


# ABBY'S Monsters

*Book 2 of the Sammy/Streiker Salmagundi*



Robin  
Hardy

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The characters and circumstances in this novel are fictitious,  
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The DPD would never allow any part of the city to sink to such anarchy.

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# Chapter 1

The three detectives of MK & Associates, a private investigations agency, sat quietly at their desks in the storefront office with “Great Deal Life Insurance Company” emblazoned in huge black and gold letters across the front windows. Contrary to their standard attire of sports coats and slacks, the three men all wore dark suits and subdued ties. And they sat without speaking.

Black-haired, blue-eyed Sammy Kidman, known among his former coworkers in the Dallas Police Department as “Dreamboat,” “that lucky stiff,” and less complimentary appellations, glanced again in irritation at the empty spot on his desk where the paper cup with orchids used to reside.

Since Sarah Hawkins had been taking care of her ailing husband, retired Dallas homicide detective Les, she had been unable to come clean their office for the past month. When Sammy’s dog Bubba had begun chasing critters across the floor, Sammy had been compelled to call in another cleaning company.

On their first visit just this morning (the Monday after Thanksgiving) the new maids had either taken or thrown out his orchids as trash, even though they were still fresh and bright with no water and no roots. He was going to call the company after checking the trash bin in the alley, but he could do neither right now. He could only sit with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped.

His former sergeant, Mike Masterson, newly 45 but still African American, sat at his desk closer to the front, since he was usually the one to bring in the mail bags. Mike, in a dark blue suit with coat still buttoned, sat with his head braced on one hand, elbow on the desk. He was silently reading from a program.

The third occupant of the office, Dave Pruett, square-jawed and six-foot-two, fighting a brave battle against the further loss of his blond hairs, was leaning back in his chair with his hands braced behind his head. Hollow-eyed, he was studying the acoustic tile ceiling, which offered no comfort in its perfection, given that Les is the one who had replaced the old ones. Dave only recently forgave him for that; still, he hadn’t yet figured out how to make them stained and broken like the ones in the Big Building Downtown without hurting himself. He had unbuttoned his coat, but not loosened his tie.

Mike cleared his throat and began summarizing from the program: “Medal of Valor. Commendation Award with Star. Life Saving Award. Distinguished Service Award. I never knew about the Medal of Valor.”

“He wouldn’t go to the ceremony. Said it wasn’t merited,” Sammy muttered, looking at the photo of Les Hawkins on the front of the program for the service provided by the funeral home.

“The old fart,” Dave barked, then abruptly leaned forward to hide the tears in his eyes.

“Well,” Sammy sighed, sitting up, “at least there was a good showing from the department. It was good of Chief Howell and Chief Kennedy to come.”

Mike turned. “Yeah, I saw you talking to Chief Kennedy, but he left before I could shake his hand. Is he still Chief of Police at Plano?”

“Only through the end of this year,” Sammy said. “He’s retiring to become a security consultant.”

“Smart,” Mike noted.

“Oh, yeah, he’ll get whatever he asks for,” Sammy agreed. “He didn’t mention it, but I heard that Chief Howell was begging him to come back to Dallas. I don’t think he’s inclined, though, since he got passed over for Chief.”

Mike snorted. “I wouldn’t. The politics would kill you before anything else.” Then he looked down at the photo of his mentor with a heavy heart.

That comment moved Sammy to open his laptop, being curious to follow up on hints of discord among top Dallas brass. When he began to search local news, however, his attention seized on an item about the recent disappearance of Sharon Betschelet, an employee of The Rivers Bank and close friend of the teller who had allegedly been strangled by her boss at the bank.

No one had seen or heard from Ms. Betschelet for two weeks. Her apartment was undisturbed; her car with her purse inside was found sitting in the apartment parking lot. The president of The Rivers Bank, Charles Whinnet, had no comment other than to say that all bank employees were cooperating with the police. At this point, foul play was not suspected. She had just... disappeared. Although she had no immediate family, bank employees had held a private prayer vigil for her. And a cousin in another state was making noises about her modest property.

Sammy opened his top desk drawer to look at her eyeglasses residing there, where he had put them atop the engraved invitation she had received to visit the Fletcher Streiker Arboretum. Sighing, he closed the drawer again.

As for Adair Weiss, the teller who had been strangled, all public information held out that she had died of heart failure after a year in a coma. But Sammy knew her to be very much alive, moving with as much freedom as her husband, reclusive billionaire philanthropist Fletcher Streiker. She’s the one who had dropped the orchids on Sammy’s desk, by the way. Literally.

Dave sat up and restlessly loosened his tie. “What d’you have working over there, Kidman?” MK & Associates generally occupied themselves with collecting past-due child support on a *pro bono* basis. Lately, Pruett had learned to coordinate with Sammy on all their cases.

Stroking his face, Sammy pulled open his second file drawer. Lying on top was the tantalizing Eoghan file. Mac Eoghan was as wily as any leprechaun in hiding his fortune from his ex-wife and their five children, but hours of painstaking research had led Sammy to a bank account in the Cayman Islands that should prove sufficient to disgorge the \$36,000 that Eoghan owed. Having done all the grunt work, Sammy was reluctant to give up this case, especially for Pruett to crow over afterward.

The missing orchids flashed across his mind. He vaguely hoped to regain them, or the favor they signified, by means of generosity toward his coworkers. So he deliberately took out the file and tossed it in Pruett’s direction. “I’ve hit a wall on this one. See what you can do.”

“Wienie,” agreed Pruett, gathering the scattered papers.

Sammy folded his hands in front of him, again looking at the empty place on his desk. It was fitting that the orchids should be withdrawn because Sammy hadn’t heard from Fletcher Streiker for two weeks. After Streiker had rescued MK & Associates from a colossal mistake three weeks ago, he had given Sammy some rather unusual assignments, which Sammy had completed to the best of his ability.

And then—silence. Every time Sammy tried to call him, the line was either busy or attended by an answering machine. Sammy had left four or five messages, then stopped trying.

He believed that Streiker was angry about Sammy’s willingness to blackmail the Threlkelds to get them to sign the adoption papers for Jess’ baby. Okay, the blackmail hadn’t really been necessary, but Sammy had enjoyed deploying it, which he was pretty sure didn’t sit well with Streiker.

And there had been nothing from the beautiful Adair, who had given Samuel, Jr., the first orchid. Yeah, her silence especially stung.

To distract himself from his perceived abandonment, Sammy looked over at Mike to say, “We have to do something for Sarah.”

“Yeah,” Mike agreed. Pruett said nothing, having opened his laptop to pick up the threads of Sammy’s research on Eoghan. Mike added, “Their only son died overseas, you know, and they’ve defaulted on their house payments. Les only owed, like, a couple of grand, but with this last hospitalization, Sarah couldn’t even get anyone at the mortgage company to return her calls.”

“I know,” Sammy said, lowering his eyes in empathy with her waiting on a phone call that never came. It had been really important to him to do a good job for Streiker. He couldn’t believe that he had managed to muck it up in just a week. *I’m sorry; I’m sorry*, he pleaded inwardly. *Give me another chance.*

They sat in silence a while longer. Sammy stirred. “You know, Sarah always enjoyed babysitting Sam for us. Maybe I can get her to come every day.”

Mike looked back at him skeptically. “Where’s she going to stay?”

“I can buy her a place near us,” Sammy said, absently chewing on a hangnail. There were advantages to winning the lottery, which Sammy had done a year ago last July. That’s why they had this agency to begin with.

Mike shook his head. “Sarah was getting as bad as Les about accepting help. She won’t let you take care of her.”

“I can talk her into it,” Sammy insisted, picking up the phone. He had a great belief, not unjustified, in his ability to sway women. He dialed her home phone number and waited, but it rang and rang without switching to an answering machine or being picked up.

He finally hung up in disgruntlement over being deprived of the opportunity to prove his irresistible charm once again. His phone rang right back, so he picked it up. “MK and associates. This is Sammy Kidman.”

“Hello, Sammy. Did you need to talk to me?” said Streiker.

“Yes! sir, I did. Thank you for returning my call. Uh, look, I’m really sorry about the, uh, the....” He lost the thread of his confession because he couldn’t remember what he was sorry for.

“Okay,” Streiker said. “Maybe I should clarify that if I’m upset with you about something, I’ll let you know. I don’t play passive-aggressive games of making you guess what’s wrong.”

“That’s good to know,” Sammy said, nodding.

“Having said that, I’m not real thrilled with how you aggravated Scarlett’s problem with lust. I don’t send people your way in order to stroke your ego, Sammy,” Streiker said.

He winced. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“All right. Is there anything else on your mind? I kind of have a backlog here,” Streiker said.

“I want another assignment,” Sammy blurted.

Streiker sighed, “Sammy, mostly I just want you to do the run-of-the-mill, everyday stuff that your family needs you to do without prompting from me. It’s a shame that you’re bored, but it’s not a high priority with me to make your day exciting.”

“Okay, but I need to know what to do for Sarah Hawkins,” Sammy said defensively.

“I’ll let you know,” Streiker said, and hung up.

“Yeah, but she needs help *now*,” Sammy grouched, also hanging up. Self-consciously, he glanced at Mike and Pruett, who appeared to be paying no attention. “That was Mr. Streiker,” he began to explain.

Pruett glanced at him as he picked up his own phone and Mike half-turned. “Were you talking with someone? I didn’t hear you say anything.”

“Oh. Never mind, then,” Sammy murmured.

He fidgeted restlessly for a while, but when the phone did not ring, he got up to go stand at Mike’s desk. “What’ve you got interesting, Mike?”

Mike sifted through the folders he had created of the most promising requests for help. Some were referrals from the Attorney General’s office, but many came as requests in the mail. Mike ran the initial credibility checks; if those panned out, he assigned them to the other two associates.

None of them gave a second thought as to how reliably they had replicated not only their working arrangement in the defunct Targeted Activity Section, but their office. Their wives, however, discussed this at length among themselves, and decided that it indicated how much the men trusted and respected each other, and how effective the protocols were that Mike had established for TAS cases, even those of questionable merit.

“Okay, Sammy,” Mike said, “now that Jan Breemont’s book about you is tied up in litigation, are you ready for another woman scofflaw?” It was true: someone *else* mentioned in La Breemont’s exposé of MK & Associates was suing her for libel, so the media’s interest in their little shopfront operation had declined accordingly.

Sammy had to think about that for a minute. Jan had proved herself considerably tougher than he had been prepared to handle, but since everything had turned out okay and her discarded family was considerably better off—and Pruett was watching—Sammy shrugged, “Sure. Lay it right here.”

He held out his hand, and Mike placed a file folder in it. Mike added, “This is particularly unusual because it came in the mail from Fletcher Streiker. I knew not to throw that one out.”

“Huh. Guess it was meant for me, then.” Sammy casually opened the folder as he strolled back to his desk, then came to a dead halt in the middle of the office. “Abby Max. Abby Max? Abby Max!” he cried, wheeling back to Mike.

“Is the name familiar?” he asked, deadpan—which was Mike’s usual expression.

“Uhhhh—” Sammy floundered while Pruett laughed behind his laptop. Yes, in fact, even the cultural dinosaurs of MK & Associates knew of her.

“Abby Max” was the screen name of this week’s most famous, or infamous, reality star. After finishing in the top three on “Abandoned in the Wild” two years ago, Abby had won a spot on “Can You Top That?” before breaking her arm in a stunt and having to drop out.

She came roaring back, however, as a regular on that season's "World's Most Outrageous Women," which showcased women demonstrating on location around the world that they had no modesty nor scruples when it came to cultivating fame. She was now star of her own new show titled, "Can You Top Abby Max?"

She was strong; she was loud; she was fearless; and she loved more than anything to humiliate or hurt the nearest man, preferably on a live feed. Also, she was a Texas resident who owed upwards of \$75,000 for the care of a special-needs child whose father had never been identified. Her elderly parents, the legal guardians of Abby's son, were already struggling to get by on a fixed income before Abby stopped making deposits to their account. Then she changed her phone number.

Staring at her sneering photo in the file, Sammy could almost hear Streiker say, "*You wanted another assignment? Okay, here you go.*"

The office phone rang; as Mike picked it up on his desk, Sammy said, "Well, I'll look forward to tackling this interesting case after I figure out what to do about Sarah. We need to take care of the people closest to us, first," he lectured.

"This is Mrs. K, Sammy." Mike gestured with the handset toward the blinking button on the phone on Sammy's desk. That Sammy's wife Marni was the boss of the agency, and not Sammy, was a fact which Mike and Pruett were careful to keep uppermost in everyone's mind.

Sammy sat and answered, "Hey. What's up?"

"Hi, Sammy. Oh, that was a really nice service for Les, wasn't it?" his wife said.

"Yeah," he exhaled. "We're all going to miss him like crazy."

"I know you will," Marni said in genuine sympathy. "Sarah is just exhausted after all she's been through the last couple of months."

"Yeah," he said earnestly, shifting. "We need to talk about what we can do for her."

"We?" she said airily. "Why, 'we' don't need to do anything for her."

Her light tone should have tipped him off that something was afoot, but he was intent on making use of this opportunity to escape confronting Abby Max about her past-due child support. "C'mon, Marni; we can't let the mortgage company put her out on the street."

"She won't be out on the street; she'll be six blocks from us," Marni teased.

"Eh?" was his articulate rejoinder.

She laughed. "Oh, this is just so amazing, you won't believe it. Mom and Dad are taking Sarah into their home to help with Adair whenever they have to go someplace."

"Adair?" he said, heart stopping.

"Yes, Sammy, I told you they were changing Jess' baby's name; nobody likes 'Augusta' or 'Gussie.' Her new, legal name is Adair Marie Taylor," Marni said patiently. Pam and Clayton Taylor, Marni's parents, had successfully adopted the neglected great-grandchild of society maven Dolly Threlkeld.

"Yes, you told me," he admitted. "So Sarah's moving in with your folks? What's happening with her house?"



“Oh, well, Dad told her that since the mortgage company was being so hard-nosed about it, to let them have it. She was too exhausted to do anything—Mom said she sat on the bed and cried while Mom packed some suitcases for her. She just left everything—Les’ clothes, dishes, furniture, even food in the refrigerator,” she told him. “Oh, and this is important: she’s leaving no forwarding address.”

“Wow,” he muttered. “They already have her moved in?”

“Yep,” Marni said. “Mom even gave Sarah her choice of rooms: the clutter room downstairs or my old room upstairs. The clutter room doesn’t have stairs, but it doesn’t have a private bath. You have to climb stairs to get to my old bedroom, but it does have a private bath. Sarah chose that room, so they’re going to redecorate it for her. But for now, she just went on up and went to bed.”

“Then where’s Gussie—I mean, Adair?” he asked.

“Right now she’s still in a bassinet in Mom and Dad’s bedroom, but they’re fixing up the room across the hall as a nursery. They still have another empty bedroom down the hall,” Marni said.

“Well, that’s—now why would Sarah let them take care of her?” he demanded, hurt over being turned down for something he hadn’t offered yet.

Marni explained, “Well, you know, who’s taking care of whom? Sarah went gaga over Adair just like Mom did when she first saw her. And Sarah has such a green thumb—you remember she’s the one who selected the plants for our back yard. [Sammy nodded.] Mom told her, ‘Have at it,’ with their back yard. And Sarah won’t have to drive any more; Mom or Dad will take her wherever she needs to go.”

“Wow. Your parents are so great,” he murmured, not even thinking about what that meant for him today.

“I know,” she said smugly. “Sarah will need a few days’ rest, but as soon as she feels up to it, we’re going to have a big family gathering with the Mastersons and the Pruetts. If the weather’s good, we may go to the Fletcher Streiker Arboretum. Depends on what Sarah wants.”

“I vote for the Arboretum,” he said quickly.

“You don’t count,” she laughed. “Okay, I know you have a lot of work to catch up on. Hey, wasn’t it nice of Jan Breemont to go and get herself sued so that you all could work in peace? Oh, I still don’t have a new key to your office. Oh, and, the guys and I may be over at my parents’ whenever you get home. It is just so funny to watch them with a little baby girl. Adair is going to be spoiled rotten. Bye!”

Sammy slowly hung up, then looked at the folder full of bad news on his desk. Muttering, he pulled it toward him to look for Abby’s parents’ address. The first step was to interview them, then he’d tackle Ms. Max. Yeah, he could handle her. Sammy smiled.

Almost before the temptation sidled over him, he seemed to hear Streiker say, “*You can’t use your sexuality with her, Sammy.*”

“I know,” he said virtuously. “That would be wrong.”

“*It’s wrong because it won’t work.*”

“Oh,” he said, deflated. “Well, we’ll figure that out as we go. Right now, let’s see....” Abby’s parents were Frank and Helena Catriona, 65 and 62, respectively, and their autistic grandson, Ripley, was 8. They lived in Dallas, Sammy noted with interest. That would make it easier to contact them. And their address was on... West 12th Street. The fact that there was no phone number in the file necessitated a personal visit.

Sammy grew uneasy. He knew that area on the west side of Dallas very well; it had been the site of many drug operations and Vice stings. The area had been declining when he worked undercover there 5, 6 years ago, and since Mama's Restaurant had closed—when?—Marni had flatly refused to go out that way to eat, with or without the guys (their sons Sam, Jr., soon to be 3, and Clay, 6 months old. Bubba, the 90-pound rescue mutt, usually got himself included as one of the guys.)

Standing, Sammy closed the file and took it with him to the door. "I'm going out to interview Abby's parents."

Mike swiveled. "You got your phone, Sammy?" He had seen the address.

Sammy patted his pocket. "Yeah." As Pruett looked up in sudden concern at Mike's question, Sammy went on out.

Because the clouds had been heavy when he came down here after the funeral, Sammy had left the top up on his classic 1966 Mustang, lime green. He did not lower it now.

Stuffing Abby's folder in the glove compartment, he pulled out of the parking lot and turned down the access road to a side street that would take him to his old turf, barely 20 minutes away.

He cruised down this street placidly, checking landmarks here and there. They were a little seedier, he noticed. Then, at an invisible demarcation, the atmosphere of the streets went from depressing to ominous.

Driving down the potholed, trashed-out streets, he grew tense. Businesses that he had once patronized were now shuttered. Windows were broken out on apartment houses that used to be full.

He stepped on the brakes to study the graffiti on the side of a service station, now closed. There was a new gang in town, and they'd left their signs all over the dominant gang's messages. "This is not good," Sammy whispered.

Starting down the street again, he glanced up at street signs riddled with bullet holes, and glimpsed stealthy bodies flitting from building to building. There was no one out walking, or shopping, or even just hanging out. Everybody was either hiding or... weaponing up.

Pulling up to the Catrionas' address on West 12th, Sammy cut the engine to look. It was just a hole, really—a tiny apartment wedged between a liquor store and a pawn shop, both of which were probably covers for gang activity.

Sammy understood how they had probably come to this state: 30 years ago, it was a nice little neighborhood of shops and apartments; the owners and their extended families lived and worked and went to school all in the same ten-block neighborhood.

But as the gangs moved in, the families moved out until only the most stubborn or the most vulnerable were left to fight the creeping anarchy. It had become a war zone in the middle of Dallas: mail delivery stopped, city services vanished. Sammy exhaled, shifting to neutral and climbing out of the car. Whatever the Catrionas' financial condition, they couldn't stay here long. How long, he wasn't sure—

Sammy suddenly focused on three gang members as they stepped out of a doorway nearby. They were armed with semi-automatic pistols, he noted, and not even trying to hide it. They emerged in a triad to assume a position of authority on the sidewalk, staring him down as he stood by his car.

Sammy was unarmed. He raised his hands and walked toward the trio. Standing in front of the leader, who, in his late teens, was both taller and heavier than his 36-year-old self, Sammy said, "There's an old couple and a little

boy who live in that house. They got nothing; they're no use to you; I just want to get them out. Please let me get them out before you start up."

The hood looked down on him through slitted eyes. "You better hurry."

"Thanks," Sammy breathed, and he turned to run back to the Catrionas' house. Leaping up the crooked front steps, he banged on the door. "Mr. Catriona! Frank! Frank!"

The door was opened, and a man who was still tall and strong looked out at him. Sammy said, "I'm here on behalf of your daughter. Grab your wallet and your medications; get Mrs. Catriona and Ripley and come with me now, please. Your street is about to become a shooting gallery."

The man looked outside as his wife brought up Ripley, who was swaying rhythmically. Sammy said, "Mrs. Catriona, please come with me. They're going to start popping each other any minute. You've got to get out."

"Helena, take Rip out to his car," Frank said, moving back into the house.

She urged the boy out, who resisted until he saw Sammy's Mustang. Sammy hurried to open the passenger door and push up the front seat. "Hey, Rip, let's ride!" he said, eyeing the rival gang members begin to line up on either end of the street. They were filling the street at both ends, sealing it off for the battle without regard for the civilians trapped here with them.

The boy came out and Mrs. Catriona pushed him into the back seat, climbing in after him. Sammy dropped into the driver's seat, leaving the passenger door open. "Fasten your seat belts, please; it's going to be a bumpy ride," he said, starting the engine.

Frank came running out with a purse and a pouch under arm; the moment he had flung himself into the passenger seat and slammed the door, Sammy peeled out down the street toward the line of gangbangers, who whipped out their weapons.

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## Chapter 2

“Get down!” Sammy cried as the gangbangers began firing. Frank braced himself on the dashboard and ducked. Two bullets hit the windshield and another ripped through the top, but after getting off that initial volley, the hoods jumped back from the oncoming vehicle. Sammy veered up on the sidewalk to avoid hitting any of them as he shifted into third gear, and the V-8 engine responded. In the back seat, Ripley was screaming.

Sammy bounced the Mustang back into the street, skidded around a corner, and then fishtailed onto the thoroughfare to take them back to civilization, only a mile or two away.

Twisting to look over his shoulder while trying to keep the car in his own lane, Sammy asked, “Is anybody hit? Anybody hurt?” The sunlight glinting off the cracks in the windshield periodically blinded him. Ripley continued to scream.

Frank was talking to him in a calm, steady voice, so Sammy shut up and let him talk; Sammy himself had plenty to do just driving. By hunching over the wheel, he was able to see the lane markings so that he could maneuver into the far right lane, checking for a safe place to pull over. Once they were well beyond the war zone, Sammy managed to find the entrance to the parking lot of a church. He whipped in and set the brake.

Breathing out, he turned around to look for blood. Seeing none, he watched Frank talk Ripley down from his hysteria. His grandmother was holding him, stroking his head, and he gradually quieted down.

With that situation in hand, Sammy began assessing the damage to his car. He reached over to feel the bullet holes, and determined that they had not pierced the windshield. The slug that had ripped the convertible top had not entered the interior, either. Having ascertained all that, he turned to quietly watch the boy.

“Charlie, Charlie, Charlie,” Ripley said 25 or 30 times, rocking.

His grandfather explained, “That’s a toy truck we left in the house. So, Abigail sent you? You seem to know us. Who are you?”

In the confines of the front seat, Sammy offered his hand. “Sammy Kidman of MK and Associates. We’re negotiating with your daughter to get you the past-due child support she owes.”

Frank shook his hand. “Well, if she sent you, then can we expect to hear from her soon?” he asked hopefully. “Our last letter to her was returned as undeliverable.”

Sammy glanced back at Ripley, who was now rocking silently. His grandmother still held him lovingly. “Well, actually, I haven’t made contact with her yet. I was coming out to interview you first. We... didn’t realize how dangerous your living situation had become.”

“I see.” Frank said. He took off his glasses and cleaned them on his worn flannel shirt.

Sammy sat staring over the wheel at the kaleidoscope created by his cracked windshield. The family had literally nothing but the clothes on their backs and whatever Frank had grabbed coming out.

Sammy’s mind was racing ahead as to how he would explain to Marni (who controlled the checkbook) the need for buying everything for them—then he realized that their first need was someplace to stay. Where? A hotel?

He glanced back at Ripley, now snapping his fingers. “Hey, that’s pretty good,” Sammy said, snapping along with him. But the boy never looked at him or altered his pattern, so Sammy stopped. He turned to ask Frank, “How long had you lived at that apartment?”

“Oh, gosh, forty-three years. It didn’t start getting bad until, eh, five years ago. But the gangs came long before then. Abigail started dating a boy in a gang when she was fifteen—did we have some discussions about *that*. She was not inclined to listen to anything the old man had to say.

“She finally left home the following year, then came back two years later, pregnant. She dropped Ripley on us, then left again,” Frank said.

“She’s—twenty-eight?” Sammy asked, surprised.

Frank nodded. As if reading his thoughts, he said, “Looks older, doesn’t she? Wild living ages you.”

Sammy nodded minutely. “Well, I’ll find her and talk to her. Right now we need to find you someplace to stay.”

Given that he was unable to see much out of the windshield, Sammy got out. First, he checked his car over thoroughly, and noted only one bullet hole in the right front fender. That was all the additional damage he could find—nothing that Ed’s Body Shop couldn’t handle.

Now, what parking lot was this? He looked around, staring up at the church spires. They looked familiar. Then he turned to see the sign for the cross street.

“Ha!” he laughed in mild disbelief. No wonder it looked familiar—he had been here just this morning for Les’ funeral, and that is the street the Hawkinses lived on.

He put a finger thoughtfully to his lips, then sat back behind the wheel and disengaged the brake. “Okay, everybody still strapped in? I have an idea.”

Squinting around the cracks in his windshield, he drove a few blocks to the Hawkinses’ house. He pulled up in the drive behind the pickup, then got out to survey the house. It looked just the same as always—modest, a little run down, but sound.

“Okay, let’s... go in and look around,” he said tentatively. The Catrionas just as tentatively emerged from the car. Sammy went up to the front door and tried the doorknob. It was unlocked, so he opened it and went inside. “Hello? Anybody here?” he called. No one answered.

It looked as if Les and Sarah had just gone for a walk around the block, or were maybe sitting in their back yard. Noting a set of keys sitting on the kitchen table, Sammy picked them up. They were the keys to the house, the storage shed in the back yard, and the pickup in the drive.

Sammy went through the two-bedroom house, which was clean and orderly, as any Hawkins home would be. A double bed in the small master bedroom was neatly made, as was the single bed in the second bedroom. All of Les’ clothes were hanging in his closet, and some of Sarah’s were still in hers. An old vacuum cleaner sat in the linen closet, along with sheets and towels. The bathroom had wash cloths, soap, toilet paper, and even pretty little guest towels laid out. Pictures were still on the wall, and a vase of fresh flowers, unwilted, stood on the television set.

Returning to the kitchen, Sammy checked the back yard, which boasted a vibrant garden and a patio set under the shade of an old tree. Yep, Les and Sarah had just walked down to the church or the corner market, and would be back shortly. Blinking back tears, Sammy went back to the front porch, where the family was waiting.

“Come on in,” he said, opening the door for them. Leading them to the kitchen, he looked in the pantry. Yep, it was stocked with bread, canned goods, flour, sugar, all the staples. Checking the refrigerator, he found fresh milk, eggs, cheese, butter and produce from Sarah’s garden.

“Okay,” he said, pulling out his phone, “make yourselves at home. You’re welcome to eat whatever you want and use whatever you need.”

“Why... thank you,” Frank said, leading Ripley to a chair. Helena immediately began opening kitchen cabinets. “Do you live here alone?” Frank asked.

“No,” Sammy said absently, then put his phone to his ear, walking away a few steps. When Marni answered, he said, “Hi, baby. Listen, ah, what’s the status of the Hawkinses’ house with the bank?”

“I have no idea. I could ask Dad to look into it,” she replied.

“Okay, that would be great. Are you still at their house? Is Sarah up?”

“Yes and no,” she said.

“Okay, hmm. Will Sarah be coming back to her house? Or does she need anything from here?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. What’s up, Sammy?”

“Well, I’ve got a family that had to leave their home with nothing, and I was hoping to park them here while I get them the child support they’re owed,” he explained.

“Ohh, okay. I’ll ask Sarah when she wakes up, but I’m sure she wouldn’t mind,” Marni said.

“Okay, and, what about their pickup?” he asked.

She paused. “What about it?”

“Does she need it?” he clarified.

“No, Sammy; that was Les’ truck, you know. She didn’t much like driving it when he was alive.”

“Okay then. Talk to you later,” he said.

“I love you, Sammy.”

“Oh, man, do I love you, baby,” he said.

He repocketed his phone and returned to the kitchen, where Helena had begun preparing a meal. “It will be ready in just a minute,” she said timidly.

“Thank you, Mrs. Catriona, but I can’t stay.” Sammy gave the keys to Frank. “Okay, I got permission for you to stay here until we can get your past-due support to you. You’re welcome to use the pickup and anything in the house. Oh, and, there’s a nice vegetable garden in back that probably needs tending.” As he spoke, he pulled an agency business card from his coat pocket to give to Frank, as well.

The Catrionas stared at him and each other. Glancing at the card, Frank said, “I... don’t quite know what to say, other than ‘thank you.’ Is this part of your normal services?”

“Oh, we’re not normal,” Sammy assured him, picking up the receiver from the phone on the kitchen counter. Hearing a dial tone, he replaced it and said, “Well, it’s still working, for now.”

He bent over a writing pad with a pen. “Okay, here’s my phone number...” He paused, then crossed that out. “I’m always leaving it someplace. Here’s my car phone number—”

He stopped and crossed that out, too. “Which will be in the shop. Okay. Here’s the phone number of my in-laws, the Taylors. They will help you with anything you need, and the owner of this house, a widow, is staying with them.”

Sammy handed the number to Frank, who took it slowly, saying, “We’re certainly willing to pay rent.” Helena was looking out the window to the fenced back yard.

“We’ll get all that worked out later,” Sammy said, moving toward the door. He noted Ripley quietly eating a sandwich, then added, “I’m going to go talk to your daughter.”

Frank looked at him without responding, so Sammy asked, “Do you have any advice for me on how to approach her?”

“If I knew that, we wouldn’t be in this position, would we?” Frank asked mildly. Sammy snorted in acknowledgment and turned to go.

It was touch-and-go getting to Ed’s Body Shop with the Mustang’s visibility reduced to 30 percent or so. There was no way Sammy was getting on the freeway, so he had to stay on the frontage road, driving other drivers nuts. Sure, he could have called a wrecker, but.... Well, in fact, he should have called a wrecker. But by the time he admitted that, he was pulling into Ed’s lot.

Dr. Ed himself came out to look at the Mustang, attended by his son and nephew. “Sammy,” he said in a mixture of wonder and grief, “as much as you say you love this car, you have done more damage to it than anybody I can think of over the last twenty years.”

“Ed, I didn’t shoot up my car. That was somebody else,” Sammy said righteously. “I might be out of pocket when you get it fixed, so call my father-in-law, Clayton Taylor. You got Clayton’s number?” Sammy asked, feeling his pockets for his notepad.

“Sure I do, Sammy. Mr. Taylor is a good customer. He doesn’t destroy his vehicles like you do,” Ed said sadly.

“Don’t judge me; just fix it, please,” Sammy huffed, turning to the waiting area to sign out a rental car. All they had ready to go right now was a purple—a *purple*—Volvo. Sammy checked all the boxes and signed the form without really noting the color until they drove it up to the front for him.

He blinked at it, imagining what a strong impression it would make on Abby Max when he roared up in *this*. She’d whip out her checkbook just to get it out of her driveway.

He sighed and drove it away. Then he had to come right back in order to retrieve the garage-door opener and the folder on Abby that he had left in the glove compartment of the Mustang.

Then it was back out in Barney the Volvo. On the freeway, strangers pulled up alongside him to point and laugh, holding up their camera phones. Sammy, ever the philosopher, just considered it part of his punishment for being so hot.

He endured the giggling clerk in the drive-through lane to get tacos and a soft drink, then found no cup holder for his drink. The car was an automatic, which meant he kept stepping on a phantom clutch pedal while waving

in the air for a nonexistent stick shift. He arrived back at the office with broken tacos and a large wet spot in the area of his lap.

When he entered, Mike and Dave both looked out to the purple blot on the parking lot and then watched him take his late lunch to his desk. “What happened to your car, Sambo?” Mike asked.

“It got shot up,” Sammy said, “and is now resting comfortably with Dr. Ed.”

“Anybody hurt?” Dave asked in a strained voice.

“Not by the time we left,” Sammy said, eating pieces of taco from the wrapper. “But some gangbangers are probably not going to wake up tomorrow morning. I took Abby’s family to stay at the Hawkinses’ house—Marni’s going to clear it with Sarah. They were humble and appreciative.” He stopped talking to eat.

Mike and Dave looked at him and then each other; Sammy was uncharacteristically silent, inwardly focused. “So,” Dave resumed, “you going out to talk to Abby?”

At that point, Sammy raised his face, wiping his hands. “Oh, yes, my fellow investigator. I am going in that classy purple wagon out yonder to talk to Ms. Max. We will jaw-jaw, and she will cough up seventy-five grand for her decent, impoverished family. Oh, yes, she will.”

As he rose to stuff his fast-food trash into the can beside his desk, he paused to look in it. There was nothing in it except the liner, so he went out the back door to look in the alley bin.

He couldn’t climb in it while wearing his suit, and he couldn’t reach in far enough to check through the bags, but he didn’t think his orchids were here. They were gone.

Hands on the bin, he lowered his head between his outstretched arms. “Lord Jesus, I’m going to talk to her and... help. I don’t care what she does to me, but she’s got to understand that she can’t turn her back on her family like this. Help. Help me—”

He suddenly pulled out his phone to auto-dial a number. Hearing the answering machine come on *again*, he said, “Mr. Streiker, I know you’re a busy guy, but do you think you could send me some help on this case? I’d sure appreciate knowing that—someone had my back with Ms. Max. Thank you, sir.”

He knew whose help he wanted, but he wouldn’t specify in case he was being presumptuous. But somebody who dropped orchids on people through thin air, and who had taken a strong interest in his family—well, she had to be interested in the Catrionas, too. After all, Streiker had given him this assignment.

Expelling a breath, he reentered the office to wash his hands in the restroom, then use the restroom and wash his hands again. As he headed for the front door, Mike asked, “You still got your phone, Sambo?”

Sammy stopped and felt his pocket. “Yes!” he said in pleased surprise. Mike grunted and Dave watched Sammy walk out.

He climbed into the purple monstrosity, reminded himself that it was an automatic, then reached for the glove compartment to fish out Abby’s file again. He stopped dead upon seeing the orchid spike lying in the passenger seat. The blooms were purple.

Sammy grinned, touching the fresh, delicate blooms. Adair had struck again. “Thank you,” he whispered.



He was rather proud of having kissed her right in front of her husband—Streiker—which had merely amused her. No, she wasn't in love with Sammy, but she had undeniably helped him. And, no, he didn't lust after her, either, knowing that she belonged to someone far above him on the ladder.

But the sight of new, unwilting flowers in the car encouraged him more than just about anything else right now. Except—

Sammy pulled out his phone and called Marni. “Hello!” she said, a little anxiously.

“Hey, everything's fine. I just wanted to let you know that I'm on my way to talk to Abby Max,” he said.

“*Abby Max?* The reality star?” she repeated in shock.

“Yeah. Did I forget to mention that it's her family I left at the Hawkinses' house? Oh, hey—did you talk to Sarah?”

She said slowly, “Yes, and she said that's fine; she doesn't want to go back to that house without Les. She's still... just very tired, and grieving so deeply.”

“I can imagine,” he said, swallowing. “Les could drive people almost as crazy as I could, but man, he had your back.”

They were silent a moment, then she said, “So Abby Max owes child support? Gosh, she should be able to pay; she's earned millions from those shows.”

“That's what we're going to discuss,” he said. Closing his eyes, he said, “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, Sammy.” There was a faint crash and wail, and she said quickly, “Bubba and Sam love you, too. Bye.”

Mildly snorting, he put his phone away, then opened Abby's folder to find her address. As he figured, it was in a tony area of Irving, close to the studios of Las Colinas.

After taking a moment to study the knobs and handles in the Volvo, he turned the ignition, turned on the heater, and swung out of the lot. It was starting to get cold now, and a light mist was falling.

On the freeway to Irving, he no longer saw the people who laughed at his car; he was contemplating the best approach to Ms. Max. But... after his experience with La Breemont, he realized that formulating an approach in advance probably wouldn't work; he'd have to wing it.

The one clear directive he'd received from Streiker (that *was* Streiker, right?) was that he couldn't use seduction at all. Asking “why?” was kind of beside the point, but he guessed that a woman who delighted in humiliating men wasn't going to be charmed into cooperating with one.

“And sure not a woman who lives in this area,” he muttered, exiting to her street. Of course, it was in a gated community. Abby Max lived in a gated community.

“She rappels over the wall at night,” he predicted. What he was not able to predict was how he would get past the gatekeeper.

Swinging around a corner, he saw that it was an unnecessary concern, as the gate was standing open. He drove through with a casual wave to the gatehouse, then saw that it was unoccupied. Watching street signs, he turned

another corner, then pulled up to a sprawling Spanish-style house. After parking along the curb, he rechecked the house number.

On a thought, he paused to pull out his phone and make sure that he could access the Catrionas' account on the secure state child-support payment site. The state had begun insisting that Marni's associates use this pipeline instead of paying the monies they collected directly to the families.

Marni's crew vastly preferred their old method, but this silky, irrevocable option to pay did make some collections easier. For some people, giving up numbers wasn't as hard as handing over a check. And more deadbeats were ditching checking accounts altogether. (They didn't realize until too late that the state payment site could access payroll accounts as well.)

After locating the Catrionas' account and finding it all in order, Sammy climbed out of the Volvo. He exhaled, "Okay, Abby, let me have it."

He walked up the cobbled drive around the yard crew. *Who would have a yard crew working in late November?* he scowled. *Somebody who was either status-conscious or forgetful about canceling them over the winter.* And it irked him that she would shell out for yard maintenance but not child maintenance.

He reached the large half-round porch to ring the doorbell. At times like this, he was grateful for his years interacting with the Threlkelds: mansions no longer intimidated him, and while this was certainly a \$2-million property, it was no mansion. Waiting, he took a business card from his coat pocket.

As he expected, a maid answered the door. Smiling professionally, he handed her his card and said, "My name is Sammy Kidman. I'd like to visit with Ms. Max about her family. Please give her my card; tell her I'll be brief."

"Just a moment, please," she murmured, closing the door.

While he was thinking about what to do if she never came back, he heard the slight whirring of a motor overhead. Glancing up, he caught a glint from a security camera lens.

*Oh, well, that's fine. Have a look.* He raised his face as if studying the framing around the fanlight. It was not an illegal use of charm for him to let her see his face.

He was gratified when, a minute later, the maid returned to open the door. She stepped back for him to enter, murmuring, "This way, please."

He followed her back to a large recreation room decorated in garish black and white and red leather. There was a modernistic fireplace in one corner, a pool table in another, and a bar along the back wall.

Two men were playing pool beneath the large-screen wall-mounted television. A bartender stood on duty at the bar, and two women with drinks were lounging in front of the fireplace, in which a small fire smoldered.

On the right, French doors looked out onto a terraced pool. In front of these doors was a grouping of zebra-skin furniture. Abby Max in the flesh sat on a loveseat, flanked by a man and a woman in the armchairs beside her.

Upon Sammy's entrance, all eight people in the room paused to look him over. In the few seconds before he spoke, he studied his object.

Abby Max had a square face, a broad nose, slightly puffy eyes, and a chafed complexion. Her hair was by far her most attractive feature: thick and blond, cut shoulder-length. It was beautiful enough to be a wig, but Sammy had seen photos of it wet, mussed, and plastered down with sweat and mud. It was real, all right.

She wore a tank top and stretch pants that emphasized a fine physique, except for a little excess padding in the stomach and hips. Overall, she was attractive mostly because of her supremely confident bearing.

She appraised him while dragging on a cigarette. Occupied as he was studying her, he did not apprehend at once that the cloud of smoke neither pained his lungs nor brought back nicotine cravings.

Sammy walked right over to her and held out his hand. “Ms. Max, I’m Sammy Kidman of MK and associates. I’ve come on behalf of your family. May we talk in private?”

“No. Have a seat.” She gestured with the cigarette. Her other hand held his business card lightly.

“Thank you,” he said, and paused. The two arm chairs on either side of her settee were occupied. He could sit on the loveseat beside her, but that was not conducive to what he had to tell her. So he sat on the edge of the coffee table facing her.

They evaluated each other for a minute. “What’ll you have to drink?” she asked, taking a drag on the cigarette.

“Nothing, thank you,” he replied. Her courtesy was disconcerting; it meant that she wanted to play with him. *Okay, if that’s what it takes*, he thought.

Clearing his throat, he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands. “I appreciate your giving me a hearing. It’s personal, and not particularly pleasant. I’d rather talk to you in private.”

She exhaled smoke through her nostrils, still studying him. “Is this about Ripley?”

“Yes. Your family evacuated their apartment today under gunfire from a gang war. They left with nothing but the clothes they wore—your mom took her purse, too, I believe. But Ripley had to leave Charlie and all his other toys.”

He paused, but she did not react, so he went on: “You are about seventy-five thousand dollars in arrears on your child-support payments. This would be a great time to get caught up on your obligations. They have nothing; they can’t go back to get anything.”

Still she said nothing. The man in the chair beside her evaluated Sammy coolly, but the girl in the other chair had her face down. She was young, with dark hair cut in a ragged, trendy pixie, but that’s about all he could see of her.

He did note (because he had radar for this kind of thing) that she was studying the wedding band on his left hand. It was an unusual style: tungsten inlaid with wood, which matched Marni’s. (She had wanted something “different.”) And without looking, he was aware that the people on the other side of the room were listening.

By the time 30 seconds of silence had elapsed, Sammy was on the point of telling Abby that he was authorized to haul her callous rear end downtown for that level of nonpayment. But then she said, “You seem very concerned about my family.”

He evaluated that, then responded, “It’s my job. But beyond that, I believe they deserve what you owe them.”

Something about him caught her attention. She leaned forward, reaching for the ashtray beside his leg. He held the ashtray out to her lest she miss it and drop hot ashes on his suit pants instead. “You’re a good-looking man.”

“Thank you. But this isn’t about me.”

“Maybe it is, and maybe it isn’t,” she replied, smiling. “How would you like to be on TV?”

Sensing the lead-in to a proposition, he did not verbalize the first decisively negative response that crossed his mind. At his obvious disinclination, the man beside her grew interested. “Dude, he doesn’t want to at all.”

Sammy glanced at him. In his early 30s, he had short black hair, hipster glasses, a small, neat soul patch, and a studiously trendy suit. Sammy looked back at Abby. Using her strategy against her, he said nothing.

“No?” Abby said, studying him. “What if I agree to pay the past-due support if you agree to do my show?”

Sammy smiled patiently. “If you don’t pay your past-due support, I don’t have to do anything but call the cops. Criminal nonsupport is a state jail felony. I’m just trying to get it done quietly, without getting all legal on you.” Besides which, resorting to having deadbeats arrested only guaranteed a longer wait for the families who needed the money yesterday.

The girl beside Abby was watching him now, but he kept his eyes on Ms. Max, who grinned at him. “Are you a betting man?”

“That depends on how much I like the bet,” he said.

“I’ll make a payment for seventy-five grand this afternoon,” she said. “But if you go on my show, I’ll make a payment of a hundred-fifty grand instead.”

Sammy blinked. “All right,” he said.

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## Chapter 3

“Here are the conditions for me going on your show,” Sammy said. “First, you will immediately pay the seventy-five grand you owe to the state disbursement unit.” This was one of those times when the official pipeline was a plus. He didn’t trust her to honor a check.

“The second seventy-five grand will be what we’re betting on. You can’t use my real name anywhere, ever. Also, I can’t show my face. There are people who want me dead and I’m not gonna facilitate that. I will do nothing obscene on your show, and if I feel it’s unacceptably degrading or dangerous, I’m walking away.”

Sitting up, hands planted on his knees, he continued, “You have to allow me the same amount of time and equipment to prepare for a challenge that you get yourself. If I don’t know how to do something, that’s too bad for me, but I get to practice beforehand as much as you do.”

With the rapt attention of everyone in the room, he continued: “We’ll put all these terms in a contract here today with at least two of these people signing as witnesses. If you want your lawyer on hand, I’ll come back when he’s available, but not unless you make your past-due payment in full today. So, are you good with all that?” he asked amiably.

The guy next to her, whom Sammy decided was an executive on her show, said, “Letting him cover his face is a nonstarter. If nobody knows who he is, he’ll just walk through it without even trying.”

Sammy sneered at him. “Maybe that’s what you would do, but I’ve got some pride.”

The guy fixed him with a glare, but Abby said, “Then let’s make it worth his while to put out. If you make it through three events, I pay the extra seventy-five grand. If you beat me in two events, I pay an extra hundred-fifty grand.”

Sammy smiled. “I like you, Abby,” he said, and meant it. Then he added, “I get to pick one of the events.” At this stipulation, she paused, and he coaxed, “Aw, c’mon. You’ll have final say. It’s your show. But viewers like a little suspense, and how much drama is it for you to walk all over me without a fight?”

“You’re on,” she said.

“Put it all in a contract,” he said.

“Nash, write it up.” She jerked her head toward the man at her side.

“Wait,” Sammy said. He pulled out his phone, brought up the Catrionas’ account, and handed it to Nash. “Enter her bank’s routing number, her account number, and the amount of seventy-five thousand. Enter an email address for the deposit confirmation.”

Nash took Sammy’s phone, quickly looking at Abby. She cocked her head at Sammy and uttered, “Do it.” Then she put out the cigarette—deliberately grinding, twisting, and smashing it into the ashtray he held.

He looked down at it. “That’s my face, isn’t it?” She smiled contemplatively at him.

Nash entered the numbers off the top of his head, then handed the phone back to Sammy. He noted the transaction confirmation. “All righty! We’re on.”

Over the next hour, they hammered out the specific wording of the contract. To be sociable, Sammy accepted a beer, but then required that the bartender and the other four hangers-on leave during negotiations. They hadn't heard his name and he wanted to keep the knowledgeable group as tight as possible.

The girl sitting on Abby's left turned out to be her personal assistant, Meadow. She was young, quiet and efficient, and said nothing to Sammy. Studying her, he received distant past vibrations, as though he had seen her before in some official capacity. But he couldn't remember, and there was nothing he could do about it now even if he did. Part of the problem was, she wouldn't look at him. It was hard to get a fix on her face when she wouldn't look him in the eye. So Sammy put the question away for the time being.

By five o'clock, they had an agreement worked out and signed, with the further arrangement that Sammy was to show up at nine AM tomorrow morning at the Half Crazy Studios just ten minutes from here. And henceforth his name was Yves Leandro—an unlikely name suggested by Meadow. "I like it," he said. "Makes me sound like a designer. We'll have a sketching contest."

Abby laughed warmly. He smiled, watching her use *her* charm on *him*. The illusion of goodwill she projected made it all the more surprising to the victim, and gratifying to the victor, when she would finally crush his head. "Stay for dinner," she said, nodding toward obvious preparations in the adjoining dining room.

"No, thank you. I have to go find out all there is to know about you," he returned pleasantly.

Her cordial veneer slipped and her teeth came together with sudden vehemence. Immediately she recovered. "Are you going to ask Rip about Mommy?" she suggested.

He evaluated her. What kind of a person made her disabled child the butt of a joke? "No, I'm going to leave your family in peace. I think they've suffered enough." He turned to extend his hand to Nash. "You're going to have fun watching your boss annihilate me."

"I sure will," Nash grinned, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

"Meadow," Sammy said, extending his hand to her, but she abruptly turned and walked away. "Well, I guess Meadow's not on Team Yves," he noted regretfully. Then he stretched a hand to Abby. "Death before dishonor, right?"

"If you like," she said. She shook his hand and he departed with his copy of the signed contract.

Standing over the purple Volvo at the curb, he returned to reality. "Why did I agree to that?" he wondered. "Marni would so much rather just give that family a hundred-fifty grand than see me do this." Sitting, he glanced at the purple orchids on the seat, drawing comfort from them.

He reached out for a car phone that wasn't there. He put his hand on the phone in his pocket, then decided to get a little more information before checking in with his coworkers. So he started the engine and pulled away.

He drove to the Half Crazy Studio lot to familiarize himself with the layout. Slowly, he drove around for the next 15 minutes, just looking. A few studio employees eyed his car on their way out, but no one chased him down. He noted that there was a large outdoor lot he couldn't see till he got past the locked gate. That would have to wait till tomorrow. Parking in the visitors' lot, he pulled out his phone and called the office.

"Hello, Sammy. How'd it go?" Pruett answered.

Surprised by his straightforward greeting without snark or insults, Sammy paused. "Well, I got Abby all caught up—"

“I saw that on the log,” Dave noted, “and was just wondering what you did to her.”

“Welllll,” Sammy drew out the word in an accidentally high pitch. “That’s what I need help with right now. I need to talk to anybody who knows anything about Abby Max.”

“If that’s the case, Chris is your man,” Dave said, referring to his 14-year-old stepson. “Kerry won’t let him watch ‘World’s Most Outrageous Women,’ but he’s followed Abby’s other two shows religiously.”

“Okay, that will be extremely helpful. Is there any way I can visit with him tonight?” Chris was almost completely recovered from his run-in with three gang members a few weeks ago. Not only had he healed up, but the highly publicized incident got him instant respect at his new high school.

Dave replied, “I think your wife has got that covered.”

“Eh?” Sammy asked, watching a fender-bender occur on the street right in front of him. Both drivers were on their phones, and neither put them away when they got out to look at the damage.

“Your amazing wife decided that Sarah needed a post-funeral wake, so she rented the barbecue restaurant on the lake at the Streiker Arboretum for tonight. All of Les and Sarah’s friends that were at the funeral are invited. The associates and families of MK and associates are expected to attend. You might want to drop by, too.”

Sammy gaped. “I did not know there was a barbecue restaurant on the lake at the Streiker Arboretum. I did not know there was a lake at the Streiker Arboretum.”

“Well, maybe you should hang around a smarter class of people than Abby Max. Mike has already left to take his crew out there. I was walking out the door when I decided to go the extra mile and answer one last phone call for the day,” Dave said.

“You are a credit to your profession,” Sammy said. “Okay, I’m closer to the Arboretum than home, so I’ll just go thataway.”

“I’ll apprise Chris,” Dave said.

“Thanks. Bye.” Sammy started the engine. Since the cops had arrived to look at the fender bender, he put his phone away and exited the parking lot on the opposite end.

Shortly, he was pulling into the parking lot of the Fletcher Streiker Arboretum. His heart rate escalated as he climbed out of the purple vehicle; he never knew what to expect on these grounds. As it was already twilight, regular guests were leaving the Arboretum, but a large sign at the entrance directed guests of the Hawkins party down a path to the right.

Sammy followed the path, lit at intervals by old-fashioned lamp posts. While it was pretty chilly, there was nothing coming down at present from the heavy clouds. For this, Sammy was glad, because a lot of Les’ and Sarah’s friends were not very good drivers.

On the path, he caught up to an old girl shuffling along by herself. Slow, bent, and thick, wearing a dowdy old coat over a dress that had been in fashion decades ago, she was making her way up the dirt path by means of a cane. Being fitted with an indoor tip, it tended to get stuck in the ground when she leaned on it.

“Hi, there,” Sammy said, coming abreast of her to offer his arm. “Are you going to say hello to Sarah? I am, too. Do you mind if we walk together?”

Due to her humped back, her face was down, and her gray hair protruded over her forehead from under a dismal felt hat. But she turned toward him in assent. Placing her veined, spotted hand on his arm, he relieved her of the presently useless cane. “May I hold this? Thanks.” She leaned her considerable weight on his arm, and they began walking together.

With effort, Sammy put aside his sense of urgency about talking to Chris and restrained himself to match her shuffling pace. He figured that he could probably carry her faster to the restaurant, but on the outside chance that this is not what she wanted, he just supported her on their walk.

Meanwhile, he chatted, “Do you get out here often? Swell place; I’ve only been here twice, but both times I saw Fletcher Streiker in the flesh. Have you met him? Great guy. Man, he saved my bacon a time or two.”

Her failure to answer did not ruffle him; for all he knew, she could be deaf as a post. But in case he was entertaining her in any small measure (to reaffirm that his charm did not discriminate on the basis of age or disability), he continued his cheery monologue up to the lighted sidewalk of the restaurant.

At the sound of laughter and conversation, the smell of roasted meats, and the sight of friends waiting, Sammy inhaled and turned to his companion. “Okay! They’re—”

He broke off when she lifted her face and he saw the beautiful Adair Streiker smiling at him. There was a promise of some kind in her eyes as she leaned over to kiss his cheek, and Sammy almost collapsed on the spot. Again, there was nothing sexual in it—just pure goodness distilled in a kind gesture toward his own poor self.

“Dadadada!” came the staccato greeting, and Sammy turned to see his eldest son, almost 3-year-old Sam, Jr., come tearing down the sidewalk toward him. Upon his heels, rapidly overtaking him, was Bubba.

“Hey, guy!” Sammy knelt to open his arms for Sam to leap therein. “Whoa, look at you! I see barbecue sauce, potato salad, and—what’s this? Blueberry or blackberry?” Sammy asked following a cursory inventory of the boy’s shirt. Bubba leaped up at his side insistently. “Hi, Bubba. Get down. Guys, say hello to—”

He turned to indicate Adair, who was nowhere in sight. But he found that he still clutched her cane. “Okay, guy,” Sammy said, bouncing his son. “Let’s go find Mom.”

Carrying Sam, he entered the restaurant, dropping the cane into an umbrella stand as he shut Bubba outside. When Sam started to cry, Sammy said, “Until he learns not to steal from plates, he has to stay out. Mike! You made it. Hey, Charisse—boy, you look great. Who’s the new chick?—Lacie? That’s *Lacie*?”

After recovering from the shock of seeing Mike’s daughter in makeup, Sammy made his way around the room shaking hands and exchanging kisses on cheeks. (He did not deliver air kisses; if a woman offered her cheek, he assumed she meant it.) The restaurant was much larger than it looked from the outside, with many side rooms here and there. He kept an eye out for two people: Marni and Chris. He found his wife first.

Still carrying Sam, he sidled up behind her as she was looking over the dessert table. He engulfed her with one arm, murmuring, “You’re so great. I don’t deserve you.”

“Sammy—? Oh, no. What have you done now?” she whispered.

He sucked air in through his teeth. “I’ll tell you about it when we get home. Right now I need to find Chris. Listen, this was a great idea. Is Sarah okay?” he asked, glancing around. Sam struggled to get down, and Sammy obliged him. He did not see Sam go right back to the door to let Bubba in.

Marni pointed through the crowd, and Sammy looked at Sarah holding baby Adair, showing her off to some friends. Decked out in golden footie sleepers with appliqued leaves and a chrysanthemum headband, the baby



was getting a lot of attention. She raised her head to smile, then cuddled back down on Sarah's shoulder. Sammy murmured, "Wow. Hard to believe that's the same baby you smuggled out of the Threlkelds'."

"I know," Marni said emphatically.

"Where's Clay?" Sammy asked, looking down and seeing no stroller.

"Daddy has him somewhere over there," she said, waving. "Listen, we couldn't have done this without Mr. Streiker's help. He's really the one who made the arrangements."

Sammy nodded slowly. "If he shows up tonight, I'd really like to say hello to him, too. Ah. I see Chris. Later." He nuzzled her and moved off through the crowd.

"Hey, guy." Sammy lightly grasped the blond boy's shoulder, marveling again at how much he had shot up in the last few months. Another six inches, and he'd be looking old man Sammy in the eye.

"Sammy!" Chris turned to shake his hand like a man. "Later, guys." He waved to his friends, moving off with Sammy. "What's this about Abby Max?" Chris said excitedly.

Someone nearby turned, so Sammy hustled Chris to a quieter corner of the restaurant. "Well, it's like this," Sammy winced. "I made a deal with her to get her paid up on her past-due child support, with a bonus. I agreed to do three stunts against her for her show."

"You're kidding. You're crazy," Chris said.

"Tell me about it," Sammy said with a sinking feeling. This was the same kid who was sure Sammy could pass tryouts for the arenaball team. "Anyway, your old man said that you can give me the inside scoop on Abby."

Chris said doubtfully, "I've watched her shows a lot, if that's what you mean. I guess they'd be filming her second season of 'Can You Top Abby Max?' That sounds like what you're doing, anyway. What do you want to know?"

"From what you've seen, what are her weaknesses? What makes her stumble?" Sammy asked.

Chris snorted, "Nothing. If she does have weaknesses, they don't get past the editing room."

Sammy exhaled, "Think, Chris! Little signs, little slip-ups that they won't think are any big deal, but indicate a larger crack in her make-up. Impatience? Over confidence? Getting emotional?"

Chris chewed his lip, staring at the wall as he thought. Then he said, "You know, funny you should mention that.... She doesn't handle emotion well, unless it's making her opponents break down and cry. The more crushed they are, the better she likes it. But one guy who almost beat her on one episode was such a class act—he shook her hand, told her how much he enjoyed it, thanked her for the opportunity, and congratulated her when she won—he was such a good sport that the audience started cheering for him, and that made her mad. And when she got mad she started messing up," Chris confirmed.

"That's what I wanted to hear," Sammy nodded.

"I read an article that said the show's sponsors want her to lose more often, 'cause it was getting too predictable and dropping in the ratings by the end of last season," Chris added.

"That may be why she was looking for fresh meat," Sammy mused.

Chris added, “You should know that she only does the stunts she’s good at—running, climbing, weights, balance. She’s really good at endurance events; she’s got a lot of upper body strength; good at gymnastics.”

“How about target shooting?” Sammy asked.

“I’ve never seen that on her show, and if she were any good at it, we’d probably have seen her do it by now,” Chris said.

“Okay, all that helps. Thanks,” Sammy said, patting his shoulder. Sammy’s internal radar went off, and he started looking around.

Fletcher Streiker was passing through the hall, stopping to talk to someone every now and then. Most of the people seemed not to see him, but anyone who tried to get his attention got it. As Chris had turned to talk to someone else, Sammy made his way over to Streiker.

By the time Sammy got within five feet of him, Streiker was putting his arms around Sarah. She hugged him, weeping, and he told her something that made her smile and nod.

Marni, teary-eyed, was telling him, “*Thank you so much.*” Although Sammy couldn’t hear her, he could read her lips and her body language: she was grateful. She said something else to him, then, and Streiker turned to look at Sammy.

He took that opportunity to come shake Streiker’s hand. “My wife is a great party planner, but she said this is your thing.”

“Only because she asked for help,” Streiker said.

“Yeah, well,” Sammy said, glancing around before returning his attention to Mr. Streiker with some vehemence, “You must have *returned her calls*, then.”

Streiker laughed. “Something on your mind, Sammy?”

“Yeah, I—I may have done something exceedingly stupid. I obligated myself to go toe-to-toe with Abby Max on her show to get her to pay up on her child support. I, uh...” Sammy faltered in explaining how bad an idea that probably was.

Streiker said, “Okay, let me ask you this: if you fail, will it have been worth it?”

Sammy looked off, thinking. “Will it have been worth it even if I fail? Yeah, I think so, because that’s the only reason she agreed to pay her past-due support.”

“Then it wasn’t stupid. Rash, risky and potentially dangerous, but you got minimally what you wanted,” Streiker observed.

“And—” Sammy drew closer to whisper, “I think Adair’s going to help me. Do you think so?”

Streiker looked pensive. “Yes, as long as you remember what I tell you. If you go off contrary to my instructions, then you cut her off at the knees. Do you understand?”

Sammy regarded him. “Yeah, I think I do. Yes, I do.”

“Good,” Streiker said with a lingering look. Then he glanced toward the buffet tables where Bubba was standing on his hind legs, helping himself.

“Gah!” Sammy cried, darting to the table.

He hauled Bubba down and heard Sam underneath the table, laughing, “Gah! Gah!”

“Okay, you—” Holding Bubba’s harness with one hand, Sammy took a swipe under the table with the other, but his son had cannily moved out of reach. “Yeah, Sam, c’mon.... Marni! Help!”

There was some laughter, then she came over to stand beside him. “Problem, Sammy?”

He looked at her knees. “Yeah, who’d bring a dog to a barbecue restaurant?”

“Your son. He wouldn’t get in the car without him,” she replied.

“Whose fault is that?” he huffed.

“Yours,” she assured him.

Finding that logic hard to refute, he sighed, “Yeah, okay. I’ll—take Bubba on home; y’all come when you’re done here.”

“Okay, Sammy.” She patted Bubba on the head, and as Sammy was slow getting up off the floor, she patted him on the head, too.

Sammy took Bubba outside to load him into the purple monstrosity. Before letting him in, though, he carefully relocated the orchid spike to the dashboard so that it wouldn’t get crushed under 90 pounds of dog. To simulate the Mustang, he rolled the side window about halfway down, then put the car in gear and headed home. That suited Bubba.

About halfway there, Sammy suddenly released the wheel with one hand to hit himself in the forehead and cry, “I was at an all-you-can-eat barbecue buffet and didn’t eat!” He sighed, shaking his head in self-pity.

Arriving home, he took Bubba to the back yard to let him do his business, then sadly pulled out his phone to see if Marni might bring him a plate. About that time, he heard her car pull into the garage, so he hastened back inside. Even before he got to the garage, an angry almost-3-year-old streaked by him. “Gah! Bubba!”

Sammy went on out to the garage as Marni released Clay’s car seat. “Well, Sam just threw a fit when he found out you took his dog, so here we are. I brought you a plate. It’s in the box on the front seat,” she said.

“You heard the prayers of a desperate man,” he said, gingerly lifting the box out of the car. “Hi, Clay,” he said, looking over. Clay turned his head toward his dad’s voice and waved an arm.

“Whose car is that?” she asked, suppressing a snort at the Volvo.

“You don’t like it?” he asked, hurt.

She paused. “What happened to the Mustang, Sammy?”

“It’s at Ed’s. Let’s go in to talk,” he said.

Marni brought in her son and his gear, then plopped at the kitchen table. Sam and Bubba, together again, came to join them in the kitchen.

When Bubba sat at attention beside Sammy's knee, eyeing his plate, Sammy growled at him. Marni, sitting to nurse Clay, said, "Sam, you know where the bag of dog food is. Would you put a cup of dog food in Bubba's bowl?" Sam thought he could do that, so he went to the pantry. Bubba showed little interest until the food was deposited in and around his bowl.

"You were going to tell me what happened to your car," Marni reminded Sammy, who was slouched over his plate.

"Okay, here goes." And he related the day's events to her: getting the Catrionas out, parking them in the Hawkinses' house, getting the Volvo, and going to see Abby Max. "So, the upshot is, I'm to show up tomorrow at nine, and they'll—tell me stuff, I guess."

She thought about that while Clay finished up and fell asleep. "So, if you actually finish three events, she'll pay an extra seventy-five grand to her own family. And if you beat her in two of those events, she'll pay an extra hundred-fifty grand to her own family. Is that right?"

He nodded, turning up the bottle of mineral water.

"And you found purple orchids in the Volvo," she smiled.

He nodded again. "I'd bring them in, but I want them where she left them."

"Did you ask Mr. Streiker about this?" she asked.

He paused. "Didn't you hear? You were right there."

"No." She shook her head, lifting Clay to her shoulder. "I thought you were talking to him, but I couldn't hear what was said."

"Ah. Well, he asked me if I'd consider the deal worthwhile if I bombed. And I told him yes," he said.

"Huh," she said.

There was a brief silence, then he said, "I expected you to be a little more upset about it."

She looked at him a little guiltily. "When I'm the one who won't give you extra money to help families? No, I can see you doing something like this. From what I've seen of those shows, they're real careful about safety equipment, so I don't think you're likely to get hurt—not like you would driving away under gunfire. But... yes, she's a cobra. Be careful."

He smiled. "That's more like it."

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## Chapter 4

The next morning, Tuesday, Sammy showed up at the agreed-upon time and the agreed-upon place. He was met by Abby and Blaine Nash, who, besides having apparent control over her finances, was also an assistant producer of her show. (She was the executive producer.)

After they had expressed their surprise that Sammy kept this appointment, they walked him through the studios to a large, sandy lot in back. Here, they showed him two identical obstacle courses set up side by side.

“This is the first challenge. It’s a good test of overall strength and endurance,” Abby said, walking alongside Sammy as he looked over one course.

“These are constructed from actual Navy SEALs training equipment. You choose which one you want to run—they’re exactly the same—and we’ll run them at the same time. Whoever gets through all the obstacles first wins. You can dress however you want—we recommend gloves and a helmet.” She gestured to a locker containing protective gear in various sizes.

Nash told him, “You can practice on these for as long as you want today. But since we’re on a schedule, we have to film tomorrow. You’re to show up here, ready to go, tomorrow morning at eight.”

Nodding, Sammy went back to the beginning of the course to look over each obstacle carefully. It certainly looked authentic, except that it was about half the length of the real BUD/S course, which neither Sammy nor Abby could ever get through.

The first obstacle was the Parallel Bars: two bars side by side on which the contestant hoisted himself up and “walked” over on stiff arms. The second was the Tires, familiar from football training camps everywhere: the contestant ran through a carpet of tires, placing a foot in the center of each. The third was the Low Wall, about 8 feet high. Two graduated pylons provided a launch point for the contestant to jump to the top of the wall and hoist himself over.

The fourth obstacle was the High Wall, about 15 feet tall, which the contestant had to ascend and descend by means of a rope on either side. The fifth was the Barbed Wire, which the contestant had to crawl under for about 20 feet. Sammy got down on his hands and knees to look under this: there was about 18 inches’ clearance between the sand and the barbed wire.

The sixth was the Cargo Net: rope net strung between two pillars about 50 feet high. The contestant had to climb up one side and back down the other. Easy, right?

The seventh was the Balance Logs, which were simply three logs set end-to-end in a zigzag about a foot off the ground. The contestant walked them, keeping his balance on the loose logs. It was no big deal to fall off and get back up, except that it would cost him time.

The eighth was the Traverse Wall, or Spider Wall. The contestant approached this from the side and walked across its face, about 40 feet, by means of 2-by-4s nailed at staggered points along it. The course ended with the Tires again, then a sprint of about 30 feet to the finish line.

Sammy looked over all this, then said, “Okay, I’ll be back.” He went out to the parking lot and sat in the Volvo to pull out his phone and select the one contact from downtown that he had actually kept in touch with, more or less.

Putting the phone to his ear, he looked at the fresh orchid spike on the dash. “Help,” he whispered. Straightening at the answer on the other end, he said, “Reyna! Man, it’s good to hear your voice.”

“Hi, Sammy. What do you need?” Phil Reyna asked patiently. He was in Tactical, probably the most elite unit in the Dallas Police Department.

“Guy, I am in deep doo-doo, and you’re the only one I know who has actually been in SEALs. I need coaching on a BUD/S-type obstacle course, today,” Sammy said.

Reyna hedged, “I’d like to help you, Sammy, but we’ve got mandatory training today. What are you doing an o-course for?”

“I accepted a challenge from Abby Max,” Sammy admitted.

There was a silence of ten seconds on the other end. “Where?” Reyna asked.

“At the Half Crazy Studios in Las Colinas,” Sammy said.

Reyna asked, “Are you dressed out?”

“No,” Sammy said.

“BDU pants, if you’ve got ’em, a tight tee shirt, running shoes and good, absorbent socks. Bring hydration. I can be there by eleven.”

“I’ll meet you at the front,” Sammy said, and they both clicked off.

Sammy went straight to the Army/Navy surplus store to get geared up with everything that Reyna had stipulated except shoes. He changed clothes there in the store. For footwear, he went to a running store, since he needed new running shoes anyway. He picked up some energy bars and bottled water, then returned to the front lot of Half Crazy to wait for Reyna.

Precisely at eleven o’clock, Reyna appeared in the parking lot, looking around. He was wearing his BDUs from his Navy days. When Sammy climbed out of the Volvo, Phil stared at him. “Where’s your Mustang?”

“At Dr. Ed’s. I picked up some extra ventilation on West Twelfth Street,” Sammy said. Phil shook his head, and Sammy said, “This way.”

He took him through the building to the back lot. For late November, the temperature was a balmy 60 degrees. There was no precipitation coming down now, but Sammy knew that should a snow storm hit tomorrow morning, the show would go on.

Phil spent thirty minutes looking over both courses while Sammy apprised him of the details for tomorrow’s filming. Then Phil said, “Okay, they both look solid and comparable, so I’ll give her props on that. If they do give you a choice, take the left. You’ll be staring at the sun this afternoon, but tomorrow morning it will be at your back.”

“Got it,” Sammy nodded.

“Show me this gear,” Phil said.

Sammy took him to the locker, and they both pawed through it. “Yeah, gloves are good,” Phil said, tossing him a pair. “A helmet isn’t necessary, except if you’re concerned about maintaining anonymity.”

“Indeed I am,” Sammy said.

“Then let’s get you one to practice in,” Phil said.

Besides the helmet, Sammy found wrap-around sunglasses in a light amber. These would not only protect his eyes from the sand, but help obscure his face from the cameras.

With Sammy geared up, they went to the beginning of the course. Studio employees were watching from windows, and while Sammy did not see either Abby or Nash, he knew they were watching, too. Phil had Sammy do the Parallel Bars just to watch his technique, then waved him through to the Tires. On a whim, Sammy decided to have some fun with this.

He had attained the level of expert at tire drills in arenaball camp, but today he pretended he’d never done them before. Phil, who had seen film of Sammy’s one and only arenaball game, waited patiently while Sammy pretended to stumble over the tires, get frustrated, and move on to the next obstacle.

At the Low Wall, Phil demonstrated how to jump off the pylons to swing himself up and over the wall. Sammy replicated this without difficulty. The next obstacle, the High Wall, required climbing a rope. While Sammy could do this, Phil was dissatisfied with his technique. “You’re trying to pull yourself up the rope hand over hand; you won’t make it the rest of the way doing that. Spread around the muscle load. Get your feet up on the wall and walk up it. C’mon.”

Whereupon Phil demonstrated grabbing the rope in order to hoist his feet up, bending his knees. It was not a difficult maneuver, but doing it quickly required getting those first steps down pat. Phil had Sammy practice it over and over so he could do it without thinking.

Under the Barbed Wire, Phil showed him how to splay his arms and legs and pull himself forward on his elbows. Again, Sammy had no problem replicating this. “Do not get your mouth down in the sand,” Reyna said, and Sammy did not ask why.

At the Cargo Net, Phil told him, “Jump up as high as you can to start; that’ll save you time. Climb as close to the pole as possible, where the net’s tighter. Coming down the other side is the problem; if you let your feet shoot through the holes, you’re gonna spend the next five minutes getting untangled. Bring your feet down in the corners if you can.” Sammy practiced that until Phil was satisfied.

At that point they took a break to eat a few bars and drink water. Sammy took off his helmet and gloves while Phil surveyed the complex as if it were enemy territory. “What’s the next challenge?”

“I don’t know yet,” Sammy said, then took a swig from the water bottle. “I’m just gonna concentrate on surviving tomorrow’s.”

He paused, then said, “She’s going to beat me like a thug, Reyna, but if I can last through three events, she pays a bonus to her family over and above her regular child support. And, I get to pick one challenge. I don’t know what that’ll be yet.”

“Okay, let’s get back to it.” Reyna gestured, and Sammy strapped his helmet back on.

The Balance Logs part was not difficult. “Don’t overthink this, just run it,” Phil said. The Spider Wall, however, he wanted to talk about: “This is a test of the strength in your fingers and toes. Don’t hurry this; get in a rhythm. Step up with your right foot, then pivot on your toes to bring your left foot forward on the inside. Make sure you’ve got a good grip on the ledge above before you move your feet.”

Sammy practiced a few times, falling each time. Phil was telling him, “Stay close to the wall, hug the wall, now,” when Nash came over to them. Sammy and Phil paused.

Nash drew up amiably to say, “Looks like your practice is going well! That’s good; we want to make it exciting for the viewers. Abby asked me to remind you that if you fall on any of the obstacles, you have to start that obstacle over. You can’t climb back up in the middle of it.”

“Sure,” said Sammy.

Phil told Nash, “A few of us want to come watch tomorrow.”

“That will be fine; we start at eight,” Nash said. “But your phones will be confiscated at the door, since we can’t allow filming. You’ll get them back upon leaving.” Reyna nodded, turning back to the Spider Wall, and Sammy climbed back on it.

After he had attained some mastery over that, the Tires came again, and again Sammy faked incompetence. He knew it wouldn’t make any difference in the outcome, but it pleased him to deceive her on this tiny point. Following that, Reyna took him back to the rope climb on the High Wall, which was his one glaring weakness.

By the time Sammy went up and down the Cargo Net one more time, he was too exhausted to do any more. As Sammy took off his gear and they walked out to their cars, Phil said, “I think you can beat her on this, Sammy.”

Sammy snorted, “Reyna, she’s been playing on that thing like a backyard jungle gym for who knows how long. I just want to survive. Thanks for your help.”

With a fist bump, Phil said, “Hooyah.”

On his way home from Las Colinas, Sammy stopped by the office. Mike and Dave were still there, so Sammy leaned in the door to say, “Okay, if you want to watch something interesting, come by the Half Crazy Studios in Las Colinas tomorrow at eight. I’m running an obstacle course against Abby for her show. Reyna came out to coach me, and I guess he’s bringing some friends, so I get to bring some friends. Oh, and, they’re gonna take your phones because they don’t want anybody filming.”

Tapping the door in finality, he withdrew while his coworkers were as yet speechless. Then he stuck his head back in again to tell Pruet: “Make Chris pray for me.” Then he was gone.

That evening, Sammy brought Marni fully up to date while he lay on the couch with Clay on his chest. The baby was getting good at push-ups, and Sammy periodically wiped drool from his face as he talked. Bubba came over once or twice to offer assistance, which Sammy declined. So Bubba curled up with Sam on the floor, as they’d had an eventful day in terms of the dollar amount of damage.

“So, they’re letting people come watch?” she asked.

Sammy lifted his head in interest. “Do you want to come watch?”

She hesitated. “Yes and no. I’m afraid it will make me angry that she’s putting you through all that because she wouldn’t support her family. You... don’t seem nervous.”

“I’m okay with the fact that she’s going to stomp my face in,” he smiled hazily. “Streiker gave me a heads-up about that, asking if I’d do it knowing I’d fail. I just want to do well enough to satisfy Reyna, since he’s bringing some people.”

She inhaled, shaking her head. “I don’t think I can stand to watch. Don’t look for me tomorrow.”



“No problem,” he said. “But I want you to call Pam and ask her to pray for me.”

“We can do that ourselves,” she said, leaning on him. And they did.

The following morning, Sammy skipped his usual workout, running only enough to loosen up. Then he dressed in the BDUs and a fresh tee shirt, kissed Marni goodbye, and set off for battle in the purple Volvo.

Marni was fine for ten minutes after he had left, then she suddenly threw all the guys’ gear together and hauled them all to her mother’s, including Bubba. Fortunately, Pam and Sarah were willing to take last-minute troublemakers, so Marni was soon speeding down the freeway toward Las Colinas.

She arrived after eight o’clock, sure that they had already started. Unwilling to miss any more of it than necessary, she hurried to the front entrance and went in. Because she was looking for this back lot that Sammy had talked about, she walked right past the receptionist’s desk without even seeing her. Marni was unaware that this gave her the appearance of belonging here.

Glimpsing a wall of windows at the top of a curving chrome-and-glass stairway, Marni hastened to the top to look out. From this vantage point, she had a bird’s-eye view of the back lot with both obstacle courses. Leaning forward, she could see observers along the edge of the sandy lot, among whom were Dave and Chris. She recognized Phil Reyna, as well.

As far as she could tell, there were about 30 in the audience, all men. The race hadn’t started yet—she discerned Sammy in a helmet and sunglasses, pulling on gloves, as he and Abby stood listening to a woman in a white polo shirt, evidently a race judge.

Looking around the lot, Marni saw two other white-shirted people with clipboards and stopwatches, and it dawned on her that this was a bigger deal than Sammy had let on. He and she had prayed about it last night, but now she prayed again, earnestly.

As she stood watching, she was joined by a few other studio employees who casually looked on. When the two contestants positioned themselves at the starting line, the people beside Marni pulled out their phones to start recording. So she did, too.

No one paid any attention to her until Abby’s assistant, Meadow, approached the window to look out. Her eye lit curiously on the stranger, and then on the wedding band that matched the one Sammy had worn. Standing casually beside her, Meadow watched the event while casting surreptitious glances at the Wife.

With the show’s eight cameras covering the course—four on Sammy and four on Abby—the head judge stood at the starting line with a starter’s pistol in hand. Sammy leaned forward, looking toward the Parallel Bars, and tried not to think about the fact that Reyna had brought almost all the guys in Tactical to watch.

“On your marks, get set—” The crack of the starter’s pistol signaled *go*, and Sammy took off for the bars at a dead run. He was a little shaky getting up and going, and could not help but notice that Abby finished them half a length ahead of him. Thereafter, he kept his eyes off her entirely, concentrating on the course in front of him.

The Tires he zipped through, thanking Jon Ramey again in his heart, and the Low Wall he mounted easily, landing on his feet on the other side. Still, he saw that she was already on the rope of the High Wall before he even got there.

On the sidelines, there was absolute quiet among the spectators. The normal protocol of BUD/S obstacle-course runs dictated that the men waiting their turns did so with their backs to the runner currently on the course: they

were not his judges. Likewise, those watching today were respectfully silent, though one or two dropped their eyes in dismay at the wide lead Abby was building.

The High Wall was the reason. While Abby zipped up the rope, Sammy had trouble getting his feet up to start with, and by the time he slid down the other side, she had emerged from the Barbed Wire to start up the Cargo Net.

Sammy saw this, but refused to give up. Since he knew all along that she was going to beat him, his goal had been merely to make as good a showing as possible. So he dug in his elbows under the Barbed Wire, ripping a line down his back in gaining maximum speed through the sand.

As Reyna had taught him, he leaped up on the Cargo Net along the edge, climbing it at a fast clip, his feet landing in the corners. Abby, coming down the far side of the Cargo Net on her course, couldn't help but see his competent ascent, and so lost a few seconds getting a misplaced foot untangled.

Sammy cheated a little coming down; his feet barely brushed the ropes as he lowered himself by his hands. Since it wasn't a full-length o-course, he didn't have to be quite as careful about overtaxing one set of muscles.

He closed the distance between himself and her a little more on the Balance Logs as well; taking Reyna at his word, Sammy ran down them without a thought as to keeping his balance, so that by the time he fell off, he was at the end of the last log, landing on his feet.

The Spider Wall was the next big trap; hopping up on the platform beside it, Sammy paused to gather himself, looking up for the 2-by-4 above his head. Grasp it and step; step up, reach up, spread knees, pivot the right foot and bring the left over on the inside. Step up, grasp, pivot and bring the left foot around. Step down, allow the left foot to drop down below the 2-by-4 until his right foot was firm. It became a dance of inches, balancing on his toes, grasping the flat wall.

Finally, he came around the post to the terminal platform of the Wall, and there hopped down to run to the last obstacle, the Tires. Abby was already halfway through that on her way to victory. She'd win; that was fine, but he still didn't let up. Approaching the Tires at a run, he paused only to make sure his feet were right and began tripping through them easily.

But then Abby couldn't resist—she knew better; she knew to keep her eyes on her feet, but, remembering how he had struggled over the Tires yesterday, she couldn't resist a glance back at his efforts today.

And when she looked back at him, she wasn't watching where her feet landed. Therefore, she fell.

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## Chapter 5

Sammy saw her go down, but immediately refocused his attention on his feet. They did not fail him, landing in the tires in a ballet of Football Remembrances. Then he was free of the obstacles; he was pouring on the power to streak toward the finish line—and crossed it a second or two before she did.

There was absolute silence, absolute stillness on the sidelines—no whoops, cheers or applause. Sammy himself did not know if he had actually beat her, because her judges might still find some reason to disqualify him or penalize him.

Hands on his knees in exhaustion, he watched as the three of them gathered to confer over their clipboards. There were cameras recording their comments, of course, but neither Sammy nor Abby could hear them.

After catching his breath, he rose up, stripped off his gloves, and walked over to her with extended hand: “Great race, Abby. I appreciate the opportunity to compete with you.”

That got her shaking in rage, and she stared at him while the sweat dripped down her face. But the cameras were on them, so she bared her teeth in a show of friendliness and shook his hand. A gopher ran over to them with bottled waters; Sammy accepted his with thanks and took a swig.

Abby toweled down; he was handed a towel, but with two or three cameras clustered around them, he did not remove his sunglasses or helmet. The show’s master of ceremonies came up with a microphone.

Sticking it in Sammy’s face, he said, “Well, Yves, that was a pretty strong showing out there today! Do you think you beat her?”

“I don’t know,” Sammy said. “She was awfully fast. I just tried not to give up. I don’t know what happened there at the end.”

That was the MC’s cue to point the mic at her. “Yeah, Abby, what happened there?”

She laughed, “Who knows? I think I knew he was right on top of me!” She winked at him.

At that time the head judge came over with a gold medallion on a blue and white ribbon. Facing the camera, she said, “By unanimous decision, we declare Yves Leandro the winner of this event by seven-tenths of a second.” She turned to Sammy, who bowed his head for her to place the medal around his neck.

He shook her hand. “Thank you, ma’am. Thank you,” he said, waving to the other judges. Turning back to Abby, he shook her hand again. “I’m very honored to have participated in this competition with you. I look forward to hearing what the next event will be.”

Glancing at the sidelines full of men who watched in silent satisfaction, Sammy left the lot without even waiting to hear his completion time. And he drove off without stopping to take off his helmet until he was two miles away.

When he was certain that no one was following him, he pulled into the parking lot of a mall and set the brake to detach the helmet and sunglasses from his sodden head, wiping down thoroughly with the towel. “I can’t believe it,” he breathed. “I. Cannot. Believe. It.” Bowing his head, he said, “Thank you, Jesus. Whatever happens the rest of my life, I can die with pride.”

Restarting the engine—and inadvertently grinding the starter—he realized: She'd kill him on the next round. She'd make sure to pick something at which she could grind him into dust.

Contemplating this, he turned the purple monstrosity toward home, still wearing the medallion.

Sammy did not know at this time that his wife was not at home. While he was leaving the lot with his medallion and towel, Marni put away her phone, watching thoughtfully. The audience of men on the sidelines then began quietly exiting to the parking lot as well, reclaiming their phones from security.

Someone to Marni's side, a studio employee, said, "Oh, f——. We're in for a world of hurt till she gets him back." Marni decided that this was a good time to slip away.

When she turned to the curving stairway, Blaine Nash was on his way up, intending to disperse the crowd of employees at the window. There were several people ascending, so Marni did not notice him in particular, but he noticed her.

First, knowing every employee by sight, he knew that she was not one of them. Also, divining that she had been at the window watching the competition, he realized that she must be attached to their guest competitor. Seeing that she was a young, pretty woman casually dressed, he pegged her as the significant other of the person that Abby Max hated most in the world right now.

As Marni passed him on the stairway, he turned back to hail her. But when he turned so abruptly, a woman ascending behind him stumbled into him, nearly losing her balance in high heels. To prevent her falling down the stairs, he was obligated to grab her arm.

This offended her so that she shrugged out of his grasp. "I'm so sorry," he began, studying her heart-shaped face, bright blue eyes, and shoulder-length blonde hair. She was mesmerizing; he just wanted to stare at her all day long.

"I do apologize," he repeated, snapping out of his trance. "Can I help you find anything?" She also was not an employee.

"I'm looking for the office of Sterling Tate," she said coolly.

As that was the studio's choreographer, Nash instinctively glanced at her long legs, partly covered by a lovely pearl-gray suit. "Yes, his studio is the last door down this hall to your right," he said, pointing behind him.

"Thank you," she acknowledged, taking her leave. And by the time he looked back down the stairs, Marni was gone.

Just in case he might yet catch her, Nash trotted down the stairs to look out the front doors. But no; she was not to be seen. Scanning the parking lot, he thought, *She'll come to the next event. I'll find out more about her then. Abby will want to meet her.* And he smiled.

Before going home, Sammy thought to stop by the office to see if Mike or Dave was back yet. When he pulled into their office's narrow parking lot, he didn't see their cars, but went on in to wait a while, in case they showed up. Coincidentally, he was still wearing the medal.

After using the restroom, he sat at his desk. Idly, he opened his laptop to scan the news. He wasn't really expecting to see headlines that blared, *Man Awesomely Beats Abby Max*, but the image did briefly cross his mind.

When the office door opened, he glanced up and then stood in surprise. “Mr. Streiker!”

“Hi, Sammy.” Streiker came in, glancing around. He noted the medal on Sammy’s chest.

“What brings you around?” Sammy asked. He was still standing, as Streiker was standing.

Streiker hesitated, then said, “Okay, you had a good run against her. That’s fine. But, Sammy, you can’t do any more events with her.”

Sammy stilled. “You came to our office to tell me that?”

“Yes,” Streiker said.

“Have I screwed up here?” Sammy asked.

“Not yet. Not badly. But you can’t do anything more for her show,” Streiker said.

Sammy evaluated his tone and found it alarming. “Uh, I was kind of hoping to get the Catrionas a bonus.”

“If that’s your reason, maybe you need to check with them first,” Streiker replied. Then he turned and walked out again.

Slowly, Sammy sat back down. This was not welcome news. He really wanted to see how well he could do against her in the next event. Besides, he’d signed a contract promising....

He got up and went out to the Volvo to get the contract from the glove compartment. While a light, cold mist began falling, Sammy sat in the car and reread the contract he had signed with Abby Max.

In fact, he hadn’t promised to do anything in this contract—it only stipulated what she would do if he did. So, if this was *really* for the Catrionas, and *only* for them....

Sammy got out of the car to lock the office door. He took the medallion off his neck and stuffed it into his back pocket. Then he sat behind the wheel again to start the engine. From there, he drove to the Hawkinses’ house, minutes away.

He parked along the curb and got out, scrutinizing the house. Something was different. He stood in the rain for a minute trying to figure out what was different about the Hawkinses’ house. Then he saw that the small front yard had been mowed and edged. The flower beds had been weeded. Les’ old truck had been washed for probably the first time in years.

Noting all this, Sammy trotted up to the door and rang the bell. In a moment it opened, and Sammy looked in at Frank, grinning broadly: “Sammy! Come in, come in!”

Sammy did, marveling at his happiness. “Hi, uh, Frank. I just wanted—”

“Oh, it’s Mr. Kidman!” Helena exclaimed, coming up beside her husband. She, too, was beaming.

“Mrs. Catriona. How are you doing?” Sammy asked, as if he couldn’t see.

She answered him by coaxing, “Oh, come sit down, Mr. Kidman! Would you like some apple pie or hot tea?”

Sammy’s mouth hung open. He did in fact smell fresh hot apple pie. Sitting weakly on the small couch in the front room, he said, “You know, pie sounds great. Thank you.”

Vastly pleased, she bustled back to the kitchen while Sammy was thinking, *Monday? Was it just the day before yesterday that I dropped them off here?* “Uh, where’s Ripley?” he asked, looking around.

“On the back porch,” Frank nodded. “Grandma made him come in out of the rain, but he still likes to sit back there so he can see the yard. I tell you—it’s been almost miraculous, to see his improvement since coming here. He loves the yard, and the garden, and the trees. He’d spend all day out there if he could. He’s so much calmer and quieter. And he’s really working in that garden! Grandma showed him how to weed around the pumpkins and squash, and he treats them like they’re his very own.

“And would you believe it?” he interrupted himself. “On our walk today we met a lovely woman who lives just down the street—Helena, what is her name?” he called, groping in his pocket.

“Willow,” she called back.

“Willow. That’s correct. She’s a retired teacher who specializes in autistic children. Rip warmed right up to her, so she’ll start tutoring him three days a week. She lives three houses down from us!” He waved to indicate her location.

Sammy had not yet shut his gaping mouth. “I’m so glad,” he whispered, then Helena stuck a plate under his nose with a huge slab of pie, topped with vanilla ice cream.

While he stared at it, she put a napkin and fork on the tray table beside him and asked, “Now, would you rather have tea or milk with that?”

“Actually, plain water would be great. Thank you,” he said, picking up the fork.

Frank watched in satisfaction while Sammy downed half the pie in three bites. “Please don’t tell my mother-in-law,” he said thickly, “but this is better than her pie, even.”

“Oh, Mrs. Taylor?” Frank said. “What wonderful people. Mr. Taylor is going to help us buy this house out of foreclosure.”

“What?” exclaimed Sammy, almost dropping his fork.

“Now, Mr. Taylor isn’t paying anything,” Frank quickly corrected a misapprehension that Sammy did not have. “We’re going to buy it ourselves, and pay Mrs. Hawkins a fair price for her furnishings and appliances. We’ve fallen in love with the place. This is a dream come true for us.”

Sammy took another bite. “That’s great, Frank, but... I don’t think that the seventy-five grand Abby paid you is going to cover all that,” he said in discomfort.

“Oh, yes, we got notice of that payment. Thank you for that, as well! And you got it so quickly!” Frank praised, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Grandpa, would you like pie?” Helena called from the kitchen.

He laughed back at her, “Grandma, you’re going to make me fat. I’ll have another piece later.”

And Sammy was marveling, still, at how happy they looked. He suddenly looked down at the pie. “I didn’t notice apples in the refrigerator.”

“No, I went to the store,” Frank said. “It’s right down the street at the corner, near the church you stopped at. We’re going there this Sunday. It’s so wonderful to have a vehicle again. Mr. Taylor helped us purchase the truck from Mrs. Hawkins, as well.”

Sammy put the plate down. “With what?” he cried.

“Well, she accepted some gold pieces,” Frank said.

“What?” Sammy said repetitively.

“I’ll show you. Finish your pie,” Frank instructed, standing.

Since that seemed to be excellent advice, Sammy did that. He was placing the clean plate on the side table when Frank reentered the room, carrying the pouch he had taken from their apartment. Without preface, he extended it to Sammy.

First thing Sammy noticed was how heavy it was, as he almost dropped it. Zipping it open, he gasped at the gold. There had to be—“How many coins have you got in here?” he exclaimed.

“Forty-four,” Frank said. “Mrs. Hawkins took a fancy to the coins after Mr. Taylor told her they were likely to appreciate. I had offered her cash to begin with, you know.”

“Cash?” said Sammy. Frank nodded to the pouch; opening it again, Sammy found a second compartment, and began wading through \$50 and \$100 bills—mostly hundreds. Then he pulled out a deposit slip, dated yesterday, from a local bank for... \$50,000 in cash.

He looked up at Frank, who said dubiously, “Mr. Taylor was firm that we should deposit the money. I didn’t like the idea—have never trusted banks—but he said we wouldn’t be able to purchase the house without showing means. So I deposited some of it.”

“How did you get all this?” Sammy asked.

“Oh, I saved it over the years. Hid it from Abby, of course. If her friends had known about it, they’d have taken it.”

“You... came out of the house with the pouch and the purse,” Sammy said slowly.

“Yes. I kept the money in Grandma’s old purse, in case we needed it quickly,” Frank said. He leaned over to look. “Did I put the safe-deposit box key in there, too? Oh, no. I put it in my wallet,” Frank remembered.

“What’s in the safe deposit box?” Sammy asked apprehensively.

“The stocks,” Frank said. “I received them from the company upon retirement. Mr. Taylor also insisted on the box at the bank for those.”

“What company?” Sammy asked.

“Home Depot,” Frank replied. “They kept their store open in our area until two years ago, when it was burned to the ground.”

Sammy handed the pouch back to him. “I thought you were destitute.”

Frank looked at him. “We would have been, had we stayed there much longer. Eh, we should have left years ago—we actually tried, when Rip was a toddler, but he cried for three days straight, so we came back. He thought his mother would be coming back there.

“And then... it got bad so quickly, but by then I couldn’t see how to get out. Had we pulled up a moving van or even a pickup truck, we would have been picked clean before the last box was out. I tried to get a cab to come pick us up, but no company will send a car to that area anymore. And can you imagine what would have happened had we started walking down the street with a pouch and a purse? We needed someone to come get us. That was you.”

Sammy looked away quickly. “Actually, you have Fletcher Streiker to thank for that. He’s the one who gave me the assignment.”

Frank cocked his head. “How do I get in touch with Mr. Fletcher Streiker, then?”

Sammy smiled back at him. “Don’t worry. He’ll get in touch with you.” He started to stand, then paused as Ripley came into the room. The boy hesitantly sidled toward his grandfather, eyes on Sammy’s belt buckle.

Sammy looked down at it, wondering what the boy saw, and Frank explained, “He likes shiny things.” (Obviously, most BDU belt buckles are nonreflective; Sammy had happened to pick a belt with a stainless steel buckle.)

“Oh, do you, Rip?” Sammy stood, digging in his back pocket. He took out the medallion and held it up. “Can I put it around your neck, Rip? You made it through a hail of gunfire. You’re a hero.”

Frank said, “My goodness, look at that! Go on, Rip; let him put it on you.”

The boy didn’t move, but he didn’t shy away as Sammy slowly brought up the heavy medallion and placed it around his neck. Then he held out his hand. “Congratulations, Ripley Catriona.” The boy gravely shook his hand.

Sammy turned to the door. “I’ve got to get home. Thank you for the pie, Mrs. Catriona. Please remember not to lord it over my mother-in-law.”

She laughed, as he intended her to. Frank, who had been examining the medallion on Ripley’s neck, stood. “Let me pay you for the medal there. That’s no toy.” Sammy had not looked at it closely to see what it said, but apparently Frank did not connect it with his daughter’s show.

He held out a bill and Sammy raised his hands in horror. “No. Oh, no. You’ve no idea what a big favor you just did for me. Have a great day. I’ll check back with you later. Bye, Rip!” And he ran through the rain to the purple vehicle.

He threw himself behind the wheel and started up the car, wiping his face. “How do you do that?” he murmured to the unseen Streiker. Shaking his head, he turned the car homeward.

When he arrived home, Marni’s Prius was gone, and the house was empty. So he showered and changed clothes. Looking outside, he saw that the rain had abated, so he ran the six blocks to his in-laws’ house. As he suspected, her car was sitting in their driveway.

By the time he rang the doorbell, the rain had started up again. But he waited on their covered porch until the door opened and Marni pulled him inside. He took her in his arms and they just held each other a moment. Then she nodded, “Come see Sarah.”



She took him back to the gameroom, and the first thing he saw was Sarah sitting on the couch holding baby Adair in one arm and big boy Clay in the other. They were both awake and content, looking around, blowing bubbles.

Sarah was talking to Pam, who stood over her with a cup of hot chocolate. “I’ll just put it on the table here,” Pam was saying.

Sammy intercepted the mug to hold it while he sat on the table across from Sarah. “Hi, Sarah. Ouch, it’s hot.” He held the mug by the handle. “I just came from your old house.” He rested the mug on his leg. “The Catrionas were just grinning all over the place. Their autistic grandson is taking care of the garden, and they say it’s helped him so much.”

He finally relocated the mug to his side, out of her reach. “They’re so grateful to have such a nice place to live, somebody should make a movie about it.”

Sarah blinked back tears, smiling. “Les is very happy for them to have it. I just know he is.”

“He sure is.” Sammy said, picking up the mug to drink from it. “Wow. I just had a huge piece of apple pie, and I’m still hungry. What’re you cooking in there, Pam?”

“Leftover turkey casserole,” she said, bringing in another mug for Sarah.

Sammy stilled. “Do you know where Bubba is, then? And by attachment, Sam?”

“Clayton took them to the park,” Pam said.

“In the rain?” Sammy asked, looking back to the window.

“It may not be raining out that way, and there is a pavilion,” Pam said. “They’ll be back soon. Clayton wants to hear all about the obstacle course. He hasn’t had a chance to see the video yet.”

Sammy hesitated, eyeing her, and Marni said, “I changed my mind and went out there to watch, Sammy.”

He turned to her. “I didn’t see you.”

“I was in the building, upstairs,” she said. “I got there in time to see it from the beginning.”

“You filmed it?” he asked, and she nodded. “How? They confiscated everybody’s phones.”

“They missed mine,” she said. “Wait—we got it uploaded.” She raised the remote to the big-screen TV and accessed the video file. Then she clicked *play* and Sammy turned to watch.

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## Chapter 6

Marni's video of the obstacle-course race between Sammy and Abby Max started out with an accidental pan of the studio employees coming to the window overlooking the lot, then a broad view, high and distant, before she zoomed in just enough to catch both competitors in the frame. "Good technique," Sammy said.

"Thanks," she said.

"I was talking about me," he clarified, and she snorted.

They all settled down to watch. The phone video was not of sufficient resolution to fill the big-screen television, only a third of it, in the middle of the screen. Still, it was better than watching it on a phone.

Sammy started well enough, but his fumbling on the High Wall cost him dearly, as Abby was fluid and well-practiced. She did miss a step on the Cargo Net, but it wouldn't have made any difference had she not been obsessed with how he was doing on his course behind her.

"That's what cost her," he said, shaking his head. "Even falling on the Tires wouldn't have hurt her if she'd kept her eyes front."

"Apparently," Marni said. "Watch."

The video continued to play to the point that he dashed up to the Tires. As he began hopping back and forth through them, Abby turned almost full around to look. Her toe caught the bead of the tire she was coming out of, and she went down face first. She scrambled up as Sammy took advantage of the opening to power through the finish line one stride ahead of her.

"You only just barely beat her," Marni observed, freezing the finish line frame.

"Yeah, I didn't remember it being that close," he murmured.

"But you clearly won," Pam argued.

He shook his head mildly as the video went on to faithfully record the judges' conference and the presentation of the award. Abby's body language at this point signified furious disbelief.

When the video ended, Marni turned to ask, "Where's the medal?"

He settled back, drinking his cocoa. "I gave it to the Catrionas' autistic grandson. He likes shiny things."

Marni smiled in surprise and the front door opened to admit a rush of furry and sweated bodies.

"Dadadada!" cried Sammy's eldest, launching himself upon the old man, and the cocoa he was drinking fountained up over father, son and coffee table. Bubba immediately set himself to the task of cleaning up the table.

"Oh, dear." Pam took the empty mug Sammy held out so he could bounce the almost-3-year-old on his leg.

While doing so, Sammy said, "Clayton, I just came from the Catrionas' new house. They think you're the greatest thing since midget wrestling."

Sarah interjected, "Oh, dear! The television isn't working."

Sammy looked at her, but lacked a comeback, so Clayton said, "I'm glad to help them, Sammy, though I do wish he'd get the rest of that money into the bank."

"Has he got enough to get the house, and, you know, live?" Sammy asked.

"With his stocks, I believe so, Sammy. His longtime broker has been paying his account in stock and holding it for him. We're getting that set up to be paid electronically to his new bank account. That looks to be in the neighborhood of eight thousand a month," Clayton said.

"Eight thou—that's almost a hundred grand a year! That's great!" Sammy exulted. "So, they really don't need child support from Abby."

"No, I would say not," Clayton agreed.

"Do you think she knew that?" Marni asked.

"Possibly," Sammy admitted. "It would sure explain why she didn't seem to care. The critical thing was getting them out of that neighborhood to someplace safe. Frank just had the presence of mind to keep his assets accessible and grab them when I came knocking."

Pam came in from the kitchen. "Well, if everybody's not sick of turkey by now, the casserole is ready."

Everybody got up to move to the kitchen. Marni looked at Sammy and Sam splotched with cocoa and sighed, but he shrugged. They put baby Adair and Clay sitting in their seats in the playpen facing the table, and Sam in his booster seat beside Sarah. Clayton said a heartfelt prayer of thanks over the meal, and they dug in.

As they ate, Sammy said, "Oh! Guess what. I found another orchid in my rental car. A purple one." Pam looked at him quickly but he went on, "I was real glad to see it after the maids threw out my other orchids. Hey, Pam, how are yours doing?"

"Fine," she began, but Sammy decided he wanted to see for himself, so he got up from the table to go look in her painting studio.

Pam drew in a short breath, glancing at Marni. "I left the portrait uncovered." Wary of showing his face, Sammy had allowed her to paint him only once. But she had recently caught him unawares to sketch him, and was now painting a second likeness.

"Oops." Marni got up to follow her husband.

When she caught up with him in her mom's studio, he had indeed spotted the 11-by-14-inch canvas. The orchid spike was already painted in; Pam was presently painting in the sketch of Sammy behind it. The way she was shading it made it look as though the orchid was lying across his chest, draped from his right shoulder to a lower left rib. Marni approached him cautiously while he stared at it. Curiously, his hand was on his chest, over his heart.

"That's right," he murmured. "If you carry that reassurance inside you, then you don't need to see it on your desk, or in your car." Apparently, this was something that the painting had communicated to him. Pam's art had a way of doing that.

She blinked. "Sammy, Adair Streiker was at the studio today."

“Did you see her?” he asked quickly.

“No.” She glanced at the orchid painting. “I just... felt her presence. But she was there to protect you.”

“That’s interesting,” he said, raising his face, “because Streiker came down to the office to tell me not to do any more events with Abby Max.”

“Really?” she breathed.

He nodded. “I kinda put up a fight, blathering about how I wanted to help the Catrionas, and he said, ‘Well, maybe you better check with them, first,’ so I did. That’s when I found out that they don’t need help financially; they just needed somebody to get them out of that neighborhood, which is what Streiker sent me to do. It’s pointless for me to do another challenge.”

“And something about Abby is dangerous to you,” she murmured.

“Oh, she could slice me up any number of ways,” he said assuredly. “It was nice that I beat her, but it probably would have been safer to lose, and lose badly.” This he just now realized.

“So you’re... going to do what Streiker says?” she asked hopefully.

“You better believe it. He didn’t come down there to make a suggestion,” Sammy said.

She ventured, “I wonder why he didn’t tell you what the problem was.”

He looked out to the back yard, glowing in an afternoon autumn shower. “Because it shouldn’t be necessary. If I need an explanation for anything he tells me at this point, then I don’t deserve to work for him,” he said, thinking back to what happened with both Chris and Jess.

Marni leaned into him, and he kissed the top of her head. “Okay, I wasn’t done with dinner. C’mon.” Towing her by the hand, he returned to the table without a word about the illegality of Pam’s sketch.

The following day, Thursday, the last day of November, Sammy drove the purple monstrosity to work at his usual time. He left the unwilted orchid spike on the front seat where he had found it and went in to make coffee and open his laptop.

When Mike and Dave came in about a half hour later, they seemed surprised to see him. “Hey, it’s the Great Manly Hope,” Dave greeted him with a gesture of homage. “No events today?”

“Nope. I’m done with that,” Sammy said breezily. “Got her caught up on her past-due support, and that’s all that mattered. Hey, good job on the Eoghan case. I see you made him cough it up.”

Dave regarded him. “Yeah, after you did all the grunt work.”

Sammy waved it away; he had orchids now. “Mike, have you got anything else from Streiker?”

Mike dubiously regarded the piles of mail on his desk. “Not that I’ve seen, Sammy. Want me to prioritize them to you?”

“Indeed I do,” Sammy replied, bringing out a file from his second drawer.

Mike and Dave glanced at each other. Dave asked Sammy, “Did you notice that Reyna was there with almost all of Tactical? They postponed training to come watch you.” Nodding, Mike turned to his phone.

“He did me a solid,” Sammy said. “He came out Tuesday to give me a crash course on technique. I’d ’a’ never had a prayer without his help. Oh, and, if I don’t get to talk to Chris, tell him I appreciate his praying for me.”

“He was sky-high afterward,” Dave admitted. “We couldn’t figure out where you went.”

“To see the Catrionas,” Sammy began explaining, but the office line rang. Since Mike was already on another line to someone else, Sammy answered it. “MK and associates. This is Sammy Kidman.”

“Hello, Sammy!” said a very friendly Blaine Nash. “Hey, congratulations on your big win yesterday. Everybody here is just buzzing about what a great opening segment that will make.”

“Glad I could help,” Sammy said distantly.

“Oh, it’s going to work great. Now, let’s talk about Event Number Two. You’re going to love this. We—”

Sammy cut in: “I’m sorry, Nash. There won’t be any more events. I have to get back to my day job.”

Nash laughed. “Ow! Wow, you’re brutal. That’s not even funny, Dude. Okay, as I was saying—”

Sammy cut him off again. “Why do you think I’m kidding, Dude?” Because his coworkers were looking over in interest, Sammy pushed the speakerphone button and hung up.

“Oh, come ON, Sammy. Okay, if you want to get testy, we do have a contract,” Nash reminded him.

“Yes, which Abby fulfilled to the letter. I, on the other hand, am required to do nada for you, which is exactly what I’m doing,” Sammy said, returning to his laptop.

At the subsequent silence, Sammy reached out with the intention of disconnecting the call. Then Nash said, “Okay, how much do you want?”

“From you? Nothing. Thanks,” Sammy said.

“Then what do you want?” Nash asked.

Sammy leaned forward on his arms to speak closely into the phone. “To get back to work. Bye, Dude.” He clicked off the speakerphone, muttering, “‘Dude.’ I hate that. When did everybody start saying ‘Dude’? Moron.”

“Why are you not doing any more events, Sambo?” Mike asked.

He glanced up. “Mr. Striker wasn’t cool with it.”

“Why?” Dave asked.

Sammy regarded him. Pruett would not be satisfied with, “*He just isn’t, is all.*” So he said, “I believe Striker has some inside information on what they’re planning.” Smiling, he added, “Besides which, right now I’m one up on her. I guarantee you, it would be all downhill from here.”

Pruett snorted in acknowledgment, then they turned to their separate tasks.

Thirty minutes later, Sammy was on the phone interviewing an angry, abandoned wife with three minor children when Pruett took a call. Sammy paid no attention until ten minutes later, when he had hung up and was scribbling notes, because that's when Pruett said, "Line three's for you, Sammy."

"Thanks." Sammy laid a hand on the phone while he finished writing, then picked up the receiver and punched 3. "Thank you for waiting. This is Sammy Kidman." When no one said anything, he said, "Hello?"

A soft female voice he didn't recognize said, "Oh. Hello, Sammy. Will you hold for Abby, please?"

"Is this Meadow?" he asked quickly. If it was, he wanted to talk to her. He needed to know more about her, such as, how she knew him.

"Yes, I'm holding for Abby—"

"Do you remember when we last saw each other? Before I showed up at Abby's, I mean." It was a shot in the dark, guided by instinct.

"I... didn't think you'd remember," she murmured.

He didn't, but he asked, "Are you still mad at me?" That was always a safe bet.

"Here's Abby," she said quickly.

Immediately he heard: "Hey, Sammy." It was Abby, smooth as silk.

Sammy inhaled, tossing his pen down. When Pruett glanced over, Sammy put the call on speakerphone. "Hello, Abby."

"Hey, Nash says you're weaseling out on me, but I told him he's a freakin' liar."

"He's right, Abby. It was fun, but I have to get back to work now," Sammy said, picking up his scribbled notes.

"How much do you want?" she asked, her voice a little harder.

"Nothing," he said, reading.

She paused, then exhaled, "Come on, Sammy; be a sport. You owe me a chance to pull even."

"I'm sorry, Abby; it's just not doable. You can make the magic happen with just about anybody else. I've got to —"

"Sammy—" she choked out. "Please... I'll do anything. Anything." And then she burst into tears.

Sammy quickly looked at Pruett, who fiercely wrote on a notepad and then turned it to face him: "FAKE."

Nodding, Sammy said to the speaker, "Aw, c'mon, Abby, don't cry. I tell you what—we'll talk. But it's got to be on neutral ground. There's a little cafe called Desireé on Bryant Irvin just a few miles from you—"

"I know where that is," she said quickly.

"Good. Only, if you show up there, you'll spend the whole time signing autographs. So, give your terms to Meadow and send her, oh, about two o'clock," he said, looking at his watch. "We'll talk through her. She can even call you if she needs to."

“Oh, thanks, Sammy. I knew you were a good guy,” Abby gushed.

Sammy smirked. “Only the best for you. Bye.”

As he hung up, Pruett demanded, “Why are you meeting her flunkie?”

“Because I know that flunkie from somewhere; she remembers some dark act of evil I once did, and I’ve got to find out what she’s going to blackmail me with,” Sammy said pensively.

“Oh.” Dave’s brow cleared. “Good reason.”

“But I don’t even know that I’d recognize her at the cafe, if she does her hair any differently. She was real careful to keep her face down around me.” He tapped his chin, searching, searching.... “Wait. Marni took video of the race.”

He picked up his phone again and speed-dialed a number. When Marni answered, he said, “Hi, baby. Listen, can you send that video to my phone? I think there’s something I need on it.”

“Don’t be stingy; have her send it to our email,” Dave argued.

So Sammy amended, “Ahem. Pruett requests that the video be sent to our office email.”

“Sure, Sammy. I’ll do that now,” she said. He heard Bubba barking and Sam screaming with laughter in the background.

“Great. Thanks. Bye.” He carefully hung up.

Moments later Dave said, “Okay, it’s there. Mike, check the office email.”

“I’m there,” Mike said, his back to them.

“What is it you’re looking for?” Dave asked, clicking *play*.

“Somebody at the beginning,” Sammy muttered, then they were all silent, watching.

About 15 minutes later, Mike said, “Hey, Marni shot a good video.” And he immediately forwarded it to several people downtown.

Dave said, “Miraculous, in that it makes Shemp look athletic.” And he forwarded it to Reyna.

Sammy was silent, having isolated one frame at the beginning of the video. He was studying the fairly clear shot of a girl with short dark hair glancing to the window at her left. He enlarged it as much as he could while retaining sharpness, then intently studied the face.

After a moment he shook his head. The image would enable him to pick her out of a crowd today, but did nothing to prompt his memory. “Guess I’ll just have to see what comes of talking to her in person.”

He got done what he could, which didn’t amount to much, then headed out to the Irving cafe so as to arrive about ten minutes early. As the studio’s helmet and sunglasses were still lying on the passenger seat, Sammy took them into the cafe with him. The lunch rush was thinning out, as he expected, so he was able to get a table near a front window to watch for Meadow.

When the waitress came to take his order, he said, “I’m waiting for someone—ah. There she is.” He stood so that Meadow could see him when she walked in the door.

Sammy pointed her to the chair across from him as he sat. “Here. You can take these back with you.” He shoved the helmet and sunglasses over to her. Then he added, “You may as well order, because I’m having lunch.”

While Meadow hesitantly scanned the menu, he asked the waitress for a Reuben sandwich and water. Meadow was then persuaded to order a salad and mineral water.

When the waitress left, Sammy studied Meadow for a moment, then said, “Thanks for meeting me. I hope it’s not too awkward.”

She shrugged, glancing away. *C’mon, give me a clue*, he thought. They waited in silence for the waitress to bring their waters and bread sticks. Sammy decided that it was incumbent upon Meadow to speak, because this meeting meant vastly more to Abby than it did to himself.

So he contemplatively chewed on a breadstick, eyeing Meadow from time to time. Nope: no hits from the memory bank. This irritated him because he was usually very good at placing faces.

When their plates arrived, Sammy said, “Looks great. Thanks,” and began eating as if they had come to the cafe to have lunch.

Stirring her salad, Meadow finally said, “Abby wants to know what it would take for you to do two more events.”

Sammy cleared his mouth, then said, “I don’t know. Do you want me to?”

She blinked at him, fork halfway to her mouth. “Why should that matter?”

“I’d hate to think that you’re still mad at me,” he said humbly.

“Why should I be mad at you?” she asked, inclining her head. She was smiling slightly, which could mean either that he had hit a bull’s-eye or completely missed the target.

“Well, you know....” He shrugged as if too embarrassed to say it out loud.

“Oh, it wasn’t your fault,” she said, looking off. “The cops got my purse out and gave it to me. I just can’t get over how much you look like him.”

Sammy stared at her for 30 seconds, then the realization of who she was landed on him like an atomic bomb.

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## Chapter 7

Sammy put his sandwich down and folded his hands under the table to keep them from shaking. Then he casually said, “Uhhh, that was... Heather. So is your real name Heather, Meadow, or something else?”

“Heather,” she said. “Heather Cruz.” She reached over to offer her hand, and he slowly brought his hand up from under the table to shake hers. “I started using ‘Meadow’ as a stage name when I went to work for the studio, so it just kind of stuck when I started working for Abby,” she explained. Sammy nodded, then replaced his hand under the table to keep the other company.

“You stopped eating,” she observed. He sat back, placing a hand on the table, and eyed his half-eaten sandwich. With effort, he resumed lunch. She ate, too, untroubled.

Wiping his mouth with the napkin, he said, “I’m glad you got your purse back. That was a pretty bad wreck.”

In fact, it was the wreck that killed his father, and she had been in the car with him at the time. All Sammy remembered about her from the scene was that she didn’t have a scratch, but was hysterical over her purse on the floorboard. She was his dad’s girlfriend when he was married to Dolly. Sammy had watched the surveillance video of his phone call to her in which he tried to break it off with her the night before he died.

“Yeah, it was horrible,” she groaned. “The cops wouldn’t let me leave, and kept asking me about where we’d been or what he had ‘ingested’ before driving, and then I couldn’t ever get back the gold bracelet I’d given him. It cost me two hundred bucks!” she vented. Sammy’s hands went back under the table. His dad’s bloody suffering did not rate a mention compared to her losing a gold bracelet.

“So when I saw you—wow, it was like the wreck never happened. I almost feel like I’ve slept with *you*,” she said, parting her lips.

“That’s a reprehensible thought,” he murmured, unaware that he had said it out loud.

“I guess,” she shrugged, evidently not understanding him.

He looked down. *If she hadn’t been with him, he wouldn’t have died.* He felt the hatred blowing up in him almost before he could defuse it. With great effort, he tamped it down with the reminder that his dad was responsible for his own choices, and if disaster hadn’t struck then, it would have later.

*Is that why Streiker didn’t want me competing against Abby any more? So I wouldn’t learn this?* He thought about this while she said that the studio something was a really ridiculous something something.

*Doubtful*, he decided. Streiker didn’t impress him as the kind of guy who would insulate him from painful truths. Streiker seemed more concerned about what he did with those painful truths. Sammy intended to follow his instructions concerning these to the letter. He had learned that lives depended on it—possibly his own.

Gradually, he realized that Meadow had stopped talking, evidently waiting until she had his attention again. Seeing his eyes wander back to her face, she said, “Okay. Abby really wants you back for the second event. What’s it gonna take here?”

Sammy ate the pickle on his plate. “What’s the event?” he asked, feigning interest.

“You are going to love this. A football skills event! You compete against Abby in throwing, receiving, running and tackling. I mean, any man’s gonna have an advantage on her there, but you played arenaball!” she said, tapping his arm.

He turned up his water glass, watching her. Then he sweetly asked, “How did Abby know about that?”

“Well—” At her cocked head and confessional smile, he realized with a chill that this was something his dad had told her about, which she then relayed to Abby. Yes, frankly, Sammy should annihilate Abby in a test of football skills, but he was certain that she had some ace up her sleeve to prevent that. There was no conceivable way she would lose a second event to him.

Pretending to consider the offer, Sammy looked up to the ceiling. He wondered how determined they were to corral him into continuing with the events. Abby’s blackmailing him over some forgotten sin was still a possibility, depending on what his dad had told Heather. How could he shake free of their interest in him?

“You know, Heather, Abby doesn’t really need me. You can find any guy, slap the name ‘Yves Leandro’ on him, and make like he’s the one who did the first event, too. Abby owns the name and the footage, not me,” he said.

“Don’t call me ‘Heather.’ I’m ‘Meadow.’ And, Abby wants *you*,” Heather/Meadow cooed.

*It’s personal, then*, Sammy thought, nodding, but decided, hey, it might be worthwhile to follow up on her objection to his use of her real name. So he casually said, “I’ll try to remember that, but I still think of you as ‘Heather.’ I learned a lot about you from my dad.”

He finished his sandwich while she mulled that over. It was a carefully constructed sentence which led her to believe that her lover had talked to his son about his girlfriend, when all Sammy knew actually came from his own observations of his dad’s behavior.

“I haven’t really stolen anything from the studio,” she said lightly.

Sammy dismissed the notion with a raspberry and a wave. “*Pbbbbt*. I’m sure you haven’t. But what if Abby thinks you have?” *Because blackmail can cut both ways, baby. Haven’t you ever talked to Stan Threlkeld?* he thought.

They evaluated each other. “Why would anybody tell her that?” Heather asked faintly.

“I do not know,” Sammy replied, scandalized. “But here’s what I need: I need for you to make Abby understand that I am *not* doing another event with her.”

She sat back with a whine of self-pity. “But I have to make sure that you do!”

Sammy studied her. He actually did empathize with her rock/hard place situation. He might find himself in that place if he didn’t work all the leverage he could muster here. So he murmured, “How do you feel about Nash?”

“Nash?” she asked, inadvertently sneering.

“That’s what I thought,” he muttered, tapping his lips. “Okay. You can go back to Abby and tell her that Nash spoiled the whole thing for me. You don’t know what he said or did because I wouldn’t talk about it, but it’s totally Nash’s fault.”

“I can do that,” she said, brightening.

They were quiet while she finished her salad and he motioned to the waitress for their check. She brought it, and as Sammy added a tip and brought out his credit card, Heather murmured, "I did care for him."

He glanced up at her, and she went on, "I know you think I was just a gold-digger or something, but I did care about him."

Sammy cleared his throat. "Then why wouldn't you break it off when he asked you to?"

"Oh, he wouldn't do that. What are you talking about? He never wanted to break up with me," she said defensively.

Sammy handed the check with his card to the waitress, then sat back to look at Heather. She had no idea that he had seen the actual footage of his dad's doing just that. Then he said, "Do you know who's really rich?"

"Who?" she asked.

"Fletcher Streiker. He's a billionaire," Sammy said.

"I... don't think I've ever heard of him," she said, weighing whether he was serious or not.

"You should talk to him," Sammy said, digging in his pockets for something to write on. "Or better, visit his arboretum. The Fletcher Streiker Arboretum, just east of downtown here. You can't miss it. He shows up there a lot, just to talk to people."

At that, she nodded gravely. "I've seen the signs for it," she admitted.

The waitress came up to return his card and receipt. "Thank you, sir! You have a wonderful day," she said, glowing. He flashed a smile at her, having discovered that, as much as Marni might object to his spending, she never said a word about how much he tipped.

Sammy stood and pushed in his chair; Heather did so a little reluctantly, looking at his hand with the wedding band. Out of the blue, she said, "Yeah, Nash said he saw your wife watching the race from the second-floor window. That was her, right? Wearing a wedding band that matches yours, except with this great big diamond."

Yes, shortly after Clay was born, Marni had agitated for new wedding sets for some reason. Sammy had acquiesced, because. But it had caught Heather's eye so that she mentioned it, and in so doing, alerted him to the fact that Nash knew his wife had been there to watch.

And this was the most important bit of information to come out of this whole lunch. It was worth every awkward moment just to know that somehow, Nash had identified Marni. Therefore, Sammy concluded that she was the one in danger, not he himself. Sammy was willing to lay a large bet on the proposition that Streiker warned him away from further events in order to protect *Marni*.

*Why wouldn't he tell me that?* Sammy wondered. Besides the fact that Sammy couldn't know for certain that this was the case, he could see how too much information would be counterproductive, just as it would have been to know that Chris was the one getting beaten in that alley. Since even implied threats to his family or close friends severely taxed Sammy's self-control, it was probably merciful for Streiker not to mention Marni in this context.

As these ruminations took half a second, he easily replied to Heather, "It could have been my wife. But she didn't tell me that she was going to watch, and I know a friend of hers was going, who showed her the tungsten-and-wood rings." All this was the literal truth: Pruett is the one who spotted the rings online, and once Marni saw them, she had to have them.

As Sammy walked out of the cafe, Heather followed, taking the helmet and sunglasses. “Oh. Then that wasn’t your wife?”

“I don’t know who was there,” he said, again true, literally. He wasn’t obliged to tell her everything he knew. “Good luck, Heather.” He shook her hand.

“Meadow,” she replied, looking thoughtful.

He ambled toward the purple monstrosity, but delayed finding it until he saw her pull out and drive away. Then, standing beside the car, he miraculously found his phone in his pocket and selected a number.

“Hi! What’s up?” Marni answered.

He began, “Hi, baby—”

“Oh, no. What happened?” she said.

“Wha—? Why do you think something happened? Can I just say, ‘hi, baby,’ without you going into red alert?” he asked, peeved. When a couple exiting their car looked over curiously, he quickly sat behind the wheel.

“I’m sorry, Sammy. How is your day going?” she asked. He heard Bubba barking in the background followed by a tinkling crash. Away from the phone, she said, “Sam, Bubba may not want to play circus.”

“Where are you?” he asked uneasily, trying to guess what belonging to the Taylors just got destroyed.

“At home. Isn’t that strange? I felt that Mom deserved a break. She and Sarah are having a quiet afternoon with Adair—the baby. So, you were saying?”

“Yeah, well, I had an interesting lunch—I’ll cover the details with you later. Just wanted to let you know that Abby’s assistant—well, both assistants—indexed you yesterday as ‘Mrs. Yves Leandro’ somehow. I think they’re going to try to maneuver you into something, so if you hear anything from them, you know....” He was reluctant to give explicit instructions on what she should say to people, because then she got the crazy idea that he thought she wasn’t capable of putting words out there herself.

“Oh, don’t worry; I will be totally unavailable,” she promised.

“Okay, thanks. I’m going to check in at the office, then I’ll probably cut out early.”

“Okay, Sammy. I love you.”

“I love you, baby.” He put his phone away, then checked again to see that it actually landed in his pocket. Following that accomplishment, he started the engine and pulled out onto the thoroughfare.

When he arrived back at the office, only Mike was there, running preliminary checks on the most promising cases.

“Where’s Pruett?” Sammy asked upon entering.

Mike glanced at him over his shoulder. “Out running down money, of course. He’s real unhappy about the state requiring us to send all monies collected through their system. Sometimes the families don’t get it for weeks.”

“Yeah, me too. You know, I might call them about that.” Having decided that, he sat at his desk and auto-dialed Barbara, the assistant to the Attorney General.

When she answered, he said, “Hi, Barbara. This is Sammy Kidman. How are you doing today?”

“Fine, Sammy,” she said impatiently.

“Barbara, I’m wondering why our agency has to shunt all of our collections through the state unit, all of a sudden. We—”

“Sammy, just because you don’t take a cut doesn’t mean you get to skip procedures. These are in place to insure uniformity and integrity throughout the system.”

He paused, stung at the insinuation that his agency required state oversight to keep them honest. “Uh, Barbara, we keep diligent records of our collections and disbursements. No one has ever—”

“Yes, Sammy, your independent record-keeping has made it difficult for us to keep tabs on you. You need to conform your practices to our system,” she said.

“Or what?” he asked mildly.

“Well, we’d have to investigate you,” she said crisply.

He absorbed that, then said, “Okay, Barbara. Thanks for the heads-up.” He hung up and sat in thought a moment.

“Oh, Sammy,” Mike said, as if he was just now remembering something. “Here’s another one from Streiker.” He held an envelope over his head, and Sammy quickly crossed the room to take it.

Turning back to his desk with the letter, he paused. It had no return address, an illegible postmark, and was addressed to him in a printed hand. It was unopened. “Mike? How do you know this is from Streiker?”

“Same handwriting,” Mike replied.

“Oh.” Sammy opened it where he stood and read: “Sammy, when you receive this, come to the arboretum. F.S.”

Sammy evaluated that a moment, then returned the note to the envelope and stuck both in his coat pocket. “Mike, he asked me to stop by the Arboretum, so that’s where I’m going.”

Mike glanced up. “Okay, Sammy.”

Pulling out of the narrow parking lot in the purple malevolence, Sammy mused, “This is weird. He couldn’t know when I would get that letter. Then again, he could have just left something for me at the Arboretum.”

Then he focused on his windshield in displeasure, seeing random snowflakes land on it and melt. “Meh. Oh, well.”

Arriving at his destination, he was rather surprised to see all the cars in the parking lot. “Why are all these people here this late in the afternoon when it’s starting to snow?” he complained, being one of them.

But when he approached the entrance, he saw why: The Arboretum was decorated for Christmas. There were lights everywhere, outlining everything. They sparkled in the afternoon, grown dark with encroaching clouds.

A sign at the entrance gates announced, “Officina Gentium Presents: Christmas Around the World.” Set around the plaza were at least a dozen little houses representing different countries, topped by their flags. Outside the

houses, and evidently inside, were reproductions of each country's unique Christmas traditions. Old-fashioned lamp posts, lit and decorated, stood at the doorway of every little house.

Waving on poles in front of the houses closest to him were the national flags of Germany, Mexico, Greece, and Wales. Sammy stepped inside the Welsh house to see a large red dragon with a Santa hat and a banner reading "*Nadolig Llawen*." There was a wall-mounted screen showing a video of *Plygain*, in which men would gather in the village church early on Christmas Day to sing *a cappella* carols in harmony. It was quite beautiful.

There was a *Mari Lwyd*, the horse's skull, carried by the man who went house to house to trade rhyming insults with whoever answered. And in the corner was a girl in costume handing out taffy. Sammy took a piece, saying, "*Diolch*."

She replied courteously, "*Croeso*." He popped the candy in his mouth and turned out of the house smiling. Without speaking or understanding a word of Welsh, he knew exactly what they had both said.

Standing guard over it all from the rear of the plaza was a huge angel, easily 30 feet tall. It looked like it was made of stone, which it could not have been, so Sammy assumed it was some kind of synthetic.

The angel's stance was arresting: He was winged—so you'd know it was an angel—dressed in armor, both hands on the hilt of his sword, point down on the ground in front of him. His eyes were on the entryway. Instinctively, Sammy gave him space.

Glancing around the crowded plaza, Sammy did not see Streiker, so he ambled over to a kiosk selling hot wassail—it was getting pretty chilly, and he wore only his sports coat. He stood in line for a cup, but when he dug in his pocket to pay, he discovered that they were giving it away tonight.

Cupping his hands around the steaming mug, Sammy walked down one path to a little footbridge spanning a brook. (This was not the bridge he had brought Sharon to; that one was much farther off.) Since children were running up and down it, he didn't attempt to linger, but went across it to a small folly, lit but deserted.

With the snow coming down a little harder now, the open structure provided some shelter, so he climbed its steps and plopped on one of the benches lining the walls. Propping a foot on the bench beside him, he sipped the wassail and waited.

Minutes later, he felt a footfall on the steps behind him, and Streiker swung up into the folly. Sitting across from Sammy in the six-foot space, he noted, "Ah, you got the wassail. Is it good?"

"Yes," Sammy replied, settling the cup on his leg. "Mr. Streiker, Abby and her people keep contacting me, and I keep turning them down. Now I'm afraid they're going after my wife."

Streiker leaned forward, elbow on one knee, eyes roaming the grounds. "If I tell you that Adair is keeping an eye on her, will that put your mind at ease?"

"Yes," Sammy said, smiling slightly.

Streiker nodded, eyes crinkling. He was silent for a few minutes, and Sammy waited, drinking his wassail. Then Streiker said, "Sammy, are you ready to do something different with the agency?"

"I sure am," he replied. "Provided I—we—can continue to employ Mike and Dave."

"That's up to them," Streiker said vaguely. "The assignments I give you from here on out may be... difficult, and you won't receive the gratitude that the Catrionas have shown."

Sammy leaned his head back, thinking. “The Catrionas’ gratitude was nice, but what you did with Jess was more impressive, and she didn’t show any gratitude at all.”

Streiker nodded, watching the children scamper over the footbridge. “She didn’t understand.” He was quiet a moment, then stood. “Okay. Since I have your consent, I’ll move on that. You might want to alert Mike and Dave that a change is coming.”

Sammy stood as well, placing his empty cup on the bench. “And Marni? Yikes. Do you think she’ll be upset about not being the boss any more?”

Streiker considered that. “Has she been pestering you for a new key?”

Sammy snorted. “No. She still doesn’t have one, and she doesn’t seem to care. I think she’d be very glad to hear that you’re the agency head.”

Streiker smiled, looking away, which made Sammy wonder what he might have already told her. “Okay, well, thank you, Mr. Streiker. I look forward to the opportunity.” Sammy extended his hand.

Streiker shook it. “Good. I’ll be in touch.”

Sammy hopped down from the folly, feeling energized. He disliked ruts. Streiker did not seem all that interested in them, either. *Something different! Awesome.*

On his way out, Sammy looked up at the formidable stone angel. The angel glanced down at him, then returned his scrutiny to the entryway. Sammy, not at all surprised, left.

In the folly, Streiker turned, and Adair mounted the steps toward him. He grasped her hand to pull her forward. Smiling, he chided, “You’re having way too much fun with this.”

“Don’t scold,” she laughed. “Not when you led me into it.” He enveloped her with a warm kiss, and for several minutes they said nothing.

Then she murmured, “When can I see Daniel?” This was Streiker’s adopted son whom Adair had grown to love while taking care of him.

Streiker sat back, inhaling. He took his time to reply in what was obviously an ongoing discussion. “He’s still too angry, Adair.”

“But—I don’t understand why!” she blurted. “He’s just a little guy. What made him so angry? Did someone tell him about the attack?”

When Fletcher did not reply, she pleaded, “Can you at least tell him that I want to see him? That I haven’t deserted him?”

“Sure, when he decides to listen to me,” he said.

“But you can make him listen,” she insisted.

He regarded her. “Now, you know that if I took so long with you, I’m not going to rush it with Daniel.”

“I know.” She leaned into him, sighing, “I go back to look at it, sometimes. The strangling. I don’t remember it—don’t remember the pain at all. But I visited Duane today. He didn’t know it was me. None of them did.”

He nodded slightly, brushing the hair back from her face, waiting. She went on, “His remorse is overwhelming him. He can’t believe that I forgive him. I’m afraid that he is becoming enamored with the guilt, drowning in it. He doesn’t know why he attacked me, and he’s afraid to find out.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Keep after him,” she said tentatively. “Please don’t let him settle for guilty feelings when he’s got to admit his guilt to get free of it.”

“All right,” he said.

“Thank you,” she breathed, sinking into him. Then she looked up. “Oh, the snow is beautiful. It’s so nice to enjoy it without freezing.” Her face darkened. “You will see that Sammy gets home safely, won’t you? The tires on that rental are almost bald, and no one’s noticed.”

“We’ll get someone to tap him on the shoulder,” he replied. She grinned at him. “So,” he added, wrapping her tighter, “what shall we do with this Kidman family that you’re so taken with?”

She puckered a little worriedly. “I don’t know! They’re so—” Her face cleared. “What a tease. You already know! What are you going to do?”

“Come have some wassail, and we’ll talk,” he said, picking up Sammy’s cup on the way out of the folly.

At that time, a late-model Mercedes pulled into the Taylors’ driveway. A nicely dressed young man with a sharp haircut and sliver of goatee under his bottom lip emerged from the car, glancing around. He was looking in particular for a purple Volvo, which he did not see. As he went to the front door to ring the bell, he assumed a pleasant, interested expression.

The door opened, and the visitor smiled warmly at the woman who answered. “Mrs. Taylor? I’m Blaine Nash, assistant producer of the show, ‘Can You Top Abby Max?’ I’d really appreciate the opportunity to visit with you for a moment. May I come in?”

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## Chapter 8

Sarah Hawkins stood at the Taylors' door, blinking at Blaine Nash on the front step. "Oh, dear! I'm afraid you've made a mistake. I'm not Mrs. Taylor."

A shadow of consternation crossed his face, and he stepped back to double check the house number. "Oh... bother. And you live here?" he asked weakly.

"Yes, but I'm not Mrs. Taylor," Sarah insisted.

She was opening her mouth to add, "*She's in the other room with the baby,*" but before she could get the words out, Nash said through gritted teeth, "I'm so sorry for the error. I do apologize."

Striding back to his car, he was muttering, "Meadow, you stupid b——h, you can't even get an address straight. I can hardly wait to hear your explanation for *this*."

With an air of confusion, Sarah closed the door to return to the studio, where Pam was standing over the padded table on which baby Adair lay. Pam said, "There you are! You're not going to believe this, but she's rolling already! I can't sketch her unless you're standing right here!"

"Well, here I am!" Sarah said, hastening over. "The strangest thing just happened at the door."

Pam looked up. "What?"

"Well...." Sarah began telling her about her visitor.

At the Arboretum parking lot, Sammy was hurrying to the Volvo in the thickening snow flurries—the one good thing about purple being that he could spot that vehicle in a packed parking lot from a half-mile away. Drawing closer, he paused at the sight of a rather disreputable-looking guy leaning over his car.

Sammy hastened his already fast stride. He didn't care if the car got vandalized—heck, he might be tempted to scratch that purple haze himself just to get it a paint job—but he didn't want anything impeding his drive home tonight.

As he drew up, the guy turned and said, "Hey, man. If this is your ride, I'd get me some new tires."

Under the bright parking-lot light, Sammy snapped his head down to look at the smooth front tire. "Oh, for the love of all that's holy—"

In increasing agitation, he checked the other tires, and found them just as bare of tread. "Ed, how could you do this to me? Eh, it's not his fault."

Pulling out his wallet, he turned back to the derelict. "Yeah, it's a rental, and I never noticed. Thanks for catching that." He held out a bill, which the guy took in shaking fingers, tapping his forehead in thanks before turning away.

Sammy unlocked the car, then paused. He felt sure that Streiker's barbecue place was open, and the guy looked like he probably needed to eat. So Sammy turned back to call him, but he was gone. Scanning the whole lot, Sammy saw no one but a family climbing into their minivan. Pensively, he sat behind the wheel.

Well, he'd better take care of the tire situation first thing. Checking his watch, he saw that he had plenty of time to make it to Ed's shop this afternoon before they closed, if he survived the drive. He turned the ignition, started the heater, and gingerly backed out.

Fortunately, the snow had not begun to stick when Sammy fishtailed into Ed's. He drove directly into the shop, which inflamed the tech on duty to rash words until Sammy pointed to the tires, already starting to separate.

Ed himself came to look at the disgrace. "Oh, no. Look at that. How did that ever pass inspection? Oh, okay. I see that the inspection is three years overdue on this vehicle. Well, Sammy, we can't have that."

"Thanks, Ed. Listen, I can't wait for tires; I told my wife I'd be home early and I'm already late. Have you got any other rentals in?" Sammy pleaded with all the winsomeness of a lost puppy.

"Yeah, we got a Jeep Liberty back today, but we haven't—"

"Give it to me, Ed. I'll fill it up," Sammy said levelly.

"It hasn't been cleaned out, Sammy," Ed warned him, gesturing to his nephew.

"I don't care. I'll dispose of any bodies myself. I know just where to take them," Sammy said.

Ed evaluated him gravely, but his nephew drove the coveted vehicle to the front. Sammy ripped through the paperwork, checking boxes whether they were relevant or not, and finally climbed into a mud-colored Jeep. He sighed, clutching the steering wheel. "Thank you, Lord Jesus, for this act of kindness." Then he had to climb down quickly to get the garage-door opener and Abby Max's file out of the purple grievance. Then he was gone.

After sailing up the freeway through intermittent snow flurries, he pulled into the garage of his house, grateful to see Marni's Prius parked where it should be. He entered the kitchen to the welcome sounds of Sam wailing, Bubba barking, and Clay crying.

Coming into the family room, Sammy saw Marni settling down on the couch with a wash cloth on Clay's head and stern words for his brother.

"What's this? Assault with a deadly weapon?" Sammy demanded.

"Dadadada!" Sam cried, leaping to his dad. Marni turned as she unbuttoned her shirt to Clay, who immediately stopped crying.

"What happened?" Sammy asked, sitting beside her with the perp in custody.

Marni rolled her eyes. "Oh, good heavens. Sam thought it would be fun to bash his brother on the head like they do in the cartoons." She lifted the cool, damp cloth to expose a small red spot on Clay's forehead.

Sammy turned to his eldest son in exasperation. "Sam!" When the toddler collapsed in tears at the rebuke, Sammy hugged him. "Sam. Listen. It's okay to bonk somebody on the head, if you remember the rule." Sam stopped sniffing and Marni raised a skeptical eyebrow. Clay, nursing contentedly, was not concerned about the rule right now.

"If you want to bonk somebody on the head, it has to be somebody bigger than you. Then you can get some practice fighting, too. See?" Sammy said encouragingly.

"Ohhh," Sam said, and slipped off Sammy's lap to run to the other room.

“Doesn’t that make sense? It’s what I grew up with,” Sammy told his wife, who blinked at him.

“I often wonder what you were like as a little boy,” she murmured.

Whereupon Sam reentered the room with his plastic hammer to bonk his dad resoundingly on the head. “Gah!” Sammy said, attempting to confiscate the wildly swinging hammer.

“Gah! Gah!” Collapsing in laughter on the floor, Sam gave it up.

Marni looked off in contemplation. “What’s that you said the other day, about feeling like you’re living in a Three Stooges short?”

“Hey, that hurts,” Sammy muttered, examining the sturdy plastic. “Who bought him this? It’s weapons-grade!”

She eyed him levelly and he muttered, “Oh. I didn’t remember it.”

Marni suddenly remembered: “Oh! Something interesting happened today. Mom had a visitor. Cool-looking dude driving a Mercedes.”

Sammy’s weapon stilled, as he was concentrating on her. She went on, “But Sarah answered the door, and he mistook her for Mom. When Sarah corrected him, he left.”

Sammy began tapping the weapons-grade plastic hammer in his palm. “Did he drop a name?”

“Blaine Nash. He wanted to talk to her about the show,” she confirmed.

“But he didn’t?” Sammy asked.

“No, Sarah confused him into thinking he had the wrong house. But he had come to the door asking for Mrs. Taylor.” Marni released Clay, who had fallen asleep, and put him on her shoulder. Sam was trying to catch Bubba’s swinging tail while getting snapped at.

Tapping the hammer rhythmically, Sammy thought out, “Dad and Dolly were at your folks’ for Thanksgiving last year. They had just gotten married. So Dad must have been seeing Heather even then.”

“Heather?” Marni asked.

“Oh, boy, have I got something to tell *you*,” he said, and proceeded to detail his late lunch with Heather/Meadow.

Marni listened in astonishment, then moaned, “I can’t believe our rings gave me away. I hardly ever wear it, and I don’t remember why I decided to put it on yesterday. I think I was just proud of you.” She looked down at her ring finger, presently unadorned.

“That gets you excused every time,” he assured her. “Besides, I think that Sarah and I jointly confused them about pretty much everything. Heather left thinking that it wasn’t you after all. But now I’m wondering what all dear old Dad told her.”

Marni looked at him. “He was proud of you, too.”

Sammy exhaled, looking away. Then his eye landed on his son rolling under the coffee table, batting at Bubba’s nose, and he murmured, “I hope I make you proud, Sam.” She wasn’t sure whether he was addressing his son or his late father.

“Oh!” Remembering something else, Sammy bonked himself on the head with the hammer, which sent Sam into further hysterics: “Gah! Gah!”

“I forgot the most important news. Mr. Streiker had sent this to the office for me.” Sammy drew the letter out of his coat pocket to hand to her.

While she opened it up, he said, “I went straight out to the Arboretum—we have to get out there, by the way; they’ve got it all Christmassed up—and anyway, Streiker met me there after I’d gotten a cup of wassail. They were just handing it out right and left.” While he talked, his son quietly relieved him of the hammer.

“Anyhow, what I forgot was that—Sam!” He made a grab for his son, who had just bonked him on the head again.

Laughing, Sam withdrew out of reach. Bubba wisely remained under the coffee table, where Sam could not raise the hammer high enough to deliver a really solid hit.

Unable to rein him in, Sammy continued, “Did I tell you that the AG’s office has decided that we have to deposit all collections through their pipeline? We can’t give the money straight to the families any more, or it won’t count as payment.”

“I heard some grumbling about that,” Marni said.

“Yeah, well, we’re all pretty sore about it. Anyway, Streiker sent me that note, and when I showed up at the Arboretum, he asked if I was ready to do something different with the agency. I told him, yeah, so he said he’d move on it, whatever that means.” He watched her nod thoughtfully, then went on, “I... think that means he’s the boss of the agency now.”

She continued to look thoughtful, then caught his pensive look. “Oh! You think I’m going to argue about giving up being nominal boss of the agency? Ha!” she laughed.

“Hey, you were,” he said defensively. “We called you ‘Mrs. K’ and everything.”

“You’re so cute,” she puckered at him. “Gosh, does that mean we should change the name to ‘The Fletcher Streiker Agency’? Get new stationery and business cards?”

He winced. “Maybe he wants to see how good a job we do before being publicly affiliated with us, and all.”

“Oh, no kidding,” she agreed, laughing again.

He squeezed her, then looked around. “Sam, if you’ll drop the weapon, I’d like to hold you a minute.”

Sam dropped the hammer and climbed up on his dad’s leg. Bubba, seeing the young master disarmed, came out from under the table to lay a paw on Dad’s leg, and Sammy obliged with a head-scratching. “Oh, man, I wish you could see—”

He suddenly got up. “Okay, everybody go to the bathroom and let’s go. C’mon, Bubba; I don’t want to buy more poop bags.”

“What?” Marni asked, getting up with Clay. She rose slowly because he was heavy and Sammy didn’t offer to help.

“Get your coat. Sam, go potty. You’re a big guy. Come, Bubba.” Sammy took him to the back yard in the early

evening, with snowflakes lightly falling.

By the time he and Bubba came back in, Marni had the boys dressed and ready to go. “Where are we going?” she asked, glancing outside.

“To Streiker’s Arboretum. They’ve got it all decorated up, and it’s great. Come on.” Sammy led them toward the garage.

Marni balked. “Are the roads slick yet?”

“Who cares? I’ve got a four-wheel drive,” Sammy said. Entering the garage, he started hauling out the guys’ car seats from Marni’s Prius to the Jeep. Bubba jumped right into the rear cargo area, pleased with the room, and waited for everyone else to get just as comfortably settled.

While Sammy strapped the guys into their seats, Marni found the leash and the remainder of the poop bags, and the grown-ups settled in the front seats. “Wow, this is great,” Marni said, looking back at the happy crew. “What happened to the purple car?”

“Well, that’s a funny story,” Sammy began, backing out. As he drove to the Arboretum, he described going out to the parking lot where the homeless guy showed him the seriously bald tires on the purple grievance before disappearing. So he himself had hopped right over to Ed’s, “and here you are,” he finished.

She was looking around the interior. “I like it. Sammy, let’s buy this.”

He twisted around to look at her, jerking the wheel a little. “This? I thought you liked the Prius.”

“Not with two guys and a dog. I like the room in this. Let’s get this one,” she said.

“It’s been a rental,” he said dubiously, looking at the odometer.

“Well, get one of your mechanics to check it out. Who are the best mechanics you know?” she asked.

“The ones that work with Ed,” he admitted.

“There you go,” she said, as if that clinched the argument, and Sammy shook his head.

At this moment, there was a conference in progress at Abby Max’s Las Colinas house. Unlike Sammy’s visit three days ago, there were only three people present. Blaine Nash had the floor, and was using it to eviscerate one of the other two for her failure in ascertaining a simple address.

“You had *one job*—” Nash began the final chapter of his harangue at Meadow.

“That’s Pamela Taylor’s address,” she insisted. “The tax records show her and her husband as the owners. I can show you the listing online.”

“They can own it and not live there, stupid,” he uttered.

Abby stirred. “Okay, enough. It doesn’t matter, because the security cameras caught the plates of his Volvo.”

“That purple car?” Nash laughed.

“Yeah.” She flashed a grin back at him. With such a wide mouth, her smile looked sinister, like The Joker

without makeup. "So all you need to do is trace it to get his address."

Meadow looked down. "Why go to all that trouble? Why don't you just grab another guy and make like he's been Yves Leandro all along?" she said, echoing Sammy's suggestion.

"It'd be hard to get someone with the same physique who knows football," Abby murmured thoughtfully, sipping a health drink. "Football players tend to bulk up. He's too small and slender."

Nash added, "I can't wait to see his face when he finds out that you quarterbacked the Nighthawks to their championship in the Women's Football League."

"Which is more than he did, with one arenaball game that his team lost," she added, again with that lopsided grin. "Yeah, that will be so great." She closed her eyes in anticipation.

Meadow stirred. "I don't think he wants to."

Abby looked at her. "Your job was to make him want to."

"I didn't have a chance! He was so ticked about something Nash said, he wouldn't really talk to me!" Meadow protested.

"What? What did I say?" Nash asked, spreading his hands.

"I don't know; he wouldn't tell me. But you really ticked him off," she said.

"When? I haven't talked to him at all since he was here Monday," Nash said, putting on his most truthful face.

"Okay, it doesn't matter," Abby said. "Nash, get an address on those plates. Sammy's going to do this for me. He'll be happy to," she said, eyeing Meadow. The girl looked away.

When the Kidmans arrived at the Arboretum, they found, to their astonishment, that it was open. Now that the sky was fully dark, the lights on the Arboretum's structures glowed brilliantly. Somehow, even the massive angel was lit.

Upon seeing it, Sam screamed. Sammy urgently turned to reassure him, but Sam evaded his grasp to run throw his arms around one big ankle. He was in love. Bubba trailed him because that was his job.

"Oh, my!" Marni, pushing a thoroughly bundled Clay in the stroller, gazed around the plaza while a few snowflakes drifted down. "What a beautiful Christmas village. Officina Gentium! That sounds familiar. Sammy, there are people here caroling! Where are their cars?"

"Probably came in a bus," Sammy said, looking down one path. "Listen, can you and the guys sit tight here while I go see if the barbecue restaurant is open?"

"Sure." She nodded.

Sammy skittered down the path, his hopes rising to see the restaurant lit. He tried the door handle, and it opened. Sticking his head inside, he saw a few people at tables. The broad back windows of the restaurant looked out over a small lake, reflecting lights along the shore all the way around. Taking in the sight, he spotted someone who looked like a manager, having a name tag.

Sammy hurried over to him. "Hey, how long are you open tonight?"

“Until ten,” he replied.

“Wow. Really?” Sammy checked his watch, finding it only a quarter to seven. “Okay, I’m going to call a few people—not more than twenty. They’ll want to eat.” He pulled out his credit card, handing it to the manager, noting that his name tag said, “Jaime.” “I’ll be back for that in a minute.”

Jaime smiled and nodded; Sammy paused to admire his mustache, then hurried back to the plaza.

He found his family loading up on cookies and hot chocolate. “Don’t eat much; we got the barbecue place again tonight,” he warned, pulling out his phone—from his pocket again! “It’s a miracle,” Sammy avowed.

He called Mike and Pruett at home, instructing both to grab anyone in their immediate vicinity and hasten to Streiker’s Arboretum, where there was to be a business dinner to discuss the future of the agency. Upon receiving that combination of facts, both associates promised to come.

Sammy hung near the entrance, walking and thinking, while Marni and her guys explored all the little houses scattered around the plaza like a town square. By the time Sammy spotted Mike and Dave approaching the entrance, Marni had taken her guys to the warmth of the restaurant.

Sammy’s heart sank to see that no family members had come; it was only Mike and Dave. Meeting them at the entrance, Sammy asked, “Hey, where are your people?”

Pruett shook his head. “Kelli’s had a cold, so Kerry’s not about to get her out in this. Chris is with his kids [nodding to Mike] and I don’t know what the heck they’re doing or where.”

Mike shot him a look. “It’s movie night at the Masterson hacienda, Sammy. They’re all good kids, but Charisse is not leaving them alone.”

Sammy nodded, disturbed. There was a time when all three kids would have jumped at a last-minute barbecue with the Kidmans. “Okay, well... come on into the restaurant and warm up.”

As they approached the restaurant, Sammy saw Bubba sitting out front, patiently waiting. When he spotted Sammy, he stood and whined, but Sammy waved him down. “No, Bubba. Stay.” He sat again in dejection.

The men entered and went straight for the buffet line. Glancing around, Sammy saw Marni at a table across the restaurant, eating and talking with a woman who had Clay in her lap. Sam was sitting in a high chair, contentedly stirring the contents of his plate into one homogeneous pile.

Sammy looked twice, closely, to see if it might be Adair with Marni, but even at thirty feet, he could see that it was not. It was an attractive, 40-ish woman with frosted hair swept back and clunky jewelry—the kind of jewelry he saw at those art shows Pam and Marni liked to frequent, like the art show where he had first seen Adair. Idly, he watched the woman take off her glasses to clean them while saying something that made his wife laugh.

Reassured on that point, he filled a plate from the buffet, grabbed a glass of ice water, and staked out a corner booth for himself and his associates. Mike came over first with only a semi-loaded plate, explaining, “Charisse is trying to make me cut down.” Dave then appeared with a fully loaded plate and no apology thereunto.

For a few minutes they just ate, then Sammy broached, “Okay, here’s the deal. I talked to Streiker today, you know [he gestured to Mike, who nodded], and he asked me how we’d feel about doing something different with the agency. I told him, sure, so he said he’d move on it. As far as I’m concerned, you’ll be getting the same salary, but Streiker will be the agency head.”

Mike and Dave were silent for a minute, as they were still eating, then Dave asked, “What, ah, what did he have in mind for us to do?”

“Well,” Sammy hedged, “I don’t really know. He said the assignments would be difficult, but—it’s hard to get across how really important they are.” He had not told them the whole story about Jess Threlkeld.

Mike and Dave looked at each other, and Sammy’s insides turned to stone. “Oh, come on, guys,” he breathed.

Mike sighed, but Dave spoke first. “Sammy, that deal with Clothier just wiped out my initiative, and whatever was left of my will to live was finished off by the attorney general deciding that money’s not real unless it comes under his purview. I... Mike and I’ve got an opportunity with a business leasing firm that looks solid, and, we’re going to take it.”

Sammy stared at him, agape, and Mike said, “Sammy, we want you to know how appreciative we are that you stepped in the gap for us to provide for our families while we were getting back on our feet, post-department. We’ll always consider you first-drawer, and will keep in touch.”

Staring at him, Sammy thought, *This guy saved my life once, and now I’m a contact?* He whispered, “You—haven’t even given him a chance. You haven’t talked to him.”

They regarded the tears in his eyes with alarm. Dave stood, clapping him on the shoulder. “Call me after your first couple of cases and let me know how it goes.” Then he quickly walked out.

Commanding his eyes to dry up, Sammy half-turned to Mike... who had saved his skin with the department countless times... who had believed his conversion was real... who had taken a chance with MK & Associates just so Dave would, too.

“Losing Les, you know,” Mike began heavily. “Charisse saw what the stress did to him. She wants me in a less stressful job, Sambo. And you know that if Marni wanted you to change jobs, you’d do it.”

“You’ve got to talk to him, Mike. Please, I’m begging you to call Streiker and talk to him,” Sammy whispered.

Mike grimaced, unable to promise what he might not deliver. So he stood, clasped Sammy’s shoulder, and also walked out.

Sammy sat there still, his back to the dining room, while the tears poured down his face. These men were more than family; they were limbs or vital organs. Now he knew why people talked about broken hearts: because that’s exactly what it felt like.

Wiping his face on his napkin, he turned to look for Marni. But what he saw first was Streiker, sitting in a corner by himself, watching.

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## Chapter 9

Sammy immediately got up and crossed the dining room to sit opposite Streiker. Wiping his mouth to compose himself, Sammy said, “You’ve got to talk to them. They don’t understand and I’m no good at making them understand something I don’t understand myself. Mr. Streiker—please—”

“Okay, Sammy,” he said. “But I have to wait until they’re ready to talk to me. Can you wait?”

“No, but I’ll try,” Sammy said.

“Okay.” Streiker then reached into his pocket to take out Sammy’s credit card and hand it to him. “The question is, Are *you* with me?”

Pulling out his wallet, Sammy stopped abruptly and looked at him. “Where else am I gonna go? I don’t have anyone else in my little black book who raises the dead.”

Streiker waved, “She was just asleep.”

Sammy nodded slowly, whispering, “I might’ve bought that if I hadn’t driven her all the way from Dallas. I will never forget that trip for the rest of my life and then some.”

Streiker grinned, then looked up at someone’s advance. As he stood, Sammy quickly did, too, turning. “Dadadada!” came the machine-gun greeting, and Sammy knelt to hoist his son.

“Wow, how much have you been eating, guy?” Sammy exclaimed, pretending to weigh him. Behind Sam, chasing him as usual, Marni laughed.

Meanwhile, Streiker was greeting the woman who had been eating with Marni. “Yvonne, here’s the other half of my new team, Sammy Kidman. Sammy, this is my personal assistant, Yvonne Fay.”

“How do you do?” she said, extending her hand, which Sammy shook warmly. “I’ve been having so much fun visiting with Marni. She’s going to be a real asset to us,” Yvonne said.

“Best thing that ever happened to me, that’s for sure,” he said humbly. Marni, suddenly regarding his face, stopped smiling.

She shifted Clay on her hip to extend her hand to Streiker. “Thank you, again. I seem to be constantly thanking you,” she said.

“Whatever makes you happy,” he replied pleasantly. It was an observation of fact.

Marni turned to Yvonne to impulsively reach out with her free arm, and Yvonne gathered her in a comforting hug. Sammy was close enough to hear Yvonne whisper, “You’re doing quite well.”

“Thank you,” Marni sighed. Jaime brought up the forgotten stroller, and she bent to load Clay.

Holding Sam on one arm, Sammy reached out to shake Streiker’s hand. “I’ll be in touch, Sammy,” he promised.

“Yes, sir. Ms. Fay,” Sammy said, turning to her.

“Do call me Yvonne,” she urged.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and she smiled in sympathy at his complete, obvious depletion.

The Kidmans collected Bubba from his begging spot at the front entrance, then they quietly exited the Arboretum, now deserted, but still brightly lit. The snow was coming down much more heavily now, and the parking lot was fully white. But they loaded the guys in the spacious 4-wheel drive without concern and Sammy started the engine, turning out of the lot.

The freeway was beginning to ice over, so Marni said nothing to impede Sammy's concentration on driving. He had no problem with traction, only with other drivers who were less skillful, in less safe vehicles. She briefly thanked God that Sammy had noticed the bald tires on the Volvo before all this snow hit.

They arrived home without incident and put the sleeping guys to bed. Even Bubba barely woke up from the comfortable ride to shake himself and then load himself in Sam's bed. Then Marni and Sammy sat on the couch in the darkened family room to watch snow flurries out the back window.

"What happened?" she asked.

He reached over for her hand, and she studied him in the side light from the neighbor's security lights. "Mike and Pruett are taking jobs with a . . . some kind of business leasing operation," he said. "I didn't think to ask about the details, and they didn't stick around to tell me about it after I started crying."

She lowered her head. "Wow, that hurts."

"Yes, it does. But, now that I think about it, it was kind of inevitable. They... never wanted me to support them in the first place. They came on with us just because they had nothing better at the time. In fact, I—if I were in their shoes, I'd probably do the same."

She looked out at the snow collecting in the bare branches of the fruitless mulberry. "You would not," she whispered. "You're loyal to a fault."

"Loyal to who?" he countered. "All of us, our first priority is taking care of our families. I sure would skip out if I saw a better opportunity elsewhere."

"Then we should have paid them more, and it's my fault that we didn't," she said, biting her lip.

"Nope," he replied. "Pruett's first reason for leaving was the Clothier fiasco. Making a mistake like that in a business like ours is just—death. Streiker saving us did not erase that mistake. If anything, it probably made Pruett feel worse about it."

She leaned into him, and he held her. "So tell me about Yvonne Fay," he said.

Marni sat up a little. "Oh, she's so sweet. She's the one who introduced Adair to Mr. Streiker, by the way."

"Really?" Sammy asked, interested. "Maybe she's the one who brought us to Adair's attention."

Frowning a little, Marni said, "I don't think so. She met us for the first time tonight."

"Then how did she know that you were 'doing quite well'?" he asked.

"I don't know," she murmured sleepily. And a few minutes later Sammy carried her back to bed, to sleep.

The next day, the first of December, Sammy put the back seats down in the Jeep and set out on intermittently icy streets to procure a Christmas tree. Mindful of the marauding hordes in the house, he returned with an actual seven-foot tree, with roots, in a pot.

But he didn't bring it inside. While Sam, Marni and Bubba watched at the back window, Sammy hauled the tree through the back gate to set it on the porch in front of the window.

Then he repositioned the seats in the Jeep, leaving it in the driveway, and came in to tell Marni, "Okay. We need waterproof lights and decorations. You have—" he consulted his watch—"two hours. Go."

She paused in disbelieving hope. "You're going to give me two hours to go shopping without the guys?"

Taking a sustaining breath, he said, "Yes."

She hesitated. "I need a minute to get ready and see if Mom and Sarah want to go. Picking them up will cut into my time."

He grimaced. "Two and a half hours. More is not safe."

"Woo-hoo!" She darted back to the bedroom, whipping out her phone. "Mom! Grab Sarah and baby Adair; Sammy is going to let me go shopping!"

She left within ten minutes, kissing him in gratitude and holding out her hand for the Jeep's keys. Wincing, Sammy relinquished them to her hand. At least it was an automatic.

Once she was gone, Sam and Bubba began tumbling over the furniture in a remarkable re-creation of the obstacle-course run that Sammy had executed just two days ago. Seeing that there was a smattering of snow still on the ground outside, Sammy put Sam in his coat and Clay in a blanket in order to take everybody out back.

Settling Clay in his carrier, Sammy set plastic toddler chairs, boxes, and a step stool around the back yard for their very own obstacle course. When he was done with that, he began coaching Sam on how to get over the various obstacles. Bubba careened over the box, knocking it over, so Sammy had to weight the bottom.

At this point he happened to look up to see that Clay had wriggled himself out of the carrier to land face first onto the snow-covered gravel. Rather than cry about it, he was now grasping fistfuls of icy gravel in his attempts to get to the o-course action.

"Oops." Sammy leaped over an obstacle or two to reach him. Brushing him off, Sammy determined that the 6-month-old was none the worse for the experience. So he wrapped Clay back in the blanket to carry him around while he coached Sam on technique.

That exercise ate up a good hour, then Sammy brought his crew back inside for lunch. While he fixed Sam a cheese/mayo sandwich, Clay expressed a rather intense desire for Mommy. So Sammy pulled out one of the bottles she kept in the fridge for just this occasion. He warmed it up by running hot water over it, then attempted to convince his youngest son that it was really and truly Mommy's milk, just in a different package. Clay was unpersuaded.

In this midst of this, Sammy glanced up to see Bubba standing on hind legs beside Sam's chair, nosing ever closer to the unattended cheese sandwich while Sam attempted to take off his boots by kicking the underside of the table. "Bubba! No! You'll go outside!" Sammy promised, and Bubba hastily sat.

Finally, Sammy secured Clay in his carrier and propped the small bottle in his pudgy hands so that Sammy could assist Sam with his boots. That done, he turned around to see that Clay had thrown the bottle a good four feet,

where Bubba was helpfully licking drips from the nipple before they could hit the floor. Sammy groaned, “How does she freaking do this?”

At that time, Blaine Nash was pulling into the customer parking lot of Ed’s Body Shop. Emerging from his Mercedes, wrapping his designer scarf a bit tighter around his neck, he regarded the humble shop with drawn brows. Since he himself had ferreted out this address for the owner of the purple Volvo, he knew it was no mistake. And yes, by the time he had left Meadow, she was in tears. He did not see it, but the first thing she did was take out a business card and pick up the phone.

Approaching the shop door, Nash glimpsed the sign that advertised: “Rentals Available,” and he groaned. Kidman was using a rental, then, for obvious reasons. Still, Nash thought he might be able to wrest some useful information from the sloped heads at this business.

When he entered, Ed’s son was manning the front counter, looking bored. Nash approached with a genial smile. “Excuse me, sir. A friend of mine is driving one of your cars—the purple Volvo—and I desperately need to ask him something, but have mislaid his phone number. Do you have it, please?”

“What, Sammy Kidman’s number? Sure,” the young man said, opening a drawer to flip through rental contracts. “Here ya go.” He detached a business card, flicking it toward the customer, who jumped to snatch it.

“Thank you so much. I’m deeply appreciative,” Nash said, hurrying out with his prize. “Stupid young ox,” he added spitefully, throwing himself behind the wheel of his Mercedes.

Before leaving, he paused to look at the card, and saw that it was the same one that Kidman had presented to Abby’s maid. They already had this number, and no one had been answering it recently.

Groaning, Nash leaned his head back on the cushioned leather head rest, then resolved to make a second attempt. He climbed out of the car again and re-entered the shop.

The young man was now gone, replaced by an older gentleman. Nash did not know it, but this was Dr. Ed, sovereign of the shop. Nash approached the counter to lean on it, and Ed looked up. “Excuse me, sir. I had asked for Sammy Kidman’s phone number, and the young man mistakenly gave me his business card, which we have. May I have the number of his mobile phone, please?”

Ed regarded him, then extended a beefy hand. “Give me your number, and I’ll give it to him.”

Nash smilingly drew a business card from his wallet, as well as a folded \$100 bill. Extending them together, he said, “Wouldn’t it be easier to just give me his number?”

Ed, knowing Sammy’s police history, plus the fact that he had just brought in his car all shot up, deadpanned, “No sir, I don’t think so.” Returning to his scrutiny of work orders, he ignored the card and the folded bill. “Heath, what year is that Ferrari?” he called.

From somewhere in the back came the shouted answer, “A sixty-two, Dad.”

“All right, then.” Ed selected a form and closed the drawer. Regarding the customer again, he asked, “Will there be anything else?”

“No, thank you.” Despondently, Nash repocketed the money, leaving the card on the counter, and returned to his car. Referring to the card he had just been given, Nash placed a call.

Inside the shop, Ed took a business card from his wallet to place a call, then picked up the card left on the counter in front of him.

Sammy had this down. Bubba and Sam were parked in front of Looney Tunes® cartoons, insuring their tranquility (temporarily). Clay was still crying for Mommy. But Sammy had a plan.

He stripped off his shirt and put on Marni's favorite plush bath robe. Then he made sure that the bottle was heated up exactly to body temperature. He sat on the couch to pick up Clay and hold his cheek against the skin of his (flat, hard) boob and Marni's robe.

With Clay positioned thusly, Sammy dribbled a little milk on his mouth to prime the pump. Clay started rooting despite the unexpected hair, and Sammy let him find the bottle nipple.

He held his breath to watch Clay push the nipple around with his tongue, then grudgingly accept it. "All right! There we go," Sammy breathed, watching him suck.

When Clay had finished the bottle and started falling asleep, Sammy put him over his shoulder per Marni's instructions, and Clay issued a definitive burp in his ear. Then he was out, and Sammy sighed.

He dutifully pulled out his phone to check office messages. Somehow, he didn't think Mike or Dave would be in today. They didn't say when they were starting their new jobs, but he wasn't going to stop their salaries any time soon. Nor did he know what to do about the office lease. He guessed they'd just let it run out, but he didn't think he could cope with going down there—

Suddenly Sammy remembered the purple orchid sprig—he'd left it in the Volvo! He didn't remember seeing it. "Dang," he muttered.

Then he thought about Pam's painting of the orchid across his chest. *Yeah. You keep it in your heart, where it can't get lost.* On that thought, he keyed in the office number and the messages passcode.

He listened to the first message: "Hi, Sammy. It's Meadow. I just wanted to let you know that Nash is tracing the address from your license plates, so you can expect him to show up at your house some time soon. I'm sorry.

"Oh, and, the reason they're doing the football challenge is because Abby was a quarterback for the Nighthawks in the Women's Football League." She clicked off.

Interested, Sammy pulled up a browser on his phone and began researching the Nighthawks' history. Sure enough, six years ago, one Abby Catriona quarterbacked her team to a league championship. She disappeared from the league after that. News reports at the time hinted of a salary dispute, but Abby's official statement was that she had hit the pinnacle and wanted to find new fields to conquer.

Well, that certainly counted as an ace up the sleeve for a football-skills competition, he reflected. Granted, six years was a long time ago, football-wise, but if she kept in shape, as she so obviously had, refreshing her skills was a minor matter. And wouldn't he be surprised to discover her aptitude on the field with the cameras rolling? Oh, yes, he would....

Except that Meadow had decided to betray her boss and give him advance warning. Why? This disturbed him enough so that he didn't want to think about it any more.

Sammy returned to the office messages to hear the second one: "Sammy, this is Ed. I'm sorry your Mustang isn't ready yet, but this guy, ah, Blaine Nash came to the shop, trying to bribe me for your phone number. I didn't give it to him, but told him I'd give you his." He read Nash's number off his card, then hung up.

*Well, how about that?* Sammy shook his head. How providential was it that his beloved Mustang got shot up? It prevented Nash's illegally tracking him down—well, that, and Ed's conscientiousness. Good man.

Sammy went on to the third message: "Sammy! Hey, Blaine Nash here. You are a tough guy to nail down when you want to be! Hey, we really want to talk about making it as easy as possible for you to complete two more events, because we're sold on you as a personality. As a matter of fact, we're looking at building a show around you. We think you have the physical presence and the star power to make it happen. So, hey, don't be coy; give us a call back. Right."

Sammy looked at the TV while Daffy Duck got his beak blown off by Elmer Fudd for the umpteenth time. Sam screamed in laughter, startling Clay in his sleep, and Sammy kissed the soft, balding head on his shoulder.

Bringing up his phone again, he deleted all three messages from the office phone on the outside chance that Mike or Dave might be moved to check in. Then he put his head back on the couch to think.

Abby sure did want her victim. But as long as he refused to be found, what could they do? He wondered if it was a coincidence that he had seen those bald tires just yesterday, because now Nash couldn't locate him by means of a highly visible purple Volvo.

What Sammy began to worry about now was, strangely, how secure he felt in his resistance. Since he was so sure that he couldn't be coerced into doing another event, he felt certain that they would find a way to make him. "You're dethpicable," Daffy Duck sputtered.

With some urgency, Sammy made another call, leaning his head back on the couch and closing his eyes. It would be a really bad time to get that rascally answering machine again—"Hello."

"Mr. Streiker." Sammy sat up, mildly startling Clay, who should be used to it by now. "Okay, I'm—Abby's people are trying to track me down, now—Nash showed up at the Taylors' house—and I'm really afraid that, somehow, they're going to find some way to force me into doing another freaking event, and I'm wondering if there's any way that I can proactively head that off."

Streiker was silent for several seconds. "It's not really possible to meet a challenge before it comes, Sammy, but they can't 'force' you to do anything. Let me remind you to disregard threats and lies."

"Threats and lies," Sammy repeated.

"The two go together because the most convincing threats involve lies," Streiker said. "You should discount them."

"I don't understand. When you say, 'to meet a challenge,' does that mean I should do the event after all?" Sammy asked.

"No," Streiker said. "Your challenge will be in refusing to be coerced by lies and threats."

Sammy lifted his chin. "That I understand. Thank you, Mr. Streiker."

"You're welcome, Sammy."

Sammy put the phone down again, watching Bugs Bunny bob his eyebrows in understanding.

Moments later, he heard the garage door open, and he sighed in relief. When the door between the garage and the laundry room opened, Clay's head bobbed up from Sammy's shoulder. "You know who that is?" Sammy asked in surprise.

When Marni came in toting large plastic bags, she stopped to stare at her family. "Gah," said Clay. She burst out laughing and Clay emphasized, "Gah!" waving an arm.

Sammy looked down at her robe gaping scandalously open at his chest and said, "I guess it's time to talk about my cross-dressing fetish."

Snorting, she dropped her bags on the coffee table to lift her chunky baby for kisses and nuzzling. He talked to her very earnestly, and she glanced down at Sam, who had not noticed her entrance. Bubba looked at her with thumping tail. "Oh, no. He wasn't in front of cartoons the whole time, was he?"

"Not hardly," Sammy said, affronted. "We ran an obstacle course out back." He pointed to the array of obstacles, still visible. Seeing that snow had begun falling again, he asked, "Did you have any problems on the road?"

"None at all, and Mom and Sarah were thrilled to go shopping with baby Adair. We had a blast. Yeah, I'm keeping the Jeep. When you get your car back, we can give the Prius to Sarah. She doesn't want Mom or Dad to have to chauffeur her everywhere, but she was glad to get rid of the truck."

"Sure," Sammy nodded. "Did you find some good buys?"

"Did I ever! It was great. We bypassed the mall and went to Goodwill," she said. Sitting beside him on the couch, she opened her shirt to Sam. He waved excitedly at the prospect of a properly soft nipple without the scratchy hair.

"What?" Sammy laughed.

"Oh, we stopped at Mom's art supply shop—she's painting baby Adair, of course—and a nursery that Sarah wanted to check, then we spent the rest of the time at this huge Goodwill store on Shiloh. That was so much fun!

"And then, I got a call from Jill Reid—her sister-in-law, Mark's wife, had her baby, a girl! I think I told you she was going to the same birthing center we went to with Clay. Anyway, they're both doing fine, and I was able to hop right online and get her this beautiful newborn layette that—"

Her phone warbled from her purse, so she said, "Excuse me." While Clay nursed contentedly, she dug around in her purse for the phone.

Sammy blinked at the sudden cessation of the flow of words. Finding a disturbing similarity in that to Gordon Clothier's speeches, he reluctantly noted that she probably needed these guy-free outings more often.

But what he said was, "Well, I'm glad you had a good time. You can do it again in five years." Somewhat disgruntled, he observed how effortlessly she made Clay happy.

"Can you wait that long to dress up again?" she asked absently, looking at the unfamiliar number display on her phone. She put it to her ear. "Hello?"

A moment later she said in surprise, "Yes, he is. Hold on." With raised brows, she handed Sammy the phone.

His jaw tensed. Taking her phone, he answered, "Hello." Then he covered his eyes. "Meadow, how did you get this number?" [Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 10

Meadow replied, “Well, ‘Marni Kidman’ is listed in the Dallas Business Directory as the owner of MK and associates, with this number. That’s your wife, right?”

“Yes,” he said, pulling the edge of the fluffy robe over his chest. He turned to Marni to say, “Dallas Business Directory.” Her jaw dropped at this obvious, and overlooked, connection.

“What can I do for you?” he asked aloofly.

“I left a message on your office machine. Did you get it?” Meadow asked.

“Yeah, I did,” he said, and paused. He did not want to talk to her, but she had information both useful to him and harmful to him. “Yeah, I appreciate the heads-up, and, am kind of wondering why you would tell me all that.”

“I’m on your side,” she said.

He glanced at Marni. She returned a questioning look as she transferred Clay to the shoulder away from him.

Sammy leaned toward her, tilting the phone away from his ear. She inclined her head to listen in, as invited. “Abby isn’t going to like that,” he said into the phone.

“I don’t care,” Meadow said.

Sammy began floundering: “Look, Meadow, I, uh, appreciate—”

“There’s more,” she said.

“More?”

“Yes, more you need to know,” Meadow insisted.

“Okay, tell me,” he said.

“Not over the phone. We need to meet,” Meadow said.

He looked at his wife; she shrugged and nodded, indicating her consent. “All right,” he said with a sinking sensation. “Uh, where—?”

“Desirée. The cafe,” she said promptly.

He glanced outside at the light snowfall. “Okay,” he sighed. “It’ll take me about forty minutes to get out there.”

“Just in time for lunch! See you, Sam,” she said, and hung up.

Uneasy, he contemplated the phone a moment. “Sammy,” he belatedly corrected her.

Handing Marni her phone, he said, “Okay, I’m going to—” He broke off to feel his pockets, then went back to the bedroom to rifle the clothes in the hamper. Finding his pants from yesterday, he extracted his phone from the pocket and took it to the family room where Marni still sat with Clay.



He appropriated her phone, giving her his. "I'm switching phones with you for now, in case anyone else gets the great idea to reach me through the Dallas Business Directory. All this time—!" he groaned, raising his face to heaven. Then he said, "I doubt we can remove the listing, but if you get a chance, we need to figure out how to dissolve the business."

She nodded unhappily. "I'll talk to Daddy."

Sammy paused. "I'm sorry that it'll screw up your résumé, but I'll write you a recommendation."

"Thanks," she pouted.

He went to the bedroom to get dressed, disdaining to shower or shave. This was not a date. And since he intended to drive there, sit in a heated cafe, and drive home, he passed over a heavy jacket in favor of a sports coat.

Entering the family room, he found Sam loudly objecting to Mom's turning off the cartoons. "Hey, now. Sam! Do what Mom says and we'll run more obstacles when I get back. Okay? Sam?" The toddler didn't hear him, being preoccupied with kicking and screaming. "Okay, then. I'm glad we agree."

Marni waved him out. Sammy made it all the way to the door of the Jeep before turning around to go back inside. There, he was amazed to see Sam sitting quietly next to Mom while she settled down with a book to read to him and Clay. Bubba lay on her feet.

Shaking his head, Sammy dug in her purse for the keys to the Jeep, then left again.

Thirty minutes later, he pulled in to the cafe's lot to find it much more crowded than yesterday. This suited him. He parked in the farthest regions of the lot, then emerged from the Jeep cautiously, scanning the area for Meadow. He didn't want her to see what he was driving today.

Entering the cafe, he stood aside to wait for the hostess to seat him, then saw Meadow stand up and wave her arms. "Sam! Over here!" Ducking his head at the people who stared at her before turning to look at him, he wiped his mouth as he approached her table and quickly sat.

"Sammy. I'm Sammy," he reminded her.

"I like it when you don't shave," she said, settling happily into her seat, and his gut tensed.

Glancing over the menu, he casually asked, "So, what did you want to tell me about Abby?"

"Oh, she's fighting with the studio over her show. She's losing viewers in the key youth demo, so they want it edgier, with somebody getting hurt. Abby's not going to get hurt, of course, so that's got to be her guest competitor. Since they already spent a day filming you, they've got to get you back to do two more."

He leaned forward to utter, "Meadow, they can get a body from the morgue—"

The waitress who had just approached asked apprehensively, "May I take your order?"

"Yes, I'll have the Po' Boy and water. The young lady wants the Mediterranean salad. Is that right? With anchovies. Right. Thanks." He confiscated Meadow's menu to give both to the server.

"What would you like to drink?" she determinedly asked Meadow.

"A glass of wine. No, make that a bottle," Meadow said.

“A half bottle,” Sammy corrected.

“Don’t you want wine, Sam?” she asked in surprise.

“Not for lunch,” he said. “And I’m Sammy.”

Glancing between them, the server finished her notations and withdrew. When Sammy was sure that she was gone, he turned back to Meadow. “They can get anybody, literally any *body*, to fill in for the last two events. Abby should hire a stunt man, put a mask on him, and call him ‘Yves Wonderful,’” he hissed.

She laughed, “But they want you! And so do I. I always have, Sam.”

Wiping the sweat from his upper lip, he said, “I’m Sammy. I have a wife and two children. I have never been with you and I never will be.”

“You’re so cute!” She reached out to caress his fingers adoringly. He withdrew his hand.

The waitress brought his water and Meadow’s wine. While Meadow poured herself a glass, smiling to herself, Sammy fought down panic.

Then something occurred to him. This whole nightmare scenario of her substituting him for his father was too abrupt. Was it a set-up? An act? He didn’t have to be flattered by it, just intrigued, for it to draw him back into Abby’s clutches. While he might not be able to tell how genuine it was without getting Meadow psychoanalyzed, it was still possible to determine whether her motivation was love or money.

He waited until she took a good, long sip of wine, then he murmured, “Well, I’m glad for the bonus Abby is paying you to get me back. That’s good, anyway.” It was a calculated guess.

“It’s not just a bonus, it’s a raise,” she said smugly into her glass.

*Money it is, then. I’m out of here.* “Great.” Putting his napkin on the table, he rose from his chair. “Excuse me.”

He walked to the front of the cafe, where he spotted his waitress coming out with a drink tray. Waylaying her, he took the tray and said, “Give me the ticket for the table of two in the corner there.”

“But, I—”

“If you want to get paid, you’d better give it to me now, because I’m leaving and I don’t know how much money the chick has on her,” he said.

She quickly thumbed through her book and held out his ticket. “You can pay the hostess.”

“That’s what I’ll do,” he said, taking it and returning her tray.

When Sammy approached the hostess and told her his intention to pay and leave, she looked at his ticket. “If you’ll wait just a minute, we’ll package your sandwich and salad to go.”

“Any other time, I would. But I have to leave right now. The girl who ordered the salad is still here, and I assume she still wants it,” he said.

“Ohh.” She read it as a date gone horribly wrong. “But then I have to charge you for the sandwich as well, because the kitchen has probably already made it.”

“No problem,” he said, handing her his credit card, so that’s what she did.

After giving him his receipt and watching him turn away, the hostess hurried back to the kitchen, knowing how swamped they were. “Hey, Carlos, have you made the Po’ Boy for Table Twelve?” she called.

The harried sandwich maker glanced around his work space and shouted, “No!”

“Then scrap the order. The customer just left,” she said.

“Right. What about the salad?” he asked, looking at his copy of the order.

“Salad’s a go,” she said.

“We got that, then.” He ripped plastic off a pre-made salad and shoved it on the ready-order counter with its ticket underneath.

Sammy, meanwhile, tucked his receipt in his wallet and turned to the exit. Glancing up through the glass doors, he saw Abby and Nash coming up the steps toward the entrance.

He sucked in a breath, casting about for escape. But he was effectively trapped in the waiting area by the sheer number of people. No place to turn; no place to hide in the seconds before Abby and Nash would reach the door.

So Sammy turned aside and dropped on one knee beside the bench facing the foyer. Propping his elbow on his knee and draping his other forearm across it, he bowed his head on his fist.

A moment later, the woman sitting on the bench beside him asked, “What are you doing?”

“Praying,” he said, which was the truth.

“Oh,” she replied. And she bowed her head in respect of his prayers. The man next to her, seeing her in an attitude of prayer, likewise bowed his head and closed his eyes. Immediately the whole corner of the waiting area was in prayer.

When Nash and Abby entered, a man stepped in front of Sammy to place one hand on Sammy’s head and another on the woman’s shoulder and begin praying out loud.

Therefore, even when Abby turned toward Sammy four feet away, she didn’t see him, and all he saw of her was her legs. But the gentleman prayed a sincere, gracious prayer for blessing on the food and the diners.

The moment he was done—and Abby and Nash were safely out of the waiting area—Sammy stood to shake his hand, and got the shock of his life: it was Streiker.

Doing a double take, Sammy saw that, no, it wasn’t Streiker, it was just a genial-looking man in his 50s. But Sammy thanked him for the blessing, and turned to thank the woman beside him. In reply, she smiled, “God bless you.”

Nodding, he exited the cafe and trotted down the steps to run for the Jeep. “Yes, He has,” he muttered. “He already did.”

Back in the cafe, Abby and Nash found Meadow, as had been arranged. Abby looked around. “Where is he?”

“He had to go to the john,” Meadow said.

“He’s here, then?” Nash asked, as he and Abby sat at the table.

“There’s his water,” Meadow indicated, and they looked at the water glass and the unfolded napkin.

“Did you tell him about the football challenge?” Abby asked her.

“Yeah. He wasn’t too interested,” she replied.

“I told you,” Nash said to Abby. “He only played that one game, and he wasn’t very good in that.”

“Okay, we’ll go with the fire challenge,” Abby said.

Nash looked irritated. “I’m telling you, if he wouldn’t do a simple football drill, he’ll never go for the fire challenge. He’s just eye candy; he’s not a serious competitor.”

Abby studied her assistant producer. “I guess not,” she admitted. “But that other guy, the one who’s so hot to get noticed—”

“He’ll do it,” Nash confirmed. “We don’t need Kidman.”

“Well, let’s see what Sammy says today,” Abby said.

At that time, a bus boy brought Meadow’s salad. (When servers got in the weeds during a rush, bus boys often helped them with their tables.) As he turned away, Meadow said, “Hold it. Where’s his sandwich? My date’s order.”

“This is the only order I have for this table. Let me bring you menus,” the teenager said to the two newcomers, and quickly moved off.

“Wait! Sam’s coming back,” Meadow said plaintively.

Abby and Nash eyed each other. “Okay,” Abby murmured. “Call this other guy—what’s his name?”

“Reilly. Quinn Reilly,” Nash said, pulling out his phone.

“Okay, he’ll be our new Yves. Call him out today to look over the fire challenge. We’ll start filming tomorrow morning at nine. We’ve wasted so much time already!” Abby vented.

“Not a problem,” Nash muttered, pushing buttons on his phone. He put it to his ear. “Quinn? Hello, this is Blaine Nash. That’s right! Yes, I am, in fact. Say, Quinn, can you top Abby Max?” He laughed at the eager response.

“Wait! Sam is coming back. He came back from the dead to see me,” Meadow protested.

“Sure, honey.” Abby patted her arm, listening to Nash instruct Quinn over the phone.

The snow flurries had picked up in the short time that Sammy was in the restaurant, but the 4-wheel-drive vehicle gripped the road securely. Yes, he felt good about Marni and the guys driving around in this. Yes, he was very happy giving the Prius to Sarah. And he was very glad and grateful to have escaped Abby and Nash at the cafe.

As he slowed upon meeting backlogged traffic, his phone—or rather, Marni’s—warbled in his pocket. Sammy located it to answer without looking at the number. “Yo.”

Streiker’s voice said, “Hello, Sammy. I have another assignment for you, if you’re interested.”

“Mr. Streiker! Sure,” Sammy said.

“All right.” Streiker paused. “Sammy, this one will be difficult.”

“Okay,” Sammy said, watching traffic ahead of him slow to a crawl.

“Since you so effectively rebuffed Abby, she’s given up on you, and has selected another contestant. They’re having him out to the studio today to look over the event,” Streiker related.

“Okay,” Sammy said, having come to a complete stop on the freeway behind a line of cars.

“It is not a football challenge; it’s something far more dangerous. I think you should go out there today to look it over, too. They’re going to practice on it today, and then begin filming at nine tomorrow,” Streiker continued, and paused.

“Okay,” Sammy said hesitantly. “If... I show my face there today, are they going to want me to do it after all?”

“Perhaps. But you still can’t,” Streiker said.

“Then what’s the assignment?” Sammy asked.

“You have to prevent their new contestant from attempting it tomorrow, because if he does, he’s going to die,” Streiker said. “And, no: for obvious reasons, you won’t be able to bring him to me.”

Sammy’s chest went hollow. “All right. Do you have any other information that will help me?”

“No,” Streiker said.

“Okay, I’m out there,” Sammy said, ending the call. Glancing down at the phone, he scrolled to Marni’s contacts and touched his own name. No, he wasn’t surprised at all that Streiker knew to call her phone.

“Hello, Me,” Marni answered.

“Hey, you. How are the guys doing? he asked.

“Fine. I let Sam and Bubba out to run your obstacle course. They’re having a blast on it. That was a good idea, Sammy,” she said.

“Great! Okay, Streiker called with another assignment involving Abby. I have to head out there today, and then again tomorrow morning,” he said, scanning traffic around him and behind him.

“Okay, no problem. I called Mom to let her know that I have your phone, and she wants us to come over again, so we’ll probably be there later.”

“Good,” he nodded. “Good. Okay, check you later.”

“Okay. I love you, Sammy.”

“I love you, baby. Bye now.” Interesting, he thought, that her usually dead-on antenna for stress in his voice didn’t register anything today. Maybe that was because he really wasn’t anxious. The assignment was grave, sure, but he had learned that Streiker did not give him impossible assignments. Somehow, there was a way to do this, but he wouldn’t know what that was until he got there—possibly, he wouldn’t know until tomorrow.

He put the phone back in his pocket and wrenched the wheel around. Bypassing stopped cars, he drove over the median to gain the freeway going the other direction, back toward Half Crazy Studios.

His phone warbled. Without looking, he quickly answered, “Yes?”

“Sam, where are you?” Meadow asked plaintively.

He inhaled. “Meadow, I am not Sam. I had to leave. Please don’t call me any more.”

“But I have to see you again.”

“No, you don’t. Meadow? Good-bye.” He terminated the call, and it immediately rang back again. Seeing the number, he turned the phone off and stuck it back in his pocket.

Reaching the studios, he parked at the closest available space and trotted toward the entrance. Although it was now snowing freely, he still wore only the sports coat he had left the house in.

He entered the studio lobby and went right for the curving stairway. After watching Marni’s video, he decided that this vantage point would provide the best overview for assessing the new event.

Sammy took the stairs two at a time and casually blended in with the studio employees and sightseers gathered at the large windows. He could hardly believe that he had beaten Abby only two days ago in the o-course challenge. It seemed like months. So what were they doing tomorrow?

Looking down on the lot, Sammy saw that both obstacle courses had been markedly changed, although they were still identical. The Parallel Bars, Tires and Low Wall were still in place, but the High Wall, Barbed Wire, and Cargo Net were gone. The Balance Logs had been relocated to follow the Low Wall, and the Finish Line was a mere 20 feet past the Logs. The course had been so simplified and shortened that healthy sixth-grader could run it. What was the catch?

Studying the grounds, he saw Abby at the edge talking with a tall, muscular guy who was wearing sweat pants and a tee shirt in the cold. He was nodding and gesturing in animated agreement with whatever she was telling him.

A couple of guys approached them with a bucket and some other accessories. Introductions were made; New Guy shook hands. Then the guys, techs evidently, demonstrated the catch. One tech stuck his bare arm out while the second reached down to bring up fistfuls of goo from the bucket. The arm was thoroughly coated and an additional substance applied. Then the second guy brought up a slim rod, and—

People at the window near Sammy gasped, and a few cried out, when the tech’s arm burst into flames. Sammy stonily watched the scene below as more people rushed to the windows.

So that was it: a burning man stunt. First, they coated the stunt man with a burn inhibitor that could be applied directly to the skin, even the face. This was then injected with a fuel, usually Pyro Gel. With the touch of a match, you had a man—or woman—on fire for up to three or four minutes.

*At most.* After that, the inhibitor would begin to melt away in places, especially if it came in contact with wood or metal. And the longer it was allowed to burn, the greater the chance of clothes or hair catching fire.

Edgy? Dangerous? *You bet*, Sammy mulled. Under those conditions, the present obstacle course looked insane. There was no way a contestant distracted by his appendages on fire could finish the course before something caught fire that was not meant to burn.

Sighing, Sammy began canvassing points of entry to the lot. They'd have security posted at entrances, but in order to get New Guy out alive, Sammy had to get in.

"Having second thoughts?" a voice at his side asked, and Sammy turned to see Nash smiling at him.

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## Chapter 11

“You have seriously got to be kidding me,” Sammy replied to Nash. “That’s suicidal.”

“For an amateur, maybe,” Nash shrugged, surveying the new course. “But not for an athlete who beat Abby Max in the first event.”

Sammy shook his head, but Nash went on, “She wants you bad, you know. You’re her first choice. But hey—I can see this. Abby Max against *two* male competitors. And them against each other, each generously compensated for his time. Yeah, that would be awesome.” Nash’s beady black eyes were shining.

“Not gonna happen, Nash,” Sammy said. “You’d have to tie me up and set me ablaze. I’m not doing it.”

Still smiling, Nash said softly, “Whatever you like. But we know where you live. We know where your family lives. We can make it worth your while—if not for the money, then for other reasons.” He spoke so quietly that no one heard but Sammy, and he only barely.

*Lies and threats.* Sammy applied Striker’s advice freely here, breathing in Nash’s face, “Oh, you think so? You don’t know who I know, Mr. Assistant Producer.”

Receiving the counter threat clearly, Nash turned his eyes away and shrugged. “You’re just missing a great opportunity; that’s all. But if you’re not here to compete, I must ask you to leave.”

“Okie dokie, then.” With a last glance at the grounds, Sammy turned down the stairs and pushed through the doors, thinking hard.

He turned aside to look at the gates to the lot. He sure needed to watch Abby and New Guy practice, to see exactly what they were going to do. But this they wanted to keep secret for its air date. He watched tourists being evicted from the lot by security.

Then, to his surprise, he saw Abby coming out with the new competitor. Sammy might actually get a chance to warn him, if he acted quickly.

What could he say? The guy was flying high, in the stratosphere at the opportunity. If Sammy told him flat-out that he was going to die doing it, he either wouldn’t believe him or, worse, wouldn’t care if he did. What could Sammy say to at least make him think? They were coming toward him.

Sammy walked up to meet them. “Abby, I love you,” he said.

That got their attention, both of them. He went on, “I’m really afraid you’re going to get hurt doing this. I don’t want to see that.”

The guy stared at him, but Abby smiled coyly. “Then do the football stunt, like we originally asked you.”

The new guy looked at her in a panic, but Sammy shook his head. “That won’t make any difference, Abby, because I think your assistant producer is trying to kill you.”

“You’re out of your mind!” the new guy shouted at him.

Now Sammy looked at him to snort, “You are so expendable. Don’t you see that?” But when he looked back at Abby, he believed she looked shaken.



“Get out of here,” she uttered. Nodding, Sammy turned away.

Driving home, he wondered if he’d accomplished anything at all with that bit of subterfuge. “Doubtful,” he said. At least the clouds were clearing. Turning Marni’s phone back on to check the weather, he found the chance of snow diminished for tomorrow, and couldn’t decide if that would help him or not.

He swung by the Taylors’ before even checking his own house. Seeing Marni’s Prius, he pulled up along the curb. When Sarah answered the door, Sammy greeted her with a hug. “How are you? Gee, you look great,” he said.

“Oh, Sammy, I’m having so much fun. Pam is upstairs with the baby now. The Taylors are letting me help decorate. And Pam is giving me some shelf space in her studio for plants,” she said, patting him on the back.

“Aw, that’s great. Yeah, I want to see the studio.”

So before even looking in on his wife and sons in the family room, he went back to Pam’s painting studio with Sarah. First, he looked at Pam’s orchid sprouts, which were growing very nicely. Then he looked again at the painting of himself with the orchid sprig across his chest. As much as he had resisted her painting him in the past, this one was important to him. He needed to know that he still possessed some—supernatural favor. He needed it.

Then he looked at the painting that Pam had begun of baby Adair. “Isn’t it wonderful?” Sarah gushed. “Pam caught her smiling.”

“I bet that wasn’t hard to do,” he murmured. “Okay, I feel better.”

Going to the game room, he slid onto the couch beside his wife. She turned to dig her hand into his front pocket. “Whoa, baby, what d’you want?” he grinned.

“My phone. I don’t like yours,” she said.

“What a buzz killer,” he muttered, straightening to reach into his other pocket. “Hey, Sam.” His eldest son got up sleepily off the floor to climb into his dad’s lap. Bubba hefted himself up to move three feet and drop onto Sammy’s feet.

Handing Marni her phone, Sammy said, “Wow, they’re zonked. What’ve you been doing to them?”

Turning on her phone to check messages, she said, “I told you; they were running your obstacle course. Sam even added a chair and some big blocks.”

“Good for you, guy,” Sammy said, bouncing him.

“Dadadada,” Sam said sleepily.

Sammy glanced over at Clayton snoozing in his recliner with his namesake sacked out on his chest. “Hey, you know, your dad just adopted a kid who is younger than his youngest grandchild.”

“Oh, no kidding,” Marni said, eyes slightly widened.

“Has there been any blowback from the Threlkelds or Jess?” he asked.

“Not a peep,” she said, shaking her head. “Did you get done what Streiker asked you to do?”

“Partly,” he said. “But I’ve got to get back out there tomorrow.” He noted that she accepted that without a murmur. *She’s too trusting*, he thought, disturbed.

She put her phone to her ear for a moment, then gave it to him. “Okay, there are, like, six or seven messages from this girl. You’re going to have to do something about her.”

He groaned, looking at the call history. “Problem is, I don’t know if she’s putting me on or not.”

Marni studied him. “You mean, whether she really thinks you’re Sam?”

“Right. It’s just too—over the top,” he muttered.

She thought about that. “Either way, I think you have to treat it as though it’s real.”

“Then what do I do?” he asked.

She paused. “Hide?” she tentatively proposed.

He laughed, “Lotta help you are!”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” she said, then looked up as Pam entered, flourishing baby Adair. “Oh, how cute!” Marni exclaimed.

“Isn’t it?” Pam held the baby up in her green-and-white striped onesie with red trim and a bow tie. “A woman in our church makes them. I bought about ten.”

“Twenty,” muttered Clayton, for all the world looking still asleep.

“All right, maybe it was closer to twenty,” Pam laughed.

“Mom, Sammy has a problem. Sam’s last girlfriend thinks that he’s Sam reincarnated,” Marni said.

“What?” Pam said, and Clayton opened his eyes.

Marni explained it again, then asked, “What should he do?”

“Hide,” Clayton said, reaching for the remote.

“Okay, ‘hide’ gets two votes. And Mother Pamela says—?” Sammy asked.

Pam sat in a second lounge with baby Adair on her knee. “Well, you don’t have the legal standing to see that she gets counseling, and the more you try to talk to her, the more it will feed her delusion or her joke, whichever it is. So, yes, I’ll vote with ‘hide.’”

“Huh,” Sammy mused, stroking his itchy face. “I think that’s the first time we four agreed right off the bat about anything.”

“I ’gree,” Sam said.

“Then that makes five,” Sammy noted.

“Well then, block her,” Marni said, nodding at her phone in his hands.

“How?” he asked, eyeing her phone. Blowing a raspberry, she reclaimed the phone to do it herself.

They had a pleasant dinner of Mexican food, which was Clayton’s and Marni’s cold-weather choice. Marni noticed that Sammy kept putting a hand to his chest as if seeking reassurance in something hidden, but she assumed that his pensiveness was due to his dilemma with Heather/Meadow.

Following dinner, Sammy helped her load up the guys in the Prius while he packed an unwilling Bubba in the Jeep, then they went home and crashed.

Sammy spent much of the night staring up at the ceiling in intermittent prayer. But since he lay still, Marni did not notice his sleeplessness.

The next day, Saturday, Sammy kissed his wife good-bye, telling her that he should be home for lunch. “Have you got your phone?” she asked, as per usual.

He felt his pocket. “Yes!” he said, pleased and surprised. So she let him go. Bubba followed him to the garage, asking to go, but Sammy shooed him back into the kitchen and shut the door. “Not today, guy,” he muttered.

Then he started up the Jeep and set out in plenty of time to make the start of filming, still with no plan. The day was clear and cold: perfect for a trial by fire.

While Sammy drove silently to the Half Crazy Studios, Fletcher and Adair sat overlooking the preparations in the studio lot for that day’s filming. They were silent as well, then she observed, “It will break Sammy’s heart to fail.”

“That’s too bad,” Fletcher said. “But Quinn made his choice. I have to honor that, even if he doesn’t understand the consequences.”

She looked at him reproachfully. “The consequences are too heavy for someone who had no say in it.” Fletcher considered that. She added, “And Sammy trusts you. He has done everything you asked. She trusts you even more, without reservation.”

His eyes softened. “Does that matter?”

“Whatever crushes him is going to break her, too,” she observed.

“Do you want to help?” He was smiling slightly now.

“Oh, yes, please,” she breathed.

“I never could tell you no,” he said ruefully, and she leaned forward to kiss him, grinning.

Meanwhile, Sammy was cruising along at 65 miles per hour, just at the speed limit, to not draw attention to himself. Traffic was moderately heavy, standard for a Saturday. He drove, thinking, occasionally shaking his head, as he could not imagine how he would successfully interfere with this event. *I wish I had been able to watch them practice yesterday*, he thought. *I should have attempted to get back there to watch.*

Suddenly, he looked ahead in mild concern as traffic began to slow. He was only a few miles from the exit to the studios. But cars began stacking up in front of him, and he watched his speedometer drop to 50, then 40, then 28, then 15, and finally zero.

He raised his hands helplessly, looking ahead at a sea of brake lights. Taking out his phone, he ran a search and discovered that traffic cops and the fire department were working an accident just past his exit. Urgently, he checked his watch: 8:32. Filming would start at 9:00.

“No. No,” he breathed. Wildly, he looked all around. He was in the middle lane of a three-lane freeway, completely pinned on all sides. If he jumped out now and started running—feverishly, he began calculating how long it would take him to get to the studio, assuming he ran a string of 4-minute miles.... And by his calculations, he would still be too late.

“God, you have to get me there on time. Lord Jesus, don’t let that guy die before I get there,” he prayed. Other than that, all he could do was sit and watch.

They were moving! He released his breath in gratitude, then watched the lines stop again. For the next 20 minutes, this pattern was repeated: inch forward, slow, and stop. Inch forward a bit more, and stop. Sammy kept his eyes off his watch, trusting that something, anything would happen to delay the event until he could get there.

Finally, he saw the exit ramp ahead, which was completely packed with other drivers attempting to circumvent the bottleneck. Sammy fell in line to exit, cutting in front of the car behind him, whose driver blasted his horn in futile rage. “Oh, just wait,” Sammy murmured, promising him more infuriating transgressions to come.

Taking the exit when his turn came, Sammy waited until he was fully on the single-lane exit ramp, scanning for patrol elements. Seeing none, he pulled out of line on to the right shoulder. He zipped down this at 50 miles an hour, then jumped a curb and ran a red light to gain the thoroughfare to the studios. Here, he restricted his speed to 60 miles an hour, screeching into the parking lot and whipping around to park along the curb right in front of the ten-foot-tall gates.

He jumped out of the Jeep, leaving the keys in the ignition. Running to the gate, he found it locked. While he was scanning for an entrance, he heard, “Sam! Sam!”

And there was Meadow, running toward him. “Meadow! Open the gate! Get me in here!”

She ran up to throw her arms around him. “Sam! Oh, I’m so glad to see you. Sam, you wouldn’t return—”

“Let go! I just need you to get me in! Meadow, let go!” he demanded.

But the more he struggled to free himself of her embrace, the more she held him. “No, Sam! I’m never letting you go again! Never!”

He grabbed her wrists to roughly push her away, and she came right back. “I love you, Sam! I don’t care about Dolly’s money! I really do love you!” She was crying.

“Let go of me!” He was almost crying himself.

Then they both heard: “Heather.”

Sammy recognized the voice, and Heather did, too. She spun to see Sam Watterson standing on the sidewalk fifteen feet away. “Sam,” she whispered. “It is you.” She let go of Sammy to walk toward Sam, who lifted a hand to her.

Meanwhile, Sammy saw a mode of entry to the lot. He climbed up on the hood of the Jeep, then on its roof. From there, he could see the stunt techs in the process of lighting the arms and legs of both contestants. A starter’s pistol cracked, and both began hoisting themselves through the Parallel Bars, limbs aflame.

Sammy leaped from the roof of the Jeep to land on the top bar of the gate on his ribs. Gasping, he hoisted himself over and fell to the sandy lot. Then he began running at top speed toward Quinn, on the Parallel Bars closest to him.

Already, something was wrong. Both contestants had fallen off the end of the Bars, staggering forward. While everyone else watched, paralyzed, Sammy grabbed Quinn, engulfed in flames, and threw him down to the sand. Then Sammy fell on top of him, pressing Quinn's arms and legs into the sand to extinguish the flames. Smoking, Quinn stopped screaming and sat up, tears streaming down his face.

Still hearing screams, Sammy looked up to see a tech wield a fire extinguisher on Abby, which emitted a weak puff of powder, then air. Everyone started shouting for blankets and water, but in the precious seconds that it took to bring them to her, she was on her face in the sand.

Then she was surrounded, and the gates opened to admit an ambulance, which had been close by due to the wreck. Quinn, standing under his own power, looked back at Sammy. But he had lit out of the gates the moment they were open and jumped into the Jeep. He turned the ignition, oblivious to the pain, and veered around the oncoming patrol car to careen over the sidewalk and onto the boulevard.

He stopped at a red light, shaking, then looked down at himself. The inside of his coat arms and sleeves had been burned away, and his forearms and heels of his palms were burned and oozing. His coat lapels and shirt front were singed, and his neck lightly burned.

A car horn behind him alerted him to the green light, so he calmly proceeded through the intersection, steering with his fingertips. At the next cross street, he ascertained his location, and turned right at the following street. He wound his way down side streets, steering shakily, until he reached a nice Dallas neighborhood.

He cruised up the street to park in front of a familiar house. Noting the Firebird in the open garage, he opened the Jeep's door and fell out. When he managed to regain his footing, he staggered up the walk to the front door. Leaning on the framing, he pushed the doorbell.

A moment later, the door was opened by Dave's wife Kerry, who stared at him. "Sammy!"

He attempted to straighten. "Hi, Kerry," he said weakly. "Hey, could you give me a hand...?"

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## Chapter 12

Kerry, a registered nurse, was already pulling Sammy into the house, stripping off the burned sports coat. “How did you get second-degree burns, Sammy?” she asked calmly.

“Uhhh,” was the extent of his reply. Holding him firmly by the shoulders, she steered him to the guest bath, where she turned on the cold water faucet.

She barely got his wedding band off, as his fingers were already starting to swell, and removed his watch with the singed leather band. As she filled the basin with cool water, she rolled the scorched, ragged edges of his shirt sleeves up away from the burned skin.

“Mom? Sammy! What happened?” Chris came up to the bathroom door.

Sammy bowed his head in pain as she gently submerged his forearms in the water. Kerry replied, “Tell your dad that lunch will have to wait. Sammy has gotten himself hurt somehow. Oh, and, keep an eye on your little sister.”

“Sure, Mom,” Chris said anxiously, moving away.

“He’s a good kid,” Sammy whispered.

“Yes, he is.” Flipping open the medicine cabinet, Kerry coated her hands with an antibacterial lotion, then said, “I’m going to wash your arms, Sammy. It may hurt just a little.”

She paused to lift his chin and look at the reddened skin on his throat. But as that appeared to be no worse than a mild sunburn, she proceeded to wash his arms with a gentle soap. Sammy closed his eyes to the sight of skin coming off and just breathed.

Dave came to the door. He stood watching for a minute, then said, “I just saw a news report about a stunt accident during filming for Abby’s show. One guy has first and second-degree burns, and she’s in critical condition.”

Sammy nodded, breathing, “Streiker told me to stop him—that he’d die if he did the stunt. I... went for him, first. I couldn’t get to them both.”

“You weren’t competing?” Dave asked.

Sammy reared up. “How stupid do I look?” he demanded, flinging water as he brandished his arms.

Dave considered that. “Pretty stupid,” he admitted.

Sammy leaned over the sink, laughing.

When his arms were washed and dried to Kerry’s satisfaction, she gently applied liberal amounts of antibiotic ointment, then wrapped his arms loosely in gauze bandages while he sat back on the couch. Dave and Chris sat by, watching.

“The mummy returns,” Sammy intoned, and Chris rolled his eyes. Then Sammy put a bandaged hand down to feel his pocket. “Great. I lost my phone.”

“Okay, Sammy,” Nurse Kerry said, “You have to keep your arms super clean to avoid infection. Don’t touch them with dirty hands. Wash them every day just like I did, and use the antibiotic ointment every time you wash.”

By holding on to the arm of the couch, Sammy was able to raise himself to a stand. “Okay, Kerry, thanks. Uh, you can go on to lunch, now—”

“Sammy, you can’t drive. Let Dave drive you in your car; I’ll follow in ours,” Kerry said.

“Sure,” Dave said, starting to move off. He paused, picking up the burned sports coat from the middle of the floor. He regarded it with sharply raised brow, then dug in the pockets. “Keys?”

“I hope they’re in the Jeep,” Sammy said, pawing in the vicinity of his pockets. His fingers were swollen and nearly useless; his wrists immobile; and his arms throbbing.

Steadying himself with a shoulder on the doorframe, he moved one foot in front of the other down the front walk toward the Jeep, where Dave had already started the engine.

Sammy found that he could not open the passenger door, so Kerry did that. Neither could he fasten the seat belt, but Dave wouldn’t allow his wife to drape herself across Sammy to do that, so he did it. “Here. Your phone was on the seat,” Dave said, handing it to him.

“Oh yay,” Sammy said. By concentrating very hard, he was able to unlock it and see that his wife had called. “Oops. She saw the news,” Sammy muttered. Dave glanced at him sympathetically as he swung the Jeep out from the curb with Kerry, Chris and Kelli in the car following.

Sammy cleared his throat. “There. ‘Hello. Why, I’m fine.’ How do I sound?” he asked his long-time partner who knew him very well.

“Hurt,” Dave said.

Sighing, “Okay,” Sammy pressed the call icon. It was very difficult bending his arm to get the phone all the way to his ear. To compensate, he leaned forward, which of course made no difference at all. So the phone came no closer than five inches to his face. He put it on speakerphone.

“Sammy?” his wife answered immediately.

“Oh, hi,” he said. “How are things?”

“Sammy, what happened?” she asked levelly.

“Well, Mr. Streiker wanted me to stop this new guy from doing the new stunt Abby had for them to do. I got there late because of traffic, so... I just had to kind of grab him when he was burning and cover him in sand. That’s all,” he said reassuringly.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“Dave is bringing me home in the Jeep. I have second-degree burns on my arms that Kerry treated. I’m all right,” he insisted.

“Okay. You’re coming from Dave and Kerry’s?”

“Yeah, we’re only about ten minutes away now,” he said.

“Okay, I’ll... call Mom. They saw the news reports and slightly freaked out,” she said.

“What was on the news?” he asked apprehensively.

“Just reports about an accident involving Abby, ‘Yves Leandro’ and the new stunt man. But he didn’t know your name and the studio is not releasing any information on the advice of their lawyers,” she said.

“Did he look okay? The new guy?” Sammy asked.

“Yes, his burns don’t appear to be serious. He got checked at the hospital and walked out. Abby was burned pretty badly, though. They’re not releasing any information about her,” she said.

“Oh. Okay, we’ll be there shortly.”

“Okay. I love you, Sammy.”

“I love you, baby. Bye now,” he said in satisfaction. Finding his pants pocket inaccessible, Sammy dropped the phone into his coat pocket. “She did not melt down at all once she knew it was an assignment,” he informed his partner, who had heard the whole conversation for himself.

Dave considered that, checking his rearview mirror to change lanes. “You really went out there on assignment from Streiker?”

“Yes,” Sammy said.

“He told you to stop Abby’s new contestant from doing the stunt?” Dave pressed.

“Yes. He told me that if I couldn’t stop him, the guy was going to die. I barely got there in time because the freeway was backed up after an accident,” Sammy explained. He leaned back with his elbows up to lessen the pressure in his arms.

Dave was silent, and Sammy thought back over the incident. Remembering something strange, he frowned and sat up.

By then, Dave was pulling into the back driveway to Sammy’s house. Sammy somewhat pointed to the remote, which Dave pressed, and pulled into the garage beside Marni’s Prius.

Sammy managed to unfasten the seatbelt, open the car door, and slide off the seat by himself. He looked back at Dave walking out of the garage. “Hey, uh, can’t you come in for a minute?”

Dave turned back a little reluctantly, looking away from the offense in his friend’s face.

They entered the laundry room and walked through the kitchen into the family room, where they found Streiker sitting on the couch. Sam was on his lap and Bubba at his feet. Marni sat beside him, holding Clay.

She quickly got up to meet them. Putting an arm around Dave first, she said, “Thank you for bringing him. Is Kerry coming?”

Embarrassed, and avoiding the sight of Streiker, Dave muttered, “She’s following me with the kids in her car. We’re going to meet her folks for lunch.”



She nodded, turning to Sammy, but he only kissed her on the forehead before sitting beside Streiker. “Hey, I hope he’s okay. I got there late. Is he going to be all right?”

“He’s not badly injured,” Streiker replied. “Give me your phone.”

Sammy gingerly stuck his fingers into his pocket and handed the phone to Streiker, who took it and began entering something. “Here’s his phone number. His name is Quinn Reilly. Call him some time today. I want him to know that you were there on my instructions.”

He leaned over Sam to extend Sammy’s phone to him. Sam, lolling on Streiker, regarded his dad. “Dada.”

“Hey, Sam. You look comfortable,” Sammy observed. He regarded the new contact entry on his phone, then dropped it back into his pocket.

Streiker looked back at the uncomfortable visitor. “Hello, Dave.”

“Mr. Streiker.” He immediately came forward to offer his hand, which Streiker shook amiably.

Then Streiker turned to Sammy. “Under the circumstances, you performed quite ably. You went to great lengths in your effort to complete the assignment.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sammy said. As far as he could remember, this was the first time Streiker had praised him on an assignment. And he did it in front of Dave.

“So,” Streiker continued, “I’m going to give you whatever you ask for.”

“Pardon?” Sammy blinked, and Dave stared at Streiker.

“I’m going to give you whatever you ask me,” Streiker repeated.

Sammy’s mouth hung open, then his expression changed. “That—that was you! You’re the one who put that lottery ticket where I’d find it.”

“Sure,” Streiker said, nodding.

“I knew it!” Sammy exclaimed. “I *knew* that was a set-up but I thought it was one of Pruett’s gags!” Turning to Dave, he said, “The money was from him all along.”

Streiker said, “That’s true. And if you had been stupid with it, I couldn’t offer you anything more today.”

Dave suddenly looked toward the front window. “There’s Kerry. Excuse me.”

As he went to the front door, Marni sprang up to follow him, still holding Clay. Sammy and Streiker listened to her tell him good-bye and call, “Thank you, Kerry!” out the door. She shut it and quietly came back to place Clay in his play pen, then sit on the couch.

Sammy looked at her. “What do you want me to ask for?” He was leaning back, resting the unburned backs of his hands on his head, because that gave him the least pain.

“I didn’t save anybody from burning to death. That’s your call,” she said.

He tried to lean forward on his knees; realizing again that he couldn’t, he lifted his arms back over his head. “I keep thinking about what happened. After I’d busted a gut and six or seven traffic laws to get out there in time,

Meadow met me. She thought I was Sam—I mean, she *really* thought I was Sam. She wasn't putting on an act. She was holding on to me, and I couldn't shake her to get back to the lot. Another few seconds of her clinging and this guy Quinn would have been past helping.

"And then—we heard Sam, my dad Sam, say her name, and he was there behind us on the sidewalk! She let go of me to go to him," Sammy said. He leaned forward, arms elevated, to ask Streiker, "Was that really my dad?"

Streiker hesitated. "In the sense that you're asking, yes. As to whether she can continue a relationship with him, no."

Sammy looked at his firstborn on Streiker's lap, and his youngest in the playpen. "What you're telling me is that we have to make our time here count, because once it's gone, there's no going back."

"That's correct." Streiker nodded.

"I want my friends back," Sammy said. "I want Mike and Dave to work for you."

"That may take some time, because I can't force them to do something they don't want to do," Streiker replied.

"Then I'll wait," Sammy said.

"All right." Streiker got up, setting Sam on his feet; Marni and Sammy stood as well. "I'll be in touch." He patted Sammy's shoulder and kissed Marni on the cheek, then left by the front door.

She and Sammy, in a subdued state of shock, settled back onto the couch. Sam then fell on his dad's bandaged arm.

Issuing a sharp whistle of pain, Sammy removed it out of reach. Marni held the toddler gently by his middle. "Sam, the white wrap on Daddy's arms means 'Don't touch.' Daddy got hurt helping somebody, and we have to let him heal. Okay?"

"K," he said

Standing, she asked Sammy, "Are you hungry?"

"No, not really," he sighed, sinking back down.

Sam tentatively climbed up on his dad's knees, careful to stay off the swathed arms. Sammy smiled at him, caressing his head with puffy fingers. When Bubba put his forepaws on Sammy's leg to sniff at his arms, Sam sat up, ordering, "Down, Bubba."

Whining, Bubba lay down on Sammy's feet. Then Sam felt sorry for him and slid off Dad's lap to lie on his feet, too.

When Marni's phone warbled, she quickly answered. "Oh, hi, Mom. Yes, Sammy's here—Dave brought him. Yeah, he's okay, except he's got second-degree burns on his arms. Yes. Well, what happened, was...."

Marni then related to her mother what she knew, with frequent interruptions from the principal actor. She finished, "Thanks, Mom, but we're doing okay right now. I'll call you if we need help. Love you, too." She put her phone away, watching him.

Then she broached, "I, um, didn't know that this assignment called for you to throw yourself onto someone who was burning."

He blinked. “I didn’t either. That’s just the way it happened, because of the traffic. And I’m thinking... that maybe that was the only way for me to do it.”

“What do you mean?” she asked uneasily.

“Let’s say there was no freeway accident, so I get there with ten, fifteen minutes to spare. And let’s assume, just to be generous, that I’m able to slip into the lot without causing a scene.

“I’m standing there watching the prelims. What do I do? If I interrupt and say, ‘You are going to kill yourselves,’ they throw me out. Because—I’ve seen these fire stunts. Haven’t you? They can be done safely. I was thinking that the problem was with the length of the course—that they wouldn’t have time to run the course before the protectant gave out. But that was not the case here; something was wrong from the beginning.

“Anyway, back to our best-case scenario. I get into the lot, and I stand there and watch to the point that they’re in trouble. Do I run up and throw myself on New Guy at that point? I don’t think so; I think I’d be looking for a smarter way to do it while he roasts. Do you know how I know that? Because that’s what everybody else was doing when I ran up!” From force of habit, he threw his hands up, then winced and placed them back on his head.

He went on: “But between the freeway accident slowing me down and Meadow strong-arming me, I’m panicked enough to jump on the gate at the exact moment that I need to act. Since I don’t have time to think about it, I don’t, and away we go. The all-important timing of the exact moment that I arrived was out of my control,” he said.

She thought about that. “And you don’t think it was coincidental.”

“If it was, it was the nicest thing that a random, impersonal universe could do for me and especially for New Guy. His name is...” Having put his phone in his coat pocket, he drew it out with two fingers. “Quinn Reilly. Guess I should call him.”

“You don’t want to,” Marni observed.

“Good Lord, no,” he said. “What am I supposed to say? ‘Hey, I’m the guy who saved your life. Please don’t call the news people.’”

Pressing the call icon, he sighed, “Here goes.” He gingerly held the phone toward his ear, but had to resort to the speakerphone again. “Message,” he told her, although she could hear it.

At the tone, he began to say, “Hello, Quinn. Fletcher Streiker asked me to call you. I’m... the guy who almost buried you in sand today, and—”

Quinn came on the line. “Yves Leandro?”

“Uh, yes, but my real name is Sammy Kidman.”

“Oh, wow. Thanks for calling. You were—how did you know? How did you know that the whole thing was going to blow up in our faces?” Quinn asked.

“Well,” Sammy said hesitantly, looking at his wife, “Mr. Streiker had some concerns about the set-up, and asked me to check on you today—”

“That’s incredible. How did this Streiker guy know that Blaine Nash was trying to kill Abby?” Quinn demanded.

“What?” Sammy said weakly.

“You told us yesterday that you were afraid that Nash was trying to kill her. The cops just interviewed me because they found that the protectant had been adulterated and the fire extinguisher depressurized. I’m hearing that Nash is going to be arrested on charges of attempted murder.”

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## Chapter 13

“What?” Sammy gasped.

“Yeah, the cops want to talk to you,” Quinn said.

At that moment the doorbell rang. Bubba lunged up barking, signaling strangers at the door.

“Okay, I think that’s them, Quinn,” he said, clicking off. Marni had Bubba by the harness, dragging him to the back yard.

When Sammy saw that she had him under control, he went to the door himself. It took some concentrated effort to unlock the deadbolt, so he shouted, “I’m injured; trying to get it open. Hang on.” The last thing he wanted was jittery cops drawing down on his front porch.

He could hear Sam crying at the back door and Bubba continuing to bark. He finally got the door open and raised his arms just to relieve the pressure.

Two plainclothes officers, a man and a woman, stood there. “Mr. Kidman? You’re not under arrest,” said the woman, showing her badge.

“That’s nice, but my arms still hurt. Come in,” he said, stepping back.

They did, looking around, and Sammy shut the door with his hip. “My wife put the dog outside and I think my son got upset,” he said on his way back to the family room.

Sure enough, Sam was trying to get outside, and Marni came into the room with his coat. Glancing at the detectives, she knelt before Sam to put his arms in the coat, murmuring something to him about minding.

“Sit down,” Sammy said to the cops, gesturing to the couch. He did not know either of them, but had been on their end of this interview ritual many times.

Marni let Sam out to play with Bubba in the back. She did not go out herself, but hovered near the door to watch them while listening to the interview.

The detectives sat; Sammy placed himself in the rocker opposite them, hands on his head. Nodding at the gauze wrappings, the man asked, “How bad is it?”

“Second-degree burns,” Sammy replied. “Excuse me, what was your name again?”

“I’m Detective Mauricio and this is Detective Errol,” he said. “You, uh, used to be DPD?”

“For fifteen years,” Sammy said vacantly, looking away.

“Ah. That’s good,” Mauricio said. “Ah—”

The woman, Detective Errol, interrupted, “How did you happen to be at the Half Crazy Studios today, Mr. Kidman?”

Sammy looked at her. You never interrupted your partner unless he or she was about to get shot and didn’t know it. His arms were beginning to hurt badly now, and that made him tense.

Resting his hands on top of his head, he said, “Fletcher Streiker asked me to go out there and have a look.”

The first thing civilians needed to remember about talking to the police was to say as little as possible. At this moment, he felt that it was in his best interest to answer questions. If he didn’t like the direction of the questioning, he would stop answering.

She frowned. It did not help that she reminded him of the worst cop he had ever known, Rosie Kray. “Why would he tell you to do that?” she asked.

He shook his head slightly. “Do you ask your sergeant why he tells you to do something?”

Mauricio snorted, then cleared his throat and said, “We’re just wondering why you told Abby Max that her assistant producer was trying to kill her.”

“I was just trying to make them put the event on hold,” Sammy asserted. “I had no knowledge of anything; didn’t even know what event they were running until yesterday.”

“You were lying, then?” Det. Errol asked skeptically.

“Yep,” Sammy said.

“Then how do we know you’re not lying now?” she asked with a little smirk.

“Am I under arrest?” Sammy asked, standing.

“No,” Mauricio said wearily, with a glance at his partner.

“Then I’ve told you everything I can,” Sammy said. Mauricio stood, and after a moment, Errol did, too. Sammy went to the front door to see them out.

Errol went straight to the car, but Mauricio paused at the door. “Hey, listen. Sorry about the—”

Sammy waved it off awkwardly, and the detective saw blood seeping through the gauze. Sammy added, “I really don’t know anything that could help you. I was just shooting off my mouth yesterday.”

Mauricio nodded, holding out his business card. Sammy took it between two fingers and watched him walk on down to the car. Then Sammy shut the door, locking it with shaking fingers.

He returned to the family room to see Marni bringing Sam and Bubba back in. “Getting pretty cold out there,” she murmured.

Throwing himself back down on the couch, he smiled. “You’re hacked.”

She blinked back tears. “I don’t know how many ways you can get hurt.”

“Streiker didn’t heal me this time,” he said thoughtfully. “But Adair had something to do with it. I don’t know how I know that, but I do.”

Marni looked at him. “I thought so, too, but I didn’t have the courage to ask Mr. Streiker. Oh, look at your arms! —Okay, I’m going to run the guys to Mom’s so that I can go get gauze and ointment. We don’t have either.”

“I want to go with you,” Sammy said, standing. “I hope Pruett left the keys in the Jeep.”

Carrying Clay and herding Sam, Marni had opened the door to the garage when Bubba slid out beside her to sit expectantly beside the Jeep. In case anyone misunderstood him, he stood up to place his forepaws on the door.

Marni got the guys in—including Bubba—then opened Sammy’s door for him. He climbed in, and when she leaned over him to buckle him in, he kissed her. “This is going to be a challenge, but I’m up for it,” he promised. “You’ll just have to do most of the work for a change.”

She did laugh.

Looking back at the guys as Marni climbed behind the wheel, Sammy said, “Hey, you don’t need to drop them off. We’ll just wait while you run in.”

She looked back as well; Clay was only half-awake and Sam was yawning. “Yeah. Good plan.” She found the keys in the ignition and started the Jeep. Backing out, she said, “Gah! I have to stop for gas, too.”

“Gah!” laughed Sam.

“Sorry,” Sammy winced.

She stopped at a supermart to fill the tank, then pulled into a parking space. “I’m taking the keys,” she said, getting out.

He grunted, relocating his hands atop his head. “You never did trust me.”

“Gah,” she replied, and Sam, in his car seat, laughed again.

Sammy leaned his head back, eyes watering. The cold was good, in that it helped numb him a little. He was still wearing the partially burned shirt, and couldn’t conceive putting a coat on. The guys were quiet while they waited, although Bubba whined, pawing at the window, and made suggestions of moving up to the guys’ seats, if not the very front. Sammy turned to growl at him, so he stayed put.

Marni returned with her purchases in record time. Thus began the worst five days of Sammy’s life to date.

He had been far more seriously injured when Grip shot him in the chest four years ago—had almost died, and should have died. But he had been under the care of skilled, dedicated medical personnel and pain management. Whenever he started hurting too much, they medicated him.

But now, the pain was constant and unremitting. Fearing a relapse into unhealthy behaviors, Sammy refused to be drugged, taking nothing stronger than aspirin. But that meant living with the pain.

He couldn’t sleep; he didn’t want to eat. He couldn’t hold his wife or his sons; common, necessary tasks became feats of endurance. Marni had to attend him constantly to keep Sam or Bubba off him and he couldn’t help her in the smallest ways. The only relief she got was whenever the Taylors could watch the guys for a few hours.

Four years ago, he had been hailed a hero for taking that bullet. Although he disdained the attention of the media, he relished the accolades from his coworkers and superiors. Then, they had bestowed on him the Lifesaving Award (for rescuing baby Meredith) and the Medal of Honor; today he heard... crickets.

When he heard nothing more from Quinn, whose life he had saved, Sammy realized that he probably didn’t know what had happened. Because of the pending criminal investigation and probable lawsuits, the studio was not releasing the footage of the fire stunt to anyone except the police. All Sammy knew about subsequent events was that Abby was still in critical condition.

Four years ago, the shooting was surrounded by manifestations of the supernatural, from Marni's finding his body in the morgue to his resuscitation and subsequent recovery. Today: nothing. During the tedious hours and days of recuperation, there was no hint of supernatural help, no mysterious appearance of orchids. His arms were not healed except by the slow, messy, natural bodily processes.

Four years ago, Sammy had the satisfaction of watching Dave and Kerry fall in love after he had introduced them. And Mike had come down from Dallas to San Antonio, where Sammy was hospitalized, to urge him to remain with the Dallas Police. Mike had spent considerable time explaining why Sammy should lend his talents to the new Targeted Activity Section—which he did, of course.

Now, Sammy heard nothing more from Dave and nothing at all from Mike. Even Striker did not call again. The feeling of abandonment would have been complete, and the descent into morbid self-pity fully accomplished, but for Marni.

After the shock of that first day, her attitude shifted to a cheerful, almost careless acceptance of his new, heavy disability. She devised ways to keep Sam and Bubba occupied so that they could be near him without hurting him. She washed and medicated his arms gently and thoroughly several times a day, watching for signs both of infection and healing.

She forced him to eat when he couldn't will himself to do it, and she slept like the dead regardless of his restlessness throughout the night. She was so matter-of-fact about the whole thing that he could not bring himself to thank her—not yet.

The most he could do was not be an ass to her. And he could not make himself believe the one thing he knew to be fact: that this condition was temporary.

Since he could do nothing else, Sammy spent the endless hours of idleness and pain thinking. It had been quite a shock to discover that he could get hurt doing what Striker told him to do. That must have been what Striker meant when he told him the assignments would be "difficult."

So what did that mean from here on out? Would Sammy now set himself up as final arbiter on assignments? Would he select only those that promised no inconvenience to himself? Was his purpose to guard his own skin at any cost, or to do what Striker said even if no one else noticed or cared? Whose side was he on?

That seemed to be the crux of the question: Whom did he work for? He was either Striker's man or his own; if he worked for Striker, then he was constrained to do his job and accept the consequences as part of the package, which included the not-insignificant income of over a million dollars a year.

Gradually, he saw that the dragging, useless, pain-filled hours were acting to force him off the fence one way or another: wholehearted service or defiant refusal. There would be no hesitation to see if the next task suited him or not, no calculating what it would cost him. Situations might be gray; he might be confused or distracted, but once he was given an assignment, there was only Yes or No.

Suddenly, Thursday morning—five days after the fire event—Sammy woke up without pain. His arms were still stiff, but almost completely scabbed over. He could actually lay his arm across his wife without discomfort. His fingers, too, were functional again.

When Marni woke up much later, he was not in bed. Flailing to get out from under the covers, she staggered to her feet and ran into the family room, which was empty. From there she followed her nose to the kitchen.

She gasped to see him standing over the stove cooking eggs. "Hey, there," he said, glancing up. "How do you want your eggs? Sam likes his with syrup."



She looked at Sam, contentedly drizzling syrup on his eggs, and Bubba sitting alertly beside his chair. Clay was in his play seat on the floor. Sammy had given him a half-bottle of diluted orange juice, which was now dripping on the floor beside him.

Opening the microwave, Sammy said, “Yeah, I like this microwave bacon cooker a lot better than frying it on the stovetop. Only problem is keeping Bubba out of the greasy trash.”

He pulled out the microwave container and opened it to taste a piece. “Here. What do you think?” He extended the rest of the bacon piece to her.

She took his wrist to look at his scabbed inner arm. The flesh on the edges of the scabs looked healthy and pink. Withdrawing his arm from her grasp, he said, “You know what? We’re going to just forget about my arms for today. If you’ll sit down and get out of my way, I’ll get you a plate.”

Numbly, she sat, to which Clay objected. She got up again to get him out of his seat and put him on her lap. He waved pudgy arms and fussed at her until she got her nightshirt open for him to nurse. “Did he drink any of the orange juice?” she asked.

“Um? Oh. Oops.” He bent to pick up the bottle without difficulty and evaluate the amount of fluid in it as compared to the size of the puddle on the floor. “I think I can safely say no.”

Bubba sniffed the puddle, but as it was not milk, he declined to clean it up. So Sammy dropped a paper towel on it, then reconsidered that. He wet another paper towel and actually cleaned the spot with nimble fingers.

When he put a plate of bacon and eggs in front of her, she started crying. He evaluated that, then said, “Okay, you can have orange juice, too.” Whereupon he opened the refrigerator to pour her a cup.

She shifted Clay on her lap and sniffled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said righteously, as if forgiving her prior ingratitude.

They had a nice breakfast, and Sammy made a point of helping her clean up, though she wouldn’t allow him to put his arms in dirty dishwater. Then he looked outside at the bright sunshine and mused, “Wonder how cold it is out there.”

“I have no idea,” she replied cautiously.

So he stepped out and checked. Re-entering, he said, “It’s actually not bad. Maybe in the fifties. Would you—object to visiting the Arboretum?”

“No,” she said. “Let me get the guys ready.”

So while she dressed the little boys, Sammy took Bubba out back and told him, “You do your business here, because I’m going to buy only one package of poop bags every five years.” Bubba did his business.

Marni insisted on wrapping Sammy’s arms, which he allowed because even the softest sweaters were scratchy. He even condescended to take a coat in the Jeep. But there was a price for his cooperation: He wanted to drive. It was a real act of faith for Marni to allow him to do so without argument.

He seemed to have no difficulty handling the wheel; there was no precipitation, and traffic was not heavy. They arrived at the Arboretum to haul out Clay’s stroller and Bubba’s leash, then they entered the plaza.

There was a fair number of visitors; it wasn't overly crowded, but free family Christmas entertainments drew visitors even on a Thursday. Marni and Sam had to visit all the little Christmas houses again, and they had a lot of company doing so.

Bubba was not among them, as Marni did not want a big dog scaring small children, so Sammy hooked his leash to Clay's stroller and ordered him to stay put.

He obeyed sullenly, whining and pricking his ears every time Marni and Sam reappeared from one little house and disappeared into another. Sammy raised his eyes to the stone angel at the far end of the plaza, and was chafed to go unnoticed today.

*Is he here?* he thought, looking around. *Mr. Streiker, I really want to see you today.*

When Marni and Sam rejoined him, they all went exploring down the paths. First, Sammy had to check the folly just off the plaza, but it was empty. They stopped at the barbecue restaurant, but it was not open yet. They went down the path to the koi pond—the fish were slow and lazy in the cold weather, but still came to the surface for Sam to feed them.

They walked the paths for an hour, until Sam grew tired and reached up to his dad, who stretched out his arms to lift him.

Marni grimaced in fear, but he tossed his head. "If it breaks a few scabs, oh well. I'm tired of being coddled."

With Marni pushing Clay, Sammy carrying Sam, and Bubba's leash hooked on the stroller handle, they completed the circuit of paths and reentered the plaza. Sammy looked around, eyes glazed in disappointment. Then he sighed and said, "Okay, I guess he's not here today. Back home, gang."

They exited the Arboretum, beautifully green even in late fall, and hiked back to the Jeep. Sammy did wince lifting Sam into his car seat, but when he saw Marni watching, he cleared his face.

Then as they settled into their seats, he glanced out the side window and started. "There he is! He's sitting on the bus stop bench."

"Are you sure?" Marni asked, as she could not see out his window.

"Yes," he said. "Listen—do you mind waiting just a minute? It won't be long; I promise."

"Go ahead," she said.

He hastily climbed down from the Jeep to make his way across the parking lot to the bus lane in front of the Arboretum. As there were no buses loading or unloading right now, the area was empty save the one figure resting on the scrolled iron bench.

Sammy plopped down beside him, and Streiker looked over. "You wanted to see me?"

"I sure did," Sammy said, then stopped, unsure of the explanation. "I, uh, wanted to know... whether..." He stopped because he had no idea what he wanted to ask. There was something he wanted very badly, and he didn't know what that was.

Streiker watched him, then lowered his head and started laughing. He passed a hand over his face, looked at the Jeep where Sammy's family waited, then started laughing again. Sammy watched without offense. Streiker looked back at him and said, "Sammy, do you want *another* assignment?"

Surprised, Sammy thought about that. “After getting really badly hurt, and inconvenienced, and finding out that nobody gives a flip? Why, yes, in fact, I do. I want to be your go-to guy.”

Streiker looked off, thinking. Then he turned back to Sammy and said, “Abby Max is in room four twelve at Roberts Hospital in the Baylor Medical Center complex. She is close to death. I can’t get in to see her without permission, and no one there will give me permission. But if you get permission to see her, you can sneak me in, and I can help her. Will you do that?”

Sammy smiled. “Oh, indeed I will, Mr. Streiker. I will ooze so much charm all over that floor that you will slide in right under the door.”

Streiker regarded him with a half smile. Nodding toward the Jeep, he said, “Then take your family home and go to Baylor Medical. I’ll be right on your heels.”

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## Chapter 14

Sammy bounded back to the Jeep, barely missing a sedan that had to screech to a stop to avoid him in the parking lot of Streiker's Arboretum. Sammy made a gesture of culpability and continued his heedless run across the lot. When he plopped into the driver's seat and turned the key, Marni said, "He gave you another assignment."

"This one's a piece of cake. I promise," he said earnestly, checking his rearview mirror to back out. "Abby Max is about to croak at Baylor Medical, and he wants me to get him in to see her before that happens."

She frowned. "He can't get in?"

"Not without permission," he said, wrinkling his brow. "Can you imagine? But he says I can sneak him in. Those were his very words."

Her eyes widened. "Okaaay."

"This is going to be so much fun," he chortled.

"Sammy, your having much more fun is liable to kill me," she complained.

"Oh, not to worry; this is his show." Still, he was grinning.

When they arrived home, he did not simply drop them off; he helped Marni bring in all the guys and see that they got settled. He even spent a few minutes playing with Sam and brought Clay out of confinement to practice Aviator Baby.

Then when Marni condescended to put on Looney Tunes, he was ready to go. As he kissed her, she asked, "Can I look at your arms before you leave?"

"No. They're fine. I won't be using them," he assured her. She looked skeptical.

With lightness of heart, Sammy climbed back into the Jeep to sail downtown. He didn't care if he got hurt again. He didn't care if no one except Marni cared that he got hurt. What made him fly was knowing that he could be useful to Streiker. He just wanted to be, was all.

He arrived at Roberts Hospital at Baylor Medical downtown just about one o'clock. It was cool but sunny, so he left his jacket locked up in the Jeep.

As he began walking toward the entrance, Streiker came up to meet him. "Okay, Sammy," he said. "I'm counting on you to get us in. Just ignore me until we get to her room, because no one else will see me."

"Okay," Sammy said. It sounded reasonable, even to be expected.

He trotted up the steps to the entrance, where the doors opened automatically, and paused to hang his sunglasses on the neck of his sweater and adjust his bearing for this most serious endeavor. He discreetly shoved up his sleeves just enough to show the gauze wrappings on both arms. Then he approached the desk, biting his lip. The receptionist at once looked at him with sympathy in her eyes.

"Excuse me. My name is Sammy Kidman. I, uh," he paused to pinch the bridge of his nose as realistic tears brimmed in his eyes. "I was a guest competitor on Abby's show just a week ago, and—if there's any way I can

get in to see her, just to say hello, or, good-bye....” He dropped his head, bringing up his hand to cover his lower face in sudden grief.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she breathed. “But we have strict orders that only family are allowed in.”

He quickly looked up. “Is her father Frank there? I know the Catrionas very well.”

“You do?” she asked in hesitant surprise.

“Yes, absolutely. Is he with her now?” Sammy demanded. “He’ll let me in.”

“No, he’s not there now,” she began.

“Is Helena there?” Sammy asked.

“No, they had to go home to be with their grandson,” she said.

“Ripley,” Sammy replied. “Listen, if they’re home, please call Frank and ask him to give me clearance. I can give you his number.”

“Wait, let me look,” she said, opening a computer file. While she brought up Abby’s parents’ contact information, Sammy rattled off Les’ and Sarah’s old phone number, which he knew very well. Her mouth hung open in surprise. “That’s it. That’s their number.”

“Please call them and ask if Sammy Kidman can see Abigail,” he pleaded.

Picking up her phone, she did just that. Sammy listened to her say, “Mr. Catriona, this is Baylor—no, no sir, there’s been no change. But, a gentleman here by the name of Sammy Kidman asks if you will give him clearance to visit your daughter.... Yes, that’s correct. All right. Thank you, Mr. Catriona. Good-bye.”

Sammy waited to see if the news was as good as it sounded. She was inputting something on her computer, then said, “May I see your driver’s license?” This he speedily produced.

She scanned it in her computer, then printed off a document which went through a laminating and cutting machine. She affixed a lapel clip by hand, then handed over his visitor’s ID. “She’s in room four-twelve. The elevators are to your right down that hall. You mustn’t stay more than ten minutes.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” he breathed, reaching out to shake her hand and, as it happened, expose his gauze.

“You’re welcome,” she said with motherly kindness.

Sammy relocated his sunglasses to hang on his belt and fastened his visitor’s badge to the neck of his sweater. Turning down the hall, he whispered, “Okay, we’re almost there.”

“Good,” Streiker said. Sammy heard him clearly, but did not look around for him.

He boarded the elevator, unconcerned that he was the only one in it, and pressed floor 4. Emerging when the doors opened, he glanced down the hall both ways, then turned to his left. He knew that was the right direction because of the two large security guards who stood at one door.

Sammy came up to them, checking the room number just to make sure, and said, “Frank Catriona sent me.” The goons glanced at each other; one scrutinized his lapel ID and nodded, then the other one reached over to open the door. Sammy entered, and his stomach dropped at the sight of the pathetic figure in the bed.

She was mostly swathed in gauze, but the visible flesh was swollen, scabbed and oozing. Sparse tufts of hair erupted from the top of her head where the wrappings stopped. Her face was grotesque in its erratic coloring and puffiness. She blinked and breathed painfully, though he knew that she had to be heavily medicated.

He advanced to her bedside, glancing up at the distracting, loud, wall-mounted television set. There was no chair by the bed—the only chair in the room was occupied by another security guard, who sat by the door with his arms folded across his chest, bored out of his mind.

At Abby’s bedside, Sammy reached down to touch her clawed fingers. Several had fused together, and were bandaged that way to heal before being surgically separated. “How are you, Abby?” he whispered. She blinked and shifted. “Okay,” she muttered.

In genuine pity and distress, he leaned down to press his lips on a spot of forehead that was neither oozing nor covered in gauze, and her fingers tightened slightly on his. Sammy looked back at Streiker standing at the foot of the bed. “Help her,” he breathed. His voice was inaudible for the noise from the television.

Streiker then came to the other side of the bed to evaluate her. He turned to look at the security guard, who closed his eyes and dropped his head in sleep. Then Streiker looked up at the television, which went dark and silent. Streiker told Sammy, “Tell her to push down the sheet.”

“Okay, I can do that,” Sammy said, taking hold of the top of the sheet around her chest.

Streiker stopped him. “No, Sammy. She has to do it. It indicates her consent.”

“Well—” Sammy motioned to her. “Abby?”

“She can’t hear me, Sammy,” Streiker said.

“Ohh,” Sammy said. He leaned down to the patient to say softly, “Abby, I brought someone to help you, but you need to push the sheet down. Can you do that?”

She stirred, then clumsily brought up the hand that was not taped with IVs. Laboriously, she shoved the sheet down until it was around her thighs. She wore a thin nightdress, and nothing under that. Obviously, she had worn protective covering on her torso while her arms and legs had been set ablaze for the stunt.

Sammy looked up at Streiker, who nodded. “Now she needs to lift up her gown.”

Sammy balked slightly, as she was so apparently nude underneath. In discomfort, he said, “Abby, you need to pull up your nightgown now.”

Her puffy, discolored eyes regarded him, then she closed her eyes and exhaled. A moment later, in a gesture of resignation, her left hand began tugging upward on her sheer nightdress. Given the condition of her hands, it was a difficult undertaking. Still she kept at it, and Streiker waited patiently.

As she worked it up over her hips, Sammy averted his eyes, but Streiker moved closer to the bed. Out of the corner of his eye, Sammy saw her pull the dress up over her chest, and he turned almost fully away.

A flash of movement brought his eye back around, and he fell back with a cry. Perched atop her chest was a giant, insect-like creature with huge mandibles bristling with protruding fangs. It had human arms and legs

equipped with clawed digits, and red eyes in its bare skull that swung back and forth between Streiker and Sammy.

The creature was not just sitting on her torso, it was burrowing down in it, eating her flesh and organs. Covered with blood, spittle, and bits of tissue, it flung bloody bits around the room as it hissed and spit first at Sammy, but mostly at Streiker.

Sammy, his back pressed against the wall in terror, cried, "Where did that come from?" He wiped away bits of bloody flesh that landed on his face.

"From inside her. We have to get it out," Streiker replied.

"We? *We*?" Sammy exclaimed.

The creature's exposed back was protected by plates of bony armor, but Streiker reached out and grabbed it by the back of the neck. This sent it into a rage of hissing, flailing and biting, and it brought up a long, jointed tail from Abby's intestines to whip against Streiker's hand and arm.

Sammy cried, "Wha—? Wha—?"

Streiker said, "Tell her to let go of it. I can't get it out unless she lets go."

In consternation, Sammy looked, and saw that she was indeed holding on to the creature, petting it, grasping it with bandaged hands to her mangled organs. "Abby," he gasped, bending down to her as closely as he dared, "sweetheart, let it go. Baby, please let go of it."

"Let go of what?" she asked dreamily.

Helplessly, Sammy looked up at Streiker, who replied, "This is Hatred. She's got to let go and push it away."

Ducking his head from the evil, spitting jaws, Sammy moved in closer. "Abby, baby, push away the Hatred. It's killing you, sweetheart; push it away."

"But I like it," she breathed, holding it tighter. The creature began burrowing back down inside her with a hiss of satisfaction.

Streiker's hold loosened, and he grunted, "If she won't let go, it will hide down inside her again, and be that much harder to get out."

Sammy wiped blood and sweat from his face and whispered, "Abby, you don't need it. You're stronger without it. It's tearing you up." On a sudden inspiration, he said, "It hurts Ripley. You don't want it to hurt Rip, do you?"

This made her pause. The creature, perceiving Sammy as a threat, snapped its jaws inches from his face. Sammy recoiled slightly, but reached out to caress her curled fingers on the hideous jointed body. "Abby, let go. Hold my hand instead."

The thing writhed and snapped at Sammy's fingers, but Streiker was still holding its neck so that it couldn't quite reach him. "Let go, baby," Sammy whispered, stroking her hand.

She let go of it to touch his fingers, and the thing reared up in a writhing fit. With a grunt, Streiker gripped it tighter on its neck. "That's my girl!" Sammy said. "Push it away, Abby. Make it get off you. Get it away from Rip."

With an exhalation of effort, she pushed against it with both hands. It was a weak gesture, certainly not enough to dislodge it, but it was all Streiker needed to pull the thing out bodily. He hauled it out of her with one hand while it writhed, spit and clawed.

Including its tail, it was longer than a man was tall, but the moment it was fully disengaged from her, Streiker clutched the base of its tail with his other hand. With a wrenching twist, he broke the thing in two and flung it at the feet of the sleeping security guard. A little blood splattered his cheek and ran down it.

Sammy watched, breathless, as the broken monster on the floor twitched in its death throes. Then it stilled, shriveled up and disappeared. “Wow,” he breathed, relaxing. “Wow.”

He looked back at Streiker, who was still leaning over Abby. There was a great, gaping hole in her chest that stretched down to her abdomen, as if a bomb had exploded inside her. Streiker reached down into this hole and began pulling up something else—something long, slimy, greenish and amorphous.

The moment Streiker began drawing it out, Sammy covered his nose with both hands. “Oh, that’s putrid. Oh my—*ack*.” He retched at the smell.

But Abby kind of wanted to hang on to this, too. Streiker had to stop drawing when she placed her curled hands on it, resisting his efforts. “Oh, Abby, let go!” Sammy cried. “What is that?”

“Lust,” Streiker said. “She’s got to give it up.”

“Lust? It’s *lust*? Oh, that is just so nasty,” Sammy gasped. “Abby, do you really want Lust slinking around Rip?”

Again, this loosened her grip, so that Streiker could resume extracting it. When he had about six feet of it coiled and throbbing on the bed, the head came out, and Sammy retched again. It had a human face with a long red tongue. Turning to look at Sammy, it spewed excrement. “Oh, I’m going to puke,” he groaned.

Streiker had to take his time with this, as the shifting, gelatinous shape was both slimy and sticky—if it couldn’t escape his grasp, it tried to engulf his arms. Sammy leaned back against the wall, covering his mouth and nose from the overpowering odor.

But Streiker patiently worked the blob, compressing it, folding it, turning it back on itself until he had reduced it to a purse-sized mass. This he pressed between his hands, continually applying pressure until it dissolved completely away. Still, it left a greenish stain on Abby’s torn skin.

Sammy lay against the wall, breathing, “That was *so nasty*.”

Streiker was still looking down in Abby’s gut. “Heads up,” he warned.

“What?” Sammy blinked.

Suddenly a barrage of six-inch creatures that looked like spiky balls with legs began shooting out of Abby’s gaping wound. Streiker caught several as they flew into the air, popping them in his hands. But the rest flew around the room, bouncing off the walls, the medical equipment, the blank television, and the sleeping security guard.

They started hitting Sammy in the face or the groin—they hit him ONLY in these two areas. And they stung. Outraged, he began knocking them to the floor and stomping on them, because he didn’t have the strength in his hands to burst them as Streiker was doing.



“What are these?” Sammy cried, stomping another. When he hit them just right, they exploded in a shower of froth and disappeared.

“Misguided Wit,” Streiker said. “Meanness, Insults, Taunting—whatever you want to call it.” Sammy saw that these, too, had faces, all spewing derisive laughter. They were just heads with legs—long legs, like frogs. Even when he was squishing the life out of them, they were still sneering.

With the successful annihilation of the first 20 or so, the barrage began to thin. Streiker started batting them down to the floor for Sammy to stomp, as that seemed to be the most efficient method of elimination.

Finally, the creatures stopped coming. Sammy stood in the middle of the room, panting. He pushed his sweater sleeves up past his elbows and groaned in apprehension when he saw Streiker looking down in Abby’s gut again. “What now?”

A grayish wisp of smoke rose from the wound, and a shadowy face appeared in it. The face looked Streiker up and down, then saw Sammy. It smiled and said, “Why, I know you. Hi, Sammy!”

“Gah!” he cried, clutching his chest. “Mr. Streiker, that one’s in *me*! Get it out!” he shouted, pulling at his sweater.

“It’s okay, Sammy. That’s just a little Vanity. They don’t like humiliation, and yours was drawn out during the treatment of the last few days,” Streiker said. Sammy watched as the smoky image sniffed and dissipated. Streiker didn’t have to do anything but expose it to the air.

“Treatment,” Sammy gasped. “I don’t understand.”

“They don’t like pain,” Streiker explained. “Pain drives them out, all of them. You’re pretty well cleaned up now. Abby’s had a good start.” He turned back to her.

Standing over her, Streiker lifted a hand, and she closed her eyes. Then Sammy watched her entrails reform and her organs regroup. Her ribcage closed back over her chest cavity, and Streiker replaced her muscles and fat. “Whoa, go easy there on the fat replenishment,” Sammy admonished.

Streiker glanced at him, but reduced the fat a little before replacing the skin. Streiker drew down her nightdress over a restored abdomen. But Sammy looked in pity at the limbs still burned and oozing. “You could heal her completely, if you wanted to,” he observed.

Streiker nodded. “But that wouldn’t be good for her. Pride is deeply embedded in her bones, and that requires further treatment. She can’t skip steps.” He stood back from the bed and she awoke, glancing around.

Studying her, Sammy had to admit that she looked worlds better. “Hey, Sammy,” she murmured.

“Hey, Abby,” he grinned, stroking what was left of her once-beautiful hair.

She saw Streiker, then. “Who’s that?”

Sammy’s mouth dropped open, and he said, “Abby, this is Fletcher Streiker. He just—uh, well, maybe he should tell you about it. He’s somebody you need to get to know.”

“Okay,” she said.

Streiker said, “Abby, may I come talk to you from time to time?”

“Sure,” she sighed. “Ain’t got much else to do. But... I feel so much better.”

Streiker looked over to the security guard, who suddenly woke up. A nurse entered. “All right, time for your—” She stopped on seeing the patient. “Why, Ms. Max! You just look great today!”

“Thanks,” she murmured. “I feel good. I feel clean, for a change.”

The nurse turned to Sammy. “I’m sorry; you’ll have to go now.”

He nodded humbly. “We’ll check back with you, Abby.” He leaned over to kiss her forehead again, and she gripped his fingers.

Then she looked at his companion and said. “Come back later, Fletcher Streiker.” The nurse glanced at the empty air beside Sammy with raised brow.

“I will, Abby,” Fletcher replied. He lifted his hand again, and the swelling in Abby’s face went down so that she could smile.

On their way out, he paused beside the security guy, who was vainly attempting to turn the television back on with the remote. “I’m afraid I broke it,” Streiker told him.

“I’m afraid it’s broken,” the guy said, and Fletcher nodded.

As he and Sammy walked back to the elevator, Sammy looked around, then hissed, “I have a lot of questions.”

“Well, let’s get out to the parking lot,” Streiker said.

Once they were safely outside, Sammy accosted him: “How bad am I? What all do I have inside me?”

Streiker smiled. “You’re doing okay, Sammy. The way you handled your pain drove away a lot of your little issues.”

“Then... how can I protect my family from that? Am I supposed to inflict pain on them to drive away those creatures?” Sammy demanded. A visitor on his way to the hospital entrance paused to regard the handsome, black-haired man waving his arms, apparently arguing with a tree in the median.

Streiker replied, “Deliberately inflicting pain makes you a monster, Sammy. If you want to protect your family, you love them. Your patience, kindness, and self-control are the greatest shield against entrenched evil that there ever was.”

“Okay,” Sammy said, turning in deep thought. “Okay. I can do that. Excuse me,” he said, almost stumbling into a woman who stood nearby. In singleness of purpose, he stalked to the Jeep.

As Streiker came up to the woman, she put her hands on her hips. “He didn’t even look at me!”

“I’m sorry, Adair,” he said, smiling. “I never had a chance to tell him what you whispered in the receptionist’s ear. Besides, he’s anxious to get home.”

Watching the Jeep accelerate into traffic, she pursed her lips. “Glad I could help, anyway.”

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## Chapter 15

Sammy pulled into the garage of his home with a lurch. He set the brake and hopped out, failing to notice the spots of blood seeping through the gauze at several points on his inner arms.

He hurried through the kitchen into the family room, where Marni was just emerging from the guys' room with their laundry hamper. A lot of chores had gone undone while Sammy was undergoing his treatment. She stopped in surprise at his sudden appearance, and he brushed past the laundry to take her up in a crunching hug.

Sam turned from his toys on the floor to look; Clay, in his play seat, waved to his dad. Bubba ambled over while Sammy gripped his wife.

She finally pulled back to look in his stricken face, then said cautiously, "If you love me, come back to the bathroom and let me look at your arms."

He groaned, "It's always about my body."

"You're just that irresistible," she said, leading him to the guest bath. Sam and Bubba followed them while Clay called out in irritation at being left behind. "We'll be right back, Clay!" she called, and the 6-month-old did quiet down.

Marni stripped off her husband's sweater, noting the hospital visitor's tag, then puckered her lips in disapproval at the blood-splattered, dislocated gauze. She tapped her fingers on the counter while Sammy looked repentant.

So he had to stand there and let her gingerly remove the gauze, wash his arms, and reapply ointment. As much blood as there first appeared to be, his arms looked to be healing just fine. She didn't have to ask if it hurt; she could tell that it didn't—much—just by looking at his face.

While she worked, she asked in a murmur, "Did you see Abby?"

"Yeah," he said. "Uh, Mr. Streiker, he, uh, ripped twenty or thirty demons out of her gut and left her in a lot better shape. I don't think she's going to croak any time soon."

She had paused with the ointment on her fingers to stare at him. He said, "I'll tell you more about it later," as he glanced down at Sam beside them. She nodded, attending to his arms.

When Sammy was repackaged to her satisfaction, she said, "Well, I still need to get laundry on, and go to the store—"

"Okay, yeah, get laundry on, and I'll, uh, either go to the store for you or watch the guys while you go. Your call," he offered.

She paused again on her way to the family room. Then she turned fully to him in comprehension. "It scared you," she whispered.

"Mmm hmmm, pretty much," he allowed, nodding compulsively.

"Can't wait to hear about it," she said. While she resumed her trip to the laundry room, he got down on the floor to talk to Clay.

When she came back into the family room, Sam was on Sammy's back while he had Clay on his lap on the floor, with Bubba spread out over all three of them. She said, "If you're sure you're up for watching the guys, then I'll go ahead and run to the store. I'll make it a quick trip."

"Sure," he said. After what he had experienced this afternoon, watching a toddler, an infant and a dog was refreshingly sane.

She claimed the keys to the Jeep and left. Mindful of Streiker's instructions, Sammy continued to lie on the floor in one of the sacrificial duties of fatherhood. He had declined to put the sweater back on after Marni's ministrations, being comfortable enough to play with the guys in his undershirt and gauze.

Sam knew to stay off the gauze, and Clay thought it was just great to practice climbing on Dad's lap. Sammy was a little alarmed to see him raise those knees already. There would be more things broken soon.

Broken things.... Sammy thought about what he had seen in Abby's room. He didn't understand it, but he didn't doubt that it was real. It did scare him to think what monsters he might have allowed into his inner being by tacit acceptance.

*The orchids*, he suddenly remembered. The orchids were a reminder to keep obedience in his heart. Doing the Right Thing was his shield—when he could bother to do that. He then thought about how careful Streiker had been to secure Abby's permission before doing anything to her. Streiker had said that he *couldn't* do it without her permission.

Except—Sammy sat up, remembering that Streiker approached her bed when he, Sammy, had asked, not Abby. She couldn't even see him or hear him at that point.

Further back, Streiker had required Sammy to gain legitimate entrance to her room to start with. Streiker would not trespass. But when Abby could not give consent to Streiker on her own, Sammy qualified as proxy because she had consented to Sammy's presence.

Sammy was thinking through all this when the doorbell rang. *The cops again*, he thought, as Bubba careened to the door, barking. Hoisting Clay, Sammy followed. He opened the door without looking first.

Dave Pruett was standing on the front porch. For an instant they looked at each other, then Sammy stepped back. "Come in."

Dave did, glancing around. Bubba, having ascertained his legitimacy on the premises, received the requisite pat and went to join Sam in some block-building activity. Sammy also returned to the family room, nodding to the couch. "Sit down."

"I only came to return your ring and watch," Dave said, extracting these items from his pocket to hold them out. "I don't know why no one noticed them till now, but I will not accept that as commentary on the frequency of bathroom cleaning in the Pruett abode."

Sammy laughed. "Oh, yay! Marni never noticed my ring was missing because my fingers were too swollen to wear it. Just a sec; I think we can make this happen."

He put Clay down on the floor to drop the watch in his pocket, then tentatively work the band onto his ring finger. "No sweat. I won't say anything to her about it so that when she does notice, I'll pretend I've been wearing it for three days."

He hesitated then, having already invited Pruett to sit. But Pruett didn't sit or leave, so Sammy sat himself and picked Clay up again. Sam was building a tower of blocks and Bubba was chewing on one.

Dave slowly sat across from him on the loveseat, regarding his arms. "You healing okay?"

"Yeah. I look a lot better than Abby," Sammy said.

"So, you've been to see her?" Dave asked.

"Yeah, today. Streiker was there. He... did some clean-up work on her," Sammy said cautiously.

Dave nodded. "Kerry and Chris have been asking about you."

Sammy brightened. "That's good to know. Thanks."

Dave sat back, tapping his fingers on his knees. He was greatly conflicted about something, but Sammy wasn't inclined to dig for details. "Where's Marni?" Dave asked suddenly.

"At the store," Sammy said. In digging around, Clay had found the chest hair above his V-neck shirt, and was now attempting to pull it out. "Yeow, guy," Sammy grimaced.

"Ah. Christmas Outdoors," Dave remarked, noting the decorated tree sitting outside on the patio.

Sammy looked outside, too. He didn't know when or how Marni had managed to get it decorated, but it looked very nice.

So he progressed to the next logical thought: "Hey, why doesn't Chris have a dog? Don't you think he needs a dog? I do. I think I'll suggest that to him at some time in the near future."

Following the addition of Bubba to the Kidman household, Chris had requested a dog of his parents, who had temporarily bought him off with electronics instead. But Sammy had found a weakness to exploit.

Dave eyed him. "Too late, my friend; he's far more interested in girls."

"Dogs are a great chick magnet. Does he know that?" Sammy asked.

"Doesn't need 'em with the Pruett Charm," Dave said absently, running a hand over his face. "Where's Marni?" he asked again.

Sammy eyed him in derision. "She's at the STORE, Pinhead."

Dave nodded as if Sammy had just offered the one bit of information he needed to complete the Grand Unified Theory. Sammy sighed. Given Dave's pride, they could be sitting here for several hours before Pruett got to the point of why they were sitting here.

"As long as we're just sitting here, is there anything we need to cover?" Sammy asked carelessly.

"Streiker called me. Asked if I'd like to meet him to talk," Dave said. Sammy nodded without replying. "So what do you think?" Dave asked.

Sammy's expressive brows arched. "Uh, I believe I remember crying like a girl, asking you to do that."

Dave waved away a mistake. "I forgot to add: at Half Crazy Studios. That's where he asked me to meet him."

“That’s interesting,” Sammy remarked. “I’m surprised they’re open. The assistant producer is under investigation and I bet Quinn Reilly will be suing. There’s no telling when, or if, Abby’s show will resume.”

Dave nodded thoughtfully, leaning back, and Sammy suddenly understood that he didn’t want to go alone. He was interested, but too intimidated or embarrassed to respond to this invitation on his own two feet.

It was not a matter of courage, Sammy knew, because he’d seen Dave put his life and reputation on the line for the job more than once. But if, for some reason, the stakes were so high—

*The new job hasn’t panned out like he expected,* Sammy realized. If that was the case, it would explain everything. When option A fails, you fall back on option B. If there’s no option C, then B had better stop your fall. So Dave was looking to the inside track with his best friend, who was already a Streiker employee.

Sammy contemplated this, then shook his head dubiously. “Streiker can get in anywhere, but I doubt the studio would let in Random Guy Off The Street. Ah, you might better let me come with you, to see if I can get you in.”

Now Dave looked serious, leaning forward. “You think that’s best?”

Seriously, Sammy replied, “I think it’s probably the only way you’ll get in. I won’t horn in on your talking to Streiker.”

“Okay, I guess that’s it, then,” Dave said, standing.

Sammy remained seated with Clay on his knee. “You can go ahead and sit back down until Marni gets back. I’m not taking the guys out there.”

“Oh, right,” Dave said, slowly sitting again. “Because she’s....”

“At the store,” Sammy said carefully. *Man, he must’ve found out they’d be paying him minimum wage, or something. He’s shell-shocked.*

They waited, with Dave attempting to show interest in Clay and Sam. Bubba even got his ears scratched. As they idly talked, Sammy avoided asking anything related to the new job or Mike, who presumably was working at said job.

But after a few minutes’ observation, Sammy deduced that Dave was wearing a new tie and an ironed white shirt for his presumptive interview with Streiker. Yeah, he was nervous.

“Let me tell you the one primary fact I’ve observed about Streiker,” Sammy said out of the blue, and Dave stilled. “You know that I can be a blockhead, right? I have been known to achieve feats of stupidity, what?”

Dave vaguely smiled, and Sammy went on, “Streiker doesn’t care about any of that. He seems to expect it. The one thing he scorches is anything less than total honesty. If I start wandering down the path of embellishments, he just—” Sammy shook his head as if the results of dissembling in Streiker’s presence were too heinous to discuss in polite company.

The truth, which Sammy did not stop to analyze at this time, was a little different: it never occurred to him to attempt to shade matters with Streiker. Just talking with him compelled Sammy to spill his innermost thoughts, or at least the ones he was aware of.

Maybe because Streiker seemed to know all about whatever it was already, or that his corrections were so light-handed, Sammy saw no downside in being upfront with him. But he wanted Dave to know going in that there

would be no résumé-padding, because that was the only thing, in Sammy's view, that could possibly kill Dave's employment with Streiker.

"I understand," Dave said, and Sammy could see that he did.

At that time, Sammy heard the garage door open. He got up to put Clay in his playpen, whereupon he immediately began crying for Mommy. "She's here; give her a minute," Sammy urged, which went unheeded.

But as he turned around, he saw Pruett bringing in bags of groceries which he set on the kitchen counter. Following him was a distinctly surprised Marni, who said, "Thank you, Dave," as she set another couple of bags on the counter.

She turned to Sammy with interrogative eyebrows, and he said, "Ah, Mr. Streiker wants to meet Dave at Half Crazy Studios. I talked him into letting me go with him."

"Oh," she said, glancing at his undershirt.

"I'm going to go change, and then we're taking off, if you're okay with that," he said carefully.

"Sure," she said, as Dave brought in the last of the groceries.

Sammy left the kitchen as she opened a cabinet door and asked Dave, "How is Kerry? I miss her." *Good girl*, Sammy thought with a grin. Streiker employees would no doubt have get-togethers.

Five minutes later he had reappeared in a long-sleeved shirt and sports coat. When Marni paused at his insufficient outerwear, he protested, "What? It's practically tropical out there. And we won't be gone long. Besides, I won't be using my arms." Despite the fact that she had heard this demonstrable untruth once today already, she shut her mouth, nodding.

Dave gestured, "We'll take my car."

Sammy agreed, then paused. "You know... we might need the Jeep."

"Why?" Dave frowned. He kind of wanted to make an impression in his Firebird, newly washed and waxed.

"Oh, we'll see," Sammy said. He paused to kiss his wife, then turned out to the garage with Dave following. Dave did not kiss Marni.

As they set out for Las Colinas in the Jeep, Sammy driving, they were quiet. Dave, too restless to remain so, asked, "When did you do that obstacle course against her? Seems like only a week ago."

Sammy nodded, turning a corner. "That's because it was only a week ago Wednesday"—in other words, eight days ago.

"Somebody—not me or Mike—uploaded Marni's video. Chris was showing it to somebody yesterday," Dave mentioned.

"Really?" Sammy frowned. "That's not good. I'm pretty sure it's proprietary."

Dave shrugged.

About twenty minutes later, Sammy pulled into the parking lot of Half Crazy Studios. It was deserted but for a handful of cars scattered around the lot, two of which had "For Sale" signs on them.

Sammy parked near the front, and they got out. From here they could see a sign taped up to the front doors, and could guess what it said.

For form's sake, they mounted the steps to try the doors, which were locked. The sign advised that the studio was closed indefinitely, and gave a website address for updates on its possible reopening and further episodes of Abby Max's show.

Peering through the glass, Sammy saw an empty lobby and stairway. There might have been a shadow of movement on the second level, but if there was, it was moving away. "Well, s—t..." Dave looked around, troubled.

Sammy went around to the gates that opened to the back lot. He rattled the handle, but they, too, were locked. Signage was unnecessary. When Dave walked up, Sammy said, "Wait here," and turned back to the Jeep.

While Dave stood awkwardly at the gates, hands on his hips, Sammy got in the Jeep and drove it up in front of the gates, as he had last Saturday. Getting out, but taking the keys this time, he shut the door and asked Dave, "How anxious are you to meet with Streiker?"

Dave scowled at him. Walking around to the front of the Jeep, Sammy hopped up on the hood, and from there climbed to the roof. Looking down at Dave, he said, "This is how I got in last Saturday. We're going to find out if I can do it again today."

Whereupon he leaped to the top of the gate, landing on his ribs, which hurt. "Oof!" Then he swung a leg over and dropped down on the inside, which also hurt.

Smoothing his sleeves, he looked up at Pruett crash-landing on the top of the gate. Dave swung about a little more adroitly to the inside and dropped. Then he straightened his tie, and they looked around.

Immediately they spotted Streiker sitting on a stack of Hooyah Logs which had been pushed off the lot almost up against the building, since they had not been used in the o-course challenge that Sammy had run against Abby. Sammy jerked his head at Dave, who began striding toward the Logs as if he had not just scaled a ten-foot gate in order to trespass.

Sammy hung back to keep his promise about not crashing Dave's interview, and looked out over the course, still cordoned off with crime-scene tape. The blackened Parallel Bars were an ugly reminder of just how bad an idea the fire stunt had been.

Waiting on Dave, Sammy strolled down the walkway next to the building. A row of wide first-floor windows looked out over the lot.

Suddenly he heard, "What are you doing here?"

He turned to see Meadow leaning out of a glass door behind him. Hesitantly, he backtracked to where she stood at the open door. "Ah, just wanted to look over the fire obstacle again. I'm Sammy," he added as a precaution.

"I know," she sighed, stepping back for him to come in. He did, and she closed the door. "Sam's dead," she said in genuine grief.

He nodded, unsure of how to reply. She added, "Well, I'm just cleaning out my desk." She waved a couple of manila folders, turning back to the lobby area in order to deposit them in the trash can.



Then she hesitated, pulling one 9x12 envelope out from among the other folders she had just thrown away. “You may want this,” she said, handing it to him.

He glanced at it, but there was nothing written on it, and it contained only a few sheets. Without thinking, he folded it and stuffed it in an inner coat pocket as she headed back upstairs.

Sammy followed her. “Are you quitting?”

She glanced back at him. “I was laid off. Abby’s show is in hiatus, so she doesn’t really need me anymore.” She looked sad and depressed, but calm.

“I’m sure you’ll find something else soon,” he said encouragingly.

She paused to smile halfheartedly at him. They stood in front of the second-floor windows. The large panes opened inward to permit cleaning of the outside glass from inside the building. These windows were standing open now, with the bucket of cleansers on the floor nearby.

Meadow said, “I’m going to start as a waitress at Desirée, the cafe. I’ll make good money, and I like it there. I enjoyed our lunch there.”

Sammy watched her sympathetically. “I did too, Heather. I mean, Meadow,” he quickly corrected himself.

She smiled again, her eyes filling with tears. “I did love him. He was so gentle and sweet. I wish... I wish I hadn’t—made him—”

“You know,” Sammy said, “some things you just let go of. If you can’t do anything about it now, there’s no point in going back to something you regret. I know what I’m talking about here.”

She smiled at him, nodding and wiping her eyes. With a glance outside, Sammy added, “I’d still like to introduce you to Mr. Streiker.”

Without going over to the window and looking down, he couldn’t see Pruett and Streiker, but knew that they were below them somewhere, if they were still sitting on the Hooyah Logs.

“I met Adair Streiker,” Meadow said, and Sammy turned to her in astonishment. “She’s the one who brought Sam to tell me good-bye. She is very kind,” Meadow said softly.

*That’s why Heather’s so sane all of a sudden,* he thought. *Adair, you are a booger. Thank you.*

“What are you doing here, Sammy?” He and Meadow turned at the approach of Nash, who was friendly but chiding.

“Just checking in with Meadow. I hear she’s leaving,” Sammy replied.

“Yeah,” Nash winced. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m glad,” she exhaled. “All of the drama was so draining.”

“Ow!” Nash recoiled in friendly pretense of being wounded. “But I am certainly peeved at Mr. Kidman here, telling Abby that I was trying to kill her.”

Sammy waved. “I was just trying to get her attention. It wasn’t enough to stop her from doing the stunt.”

“It was enough to bring the cops down on my case,” Nash said, less friendly.

Sammy was unrepentant. “Yeah, they talked to me, too, and I told them it was a bald-faced lie. End of story.”

“I wish it was,” Nash said, twitching a little. “But they’re still investigating me on the basis of your ‘bald-faced lie.’”

“Have you been arrested?” Sammy asked.

“Not yet,” Nash said.

“Well then, if there’s no corroborating evidence, you won’t be. My clearly unserious statement is nowhere near sufficient grounds for arrest, and the district attorney is way too publicity conscious to make that kind of mistake on a high-profile case,” Sammy said. “I mean, you can tell that by the way he combs his hair for the cameras.”

“It’s not a mistake,” Meadow said.

Both men looked at her. “What?” Sammy asked.

“He did try to kill her,” she said indifferently.

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## Chapter 16

“What?” Nash laughed.

Meadow told Sammy, “Abby was on the way down, and taking him with her. Viewers were getting tired of the show, so she kept ratcheting up the danger factor to try to get eyeballs again. And she wouldn’t let Nash out of his contract. The studio heads had another show they wanted him to produce, but he had to get her out of the way, first. So he—”

“Meadow, be quiet,” Sammy said, his eyes fixed on a point above Nash’s head. While she had been talking, Sammy was distracted by something going on around Nash. His facial expression toward her was that of hurt disbelief, but there was a shadow, an image, of something rising up from his back.

And Sammy saw the outline of Abby’s monster Hatred rearing up, snapping its jaws at her. Only it wasn’t Abby’s monster now; it was Nash’s.

“It’s true,” she shrugged. “I’m not hiding it any more. He hired a guy to—”

“Meadow!” Sammy shouted, as both men lunged for her.

Sammy reached out to haul her back from the wide-open window, but Nash grabbed his arm and twisted, ripping open scabs and tender skin. Sammy choked back a cry as Nash let go of him and turned to push her out the window. She fell without a sound.

Nash then wheeled to grab Sammy’s lapels and hoist him toward the window as well. When he had Sammy teetering on the edge, they both heard shouts and rapid footfalls ascending the stairs.

But Sammy was transfixed by the sight of the grinning, slobbering mandibles opening greedily toward him. He fell back, falling out of the window as Nash let go of him and ran.

In falling, Sammy managed to grab the aluminum edge of one pane, which slammed shut with the weight of his fall. As his hand slipped down, he caught hold of the handle, and there he hung for a moment, scrabbling to get a foothold.

“Let go, Sammy! I’ll catch you!” Pruett shouted from below.

“Are you nuts?” Sammy cried. His hand slipped from the handle, and he caught himself by both hands on the sill, which sent shockwaves of pain from his forearms. Still he held on.

“I caught the chick; I’ll catch you!” Pruett shouted again.

“Never!” Sammy avowed. Grimacing, he did a chin-up on the sill and flung up his right leg to hook it over the edge. From there, he was able to raise himself to a straddle and look down.

Three faces looked up at him. Striker was still sitting on the Hooyah Logs, but Dave and Meadow were standing beside them. “You okay, Meadow?” Sammy shouted.

“Yes. He caught me,” she said, holding Dave’s arm.

“You blue-footed booby, don’t you trust me?” Pruett shouted.

“No,” Sammy said, looking back into the room where a uniform was rushing toward him.

The cop assisted Sammy into the room. Straightening his coat, Sammy said with dignity, “Thanks. And how did you happen to happen along?”

The officer paused, then said, “The security guard called in a report of two men climbing over the fence. Do you know anything about that?”

“Could have been someone Blaine Nash hired,” Sammy said thoughtfully. Looking down out of the window, he gestured to the officer. “You’d better interview Meadow, down there with ex-Dallas Police Sergeant David Pruett, who saved her life. She says Nash did conspire to murder Abby Max with this last stunt.”

The cop looked. As his partner was down there talking to Pruett and Meadow, he hastened downstairs, and Sammy followed.

By the time Sammy got down to the lot, the cops had Meadow between them, listening as she talked. One was calling for backup on his shoulder unit. Discreetly, Sammy caught Dave’s eye and gestured toward the open gate with the Jeep sitting just past it. Streiker was nowhere in sight.

Dave nodded, casually inching away, but Meadow suddenly looked up. “Wait,” she said.

She came forward to whisper in Sammy’s ear. His hand went to his chest. She kissed his cheek, then turned back to the waiting officers. Sammy, his face frozen, walked on toward the gate, and Dave fell in with him.

They did not speak until they were seated in the Jeep, and Sammy had successfully maneuvered around the incoming patrol elements to reach the boulevard. His face was still a mask. Dave eyed him, then asked, “What did she tell you?”

Sammy cleared his throat. “That Adair told her Jesus Christ kept my dad alive in that car long enough for him to pray. He’s still got a lot of treatment to undergo, because he can’t skip steps. But he’s going to be okay.”

“Whoa,” Dave exhaled, sinking back into the seat.

Sammy glanced at him. “You were right. I don’t remember most of what you said at his memorial service, but I do remember that last part, and you were right.”

“Of course I was,” Dave huffed, not remembering what he said at all.

Sammy drove silently until he reached a stoplight, then turned to ask, “Well? How did your interview with Streiker go?”

“He, ah,” Dave shook his head. “He started out asking about Chris, and Kerry, and Kelli, and just making small talk. Then he said, ‘A girl’s going to come sailing out of that window right above us in a minute. Whether you work for me or not will depend on your catching her.’ I’m like—‘What?’ I look up, and here she comes. I just had to get off the Logs and hold my arms out. A classic baby catch.”

Sammy nodded, then cracked a smile. “Working for him is awesome. You stand there and save people.” Then he glanced sideways at his partner. “Are you working for him? Whether you continue to ride in this vehicle will depend on your answer.”

“You’re a riot,” Dave grouched. “Everybody’s supposed to meet him at the barbecue place tonight.”

“Yay!” Sammy said, glancing distractedly at his inner elbow, where blood was seeping through the sports coat. Then he relaxed: Marni could drive.

As it turned out, Sammy drove after all, because when he got home, he discovered that Marni and the guys were at her parents’ house. So he had time to clean himself up, anoint himself, rewrap his arms in clean gauze, and hide his soiled coat in the hamper to put on the black one for tonight. He still didn’t need a heavier coat because after the snow blitz in late November, they had returned to a standard North Texas late fall ranging from 40 to 60 degrees.

In stuffing his sports coat in the hamper, he saw the folded, wrinkled envelope still in its pocket. He pulled it out, opening the clasp. He drew out three old sheets covered front and back in typescript. These he had to study a moment—faded, yellowed records in old Courier type, headed, “Samuel James Watterson”—

He sucked in a breath. These were his dad’s prison records. Correction: these were the warden’s personal notes on Sam, which had not been included in the court records which Sammy and Marni had unearthed several years ago. That was right after Sam had come to their apartment and spoken to Marni.

Sam Watterson and Carla Kidman had been teenage lovers, which resulted in her becoming pregnant with Sammy. When her overbearing parents found out, they had the young man sent up on rape charges—hence, a lengthy prison sentence.

In a flash, Sammy realized that for some reason, the warden had given these records to Sam, who in turn must have given them to Meadow—evidently, she wanted to hear about his history. But he hadn’t wanted to talk about it, so gave her these instead.

Sammy rapidly scanned them. The first bombshell they contained was his father’s public defender’s complaint to the judge of the illegal suppression of exculpatory evidence, apparently related to Carla’s history. The warden’s assessment here was brutal: “Judge Marlowe, may he rot in hell, quashed the complaint because he’s a personal friend of the Kidmans going way back and a VERY CLOSE FRIEND of the complainant’s mother.”

That stunning charge snapped Sammy’s eyes to the typed name underneath the scrawled signature on the notes, and he felt a thrill up his spine. The warden was none other than Franklin K. Carmichael, legendary as a reformer, a man of conscience and compassion.

Warden Carmichael personally noted the bare facts of subsequent conferences with the judge regarding Sam Watterson, and when the hard-nosed judge signed off on a ludicrous sentence of 20 years for the 19-year-old, Warden Carmichael proceeded to treat the young man with special favor.

Sam was given immediate access to the prison library, gym and all recreational areas. When he was harassed by other inmates because of the rape charge, he was transferred to a minimal security facility and upgraded quarters. As a prison trustee, he earned a salary and generous freedoms, which he never abused. Notes as to his conduct included such terms as “reliable,” “courteous,” “conscientious,” and “a quick study.”

Three times the warden had attempted to initiate an early release, but all three times Judge Marlowe denied the motion. Finally, the same month that the judge died, Sam was awarded his freedom. He had served ten years.

With moist eyes, Sammy laid the envelope on the nightstand by the bed. He almost laughed, picturing Sam toss the envelope to Heather in bed: “*Here, read all about it, if you want.*” Of course he’d give them to his girlfriend rather than his son, because Sammy was almost sure that Sam never read through the notes himself. Why should he, when he’d lived it? Most likely, he had no idea of the explosives inside.

So, providentially, he had given them to the one person who would see that his son got them. Had he given them to Dolly, his wife at the time, they would have been shredded or burned. As a matter of fact, Sammy had received nothing of Sam's since his death—not even his Heritage Softail, which Sam had bought before his marriage.

Well. Sammy would have to cover this new information in detail with Marni later. But right now he had to round up his family and get them over to Streiker's place. He hastily left, buttoning his black sports coat against the cold.

On the Taylors' front porch, Sammy leaned on the doorbell to inform them that whatever plans they may have had for tonight were scuttled due to the imperative of accepting Streikers' purported invitation. Since no one answered the door quickly enough, he let himself in. Entering the gameroom, he announced, "Dinner tonight is at Streiker's Barbecue Place."

"Hi, Sammy," Marni said, glancing up. He noted her noting his change of clothes and casual bearing. Reading no pain in his face, she returned to conversation with her mom.

But nobody else took much note of him. Sarah was playing with baby Adair; Clayton had both Clay and Sam on his lap, both attempting to dislodge something from his pockets. Bubba's tail thwacked the floor, but even he didn't get up.

"AHEM." Sammy cleared his throat forcefully, so that everyone would look at him. They did. "You all have to get ready now."

"Sammy, we have plenty of time. We don't have to be there till six-thirty," Marni said.

"Who told you that?" he asked.

"Yvonne, his assistant," Marni said, bristling a laugh.

"Oh." Sammy sat, a little disappointed, and Bubba ambled over to cheer him up.

But soon enough, they were heading out for barbecue, the Kidmans leading in the Jeep and the Taylors with Sarah following in Pam's Taurus.

On the way, Sammy was able to bring Marni up to date on the visit to Abby's hospital room and Dave's unique employment interview. He told her everything, but moderated his description of Abby's treatment due to the presence of tender ears in the seats behind them.

Pulling into the parking lot of the Streiker Arboretum, Sammy inadvertently slammed on the brakes. "It's closed! It can't be closed! We have barbecue to eat!" Then he saw Clayton, driving the Taurus, pass him with a gesture that eloquently asked, "*What are you doing?*"

"Follow Daddy," Marni said, so Sammy turned the wheel, checking behind him.

Clayton turned out of the Arboretum parking lot, went down the street a block, and then turned into the lighted parking lot of Streiker's Barbecue Place, open for business.

Sammy slapped his forehead. "It has a street entrance. Duh."

"GAH!" Sam corrected from the back.

"Yeah, gah!" Sammy admitted, and Sam laughed.

Marni suddenly laughed and clapped. “That’s right, sweetheart!”

Sammy twisted in his seat to see Clay uttering a wide-mouthed baby laugh, and he thought, *If there’s anything that would keep monsters at bay, that’s it.*

As they unloaded everybody, Sammy brought out the leash for Bubba. “Sorry, Bubba; you have to sit out front again.” Bubba laid his ears back, but accepted the restraint.

Approaching the restaurant, they saw a small fenced yard off to the side. A sign over the gate read, “Bubba and Friends.” “Hey, look, guy! You’re famous.” Sammy took off his leash and they opened the gate latch to enter the yard. A sturdy, non-climbable fence separated the kennel yard from the shore of the lake fifteen feet beyond.

Bubba sniffed around while Sam investigated the dog house and various dog toys scattered around the yard. Sammy lifted him away from the large water dish. Bouncing Clay, Marni murmured, “He thinks of everything.”

“Yeah, he—” A bright glint caught Sammy’s eye, and he turned to the door leading from the yard into the restaurant. A boy with a gold medallion around his neck stood at the door, hands on the glass, watching Bubba.

Sammy went over to open the door and kneel. “Hey, Rip. Good to see you. Come out and meet Bubba,” Sammy said softly.

Ripley did not react, but Bubba came over to check him out. Sammy held him by the harness as Bubba reached out his graying muzzle to sniff the newcomer. Then he began methodically licking his face.

The boy pushed him away, giggling, but Bubba persistently bestowed kisses until Ripley began stroking his coarse fur. Sammy stood near them.

Marni came over to whisper, “Is that Abby’s son?” and Sammy nodded. “Wow. Amazing how Bubba took to him just like that,” she added.

Under his hand, Sammy murmured, “Barbecue sauce,” and she snorted. At a shadow on the door, he looked up, then quickly went to Frank Catriona with outstretched hand.

“Sammy!” Frank exclaimed, taking his hand in both of his. “Sammy, I—Abby called us after you left. She’s—the difference in her is—is—”

“Listen, Frank.” Sammy took him by the shoulder to talk in his ear. “That wasn’t me. That was Fletcher Striker. He’s the one who did it.”

“I’ve been talking to him. He invited us here tonight. Extraordinary man...” Frank began, walking with Sammy in the side yard.

Meanwhile, Clayton, Sarah and Pam, carrying baby Adair, had come in through the front entrance. Pam effortlessly drew attention wherever she went with Adair because she carried the 4-month-old like an ornament.

Yvonne came up to her. “Hello, Pam! I spoke to you over the phone. I’m—”

“Yvonne Fay, of course,” said Pam. “Thank you for your call this afternoon.”

“I’m so glad to see you tonight. Oh, my, look at this little angel. She’s changed so much in just a month, hasn’t she?” Which was how long it had been since the Taylors had adopted her.

“Yes, she has. Marni’s sharing some breast milk, which has helped a great deal,” Pam said.

A blonde woman approached. “Is this my namesake?”

Pam turned to regard her heart-shaped face and neon blue eyes. “You must be Adair Streiker.”

“Yes.” She smiled, then asked, “May I hold her?”

“Of course.” Pam handed over the baby dressed in her adorable Christmas onesie with an elf stocking cap.

Adair lifted the baby in the glow of the Christmas lights and said, “Little Adair, may you dance in the joy of the Lord all of your days, and may the days of joy be neverending.”

“Amen,” Pam whispered, tears coming to her eyes. Clayton looked over at Streiker watching from across the room. He smiled slightly, and the old dad knew this was a blessing that would be fulfilled to the brim.

The Pruetts entered, Dave looking like his competent, professional old self. Kerry, holding Kelli, looked around anxiously for someone. Seeing Sammy come in from a side door, Kerry thrust the toddler into her father’s arms and hurried toward him.

Seeing her fly to him so eagerly, Sammy opened his arms for the expected hug. “Kerry! Hi! I’m fine.”

But Kerry merely grabbed his shoulder to pull his ear toward her mouth. She whispered, “Chris brought his girlfriend tonight and you cannot embarrass him in front of her.”

His face fell, then he looked around thoughtfully. “He brought his girlfriend?”

“Promise me that you will not embarrass him, Sammy,” she ordered.

He looked dismayed. “Not even a little, tiny microscopic bit?”

“Not the tiniest subatomic particle,” she breathed.

He slouched in disappointment. “All right.”

“Thank you.” She kissed his cheek. “I’m glad you’re doing well.” Having attained her objective, she returned to her husband’s side.

Sammy cautiously trailed her, pausing five feet away as the Pruetts looked over. Chris, straightening, said, “Blake, this is an old friend of my dad’s, Sammy Kidman.”

“Hi,” she said, giggling slightly. She was a cute thirteen-year-old with long, dark hair.

“Hello,” he said, grieved by the adjective Chris had used. She was watching the “old” friend expectantly. He glanced at Kerry, whose slightly elevated eyebrows constrained him, and he cleared his throat. “I like to consider Chris my friend, too. He acquitted himself like a man after that alley beatdown.”

Chris lifted his chin in affirmation of that, and she glanced at him. Sammy added, “But it runs in the family. Today his old man caught a woman who had been pushed out of a second-story window.” Even in a compliment, Sammy would use the same adjective in describing Chris’ father, by gum.

Everyone stared at Dave in astonishment, then Sammy did, too. “You didn’t tell them about it?” he asked, incredulous.



“Well, no,” Dave said.

“Don’t you think you’d better?” Sammy suggested, so Dave began recounting the incident. Since he was so obviously reluctant, he attracted a much larger audience than he would have had bragging about it.

Dave ended the account with, “Anyway, I’ll be working for Mr. Streiker now.” Kerry squeezed his arm proudly.

Sammy looked thoughtfully over to the corner where he had last seen Streiker sitting. “I wonder if he’ll want us to continue using the North Central office.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen the news?” Kerry asked.

“News?” Sammy repeated apprehensively.

She explained, “It’s all over the internet. Blaine Nash is being questioned about the attempted murder of Abby Max and Quinn Reilly, partly because Reilly said that ‘Yves Leandro’ warned her about it the day before the stunt. Nash outted ‘Sammy Kidman’ as ‘Yves Leandro.’ He even gave the news crews your business card. So now they’re out in force around your office again.”

“Great. This is just great,” Sammy vented, pacing in front of a set of closed French doors. “Where are we going to meet? Even if it’s just you and me, we need a meeting place.”

Those listening might have been surprised at Sammy’s relatively subdued reaction to this news. Just a month ago, he and his coworkers had engineered a complicated ruse to convince the news crews that the offices of MK & Associates had been vacated, thus allowing the men to continue to work there in peace. The fact that he suddenly accepted the necessity for new office space indicated his final, unconscious break with the old business.

At the point he chose to stop pacing, there was an engraved brass plate at eye level beside the French doors. “It has to be a place convenient to both of us, and out of the public eye,” he told Pruett, thinking through the requirements for new office space.

“It’s Streiker’s company; maybe he has a place in mind,” Dave said, looking around. “I don’t see him now.”

“He’s never around when you need to ask him something,” Sammy complained, still standing beside the brass plate.

Chris, eyeing the plate, said, “What do you suppose he wants to call this business?”

“What?” Sammy frowned, then said, “Pruett, there’s Mike’s family, but I don’t see him, either. Have you heard from Mike?”

“Not recently,” Dave said, turning to regard Charisse, Todd and Lacie at the buffet tables.

“Well, until we do, I don’t know that we should let him come back,” Sammy sniffed, leaning on the wall next to the plate, hands jammed into his pockets.

Dave regarded him humorously. “It’s not up to you, Pinhead.”

Chris again asked, “Sammy, what is Mr. Streiker calling your company?”

Sammy asked irately, "What difference does that make, Christopher?" Looking around, he then noticed that most of the bystanders were studying the placard beside him. So Sammy turned around to read, "Private Room—Great Deal Life Insurance Company."

Hands flopping out of his pockets, Sammy opened the doors. There, sitting at a round rattan-and-glass table, were Fletcher Streiker and Mike Masterson. Streiker leaned back and said, "There are two more chairs. We'll only be a moment."

Contritely, Sammy entered and sat. Pruett followed, closing the doors with apologies to those outside. Then he also sat at the table. One wall of their new office had large windows that looked over the lake, and the wall next to it had a glass door opening out to Bubba's yard. Sammy frowned, unable to place this room in what he had glimpsed of the restaurant's layout.

Streiker said, "All right, you've all indicated a willingness to work for me. It may get... uncomfortable, but I will certainly provide support. Are you sure you want to do this?"

None of the three said anything at first, then Pruett said, "I think we're past that point, Mr. Streiker."

"Yeah, this was kind of inevitable," Mike added.

Sammy burned to know what had happened with the whiz-bang great job opportunity, but only said to his boss, "You knew that, or we wouldn't be here."

"In that case, go enjoy dinner with your families, and I'll be in touch," Streiker said, rising. The other three stood, as well.

"Oh, Sammy," Streiker added, and he turned. "I happen to know that Chris is burning to play an old game of yours."

"Really?" Sammy asked, brightening. Whereupon he immediately left the room and clapped loudly. "Attention, people! Attention!" he called. The roomful of people stilled.

Grabbing a chair from a table, Sammy placed it in the center of an open space in the dining room. "Whoever wants to play Truth or Dare, pull up your seat right here."

"I have the spinner!" Todd exclaimed, rushing up. Mike and Dave, the old veterans, pulled up chairs. Lacie followed with an evil grin.

Standing beside his chair, Dave muttered to Mike, "I'm getting a plate and bringing it back here. You want one?"

Mike turned to canvas for Charisse, safely on the other side of the room. "Yeah. Fill it up." Dave nodded, heading toward the buffet tables.

Meanwhile, Chris turned to Blake. "You don't have to play. It gets rough."

"I'd like to," she said, so he pulled up chairs for both of them.

Sarah bustled up. "Oh, this looks like fun. I'll play."

Todd looked concerned. "Gee, Mrs. Hawkins, I don't want to see you embarrassed."

Mike said, "Son, you're forgetting: this woman was married to Les for thirty-eight years."

“Ohhh,” Todd acknowledged.

Sammy, recalling a burn that Kerry once inflicted on Dave, sang out, “Hey, Kerry, come sit by me.”

“Sorry, I’m busy,” she called back, huddled with Marni.

Sammy slouched. Once upon a time, Kerry had had a crush on him. But at his wife’s lingering glance of amusement, he realized that if Kerry played, Marni might, too, and that would be dangerous.

Frank Catriona approached. “This looks interesting. Can anyone play?”

Sammy paused. “It will greatly lower your opinion of us, Frank.”

Frank looked at him. “Friends give each other the benefit of the doubt, Sammy.”

“Who starts?” Todd asked, bringing out the spinner from his shirt pocket.

“This is way overdue. Tonight, I propose that Mr. Christopher Pruett have that honor,” Sammy said, so Todd handed Chris the warped, beat-up spinner.

Biting his lip in concentration, Chris flicked it. Then he looked up; everyone looked up, and he smiled, “Truth or dare, Sammy?”

The story concludes in *Today and Forever*.

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## Notes

Following are Scriptures and quotations I had in mind when writing this book (all Scriptures are from the RSV):

On Sharon Betschelet: “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.” [Gen. 5:24](#). Sharon’s fears did not prevent her ultimately embracing faith.

On Duane’s superficial admission of guilt: “I observe many who think it holiness enough to complain, and set themselves at nothing: as if to say ‘I am sick’ could cure them. They think complaints a good charm [antidote] for guiltiness.” Samuel Rutherford to Lady Kenmure, [March 7, 1637](#)

On Streiker with Sammy: “He [God] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities.” [Psalm 103:10](#)

On Sammy, after discovering how painful Streiker’s assignments could be: “After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’” [John 6:66-69](#)

On cleansing the monsters within: “Whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” [1 Peter 4:1](#)

On Streiker’s rewarding Sammy: Jesus said, “If any one serves me, the Father will honor him.” [John 12:26](#) and “To him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance.” [Matt. 13:12](#)

Background information on some events and minor characters mentioned in this story are found in these books:

Officina Gentium: [\*His Strange Ways\*](#)

Yvonne Fay: [\*Streiker’s Bride\*](#)

Grip: [\*Sammy: Dallas Detective\*](#)

Mama’s Restaurant: [\*Sammy: Working for a Living\*](#)

Jon Ramey; Sammy’s arenaball experience: [\*Sammy: Arenamania\*](#)

Rosie Kray: [\*Sammy: In Principle\*](#)

Sammy’s father’s death: [\*Sammy: Love Shouldn’t Hurt\*](#)

Jan Breemont; Great Deal Life Insurance Company: [\*Sammy: The Consolation of Bucephalus\*](#)