

Ronnie Allen



LIBRA

The Sign Behind The Crime
Book 4

They'd thought the case was over, but now they weren't sure...

Frank put his napkin down on the table. "Did—Does Uncle Mike have a wife and children?"

"I thought you said you're friends?"

"Well, we are. New friends. We met last month. We do the same kind of work with people."

"Yes. He's a talking doctor," Benjamin said. "He had a wife. But what's it called when the wife leaves?"

"A divorce?" Sam said.

"Yes. And she stayed in Florida. With their children. But they're older than us."

Sam continued to feed Margie the soup. It gave her some time to let her mind wander.

Thank you, Benjamin for confirming that Mike Sheffield had to travel with Henry Slater. No wonder his wife wanted a divorce. Mike would rather play with Henry than with her. What wife would tolerate that? Or maybe she wasn't into the culture. Um, was it a divorce, or was she another victim? How many more bodies do we need to uncover?

Sam felt the jab of Dara, her spirit guide, in her abdomen. She'd learned to trust that response since her conversation with Dr. Trenton in the Aries case. Her feelings were consistently on target—especially in the case she thought they'd completed, just two days ago. This time she was sure. There'd be more leftover bodies still to uncover.

Forty-eight hours ago, a serial murder case that spanned nine years ended. Or did it?

Four children intrude upon the scene of the suicide of Henry Slater, claiming he's their dad. Dr. Frank Khaos and Detective Sam Wright become their temporary guardians. The goal—to find the children's biological mothers. Or has Henry Slater added them to his dossier of kills? Through the investigation, the NYPD detectives and FBI Special Agent Brett Case uncover a kidnapping ring and do find the mothers, but are they fit—and willing to take their children back? As Sam and Frank fall in love with them over nine weeks, and the reality sets in, *Libra*, the Scale of Justice kicks their butts. What's right for the children is against the law.

Another case falls into Agent Case's lap. A murder spree and drug involvement with Jarrett Miller, Vicki Trenton's first husband. To make matters worse, Miller has ties to the biological parents of Dr. Khaos whom he has to travel to Florida to confront as a stipulation to the execution of Slater's will.

How will Frank deal with the two people who've been his Achilles' heel his entire life, and will he and Sam get the family they desire so much?

KUDOS for *Libra*

In *Libra, The Sign Behind the Crime, Book 4*, Detective, Samantha Wright, and Forensic Psychiatrist, Frank Khaos, discover that Henry Slater, the serial killer they apprehended in the last case, has four children. But who and where are their mothers? Are they really Henry's children, or was he running a children kidnapping ring? As Sam, Frank, and the team search for answers, they soon discover that this case is a lot more than they bargained for, especially when innocent children are involved. Like the other three books in the series this one is intense and chilling—one that will keep you on the edge of your seat all the way through. ~ Taylor Jones, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

Libra, The Sign Behind the Crime, Book 4 by Ronnie Allen is the continuation of the serial murder case from *Scorpio*, the third book in the series. The serial killer, Henry Slater, is dead, but the consequences of his crimes live on. Detectives discover that Slater has four children, whose bedrooms are hidden behind a wall. The kids show up forty-eight hours after Slater dies, claiming to have been at the nanny's. So now the main question is, where did Slater get the children? Are they really his, and if so, where are their mothers? Were the children kidnapped from their parents, or do the detectives have even more bodies to find. It was thought that Slater killed seventeen women, but now it appears that number could be higher—much higher. *Libra* answers many questions and solves a few remaining mysterious left from the first three books, as well as presenting some intriguing new ones. With marvelous character and fast-paced action, it will grab your interest from the very first page. All in all, an excellent addition to the series. ~ Regan Murphy, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Book 4 in *The Sign Behind the Crime Series* is here. It was such an exciting time writing this book because it's the culmination of a thread that spanned the series. And yes, it's a happily ever after ending, the happiest you'll ever find in a novel.

As always, I want to thank my cherished critique partners and beta readers who have been with me from the beginning. Sherry Wilson, Sue Pellegrino, and Judi Oglio spotted some areas in *Scorpio*, Book 3, that I was able to incorporate in and create the plot for this book, *Libra*. And this year, Carol Cohen joined us. These four women gave up hours of their time with dedication and passion to help me create a book that I am proud to release.

I have new consultants in this book. Elly Molina, world-renowned spiritual consultant and the author of the Amazon best seller, *Children Who Know How To Know*, also published with Black Opal Books, was my guide for my psi-child, Benjamin. Her insight helped me to enrich his character and credibly portray his abilities. Any deviation is on me; this is a work of fiction.

My son and car expert, Dave Allen, provided me with information about navigation systems that helped me develop a subplot.

Lisa Dinaso Bastedo, AKA Hunter, allowed me to use her tag name and skills as a hairstylist and colorist. Seriously, readers, if you're in NYC or in California you must sit in her chair! In Central Florida, you have to see Freedom, John Freedom Henry, who appears as himself in this book, and who also gave me tips on color. I thank him and Lisa for allowing me to use their names and personas.

As always, I'm grateful to Black Opal Books and their editors, Lauri and Faith, who stuck by me through four books, and Jack in the art department who created my vision for the covers.

And my husband, Bob, who understands what being an author means: More work for him.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this book, and keep a box of tissues handy.

Best,
Ronnie

LIBRA

The Sign Behind the Crime
Book 4

Ronnie Allen

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: ROMANTIC THRILLER/SUSPENSE/MYSTERY-DETECTIVE

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LIBRA ~ THE SIGN BEHIND THE CRIME ~ BOOK 4

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eBOOK ISBN: 9781644370896

First Publication: FEBRUARY 23, 2019

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Published by Black Opal Books <http://www.blackopalbooks.com>

DEDICATION

*To every parent and grandparent, biological and adoptive. May
you love, cherish,
and support your children in every aspect of their lives.*

CHAPTER 1

It was over—less than forty-eight hours ago. The serial murder case that spanned nine years and took seventeen lives now put to bed. None of their own were lost, though it came close. Too close, with one of his favorite rookies, Samantha Wright. He'd relax. At least there was no bloodshed in here to clean up. Henry Slater had been the toughest of his cases to date, in his twenty-year career with the NYPD.

Detective Lex Withers blew out a breath of relief as he observed crime scene techs still putting down markers throughout the Upper West Side Manhattan apartment—over two hundred markers. Two teams of investigators were there now, all wearing Tyvek protective gear with nothing left up to chance. No telling what that Slater character would do to exterminate all of them. Withers trusted the system. Yeah, he was feeling pretty good now. Feeling good he was a cop.

When his cell rang, he went out into the hall to answer it. Markers lay on the carpet, and a long table holding photography equipment hugged the wall. He nodded, acknowledging what an arduous process this would be as he leaned against the spotless bone and gold wallpaper, talking on his phone.

At the other end of the hall, an elevator door slid open. With his back turned, Withers didn't notice. The eldest child, Benjamin Slater struggled to push his sister's stroller over the tracks, and then he started to roll it down the hall as the next oldest, Mel, held the toddler, Henry's, hand. They didn't get far.

Squeaky wheels on the stroller caught Withers's attention, and he turned around. Stopping his conversation mid-word, he disconnected the call without saying "goodbye," then put up his hand for the children to stop. "Whoa. Hold on." Smiling, he

approached them. “And who might you be?” His gaze scanned the older children before settling on the infant in the stroller.

The children just stared at him, then at the markers, then at the cluttered table but remained silent. Withers gave them their space. He knew damn well who they were. Frank Khaos was spot-on. There *were* little Henry Slaters out there. Their forensic psychiatrist did indeed have more nieces and nephews. The detective removed his badge from his pocket and showed it to them. “I’m a detective with the New York City Police Department. My name is Lex Withers.”

The older boy’s eyes widened in astonishment. “A real police badge? I never saw one up close.” His gaze darted around the hall. “And why are there cops outside our house?”

Mel trembled. “And where’s our dad?”

“And who is your dad?” Withers asked. The question was merely for confirmation. The older boy was a miniature Henry Slater with hair, and come to think of it, a miniature Frank Khaos, too. Damn!

“Henry Slater,” Mel said.

Withers bit the inside of his cheek to prevent expletives from flowing out of his mouth. Some choice words certainly filled his brain. This wasn’t what he wanted to confront right now, though he already knew it. “All right. Listen to me, okay?” The children nodded. He continued. “We’re going to help you, so there’s no need to be afraid of us, understand?” The children nodded again. Withers smiled. “Good. I need you to help me out, too, and answer my questions, okay? Who else lives here with you?”

Benjamin didn’t seem to understand why the detective asked that. “Us and Dad. Who else would live here?” He started to move the stroller around the detective. “Excuse me, we have studying to do.”

Moving in front of the boy, Withers blocked him. “Studying? On a Sunday?” The detective nodded in approval. “So you live in the apartment? All of the time?”

“Yes. Please tell us what happened, sir,” Benjamin said.

Withers smiled at the politeness. “Okay, I will. Come on. But you have to stay inside the path we blocked off.”

Benjamin and Mel looked surprised. “Why?” Benjamin asked as he wrapped his arms around Henry, holding him close. “You’re scaring my little brother.”

“Us, too,” Mel said, shaking.

“We’ll explain everything. But you have to come with me.”

In the walk down the hall to the apartment, Withers’s mind reeled. Henry Slater was dead, and he continued to be a nemesis in the afterlife. Withers himself was beginning to sound like Sam Wright. Her, and her psychic intuition crap. Too bad, she was always correct. *What else is this case going to bring?* Withers called his partner to come outside into the hall.

“What’s going on?” She stopped mid-sentence, seeing the children. “Lex...”

“And this lady is my partner, Detective Bella Richards. Now, tell me your names.”

Benjamin swallowed hard. “I’m Benjamin. This is Mel. That’s Henry, and Margie is her,” he said, pointing to the infant.

Bella softened. “Um, sweetheart, we didn’t see any children’s bedrooms, and we’re looking through the entire apartment.”

Benjamin stood silent. Then he whispered, “Our bedrooms are behind a wall.”

That statement shot Withers an unnecessary jolt of adrenalin. He forced a smile to cover-up his sinking heart. “Show us.” While waiting outside, he peeked into the doorway and yelled, “Curtain.”

A six-foot tall white curtain rolled, closing off the right side of the apartment from the doorway to the bathroom where Henry Slater offed himself. Withers hoped the kids’ rooms weren’t on that side.

Benjamin led the way into the center hall in the apartment. Withers could tell his tough bravado was a front. His hands trembled on the stroller handle, as did Mel’s, as the two children huddled together, taking small steps. *Brave kids*. Crime Scene roped off a path by which people could enter and leave. The children stopped dead and looked up at the detectives.

Withers read the fear in their eyes. Damn, the curtain didn't conceal half of what he wanted to prevent them from seeing.

The apartment had been transformed into a science lab. Long tables stood on top of white paper covering the tile floor. Photography equipment and sterile packaging supplies were on opposite ends of the table. Markers lay on the floor. More tape lay across the doorframe of Henry's master bedroom, to the left. Technicians barely gave the kids a glance. The two older children became teary-eyed.

Benjamin whimpered. "Something bad happened to our dad."

"Yes," Withers said. Not having the heart to tell them the truth, he lied. He'd need Frank Khaos on this one. "Your dad's in the hospital. He got very sick. Now, we need you to help us, okay?"

Mel sniffled. "Can we go see him?"

"No. Not yet. Now where are your rooms?"

A crime scene tech overheard them "What rooms, Detective? We covered the entire apartment."

"Our rooms are hidden," Mel said.

Oh man! Slater told Frank at their family meeting on Friday that his parents hid him in the closet. Is that what he's doing to his kids? Crap, Slater, what kind of son of a bitch were you? If we walk in to closets, I know Bella will freak. Hell, I'll freak.

"Down there," Mel said, pointing to the left.

The narrow hallway to the babies' rooms was free from any furniture or wall-decoration. Crime scene tape ran across the open door to the baby girl's room. If these kids were as smart as their father was, they wouldn't let that go. Withers wanted to walk past it.

Benjamin jolted at the sight of the tape. "What happened in there?"

He had to answer. The kids deserved some honesty. He certainly couldn't say that Detective Sam Wright came close to losing her life in that room. "We don't know yet. It's procedure to look at everything."

Benjamin stared at him, compressed his lips, but said nothing. Withers knew a lot was going through the kid's mind. Had to be.

This was unexpected. He shot a concerned look toward his partner to break the ice.

Bella understood. "Is that Margie's room? It's so beautiful."

Benjamin gave a harrumph. "That? That tiny box?"

Bella stiffened. "Tiny box?" She put her hands on her hips. "That tiny box is bigger than my bedroom. Shoo, kid. Show some appreciation. Everyone who went in there loved it. The pink and brown wallpaper, the matching bedding. Everything. I know a detective who'd love that for her little baby's room, especially the pink carpet. Her name is Samantha."

Benjamin smirked "Good for her. Keep that one away from us."

The adults looked at each other in bewilderment. "Benjamin, what's with the attitude all of a sudden?"

Whoa, like father, like son. This one we'll have to watch.

Benjamin shook his head. "You're not telling us the truth, Detective Withers. So I don't have to act nice."

"What do you mean?"

The boy sulked and waved a dismissive hand. "Forget it," he said, shrugging.

Withers needed to make it right. "How old are you, Benjamin?"

"I'm eight and a half. But we're accelerated. I'm in fifth grade."

"Fifth grade?" Bella said impressed. "Are you accelerated, too, Mel?"

Mel let out a breath of exasperation. "Yes. I'm six, if you must know, and I'm in third grade. And Henry is three. He's in nursery school. He hasn't been tested yet, but I'm sure he's as gifted as us."

Okay, little brother copies the older one. "Where were you yesterday, and Friday after school?" Withers asked in an interrogative tone.

"Why do you want to know?" Benjamin asked, mimicking the detective. "We didn't do anything wrong. We swear," he

said, beginning to tear up. “We never do anything wrong. We’re not allowed.”

Withers mellowed. “I know you didn’t. It’s okay, son. Who was taking care of you the past two days?”

“Our nanny,” Mel said.

“And where does she live?”

“On the twenty-fifth floor. Right below us. Can we get into our rooms, please?” Benjamin rotated his shoulders. “These book bags are heavy.”

“Sure,” Withers said. “What’s your nanny’s name?”

“Locklear Henderson. Our rooms are through there.” He opened up the door to baby boy’s room.

Withers stepped away. He wasn’t going to overthink this now. This was the time to keep his emotions out of the game and go by the book. All he knew right now was that these kids would need long-term care on every level going forward.

He made a call for a unit to pick up the nanny and bring her to the Manhattan-North precinct. He then signaled to two crime scene techs to join them.

“Henry, did you sleep in here when you were a baby? This room is awesome!” Bella said.

The three-year-old frowned and pursed his lips. He shook his head.

Benjamin sighed heavily. “You don’t have to pretend to be nice to us, Detective.”

“I’m being nice because I’m a nice person.”

Benjamin gave her a quick glance. “Our dad tells us not to trust anyone.” He walked into the room and moved the rocking chair against the wall to the side. “Dad must have had a lady friend up here.”

Withers hiked a brow. *This kid sure has great inference skills*, he thought. “What makes you say that?”

The eight-year-old looked up at him. “Whenever he does, he moves this to here, to block the wall.”

“And he told Locklear to keep us until today, so I guess she slept over,” Mel added.

“And let me guess. I bet her name was Samantha.” After glaring at Bella, Benjamin bent down toward the baseboard.

“Just don’t go all nuts. I can guarantee you have never seen anything like this.”

“Stop the drama, kid.” Benjamin jumped back from the adult. “Slide the wall open,” the tech said with a softer tone.

Benjamin pressed a button on the baseboard, holding his finger on it. The door slid open. Everyone stood mesmerized. Withers couldn’t take it in all at once. *Thank God, it’s not a closet.*

“You just gave us a couple of weeks of extra work, kid.”

“Come on in. We’ll show you around.” Benjamin snickered at the adults who stood dumbfounded.

Withers and Bella followed the children into a massive space—a one-bedroom apartment with the walls removed. Hand painted murals of sports figures and games lined the walls on both sides of the room in the color schemes of bright oranges, yellows, reds, and some browns for a grounding effect. The low-textured carpet, divided into four parts, picked up the colors from the wall. Two twin beds were on the left, with a wood dresser matching the bed frame, interspersed between desks with filled to capacity bookshelves, containing children’s books and games. A twin bed and a crib were on the right.

“Are you just going to stand there?” Benjamin picked Margie up and out of the stroller and crinkled his nose. “Ugh. She just pooped.”

Withers smiled. “Give her to me. I’ll change her.” He reached out to the baby.

Benjamin stood hesitant, wrapping his arms around the infant. “Do you know how?”

“Yes. I know how. I must have changed over a thousand diapers in my day.” Benjamin groaned. “I have children,” Withers said, taking Margie in his arms. “How old are you, baby?”

Benjamin laughed. “You have children?”

“What?” Withers said as he took the child to the changing table.

“Then you should know that at her age, she can’t answer you. She’s ten months.”

“Oh, man,” said the tech. “Come on, show us around. A diaper change doesn’t warrant an audience.” He urged the children forward.

“This is my bed,” Mel said, bouncing on the soccer themed bedspread. “And my dresser with my clothes is here.”

“And those beds on the other side are for me and Henry,” Benjamin said as he placed his book bag on the desk chair. “I have to pee.” He went into his adjoining bathroom.

The tech followed him, and Withers noticed Benjamin’s scornful glare. “Hey, I just want to see what it looks like,” the tech said. After he glanced in, he did a quick turnaround. “Hey, Detective, ya gotta see this.”

“In a minute.” After the diaper change, the baby squirmed in Withers’s arms. He forced her onto Bella who clumsily took her. “Bella, keep an eye on her.” He chuckled. Walking into the bathroom, he halted. “Holy sh...cow. Benjamin, this is bigger than my bathroom in my house.”

“I’m sure it is,” the boy answered snidely.

Again, Withers slid past the attitude, but he surely planned to address it. “Did you help your dad pick out the design?” He ran his hand over the three dimensional wall art. “It actually looks like you’re on a pirate’s ship in rough seas. The colors and everything.”

“No, Dad did this by himself. He covered the walls with cement and carved the picture. Then he painted it. But it is a replica of a real ship. And the pirate drawings are real pirates.”

Withers had to switch his tense deliberately to make sure he didn’t alarm the boy. “Your dad *is* a very talented man. Even your towels have matching pictures.”

“Dad had them specially made. You should see Mel’s bathroom.”

“You each have your own bathroom?” The tech asked.

“I share this one with Henry. And Mel shares with Margie...well, when she gets older.”

“Where is it?”

“Right across.”

Withers couldn’t stop from looking around. Every bit of space contained something educational. A computer station

stood at the far end of the room against a wall. A wall unit next to it held computer games. *Wow. Slater sure made up for what he lacked as a child with his own. He told Frank that he never had books or games.* Withers walked into Mel's bathroom. The shock of the navy and white with splashes of red caused his eyes to blink involuntarily. Mel stood by the doorway.

"Got a problem?"

"No. I do not have a problem. So you're in the navy?"

"I don't have plans to, no."

"Dad did this by himself, too?"

"Whoa," Mel said, twirling an index finger in the air. "You're smart, Detective."

"And you kids have smartass attitudes. How does your dad deal with that? I spoke with him and he seemed strict. And didn't your brother tell me just a few minutes ago that you're not allowed to do anything bad?"

"We don't with Daddy. But Daddy says if people lie to us about anything, then we can answer back. Because we can't trust them. And Benjamin said you lied to us, and I believe my brother."

All well and good. Better off to lie to them today. I have no qualms about that. And I know exactly who to call to knock them down a peg or two.

"Bella, help the kids pack for a few days. I have some calls to make."

Withers left the bedroom area, walked through the baby boy's room, down the hall into the living room. He stood still in a somber moment, leaning against the only wall that wasn't taped off. He ran his hands over his mouth. Damn, his son was eight and a half. He could just imagine what would be going through his mind if he suddenly disappeared from his and his brothers' lives. It would be the unthinkable. Then again, his sons would have their mom.

Come to think of it, where are their mothers? Did Slater kill them, too? Closing his eyes, his heart wrenched, thinking about what his department had to do.

He decided to wait on the calls and he returned to the bedroom.

Still holding Margie, Bella sat down on Mel's bed. "Need some help to pack?"

"Where are we going?"

"We'll figure it out."

Benjamin brought over an overnight bag. "Here, Mel."

Mel took the case, pouting. "We can stay with Locklear."

"Not at the moment."

"Why not?"

"We'll decide after we speak with her."

"I'm okay. Go pack Henry and Margie."

Bella compressed her lips and rose from the bed. She slipped Margie into her stroller and strapped her in.

Benjamin had jeans and long sleeve polo shirts on his bed. Withers sat down next to him. "Need help?"

"No." He looked away. "What's going to happen to us?"

"I don't know that yet. We're going to where we work, and we'll talk to a lot of people. All I can promise you is that nothing bad is going to happen. You'll all be safe and kept together."

"Now you're telling me the truth, sir."

Withers let out a nasal breath. "Yes, listen to me. Mel told me why you spoke less than respectfully before. Sometimes we adults have to protect children from hearing certain things. It's not as if we're lying. We're just deciding what's necessary for you to know at that time. Understand?"

"No. Dad says we shouldn't be protected from hearing anything."

Withers compressed his lips. *That's what Henry Slater Sr. told Sam when he had her in the bedroom.* "You can't pamper kids," were his exact words after he tormented Frankie on the phone. "Cops have a different opinion on that one."

"Why can't we stay here?"

"Well, the police have a lot of work to do."

"Why?"

Withers paused long and hard. *How do you tell a child that his dad was a serial killer?* "A lot happened and the police need to investigate so we can do what's best for you and your siblings."

“We can help them.”

“Nope. You’re minors and now that Detective Richards and I found you, you’re our responsibility. Does that make sense?”

Benjamin bit his lip and exhaled deeply before he nodded. “What do I need to take?”

“Let’s see.” Withers counted the jeans and polos. “There’s enough here. Now pack underwear and socks. And pajamas.” He got up and went over to Mel.

Navy and brown jeans along with long sleeve sweatshirts lay on the bed. A few of the shirts had decals of famous football players in the center. Withers smiled. “When you grow up, Mel, do you want to play football like these guys?”

Mel swallowed hard. “No. I heard what you told Benjamin. I just have to pack my pajamas and I’ll be ready.”

“Okay. Ready?” Withers asked Bella.

“Yes, all set.” She put the baby’s bag on the handle of the stroller and handed her partner Henry’s bag.

“Ready, guys? Grab your coats and gloves.”

“Okay,” Benjamin and Mel said together.

“Hold on,” Benjamin said. “Grab some containers of food from the fridge for Margie. Dad makes her baby food. And her bottles are in there, too.”

“Good boy. Taking care of your baby sister. I like that,” Withers said.

“Yeah, well. You wouldn’t know. And there’s cooked food for over a week in the fridge and freezer.” Benjamin walked toward the tape barrier but a crime scene tech stopped him.

“Who made all the food?” asked the tech.

“Our dad.”

“No can do.” The tech looked up warily at Withers. He compressed his lips. “Based on what happened, Detective, we’re not letting prepared consumable products out of our custody.”

Withers caught on fast. *Would Slater poison the food he prepared? To take the kids with him?* The thought nauseated him. “Where did your dad get the milk for Margie’s bottles?”

“Some place where they give mommy’s milk to dads. I don’t know where,” Mel said.

The tech smiled. "How is it packed?"

"I don't know what you call it. It's in the freezer. And he mixed it with goat's milk."

"Hold on." The tech left and returned a few minutes later with vacuum-packed bags of breast milk. "These were brought in as is from a milk-bank. We checked them. Not tampered with so you can take these. And, Detective, when these thaw, the milk needs to be consumed within twenty-four to forty-eight hours. I'll pack these in ice. We found a cooler in the closet."

"Okay. Thanks." Withers yelled to the senior crime scene tech, "We're leaving. I'll write up this report." He turned toward Bella. "Wait here. Give me a minute."

He walked into the hallway outside of the apartment, took a deep breath, and pressed a key on his phone. He knew Frank and Sam had gone to the cemetery today so Sam could pay her final respects to her friend, Carrie Baines.

"Frank Khaos."

"It's Withers. A major development just popped up in the Scorpio case. We need you and Sam at Manhattan-North, ASAP."

"Okay. We're just leaving the cemetery. On our way."

CHAPTER 2

Withers hadn't given Frank specifics, so on the drive up, both he and Sam went through possible scenarios. They knew Slater didn't survive, so what could have Crime Scene uncovered? More money? Sam had gotten her resolution. What she'd had vowed to her friend Carolyn Baines came to fruition. The man who'd murdered her was dead himself. It was less than forty-eight hours after the suicide. Frank didn't know what to expect. Withers kept his tone of voice mellow. Was it something minor, or did he do that on purpose because he was with people? He knew Withers was still at the apartment and would be for at least another week. Frank didn't know him outside of the job, but one thing he did know. Detective Lex Withers was dedicated to everything he took on. He was a damn good detective, and Frank respected him. When he got the call, Frank didn't question the man further.

Forensic Psychiatrist Dr. Frank Khaos and Detective Samantha Wright opened the door to the war room in the Manhattan-North precinct. The bland walls made the people within them stand out. Sitting around the conference table more than the expected people accosted them. Frank nodded, as his gaze hit Withers and Richards, along with Nick Valatutti, Sam's partner, and Lieutenant, Ted Martin.

Then Frank laid his gaze on the four children sitting opposite the detectives. He couldn't take his eyes off them. He looked at Sam. He knew it—her love for children. With her serene expression, she was already in love. *Wow, Sam, hold on. Way too soon for that.* Sam couldn't stop smiling at the beautiful little faces. Frank shot Withers a glare and merely got a nod

in response. Sam was right again. She'd had wondered if Henry Slater had children. And even Frank thought he'd have nieces and nephews out there. More importantly, they resembled him—and his son, Frankie.

"Get comfortable," the lieutenant said. "This is going to be a long afternoon."

Frank and Sam took off their coats and hung them on the wooden rack in the corner, and took a seat by the conference table. Not expecting to go in to work today, they were both dressed uber casual in dark denim jeans and solid colored T-shirts. Sam had on a multi-shaded, blue-floral, fleece, zip-up-the-front sweatshirt over her pink T. All the while, the children didn't take their gaze off Frank.

"Dr. Khaos, meet your nephews, and niece," said Lieutenant Martin. He introduced the children, pointing to them. "This is Benjamin, Mel, Henry, and the little one, Margie. Children, this is your Uncle Frank. And this is Detective Samantha Wright."

Benjamin sniggered at Sam then turned his attention to Frank. "You look like our dad, but he wouldn't wear that."

Frank looked down at his black T-shirt. "Why? It's clean."

"He isn't the T-shirt type. And he doesn't have tattoos on his arms."

Frank chuckled. "What you see is what you get. Deal with it."

Benjamin, wide-eyed, stared at his uncle as he pressed back into the chair, obviously intimidated by Frank's tone. Then he looked toward Sam and spoke with a low voice. "And are you the Samantha who was in our house?"

"Yes, I am, sweetheart."

Margie squirmed in the stroller. Sam got up and took off the harness holding the baby, lifting her up and embracing her, letting out a soft moan.

Margie babbled and grabbed onto Sam's hair, as she sat back down on the chair. Sounds of delight emitted from the baby's mouth.

Sam swooned holding the precious child who wore a pink and yellow one-piece outfit. She rested her cheek on the side of the baby's head. "Oh, my God, so sweet."

Frank looked at her, groaning, as Withers handed Sam a bottle. Frank could just imagine what was running through her mind. Probably it was the same thing going through his. What were they going to do now? He would do what it took to protect these children. They were family. His family. His blood.

“This is too cold for her.” Sam put the bottle on the table and flexed her hand. “Who wants to go heat this up?”

Nick laughed. “At her age, she can drink cold milk.”

“No,” Mel said. “Daddy still heats it up for her.”

“I’ll go.” Nick patted Sam on the shoulder before he left the room. Sam smiled.

Mel looked down at the floor. The child blinked repeatedly, sniffled, and swallowed. Frank could tell that Sam’s heart wrenched. She moved forward in her seat and tilted her head toward Mel. “What’s the matter, sweetheart? I know. You’ve all had a shock.”

Mel sat up but hesitated. The child froze. Benjamin whispered something. Mel sniffled and nodded then got up, went over to Sam, and stood between her legs. “You’re so beautiful.”

Sam smiled from ear to ear. “Oh, thank you, sweetheart.” She pulled a tissue from her bag and handed it to the six-year-old.

Mel blew her nose. “I want to be beautiful, like you.”

Frank did a double take. Sam gasped and handed him the infant. He seemed to guess what was next, as did Sam. His gaze took in all the shocked faces on the adults in the room.

Nick returned and he smiled seeing the baby with Frank. Then he had to have seen his colleagues’ faces. His smile vanished.

Frank took the bottle and immediately Margie wrapped her hand around it and put the nipple into her mouth. She nestled in the crook of his arm, bending her knees with her right leg over her left. Frank laughed at how comfortable she made herself.

Sam removed the baseball cap that covered Mel’s head. Her hair was bobby-pinned to her scalp. “Oh my goodness, Mel, who put your hair up like this?”

“Me.”

“Why, sweetheart?” Sam started removing the pins, and Mel’s unruly and uneven hair fell below her shoulders.

The detectives looked like they were about to die. Apparently, they hadn’t suspected Mel was a girl. At six, it could be hard to tell.

“Dad wants me to be a boy,” Mel said, breathing heavily, holding back tears. “But I want to be a girl, like you. I am a girl.”

Withers pounded the desk, startling the children. Richards collapsed into her chair. There were no words. Frank closed his eyes to prevent himself from exploding in anger. He couldn’t let loose with Margie in his arms.

Ignoring them, Sam removed all the bobby pins, putting them on the table, and barely held back tears, herself. “What’s your real name?”

“Melissa.”

“From now on, you’re going to be a girl.” Sam fluffed out her hair and then pulled Melissa into her arms and held her tight.

Melissa fought her and pulled back. “We don’t hug.” Sam looked sad. “Daddy says ‘we don’t need that.’”

“I know that about your dad, but most people love hugs. I love hugs. Want to give it a try?” Sam opened her arms.

Melissa looked toward Benjamin, obviously for approval. The boy stared at Sam for a moment then nodded to his sister.

Melissa meekly went into Sam’s arms. Apparently comfortable, the little girl wrapped her arms around Sam’s torso and rested her head on Sam’s chest.

Wow. It looks like big brother has the final word. Frank put his hands up and out. He couldn’t let his true feelings show. “How did this ever happen?”

Melissa turned her head toward him. “From the time I was little.”

Frank blew out a deep breath to prevent obscenities from pouring out. “Why did he do that?”

“Daddy says girls aren’t as smart as boys.” Melissa hugged Sam as she let some tears sprinkle down her cheeks. “And—

I'm—trying—so hard—to show—him—I—am.” She used her fist to wipe away the tears.

Sam caressed her. “What about in school?”

She looked up and swallowed the tears. “In school, I'm a girl and we wear uniforms, but as soon as we get back to the nanny we change into regular clothes.”

Sam smoothed out Melissa's hair. “Didn't your nanny ever talk to your dad about it?”

“No, she was afraid of losing her job. And she's a really good nanny.”

Withers really didn't understand it. “So there was no one you could tell?”

“Not until now. I never met a lady I could talk to who wouldn't tell on me to Daddy. Benjamin told me I could trust Samantha, and she likes Margie. So maybe she'd like me, too.”

Sam hugged her tightly. “I do like you, Melissa, and you'll always be able to trust me. We'll make this right. I promise.”

“Hold on. All you have is boy's clothes at your house?” Withers asked.

“Yes.”

Frank's blood boiled. “Did you ever tell your dad that you were unhappy?”

“No. It was his way all the time.”

Benjamin leaned forward in his chair. “We're not allowed to give our opinions. That's why Melissa couldn't tell anybody.”

Frank groaned. “What did you wear when you went out with your dad?”

“We never did.”

“You were in your house, all the time?”

The little girl nodded and sniffled, holding back more tears. “Most of the time.”

“So you wore boy's clothes all day?”

Melissa nodded. “At night, too.”

“Well, we are going to change that.” Sam revolted. “In ten minutes. I'll be right back, Melissa. Stay with everyone.” Sam kissed her cheek. Melissa startled at the affection then backed up. Sam glanced toward Frank, worried, then turned toward the girl. “What's your favorite color, sweetheart?”

“Pink, like what you’re wearing,” Melissa said like a child with no hope of getting what she wanted.

Frank blew out a deep breath. *Yeah, Slater wasn’t an affectionate guy. These kids aren’t used to any warmth from adults. We’ll change that, fast.*

Sam ran her fingers through Melissa’s hair, got up, grabbed her coat, and left the room without saying another word. Melissa watched her leave then sat down next to Frank.

“So now what?” Benjamin asked. He held back tears, himself.

Frank didn’t miss a beat. “Until we find out what’s going on, you’re coming to live with Sam and me.”

“Hold on, Khaos,” Lieutenant Martin said. “CPS is on their way.”

“I don’t give a damn about protective services, I’m their biological uncle.”

“We don’t know how long it will be.”

“And I don’t give a damn how long it will be. It’s permanent, as far as I’m concerned.”

“It’s not that simple.”

The door flung open and the elderly social worker entered with a newbie children’s attorney. Not waiting for an introduction, she took her seat at the conference table and grabbed folders out of her tote bag.

She frowned. Frank assumed from now being delegated not one child, but four. The young female attorney held a softer expression.

Benjamin ignored the new adults. “Where do you live?”

“In Brooklyn.”

“Ewww,” Benjamin and Melissa yelled in unison.

Frank put his hands out. “What’s wrong with Brooklyn?”

“Brooklyn’s a dump.”

“It is not! Who told you that?”

Melissa sat up tall as if proud. “Daddy. He won’t go there.”

“Your dad was born in Brooklyn.”

“Yes, we know,” Benjamin said, shaking his head. “And he told us he’ll never go back there.”

The social worker looked impatient. "I'm Mrs. Kruger. Are you making arrangements for the children, Dr. Khaos?"

"Yes. I want them to come live with me. I have a large house and my son would love to have his cousins."

"But where is their mother?"

"Uh, you mean, mothers, ma'am. We each have different ones, but we don't know where they are," said Benjamin.

Melissa added, "We don't know their names, either."

Frank closed his eyes for a moment. Did Slater kill more women? "When was the last time you saw them?"

"I guess when we were babies. Younger than Margie," Melissa said.

"I guess you're Melissa," Mrs. Kruger said. "Can you please tell me more about that?"

"About what?" The child didn't seem to understand.

"I've been doing this a very long time, Detectives, Lieutenant, and I'm sensing you have a big problem on your hands."

Oh, man. Frank wrote *where did Slater get these kids and how?* on a piece of paper and passed the sheet to the lieutenant, who, in turn, nodded, after reading the chicken scratch, and passed the paper on.

Sam returned, carrying two bags from a children's store. Everyone stopped talking and stared at her. "What? I'm a fast shopper and this is just one outfit, pajamas, and a coat. Come on, Melissa, you're going to change."

The little girl smiled, probably for the first time in a long time. Sam took her by the hand and squeezed it tight. She glowed. Swinging their arms, Sam left the room with her.

"I can just imagine what Samantha bought her, with her taste," Benjamin said with a hint of jealousy.

Frank laughed. "Excuse me? Taste? What's that about?"

"That woman liked the baby's room," he responded, shaking his head.

Mrs. Kruger cleared her throat. "Can we please get back to the children's residency? I don't have all day."

Benjamin met her eye to eye. "We don't want to go to Brooklyn. We'll stay in the city. And you have to keep us together."

He certainly knows how to stand up for himself and his siblings. That's a good thing. He must also feel less restricted not in front of his father.

"Well, don't you have demands?" Mrs. Kruger retorted. "There's no guarantee of any of that. Even if you went to a group home instead of to foster care, you wouldn't be in Manhattan or kept together."

"If they came with me and Sam, they'd be kept together."

As Frank spoke, Sam entered with Melissa dressed in a three piece pink and brown fleece sweat suit, with a matching long sleeved shirt under the jacket. She smiled, when everyone stopped and stared at the little girl and compliments came from everyone. Even the staunch social worker smiled.

"Wow, Mel—"

"It's Melissa from now on, Benjamin."

"You look great, Melissa."

Frank chided the boy. "What did you say about taste?"

"Okay, so I take it back." Benjamin sat back in his chair, looking smug.

Melissa sat next to Sam at the table and hugged her. Sam, beaming, wrapped her arms around the girl.

"So what about it? You want to come live with us?"

Sam sat up startled. "That would be wonderful!"

"In Brooklyn?" Benjamin paused. "Do you know how to cook?"

"I'm learning."

"Learning? How old are you?"

Sam did a double take. "What's that got to do with it?"

"We only eat gourmet meals."

Frank bellowed out laughter. "You're kidding me, right?"

Benjamin leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. "No, I never kid."

Neither did his dad. "Excuse me?" Whether, it's the right time or not, this kid needs to know some middle ground. "Come over here, now." Frank signaled with his index finger.

Benjamin reluctantly got up and sauntered over to Frank with a smirk on his face.

“Oh, boy.” Withers chuckled. “Sure you can handle this, Frank?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m good.”

Benjamin reached Frank. Standing in front of his uncle’s knees, the boy’s smirk transformed into a pout. Frank stared at him without saying a word.

Benjamin exhaled deeply. A minute of silenced passed.

“Now, respectfully, tell me about your gourmet meals.”

The boy sniffled. “I’m sorry, sir. I just don’t know what’s going to happen to us.”

Frank cringed at the word *sir*. That didn’t suit his personality at all. “It’s okay, bud.” He placed his palm on the boy’s shoulder. “Listen, I’m an informal kind of guy. And sir makes me feel so old. Let’s drop the ‘sir.’ Okay? Uncle Frank will work just fine.”

“Okay, Uncle Frank. Dad only cooks gourmet.”

“And what is that, exactly? Like four or five course meals?”

“More like three. And only healthy.”

“Okay, good. Me, too. What kind of courses?” Frank didn’t know what to expect.

“We always start with a salad, always. Chopped, so Henry can eat it, too.”

“Okay. Then what?”

“Then a chicken, meat, or fish, and vegetables. But we eat on fancy plates—”

“China,” Melissa interrupted him.

“And he makes the food pretty,” Benjamin added. “He just doesn’t slop it on the plate, like they do in restaurants.”

“There’s no slopping on the plate in restaurants,” Sam said. “Which one did that?”

“I don’t know. We never went to one. But Dad told us.”

“You never went out to eat in a restaurant?” Sam asked.

“You never went out to eat Chinese food or Italian?” Frank asked. Benjamin shook his head. Frank frowned. “We’ll have to change that. Speaking of food, I’m starved. Did you guys each lunch?”

“No.”

Henry got antsy in the chair and he started to whine.

Sam reached for the three-year-old. "Come here, sweetheart."

The boy revolted. "No!" He punched Sam in her chest, flailing his arms. "Go away! We don't like you!"

Sam backed off, startled.

After swiftly handing the sleeping infant to Withers, Frank grabbed Henry as Sam sat back down with jaws dropped. "Hey, stop it, Henry." The kid screamed in an all-out tantrum. "Whoa, whoa, whoa." Frank wrapped his arms around him, and carried him to the couch against the wall. "Henry, stop."

The little guy continued to scream. He kicked Frank's legs.

Frank couldn't sit. "Shush, shush, shush, it's all right, Henry." With patience, Frank rocked him like a baby. Henry stopped fighting after a few minutes, still breathing heavily and sobbing.

Melissa and Benjamin sat, stunned.

"He never ever does that!" Benjamin bellowed.

Mrs. Kruger shook her head. "With behavior like this, that child will be hard to place."

Frank continued to hold him tight to his chest. Frank rested his palm on the back of Henry's head. "No one is being placed. They're coming with us."

Henry cried on Frank's shoulder. "I want Daddy. Tell her to go away," he cried out, pointing to Sam.

"Oh, man. I know you do. I know you do, bud. Why don't you like Samantha?"

"Daddy said we don't need any mommies. Just him."

Withers blew out a deep breath. "I think we gave the FBI another case. I'll put in a call to the New York office." He began to get up with sleeping Margie in his arms. "Order me whatever." He strapped the baby into the stroller before he left.

Frank patted the boy's back. "Well, I disagree with your dad. My son, Frankie, loves Sam and she's going to be his mom."

Henry rubbed his eyes with his fisted hands, still pouting.

Benjamin frowned. "What do you mean, 'going to be his mom'?"

After Henry calmed down, Frank brought him back to the table and sat with him on his lap. "Sam and I are getting married and we're going...well, now that you're coming to live in my house, Sam's moving in today, too." He shot Sam a wide grin.

"I guess I am." Sam reached over and hugged Frank's arm. "Are you hungry, Henry?"

"Yeah." He frowned at Sam, sticking out his lower lip, as he sat on Frank's lap. "But we don't like you. You're not coming."

"We like Samantha, Henry. She's nice," Melissa said.

"Is he in nursery school yet?"

Melissa nodded.

Sam sealed her lips into a sliver and then put on the drama. "Oh, my goodness, Henry. You hurt my feelings, so bad." She crossed her hands over her heart. "You made my heart hurt."

The three-year-old's expression changed. He stared at her.

Sam laid on a pout. "I'm going to cry."

Henry slipped off Frank's lap. He gingerly approached Sam. "I hurt your feelings?" He stood in front of her. His high-pitched three-year-old voice sounded sincere. It took a lot for the other adults in the room to hold back laughter.

"Yes, you did. Come here, sweetheart," Sam said in a pleading tone.

He climbed up onto her lap.

"You're learning all about feelings in nursery school, aren't you?" The boy nodded. "What did your teacher tell you?"

Henry sniffled. "To be nice and not hurt anyone's feelings cause it could make them sad."

"She's right. You made me sad. And what are you supposed to do, when that happens?"

"Say you're sorry."

"So what are you going to say to me?"

"I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, Samantha."

Sam hugged the boy. "It's okay, I accept your apology."

He shook his head. "But we still don't need a mommy."

"That's not true, Henry," Frank said. "Your cousin Frankie loves Sam and he wants her to be his mom."

“I know!” Melissa jumped up out of the chair. “Why don’t you go ask Dad who our moms are? But we won’t need them anyway, when he gets out of the hospital, right?” she said as she threw her hands out to the side.

Frank and Sam both gasped at the same time. Frank immediately realized the inevitable.

All right, Withers, you laid it on the shrink. I am the one who makes family death notifications, and I did have personal experience with it, telling Frankie his mom had been taken from us. It’s not something I want to repeat. But, okay. It needs to be done, but not today.

Frank changed the subject fast. “Call in from the deli. Do you kids have any allergies to foods?”

“No,” Benjamin said. “No allergies, but we don’t eat bread with that gluten or any foods, like, that come in packages with bad stuff.”

“Like no, ham, Bologna, cheeses.”

“Yeah, stuff like that. No bacon, sausage, boxed cereals. And you need baby food for Margie. I know what’s it’s called. Organic. Dad only buys organic food. I don’t know why but the man in the white suit at our house wouldn’t let us take any of her food. Dad made it special.”

Frank nodded. “Well, for today, she’ll need some jarred. It’s all right. We’ll make her food at our house.”

“I’ll go take care of the ordering.” Nick got up. “Mrs. Kruger would you and Miss Schaeffer like to join us for lunch?”

The lieutenant handed Nick the precinct’s credit card.

“No, thank you. We have paperwork to do.” Mrs. Kruger’s cell rang and she excused herself to take the call, answering it as she left the room.

“Does he know what to get?” Benjamin asked.

“I think so, why?” Frank’s delivery was firm with an additional glare.

“Never mind.”

Mrs. Kruger re-entered the room too fast, and Frank could read her expression. She looked like a person would after their power was usurped. “I don’t know what strings you people pulled, but I just got off the phone with Judge Holmes from

Family Court. Usually, this process takes a lot longer before granting guardianship. He'd gotten a call from the FBI of all things. I'm not questioning it because the bottom line would be that the children are well cared for. Just give me a few minutes to amend these papers. Where can Miss Schaeffer and I go to work on this? And is there a notary in this building? On second thought, we can work in the corner over there."

Frank turned around at hearing the door close. "Reach him?"

"Oh, yeah," Withers said as he tilted his head toward the social worker. "I filled him in on everything. Agent Case is on his way."

"Who's Agent Case?" Melissa asked.

Withers smiled. "He helped up with some things with your dad. It's nothing for you children to worry about. We have everything under control."

The attorney, Miss Schaeffer, approached the table. "Dr. Khaos, we'll just need you to sign these guardianship papers." She placed the papers on the table in front of him. "I need you to initial and then sign the highlighted lines."

Frank flipped through the papers. "Okay. Standard. I've seen these before."

The notary came in and witnessed the signing. Frank carried through with intent, the notary did his job, and he and slid the papers back to her.

"All right, Dr. Khaos." Mrs. Kruger and the attorney rose. "Everything is in order. I wish you and the children luck." She and the attorney raced out of the room.

"What kind of a doctor are you, anyway?" Benjamin asked, still with the attitude.

"I'm a psychiatrist. Forensic."

Benjamin's face lit up. "You work with the brain?"

Frank smiled, his lips curling in approval. "Yes."

Benjamin bolted up and pulled his iPad out of his backpack that hung on the back of the chair. "I love the brain!" He opened to an app and ran over to Frank. "See? This is an app that shows every part!"

Frank wrapped his arm around the boy. "I'm impressed, Benjamin."

“See, this is the frontal lobe.” Benjamin pointed. “This is the hippocampus.”

“That’s terrific. And the names aren’t even written there. How did this interest come about?”

“I love science. It’s my favorite subject. And I want to grow up to be a doctor because...” Sadness overcame the boy’s excitement.

“What’s the matter?”

“Tell him, Benjamin. He could help Dad.”

“Help Dad with what?”

“Dad gets bad headaches. And no matter what he does they don’t get better. Well, sometimes, they do. He’s got to be real careful with what he eats.”

“And how he sleeps, too,” Melissa added. “He needs three pillows.”

“Sometimes, he’ll go away for a day, and we’ll sleep over at the nanny. He comes back all better.”

That’s when he went out for murder. Oh, man!

“Did he ever go to a doctor?”

“No. He doesn’t even believe in doctors. I didn’t tell him I want to be one, either.”

“Did he ever take you to the doctor, even for your vaccinations for school?”

“For that yes, but we really don’t get sick.”

Nick opened the door, carrying bags of food. He placed them on the table as the children watched Lex and Bella distribute the lunches.

Melissa and Benjamin’s gazes darted to the white wrappers back and forth to each other, then both of them sat back into their chairs, grimacing as they stared at their names on the packages. They seemed to have been communicating with just their facial expressions, almost telepathically.

It was obvious to Frank what they were thinking. “Didn’t your dad ever bring in prepared foods?”

Melissa shook her head. “No! Never. We only ate what he cooked.”

Oh, man. These kids are too sheltered. Frank smiled, keeping it inward.

Margie had awakened and sat up. Sam pulled the stroller over to her. She opened a couple of jars of the baby food: puréed chicken, and peas and carrots. The baby giggled excitedly seeing the jars. Sam held the jars on her lap. Gingerly, she fed Margie with tiny bits of food on the spoon.

Good thing Nick was a parent, Frank thought. He made great choices. He doubted if Sam would have known what to get. “Sam, you can give her some more on the spoon.”

“I’ll get the hang of it.” She brought the spoon to Margie’s mouth and spoke in a childish tone. “Right, baby-doll. I can do it.”

The children looked confused, especially when Frank put their tuna sandwich in front of them. Melissa and Benjamin backed away from the table and leaned into their chairs again. They vehemently shook their heads.

Do they actually think that behavior is going to allow them to escape? “What’s the matter?” Frank asked as he unwrapped the paper around the sandwiches. The white paper doubled as a plate.

“Where’s the china?” Henry asked.

Everyone in the room laughed and dug into their sandwiches.

“Henry, this is a police precinct,” Lieutenant Martin answered. “No fancy plates here, son. Use the paper as a plate.”

“Yeah. We’re roughing it.” Frank laid a napkin across Henry’s lap and started to slice his piece of sandwich. “Eat. Listen you, two. Your brother will copy you, and you have to show him it’s okay. Got it?”

Benjamin succumbed. “Yes, sir—uh—Uncle Frank.”

“No. I want it that big.” Henry looked at his brother and sister. “I wanna hold it myself.”

Melissa swooned after taking a bite. “This is soooo good. I never tasted anything like this before. Oh, gosh.”

Frank handed Henry his food. “Hold it good. Otherwise, it’ll fall out.”

Some of the tuna plopped onto the napkin in his lap. Henry was determined. With his fingers, he stuffed the tuna back into the bread.

“You’re an independent little guy, aren’t you?”

Henry looked up at Frank making a mean face, scrunching his nose. “Yes.”

Frank shook his head.

After she swallowed, Melissa asked, “What’s next, Uncle Frank?”

“We’ll go to my house. We have a lot to do,” Frank said, looking at Melissa and Benjamin. “And I’ll need your help and Frankie’s. The crib is in the garage.”

Benjamin looked toward Frank with a mouthful of food. “How old is Frankie?”

“He just turned eight.”

“What grade is he in?”

“Second.”

“Second? And he’s eight?” Melissa smirked.

Frank did a double take. “What?”

“I’m six, and I’m in third grade.”

Frank stared at Sam, surprised.

“And I’m in fifth grade,” Benjamin said with superiority.

Withers must have thought it was time to fill him in. “Oh, yeah, Frank. I was informed by these children,” he said, forcing a smile, “that they’re accelerated.”

Frank sat speechless—not his usual behavior. He couldn’t even think of a response in the moment.

It was a good thing Special Agent Brett Case opened the door. Accompanied by his fifteen-year-old son who carried a highchair and a booster seat for a chair, the agent carried a shopping bag and car seat. He wore his blue FBI jacket with the initials in yellow on its back. “Hey, guys.” After putting down the packages, he took the highchair from his son and brought it over to Sam. “Here, put her in this. You’ll kill your back leaning over. This is my son, Kyle.”

Everyone said greetings. Frank introduced the children to Special Agent Case and the kids looked at him with their mouths agape. He and Frank laughed. Sam lifted Margie out of the stroller, moved it out of the way, and put her into the highchair. The baby giggled in delight.

“Hi, Kyle,” Frank said, extending his hand to shake. The fifteen year old reciprocated.

Agent Case looked down at Henry, with his legs criss-crossed on the seat and the napkin over them. The tuna fell onto his lap with every bite. Case laughed. “Come here, guy.” He removed the napkin and put it on the table.

Henry yelled, “No. I eat like this.”

“Uh, oh,” Kyle said.

Frank glanced up at the teen. Yeah, he’d figured Case would be a stricter parent than he was.

Henry yelled at the agent, again. “No!”

Agent Case compressed his lips but didn’t say a word. He scooped up Henry in one arm, as Henry flailed his arms and legs.

“Let go a me, you mean FBI man!”

Case ignored the tantrum and with the other hand placed the booster seat on the chair. With Henry yelling, Case put him into the seat, and pushed the chair toward the table. “There ya go.”

The little boy pouted, but he lifted the sandwich and with tiny fingers stuffed the fallen tuna back into the bread.

“Now isn’t that better? You’re the same height as everyone else. And now you can have the salad, like everyone else.” He brought the salad tin toward him and removed the cover. He handed Henry a plastic fork. Case pulled out prepared baby food from the bag. “Here. You’ll have this for a few days until things settle down. My wife made it.”

“Thank you so much, Brett. That was so thoughtful of her,” Sam said. “And it must have been awhile since she’s made some.”

“You’re welcome. And not really. We have four at home. Our youngest is his age,” he said, pointing to Henry. “And we’re expecting in June.”

“I didn’t know that!” Sam said, looking up at Frank.

“Yeah, you missed that conversation. We were in the van following you.”

Case coughed, Frank guessed to prevent the children from questioning his last comment and the agent pulled a chair from

the corner to the table. "Give me an update." He sat next to Benjamin.

"You're a real FBI agent?"

Case nodded.

"Wow."

Case smiled. "So tell me, Benjamin, how long were you living in this apartment?"

"Uh..." The boy paused as if calculating the time in his mind.

"I'll help you out. How many school years were you in the apartment?"

"Oh! This year, and the year before." Benjamin paused. "And the year before. This is our third school year."

"Okay, excellent. What's the name of your school?"

"Scholars Academy."

"And where is it?"

"In Manhattan near our house."

"How do you get there?"

"By school bus."

Frank listened intently to the exchange. Case certainly knew how to elicit responses from a child. Probably because he had his own. Frank doubted if Case interviewed many children in his homicide investigations, though.

"How long are you on the bus?"

"Um, I know," Melissa chimed in. "Fifteen minutes. We had to time it as a homework assignment."

"Very good. Thank you, Melissa. Do you remember where you lived before?"

The little girl smiled. "Yes. In Florida."

"What part of Florida?"

"Miami. We like it better there. We don't like the snow."

Case chuckled. "Yeah. It is something to get used to. Detective Withers, check out that Miami address we have." Withers nodded. Case faced him. "Have your people made contact with the nanny?"

"Locklear?" asked Melissa.

"Yes," Withers said. "I got a message from the team that she wasn't home."

With her fork, Melissa picked up some of the tuna that fell onto the paper. "She's on vacation."

Bella groaned. "Where did she go?"

"She went to visit her sister in Ireland."

Bella leaned toward the girl. "When did she go?"

Benjamin elbowed his sister. "I'll talk. When she put us into the elevator, she had her suitcase."

Withers blew out an exasperated breath. "Why didn't you tell us this at your house when we asked about her?"

Benjamin shrugged. "Dad always tells us to only give short answers and not more...well, something like that."

Case shot Withers what appeared to be an unappreciative glare. "You kids know so much. I'm impressed. Do you know how long she'll be gone? And we need a full answer."

Melissa nodded. "Three weeks. She and Dad worked it around his schedule. So we know he'd be home three weeks." She sounded relieved. "That'll give him time to get better in the hospital."

"Right." Case shot Frank a saddened look. He turned away from the children. Frank guessed he needed time to compose himself. Turning back, Case asked, "Who did you live in Miami with? Was Henry born there?"

"No. He was just three. He came to live with us in our first year here," Melissa said. "Oh, and Margie just came to us, too."

"Margie just came to you? When was that? She's ten months, right?"

"Yes, but I don't know exactly when," Melissa said.

"Okay, tell me this. Did Margie come around Thanksgiving in November?"

"I know! I know," Benjamin said, jumping up and down in his chair. "She came at Christmas."

"Yes!" Melissa shouted. "That's right. Daddy said she's our Christmas present. We got other presents but he was teasing."

Oh, man, where did he get these kids? They resemble Frankie and me. Our coloring, facial features. Benjamin could pass for Frankie's brother, except for the longer hair. Melissa's

face is rounder, probably after her mom. The little ones? They both have Slater's oval eyes—come to think of it, mine, too.

Frank watched Sam wiping the baby's mouth and lifting her out of the high chair. He extended his arms out to the infant.

Margie leaned in toward Sam, not wanting to go to Frank. "Mama," she whispered.

Sam lit up. "Oh, my God!"

Benjamin's eyes widened. "Mama? She never says that!"

"Does she say, 'dada'?" Case asked.

"Yes, all the time."

Case and Frank stared at each other, probably with the same thing going through their minds. Frank slumped back in his chair. Case must have gotten the message. *That's right, Case. This one's on you. You can be the mean FBI man.*

Case got up with a tense posture and went over to Sam who'd already bonded with the infant.

"Let Dr. Khaos hold the baby, Detective Wright."

Sam had to have caught on to the formality. She hesitated. Frank reached for the infant.

Margie hugged into Sam. Frank put his hands on the baby and pulled her toward him. "Mama," she cried.

Sam stiffened. Frank was confident she wouldn't break down in front of her colleagues.

"Come over here, Detective." Case walked to the door, opened it, and led Sam into the hallway before closing the door. She stood in front of FBI Special Agent Brett Case. He continued. "Listen to me and listen good, Detective. Margie apparently remembers her mother. And that's not you. I'm warning you. Do not become attached."

Sam sniffled. "I know."

"Good. Our goal, your team's goal, is to find the children's biological mothers. Understand?"

Sam exhaled deeply and nodded. "Yes."

"And I expect you and Dr. Khaos, while the children are with you, to continue to try to get as much information as you can. We'd like their reunion with their mothers to happen as quickly as possible. Got that?"

“Definitely, Special Agent Case.” Sam turned to go back into the room.

When Margie saw Sam, she called out to her. “Mama.”

CHAPTER 3

Frank and Sam drove their cars to Frank's Mill Basin, Brooklyn, home in the section with the largest properties. He pulled into the driveway in his Explorer first, and Sam followed in her Murano, parking behind him. Perfect timing. She'd left the precinct with Nick twenty minutes earlier to get a lift to her house. No matter what, they'd need two cars. It was a good thing that Agent Case brought a car seat to the precinct. Frank had Frankie's seat that he outgrew in the trunk. It came in handy for Henry, and Benjamin was tall enough for the seat belt. Sam took Margie and Melissa with her. Margie's stroller converted, so Melissa sat in the gifted booster seat.

He'd had called his in-laws before he left the precinct—when he had the energy. Frankie was so excited to meet more cousins. And he couldn't wait to see Cameron and Andrew again. Frank smiled. Yes, he'd be getting together again soon with his brother Carl. This reminded him. He'd have to call Carl ASAP. He needed to know what happened today.

Frank's mind reeled. In the course of an hour today, his life changed. How would he deal with this—going from one child to five, and Sam moving in after only being engaged two days? He was usually slow in making life-altering decisions. The universe certainly pelted him with the unexpected. He closed his eyes for a moment in a silent prayer to his mom up in heaven. He needed her protection more than ever, now. Theresa had never let him down, even when she was alive and he was in Iraq, he felt her energy surrounding him. She'd dealt with plenty of his craziness over the years from the time she and Peter adopted him when he was ten. She was making it her duty to make sure he paid it forward, all right—by now adopting four

children. How could he not? They were his brother's blood, his blood. *Hold on, Frank. You're jumping the gun here. It may never come to adoption if, and when, they find the children's mothers.*

His adoptive parents forgave him for all of the grief he had put them through. Now it was his turn to forgive. *But could he? Could he forgive his biological brother for murdering seventeen women across the United States?* That would be a tough nut to crack.

Until he met Sam, Frank didn't give a thought to the astrological signs. His was Libra.

Oh, man! Thinking about it, he was a true Libra—forgiving. He never liked confrontation. He was the negotiator by career choice. Now, it spread to his personal life. He didn't know why these thoughts hit him now, but they did.

Yeah. He was a Libra all right—on every level.

The front door of the house opened, and Frankie ran down the ten steps to meet them before Frank opened the car door. "Dad!"

The sound of his son's voice jolted him out of his self-analysis.

Sam was the first to get out of the car, and she went around the passenger side rear to help Melissa. Frankie ran into her arms. "You're moving in, Sam? Really?"

"Yes, I am!" She kissed him on the top of his head.

Melissa stepped out of the car, and Sam introduced them.

After the eye-to-eye then body lookovers, Melissa broke the ice. "Frankie, you look just like my brother!"

"Really? I look just like my dad."

Frank got out of his car with Henry and Benjamin and noticed the mischievous look Frankie carried on his face—the hidden smile as he twisted his mouth. "Frankie, be nice."

Frankie went face to face with Benjamin. "We do look alike," he said as he used his hand to measure their height. "And you're as big as me, too!"

"I'm even bigger! When were you eight?"

"In January."

"I'm eight and a half."

So far so good. “This will be great, Frankie. You’ll have friends right in the house with you.” *I hope.*

Sam held Margie as Frank pulled out the stroller base from the trunk and reassembled it. Trying to put Margie back in the stroller was impossible. The baby wiggled so much in Sam’s arms, she gave up. Frank sucked his cheeks in. Right away, he realized—as if he didn’t at the precinct—that Margie had Sam wrapped around her little finger, and at ten months, that finger was definitely little. Sam was already a pushover with these kids. Something, he’d have to change.

Benjamin looked around in awe. “Why is there so much snow on the ground?” He looked as if he was afraid to take a step.

Yep. Definitely sheltered, Frank confirmed.

Frankie didn’t seem to understand his cousin’s question. “Because it’s winter.” He took the lead and charged onto the snow-covered lawn that ran around the expanse of the brick house. “Bet you can’t catch me.”

After bursting out laughing at Frankie, Henry was the first to take the plunge, running into the snow, falling in up to his waist. Melissa yelled after him, sounding as if she was the little mom of the four. She traipsed into the snow, wobbling and falling, herself. Benjamin took a few small steps into the white mound. He picked up some snow in his gloved hand, appearing not to know what to do with it. He compressed it in his hands and then stared at his gloves. Shaking his hand did nothing to dislodge the snow. Margie squirmed in Sam’s arms, wanting to go down onto the snow. In her snowsuit that had booties to cover her shoes, and gloves attached to the sleeves, she was the most protected. Sam made sure the gloves were secure, fumbling with one hand. Frank laughed at her. She responded with a crooked smile then put the baby down. Margie took one crawl, got snow on her mouth, and sat up. She looked up at Sam with a quivering lower lip. Sam bent down to pick her up, but the baby pushed Sam’s arm away. Then the little one clapped her hands and the snow puffed onto her face. Then she put her arms up, and Sam picked her up immediately, brushing the snow off her.

Henry struggled to take steps and his laughter turned to crying quickly. Frank scooped him up into his arms and brushed the snow off him. He realized the older kids weren't wearing boots. "Come on, guys. Inside. It's getting dark and the temperature is dropping."

"I want to play, Dad." Frankie jumped with big strides over to Benjamin and picked up snow in his glove. He made it into a snowball and handed it to the newcomer. Benjamin took it and smiled. Frankie made another snowball and tossed it gently onto Benjamin's chest. This time, the newcomer scowled. "Hey, this is what we do with it. Have a snowball fight," Frankie explained.

Benjamin shook his head while backing away and bumped into Frank.

"Not now, Frankie. We have a lot to do. Come on. We need your help putting together the crib and setting up the guest rooms. Let's go. Grandma and Grandpa have dinner ready." Frank opened the garage door. "Grab your bags from the car."

Benjamin handed Melissa her bag then he took his and Henry's. Turning back quickly, he realized he needed Margie's and grabbed it from the open trunk.

Frank nodded, impressed. "It's terrific the way you take care of your brother and sisters, Benjamin."

"Yeah, well, we're all we have right now. I don't know how long we'll be here."

"We'll stay together for as long as we can. Hopefully, that'll be a long time."

Benjamin looked up at him suspiciously but didn't respond. He looked down as he followed Frank into the garage.

Leaving the stroller in the garage, they entered the mudroom where Frank's in-laws met them. Both career military, they always held serene postures. Nothing ever riled them. Nothing overwhelmed them—except for the murder of their daughter.

Now they smiled at the five, cold, snow-covered children and gave Frank a long stare. *Okay, they may not be overwhelmed, but they think I'll be,* he thought. Now wasn't the time to tell the children these were his late wife's parents and that he was very close to them. He introduced Kathryn and

Walter as Mom and Dad, Frankie's grandparents. They held warmed socks and slippers in their hands for all of the children.

Kathryn bent down toward Henry. "Let's get these wet clothes off you." She began to pull the zipper on his coat down, but he grabbed her hand.

"I can do it, myself," he said, shuddering.

"Well, you're too cold, so I'll help."

She spoke firmly, and the youngster apparently got it. His coat, shoes and wet socks came off without a problem.

The coats and gloves were hung on racks, shoes under the bench.

Melissa hugged herself, rubbing her arms. "It's so cold." They scrambled into the house. "Ah, warm. Much better."

Frankie didn't get it. "Didn't you guys ever play in the snow before?"

"No," answered Benjamin, for the first time appearing to Frank to be shy.

"How can that be?" Sam asked.

"Dad wouldn't let us play in the snow."

"Why not?"

"Snow is dirty in the street and it melts fast."

"Come on, guys, get your wet clothes off. Benjamin, you're in Frankie's room. We'll set up the crib in the room next to Sam's and mine, and Melissa, you're sharing with Henry, for now. So let's go upstairs and get into dry clothes."

Melissa stopped dead. "I only have boy's clothes in my bag."

Sam smiled. "I got you covered. I bought you two outfits."

The little girl stared at her. "You lied? At the police station you said one outfit."

Frank shot Sam a look that could kill. She had to make it right. "It's one set that came with a few choices, so I bought all of the pieces. Come on, Melissa, I'll show you, upstairs." Frank glared at her. Sam blew out a deep breath. "What, Frank? I like to be prepared. And I'm glad I did. Hey, don't you remember I taught for ten years before joining the department? I know kids need more than one change of clothes."

Before he went up the staircase, Benjamin turned toward Kathryn and Walter. "What do we call you, anyway?"

The seniors glanced at each other. "Grandma and Grandpa will do just fine," the older woman said with a warm smile.

Melissa pouted. "We never had a grandma and grandpa, ever."

"How come?"

"Dad told us his parents lived very far away, and he doesn't see them anymore."

Grandma's voice softened. "That's so sad, sweetheart."

"It was only bad at school when we were in a play or when people came to see us in the classroom. Other kids' grandparents came."

When Melissa became teary, Frank intervened. "Upstairs, now. Let's get you all into dry clothes. Give the baby to Mom, Sam." He stared at his wife-to-be.

Mom held out her arms for Margie. As Frank expected, it was a no go, at first. The baby held onto Sam's hair, whining, "Mama."

"Come to Grandma, Margie. Mama will be right back." Kathryn took the baby, held her tight, and turned her away. "Go."

Sam stood hesitant, while Frank rolled his eyes. He actually had to push her toward the stairs. "Come on, Sam. You have to get your tough on."

They heard Melissa arguing with Henry over who was going to take which bed prompting them not to waste any more time on nonsense. Frank bolted up the rest of the thirteen stairs to find Henry crying in the corner. He was soaked down to his briefs. Frank knew he'd done it to himself.

"Come on, let's get you washed and changed. I'll show you where the bathroom is." Frank got his clothes off, giving him a chance to examine the little guy. Not one mark scarred his light skin. *Thank God, these kids don't appear to be physically abused.* "Come on, Melissa, you get changed, too."

"Not in front of you, Uncle Frank."

"Ah, okay, you're at that age. Come on, Henry, let's give the girls their privacy." He winked at Sam and left the room.



“Finally, girl time!” Sam exclaimed, lowering her tone to that of a child, proceeding to take out the second outfit from the shopping bags that lay on the twin bed. Melissa giggled but Sam saw her holding back. “What, sweetheart?”

“We’re used to being with adults but you’re acting like a little kid!”

Sam stared at her with jaws dropping. “Guess I’m trying too hard to make you feel at home, huh?” She felt her sweatshirt and T-shirt then the pants. “Just your pants need to be changed—oops, and your socks.” Sam handed Melissa the clothes, and she sat on the bed to change.

As Melissa pulled on the pants, she looked around the room. “Not that. Dad expects us to act grown up all the time, especially with strangers. And you’re talking baby-talk. It’s okay with Margie, but not with us. This room is so pretty.” After she dressed, Melissa went over to the wallpaper, and ran her fingers over the Paisley pattern. “Wow, I love these colors. The pinks are my favorite.” She ran her finger down the striped wall then raised her finger to her mouth. “I bet this wallpaper is hand painted.” The curtains seemed to have drawn her in. As if mesmerized, Melissa handled the matching textured silk, ceiling-to sill-curtains. She lifted the top layer and moved it to the window frame. “I’d like it better if the sides were pulled back.” She held the fabric, stretching her arm out, and moved back to get a better view. Tilting her head to look at it in different perspectives, she nodded. “Definitely better.”

“Melissa, you’re six years old. How do you know all of this?”

“Did you forget that my dad is a designer and artist?”

“He’s teaching you?”

“Yes. He has a design studio.”

“Where?”

“Oh, in the apartment. And he has tons of art stuff. We stay in there with him while he’s working, and he asks us what we think.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“I think I want to be a decorator when I grow up.” She continued to look around and walked to the dresser opposite the twin beds. “See, like this? I think it would be prettier painted white, than left in the plain colored wood.”

Enough with the decorating. She’d like to remodel it herself, except for the fact that Frank’s late-wife, Jen, did it all and he’d made it a point to tell her he’d change nothing, ever.

“You said you have to act grown up with strangers. Are you with strangers, a lot?”

Melissa turned toward Sam and then a painting on the wall caught her eye. She went up to it and answered Sam, but the painting held her focus. “No, never. I mean with Locklear and if any of her friends come over. But she’s not supposed to. This could be like the ship in Benjamin’s bathroom, but I think my dad could do a better one.”

“How do you know?”

Melissa turned abruptly apparently not understanding the question. “Have you seen any of his art?”

“Uh, yes.” Sam paused to refocus. “But I meant how do you know Locklear isn’t supposed to have friends over?”

Melissa stared up at the painting. “We heard Dad yelling at her. Not exactly yelling, he never yelled, but he sounded angry. I’d sure like to feel this.”

“You’ll have to ask Uncle Frank. What happened?”

Melissa plopped down on the bed next to Sam. “Well, you met Dad, right?”

“Yes. I did. He was so nice to me.”

“He didn’t yell, did he?”

“No. Not at all.”

Melissa scrunched up her nose. “Why were you in our house, anyway?”

“Well,” Sam paused. “First tell me about how you knew he was angry. I don’t want to forget that part.”

“Okay. He came to pick us up and Locklear’s friend—”

“A man or lady?”

“A lady. Her name is Chantal. And she was playing with Margie on the floor. And it looked like she and Locklear were having a serious conversation.”

“How could you tell it was serious?”

“They were whispering then looking at me and Benjamin and then whispering more. I couldn’t make out the words. And Margie was laughing. Dad came in, and he motioned with his finger like this—” She demonstrated with her index finger bent toward her. “—and said, ‘over here, now.’ He whispered something, and Locklear looked like she was going to cry. Then he got us together without saying another word and we left.”

“I guess your dad wanted Locklear to give her full attention to you. I could understand that. So Benjamin saw this, too?”

“Yes, and we just hoped that Dad wouldn’t fire her, but he didn’t.” Melissa let out a breath of relief.

Frank passed by the door with Henry already in pajamas. “Dinner’s ready. One bathed and four to go. Meet you downstairs. Come on, guy,” he said, holding Henry’s hand.

“Melissa, hungry?” Sam asked.

“A little. We just had lunch.”

Sam checked her watch. “That was four hours ago. What time do you usually go to bed?”

“Benjamin and me by nine. Henry by eight, and Margie, earlier.”

“Well, tonight will be a late night for all of us. Let’s go downstairs.”

Benjamin and Frankie already seated around the dining room table dug into their salads. Frank had put Henry into a booster seat, served him, and Margie was in a highchair, with seats for Sam and Melissa next to her. Frank’s parents sat at the end of the oval table. A white tablecloth with lace trim covered the table, with cream-colored plates and matching silverware in front of each place. A chopped mixed salad sat in the center as the first course.

When Sam came in with Melissa, the little girl’s gaze scanned the entire room. She nodded as she looked at the cream embossed wallpaper but grimaced at the table settings.

Sam and Melissa took their places and immediately Margie squirmed to climb out of the highchair. Everyone was distracted from acknowledging Melissa's disapproval.

"No, Sam, don't take her out." Frank gave Margie a stern look. "No." He got up to get the baby food, that Special Agent Case's wife made, from the warmer and brought it over in a divided baby serving plate.

As Grandma served the salads to Sam and Melissa, Frank attempted to feed the baby. As he brought the spoon to her mouth, she shook her head with closed lips. Frank attempted the old airplane trick with the food-filled spoon coming in for a landing. Too bad, Margie's hangar closed.

Sam snickered. *Go ahead, Frank, show me you can beat me.* "Let me see if I can feed her." She turned the highchair around, and as soon as she lifted the spoon, Margie opened her mouth. "Yum, yum, right?" Sam was in heaven. Though not her own biological children, she felt fulfilled. *Too soon? Maybe.* But, yes, she was totally willing to adopt as she and Frank had discussed just last week, and today confirmed it. Even though Frank did say he wasn't afraid of having another child, and he mentioned it in front of her own father, she'd wait and see. *And who knew how long the kids would be staying? Right. Way too soon for her to become their mommy.*

All she knew right now was that her life was becoming complete—a wonderful husband-to-be, an amazing stepson, four beautiful and healthy nieces and nephews, and wonderful in-laws who adored her. Everyone ate so peacefully, and she was shocked the kids were so quiet. *After what I've been through the past few weeks, I deserve peace.*

Grandma served bowls of homemade chicken soup full of carrots, celery, and boiled bite-sized pieces of chicken in front of all but the baby. The sweet and savory aroma woke Sam up from her focus on Margie. She watched the children and smiled as she dug into her own bowl of soup. She blew on a tablespoon. Margie grunted and pointed to the soup. "You want some, Margie?"

The baby grunted again.

Frank got up and pulled a bowl from the cabinet, filling it with the soup. After mashing the veggies, cutting the chicken into tinier pieces, he brought it over to Sam, who was already feeding Margie from her bowl. The scornful look she got as he sat back down gave her the idea that now was the perfect time to change the subject. "Melissa, tell Uncle Frank your decorating ideas."

Frank nearly choked on his soup. He coughed and soup dribbled down his chin. He grabbed his napkin just in time. "Excuse me?" he said. Melissa sat with serious intent. He sighed. "Redecorating ideas?"

Sam saw his body tense up. *Will he stay in his staunch 'I'm not changing a thing' stance or will he humor the six-year-old?*

He took another spoonful of soup, and while he chewed and then swallowed, he stirred the soup. He barely glanced up at Melissa. "And what might those ideas be?"

"Here she goes." Benjamin rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't get her started if I were you, Uncle Frank."

Now Frank laughed. "Why not?"

"Every house we go to, she tells people what she thinks they should do."

Sam perked up. She was still on the job to get as much as she could from them. "I thought you said you didn't go anywhere with your dad."

"Not like outside," Benjamin said. "We went to his friend's apartment a lot."

"Yeah, Uncle Mike," Melissa added "And when Dad was decorating his apartment, I picked out a lot of the stuff."

Sam had an idea she was talking about Mike Sheffield but she had to ask. "And where does Uncle Mike live?"

"On the floor below us."

Frank groaned. "Mike Sheffield?"

"You know Uncle Mike?" Melissa said.

Frank distracted himself by helping Henry wipe his mouth. "Yeah, we were—" Sam immediately patted his arm. "—are friends," he said.

"You better call him," Melissa said.

"Why?"

“He’d want to know Dad is in the hospital.”

Sam saw Grandma grasp onto her husband’s hand underneath the table. Frank had brought them up to speed on the entire Scorpio case—that the children’s dad was deceased and so was their “Uncle” Mike, by their dad’s hand, or rope to be exact. And that Mike Sheffield was Henry Slater’s accomplice in the seventeen serial murders. Well, they had to confirm the last sixteen. The FBI was in the process of tracking Sheffield’s traveling to the casinos that Slater had hit.

After worried looks from Frank’s in-laws, Sam changed the subject. “Let’s get back to Melissa’s decorating ideas.”

Frank sucked in his cheeks. With pursed lips, he focused on Melissa. “Sure, tell me your ideas.”

Benjamin bit his lip but then said what was on his mind. “Melissa, look at him. He really doesn’t want to hear it.”

Frank had to know what he was doing. He immediately relaxed his facial expression. “How do you know?”

“I’m good at...I don’t know how to say it. I can look at someone and tell stuff.”

Frank smiled. “What kind of stuff?”

Sam grinned. She knew Frank understood exactly what Benjamin meant. Just like with Frankie, Frank wanted to increase his expressive abilities and made him explain things. Frank was also on the job. Another pressure.

“Like the way a person looks.”

Smiling, Frank explained it. “You mean you’re good at reading someone’s body language.”

“Yes. I think that’s what they call it. That’s how I knew when not to talk to Dad.”

“How did your dad look?”

“It’s hard to explain. Dad just sat there and looked straight ahead.”

“Yes,” Melissa said. “He was in a daydream. I did it in school and my teacher woke me up.”

“Good. Daydreaming in school isn’t a good idea. Well, I will listen to Melissa, but tell me first about your Uncle Mike. You told Special Agent Case this is your third school year in New York. Did you meet him when you moved here?”

“No,” Benjamin said. He put a spoonful of chicken soup in his mouth and swallowed. “He moved here with us.”

Sam perked up. “Really? From Florida?”

“Yes.”

Frank put his napkin down on the table. “Did—Does Uncle Mike have a wife and children?”

“I thought you said you’re friends?”

“Well, we are. New friends. We met last month. We do the same kind of work with people.”

“Yes. He’s a talking doctor,” Benjamin said. “He had a wife. But what’s it called when the wife leaves?”

“A divorce?” Sam said.

“Yes. And she stayed in Florida. With their children. But they’re older than us.”

Sam continued to feed Margie the soup. It gave her some time to let her mind wander.

Thank you, Benjamin for confirming that Mike Sheffield had to travel with Henry Slater. No wonder his wife wanted a divorce. Mike would rather play with Henry than with her. What wife would tolerate that? Or maybe she wasn’t into the culture. Um, was it a divorce, or was she another victim? How many more bodies do we need to uncover?

Sam felt the jab of Dara, her spirit guide, in her abdomen. She’d learned to trust that response since her conversation with Dr. Trenton in the Aries case. Her feelings were consistently on target—especially in the case she thought they’d completed, just two days ago. This time she was sure. There’d be more leftover bodies still to uncover.

“I’m full,” Frank said, wiping his mouth and pushing his chair away from the table. He checked the kid’s bowls and saw they were near empty.

“Me, too,” the children all said with their voices trampling each other.

“Sam and I will clear the dishes, Frank,” Mom said. “Dad will help you bring up the crib.”

Melissa jumped up. “We could help, too.”

“How about, you let the boys help, and Melissa, you can help Grandma and me, and keep Margie occupied?”

“Okay!” the little girl said excitedly.



The next two hours dragged for Frank and his father-in-law, though it was nonstop strenuous work. Leave it to Jen to pick out the most complicated crib to reassemble—with the added designs on separate pieces of wood. Unpacking the frame was a struggle. It was wrapped tight in plastic and duct tape to prevent it from yellowing in the heat of the garage. Frank decided to forget about the decorative pieces. They’d take at least another hour. And he was already beat. The kids looked like they were falling asleep on their feet. Jen demanded the crib be white in case they had a girl. When all the plastic lay on the floor, he paused at the memory. They were going to have a girl. She was pregnant when gunned down by Dingo Withers. The emotional side of Frank reared its head, filling his eyes with tears. His father-in-law wasn’t doing any better. Oh, man! Even though he’d move on with Sam, and he knew it was right, he couldn’t get past this moment. He literally froze, immobilized. It wasn’t until Frankie yanked on his pocket to get a move on that he snapped out of it. Frank ruffled the top of his son’s head as a thank you. Frankie understood what his father meant and looked away.

It took three trips from the garage up to the bedrooms to get all of the parts of the crib and that was with the three boys helping. Henry carried the plastic baggie of nuts and bolts that opened and fell all over the stairs. Another ten minutes wasted as the older boys went on a search to find the pieces. It was more of a game to them than a serious assignment. Frank let them be. The boys were bonding—loud and boisterous but bonding. Frankie always loved it when a friend slept over for one or two nights, max. This would be a long-term arrangement and Frank wanted the boys to be friends. Spending all of their time with their dad, Henry and Benjamin didn’t have much socialization time with kids their age outside of school. He saw that Benjamin had even been a little awkward in the snow. Undoubtedly, these children would have problems yet to be un-

covered and the next few days or upcoming weeks would be the honeymoon period. Not to mention his son. This would be an adjustment for Frankie—no longer the only child.

The crib itself wasn't hard to assemble once the opposite sides were aligned, but Frank and Jen's dad were eight years younger the last time, and Jen, with belly nearly popping, and her mother helped. Now they had the assistance of three more-than-clumsy kids, with Frankie being the only one who could hold a side upright. It was apparent that Frankie was the more-athletic child, thanks to his own involvement in Mixed Martial Arts and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and Frank's encouraging Frankie to earn a yellow belt in Tae Kwan Do. Okay, one of his first goals would be to get these kids into martial arts. *But first things, first. Let's survive this first night.*

They assembled the crib and change table in the bedroom next to Frank's master. When it was finished, Frank tugged on the side railing to make sure it was sturdy. He didn't remove his hands. It was as if they stuck. This had been Frankie's nursery and the decor and wallpaper was still the infantile animal print in yellow, white, pink, and blue. Frank had kept the door to this room shut—to block out the memory, though he told people it was for less to clean. When Frankie needed a big-boy-bed, Jen wanted him in another room, farther from their master, so when they were busy trying to add another member of the family—for the nursery—they'd have some peace and mommy-daddy time. Frank inhaled deeply then smiled.

Come to think of it, he needed to tell the kids about his rule. *If the bedroom door is closed, don't come in unless you're bleeding or the house is on fire.* Frank wondered if Henry had such a rule. Did he entertain lady-friends in the apartment when the kids were there? He made sure they were gone when Sam was there.

A warm arm sliding around his waist pulled him out of his reflection. He hadn't even noticed that Benjamin and Frankie disappeared out of the room, and Henry lay collapsed on the carpet. Oh, man! He was in a deep one. Frank reciprocated and hugged Sam, smiled at Melissa, then let go of Sam to get crib sheets out of the chest against the opposite wall. Blue, but

they'd have to do for now. After handing them to Sam to put on the mattress, he scooped up Henry to put him into his bed in the room next door.

He stopped when he was in the hall. "Melissa, did the detectives pack nighttime diapers for Henry?"

"I don't know. The lady detective packed him. But he does need them."

"Okay. We're covered. Sam, in the bottom drawer there are toddler diapers. They should fit for now."

The shower started in the bathroom next to Frankie's room. Then laughing. Too much laughing. With Henry in his arms, Frank peeked inside. "Guys, make it fast. It's late." It was beyond late.

Another half hour to shower the kids then tuck them into bed. Henry had been out, Melissa dozing off, but Benjamin and Frankie were pulling a stall technique—reading a book.

"Wow!" Benjamin exclaimed as Frank entered the room. "Uncle Frank is this really you?" Frank smiled and nodded. "Wow! You jumped out of a helicopter!"

"That's right. In Iraq."

Frankie turned a couple of pages. "And that's my mom next to my dad. They're taking care of a soldier who got hurt."

"You took care of people on the dirt? Where's the hospital?"

"None around there. We had to make do."

"Is Frankie's mom a doctor, too?"

"No," Frankie said, with gloom. "She was his nurse."

"She looks almost like Samantha. Where is she?"

Frankie looked up at his cousin with tears in his eyes. Frank sat down on the bed and hugged his son as Frankie hid his face on his dad's chest. It took Frankie a few moments to compose himself and apparently, he decided to brave it. "My mom was killed when I was five." He sniffled. "This past November, Sam found the man who did it, and now he's in prison for the rest of his life."

Benjamin looked somber. "At least you knew your mom. I don't know mine. Uncle Frank, do you think Sam can find her and all of our moms?"

“Come here,” Frank said, pulling Benjamin into his arms along with Frankie. Now came the task of comforting two choked-up kids. “That’s exactly what we’re going to do. But right now, all you have to know is that you’re safe and loved. Okay?”

Benjamin buried his head in Frank’s chest. Frank bet that this was the first time Benjamin attempted to cry, probably having to hold onto his emotions in front of his dad. Frank didn’t stop him. After a few minutes, Frank had to.

“Come on, into bed now. It’s been a rough day for you guys.”

Frank looked toward the wall above the boy’s head, compressing his lips.

And I sure hope we find your moms...alive.

CHAPTER 4

When the sun peeked through the bedroom window, Frank opened his eyes, still lying on his back. He turned his head and caught a glimpse of the clock on the night table next to his bed. Sitting up fast, he pulled the blanket off. “Crap! Nine-thirty?” He almost didn’t believe it. Sleeping late was not his thing.

The high-pitched “Hey,” that came from next to him made him turn around. His gaze went to Henry—still asleep—who struggled to tug the brown Jacquard blanket back up. Then his gaze hit Melissa sleeping on her side facing Sam, and lastly to Margie, who laid half on Sam, half on the bed—all with their eyes shut tight and that included Sam. *How in the hell did that happen? Without me knowing?* That was a first. Ever since the military, he’d been a light sleeper. He’d be the one up with Frankie at the slightest whimper. Three kids in his bed? Uh uh. Not good. He looked at the foursome sleeping so peacefully. Ah, what the heck? He’d let them sleep.

Frank got up, pulled on sweat pants and then his T-shirt. After taking care of his needs in the bathroom, he went into Frankie’s room to check on him and Benjamin. The boys were just beginning to stir.

Frankie sat up quickly. “Dad, I’m late for school.”

“No, you’re taking off today.” His son looked surprised. “I shot your teacher an email last night. You’re covered.”

Benjamin opened his eyes. “We can’t miss school.”

“I know. I like that you feel that way. But we have to take care of things to register you. Tomorrow we’ll go. Get washed and ready for breakfast. Hungry?”

The boys couldn't get out of bed fast enough. Frank laughed.

Frank passed Sam in the hall holding Margie as she walked into the baby's room. "How did that happen last night?" His gaze scanned her body. Pajamas? She was actually wearing frumpy granny PJs? In a monotone navy blue? She prepared better, rather more modest, than he did at least.

"How did what happen?"

"Sam. Three kids in our bed. Not good."

"Margie started to cry and I went in to her. Listen, I was exhausted. I wasn't going to fight her."

"And the other two?"

Sam laughed. "I don't know. Magic?"

"Not funny, princess." He kissed the top of her head. "Get the kids ready. I'll make breakfast."

Still in their pajamas, Sam included, the troop sat around the dining room table as Frank served sunny-side-up eggs he made in a special pan that had indented sections to maintain their shape. He placed flawlessly rounded circles of egg—with the yolk positioned in the center—on each plate. The kids stared at them. Frank laughed. "What? Your dad made them plain scrambled?"

"No," Melissa replied with an attitude. "He made them with the exact same pan."

"Ah. And it's exact or same, not both," retorted Frank. "They mean the same thing." Melissa rolled her eyes. He wasn't letting this go. "Hey! Did you wake up with an attitude today?" He flipped over the waffle maker and opened the top. He cut the waffle into four sections and handed them out.

"No," she pouted.

"Then what's the matter?"

"I want to go back to our house, our own room. When can we go?"

Frank paused. The time was getting closer to tell them. "The police are still there. It's not good to be in the apartment with all of their equipment."

"Why not?" Benjamin asked.

Frank's cell rang. "Hold that thought. Khaos."

“Hey, It’s John Trenton.”

Frank served Sam and himself eggs and waffles, holding the phone between his shoulder and ear. “Hey. What’s going on?”

Sam was feeding the baby oatmeal with mashed banana, but Margie grunted and pointed to the egg and waffle on Sam’s plate. Without hesitation, Sam took a tiny amount of egg on a spoon and fed her. The baby sucked the egg, delighted, and opened her mouth for more.

Frank couldn’t pay attention to her and the call. He turned his back on Sam and plated more eggs.

“Did you survive the first night?”

Frank laughed. “Yeah, the kids are great.”

“Glad to hear that. Honeymoon period.”

“Don’t I know it?” Frank took the loaded plate to the table.

“Lieutenant Martin called me in to work the Scorpio case while you and Sam are off this week. I just wanted to give you a heads up.”

“Hold on a minute.” Frank got up. “Sam, hold down the fort. I’ll be right back.” He walked out of the dining room and into the den. He opened the blinds to let in the sun before he sat on the leather couch in front of the window and put his legs up onto the coffee table. “Okay. Cool. What did he tell you so far?”

“It’s still too fresh. When he called me this morning, he caught me up on yesterday. I’m going to meet with him now. Brett Case is also coming in. Then if Withers can meet with us, we’ll go over to the apartment. I want to see the children’s quarters.”

“That’s something I’d like to see, too.”

“Okay, I’ll keep you posted. In the meantime, take care. Five kids are more than a handful. Oh, before I let you go. The captain approved our leave for April to go to Florida.” The phone disconnected.

Frank’s mind came to a full stop.

Crap! I forgot about that. I have to fulfill Henry Slater’s will before it can be executed. How in the hell did I allow myself to be sucked into that? Confronting my bio parents? I still don’t see Trenton’s point of view on that. Shrink or no shrink, he actually wants me to thank my bio parents for placing me for

adoption so I could have a better life? Sorry, Doctor Trenton, this time forgiving will be very hard for me. Plus, I'm sure his kids get the bulk of his estate, which Slater failed to tell us at the time, and now I'm their guardian.

He blew out a deep breath.

That makes it imperative for me to carry through on Slater's dying declaration.

The worst was yet to come. He knew he and Sam had to tell the children their dad was deceased. And he had to do it today. Knowing Benjamin's skills of putting two-and-two together, the kid must be surmising something is up. He'd never lie to a child—no matter his or her age. The memories of how he told Frankie his mom was killed came back to haunt him.

He sat on this couch. He remembered the exact time that he broke the news. It was three-o-five in the afternoon, when he told his son. Jen had been gunned down at ten a.m. On his birthday. And it was noon by the time they reached him at the Manhattan hospital. His lieutenant, Miguel Rojas, came personally with the hospital administrator. He couldn't believe it. He wouldn't believe it. It still seemed surreal. He'd collapsed screaming and demanded to be taken to see her body in the morgue. A sight he'd keep from their son. All the way, he kept hoping they'd made a mistake. Jen did two tours in Iraq with him, and she returned to the states without so much as a scratch. As did he. Only for her to be gunned down by a cop. That damn bastard crooked cop. At the morgue, they prevented him from laying on Jen's bullet ridden body. Three bullets to her torso was what it took to deform his beautiful soulmate and murder their daughter in her womb.

Frankie was just five and in the second month of kindergarten. Frank held his son tightly in his arms and told him, "Something bad happened to Mommy." Frankie might not have understood at that moment but at the funeral when he saw his precious mommy lowered into the ground, the kid just lost it. So did Frank. And Jen's parents. On the positive side, Jen was given the priceless military funeral that she deservedly earned.

The sounds of raucous children running into the den brought him back. Thankfully so, or was it? "Hey, finished eating?"

“Yes, but you didn’t,” Sam said as she placed Margie on the carpet with some toys.

“I’ll grab a shake.”

“You okay?” Sam obviously read his despondent look.

“Oh, yeah. How about you kids getting dressed and we go over to visit Sam’s parents?” Frank asked the children. “I’m sure they’d love to meet you.”

“The only parent we want to meet is our own.” Benjamin stared eye-to-eye with him.

“What’s on your mind, Benjamin?” Frank knew this was it.

“Would you tell us the truth?”

“Always. Come here.” Benjamin sat on his lap. Melissa snuck in between him and Sam, and Henry sat on Sam’s lap. Frankie sat on the other side of his dad.

Benjamin’s lower lip quivered as he paused. “Is our dad going to be okay?”

Frank exhaled deeply and glanced at Sam. “No.”

“Did he die?”

Frank blew out a nasal breath and just nodded.

“What?” Melissa screamed.

Sobbing audibly but without tears, the children buried their heads into Frank’s chest. Henry sobbed from example. The little one didn’t seem to know what to make of it.

Intellectually they know they should cry, but they don’t know how to get to real emotions. “I know,” Frank said, rubbing their backs and kissing their heads.

Sam’s tears flowed as she hugged the children.

No matter what their dad did, he was still their dad, the one who protected and loved them—if Henry Slater Sr. knew how to love. There were no words at this moment.

Melissa sat up. “What happened?”

Oh, man. That was too fast of a recovery. “He took a pill of some kind and collapsed.”

Benjamin stammered. “How—do—you—know?”

“I was with him.”

“Then why did you let it happen?” Melissa raised a fisted hand but stopped before slugging Frank on his chest. “I hate you!”

Frank pulled her in close to him. "I couldn't get to him in time. He closed the bathroom door. I know, baby, it's so hard to understand."

"Sam," Benjamin cried. "Were you there, too?"

"Yes," Sam swallowed, stalling. "But I was in another room."

"Why did he do that?"

Frankie looked as if he was about to spill it all. Frank stared at him and shook his head.

"What, Frankie?" Benjamin demanded. "Do you know about it?" He sniffled out the words. "You know and we don't!"

Frank thought hard for a moment. As a kid, he'd been through a rough life, himself, and the people around him haven't been honest. It screwed him up for years. Until he was told by his adoptive parents, that his foster parents were killed in a car accident. It wasn't that they abandoned him at four, as he'd thought all those years. He nodded to Frankie that it was okay to talk to his cousins.

"I spoke to Uncle Henry, your dad, too."

"How did you speak to him?"

"I failed a test and I called Sam. Your dad answered the phone."

"You failed a test?" Benjamin grimaced.

"That wasn't the important part. He wanted Sam to marry him, and I wouldn't let him."

Melissa threw out her arms. "What? What about us?"

"He didn't tell me about you."

Benjamin stiffened, apparently in shock. "Why not? Uncle Frank, did he tell you about us?"

"No, he didn't."

"But why not? He loves us." Melissa collapsed onto Sam's chest. "No, I don't believe you."

"It's true, Melissa," Sam said, stroking the girl's hair.

Benjamin sat up and Frank could see in his eyes that the eight year old was reflecting upon something. "Why was he keeping us secret, then?"

“We’re looking into that. It could explain why he never took you anywhere and you stayed in the apartment all the time, except when you went to school.”

Benjamin turned toward his cousin as though he probably thought he’d get a more honest answer from the one his age. “What else, Frankie?”

“Yeah, then I met him at your house with Uncle Carl and our other cousins.”

“We have another uncle?”

“Uncle Carl. And he has three kids. Andrew, Cameron, and Abby. And Abby is in jail for something. And the police were there with the ESU.”

“What’s the ESU?”

“The Emergency Service Unit,” Frank explained.

“The same police that were in our apartment yesterday?” Melissa asked.

Frank felt a lump in his throat. He swallowed before he answered. “No, that was a different department.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Benjamin inhaled deeply, his cheeks reddening as if bracing himself. “Tell us, now!”

Frankie bit his lip and looked up at his dad.

Frank had to muster up the courage. “All right...”



John Trenton walked through the lobby in the Manhattan-North Precinct. In the six years he’d been a consulting forensic psychiatrist with the NYPD his reputation through the five boroughs preceded him. Although most of the department knew of him, he hadn’t met all of them personally. Thankfully, since Nick Valatutti was in on the Scorpio case and he’d be here today, Lieutenant Martin had requested that Trenton come in, along with the Queens team—Lex Withers and Bella Richards—who were at Henry Slater’s Upper West Side apartment right now. Except for the brief phone call this morning, Trenton would have to get to know Lieutenant Martin.

Entering the war room, the lieutenant cordially greeted him. “Have a seat, Dr. Trenton. Just when we were hoping that this case was winding down, we were hit by a major avalanche.”

“Well, it wasn’t a total surprise, Lieutenant,” Detective Valatutti said. “Detective Wright surmised there might be children. And so did Dr. Khaos.”

“Yes, Detective, I read the full report, and Lieutenant Hicks of Queens filled me in. I’m glad the children appeared when they did, though. From the standpoint of a parent, the thought of them appearing on the scene of their father’s suicide would have been emotionally disastrous. Dr. Trenton, are you up to speed on the case?”

“Somewhat, as much as I’ve gotten in our meetings with Special Agent Case and the detectives,” John said, hanging up his coat on the rack in the corner of the room. “But I haven’t analyzed any paper work yet.” Before he sat at the table, he unbuttoned his sports jacket. “And it’s going to be emotionally disastrous anyway. I can’t imagine how Dr. Khaos and Detective Wright are going to break the news to them. Dr. Khaos’s son knows because a cousin, who’s also in custody for home invasions, blurted it out. To learn their dad is a serial killer is going to haunt them a long time. I know the goal is to reunite them with their mothers, and that will be another trauma. They’ve been raised together and now to separate them—bad move, in my opinion.”

“Okay, point taken. I happen to agree with you.”

Excellent. This guy is a caring human being. I could work with him.

“Agent Case is bringing over the will, and you’ll dissect it to find the answers to what we need.”

“Which is?”

“Where are these children’s mothers?” Lieutenant Martin asked. “Are they alive or did they fall victim to Slater? On the one hand, I hope they’re alive, and, on the other, it’d be better for them to have met their demise. Going along with what you said, Dr. Trenton, if the mothers are indeed alive, the children have to go back to them. It’s the law.”

“We can possibly delay the reunions for a while for the investigation,” Detective Valatutti added. “It’s easier to keep the children here for questioning, rather than hunt them down across the country. Then again, none of their testimony will be valid in court.”

“Correct.”

A receptionist showed in Special Agent Case.



Taking some silent time, Frank and Sam sat holding hands on the couch in the den. Frank’s legs rested on the coffee table, while Sam rested hers across Frank’s thighs. Sitting up, she leaned into him. Their conversation with the children had been the hardest thing either one of them had ever done in their lives. Frank knew kids were resilient. Frankie seemed to be after his mother’s death, and Frank grew up, in spite of himself. He was also of the belief that no one ever escaped trauma in their life, and anyone who said their life was perfect or their children were perfect were lying. He encapsulated Sam in his arms, ready to kiss her. Loud voices from upstairs stopped them dead.

“Uncle Frank! Get up here,” Melissa yelled, repeatedly, from the top of the stairs.

Frank pursed his lips and for a moment of needed rest, laid his head onto the back cushion before he bolted, ran up the stairs, and into Frankie and Benjamin’s room. He found Henry scrunched close to the ceiling on top of Frankie’s bookcase.

Frank reached for the boy. At six-four, with his arms extended, he just about had him. “What are you doing?”

“I climbed.”

“Well, you’re not supposed to. Get over here.” Frank pulled him into his arms. Henry was hysterical laughing. “It’s not funny. I’m not laughing.”

“We’re laughing,” Benjamin said as he and Frankie lay on their backs on one of the beds.

Frank glared at them. “Don’t egg him on. It’s not funny.”

“Yes. It is,” Benjamin said, sitting up.

“You don’t do that again.” Frank carried him out of the room.

“Yes. I will.”

Midway down the stairs Frank upped the ante. “You will? Then you’re having a time out.”

Henry stiffened. He stared at Frank as if his world had ended. “No!” he screamed. “No time out. I don’t wanna go in the cage!”

Frank halted at the bottom of the stairs. “Cage? Kids, get down here, now!” He carried Henry over to the recliner in the living room and sat him down. Henry rested his hands on the plush tan suede armrests. “Lay back.” Trying hard to keep a firm expression on his face, which was difficult because this kid was so darn cute with his curly head of dark blond hair and chubby cheeks with dimples, Frank pulled up the footrest so the recliner tilted back. Then he pulled the throw that hung over the arm and put it over Henry, cuddling him. “You rest now until I tell you that you can get up.” Henry pouted but he relaxed. Frank sat down on the freestanding couch in the center of the room. “What is the cage?”

“Yeah, it’s a cage for time out,” Melissa said.

“Like an animal cage?”

“Sort of.”

“And where is the cage?”

“In a room next to the kitchen.”

“How often do you go into this cage?”

“Whenever Dad said we were bad.” Melissa looked over at Henry. “He’s sleeping. No! Don’t let him sleep.”

“Why not? He needed a nap. That’s why he was cranky.”

Margie crawled over to Henry and stood up holding onto the edge of the footrest of the recliner. Sam’s eyes widened as the baby pointed. Sam picked her up, kissed her cheek, and put her under the blanket with her brother. She closed her eyes.

“No, don’t let him.” Melissa vehemently shook her head. “We’re not allowed to nap. Dad says that if we sleep during the day, we won’t sleep at night. And he likes a good night’s sleep.”

“It’s okay. Let him. We need to take care of this.” Frank put in a call to Withers at the apartment.

“Withers.”

“Yeah, it’s Frank. Did you find a cage in the apartment?”

“A cage?”

“The kids told me it’s for time-out.”

“Are you freaking kidding me?”

“You’re on speaker. No. I’m not. Benjamin, tell Detective Withers where the cage is.”

“In the room next to the kitchen.”

“Another hidden room?”

“Hey, Detective, did I hear you correctly?” yelled a crime scene tech.

“Yeah, you did. Benjamin, how do we get to this room?”

“First, go into the kitchen.”

“Okay, we’re here.”

“On the wall next to table and bench.”

“Yeah?”

“On the board by the floor, there’s a button.”

“Got it.”

“Push it and door will slide open.”

Frank heard the door mechanism and then a few moments of nothing.

Withers yelled, “Holy crap! What else are we going to find?”

Frank became antsy. “Lex, what’s going on? Show me!”

“Yeah, hold on, Frank.” Withers hung up and called back using Facetime. “Take a look at this.” He panned the phone for Frank and Sam to see the room.

“What is that stuff? That’s a drawing board?”

Melissa looked at the phone. “That’s Daddy’s art studio. I told Sam about it.”

“Where’s the cage?”

Withers continued to pan the room.

“Stop. Right there. There’s the cage,” said Melissa.

Frank saw Withers turn around abruptly. He pointed. “This? This is a cage?”

Benjamin bopped his head. “Yes. That’s where we go when we’re bad.”

Sam’s jaws dropped as Withers moved the phone to cover the structure. “Oh my God! Melissa, that’s not a cage. That’s a dollhouse. A giant, adult-sized dollhouse. Lex, take us inside.”

Lex moved the camera to inside the dollhouse that had pink and blue tiles on the roof. “Frank, you can fit in here.”

“I see that. What’s that? A bench? Melissa, give us a tour.”

“Okay.” She pointed on the screen. “That’s the bench we sit on to read. And in the corner are the books Daddy wanted us to read. And when time out is over, Daddy sits on the bench with us to test us on the book. Over there, are the stuffed animals we could cuddle. Detective Withers, open the window on the side.”

With the tip of his index finger, Withers slid the window up. He looked through it at Frank and shook his head,

Melissa continued. “See? When we were in there, Daddy was in the kitchen cooking, or we were doing homework at the table, so he could always see us.”

“Why didn’t he just send you to your room?”

Melissa let out a huff of exasperation. “Obviously, Uncle Frank, you didn’t see our room.”

“No, I did not. How long did you stay in there?”

“I don’t know the exact time, but see the fridge?”

Withers brought it into the camera’s view. “A real fridge?” He opened the door.

“Yes. Daddy never wanted us to be hungry, so he always brought us a snack.”

“Oh, man!” Frank laughed. “So what snack did he bring?”

“Stop making fun, Uncle Frank,” Melissa admonished. “This is serious. A bowl of fruit with humus or cottage cheese.”

“Tell us about the outside. Did you build this with Dad?”

Benjamin sat up proud. “No. I did. Melissa was too little. See the fancy tile-work?”

Frank and Sam nodded.

“I bet you can’t guess what style it is.” Melissa taunted them.

“I wouldn’t venture to guess,” said Sam. “But I’d sure love to play in there.”

Putting her hands on her hips, Melissa didn't hesitate to show her disapproval. "Of course *you* would."

"Hey," Frank responded to her attitude.

"Sorry. It's Victorian."

"Whoa!" Frank exclaimed. "And how do you know about that?"

"Daddy taught me." Melissa blew out a deep breath, preparing for the explanation. "Daddy said a dollhouse is perfect for the Victorian style. It's got a slanted roof, and many bright colors. This one is only one floor, though."

Frank's eyes opened wide. "I am very impressed."

"I told Sam. I want to be a decorator when I grow up. Detective Withers, can you bring all of Daddy's art stuff here?" Melissa choked up. "I want to still work with it."

"Sure, Melissa, when we pack up the apartment. Speaking about packing up. We sent out boxes of the kids' clothes and things to you this morning, and his office is already boxed, too. A lot we'll bring to the precinct and some will go to our guys at the lab."

Frank heard tapping on a wall and then a tech yelled into the phone. "Ask the kids if there's a moveable wall here. The paneled one on the other side of the room."

"Yes," Benjamin yelled into the phone.

"What is it, Benjamin?" Withers said with frustration in his voice.

"It's something secret. Dad never showed us what was in there. There's no button to open it. A keypad is on the wall."

"Hold on. We can get it." A minute passed. Frank heard the sliding of wood. Another moment passed. "Everyone, out of this apartment! We're done! Out now, Detectives!"

Frank heard voices, scrambling feet, and skidding sounds of heavy equipment on the floors. "What was behind that wall?"

"An aquarium, Doc," responded the tech. "An aquarium of scorpions."

CHAPTER 5

Sam sat on the couch, stunned, after Withers's quick disconnect in discovering the scorpion aquarium. She and Frank very well knew what that meant. No one would be allowed into the apartment until animal control neutralized the critters. That could take a week or more. Her heart sank thinking that Melissa's wish for her dad's art supplies may not happen. When those guys went in to spray, preserving the crime scene—yet alone a room not in question until a few minutes ago—was not on their agenda. She'd sure as heck do what she could to make sure the property remained intact. Would they let her in to supervise? Not a chance in hell, she thought, especially being on leave for a week. She'd never missed more than a day of work since she began her teaching career fifteen years earlier. Um, this gave her pause for thought. *Would I be able to cope being a stay-at-home mom for these children, or my own, one day? Take it easy, Sam,* she admonished herself. *Way too soon to even think that.* Though their needy faces as they played on the carpet gave her the answer—hell, yeah!

Hopefully, what was needed for the case had already been removed. Damn! That art room could tell them a lot, especially if Slater kept client files in there. Contracts would be even better. Frank patted her thigh. They were so in-sync with each other, even though barely three months into their relationship, but she knew he was probably thinking the same thing—about preserving the art supplies. She was sure—with their love for children—that's where Frank's mind went, too—not the crime scene.

Benjamin stared at her from where he was sitting on the carpet with Frankie and Melissa, playing with some transformers. “Samantha, what are you thinking about?”

He startled her out of the reflection. “What, sweetheart?”

“What were you thinking about?”

“How do you know I was thinking about something?”

He exhaled deeply as if he was insulted that she’d ask. “I can tell things.”

Immediately, Sam caught on. What if this kid was already in tune with his abilities? His psychic abilities. She was certainly going to encourage it. Withers had already told her about his inference skills. “Well, you’re right on target. I was thinking about the scorpion aquarium.”

“And what else?”

Wow! He can read me. “Did you know about it?”

“Not that. But Dad has a big scorpion tattoo on his back. And he’s a Scorpio, November second. I’m a Gemini, June tenth. And Melissa is an Aries, March twenty-first. What are you?”

“I’m a Scorpio, too.”

“What’s Uncle Frank?”

“A Libra. Listen, as much fun as it is to stay in PJs all day, how about getting dressed and going over to meet my parents?”

“Why?” Melissa asked, with a snicker.

“Because, I want to show you off to them. They’ll love you. Just like Uncle Frank and I love you.”

Melissa got up and, with pursed lips, went over to Sam. She tilted her head and put her hands on her hips. “Love us? How can you love us? You just met us yesterday.”

Sam did a double take and looked toward Frank with mouth agape. “Come here, sweetheart.” She tried to take Melissa in her arms. The six-year-old pulled back. “I’ll tell you one thing. When a mom meets her baby or adopted child the very first time, the very first moment, the bond is there.”

Melissa looked more despondent than she did before. “Then how come my mom didn’t love me and my dad did?”

“We’re going to find that out, sweetheart, and for right now, you’re loved with all our hearts. Okay?”

Melissa nodded, without a smile.

Sam blinked back her tears. “After we go to my parents, you and I are having a girl’s day out. Okay?”

“What’s a girl’s day out?” Melissa said suspiciously.

Sam spoke in a girly girl tone. “You—and—I are going shopping for school clothes, and I have a surprise for you.”

Melissa huffed. “Okay. But please—stop with that little girl voice. It’s getting on my nerves.”

Frank bellowed out laughter.

“So, you know what I mean, right?” Melissa asked.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“So do I,” Frankie yelled. “But you’ll get used to it.”

“I can’t help it. I was a teacher before I became a cop. So, let’s all go get dressed.”

“Really? What grade?”

“I started in kindergarten and moved up grades until fifth.”

“Maybe you should go back there,” Melissa chided.

“No!” Benjamin yelled. Melissa turned toward her brother. “Sam, found out who killed Frankie’s mom,” he told her, “so maybe she can find our moms. She has to stay a cop.”

Melissa’s jaw dropped, and then she compassionately looked at Frankie. “I didn’t know that.” She looked down at the carpeting, pouting. “Guess we’re all messed up.”

“No you’re not, sweetheart. Come here.” Sam pulled Melissa into her arms. This time the little girl went and laid her head on Sam’s chest. “You’ve all had a hard time, but don’t you worry. Uncle Frank and I will make it right.” Sam kissed the top of her head and a solemn moment passed. “And so will everyone on our team.”

Henry and the baby were still sleeping peacefully on the time-out recliner. Sam so badly wanted a distraction to lighten the mood. “Ooh, ooh, ooh.” She took out her cell phone and opened the camera.

Melissa lifted her head. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking a picture.”

“No, you’re not allowed to.”

“Why not?”

“Dad wouldn’t ever allow it. He said bad things happen to children when their pictures get out.”

“We’ll be very careful. And we want to have memories. Just for us.”

“Melissa, Dad is dead.” Benjamin interjected. “It doesn’t matter what he said.”

Melissa moved out of the way with her head down. Sam took the picture. “Hey, Melissa, want a selfie with you and me?”

She scrunched her freckled nose. “What’s that?”

“Come here.” Sam held Melissa close and held up the camera. “Smile.” After the click, Sam showed it to her. The little girl giggled.



The glare from the sun on the folders on the table distracted him. John squinted as he, Nick Valatutti, and Brett Case sat around the conference table in the war room in the Manhattan-North precinct. Open forensic folders and Henry Slater’s Last Will and Testament covered the table. Half-eaten sandwiches and coffee cups added to the tabletop decor. Obsessive-compulsive, orderly John became more confused by the hour. As organized, as Henry Slater appeared to be, his financial records were a mess, as least as far as what his will projected. *Was that deliberate?* They had gone through it page-by-page, line-by-line, and they still hadn’t reached the part that mentioned his biological children. They’d put a call into the attorney who created the will, only to get a disconnected number. What a shock? While Agent Case stared at the handset in bewilderment, Detectives Lex Withers and Bella Richards opened the door, wearing intense frowns on their faces.

Agent Case looked just as annoyed. “You can’t be done?”

“Far from it.” They pulled chairs out from the table and sat. “The all mighty Henry Slater had his own supply of scorpions. Live ones. A lot of them.”

“You’re kidding me?” John said. “It’s illegal to have scorpions in a New York City apartment.”

“Tell that to the decedent,” Withers said sarcastically. “It was a large aquarium in his art studio—another hidden room—concealed by a paneled wall. Thankfully, we didn’t see any loose, but the apartment had to be vacated.”

“Got that part,” John said. “But Slater couldn’t buy them in a pet shop or even have them shipped to his address. He had to bring them across state lines himself.”

Agent Case leaned forward in his seat. “And that matters because?”

“All right,” John said. “Hear me through. I’m going to do a think aloud.”

Agent Case snickered. “Would you please explain to me what that is?”

“Going with thoughts as they come into my mind. Not necessarily making sense yet.”

“Yeah, you did that at the halfway house, looking for evidence in the Bobby Mitchell murder case last month.” Bella sat back in her seat to take it all in. “Okay, go ahead with your *think aloud*.”

John shook his head. “Okay, we know Slater committed murders in fifteen states along the East Coast, including two in Jersey to make seventeen. But we do not know if his children’s mothers came from those states. I’d guess not. Because he wouldn’t want to be seen again. Make sense?” The team members nodded. “And it’s our primary goal now to locate their mothers,” John continued. “The Southern and Mid-Western states allow the sale of scorpions. The storeowners had to know he was an out-of-towner. It’s also policy for a responsible business owner to ask the reason for the purchase, especially if they’re in bulk. Possibly Slater gave the mother’s address to the owner of the store. Number one, to establish his residency, and number two, so they don’t question the purchase. Giving his New York address would nix the sale. So I’m guessing Slater visited the mothers of his children. I’d like to have a language specialist, especially for the older children, and yes, the three year old and the infant too, yes, even with her babble, to speak with them, possibly to determine accent or region. That would help us narrow down birth. Okay, back to scorpions. Pet store

franchises keep records that we should be able to access with a warrant, Agent Case. They also have security cameras in place. There are lots of break-ins and thefts of animals. So, it was revealed that the little one, what's her name?"

"Margie," answered Agent Case.

"Margie came to live with them around Christmas time. That's just five weeks ago. Can you get a warrant for every major franchise that sells scorpions throughout the US? Maybe we can track the surveillance footage and see Slater with one of the children, Margie, specifically, and her mother."

"Do you realize how much work that's going to be?" Withers said, annoyed.

"Absolutely. And I'm sure Agent Case's office can put all this into a database and find something."

"Yes, we can," Agent Case said. "You're right. I'd guess larger franchises, as well. They'd have younger employees who wouldn't necessarily be on the ball. A mom and pop store's employees might get more suspicious. Probably older. Possibly the owners, themselves. It's not going to be 'poof' immediate, but it can be done. Okay, what else, Doc?"

"Very conveniently the nanny disappeared, so did the building superintendent. We know for sure Slater didn't kill the nanny. She was with the children Sunday after Slater died on Friday. But the superintendent, I'm not so sure about. Slater knew the end was near. He killed his swinging partner, Mike Sheffield, because of it. What's going on with that search?"

Nick opened the file on the desk in front of him. "Lex, since you're going to be busy, I assembled a team. They've been going door to door in the apartment building. As Henry Slater told everyone in the family meeting, celebrities do live in the building. Most of them were on location. The other residents seem to keep to themselves. Apparently, it's rare for the children to use the elevator in the hallway. Only one neighbor on the twenty-fifth floor ever saw them."

Withers nodded. "He does have a private elevator in the apartment that goes straight into the garage."

John referred to his notes. "First, can we get the nanny back to the states?" he asked the agent.

Case nodded. “Yes. We need her contact info, and I doubt if the kids know her address abroad. I do want to get a warrant for her apartment. Hopefully, we can find her destination in there.”

“Okay, good. Lex, what can you tell us from being in the apartment?”

“A lot, John. Everything was meticulous. Even the kids’ clothing drawers, clothes all folded. We packed up a lot for three of them. That crap about him wanting Melissa to be a boy scares the shit out of me.”

“Leave it to Sam.” Nick laughed. “A few days with her, Melissa will be a little princess.”

“Oh, yeah?” John asked.

“Oh, yeah. That woman invented the word *Fashionista*.” Nick grinned. “She could go head-to-head with you, Doc.” John laughed. Nick continued. “I’ll tell you, in the Aries case, with Sam newly assigned, she batted it out of the park with what she knew about the fashion world. Helped us solve that case, big time. What else about the apartment, Lex?”

“His fridge and freezer were stocked with prepared meals. Like there wasn’t an inch of space available to put in anything else. An investigator only allowed me to take out prepared breast milk. They removed the food and brought everything to the lab for testing for poison. We’ll have to wait on those results. Slater knew the nanny was going to be on vacation, so the food wouldn’t be for her to feed the kids, and we believe he planned his suicide, so why so much food? Did he count on Frank taking it to feed the kids at his house?”

“I bet he did,” John said. “Or that Frank and Sam would live in the apartment. That’s what he told Frank at the family meeting, right?” The team looked at John, startled. John shrugged. “Lieutenant Martin let me listen to the tapes before you all came in. But breast milk?”

“Yep.”

John jumped on that. “Hold on. So, Margie was nursed by her mom for at least eight months before she came to live with Slater. And he’s continuing to get it for her. Okay two things are coming to me. We’re either looking for women who agreed to be a surrogate, but no, that doesn’t make any sense to me.

What women after giving birth and nursing for eight months would hand a baby over? Anyone?"

"Are you kidding me?" Brett answered immediately. "That bonding is too strong. I can see a surrogate handing a baby over as soon as he or she exits the womb, but even to hold him or her—that would destroy it for my wife."

"Mine, too," Withers and Valatutti responded together.

"Now, I get the feeling Slater would have told people he had surrogates for mothers. Lessens questions," John said.

"So what are we looking at?" Bella asked.

"Four murdered women," said John. "Or—"

"A baby snatching ring," everyone blurted out at once.



Sam and Frank, with the entourage of five children, lined up on the steps of Sam's parents' house in the Madison section of Brooklyn, the house that Sam grew up in, waiting for her dad to open the door. Both her parents greeted them—her mom dressed in a gray sweat suit and her dad, in jeans and a long sleeved polo—with broad smiles.

The troop piled in and Frankie ran to give them both hugs. "Grandma, Grandpa, I have brothers and sisters, now."

"I see that," Grandpa George said. "How about introducing us?"

"That's Benjamin. He's older than me. That's Melissa. That's Henry, and that's, where did she go? Oh, over there," Frankie explained. "Crawling—by—up the stairs. Dad, get her."

Frank did a quick turn around. "Oh, man, Sam!" He caught the baby going up the third step. "Come here, you. Where do you think you're going?" He cuddled Margie in his arms as she heartily laughed and returned her to the love seat perpendicular to the couch where Sam's parents sat.

"I know you both have a lot on your plates now, but have you thought about a date?"

"Mom!" Sam shot Frank a look of astonishment. "It's only been four days."

“A date for what?” Melissa asked.

Grandma Marilyn blurted it out. “For Sam and Frank’s wedding.” Sam cringed.

George nodded. “Sorry, princess, Mom and I are too old to care about what we say or think.”

“Yes!” Frankie yelled. “I’ve been bugging him for months. You gotta plan a date.”

Frank burst out laughing as Sam buried her head on his chest.

“We never went to a wedding!” Melissa exclaimed.

“Well,” Grandma said as she out pulled the spring issue of *Brides Magazine* that was wedged into the love seat frame. “Here, you can look through this book with Samantha.”

Melissa took the issue that was almost too large for her six-year-old hands. “Wow! That is so beautiful.” Mesmerized, she walked over to Sam almost tripping on her own feet. “Wait! I got a great idea!”

Sam took the magazine and Melissa into her arms. The little girl leaned against her. “What Melissa? What’s your great idea?”

“I’ll plan the wedding. I can draw the stuff and I can decorate.”

“Whoa, hold on there, Melissa,” Grandpa George said. “What about us? The girl’s parents plan the wedding.”

Sam felt Frank’s torso warming up. That meant his anger flared—or at least him not being keen on the idea. “Excuse me? You two are planning—” Frank pointed between himself and Sam. “—our wedding?”

“Yes. Without a doubt,” George said. “We’re very old fashioned.”

“Then what are Sam and I supposed to do?”

Marilyn let her words flow so naturally as if there was no other alternative. “Come as guests.”

Frank held back his laughter and, in a combination with anger, at the thought, probably in respect for her parents, but Sam knew that was never going to fly. “Mom, today’s couples when they’re our age, we make our own wedding.”

“And I’d like to hear what the kids have to say, too.”

Melissa scowled. "Yeah, right, Uncle Frank. You wouldn't listen to me when I said I wanted to redecorate your house, you're going to listen about a wedding?"

"What? You want to redecorate my house? When did that conversation happen?"

"Well, it didn't, remember? Last night, you almost choked at dinner."

Frank paled. Sam had to change the topic quick. "You know what? How about, Melissa, you and I go shopping now as we planned?"

"Shopping?" asked Marilyn. "Where to?"

"I need clothes for school. My brothers have theirs, but I need girl's clothes."

Marilyn shot Sam an inquisitive look. "What kind of clothes did you have before, sweetheart?"

"Uh, do you know about kids?"

"Yes, I do. I'm a pediatrician. What's your pediatrician's name?"

"Mine is Dr. Hill."

"Yours? Do you by chance all have different ones?"

Sam and Frank sat up and paid attention.

"Yes. Benjamin, what's your pediatrician's name again?" Melissa asked.

"Dr. Berry."

"Do you know Henry's or Margie's?"

"No, they go to different ones."

Marilyn and Sam looked at each other. Marilyn sat up on the couch and folded her hands on her lap. Sam knew her mother had some strong thoughts on the matter. "Mom, come into the kitchen with me. I need to talk to you about your wedding plans for us."

Benjamin looked up as the women rose. "Samantha, I thought you said you'd never lie to us."

"I wouldn't."

"You're lying now. You're not going into another room to talk about the wedding." Sam compressed her lips. "You're going to talk about why we have different baby doctors."

“That is suspicious, Benjamin,” Grandpa George said. “But why don’t you let the women talk about it? It’s to help you children, after all.”

Benjamin exhaled deeply. “How is it going to help us? Dad died. But, yeah, if it’ll help Sam find our moms, go ahead.”

Sam and her mom darted into the kitchen. Sam smiled at the new faux art mural on the largest wall. The same guy from the East Village who did her master bedroom, painted this for her parents—just yesterday. As expected, he ripped them off, too, but he was so worth it, as she at first thought. But after seeing Henry Slater’s decorating, she changed her mind, quick. The green and purple tones made the flowers appear to jump off the wall. Sam could swear the young girl on the wall carrying the vase was her, maybe twenty years earlier. Leave it to Mom to want her permanently embedded into their house—especially since her heart now belonged to Frank. Sam didn’t even ask her mom if it was her. She let it slide. At least, now was not the time to ask about it.

“Mom, what are you thinking?”

Marilyn leaned against the sink with her arms folded across her chest. “First, what did she mean by girl’s clothes?”

“It’s very hard to understand. Her dad wanted her to be a boy, so other than in school, he forced her to wear boys clothes.”

“That’s very disturbing.”

“Tell me about it. The school didn’t know, but as soon as they got home to the nanny, they had to change.”

“What happened when they went out?”

“They never did. He kept them secluded in the apartment. They never watched TV or went to a restaurant.”

Frank appeared in the doorway and leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest. Marilyn acknowledged him with a nod and then Sam turned around. “Come in, Frank.”

“Sam, there’s only one conclusion I can make. When a parent takes children to different doctors, it’s usually to hide the other children’s presence or even existence. I’ll make you a bet that this man, though he very well might be their biological fa-

ther, he kidnapped these children or had them kidnapped, from their mothers. And because he keeps them so hidden, I bet their mothers are out there.”

Sadness overcame Sam. “I agree, and because the mothers are probably out there, we’ll find them. If that’s the case, they’ll have to go with them. Mom, I know it’s way too soon, but I’m having a hard time trying not to fall in love with them.”

“I know, Sam. I know. Think about how appreciative those women will be, knowing you’re taking care of their babies. So right now, pull yourself together and go have your time with Melissa. Daddy and I will watch the others with Frank.” Marilyn looked up at Frank with an equally sad expression.

Good thing I didn’t put on makeup. Nothing to smudge during her teary-moment. Returning to the living room, she asked Melissa if she was ready to go.

“Okay. Where are we going?”

“There are some stores on the avenue, and you need sneakers and boots.”

“Looks like someone is going to be spoiled today.” Marilyn smiled warmly and Sam could tell her mother’s heart was breaking for the children, as much as her own.

Frankie had a gleam in his eyes. “I know! Grandma Marilyn, do you want go with them?” Frank’s lips curled up in approval. Sam grinned. “This way, we’ll be all boys together, except for Margie.”

“If it’s okay with Samantha.”

“I’d love for Grandma to come. Right, Melissa?”

“Yes!”

Sam hesitated. “Sure you two men could handle three boys and a baby?”

“Yes. Go,” Frank said. “Not too long. How about we all go for Chinese for dinner?”

“I’d love it!” Sam gave him a hug and kiss while the kids reacted with “ewes.”

Frank pulled out his credit card from his wallet and handed it to Sam. “Don’t max it out.”

Sam smiled like a little kid in a candy store as she twirled the card in her fingers as she left the house.



As soon as the women were out the door, even before Frank could say a word to Sam's father, his cell rang. Looking at the caller ID, he knew he had to take it. "George, can you handle them? I have to take this."

"Of course."

Frank handed Margie over to him, and for once, the baby went without complaint. "Hey, John." He walked into the kitchen and pulled out a chair facing the mural. The first thing he focused on was the girl with the vase.

Crap! That's Sam!

"We've been in meeting for the past three hours. Have a lot of questions."

Frank couldn't stop looking at the mural. "Yeah, so do we, along with some answers. What have you got?"

"The scorpion tank suppliers could give us a lead. Brett Case is getting surveillance footage. It's a stretch, but we'll use it. We also seem to think the kids were kidnapped from their mothers."

"We're on the same page there. Sam's mother is a pediatrician. She had some pretty strong feelings that's the case."

"All right, good. There's a team out looking for the building superintendent and Brett will try to get a warrant for the nanny's apartment. At the very least, to find her destination so we can bring her back. We still haven't found birth certificates. Can you find out the children's birth dates? Case wants to enter their names into NCMEC."

"Great idea, but for the National Center For Missing and Exploited Children you need their exact date of birth, their birth name, and a photo. Get this, Slater never took pictures or allowed pictures to be taken. Guess he didn't want any identification. Hold on, Benjamin told us his and Melissa's birthdates. Let's see if he knows the other two. Melissa went on a shopping spree with Sam and her mom."

John laughed. "Yes, Nick told me about her."

Frank sneered, glad John couldn't see his reaction. "I'll call Benjamin, but there's something I have to tell you. How old

were you when you started to become psychic, maybe not psychic, but have the uncanny ability to put two-and two-together?”

“I know exactly what you’re saying. I was a toddler. Lex said Benjamin has great inference skills. You think it’s more than that?”

“Much more. Before we go to the birthdates, I have to tell you something. These kids recover way too fast. We just told them their dad died an hour ago, and now they’re all happy planning a wedding.”

“Very concerning. Were their reactions intellectual or emotional?”

“At this point, intellectual. No real tears. We’ll need to go deeper for sure. Hold on a sec.” Frank went to the hallway and called Benjamin. The boy came into the kitchen the first time he was called. Frank put the phone on speaker. “Benjamin, I want you to meet someone.”

“Okay.”

“This is Dr. Trenton. He’s a forensic psychiatrist, like me.”

“Hi, Benjamin.”

“Hi, Dr. Trenton.”

“Benjamin, I’m talking with people you’ve already met, and they’ve told me wonderful things about you and your siblings.”

“So?”

“I just wanted to tell you. Can you answer some questions for me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know all of your birth dates?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. What’s yours?”

“I’m June tenth. Melissa is March twenty-first. Henry is January eleventh. He was just three. And Margie, I don’t know. But it’s in April.”

“That’s fine. Thank you. Benjamin, did your dad ever bring home a box with scorpions in it?”

“We just saw the tank this morning.”

“But did you ever see a box being brought into the apartment? A box with holes poked into it, possibly?”

“For oxygen to get in?”

“Exactly.”

Benjamin scrunched his nose as if thinking. “Yes, a few times. Once, he put it on the kitchen table, and he got mad when we went near it. Then he pulled it away and told us to go into our room to study.”

“Do you remember when the last time was?”

“Yes. I remember because it was the same day he brought Margie home. We were so excited about our new sister that we forgot about the box. Do you think he got Margie in the same store—no, that can’t be. You can’t buy babies in a store. But wait! How about in the same state? Uncle Frank and Sam said you’re going to find our moms. Right?”

“That’s right. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“The box had a big stamp on it that said the words Fragile and Texas. Texas is a state. And animals are fragile. I just remembered that now. I don’t know why it just popped into my head.”

“Excellent, you’re doing great. Was there a label on the box?”

Benjamin closed his eyes as if to visualize it. Sam did that many times. Frank assumed the boy was doing the same thing. “There was paper over the top of the box, like to keep it closed.”

“Excellent. Do you remember if the store name was on there?”

“No. I didn’t look at it.”

“That’s perfectly all right. You helped us a lot. What are you thinking about now, Benjamin?”

Benjamin looked at Frank then turned his attention to the phone. “Why?”

“Detective Withers and your Uncle Frank told me you understand things and reasons for things and you can connect them. That’s very mature for your age.”

“Oh, yeah. I can tell things.”

“Well, you know what? So can I, starting from when I was much younger than you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And I want to talk to you about it but when we meet in person, okay?”

Benjamin smiled. “Okay.”

“I wanted to tell you, Dr. Trenton, that we’re taking them to school tomorrow.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Yes, it is.” Frank hugged Benjamin. “So we need you to go talk to their headmaster and teachers so we can get their records transferred over. Like, first thing in the morning, so it’s not a surprise to their school.”

“Will do. Benjamin, what’s the headmaster’s name?”

“Dr. Sulley is the principal. And my teacher is Miss Redding. Melissa’s teacher is Miss Monty. She was my teacher last year. And Henry’s teacher is Miss Sandy. I don’t know her last name. Sandy is her first name. He’s in nursery grade.”

“Pre-K?”

“No. The grade before Pre-K.”

“Thank you, Benjamin. Now we know whom to ask for. What grade does the school go up to?”

“Nursery to eighth grade. Oh, and don’t forget to ask if you can bring us our books.”

“Thank you, we won’t. Anything else you want us to tell them or ask for?”

Benjamin sniffled and put his head down. “No.”

“If you think of something, tell your uncle and he’ll call me, okay? Okay, Frank. At least, now we know where to start. Speak to you soon.” John disconnected.

“You, okay?” Frank asked Benjamin.

“I guess.”

Frank and Benjamin returned to the living room where Margie was asleep on the couch, and Frankie and Henry play wrestled on the carpet, noisily. Frank was surprised that Walter let them, knowing how protective he was of Sam. Benjamin sat back on his legs watching them. He looked uneasy.

“What’s the matter, Benjamin?” Frank asked.

“Dad wouldn’t like that at all.”

“No?”

Benjamin shook his head. “We’re not allowed to do that.”

“No roughhousing?” Frank asked. Benjamin’s brows furrowed. Frank exhaled deeply. “No physical playing?”

“No.”

“Well, in this house, we play, but safely. You’ll get used to it.”

An hour passed with Frank and George having conversations with Benjamin and Frankie—all educational discussions. From what Frank could tell about the kids so far, Henry was the one who was free-spirited.

The noise from the girls opening the door stopped conversation. Frank heard the shuffling of bags rubbing each other. “Uh, oh.” Frank saw Sam and her mother who both beamed with ear-to-ear-smiles. *Where’s Melissa?* “Missing someone?”

“Nope.” Sam opened the door gallantly as if presenting royalty. “Meet, Princess Melissa.” She opened the door all way, and Melissa entered with a fresh haircut with bangs and her dark brown hair cut shoulder length.

She held out her hands displaying her fingernails polished a light pink. “Finally, I feel like a girl.”

CHAPTER 6

Frank; Sam, holding Margie in her arms; four more children; and Sam's parents planned to meet Frank's in-laws in the waiting lounge of their favorite Chinese restaurant on Flatbush Avenue. Parking was nearly impossible, including after rush hour. Brick and mortar stores took up the commercial avenue that ran through almost the entire borough. Frank tried to avoid this main thoroughfare as much as he could, except for going to this restaurant, a little past The Junction near Brooklyn College. He and Sam intended to get the Slater kids immersed in Brooklyn life immediately. You couldn't live in Brooklyn without savoring the tastes and aromas of ethnic foods. This restaurant was the best. It catered to gluten-free and MSG-free customers including their rice and noodle dishes.

The children stared at the large red Buddha statue in the corner in between two Bonsai trees. The red and gold wallpaper with a Chinese garden mural embedded in the fabric held their attention and Melissa touched the three dimensional pattern. From her pursed lips, Frank guessed she was thinking of redecorating ideas. He smiled and then rustled Henry's hair, paying attention to the boy clutching onto his leg, pushed onto him in the crowd. The little guy looked as if he was going to cry. Frank lifted him up into his arms. Henry wrapped his arms around Frank's neck and held on for dear life. *Okay, the assertive one doesn't like crowds.*

At least paying attention to Henry took his mind off his nervousness. With Frank's free hand, he clutched Sam's hand. Sweaty. Both of them. Today, the parents would meet. It would go well, Frank hoped. Not that it would matter. He and Sam were too old to need approval, but he hated family conflict. The

parents were of the same age, late sixties, his in-laws retired from the military and Sam's parents still worked at their medical practices. From the way it appeared so far, the big difference would be that Sam's parents would be pushovers with the kids and his in-laws were tough. Sam's mother proved it already, not allowing Sam to use his credit card or hers while shopping today for Melissa's new wardrobe or salon appointment.

Sweet and spicy aromas filled the lobby and the children sniffed and inhaled deeply. "Smells good in here," Benjamin said.

"Wait till you get inside," Frankie said. "Dad, how much longer?"

"Just a few minutes till Grandma and Grandpa get here."

Frankie looked toward the door when a cold breeze hit him. He moved in between other patrons to make himself seen. "Grandma, Grandpa, over here."

Frank smiled. Should he introduce them as Major Kathryn and Colonel Walter Brandman and Drs. Marilyn and George Wright, or leave the titles out? In his contemplation, the seniors beat him to it and introduced themselves with handshakes and warm smiles.

"Khaos, party of nine," came through the loudspeaker, and Frank held the door open for everyone to enter. The hostess led them to the section with larger parties and the loudest conversations. Benjamin and Melissa furrowed their brows.

Grandma Marilyn and Grandpa George took their hands in what Frank knew was a comforting response. Then he saw the still expressions on his in-laws faces. To them, that was a pampering response, not what they'd do. Nor would it be what Frank would do under ordinary circumstances. But this wasn't the ordinary. These children had just lost their father, their only parent as far as they knew, and they were thrust into the unknown. As far as he was concerned, the children were dealing with it quite well. But he wouldn't let his in-laws in on his thoughts right now.

The hostess brought over a high chair for Margie and the waiter brought the booster seat. Neither one of the children

wanted to sit in them. Margie fought Sam, wiggling so much Frank could tell his fiancé was in a place she didn't want to be. Frank put Henry into the booster seat with a firm "stay there," and he pulled the baby out of Sam's arms. After absorbing a glare from the colonel, Sam blushed. Frank put Margie into the highchair then immediately handed her a teething toy that worked for the moment.

The server handed the adults menus that held their attention. But not for long. Melissa brought it upon herself to update the military grandparents on what she'd planned. "Guess what, Grandma?"

Kathryn, who sat next to Melissa, turned toward her. "What, Melissa?"

"We're planning Uncle Frank's and Samantha's wedding and I'm in charge."

All of the adults did double takes. "You're doing what?" Grandpa Walter bellowed out in laughter.

"Yes," Marilyn explained. "We adults were taken out of the equation today." She pointed to Frank. "And that seems to include you and Sam, too."

"Oh, no!" Frank said. "Who gave you that power?"

"See?" Frankie said. "I told you my dad wouldn't let us do it."

"You guys discussed this?"

"And they need me to be in charge because I have the best ideas," Melissa said proudly. "But don't worry, we didn't do anything yet. We just got the idea to do it."

"Whew, I thought you had the limo coming to get us already."

"No, Uncle Frank, things like this take time." Melissa bobbed her head as she spoke. "If you want it done right, you can't rush."

Sam moaned in delight. "And where did you learn that, sweetheart?"

"Daddy always said that to the people he decorated for."

"You listened when he was on the phone?"

"Yes. We were with him in his art room a lot, and he always called the people with questions."

The server interrupted, ready to take their orders. Frank looked at Sam's parents. "I usually do the ordering. Shall I?"

Her father was quick to respond. "No, I like to order myself, thank you."

After snickers from his in-laws that Frank noticed, he used his own judgement and conceded. "Okay, go ahead then I'll do the rest."

This is an opportune time to get some more information about Slater and block out Sam's father. "Did your dad remember all their phone numbers?"

Benjamin laughed. "No, too many people."

"Where did he keep their phone numbers?"

"He had this big book. And it had the people's orders and things."

"And where did he keep that book?"

Benjamin scrunched his nose. "Why do you need to know that?"

The waiter addressed Frank. "Dr. Frank, you ready to order?"

Frank rattled off eight dishes from soups, to appetizers, and main courses. Each had modifications to order. The children looked amazed, and Frank watched their reactions—furrowed brows, grimaces, scrunched noses, and stuck out tongues—all except Frankie who gave the fisted hand up for "yes." Frank handed his menus back to the waiter.

Benjamin repeated the question.

"Well, these people hired your dad, and we really should call them to tell them he won't be able to finish the work."

"Oh, don't worry about that!"

"Melissa, don't tell me, you plan to complete those projects," Grandpa George chided.

"No. But everybody loved Dad, they'll understand."

Frank thought for a moment before he answered. "In business, though, Melissa, people may not care as much as you think. Do you know if your dad worked with anyone who would take over, in case he had to travel to one of his work places?"

“No, he didn’t,” Benjamin said, pouting. “He did it all by himself. That’s why he let us stay with him in the art room. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t see us that much. He was always working.”



With the baby in the crib and Henry tucked into bed, Frank thought the easy part was done. He went to Frankie’s door where Sam was eavesdropping, swooning from watching the trio. Frankie, Benjamin, and Melissa lay on their stomachs on Frankie’s bed with the *Brides Magazine* between them. They turned each page, looking in wonderment at the wedding gowns.

“Yes. This one is it,” Melissa exclaimed.

“No, wait.” Benjamin turned the page. He tapped it with his finger. “This one is it.”

“I want to see more before we decide,” Frankie said. “Like this whole book.”

Melissa turned the page and stared at the table setting. “Look at this. Hold on. Hold on.” She pointed to a box painted white, made out of Styrofoam, filled with white carnations. “See the box? I can do that easy and even better. Dad has plenty of that white stuff in his office, and Detective Withers said he’d get it for me, and we can order the flowers. I bet Dad has all the people we can call.”

“No. I don’t like that one,” Benjamin said. “I think if it were Dad, he’d pick out something fancier.”

“This is not happening,” Frank whispered to Sam. He entered the room. “Come on, guys, bedtime. It’s a school night.” He gently pulled the magazine from Melissa’s grasp and got a pout in response. “You’ll have plenty of time to look at all of this. I promise. In bed, now. We’re all going to bed.” He tucked in Benjamin and Frankie, while Sam tucked in Melissa in her room.

With their bedroom door closed tight, Frank lay naked on top of Sam in bed. The kids, slept peacefully, or so Frank thought. “Oh, man, do I need you now, princess.” He caressed

her face in his hands and brought his lips down to hers, as his hands slipped to the back of her head. Wrapping her arms around his neck, Sam didn't want to let go. She spread her legs and, with bent knees, braced her lower legs on Frank's buns. Peace and quiet. What he craved. What he knew Sam craved. He'd never been around so much non-stop chatter since he was in Iraq. The silence seemed deafening.

Too bad, it was short-lived.

Henry pushed opened the door with such force the little guy almost fell into the room. He made it to the bed, head first and scrambled up onto it before he realized that Sam and his Uncle were both in dispose. Thank God, they were both covered, Frank thought.

"What you two doing?" the little voice inquired as he sat up, wide-awake.

While Sam had a hard time concealing her laugh, Frank wasn't so sympathetic. "Now, go into your room." He threw the blanket over Sam's head.

"No. I sleep here." Henry plopped onto his back, rolled onto his side and pretended to be asleep.

Frank shook his head. He kept telling Sam that she had to be more firm, and like his in-laws said at dinner, so did he. The colonel couldn't believe he was so easy going with these four. Frank was military. Special Forces. Tough to the core. He'd never let Frankie get away with it. Why now? Because he still didn't know for sure if these kids had been abused by their dad or not, that's why. He rolled off Sam and grabbed up his briefs from the floor just before Melissa came in.

He pulled them on while under the covers. "Take your brother and go back into your room."

"Eww. What are you two doing?"

"What? Didn't your dad ever have a lady friend stay overnight?"

"No. Never!"

"Did he ever keep the bedroom door closed?"

"No." She put her finger up into the air. "Oh, only once. No, uh, maybe more."

"And you were expected to stay out, right?"

She nodded.

“Well, same here. So take Henry and go back to bed. It’s a school night.”

She went over to where Henry lay and took his hand. He pulled back, giggling. “Come on, Henry.”

Frank leaned over to him. “Now,” he said, the sternest they’d heard him speak.

Henry must have realized his uncle meant it. He got up with Melissa. Before they left the room, Henry turned toward the bed. “Okay, go back and play with rubber dolly.”

Frank perked up. “Rubber dolly?”

“Yes,” Melissa said. “Daddy has a rubber dolly he sleeps with.”

“That rubber dolly,” Henry said.

“This is Samantha. Not a rubber dolly.”

“No. Samantha went home. That’s rubber dolly.”

“Okay, Henry. And where does he keep this rubber dolly?”

Sam squirmed under the blanket. Frank felt kicks in places that were not pleasant. He fought to keep the *rubber dolly* still, finally lying over her.

“Under the bed.”

Having a hard time controlling laughter, Frank forced a straight face. “Oh, okay, go to bed, now. I’ll be careful to put the rubber dolly under the bed in the morning.”

The kids left and closed the door with a bang.

He leaned off Sam, and she pushed the blanket down. “Damn it, Frank. You almost suffocated me.” She sat up out of breath, pushing her hair off her face. With labored breathing, she slugged his chest.

Frank ignored that. “Sam, that’s messed up. Did you see anything like that when you were kept in Slater’s bedroom?”

“No, it didn’t dawn on me to look under the bed. And he had me tied up, if you remember. Where was Dara when I needed her?”

“Sam, I think fear for your life interfered. Come on, let’s get some shut eye.”

“No. Hold on. Something’s very wrong.”

“What are you thinking?”

Sam did her own thinking aloud. “Slater exaggerated things to his children, like telling them they’re having a time-out in a cage, while it turns out to be an elaborate doll house. Now it seems he calls a lady-friend a rubber dolly. He misconstrues things to them. What does that mean? Are they brain-washed?”

“It’s got to mean something. Right now, I’m too tired to think. This is a big adjustment for me.”

“Excuse me? Just you? What about the children and me? You were at least a parent. I’ve got to leave a house I put my heart and soul into a full year before I moved in—just four months ago—and now, spontaneously I’m leaving it.”

“I know, Sam, I get it. But I’m going to fall asleep mid-conversation in a minute.”

And he did. Just as he did in the military.

CHAPTER 7

John Trenton, Lex Withers, and Bella Richards got out of Withers SUV in the parking lot of the Scholars Academy on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. The three NYPD employees looked up at the massive red brick Victorian style four-story building. On both sides of the school, brownstones took up the rest of the block, alternating with off-white stone and red brick on the front. Stone columns stood on either edge of the ten steps leading to the entrance from the parking lot. A red neon sign—*EXIT*—was affixed on top of the redwood door.

As they approached the steps, John pointed to the sign and then his gaze caught the path leading to the front of the building. Even during winter, with snow on the lawn, the bushes lining the path were snow-free. The front entrance was a duplicate in style to the rear. They went up the steps. John pulled on the lion-head door handle. Locked. Finding the intercom, he rang the bell.

“May I help you?” said the elderly female voice.

Lex rubbed his hands together as frost pillowed from his breath. “We’re NYPD. Need to speak with Mr. Sulley.”

“One moment, please.” The clacking of high heel shoes on wood flooring permeated the intercom. The woman opened the door. After the detectives showed their credentials, the woman moved aside. “Come in, please. And it’s *Doctor* Sulley. I wouldn’t make that mistake unless you want your visit to be short lived.”

“Wouldn’t think of it, ma’am,” said Bella. The detective walked past the woman with sleeked back salt and pepper hair, wearing a tailored silk white button-down-the-front blouse, na-

vy blue knee length skirt and stockings, and four-inch heel navy pumps.

John took notice of her appearance and attire—simple but definitely elegant and designer. He recognized the Italian leather shoes. He'd bought the exact pair for Vicki right after the first time they'd come to live in Manhattan. Twelve hundred bucks. To him, they were worth every penny. To Vicki, not one cent. She'd insisted he return them, which he did after she fell walking in them for practice in the condo. Getting a bruised knee in the bargain, his athletic gun-toting wife couldn't balance herself. She threatened to shoot him the next time they were in Florida. Too bad, it did happen—being shot—three years later in Florida by Barbara Montgomery in the Gemini case. Crap! Why was he thinking about those shoes now? It was over four years ago. In his reflection, John wasn't aware of the silent walk down the hallway to Dr. Sulley's office. The woman opened the door for them.

“Thank you, dear. Come in, please.”

John furrowed his brows at the way Dr. Sulley addressed his secretary, or so he assumed.

“She's my wife. Over fifty-three years now.”

John smiled and extended his hand to shake. “I'm Dr. John Trenton and Detectives Lex Withers and Bella Richards.” He watched Mrs. Sulley as she closed the door behind them.

The office was wood paneled, with filled-to-capacity bookcases lining the walls. The oversized colonial desk with desk accessories matching the light sand colored leather couch and club chairs added a sophisticated feel to the office. The conference table, appointed with the same details, didn't show even a speck of dust.

John felt at home in here. It was similar in decor to his office in Manhattan Psych in which he spared no expense. If he was going to spend most of his day in there, he had to be comfortable. He guessed this school administrator felt the same way.

“How may I help you?” Dr. Sulley pointed to the conference table. “Come, let's make ourselves comfortable.”

After sitting around the table, Withers took out his notepad. “Dr. Sulley, how long have you owned this school?”

“Over twenty years.”

“What were you doing before?”

“My wife and I were college professors. In education. Teaching theories and best practices for teachers in elementary school classrooms. That’s where we started our careers. In the classroom. In 1964. We met teaching in our first school in the Bronx and have been together ever since.”

“Nice,” John said, smiling.

Withers apparently wanted to get down to business. “We need to talk to you about the Slater children.”

“Benjamin, Melissa, and Henry?”

“Yes.”

“Where have they been? Is everything okay?” Dr. Sulley depressed the intercom. “Millie, come in here right away, please.” She entered and joined them, taking a seat at the table. He continued. “We’re talking about the Slater children.”

“How well did you know their father?” Withers asked.

Mrs. Sulley sucked in her cheeks. She sat up straight in the chair. “That man was going to be the death of me.”

“Why, Mrs. Sulley?” John asked.

“He wouldn’t let the children breathe. He regulated everything around them. Their diet. Well, I could understand him wanting the children to eat healthfully, but he was extreme. We only serve healthful foods here. We even have a special caterer, but he insisted they bring their own lunches and snacks. No one could cook as well as he, he would tell me. He was so protective, he wouldn’t allow them to go on class trips the first year, and we take the children to wonderful places. We finally convinced him to allow it because the teachers use those trip experiences in the classroom. We also had to promise him, when a child was having a birthday party, we’d send them to another class. And it wasn’t religious, mind you. Now he’s all right with it since the children know what they can and cannot eat.”

“How did the children react to those restrictions?”

“Like obedient little soldiers.” She shook her head. “Not like children should be. They were also younger, easier.”

“Why did you keep them in the school, then?” Withers asked. “Money?”

Dr. Sulley hesitated then pursed his lips. “No, Detective. The children are needy, like some of our other students from single parent homes. And we were able to convince Mr. Slater to be slightly more open.”

“Needy? As in how?” John asked.

“They needed warmth, nurturing, sometimes they’re withdrawn. Emotionally they’re very repressed. They wouldn’t open up about it, and we didn’t push.”

“You have a guidance counselor on the premises?”

“Yes, with a full time nurse, as well, but—”

“But what?”

Mrs. Sulley was quick to respond. “Mr. Slater didn’t want them to speak to the counselor. Another reason I was unhappy with him.”

“I have a feeling I know why.”

“Why, Dr. Trenton?”

“Did you know that at home Mr. Slater wanted Melissa to dress like a boy?”

“No! That can’t be.” Mrs. Sulley shook her head. “Melissa is a precious little girl. She needed a haircut over the past few months, and I couldn’t understand that one. They were impeccably dressed.”

“Yeah, it can be,” Withers responded. “She had her hair pinned up under a baseball cap when we—” He pointed between him and Bella. “—met her. We thought she was a boy. She has only boy’s clothing in her room, and boy’s furniture, wallpaper, everything. They were here for three years, and you didn’t know that?”

“Oh, my God!” Dr. and Mrs. Sulley responded at once.

“How can you let a parent get away with telling you they won’t let their child see the counselor?” John asked.

“We don’t if there’s any sign of abuse, but there was none. And Melissa didn’t come to us to tell us. She acted like a little girl who wanted to please her father.”

Withers paused to phrase his comment, John assumed, not to alienate these school administrators. “Okay. Hear me out. When we took custody of the children, they knew something

was up, and we'll tell you about it in a minute. Melissa broke down and told a female detective."

Mrs. Sulley sighed. "I'd bet that was the first time she displayed any emotion."

John nodded. "I'd have to agree."

Bella looked around the room. "How much does it cost to send a kid here, forty, fifty grand?"

"Are you assuming we're in it for the money, Detective? I'll assure you we're not. It looks more expensive than it is. Fifteen thousand for the school year. Three thousand for the summer camp."

"That's pretty inexpensive for a New York City private school, isn't it?"

"Yes, Dr. Trenton. Uh, what's your specialty?"

"Forensic psychiatry."

Dr. Sulley did a double take. "What on earth happened? The children haven't been here for two days. That's unlike them. Now you've gotten us very worried."

John received a jolt from Max, his spirit guide. His feeling was correct. These administrators had genuine concern for these children. "Henry Slater was under FBI and police investigation." John glanced at Lex and Bella. They nodded. They'd allow him to do the questioning.

"For what? He has a successful decorating business, and I believe he works with casinos in that venue."

"Did he talk to you about his work?"

"He told us, yes, because he had to travel, so their nanny would pick them up at times or she'd meet them when the bus dropped them off. She also came to their in-classroom events. What struck me as odd was that he always had to travel whenever there was something going on in the classroom, even parent-teacher meetings. But the children verified it."

"How? How did they verify it?"

"They told me they spoke with their dad through Facetime. They never missed a day talking to him. I have to correct myself. He did manage to meet each teacher at least once during the school year. I have the teachers fill out a response form about each parent, so we know what struggles we'll be up

against. Every report about him was glowing. The teachers found him charming and totally interested in his children's success. They never missed an assignment or homework. He signed everything. Now, you tell me what's going on. We have an obligation to protect those children."

"We're glad you feel that way," Withers said. "The children are safe. They're living with their uncle and his fiancée, in Brooklyn."

"Mr. Slater told us he didn't have any siblings."

John continued. "He has two biological brothers placed for adoption, at birth. They didn't meet each other until...this situation."

Mrs. Sulley put her hand over her heart. "Oh, my! They have to be attending school."

"We know that," Withers said. "They're starting today in Brooklyn. We'll need their records transferred. That's one of the reasons we're here."

Mrs. Sulley wagged an index finger at the detective. "Uh, no. We can't transfer records without their father's written consent."

"That will be the hard part." Withers paused. "Henry Slater is deceased." He nodded at John to take over again.

Mrs. Sulley reached for her husband's hand. "Oh, my God! How did that happen? Was he ill?"

John swallowed hard. He hadn't cleared it with the department as to how much he could say or not say. "Okay, I'll tell you as much as I can. Henry Slater had killed seventeen women in casinos along the eastern coast, the last one in Queens. The victim was a friend of one of the detectives on the case, the woman with whom the children are living now. We found Mr. Slater's brother by examining familial DNA. His brother, who came up, works for the department, a forensic psychiatrist, like me." The Sulley's sat with jaws dropped. Before they could respond, John said, "We're trying to find their biological mothers. Did Slater tell you what happened that precipitated him to be a single parent?"

“That’s absolutely not believable, Dr. Trenton,” Dr. Sulley said. “He was a bit rigid in his persona but in no way was he a killer.”

“What you described in how the teachers responded to him is exactly part of the psychopathic personality. Did he tell you why he’s a single dad?”

Mrs. Sulley bobbed her head. “Yes. He came to New York from Florida with Benjamin and Melissa three years ago. Benjamin was five, and Melissa was too young to be admitted. He told us their mother died of ovarian cancer the year before.”

“So they both have the same mother?”

“Yes.”

Lex and Bella looked at each other suspiciously. “That’s not what the children told us.”

Mrs. Sulley sat stunned with her palm covering her mouth while her husband continued to respond to the questions.

“And what was that?” Dr. Sulley asked.

“That they each have different mothers. And that they don’t know who they are. What did he say about Henry?”

“He told us he wanted a large family, since he didn’t have one, so he adopted. The same thing for the little one, Margie. The children may not understand what was going on so they said what they did.”

“No, Dr. Sulley, ” John said firmly. “If Benjamin lost his mother at four, he’d remember it. There’d be memories. Parents who lose a spouse have pictures, want the children to remember them, talk about them. He doesn’t have any pictures at all. This could explain his rigidity, not wanting them to go on the trips. He doesn’t want them being seen. We need to see the birth certificates, please.”

Mrs. Sulley scrambled out of her seat to get to the file cabinet. Her fingers trembled as she thumbed through the files to get to S. She pulled out three folders, one for each of the admitted children. Placing them in front of John, she leaned over his shoulder and flipped pages until she reached the attached certificates.

John sat stunned and just stared.

Withers pulled the files between him and Bella. “Okay, while Doc is in La-La Land, we’ll look at these. Okay, same mother for the older two. Sara Phipps, married name Sara Phipps Slater. Birth date, Benjamin, June tenth; Melissa, March twenty-first; Henry, January eleventh.”

John refocused. He pulled the file back toward him. “Those are the dates Benjamin told me. Look at these name spellings. Far from the traditional way. The children don’t know about this Sara Phipps, I’m sure. Did you ever get an idea that these birth certificates are counterfeit?”

“No,” Dr. Sulley said. “Why would we?”

“No, you wouldn’t, I guess.” John turned toward Lex and Bella. “I can’t start profiling based on these.”

“True, then any theories we form on that would be bogus. Okay, first things first,” Withers said. “The children need their birth certificates for admittance to a New York City public school—”

“We just can’t hand the birth certificates—”

Without saying a word, Withers pulled the warrant from his pocket and slid it across the desk to Dr. Sulley.

Ignoring her husband’s comment, Mrs. Sulley interrupted. “Oh, no. No way would they make it in public school. Not with the education they’ve gotten here.”

“I beg to differ,” Withers said. “New York City schools give a very good education. My boys are doing fine.”

“Glad to hear that. But they’re used to, what, thirty-five children in a class?”

“Just about.”

“Here, we have fifteen, max. All lessons are individualized and mostly hands-on experience. There are two teachers in a room at the minimum.”

John’s mind wandered. He liked these people. He and Vicki had discussed getting their son, Ricky, into school. The nine-year-old had come a long way over the past year being home-schooled. Maybe now would be a good time. “We’d like to speak to Benjamin’s and Melissa’s teachers and Henry’s too, as well as see some of their work in the classroom.”

Mrs. Sulley smiled. "Perfect, Dr. Trenton, I'll take the three of you to see Melissa's teacher, Miss Monty. She was Benjamin's teacher last year so she'll tell you about both children. And, before I forget, there was one incident, but I'll let the teacher tell you."

John got the feeling it was something endearing not troublesome. "That's fine."

"What do you need transferred to the new school? I'll tell our secretary to get it all ready."

"Immunizations, did they have those?"

"Yes, I believe they did."

"We'll also need their pediatrician's numbers," John continued. "And report cards. Also the original birth certificates you have. We'll be able to verify authenticity."

"No problem on any of that. Now, Henry is in the nursery class, and he's age appropriate for that. Melissa came in Pre-K and she was so advanced, probably from all the work at home with her father, that mid-year, we moved her to Kindergarten then first grade. They're also tall for their age, so moving up seemed practical. Last year, second, this year third. But in all honesty with the class size in the public school system, I'd personally recommend second grade placement for her."

"That's very valuable information, Mrs. Sulley. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Dr. Trenton. The children are my utmost concern. And likewise for Benjamin. He's in fifth grade here, but I'd recommend fourth in his new school. And there probably won't be a choice. But he needs a very special kind of teacher."

"How so?"

"Benjamin...how do I say this so do you don't think I'm not all there?...Benjamin has certain skills, abilities, that most children can have—" she sucked in her cheeks. "—until... well, adults squelch their imaginative expression."

John caught onto exactly what she meant. "So he has psychic abilities and intuition?"

She exhaled deeply. "Yes, and more than that. He has premonitions, sees visions in his daydreams, and if he's in tune with the adult communicating with him, he can tell what he or she is

thinking. Lying to him will make an enemy for a very long time. From your expression, I can tell you understand what I mean.”

Detective Withers confirmed it. “He sure does. He’s our department psychic.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. I’ve been psychic and clairvoyant since I was a toddler.”

“Then maybe, Benjamin should be living with you.”

“I wouldn’t want to break the siblings up, but don’t worry, I will be speaking with him and the detective he’s living with, Samantha Wright, has many of the same abilities. She was also a teacher before she joined the department, and I know she’ll encourage him.”

Bella added, “That one? She sure would.”

“I’m glad to hear that. If you’ll come with me, I’ll walk you to the classroom and get Miss Monty coverage so you can speak with her in private.”

John appreciated this school as a perspective parent as well as an outsider. He bet his parents, Esther and Sam, would like it, too. Even though they called Max, his spirit guide, his imaginary friend when he was a toddler, they never discouraged communication. They probably weren’t a fan when Max forewarned him of their impending presence, but on the other hand, John conformed before his parents told him what to do. That had to relieve their parenting stress. John smiled at the memory and followed Mrs. Sulley around the hall from the point of view of an incoming parent.

They came to a white marble spiral staircase with solid mahogany handrails engraved in an early 1920s leaf pattern style. *Henry Slater must have examined these thoroughly. That man was meticulous in details.*

“Stairs or elevator? It’s right there.”

The trio looked at each other and all came out with “stairs” at the same time.

At the top of the staircase, Mrs. Sulley led them around to where the classrooms started on this floor. John and Lex smiled and nodded in approval to each other. Student work took up all

of the bulletins boards hung across the walls between the classrooms. Some teachers went beyond the boards onto the white tiles. Laughter permeated the hall from Miss Monty's classroom, the third classroom from the stairwell. John stopped to examine the bulletin board. The social studies topic that featured children's artwork compared imported foods from Egypt, China, and the Middle East. He was impressed. That was beyond the topics Vicki covered with Ricky—who was third grade age, though well below academically. John looked at the board on the other side of the door. Math—that he could identify with. The board illustrated problem-solving techniques for subtraction with exchange. Mrs. Sulley let him look without interference.

Lex and Bella entered the classroom but stood by the doorway. John joined them a minute later. Mrs. Sulley approached the teacher, and she acknowledged the visitors with a warm smile. This woman was a looker. Dark auburn hair in a ponytail, dark brown eyes, and a very pregnant belly. John smiled, wondering how much longer she had to go. She seemed to be nearing the end of the second trimester, and she resembled Vicki when she carried the twins. She wore a solid white tunic sweater, with navy slacks. John guessed those were the school colors. As his gaze scanned the room, he saw all of the children in the same colors. Mrs. Sulley signaled to the visitors to come into the room.

They went to the back of the room to observe, not wanting to interfere. Fifteen children appeared in center activities throughout the room, communicating methods of solving the task. No yelling. No fighting. Lots of laughter, and seemingly plenty of fun. Every area of the room had something going on—crowded bulletin boards displaying the children's work, carpeted areas for reading centers, multiple computer stations, a reading loft with comfy pillows, a center for table games, and a library with books of every dimension. John compressed his lips. He missed not having any classroom experiences with Ricky. His own parents loved coming into his class.

Lex must have read his demeanor. "Hey, think this school would work for your son?"

“Believe me, I’d love it to, but he’s refusing to try.”

“Who’s the boss in your house?”

“I was hoping it was me, but apparently not. He’s come a long way with homeschooling but still fearful, maybe of leaving us. I don’t know.”

Mrs. Sulley overheard them. “You’re homeschooling, Dr. Trenton?”

“Yes. It’s a long story. We adopted last February. He’s nine now and very behind in school.”

“How did that come to be?”

John exhaled deeply preparing for the hurtful memory. “Ricky had been abused.”

Mrs. Sulley interlaced her fingers and brought her hands to her chin, placing her touching index fingers over her lips.

This woman truly listens. John let out a nasal breath then felt comfortable in explaining. “Sexually, up until he was five. I rescued him from a hostage situation in Florida. I was down for the Jewish holidays in September, five years ago, and he wanted to come live with us then. But I had just met my wife and the courts wouldn’t let me bring him to New York. It took us three full years to reconnect. He’d been thrown out of every school he went to for behavior issues. We figured we’d homeschool until he caught up. But to tell you the truth, I’m missing not having school experiences with him.”

“Why don’t you and your wife come in to speak with Dr. Sulley and me? Your story isn’t a stranger to us.” She looked toward the door when she heard Miss. Monty’s relief teacher enter. “Ah, perfect. Thank you, Miss Burger.”

“Now, I expect a good report. Am I going to get one?” Miss Monty smiled at the class.

“Yes, Miss Monty,” came from eight-year-old mouths.

“Come with me, please. We can talk in the lounge.”

The lounge was an open space with seating in quadrants. Artwork covered the walls. Special care was taken in painting the picture frames the school colors of navy and white, though not always successful. John liked that apparently no adult interference corrected the children’s efforts. The low-shag carpet was a lighter blue complementing the navy seating upon it.

Miss Monty led them to a couch grouped with club chairs as John looked around the room as he walked. She sat in a club chair, John in one next to her, and the detectives took the couch. As she felt the baby move, she smiled and put her hands on her stomach.

John smiled. "When are you due?"

"Not until the end of May."

"Your first?"

"Yes, and my last."

John startled.

"Oh, don't mind me."

"Believe me, honey," Bella reassured. "I get it."

Miss Monty laughed. "So, what is going on with Melisa and Benjamin? They've been absent for two days. I would have called tonight."

Rather than catching her up on the conversation with the administration, John wanted her take on the children and their father. "What can you tell us about their work in the classroom?"

"Meticulous. That would be the one word to describe them. Even with their penmanship, they write slowly, as if they were afraid of getting the angle wrong. I tried to get them to relax but that made them more nervous. Melissa would shudder and throw her paper away to start over rather than erase something. Benjamin, the same thing. Why are they absent?"

"They're safe and living with an uncle. We'll tell you everything, Miss Monty, but right now, what can you tell us about Mr. Slater? Have you met him?"

She chuckled. "Oh yes, I met him," she said, patting her stomach.

The detective shot each other curious looks and Miss Monty's comment halted the conversation—for a moment.

Pointing to her belly, Withers exclaimed, "That's his?"

"Oh, no, no, no. I think he just opened me up to become aware of my maternal urges."

John got the feeling it was a lot more than that. He felt Max's jolt.

“And what?” Bella said sarcastically. “You became pregnant through osmosis?”

“What? No.”

Withers squirmed in his seat. “Would you mind elaborating?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We need to hear it,” John said emphatically.

Miss Monty let out a deep breath. “Okay. Last year Benjamin was in my class. He never got less than a hundred on a test. This time, he failed a spelling test, and I knew it was on purpose. He got every word wrong, twenty of them. I told him to have the paper signed and to bring it back tomorrow. He didn’t. For five days, he gave me every lame excuse—his dad was busy, his dad wasn’t home. The usual I-didn’t-do-my-homework excuses. I called Friday night and spoke to Mr. Slater for the first time. He was shocked but he thanked me for calling. And that he’d take care of it. On Monday, Benjamin came in with the paper signed, and I asked him what his dad told him. He said that he was punished severely. That word struck a cord. I asked him what ‘severely’ meant. He said his dad spanked him and his dad told him, it was a severe spanking. He told me he had to stay in his room and write all twenty words, a lot. With describing it like that, I had to call Dr. Sulley and the guidance counselor.”

“I’d agree. But was it severe, in the sense of what most adults consider severe?”

Miss Monty’s eyes widened. “No. Not at all. Why are you asking that, Dr. Trenton?”

“All right. Finish the story and I’ll tell you.”

“Dr. Sulley and the counselor actually checked his bottom. Not one mark, no red spots, nothing to indicate anything severe, actually nothing at all. The guidance counselor asked him to hit his palm with the same strength his dad hit him, and Benjamin gave him what you’d call a love pat. They decided to call Mr. Slater to come in and talk with us. Monday afternoon he came and I was called into the office as I was getting ready to leave. We met for the first time. Benjamin was with us. I looked at Mr. Slater, he looked at me, and Benjamin said, ‘So?’” Mr.

Slater asked him what he meant. Benjamin started to giggle and he blushed. Then he responded, ‘You can’t figure it out?’ It hit us like a ton of bricks. Benjamin was trying to fix us up. Mr. Slater got so upset, and he started apologizing for his son. He’s the sweetest man. I explained to Benjamin that I couldn’t go out with his father because it’s against school policy. It’s true. At this school, teachers are not permitted to fraternize with parents. And I asked Benjamin if he wanted to get me fired. Of course he didn’t. So we left it at that. At the end of the year, Benjamin approached me again. He still wanted me to go out with his dad. The last day of school Mr. Slater came to pick up the children, and he brought thank you gifts for the teachers. I heard Benjamin whispering to him, ‘Ask her out.’ It was so sweet, I blushed. He told me that Benjamin wouldn’t stop nagging him until we did, so he asked me out for lunch. It was in front of Benjamin, so I said ‘it would be my pleasure.’ A week later, I received a call and he asked me out for a casual dinner.” She sighed. “I made a good guess because he doesn’t describe things accurately.”

John moved in toward her. “Sorry to interrupt, but we’ve seen that. What do you mean?”

“Well, like he did with the severe spanking, for one. What have you seen?”

“He gives the children time-outs and they think they’re going into a cage.”

Miss Monty gasped.

John held up his index finger. “But it turned out that the cage was an elaborate adult-sized dollhouse with even a refrigerator for snacks. So what about casual wasn’t correct?”

“Because I’m in a uniform, so to speak, all day, when I go out, I like to dress up. I did, and it was good thing, too. He picked me up and we went to the most expensive French restaurant in the theater district. He’s the most charming, courteous man, and he’d be a great catch for a woman who wants to get married and be a stay-at-home mom. That’s his vision. Not mine. I told him I didn’t even want children.”

She must have seen her audience stiffen. John saw the detectives expressions turn stoic, he felt his face tighten, too.

“What’s the matter?”

“This part is crucial, Miss Monty. How did he react to that statement?”

“About not wanting children?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I think he wasn’t pleased. It was more like angry. He put his fork down and asked me why. I told him it was my choice and I really didn’t owe anyone an explanation. He didn’t agree with that and continued to push. Uh, why is this important? It’s rather personal.”

John nodded. “All right. You’ve been forthcoming with us. Mr. Slater is deceased.” John paused, waiting for her reaction.

Miss Monty held her baby bump and looked faint. She closed her eyes and slumped into the chair. John jumped up to take her pulse.

Detective Richards wasn’t so sympathetic. “And you expect us to believe that little bundle of joy isn’t his?”

With labored breathing, Miss Monty pulled herself together. “No, it’s not that, believe me.” She grasped onto John’s forearm. Her gaze traveled between the visitors. “Those poor children. Now both their parents are gone.”

“Better now?” John asked.

She nodded.

“We need to know everything, Miss Monty. Please don’t hide anything from us. This is an FBI investigation.”

“What?”

“Henry Slater murdered seventeen women.”

“Oh, my God! What? How?” She looked up at the ceiling, her mind appeared to wander.

“Miss Monty?” John touched her hand to bring her back.

She burst out in tears and threw her hands up to cover her face. “Why? Why did he murder women?” With labored breathing, she looked pleadingly at John.

“Is he the father of your baby?”

“Yes. And no. Why did he murder women?”

“He murdered women whom he wanted a relationship with, but they told him they didn’t want children,” John explained. “So how come you’re still alive?”

“What a dismal thought!”

“But it’s true,” Withers said. “And that’s the million dollar question. Tell us the rest of the story, and don’t leave anything out. What is this? Yes and No? It’s not like you can be a little bit pregnant.”

“In vitro.”

Bella grimaced. “What about the good old fashioned way?”

“Aside from that, let her tell us what led up to it.” Withers apparently didn’t like the aside.

John smirked.

“After I told him that I didn’t want children, he asked me why and he didn’t let up. He asked me if I’d meet a man I was madly in love with who I knew would be a wonderful father and could support us would I change my mind. I said, in that case, maybe. He was satisfied for the moment. He then told me I was the type of woman he was looking for. He wanted an educated woman. I have a doctorate in elementary education. I was shocked that he knew so much about me. It was definitely off putting that he researched me, like analyzing data, comparing different cars. He took me home, and I figured I’d never see him again. That was fine with me. He’s—uh, was—too controlling.”

“Okay, so how did you go from there to here?” John pointed to her stomach.

“I told all of my friends about him, all his good points, and mostly they were all good. He was raising four adorable, sweet children. And for someone who didn’t want a child to begin with, I’d be a stepmom to four. For me, that’s a lot to take on. I’m also an associate professor at the university, and I teach at night. I want to go for full professorship, so being a mom wasn’t in my plans. Then three of my friends gave birth in the same month. They’re around my age, thirty-nine. I went to see all of them, and all of a sudden, I couldn’t believe it, when holding those babies, I fell in love. Something inside of me did a three-sixty.”

“And?”

“What I tell you, can it be in confidence?” she whispered. “Dr. and Mrs. Sulley can’t find out.”

“We’ll see,” Withers answered. “But we need the full story.”

“Out of the blue, Henry, uh, Mr. Slater called me and we went out again. I told him what happened and that I changed my mind. We couldn’t continue a relationship because Melissa was going to be in my class this year. And if I became pregnant with his child, Benjamin, being so intuitive, would be able to tell and he’d rat us both out. I have to say that Mr. Slater was manipulative and he has an answer and solution for everything. If we had gone to a fertility doctor the first question we’d be asked is “How long have you been trying?” Well, we weren’t. He suggested because of our ages, that we have in vitro and tell the doctor I was his surrogate. That’s the way he came to have Henry and Margie—”

“Whoa!” Withers interrupted. “Dr. Sulley just told us that Henry and Margie were adopted.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Why would he lie to me?”

“I think your infatuation with this man let him get to you,” Withers said.

She frowned. “Anyway, he wanted me to be a surrogate, and when the baby was born he’d take it.”

“It?” Bella didn’t mince words. “As in something inhuman?”

“Sorry. I’m just so rattled right now. Him or her. And I’m seeing a man now who knows about it, and he’s expecting me to carry through on the surrogate thing.”

“Well, now you can’t,” Bella said. “So what are you going to do?”

Miss Monty’s teary gaze shot to the ceiling. Sniffling, she said, “I have no idea.”

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Ronnie Allen is a New York City woman who transplanted to Central Florida eleven years ago. A teacher for thirty-three years in the New York City Department of Education, as well as Board Certified Holistic Health Practitioner, she has an MS Degree in School Psychology and a PhD in Parapsychic Sciences. Ms. Allen holds children and family close to her heart and includes stories of survival in her plots. She specializes in healing on the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical levels which appear in threads running through her books.