You scared me!"

"You missed the talk and the reception," Alexandra accused, glaring at him.

He slipped off his jacket, laid it across the back of a wooden high-backed chair, and stepped from his shoes. "I assumed you'd be asleep."

"I assumed you'd at least make an effort to show up."

TJ turned on the overhead light, leaving it dim.

"I didn't know if I could face you publicly" – he shrugged – "I didn't want a scene when I learned Amber went to your office."

*Amber, that's the woman's name?* "Because I'm the type of woman who makes scenes? Really? And you're the kind of man who has an affair with a student?"

"This is exactly the scene I was trying to avoid by not coming to the reception," TJ told her. "I'm very disappointed Amber chose to tell you in the manner she did."

Alexandra tucked her hands into her slacks. "You know what? I'm disappointed too. In you. In us. Because you should have been the one to tell me in private."

TJ stepped forward, reaching for her, but she stepped back.

"I know you won't believe me when I tell you I had no idea Amber was pregnant."

"Terrance James," she said his name disapprovingly. "Really? Now you're going to lie to me again? Her pregnancy is kind of hard to miss. Try again."

"Honestly, I hadn't seen her in months, and when she called to tell me she was pregnant, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to hurt you."



She laughed, but the sound was heartbroken. “Did you think it would be less devastating for your slut to tell me?”

His mouth opened and shut, before he said, “She’s a sweet girl.”

“Did you really just say that?” She grabbed her bag and keys from the top of the credenza. She stepped around him and was out the door and halfway to the car before he could respond.

He called after her from the doorway, “Xandra, don’t leave now. It’s almost midnight! We’re both adults. We can talk this through in the morning and come up with a satisfactory answer to this snafu.”

“I’m not Cinderella, TJ, and there’s no fucking magic spell to govern my behavior tonight.”

“I didn’t know she was going to tell you. I promise, I would have told you first. I wouldn’t have let *this* happen.” He rushed toward the car in his sock feet. “Where will you go?”

“Really? Does it even matter?”

“Of course it matters. Just because Amber is pregnant doesn’t mean our relationship has to change. You’re my wife. I love you.”

*Right. Feeling the love.* Alexandra flipped him the bird over the roof of her vintage Camaro before sliding behind the wheel. She slammed the door, turned the key, and revved the engine in a smooth move, then peeled out of the drive.

Anger fueled her flight from the neighborhood, but after driving around aimlessly, she’d parked, realizing her subconscious had brought her straight to the Law Offices of Burge, Garner, and Schuester. She called James Malcolm Burge, Esquire, at home and requested an immediate meeting.

After tending business, she ended up at the last place TJ’d ever look for her, *Cronies*, the Irish pub he co-owned along with three buddies from his adolescence. The money he dumped into the place had been a bone of contention their entire marriage. He’d bought

in during the time when she was still studying for one of several doctorates she'd earned, and there was no money to spare. When money was no longer an issue, the monthly feud still hadn't died out because she believed the place was nothing more than a money pit and time waster, and he saw it as a secure investment toward his retirement and a place to hang with his friends each evening after work and every weekend.

Amber had accused Alexandra of never being home to invest in a relationship with her, but that was only half their problem.

From the threshold she searched the dim interior for TJ, because she really didn't want another run-in with him. She sighed with a small measure of relief when he was nowhere to be seen. Still, she didn't enter. Her visual search easily found Conor Larkin, tall, blond, his hair cut military short, wide shoulders, narrow waist, and Jonathon O'Donnell, short, his hair as black as a panther's and kept much longer than Conor's but barely brushing his shoulders, and similarly as lithe and muscular—two of the four partners—and though she wasn't surprised to see them, she didn't know them well. They were TJ's friends. The majority owner, Patrick Gowan, otherwise known as Gabe, so no one would mistakenly call him Patty or, heaven forbid, Paddy, had been her friend long before TJ had moved into town. That was ages ago. She hadn't seen him in years, so who knew what lies TJ had told to poison the three against her.

Regardless, when all was said and done, she at least knew someone *here*, and the truth was, she needed the distraction of people. She could have gone back to the lab, but being alone wasn't what she needed and discovering Edward's secret had ruined any sense of peace she'd found at the lab prior.

An Irish folk music band played, and she recognized them as one of the fairly regular groups who rotated through the tri-state's Irish pubs. She took a deep breath and stepped inside, committing to the dim interior as the door closed behind her. What was it about pubs and not being able to find your hand in front of your face once you were swallowed in?

She weaved around tables and took a seat at the bar across from Conor, who was currently acting as head bartender. He had a crowd of twentysomethings huddled close to watch him blend a dozen cocktails at the same time at the granite counter with what she'd heard TJ refer to as mad bar skills.

TJ had told her about Gabe's idea to increase revenue by drawing in the college crowd with special pint nights wherein if a pitcher was ordered, they could leave with a specialty glass. It was supposedly going to be a big moneymaker because the pint glasses with advertising labels for different brands of beer and ale. The one bit of good news she'd caught in his sales pitch for an increased budget to cover his share of advertising was that the glassware was donated by their main distributor.

The crowd seemed big enough, every table filled, some of the high tops with additional standing-room-only patrons, so where was the big payoff? She frowned, not understanding where their sizable investments had gone over the years.

She stopped and just took in the view because as much as she detested the amount of money thrown at keeping the place afloat each month, she appreciated the aged beauty and charm of the long, intricately hand-carved bar top with matching stools, and the stylized shelving, which housed the wide assortment of spirits and had been relocated piece by piece from a long-ago closed pub in Ireland. The antique woodwork had been completely refurbished and restored.

"Alexandra!" Gabe did a quick pass-through behind the bar, his arms filled with dirty glasses destined for the washer.

Seeing him, she tensed and found herself more nervous than she should have been. He'd been her dearest childhood friend, a relationship that had carried them both to Stanford, Queen's Belfast, and a few jail cells. She smiled, remembering too much and realizing just how badly she'd missed him the last several years.

*I chose TJ, because Terrance James Browning was stable, not an enabler, not an instigator, and not in possession of a death wish. Under her breath she muttered, "How'd that work out for me?"*

"I'd say it's a nice surprise to see you, but the expression you're wearing makes me afraid to say anything. I swear TJ hasn't been here all night," Gabe promised.

She relaxed, hearing the lilt of Gabe's true Irish heritage, which newcomers felt was just for show. Cronies' regulars knew the pride of his heritage returned him to the island every summer to spend it with his grandmother, who expected his accent to be strong and his Gaelic perfect, else she'd box his ears. She smiled, remembering the only time she'd met the woman, and she'd seemed ancient then.

She countered, "Maybe I came to see *you*."

Gabe reversed direction and met her gaze with the same serious countenance she knew she was expressing before bending across the narrow bar to kiss her cheek. "Whatever brought you here, it's always good to see you. It has been far too long."

"Far too long," she agreed, staring at his hazel eyes. She'd forgotten how much she missed looking at his face.

Like Conor, he kept his golden-ginger hair military short, and his face clean shaven.

"Oh yeah, yeah, TJ was here earlier," Conor confirmed, obviously having been eavesdropping. He stepped nearer as he sent the crowd away with fresh drinks and a promise for another show later in the night.

*There it is.* His friends had her husband's back, for certain. Alexandra watched with little amusement as Conor caught Jonathon's attention and waved him over to the bar from the center of the room where he'd been making the rounds to assure everyone was happy with their service, food, and beverages. She had no doubt all three of them would lie their asses off to protect their buddy.

"Must have been when you stepped out, Gabe, I forgot—"

"*Nach tusa an bréagadóir!*" Gabe smacked Conor in the back of the head.

Alexandra hid the small smile that came to her lips behind her hand in response to Gabe chastising Conor in Gaelic. *Aren't you the liar!*

"I've been here all night. He hasn't been here," Gabe promised Alexandra, before saying, "I'll be right back," as he stepped away to go into the kitchen.

Alexandra felt warmed inside, Gabe appearing to be the still loyal friend to her that he'd always been with his refusal to cover for TJ.

"What's up?" Jonathon inquired as he approached. He pulled Alexandra into a loose hug. She stiffened in the embrace. She'd forgotten Jonathon was a *hugger*. "Long time, lady; you should come by more often."

She never knew quite what to do when she was hugged. She could never bring herself to return the hug with the exuberance she believed was expected, and so she usually held herself tragically still, counting the seconds to release.

"Conor was just lying to me about seeing TJ here earlier tonight, but it's fine, really, I didn't expect him to be here."

"Sorry, Alexandra," Conor said. "TJ hasn't been around much lately. We kinda thought, you know, that maybe things were better at home, and he'd just been spending more time with you?"

Alexandra lifted an eyebrow. *When did things get bad at home?*

Gabe returned from the kitchen with a plate of fresh *boxty*—potato pancakes filled with fish and vegetables. Knowing it was Alexandra's favorite pub food, he sat the warm, fragrant plate in front of her. She clapped happily.

"A pint? Connemara Red, if I remember correctly?"

A small smile played on her lips as she remembered the day Gabe had taken her to a *real* Irish pub, on *his island*. They'd been so young then. He'd vowed, "*I will own my own traditional pub someday.*"

"*Seems like a waste of a perfectly good engineering degree,*" she'd teased as he'd lined up a dozen different pints for taste tests to discover her favorite. After plying her with enough drink, he'd proceeded to pick her brain; his true quest had been to gain her help on a DNA cryptography encryption and deciphering thesis she'd adamantly refused to

help him with earlier in the day. Her standard reply had always been, *"You're in over your head, bioengineer; back away slowly and leave the complex theories to the real scientists."*

"Why are you smiling?"

"No reason at all," she lied. "Maybe something stronger? Since this smile is the only thing keeping me from crying."

"Crying is it? What's happened?" Gabe poured her a shot of Kilbeggan Irish whiskey and set it in front of her. "I know your career is good. You're in the news often enough. You're the pride of Cincinnati."

"Bringing out the best?" Alexandra threw back the shot. "What's the occasion?"

"It's your sob story; start talking." He immediately filled the empty glass when she sat it back on the bar.

"There was a trespasser at the lab this afternoon."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Lab's fine. Research is fine. The trespasser was a woman. *His* woman," she said accusingly.

"Now, Alexandra, I—"

Alexandra lifted a finger in warning. "Don't lie and tell me you didn't know. I like you too much for you to ruin my belief in the fact I think you are a decent guy."

"His girlfriend broke into your lab?" Jonathon asked, bewildered. "I thought AODH was a super high security facility? She never seemed bright enough to manage breaking into a car, let alone a building."

"Well, bright or not, she's one of my husband's computer science majors. She managed to break in, changing some security codes to do so. All to tell me she's..." Alexandra grimaced before spitting out the words, "pregnant."

"What?" Jonathon choked on the shot he'd just thrown back, sputtering.

"She plans to somehow blackmail me or some shit that has to do with knowing my Achilles heel."

“Shelly’s pregnant?” Jonathon pounded his chest and fought back tears to the merriment of the closest patrons. “Fuck, warn a person you’re going to drop a bomb like that.”

Alexandra stiffened and threw back the shot Gabe had left in front of her. She slammed the glass onto the bartop. “Who the fuck is Shelly?”

All three men shared a back-and-forth silent conversation with their eyes before Conor braved, “Who’s pregnant?”

“Uh-huh.” Alexandra tapped the rim of the shot glass with her French-manicured nail, and Gabe poured. “So how many were there other than Shelly?”

“Who’s pregnant, Alexandra?” Conor asked more insistently.

She threw back the third shot and locked eyes with Gabe, believing he was the only one of the three with any integrity at all. Her voice cracked with emotion when she demanded, “Start naming names, damn it.”

Gabe looked deeply into her eyes as he poured her another shot. “Knowing won’t make any of this situation better, beautiful girl.”

“It’s a *situation* now, is it? Meaning I’ve put you in an uncomfortable *situation*?” A tear slipped down her cheek, and she swiped it away angrily. She didn’t want to care. She didn’t want to give a single damn. But she did. The pain in her chest was worse than anything she’d ever experienced since her brother’s funeral. Granted, their marriage wasn’t perfect, but TJ was the only man she’d been with. They’d been high-school sweethearts, and he’d followed her to Stanford. They’d broke up when she insisted she needed a year off and fled the country to disappear for a while in Europe. He’d taken her back as soon as she returned from Belfast, but never gotten over the fact she’d taken Gabe with her. It mattered not that she’d asked him first, but no, TJ was too responsible to be *flittering about Ireland like vagabonds*, his exact words at the time.

TJ’d known when he’d married her there was a high chance she’d have fertility issues. They might never have a child together. So when Amber had shown up in her

office, very pregnant, claiming he was the father, Alexandra seemed to have forgotten how to breathe because her chest hurt so much. She threw back the shot. "Amber."

"Amber?" Gabe repeated. "Amber who?"

"I didn't get a last name. *Jesus*, just saying her name out loud... She showed up at my office today and demanded I let TJ go so they could live happily ever after, raising children together. By the looks of her, I'd say there was a white picket fence in the suburbs of the future she has planned."

She tapped the shot glass's rim again.

"Uh-uh. I'm switching you over." Gabe set a pint of Connemara Irish Red Ale in front of her.

Jonathon guessed, "Really dark hair? Kind of goth? But kinda nerdy? Alternative? Maybe that's what kids are calling it these days."

"Kid," Alexandra agreed and closed her eyes. "She was very young. Twenty? Twenty-one?"

Gabe startled her by taking her hand, and she opened her eyes and met his gaze.

"I'm guessing not the goth, nerdy, alternative chick."

She watched as he poured himself a pint as well and pulled a stool from the side so he could sit directly across from her. Once he was settled, she whispered, "No."

She lifted her beer and took a drink. She closed her eyes. "As good as I remembered, thank you, Gabe."

Conor snapped his fingers, and Alexandra opened her eyes again. "I've got it. There was that one chick who was hanging around for a while. Mousy brown hair, not very pretty, kind of frumpy, but she had a great laugh. Remember? She'd always dance right in front of the band when the Patriots played."

"When did any of you start giving a rat's ass about the New England Patriots?" Alexandra rubbed her temples. "God, the whiskey is going straight to my head."



“Not the ball players.” Gabe pushed the boxty closer, and she obligingly took a bite, then remembered how fucking good they were. She started making happy sounds as she chewed. She shook one in Gabe’s direction. “I love these things. Take one, you brought too many.”

“I know you do, and you should eat all of them. You’re thinner than I ever remember seeing you. When’s the last time you ate?”

“Yesterday, thank you very much,” she said defensively. She looked at her watch. “I take it back. It’s after midnight, so that would make it day before yesterday.”

“Xandra,” Gabe said sadly, worry creasing his brow.

“I eat. I promise I do, meals and everything. The reason for my thinness is no longer a matter of not eating enough and more because I damaged my pancreas.”

Jonathon leaned toward her and whispered, “The Patriots are a pipe and drum band. The guys have long hair, play shirtless, and wear kilts. The ladies eat that shit up! Always a big night here. You should really get out more often.”

“Sounds like,” she mumbled, looking at the boxty and wondered what the secret was to making them taste so good. She took another bite, then set the remaining portion back on the plate. She rubbed her stomach, feeling overwhelmingly full already.

Conor said, “Maybe if you describe the woman?”

She met Gabe’s gaze. “Food always tastes better if someone is enjoying it with you. So I’d probably eat more if you joined me.”

Conor reached for the boxty, but Gabe slapped his hand away, picking up the boxty she’d already taken several bites of and taking a bite himself before holding it to her to take another bite.

Alexandra smiled and took a bite before answering Conor’s question, “Amber would be a very young-looking blonde with a round face, blue eyes, and cupid lips.”

“Ohhh yeah, Gabe wouldn’t let her drink without an ID.” The three shared enlightened nods, seeming to remember, before Jonathon said, “That was a while ago.”

“More than nine months, by the looks of her,” Alexandra assured them. “She’s *very* pregnant and too young to drink. This night just keeps getting better and better.”

Jonathon and Conor both sat down on stools, with Conor setting up another round of shots. All four lifted their glasses and clinked, saying in unison, “*Sláinte*.”

“So what’s your plan?” Gabe asked.

“Ummm, divorce his ass? As if there’s any reason to speculate. I’ve already met with my lawyer. Papers were drawn up, and I signed them before I headed here. TJ will be served in the morning, and” – Alexandra snapped her fingers – “bam! Divorce.”

“It doesn’t happen that fast,” Gabe cautioned. “The back and forth between lawyers could go on for months.”

“If he’s smart, he’ll just walk away. My first offer will be my only offer.”

“Your offer?” Gabe asked, confused.

“Marriage settlement, one million dollars, that’s it, not a penny more.”

Jonathon whistled.

Conor asked, “Wait. Let me get this right, you’re paying him to get out of this marriage?”

Alexandra nodded. “Unfortunately. It’s the law. I made significantly more money than he has during our marriage, granted mostly in just the last five years, but according to my lawyer, since we didn’t have a prenup, he is entitled to a portion, especially since he completed his studies three years before I did and helped” – she made quote fingers – “*support me* while I was completing my doctorate.”

“Lucky bastard, is all I can say,” Conor reflected. “Sorry, Xandra. I’m getting a crowd; the master must get back to work and serve the masses. I promised them a show, and I am the guy with mad bar skills.”

“Yeah, me too.” Jonathon hugged her. “Find me before you go, lady?”

“Sure.” She smiled at him and leaned toward him for air kisses.

Alexandra turned to Gabe and said, “So, big guy, catch me up.”

“Not much to tell.”

“Bullshit. How long have I known you? And in all those years of knowing you, has there ever been a month there was not much to tell?”

“Not a lot I’ll admit to,” he said with a wink.

“There he is. Come on, Gabe, it’s me. It really is. I know I’ve been out of touch—”

“Xandra, Xandra, Xandra-doo, what you do to my heart.” He clutched his chest, his brogue a bit thicker. “At Bran’s funeral, you hugged me and promised me if you needed anyone to talk to, you would talk to me. I’ve only seen you twice since, and we didn’t get a chance to talk either time.”

She shook her head, looking at the boxty growing cold and limp on the plate. No one had called her brother by the shortened version in a very long time. She didn’t think of Brandon as Bran, or Brian as Bri, anymore. Brandon’s infidelity had changed everything. The fatal collision merely ensured nothing ever could or ever would be normal in their family again

“I’ve missed you, Alexandra. You’ve always been my best friend. It was always me and you against the world. Remember?”

A single tear dropped onto the bar top before she could rein in her emotions. When her gaze returned to his, she changed the subject entirely. “You just got back from the homeland. That’s why your tongue is so thick! How’s *Mamó*?”

Gabe followed her lead, shifting easily to the happier subject. “Older than the hills and frailer than ever, but I swear she is going to outlive us all, and she still packs a wallop when I show up sounding *too English*.”

“*English* is it? I wouldn’t be able to understand a word if your accent was any thicker!”

They both laughed.

“I’ve been going back more often these last few years. I spend a better part of half a year there with her. She’s the only blood relative I have, and time flies. I don’t know how

much time we have left to share," he admitted and glanced away. She knew how much Mamó meant to him "I have pictures."

"God, yes! Show me pictures." Alexandra took a deep breath, firmly pushing the past back to where it belonged.

Gabe pulled up a four-inch-thick binder from beneath the bar. "This is the latest volume."

"Volume?" She chuckled, thinking he was joking, but then read the spine and guessed he was serious. "Meaning you have volumes, plural?"

"Yes, I document everything, every year. Landscapes, people I meet, meals she teaches me to make. Half of this one includes recipes I've finally pried out of her. They were always family secrets I wasn't ready to hear yet according to her."

"I don't like the sound of that. You don't think she planned this summer to be your last together?"

"I considered it, but I don't dwell on it. I'm going back in late October."

*A second visit so soon?* Alexandra listened avidly to every tale as Gabe turned pages. She was soon glad she'd decided to come here tonight. How had she allowed herself to forget how important Gabe had always been in her life?

When the bar closed, and the staff was assured it was fine if they all called it a night. It wasn't an unusual event for the owners to hold a private after-hours party, so their employees all filed out without a backward glance or comment among them.

"I should go," Alexandra announced.

"Or I can pour us both a pint," Gabe volunteered.

Alexandra rubbed her stomach. "I'm bloating up like a fish out of water now, and it isn't really helping to chase the demons from my mind."

"Bar is closed. None of us have to keep up appearances now that the kiddos are gone. A round before you go?" Conor lifted the bottle of whiskey and retrieved four fresh shot glasses in the cup of his palm.

*Mad bar skills, indeed.* Alexandra nodded, being in no hurry to leave because she wasn't really sure where she was going to go. *Probably a hotel.* She shuddered. God knew how many contaminants lurked in such places. Nope, in no hurry to go.



A while later, Alexandra reached across the bar separating them and pulled Gabe forward with a tug on his collar. She kissed him, openmouthed – a drunk, sloppy, deep kiss the man reciprocated. Pulling back, she met his gaze. “You should fuck me.”

“That’s a really bad idea.”

Alexandra stood, weaving, and quickly climbed atop her bar stool. She pointed at Conor. “You should fuck me too.”

Teetering on the stool’s edge, she lost her balance. Jonathon, being nearest to her, caught her as she fell sideways with a sharp squeal.

“My hero.” She stroked his face, gazing into his clear, deep, blue eyes.

“Your eyes are a stunning shade of green, absolutely mesmerizing,” Jonathon complimented. “You would be a very dangerous spell caster in a fairy tale.”

“God, *you* should definitely fuck me.”

Jonathon set her feet back on the floor and steadied her. He held her gaze. “What happens in Cronies, stays in Cronies.”

“Bad, bad idea.” Gabe was suddenly beside her, pulling her from Jonathon’s grasp.

Alexandra slid easily into Gabe’s arms, laughing at his shocked expression. Being his same height in her heels, she pressed against him and whispered in his ear, “What happens in Cronies –”

She felt Jonathon mold against her back, his hard, ready cock caught firmly between them, a force pressing against her hip. She felt the warmth of his mouth grazing the back of her neck and sighed with pleasure. She’d never been kissed on the nape of her neck, and it sent a shot of intense need deep into her pelvis where it caught and throbbed.

She cupped her hands around Gabe's face and lifted her lips to his, while Jonathon continued to nuzzle her neck, his breath hot on her skin. She whispered, "Please, I want to be bad. I want to get even. I want to shut up my brain. Do you remember how I used to quiet my brain when I thought I was going insane, faced with a problem with no solution?"

She could tell by the look on his face he did. How many times had he pulled her from in front of oncoming cars or trains? How many times had he ended the bar fight she'd started?

Gabe pushed Jonathon away with a shove to his forehead and shook his head when the man started to come forward again. He shrugged and headed toward the vintage jukebox that was rarely used and there more for atmosphere than functionality.

"I don't want you to do the old tricks, but *you* don't want to do this, Alexandra."

"You have no idea what I want, Gabe."

"TJ fucked up, no doubt about it, but *you* are not *this* person!" he said passionately.

"It's been a long time, Gabe. Since leaving Belfast...since leaving you in Belfast to figure yourself out. I've watched you. I've feared for you, and look at the man you've become. But me? I have no idea what kind of person I've become since Belfast. I've been hiding...in a marriage...in dozens of labs around the world. And for the last six years, I've been hiding at AODH, building a name for myself, building a brand, building a bloody fortune, which is meaningless because I don't have a life outside the lab to enjoy it. So I honestly have no idea what kind of person I am, but I intend to start finding out, and tonight is as good a night to start as any, and how else would I begin such a quest but by dangling ever so dangerously over the precipice?" she asked fervently. "I was crazy once. I know you haven't forgotten our year abroad."

"I remember," he answered softly.

"I was alive then—not medicated into numbness—feeling every moment. I dream about those days with such longing in my heart I wake up crying. Sometimes I think

leaving you in Belfast and coming home was the biggest mistake I ever made. I know you haven't forgotten how many times I almost got us both killed."

"I know your parents still blame me for being a bad influence." Gabe tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

"You're my hero for taking that blame. Think how badly they'd feel if they knew the terrifying truth. I was so out of control." She laughed, and it verged on hysteria as she fought back tears. "Completely unhinged, dangerous to myself and you."

Gabe locked gazes with her and slid his arms around her waist. She knew what he was trying to do. She shook her head. "Your mind meld won't work on me. I am way too far gone for that."

"Please think," he pleaded.

"You're thinking too much for both of us," she whined. She started swaying in his arms to the rhythm of a folk song playing on the jukebox. "*'You always think too much. Don't think. Tonight, just don't think.'* Aren't those the exact words you used to say to me right before getting us both into lots of trouble when we were younger? I seem to remember a night shared in the lovely Kenmare jail."

"I might have been a little too intoxicated when I agreed commandeering Paddy O'Leary's fishing vessel was a good plan, but it was your plan, not mine."

"Uh-huh, and whose idea was the summer of protests in Dublin?"

Gabe released a long sigh. "You're the one with perfect recall. I'm just a rabble-rouser who has finally become a responsible adult. This is me being responsible."

"Maybe I'm exhausted from being such a responsible adult. Maybe I don't want to think at all about the decisions I have to make tomorrow. I'm not Captain Planet."

Gabe pressed his cheek to hers and whispered, "Tonight has nothing to do with TJ, does it?"

Alexandra pulled back, met his mesmerizing gaze, and slowly shook her head.

"Your brain is still stuck on a problem at the lab?"

“The biggest problem I’ve ever faced, and there’s no acceptable answer foreseeable. I’m scared. Terrified. Please let me stop thinking for just a while so I don’t fall into the abyss.”

Gabe searched her face, knowing the abyss was her code for going to crazy town and never returning. “Not to be a smart aleck, but wouldn’t burying yourself in work at the lab be safer for your mind than burying yourself in men?”

Alexandra laughed.

“I see what you did there. I’m kind of liking the sound of being buried in men. Don’t you want to be one of those men” – she smiled wickedly – “buried inside of me?”

“I’m trying to protect you. You tell me you’re close to falling into the abyss, and I can’t fathom how fucking is going to keep you sane. Let me into your thoughts and help me understand, because I’m not going to stand by and watch you destroy yourself. I sent you home once –”

*From Belfast.* She doubted he remembered that time as fondly as she did.

She pressed her forehead into his. “I’ve warned you before; don’t try to understand my brain. I don’t. It’s a terrifying place inside there.”

Gabe pulled her into a hug, and swaying, she laid her head on his shoulder.

Jonathon yelled from the vintage jukebox, “What we need is decent music on this old thing.”

“Got it!” Conor was behind the bar pouring four more shots of whiskey, but took a moment to adjust the music settings on the bar’s main controls. The preprogrammed Irish folk music abruptly changed to electro.

She watched as he pulled his black short-sleeved polo over his head, revealing a perfectly honed body. Her mind got lost in the perfection of it, looking at the shadow play along his ripped abs, seeing for the first time tattoos and a few scars always hidden by clothing. He met her gaze, seeming to let her know he’d caught her looking.

Head bobbing, Conor hooted. “Who wants to dance?”



“Woot!” Alexandra hooted in response, pulling out of Gabe’s embrace. “Let’s get this party started! Who wants the first fuck?”

Gabe caught her hand and mouthed, *Please be careful.*

Alexandra’s head and shoulders were bobbing with the rhythm, and she lifted her arms in the air as she met Gabe’s gaze. “Ha, ha, I mean seriously. First. Fuck. Since there has only been TJ. *Ever.* This will be a momentous occasion I am heralding in with his three best mates.” She started singing lyrics playing from the surround-sound speakers. “I wanna take shots with somebody. I wanna leave with somebody.”

Conor came forward, holding out a shot. She took it and lifted the glass. “You have excellent taste in music.”

She danced, shot in hand, and sang lyrics. “We ain’t gonna tell nobody.”

He clinked glasses with her. “I can totally drink to that!”

They threw back the shots, but then Conor was pulling her into him hard and fast. His mouth fell over hers, tongue pushing into her mouth.

Alexandra pulled her mouth away and looked into his eyes. All she saw was arrogance. From the first time they’d met, she’d hated the arrogance she saw in those eyes and the smirk ever present on his mouth. “Of all of TJ’s friends, you I dislike the most.”

“Feeling’s mutual, sweetheart.”

He claimed her mouth again, his teeth scraping her lip as it became rougher, his tongue probing deeper. When she was able to pull away, she was gasping to breathe.

“I am going to fuck you so hard. You’re not going to know what hit you.”

His words held a threatening edge. No one had ever spoken to her that way. She felt like she was dreaming. *Is this really happening?*

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