

Prologue

The Watcher sat quietly on the bed, fingers running over year books and photographs, anger dwelling deep inside, not seeming to notice the peeling and faded rose wallpaper or the musty smell from the dusty drapes that blocked out the world. For once it seemed as if the nervous energy was contained. They must be made to pay, to suffer for the way they ignore most everyone around them, flaunting their exclusive bond before the world, shutting all others out of that inner sanctum. They can't seem to help the little tortures they placed each day upon the non-gifted masses craving entrance into their glittery lives, and their hearts.

One of the year books is slowly opened. The Watcher takes out the red marker always kept close, a symbol of the power now taken over those hateful ones. An image gets an "X" in the deep, angry, violent red. It starts to bleed through the page but still the face can be seen, the name read; seemingly screaming out at the violations the watcher has committed. More red gashes follow until the offender is gone. The photo has become almost mush as the thick marker eats through the page.

"That's one less person taking up MY space in your life," the watcher mumbles.

Turning slowly, the remote is fingered, as a hand shakes, not in fear but in pure unadulterated joy. Anxious to see the

new masterpiece discovered multiple TV's are turned on, each one on a different news channel. The police scanner blares to life with a crackle, adding to the cacophony of noise filling the well hidden and long forgotten secret place.

The Watcher stares in slow anticipation, greedy eyes devouring each screen, knowing this nights work will be discovered any moment, knowing that once the media hears of it they will flock to the dark neighborhood, the hulks of abandoned houses and buildings not yet repaired will call to them despite the way they have before avoided the area like a plague. Only the derelicts, the homeless, and the desperate tread the ally's regularly. Still enough of them roam here to make this first contribution to the masterpiece easy to discover.

Hours creep by as the anger builds. The Watcher is stunned as not even a call has gone out on the scanner humming mercilessly, voices crackling about seemingly everything but the grisly prize left to be discovered. Is this city really still so blind after all it has been though? Do they not sense the darkness in their midst? Do the offenders not feel the creep, creep, creep of hatred and despair as it winds its way through their beloved town, the stench just as bad as it had been after Katrina dissipated?

The Watcher stands, shaking now in a rage so immense it is as if the red of the marker covers every window, every wall, and every piece of unforgiving furniture. A velvet wrapped book is

tossed hard, shattering the gilded mirror and the haunted eyes staring back, condemning a soul to darkness.

"I will make them see, I will make them pay for locking me out of my destiny. The Sutherlands will know they have lost much and that there is much more to lose."

Trinkets shatter and wood splits as the Watcher whirls through the room in an uncontrollable fury. Every thought, every feeling, every breath is so focused on the anger that for a moment it is as if all humanity has fled leaving a monster in its place.

The harsh tirade fades and calmness begins to return. "They may not have taken notice of my work, but they will feel the next one like a blow to the stomach."

The Watcher carefully changes, stripping off blood spattered coveralls, dressing with care, knowing the day will be spent before the eyes of many and the appearance must be meticulous but unnoticeable. Fitting in is the goal for now but soon, soon the Watcher will be able to come out into the open and finish what was started.

Chapter 1

Alexis Sutherland paced the small room like a caged animal. Her shoes click clacking on the worn, but gleaming, hardwood floor. She tried to console herself that at least the click clack was her favorite red peep toe Ferragamo shoes but her addiction was little comfort. She had never understood how a brother of hers could live in such a tiny place when he could afford something so much better. Her eyes danced across the peeling golden paint testifying to the time and torrents of weather the building had withstood. She loved the dripping ivy he had hanging on his balcony, obscuring his view, just a little, down the alley and into the heart and life of the city, the green of the vines a calming wave in the midst of so much busy life. She could hear the city waking up, the shop owners opening to ply their trade, the street vendor's wares sending smells through the area, making her stomach growl. She could even visualize the witch doctors and voodoo priestess' grumbling as they prepared to do what the city was partially famous for.

He seemed to avoid their money like a plague rather than reveling in how hard won it was. They deserved to not have to panic at every turn over where the next meal would come from, or how they were going to keep a failing, holed roof over their heads.

"Aarik, Will you ever use the money I give you or do you plan on living in this ratty hole even after you find a wife?"

He walked into the room, all legs, and emanating strength where there had once been gangly awkwardness. "Lex, I love this hole. Plus I didn't earn any of the money. You earned it. It feels wrong using it to live when I haven't put any effort into the making of it. Maybe once I have a wife and family that will change, but for now I am staying in my charming hole here in the Quarter."

"I guess that is one good thing about this place. You can almost breathe in the life of New Orleans here, and being close to Bourbon Street puts you in the thick of things."

She couldn't help but love the look of him. His tall frame had made her feel like a dwarf since he hit puberty. She loved how he had their mother's rich chocolate eyes, and the completely Sutherland thick brown hair that would crimp if he let it grow past his harsh crew cut. She had watched him grow into this amazing man, this cop, all of his life and he was one of the few people she felt completely safe with.

He was pulling on his gun when his eyes caught the stack of papers sitting on top of her gleaming leather briefcase and the top one seemed to scream at him from the pages.

Ice Queen Once Again Avoids the Thaw

The accompanying photo was meant to be distant and flattering all at the same time. He knew the press loved his

sister, despite these crummy articles. She was dressed in silver. The camera had caught the gleaming green strands shot through the glittery fabric and she looked wreathed in rainbows. Her hair was tight atop her head as she walked down the stairs from whatever gala charity event she had been at. He loved that she was so involved in the city and the needs of the people but he hated how that exposed her to the vultures, the jealous, and the just plain spitefulness of some people.

"Ice Queen again huh? You would think they would get over this nickname."

He glanced at her sprawled on his overstuffed maroon suede couch, those horrid 4-inch heels dangling from her dancer's feet. He would never understand how she could love torturing herself with those shoes. Even when she was trying to be lazy she couldn't help the innate grace that seemed to seep through her pores and fill the room with her calmness. Her long hair was twisted at the back of her head, the ends left free to dance around her head like a tarnished halo. Her green eyes danced with mischief as she noted how he seemed so affronted on her behalf.

"They have loved that name ever since Nicholae spouted it off to them when I refused to let him enter the limo, let alone come home with me. I think they use it almost as an endearment now." She couldn't help the chuckle that escaped.

She watched as his eyes flashed and loved that he was so protective of her despite the six year difference in their ages. Lexi looked purposefully at her red slacks so that he wouldn't see her merriment, picking at imaginary lint, loving the feel of the soft fibers against her skin. If there was one thing she loved about her success it was that she could get glorious clothes and these amazing pairs of shoes.

"Well I think you are avoiding telling me about the new Lieutenant Marks." Lexi tried to keep the curiosity from her voice despite the fact that she was dying to know more about the cop who had contributed to her brother's shiny new Detective badge and assignment to New Orleans' elite homicide task force.

"He is cool Lex, I think you would approve. Nothing seems to faze or surprise him and when he wants you on his team he makes it happen. That determination reminds me of you actually." Aarik pulled his badge from the nightstand and hung it around his neck from the nifty chain she had given him.

"Me? Determined? Are you sure you are thinking of the right sister?" She let herself smile at their usual sibling banter. Alexis knew that Aarik was her biggest ally in a city full of people waiting to get a piece of her. Sometimes it honestly felt like he were her only ally.

"You're my only sister little miss sarcasm and I have never known someone go after what they wanted and needed like you do." He came towards her with that all too normal silly look of

torture in his eyes, hands at his sides curling into claws, fingers wiggling evilly.

"If you tickle me Aarik Malcolm Sutherland I will make you sorry." She scooted along the couch in a crab crawl, kicking shoes aside as she moved, knowing he would get her. His stride had been longer than hers since his tenth birthday. "Aarik, I swear I will have my revenge."

She was up and behind the kitchen counter before he had hardly blinked. Lexi loved that she had speed on her side. "I will blow up a naked bath picture from when you were a toddler and email it to everyone in the station house." She tried to sound fierce as her hair started to fall, pins sprinkling the floor.

"I'd like to see you try."

She could hear Aarik breathing from around the corner, as she used her heel to sweep aside the sharp pins, always trying to protect him, knowing he would be coming after her. She shook her head to remove the last of them, letting her hair fall in its large curls down her back.

"Little brother, did you forget how I made my first million?"

She loved his caught chuckle, "Crap."

She turned to make a dash and was yanked off of her feet. Lexi gave a startled yelp and tried to get away as those dangerous fingers tickled her sides. She managed to turn in his

arms and went right for his soft spot. . . The armpits. Both laughing siblings fell to the floor in a heap of giggles, breath ragged. She lived for these moments where they gathered the lost pieces of their childhood together. Too many had been lost to the violence, and the tragedy.

"Say 'Uncle' and swear no pictures will find their way onto the crime board."

She shouted right in his ears knowing it would force him to let her go. "Uncle, for crying out loud, Uncle."

"That's my girl." She heard him take a deep breath, probably to calm his racing heart like she was. "Awww. . . I ruined your hair. I'm sorry Lex, but I couldn't resist. I had to show you the 'Ice Queen' isn't who you really are."

Alexis playfully punched him as she made her way to hands and knees, gathering pins and re-twisting her hair. Her hair was easier that it probably seemed it would be to style, once you learned that the curls were an ally and not the enemy so many women ironed and blow-dried away. "I know I am not the 'Ice Queen' dummy."

She glanced at him and caught that quick grin that always made her heart glow. "I thought you might need reminding."

"Uh huh, I think you just needed to get rid of some of that nervous energy. Today is a big day for you, in case you forgot." She stepped into her shoes as she got the last pin secured.

"Where do you meet your new partner anyway?"

"He will be here in a few minutes. I should probably make my lunch huh?"

She smiled at his momentary boyishness. "Yeah lunch is a good thing to have." Lexi grabbed her briefcase, once again looking like the professional she presented to the world. "I have to get to the office. I am sure Shelby has a mountain of stuff for me to go over."

Just then there was a knock at the door, startling her with its loudness. "Aarik, have you seen that sexy piece parked in front of your garage? Man I would kill for a car like that."

Lexi pulled the door open, her head high, almost upset that this man was so comfortable with her brother, and hating herself for it. "I am glad you like my car Lieutenant."

She tried not to notice those teasing blue eyes darken as they saw her, tried to shut down any warmth that threatened to seep up her face at his obvious examination of her body.

"Sorry ma'am, I didn't know you were here." The tone sounded harsh to her ears even though she knew it was probably meant to be polite and authoritative.

She ignored the tingle that swept down her spine at his voice, despite his gruffness. She would not be attracted to or flattered by this strange man who had a part of her brother that she never would. "It's no problem." Alexis turned to Aarik, kissing his cheek from tiptoes, trying not to notice the warmth rise in the room as she realized the picture she was displaying

to this strange man. "Be safe Aarik," She whispered so the Lieutenant wouldn't hear.

With a cool nod to both men she was gone.

"Wow. That was the legendary Alexis Sutherland eh?" Lucien Marks heard the appraisal in his voice and knew he needed to get it in check. It wouldn't do to alienate the man he viewed as his protégé on their first day as a team.

"Yes, that's my sister." Lucien could hear the reprimand in Aarik's voice and knew he had earned it.

"So we better get on the road. We have a long day today, full of paper work, and court. I know that you weren't in on the cases but it will help you get familiar with the difference in how a street cop testifies and how we need to testify."

"Whatever you say, Lou, you are the engine of this train." Lucien watched Aarik shut the door and already Alexis far from his mind, or he pretended to anyway. Work and building up this partnership was the focus.

Lexi made her way to her shiny blue Porsche Boxter with its soft leather bucket seats, getting in to drive towards her sparkling hundred story building in the city's center. She would not think about Lucien Marks. She would ignore the way his eyes roving over her body had made her blood quicken, the way his shaggy black hair had danced across his tanned skin, making

him look rakish and dangerous and mysteriously sexy. The way her spine had bowed as she looked way up into his towering frame was something she would disregard as if it was the most accursed thought a person could have. Who cared that he thought her car was sexy? It was, that was honest fact, and a person would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to see the cars strength behind the flash.

Lexi had no time for men, even hot ones. That he had a badge seemed to be a plus and only added to his allure. The last time she had actually gone on a date it had been a total disaster and she was not going to go there again. Men may notice her pretty face, but they wanted her more for her pocketbook and extensive portfolio.

She parked the car on auto pilot as the sensuous heat those haunting eyes promised danced across her brain, feeling the warmth spread and trying to convince herself that it was the beautiful August sun and not sparks of desire.

She shoved him from her mind and instead admired the sprawling lobby. It still amazed her that it was hers. Alexis loved the white marble and black leather. The rock fountains were a comfort to those who needed a break from the hard work, and she worked her people hard. She couldn't help but smile as her head of security made his way gingerly over to her. Brent James was 70 if he was a day but she adored him. He had been USAF for more years than she had been alive but he hated

retirement and was still sharp as a tack so she had found a position he was suited for and that she knew he would revel in.

"Hey there Brent, what's going on this morning?"

She loved watching his eyes light at the familiarity.

"Nothing much, Miz Sutherland. All has been quiet though we had a reporter try to sneak in a while ago."

Lexi patted his wrinkly hand, "That's not too surprising after as big an event as I had last night. I am sure no one could manage to get past you anyway."

"Thank you ma'am. I sure do appreciate your confidence in me."

"Oh I have the utmost confidence in your ability to keep the building secure. Now I better run before Shelby has a fit and starts calling every five seconds. She is a demon if I am not in early enough."

"Now that's surely the truth Miz Sutherland."

Lexi had stopped trying to get him to call her Lexi, or even Alexis, ages ago. He was old school and she was his boss so that was that where he was concerned. Plus he made the 'Miz' sound like a nickname for a beloved friend rather than propriety to a stranger.

She climbed into her private elevator and braced for the day, anticipating being busy like most people anticipate a vacation. She reveled in hard work and made sure her employees

felt the same way. That's what made Sutherland Industries one of the largest and most successful companies in the world.

Alexis walked into her sprawling penthouse office suite with a sigh. She could already tell it was going to be a long day as she watched her secretary, Alyce, and her executive assistant, Shelby, going through a stack of files and five department heads vying for attention by shouting at the pair, their voices echoing in the cavernous room, the skillfully padded art on the walls not dimming the sound at all.

"Okay people, quiet down and one at a time you can come into my office to discuss what ever disaster has occurred that needs you to shout above each other for attention." She kept her voice soft but let her annoyance show just enough to get instant silence. They knew better than to bombard her office like this and if they wanted to be pissy about it she would go even slower.

"Lexi, the new. . . Ms. Sutherland, I need. . . Alexis, I know you are busy. . ." Once again they were talking over each other and she could see Shelby about to blow a gasket and start to go off on the group, which would be a rare but lethal occurrence for her demure assistant. Poor Alyce looked as if she was desperate to hide under the desk rather than have to face the angry mob before her.

"Enough. I will meet with you alphabetically by department. If you have an issue with the fact that I am fitting you in to a probably packed schedule," She looked at Shelby for a nod of

confirmation, "then you can make an appointment with Alyce and I will see you when time permits. Otherwise stop the bickering and let's get to it." She put just enough rebuke into her face to get nods and quiet acquiescence to her request.

Lexi pushed into her inner office, savoring how her heels clacked on the gleaming floor. She knew she was lucky. She had accomplished much with a chance adjustment to her computer processor that revolutionized the computer industry and had made her her first multi-million dollar deal at 18. She had poured her profits into creating an empire and this office was a testament to where she had been and where she was now.

The gorgeous deep red plush carpet in the center of the room was a wonderful focal point and framed her gleaming lightwood handmade pine desk. Aarik had made her the desk in his high school woods class, and she treasured it above all the things in her space. Even the little burn that marred the surface just made her smile. Alexis knew that some were surprised she didn't have antiques surrounding her, and that she let such imperfections be seen and even lauded. Everyone expected her to be so stiff and so aloof, and she was mostly, but when it came to her private surroundings she went by heart and not by how she could impress this politician or that charity head.

She sat at her desk, kicking off her shoes where they wouldn't be seen. She may love having beautiful shoes but she

wasn't a masochist. She loved sinking into the padded leather chair; the swish of cloth rubbing against it was softly comforting as she took a deep breath, braced for chaos, and prepared for a hectic day to be followed by another social event that she HAD to attend, according to Shelby anyway.

Lexi turned to admire the view as her assistant came in to the office, having obviously gotten the frazzled department heads situated. She could see far in three directions but her favorite spot was right behind her desk, where she had a view of the grand Mississippi. She loved watching the big cargo ships and the majestic paddle-wheel casino ships and the yachts, all passing by her window, going about their business, reviving what had been a crippled city only a couple years ago.

"Okay Lexi, first up is Connie Sinclair from Accounting. I am guessing she isn't happy you tacked on another zero to your donation to the rebuilding effort and will probably try to forbid you to donate too much to the public school fundraiser that you are going to tonight." Shelby said quietly, her voice always tentative, except when angry. "Oh and your dress is set to be delivered by noon, along with all the accessories you asked for. Marta is also bringing your jewelry from the bank."

"Thanks Shelby, I have no idea what I would do without you." Lexi smiled as she turned. "What's the point of making all this money if we don't actually do a thing with it? If I can help people then I will. It wasn't that long ago that I had to

worry when each hurricane hit, praying that we wouldn't be flooded and left destitute. I know how they feel about their homes and about this city. We may have our faults but we try to help each other and now that I can help in a big way I will weather she likes it or not."

Shelby let loose with one of her rare grins. It softened her face and made her look beautiful rather than just quietly pretty. She took the moment to admire her assistant. Shelby was a classic red head. Her bright hair brushed her shoulders and made her green eyes jump out from her face, as if framed in fire. Her smattering of freckles only added to the effect. She was dressed today as she usually was, understated elegance bordering on plain, as if she were afraid to let her beauty show, or maybe she was just unaware of it. She was tall, but not awkwardly so, and she seemed to have this quiet grace, which is why Lexi had hired her in the first place. She had wanted someone who would look like she was at ease in any situation and Shelby fit that bill to a T, despite her shyness.

Lexi loved making her smile and enjoyed hearing that smile in her voice as Shelby responded. "Hey it's your money; if you want to give it away then you go right ahead. I'll show her in now and spare you the lecture on your tardiness."

"Ha. . . I am shocked. You usually love to try to take me down a notch. BUT I'll take the reprieve where I can get it. Let in the formidable Mrs. Sinclair."

Hours later Lexi's door slammed open, a whirlwind of blonde hair and leopard print storming in as if she had a right to be there. "Who the hell do you think you are, Alexis? I refuse to be treated like this."

Lexi took a deep breath as she tamped down her rage at this horrifying woman. "Cecily, I have no clue what you are going on about." She hit her red security button and stood in one fluid motion while glancing at her mantle clock. 12:15. That meant both Shelby and Alyce were at lunch, which partially explained how Cecily had made it into her inner sanctum.

"You know damn good and well that you got me fired from Weston Shipping. I was making decent money as their secretary, you bitch, and you totally ruined it for me. How am I ever going to get Aarik to love me if you ruin all my good steps?"

Lexi couldn't hide the eye roll or the contempt that she felt for this psychotic woman. "First off you are not important enough to me for me to go out of my way to 'ruin' anything that you are concerned with. Secondly Aarik has told you repeatedly that he is not interested. You were in trouble and he helped you. He is a cop that is what he does, end of story. Now I suggest that you get out of my office before I call the police. I happen to have some pull with them, you know?"

Just then her door slammed open again, this time admitting two burly guards and a wheezing Brent. "Sorry ma'am. . . I was dealing with another reporter and didn't even see her slip by."

"It's fine Brent." With the haughtiest look she could muster through her worry for her CSO she glanced towards the bulky men. "Gentlemen please escort Ms. Flintwood from the property and make sure it is known to everyone that she is banned from this building, permanently."

With a cool glare for the offensive excuse of a woman standing before her, she snapped sharply, "Goodbye Cecily. I sincerely hope that you find what you are looking for. From anyone but my brother."

"You may think you are all hoity-toity sitting here in your shiny office, looking down on us regular folk but trust me sister, one day you will get what is coming to you and I will get what I deserve." Cecily clumsily shrugged the hulking guard's hands off of her like she probably would shrug off a fly, and turned on her tacky ten dollar second hand heels, hips swaying in what Lexi was sure Cecily thought of as a sexy sway but instead came off more like white trash ditzy.

Once the bimbo was out of her office and the door shut behind her Alexis rushed over to help a still gasping Brent into a chair. "I know you hate when you think you have failed at something, but she would have found a way to get in no matter how attentive you were. That woman," she sneered the word,

"would stoop to who knows how low to take a shot at me. Getting her fired was the best thing I have done in a long time. To bad she doesn't know I am the newest owner of Weston Shipping, eh?"

She loved that Brent chuckled with more vigor than his pale face gave him credit for. "Yeah, Miz Sutherland, you sure do know how to take care of business."

Just then Alyce popped her head in the door. "What was that awful woman doing here?"

Lexi just shook her head as one of her parent's closest friends bustled into the room as Brent slowly left. "I think she purposefully waited until you and Shelby would be away from the area and took the opportunity to pounce. More ranting. Oh how she grates on my nerves."

Alyce tossed her long blond hair over her shoulder. Even though she was fifty-five it was hard to tell. She was careful to bleach the gray from her hair regularly and despite a few extra pounds she made sure the demure business suites showed off her assets. Once Lexi had started the company it had been a no brainer to hire her father's former secretary. The woman was a treasure with a schedule and could take dictation with ease. Add the shared love for their past and it helped her feel like Sutherland Industries was more than just her brain child but also a tribute to her parent's memory.

"Luckily she is gone now. I guess I better get back to it. Let me know if you need anything." Alyce turned and gracefully walked away.

Lexi glanced at her watch, grateful that the work day was half over. She had that function later but she hoped she could pull off a quick drop in rather than a long night under the glaring spotlight and the stares of men yearning for her money.

Lucien pulled the city issued unmarked car up in front of Aarik's ancient brick building, thankful to be done with the annoyingly monotonous day. "You try not to have too much fun tonight okay."

"You want to come up for a beer and some nachos; I have a while before I have to take Lexi to her shindig and would love some company while I unwind. I swear I have been in a cramped chair or courtroom for the past century and not just the past eight hours." Aarik said quietly, the boredom of the day seeping out of his voice and making Lucien smile.

"Sure, sounds good." He said as he pulled into a parking spot. "Hey why do you have to take your sister out? You would think she would have a man for that."

Aarik rolled his eyes, "She has no time to relax let alone date someone."

"Yeah I imagine it takes a long while for her to thaw out enough to let her hair down."

"Humm. . . . " Aarik shrugged nonchalantly.

Lucien hoped he hadn't offended his new partner. The kid had some major potential. It had been pure luck that he had even discovered Aarik hidden as he was in the mounted unit. Being a homicide cop you rarely got to see that exclusive club in action but Aarik had been the closest to a domestic violence case that went south fast and so they had met, and Lucien would always be grateful. His life had ended up on the line in that case and Aarik had been the only cop thinking clearly enough to save his ass. Sure, he trusted the men and women in his squad, but there wasn't a one who had that spark. You know the one, it is where a cop has that extra passion and a belief in the system and a belief that good can be accomplished and wrongs made right. Throw on a heap of amazing instinct and you have yourself one ace detective.

He followed Aarik up the steps, reminding himself to go easier on his sister bashing comments. He just couldn't help himself. He sure wasn't blind. Lucien had seen the many tabloid pictures. The rumors swirling about how she snubbed that politico or had ignored that movie star. If the woman was an ice queen to the men that were in her league then he knew the ordinary hardworking types had no chance to thaw that ice and it

galled him. He was a damn site better than some of those metro sexual fruitcakes she was always associated with.

He did need to give her credit for accomplishing all she had, it took guts to invest everything she had made off of her processor into so many different fields, but she seemed to do well, and was well known for her hard work.

Lucien couldn't help but grin at the painting that hung over Aarik's mantle. It was of a breath-taking woman wrapped in blood red silk, and very pregnant. It was sweet and almost erotic and seemed very out of place in this dorm like bachelor pad.

"So is there a story behind this?" He just had to ask, couldn't help it with the curiosity almost throbbing.

Aarik smiled, looking wistful. "It's my mother. Lexi painted it from a picture taken while our mom was pregnant with me. The story behind the photo is that our mom was feeling fat and yucky, as I guess most women do when they are that far along, so our dad set up this photo shoot, to show her how much he loved her and thought she was incredibly beautiful. She carried a copy in her wallet until the day they died. Lexi painted it to give me a symbol of how much I was loved."

For a moment he felt speechless. How could such a stick in the mud paint something so wonderful? Sure it had been the recreation of a picture, but it took skill and passion, and knowledge of paint to make it so accurate and beautiful. Guess

he better give her a smidgen more credit. There is no way a person could be completely frozen and still be able to paint like that.

"Wow. . . "

Lucien glanced over at the comment to see a slack jawed Aarik looking at the computer screen. "What?"

Aarik looked at him, his eyes wide. "I got a love letter."

"You mean like some naughty thing or an actual flowers and hearts mushy letter?"

"I mean the flowers and hearts kind. It talks about how I inspire her. How my courage makes her see the world in a different light. How my eyes melt that part of her she thought would never meet the light of day."

"Who is she?" Lucien felt that curiosity and a pinprick of unease, though he shrugged the latter off as a cop's over suspicious brain.

Aarik looked bewildered. "That's the weird thing, there is no name. Just page after page about how much I mean to her. Who could love me like this yet still hide from me?"

"Maybe it is an ex or someone you haven't noticed like that, or someone you did but not intently enough to suit her. Women can be weird. I had a girl from high school e-mail me a month ago, wanting to hook up because she saw my name in the paper. I can't even remember who she was."

"Maybe I'll have Lexi look in to it, computers are her thing."

"I bet she won't even write you again so why worry. If she wants you to know who she is I am sure she will make herself known. These types usually do."

Aarik grinned, "You have all women in 'types' and categories eh? You know that they really are individuals right, each one different, and oh so exquisite."

"Women usually can fit into types. There are the snobby ice queen types, the teasing stalkers, the shy but deadly, and then the perfect type. Perfect is very very hard to find. Only one chance in a million that you will discover that perfect woman. I actually am starting to think that they just don't exist."

"You are so jaded. I would hate to feel that way about something so delectable. I think you just have got to be too picky."

Lucien was glad that his 'ice queen' comment hadn't offended Aarik, but he also was sure that there was no such thing as a perfect woman. He had yet to meet one anyway.

"So are we gonna have a drink or sit here gabbing like old women?"

Aarik smiled and jumped up to retrieve the beers. "Yeah yeah, I am on it. I think there may be a game we can watch before I have to don my tux."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Lucien said, grateful that he wouldn't be the one dealing with the rich and snooty all evening.

Alexis took the elevator down to the suite she kept in the building. It saved her time when she had an event in the city or when she was too tired to make the drive home. She pushed the door open and breathed in the clean ocean smell that she loved so much. She could live off of candles scented like the sea because they were so soothing, so inviting, begging you to just lay back and sink into some aqua blue warmth.

Tonight was another event, though she knew she was lucky she had convinced Aarik to squire her about. She walked into her plush blue bedroom, grateful for the soundproofing that shut the world out. This was her sanctuary in the city, where no one was allowed to bother her, where she could get some peace and quiet, with no demands or imagined emergencies. When she was here it was her quiet time.

Lexi clicked the remote, letting her favorite mix come to life in the built in apartment wide stereo system. Natasha Beddingfield poured out, singing of being wild and free, letting the wind take you where it would, enjoying the moment, and it helped her to let the many crisis and stresses of the day melt away.

She walked into the marble bathroom, stripping as she went, craving the feel of a hot scented bath on her skin, wanting that last bit of tension headache to drain away in her quiet time, before she had to face the hordes of media and the groupies wanting a glimpse of what her life was like. Little did they know the work days she put in, the hours she logged working on this project or that job.

As Lexi sunk into the filled bathtub she closed her eyes and was shocked and mildly annoyed when Lucien Marks filled her mind. She had avoided thinking of him all day and hated that he would intrude on her alone time. What was it about that man that warmed her body and boiled her blood all at the same time? Sure he was a treat to look at but his manners were deplorable and the fact that he looked at her as if she were some sort of object just made her want to smack the appraisal right off of that gorgeous face of his.

"Have I really been that long without a man that I would find a brash, strange cop so appealing?" she spoke aloud, a habit from childhood that had driven her parents and teachers mad. It wasn't her fault she had been stuck in such a dry spell. Every time she had felt the craving to develop a relationship it took maybe three dates before the true colors came out and her money or the status she could give became the topic of discussion. Always wanting a favor here or a loan there

or to be introduced to someone. It never ended and that's why she hadn't been out with anyone in ages. Who needed that stress?

She let herself drift for a little bit, always pushing those penetrating eyes away, avoiding even the thought of him and his assessing gaze that made her hotter than a bayou summer.

Once she was sure the headache was gone she stepped from the tub and dried off, blow-drying her hair and contemplating who she would see at the event and who she would need to avoid. She was once again incredibly glad that Aarik was her date as Nicolae seemed to think the regions poor children were his greatest cause and was sure to be there and to say something snide enough to maybe get a rise out of her, which of course was his point. He seemed to revel in disgracing her and making the press have a field day with what seemed to be a shattered relationship that she had caused when there had never even been a date let alone a relationship. Nicolae was a prime example of the money grubbers that haunted her at these events.

Alexis strode from the bathroom, hair swinging, to grab the silky blue gown from the rack where the ever efficient Shelby had hung it earlier. She had just gotten her chemise on when she heard a knock from the main door.

"Good," she exclaimed as she opened the door, "you are. . . right. . . Oh my God!" She stumbled backwards, away from the slithering mass hissing on the floor. Who would leave a snake at her door? Who would even know how they terrified her so?

As she ran for her security button Lexi heard a thump from behind her and prayed that leaving the door open hadn't let in the person who had left her such a terrifying gift. She felt her breath coming faster and faster as panic built. She turned towards the door, bracing for attack and almost fainted when she saw it was Aarik, using a plastic looking box to smack the snake.

She felt her chest lock and was grateful when the snake stopped moving and Aarik turned to her. Lexi threw her arms towards him and felt herself being lifted off of her feet as her vision started to swim.

"Lex, where is your inhaler? You need your inhaler honey."

She pointed towards her room and her purse on the nightstand, grateful that it was Aarik and not some stranger holding her while she was clad in only her slip and looking a mess.

She took one grateful puff, then another, and at the third felt her chest ease and her head start to clear. "Thank you. Oh God, thank you so much," Lexi wheezed.

"No problem. Are you okay? Do you need a medic? This was a bad one." Aarik said and she could see the worry on his face.

"No. . . no, I think I am okay. What I really want is security to tell me how in the hell a snake not only got to this floor and my doorway but managed to knock on the door."

She felt her brother's head jerk, "It knocked? Well of course it was placed there huh? No way a snake would make it through the building, up the elevator and right to the center of your door all on its own. Let me call security and we will see what they have to say." He sat her on the bed finally releasing her.

"Thank you, I'll put some clothes on while you call them."

She stood slowly after he had shut her bedroom door, thankful he didn't see how her knees shook. Who on earth would want to hurt her? To scare her into a major asthma attack? Cecily sprang to mind, but Lexi didn't think she was smart enough to get past security twice in one day, let alone to her private floor, where you needed a pass key with a certain security clearance approved by her just to open the elevator or stair doors. Just another reason she was grateful to have Aarik so close by.

She zipped her dress and took a sip from her ever present water bottle, and braced for the discussion with her security team, already feeling the accursed headache returning to pound in her forehead. It looked like her evening was going to be even more of a nightmare than she had anticipated.

Aarik rubbed her neck and temples and Alexis was once again reminded of how lucky she was that she had him and that he was

so amazing. "I really don't think I can go to this stupid party tonight. I just don't know how to get out of it and Sutherland Industries needs to be represented since we have given so much money." Lexi fought to keep the whine out of her voice, she hated sounding weak.

"Well I guess I could go alone. I am a Sutherland, and a major shareholder, at least on paper, though you run everything, and gave me the shares as a gift rather than because I actually worked for them." Lexi smiled at the long suffering tone of voice, grateful she had such a self sacrificing brother and knowing she was going to take advantage.

"How about you take Shelby? Everyone knows that she is my right hand. I know you both hate these things but if you have each other then you won't be able to be bored out of your minds. She has great skill at making fun of the snooty well-to-do."

Aarik laughed, "You are a part of the snooty well-to-do now Lex, and you need to accept it."

"I will never be as shallow as them, and thank your lucky star that's the case because with you being such a shareholder and all I could make you actually come to the board meetings."

She smiled at his groan as he probably knew she would. "Okay I'll go hunt up Shelby and have her get her dancing shoes out for this thing. You rest and relax and I will check on you tomorrow okay," He said as he kissed her forehead and gave her shoulder one last squeeze.

As he left Lexi shrugged back out of the dress and put on a pair of cotton pants and one of her favorite t-shirts, grabbed her bag, and started to make the dash to her car so that she could go home and get some much needed rest in a place that no one had harassed her or gotten through the security.

Chapter 3

The Watcher had the latest prey in sight, knew that tonight was the night to make another statement, to get their attention,

to add another red 'X' to the lives of the gifted. They would learn that no one was safe, that there was always someone to be gotten to and disposed of to send the point home.

Even as the prey moved about the room the Watcher knew that fool Alyce would have done her job and put the snake in front of the bitch's door. It had been so easy to convince her to participate in the harassment of Alexis. The woman still had a grudge against the Sutherland's after daddy dearest had refused to pay up what any good mistress deserved. Then he had died before any blackmail could have come out to up the stakes. Alyce was loving getting her revenge even if only on the jerk's children.

Pulling back to the current task with a start the Watcher's eyes shifted back to the girl tending tables. She was pretty, in a girl-next-door way, her hair pale and wispy as a dove's wing, eyes bright and dancing in laughter as she served a customer and the music hummed. The Watcher hoped she would be easier to subdue than the last one. When they fought it just made the night longer, everything becoming this endless struggle even though the outcome was always the same.

The Watcher watched as this jezebel of a woman was spun into a dance with the man meant to help build an alibi and a story. The anticipation was building and the Watcher was grateful to have slid Mr. Military that fifty when he had entered the pub. It wasn't exactly a dance hall but it was

Scottish and had made this method easier to find than some of the others had been. Her plaid skirt, worn more for effect than comfort and shorter than was needed, swirled as she dipped and turned to the jaunty reel that the house band was playing. Her wedding ring glinted though the hand in hers was not her husbands and she was paid to flirt just a little as the ale flowed and the reels were spun.

Finally the blonde was on her way out. Her shift was over finally and she nodded to the bartender, politely accepting the offer of an escort through the darkened parking lot to her motherly car. Time to make them pay; make them see how dismissing someone without a second glance could be deadly.

Hands rubbed together in glee, gloves tickling skin as adrenaline flooded the veins, the Watcher ducked down in the back seat of the car. This one would definitely be more pleasurable than the last one had been, and much harder to ignore.

Lucien and Aarik pulled up behind the cruisers and coroners van on what was, after Katrina a rural rode right inside the city limits, and geared up to view the crime scene and talk to any witnesses. All they knew so far was a woman had been killed with her own panty hose.

He pulled on his gloves and reached for his notebook. "So Aarik how was that gala thing with your sister?"

"You really don't read the newspapers at all do you? I went with my sisters assistant instead of Lexi because Lex had had a scare and just wasn't up to it."

"A scare, huh? What'd she do, break a nail?"

Aarik looked at him with a rare flash of ire. "No Lucien, my sister isn't as shallow as you seem to think. Some bastard left a snake for her. Scared her so bad she had a major asthma attack. I thought I was going to have to take her to the hospital."

"Where was this snake? How do you know it didn't get there itself?" Lucien asked as they picked their way down a small hill to the, thankfully dry, ditch below.

"It was in front of the suite she keeps in her building downtown. Kinda hard for a snake to climb seventy flights of stairs or press the right button and swipe a security card in the elevator."

Lucien glanced up at that, "So she pissed someone off enough that they broke through her security? Guess she better see if she crushed any lives in one of her takeovers."

"Man, she really isn't as heartless and evil as you seem to persist in believing. Anyway let's concentrate on this case."

Both men walked up to the waiting coroner, a small bald guy both had known for years, "Hello gentleman. I would like you to

meet Jane Doe. Without having her on the table I say her COD is strangulation. The MO seems familiar somehow though I don't think it is one that has come across my table."

Lucien noticed Aarik's body give a jerk as the sheet was pulled back. "My God, that's Paige McKenna. Used to be a Rosenbaum back when I knew her."

"You know this woman?" Lucien asked softly.

"Yeah her and I dated for like a month back in high-school. She married an Army reservist, oh about 6 years ago. He works for S.I. Computers I think but is currently in Iraq. Lexi would be able to get us a current address."

"Okay you call her and we will see what we can what?" He didn't like the suddenly horrified expression crossing his partner's face.

"I just figured out how the doc was right and why this seemed so familiar. Ya'll ever hear about a killer called 'Bible John'? He was active in Scotland in the late sixties."

The ME nodded, "Yeah, Of course I remember that case, not from experience but from doing a case study on unsolved serial killings for a research project. He would pick up women from a dance hall, then strangle them with their panty hose and drop them fairly close to home. There is talk they have him locked up now as a guy was convicted in 2007 for a murder and research into him has led to info that his behavior has been similar to

Bible John even linking him to a rape in 1968. Pretty interesting stuff."

"How closely does this match that MO?" Lucien asked.

"Well first there is the panty-hose, plus she is menstruating." The ME commented.

"And she worked in a Scottish pub down in the Quarter. You could catch her dancing a reel most nights she was there." Aarik added.

Lucien scribbled in his notepad, "Anything else?"

Aarik nodded, "She pretty much matches the first victim attributed to Bible John. Husband deployed, raising a kid, staying with her parents. Only difference is that Paige worked in a pub, while, if I remember right, that first vic was a nurse killed after a night out."

"Was she killed here?" Lucien asked as one of the lab people walked up to them.

"No sir, it looks like she was dumped here. So far we haven't found any of her other clothes or personal items."

"Yeah," Aarik said, "That fits with the Bible John case too."

"So we have ourselves a copy cat huh? How many did Bible John get?"

Aarik tapped his chin, looking thoughtful. "Three I believe." He glanced at the ME for confirmation and received a nod of agreement. "Yup, three. Though they were never completely

convinced that all three were the same guy but they sure believed so back then."

Lucien didn't like to think that there could be more victims out there being preyed upon. "Let's talk to the witness and go inform her family." He hated that sort of task worse than a cat hated getting a bath, and usually tried to pass it off, but with Aarik knowing the victim, however old the connection was, he knew he needed to take the time and do it himself.

Getting the deplorable task of body identification and next of kin notification out of the way they were on their way to the pub the vic worked at. Lucien hated how homicides devastated so many. A grieving husband was trying to get leave time, a child was without a mother, parents had had to look at the child they had raised and loved and nurtured lying cold and broken on a stark metal slab, nothing hiding the bruises marring her throat or softening the blow.

He knew if he was feeling down about the case his partner had to be feeling it too, "So tell me about your sister. If she isn't so bad then why does she get such awful press?"

"How would you know if you never read the papers?"

"Well I do watch the news at night and she seems to show up at least once a week, having snubbed someone or spent tons of

money. She always looks so prim and proper and she is known as the 'Ice Queen'."

Aarik chuckled, "Some money grubber wanted in her pants and she turned him down, so he waited until she was leaving an event to shout at her about how he 'couldn't date an Ice Queen' and the press took it from there. She really isn't like that. She is actually really shy."

Lucien was a little surprised. "With a body like hers you would think she was used to dominating a room."

"Oh she can talk you in circles until you are willing to sell her your soul at half price, but ask to get personal and she will shut down every time. I think she skipped the dating and intimacy stuff and went straight to parent, though I think she was always reserved."

"Oh that's right, you guys were orphaned when you were pretty young right?"

He noticed the shadow cross Aarik's face and knew he had hit a sore spot. "Yeah."

That seemed to be the only answer that he was going to get and he let it slide. "So if she really isn't so cold why doesn't she work to change what everyone thinks?"

"Being untouchable and distant is a shield I think. Too many people wanting money or a favor. I think she has been pushed so much she prefers to be alone, separate from everyone but those she trusts. And it is very hard to get that trust."

"Hmmm. . .I guess you can't judge a book by its cover can you?"

Aarik smiled, "You would think that as a cop you would know that by now. The guiltiest looking SOB can be innocent as a newborn and the sweetest housewife could have killer tendencies."

"Yeah but most of them are ordinary folk, not people who could buy and sell France without batting an eye. Rarely do you see the press be to far off in pegging the rich and powerful."

"Well they are off about Lexi, I can promise you that. And we're here." Aarik said as the pulled up outside the steamy pub.

Lucien knew from the vic's family that she had worked here of and on since she was sixteen and that a family friend owned it. He was dreading shattering more lives with the grisly news.

Chapter 4

Lexi stretched luxuriously, reveling in the way her body actually felt rested and refreshed. She had given herself a long weekend for the first time in ages and was so thankful that she had. Yesterday had been all about relaxing. She had gone to her favorite day spa and gotten the works done, evidence of one of the many luxuries her money had given her. Her skin felt smooth and looked dewy, the shadows banished from under her eyes for the first time since the snake incident.

Security had tightened at the office and she was grateful for it but what she was really craving was time away from the grind and demands of the city. Alexis crawled from her favorite hammock bare feet touching warm grass, grateful for the breeze and clear blue skies.

She loved her little slice of heaven outside the city, the sprawling grounds, the marshes and bayous. The weeping willows with dripping vines that would sway in a breeze and created little havens of green silence to hide in when she wanted to be totally alone. She loved the colors too. The greens of the water, the yellow gold of fields, the blues of her favorite flowers.

The sounds only enhanced it all. She could hear the croak of frogs, the splash of what she convinced herself was only

fish, the chirp of birds dipping in and out of trees and bush. It was heaven here.

She walked around her garden now loving the smells that filled her body, glad she had convinced Shelby to clear her schedule so she could rejuvenate before facing the world again.

Lexi heard a thump and looked up to see her Aunt Jamie coming from the house, and Lexi's dog Bay following close on her heels. She smiled to see Jamie carrying a silver platter with tea and cookies, and a grimace for the dog swirling around her feet.

"Hey there Aunty! What you doing in my neck of the woods?"

Jamie smiled as she sat the tray on the garden table and swatted at the goofy hound. "I was wanting some girl time. Tyson has been driving me insane with preparing for school and looking for work and dating a new girl each time I turn around. I knew there was some common sense waiting for me here, and Aarik told me you had taken the weekend to just be."

Lexi smiled at her father's sister. "Well I am happy for the company. Why don't we sit a spell and you can tell me the latest gossip."

They sat in the cushy chairs surrounded by flowers and life. Lexi couldn't help but notice what a picture her aunt made with her billowy dress and oversized straw hat. Her hair was French braided and tucked up under the hat and her eyes showed the laugh lines that came with age and late in life babies.

Tyson had been born right before her aunts forty-third birthday, though she didn't look it. She was slim under the sweet ocean blue cotton, tone from running a household on her own since her boy was a baby.

Lexi grinned as her aunt talked about this neighbor and that one, all common acquaintances from back when Lexi's parents were alive. Jamie had offered them a home after the tragedy but Lexi had been determined to give Aarik stability and keep him in the home they grew up in, small though it was. She would always be grateful to her aunt, the last family that they had on the planet.

"So anyways, darlin', how you enjoying your weekend?" Jamie asked once the gossip portion of the day was done.

"It's been nice. I have left my cell off and laptop closed and just enjoyed being alive."

"When you going to share this big old house with someone other than your ancient hound?" Jamie asked and Lexi could sense a motherly craving to see her girl happy.

Alexis shrugged, "Aunt Jamie, I have yet to meet a man worth bringing here let alone sharing it with."

"That Lucien is a hot one. If I were younger I might just have to see what that boy was about."

"He may be hot but he is as classless as a two dollar tramp and about as smart."

"He seemed smart to me, and was nothing but polite, full of yes'm and pleases. It was rather refreshing after living with a teenager day in and day out."

Lexi smiled, "Well then you met a totally different Lucien than I did. Something about him just drove me nuts." She could feel her face flush as she remembered how he had inspected her like a prize calf. "How did you meet him anyways?"

"They dropped by last night. I think dealing with the McKenna case just took a lot out of them both so they wanted a home cooked meal and some small talk to alleviate the stress of the day."

Lexi glanced up sharply, "McKenna case? What McKenna case?"

"Baby girl haven't you seen the news?"

"No, part of this relaxing weekend has been no TV, I haven't even looked at the newspapers either. I wanted time away from drama and demands. Tell me now since I have no idea what you are talking about."

Jamie responded quietly, "Well Aarik and his handsome partner were called to a scene yesterday. Turned out to be Paige McKenna. She had been killed, strangled with her pantyhose. Aarik thinks it is some guy trying to copy some old case out of Scotland. Nasty business."

"Wow. Paige's husband Joe works for me when he isn't on active duty. He must be devastated."

"Oh I am sure. Aarik was pretty shook up himself. Seems that everything is pointing to some sort of copycat. Even the last person seen with Paige matches the suspect in this other case. If the Scotland case weren't so old, Aarik said he would think that the killer had moved to the states."

Lexi shook her head, feeling the world intrude on her tranquility. "Yeah Aarik and Paige dated way back in the day. He'll be wanting to catch this guy something fierce."

"That's the truth. He and Lucien both are pretty determined. It was another thing I found so attractive about Lieutenant Marks."

"Yeah well attractive only gets you so much."

"Very true. How about I go in and make us some supper and we have a quiet girls night in?"

Lexi loved the sound of that. "Okay, I'll be inside in a few minutes to help you out. Just going to throw the ball for Bay for a bit to get some of her energy out."

She watched her aunt go inside and let her mind rest on the McKenna family. They had to be going through hell right now. Paige had been so young, so vibrant and sweet. She could always be counted on for a quick laugh or a good ear when you needed someone to listen. She had always been a wonderful addition to S.I. Computer's staff get-togethers.

Alexis tossed the ball as hard as she could and sat in the grass and let herself stare at the home she had built for

herself, feeling grateful to be alive and guilty that she was and a wonderful woman wasn't. She let her mind slide and listed the details of the house in her head rather than go to the melancholy place her mind was trying to go.

The graceful columns lining the wraparound porch almost looked delicate in their craftsmanship, the white trellis dripping with roses made such a pretty picture it sometimes took her breath away. She loved the green trim that matched her favorite trees in depth and intensity of color. The windows shone like beacons in the fading sun. She had kept the little house in the city for all of Aarik's school years, but this, this was her dream. It was her haven against the storm, her release from the past, and her proof that she had survived and not only lived but thrived.

The white washed wood and raw neutral colored stone brought images of old distinguished plantation houses. She had thought of buying one of those but knew she wanted to build fresh, have a place where she created her own history, her own traditions and habits. The beauty of the home was her pride and her comfort and, despite its size, it was absolutely a home.

Lexi tossed the ball once more and turned to watch the sun glint one last time off of her pride and joy, a stained glass window. In it her parents could be seen laughing, the ocean bright blue against their backs, sun warm and vibrant on their head as they each held onto the small child between them. She

had given Aarik evidence of the love felt for him, but this window was the testament of the love her parents had had for her and it was one of her greatest treasures. The artist had used one of her paintings to create the clashes of color and life. It was one of the few times she had let someone other than family see her work but she knew she wanted something more visual than the painting was and this way she infused the house with only the good things of her childhood, only the love and smiles that came before the dark times.

"Lexi, you coming?"

Pulled from her thoughts by her aunt's voice Alexis threw the ball one last time and made her way into the gorgeous home, determined to keep all of the ugliness of the world from her safe haven.

They were clearing up from a scrumptious meal of spaghetti and garlic bread when there was a strange scratching at the door. Lexi dried her hands and went to answer it, ignoring the nervous tickle at the base of her spine.

She let out an oath and a very girly squeal when she saw the decapitated swamp rat on her porch. She looked right and left, searching the dark for whoever had done this, pissed that her home had been violated.

Lexi heard Jamie walk up behind her. "Oh my word, where did that come from?"

"I have no idea Aunt Jamie. I don't see a car."

"Now why on earth would you think a person had done this? It is clear that some animal brought it up here. Go get a trash bag and let's get rid of this thing."

She had to smile at her aunt's take charge tone. "Yes ma'am."

As she was returning with the bag lights flashed up the drive, making both women jump as if a fire cracker had gone off next to their heads. She saw Jamie grip the shovel she held tight, bracing for a fight. She glanced around herself looking for something she could use as a weapon, not wanting to face any more crap.

They both let out signs of relief when they saw Shelby getting out of the car. "What are you guys doing out here?" Shelby walked towards the house. "Eww that has got to be one of the grossest things I have ever seen. Where did it come from?"

Lexi spoke up quickly, "Jamie thinks some animal dropped it here," She used her eyes to convince Shelby to keep silent about the other animal incident.

"Huh. Well I guess we better get this thing put somewhere."

She was grateful that Shelby didn't push the issue. "You are right in time for movie night. Why don't you and Jamie go pick one and take it to the theater room while I get rid of this nasty sucker?" Without waiting for an answer she turned to her task and let the door shut behind her.

Alexis woke groggy, the injection of Kevin Costner, Christian Slater and Brad Pitt mixed with a couple bottles of amazing Chianti leaving her head pounding and her eyes gritty with fatigue. She struggled for a clear head trying to figure out what had woken her when she had only been asleep for. . . how long? She turned bleary eyes to the clock. Five twenty in the freaking morning. She had been asleep not even two hours, the movies long and sappy and a great was to get her mind off the animal issues she was having and the death of such a sweet woman.

As the phone blared again she realized what had woken her. "Hello?" Lexi hated how ripe her throat felt and how she croaked more than spoke.

"You listen up you stupid bitch. I did some checking. I know you just bought Weston Shipping. You get the hell out of my life. Stop ruining things for me. Your brother is my soul mate and I will have him, you better believe it. So step the heck back and let it be or you will be sorry. Bet the press would love pictures of a drunken Ms. Snooty in a compromising position."

She groaned. This woman never gave up did she? "Cecily, when are you going to get it through your head? Aarik doesn't want you. Stop calling him. Stop calling me. Go crawl back into

the hole you climbed out of. And stop putting weird things on my doorstep, it isn't funny." She took a breath, feeling the anger simmer. "Plus I am rarely drunk and I highly doubt you have any pictures of me let alone bad ones. Blackmail is a crime, sister, and you better believe I will report you on it." Yeah the irony of that statement in her current state wasn't lost to her.

"Photoshop is amazing bitch."

Lexi heard a dial tone and was grateful that was over. She knew that Cecily couldn't do much more than try to humiliate her, she was too well respected, even if the press liked to pick on her. She rubbed her temples and flipped off the ringer. She was determined to get more sleep before she had to face the day. Her brother probably needed her and she wanted to be tip top. And if not tip top then at least coherent."

She sneezed and swatted at her face as she slid from sleep, head still pounding, but nowhere near what it had been. Lexi opened her eyes and saw her brother beside her on the big four-poster bed. "Hey you, what are you doing here?"

"Well Ty called me and said that you guys had a girl's night. Since it is noon and I had yet to hear from you I figured ya'll had a very very lively girl's night and might need my manly self to cook you some breakfast. Shelby is taking a

shower, Jamie is relaxing in the sunroom, and I am making waffles."

She smiled, "I am not sure how hungry I feel," Her stomach growled loud enough that they both could clearly hear it, "but I guess I could eat."

Aarik chuckled, "It was sweet of you to put Shelby and Jamie up for the night."

"Yeah well, Legends of the Fall didn't get over till like four, and we all consumed about a bottle each, so I knew it was better if they stayed here."

"Yeah but you hate to share your space, so it was very sweet. Now get a shower and get dressed, breakfast will be on the table shortly and I expect you to eat your fill."

She felt her heart warm as she watched him walk from her room. He really was her reason for everything that she did. She had needed to take care of him and it had pushed her to see what she could do to make that a reality. It had been luck that she had landed a job working for a private computer repair shop. She had always excelled in computer programming and technology so it was a dream fit. That she had figured out how to make a processor faster and able to deal with more information had been sheer chance, but one she had grasped with both hands and seen for exactly what it was. Their saving grace.

She snuggled into the bed, pulling her light down comforter close to her, savoring that last comfortable warmth, the feeling

of being held and treasured, and took the moment to send a little prayer of deepest thanks to the heavens, so grateful that she had all that she did. They had made it through the bad and into such a wonderful world. Even when tragedy touched them they always had each other.

Lexi pulled herself from bed and went to follow the advice of her very smart brother. A shower would clear those last pounding hammers from her head and give her the strength she would need to make it through the day and comfort her brother.

Aarik flipped the bacon and watched Shelby walk into the large custom kitchen with its gleaming counters and gorgeous pine cupboards. "Hey there sleepy head you ready for some food?"

She gave him a small smile. "Yeah." She looked nervous all of the sudden which he didn't understand. They had been friends for a while, he even considered her another sister most of the time. "Aarik, when I got here last night Lexi was dealing with a rat that had been decapitated and put on the porch. She made it clear she wanted me to agree that an animal had left it there, for Jamie's sake I imagine, but it concerns me. First the snake and now this. Few people know about this house, everyone thinks she lives in the suite in the tower. That both would be attacked like this really bothers me. She is usually alone out here."

Aarik nodded, grateful to have someone who worried about Alexis just as much as he did. If Shelby thought Lex was in danger then she very well could be. "I'll talk to her. I doubt though that she will even consider staying in the city for a while. You know how stubborn she is."

"Yeah I do and that's part of what worries me. She rarely takes enough precautions to keep herself safe. I know she adores Brent but the man is way too old to be able to properly protect her and out here all she has is the alarm."

"I know but she treasures this house and her space. I'll see about her getting a better guard dog and maybe at least having a better weapon than mace."

He knew it wasn't the best outcome but saw it satisfied Shelby as she sat at the table and opened her laptop. Aarik really was a bit concerned about Lexi's safety. Maybe he would see if Lucien would talk to Cecily, see if she was the one bugging Lex. He felt evil for the thought but that was one person he sometimes regretted saving.

He felt an arm slid around his waist and grinned at the lavender smell of his aunt's hair. "Hi Aunt Jamie, you done with your book?"

"That I am. The warmth of the sun room even lured me into a little cat nap. That surely is the most glorious room ever made. Your Daddy would have adored it."

He felt his heart twist. "Yeah, he would have."

Alexis found them like that, standing by the stove, arms draped around each other, looking sweet as a picture. "So I heard somewhere that there were waffles on the menu today."

She stepped up to the pair putting her arm around her brother and connecting them all, flashing a grin at the ever busy Shelby as she tap tapped away on her keyboard. "Girl it is our day off. No work allowed in this house and if you argue, why I'll just have to get this hulk of a brother of mine to toss you into the marsh and let the bugs and creepy crawlies teach you a lesson."

"Okay okay you convinced me, no work today." Shelby snapped the lid down and sat, putting her hands primly in her lap making Lexi think of the class bookworm.

"You're a goof, Shelb." She smiled to let her rarely silly assistant see she was teasing then turned to tickle Aarik. "Now you sir, have a bunch of hungry women to feed. Get to it."

Alexis watched him take the bacon from the pan and turned to set the table, the easy domesticity of it all easing her mind as she braced to discuss Aarik's new case and the impact it has had on them both.

"Okay ladies let's eat!"

They gathered around Lexi's glass top table for a very late breakfast and she was grateful for the hum of happy eating and

clinking silverware as she gathered her thoughts. She wanted to wait until they were done to broach the subject of death and a horribly violent death at that and hoped the peace of the meal would help ease the way.

She cleared her plate and listened to the small talk of her aunt and brother, loving how Shelby seemed to fit right in, a part of the whole. Lexi didn't realize she had a sappy grin on her face until all three turned to watch her and Aarik commented.

"You seem happy sis. I'm glad."

"I feel content, surrounded by three of my most favorite people, eating a good breakfast with the ones I love." She felt her smile slide slowly away, "Not everyone gets this kind of peace."

All looked somber now as they stood as a unit and cleared the table. Lexi knew where her thoughts were and felt pretty confident that at least her brother was thinking of the same things. "Was Joe able to get leave?"

"Yeah, he should be home sometime late tonight. They are giving him a little time to make arrangements for the baby, then want him to come back to finish out his tour."

"Wow that's rough. Shelby we will have to see how we can help there, maybe give his in-laws some help so that the baby can stay with them."

"I know a great nanny service and someone in particular who has experience in helping families through the grief process. I'll put a call in right now." Lexi watched Shelby walk from the room and was so grateful she had gotten such a warm and efficient assistant.

"I'll call some of my church girls, we will figure out some meals, get them on a schedule for the next while so that the family can deal with other things besides the basics." Jamie said softly.

"That sounds wonderful Aunt Jamie, and I thank you for it. I am sure that the whole family will appreciate the help."

As Jamie left the room after Shelby, Lexi turned her face into her brothers chest and they just held on to each other, getting the comfort and reassurance they both needed.

"I am sure this isn't easy for you Aarik, and I doubt anyone would fault you for passing the case on." Lexi was sure she knew how he felt about that but wanted to get it said anyway.

"Yeah, Lucien offered to let me off, but I would go nuts. It means more to me, and it would to her, that I am the one to catch her killer." He patted her hair. "She was so vibrant Lex, so sweet, and so in love. Joe made her beyond happy and that baby just lit her soul. To be killed like that just makes it all worse."

She sighed and leaned back against the counter so she could look up into his face without getting a crick in her neck.

"Violent death is never good, babe, but I know you and you will stand for her. You will find out who did this and you will make it right, balance the scales. You are very good at what you do; it's why Lieutenant Marks got you in his squad and choose you as his partner. You get the job done."

"I hope so Lexi, I really really hope I catch this bastard and get him in a cage."

Chapter 5

It had been almost two weeks and still Lucian and Aarik were no closer to finding out what had happened to Paige McKenna than they had been when she was discovered and it had both tough

cops angry and frustrated so they were taking a break. Working, going over data, interviewing any related persons had become an exercise in futility so they were avoiding it at all costs for the moment.

Lucien grinned at his partner as they sat on the boat, about a mile from shore, in the deep blue ocean, hoping for fish but mostly just clearing away the drone of witnesses and monotonous paper work with some quiet time.

"You got a bite yet?"

Aarik smiled, eyes finally looking like they belonged to a person and not a ghost. "Man if I had a bite you would know about it."

Both sat in lawn chairs better suited for sunbathing than fishing and their poles were better for a lake and fresh water fish but hey it is the thought that counts. They were enjoying the sun and the suds, both keeping them comfortably warm and content.

Suddenly Aarik jumped as if he had been attacked and started to laugh as he dug in his pants for his cell. "Damn thing is on vibrate."

As Aarik listened Lucien could see the nerves and the dread seep back. "Jamie calm down. Jamie, take a breath, you have to calm down or I won't understand what you are saying."

Lucien felt his blood quicken. Even from their brief encounters he knew that Aarik's aunt was one of the most

sensible females he had ever met and if she were panicked or upset then something had to be very very wrong.

"Aunt Jamie I am going to put you on speaker. I am with Lucien and he needs to hear this too."

Lucien led Aarik to the cabin below decks, to mute the sounds of the wind and sea and braced for information.

"Oh my God, Aarik, I don't know what to do. He never does things like this, never, he knows how I worry and panic. You have to fix this."

"Jamie this is Lucien start from the beginning so I can hear okay. We will figure this out."

Lucien heard her take a very deep breath and hold it, counting he was sure, for ten seconds before letting it shakily out. "I was going to meet Ty for lunch. It is the anniversary of when we lost his father and we try to spend some time together remembering and sharing. He never came. I waited three hours Lucien and he never came. I just know something happened."

"What were his plans for the time before he was to meet you?"

"He didn't have any. It was his day to just be lazy and stop stressing. He leaves for UCLA in two days and wanted to just sit around. I was the one with plans. I was at my knitting circle doing our usual gossiping all morning but his bike was gone when I called and had a neighbor check. He never does this. He is one of the most responsible people I know and he is very

aware of me and my feelings so he always checks in and does little things to take care of me. I know something is off, I am sure of it."

Lucien glanced at Aarik for confirmation and got it in the form of a frown and a nod. He could see that his partner was worried too so knew that they needed to get on this. Even if it was just that the kid was off getting drunk they would figure it out.

"Jamie I am going to get us back to shore and we will come to you okay, so you sit tight. You're still at the restaurant right?"

"Yes. I am at Bacco. The chef makes such amazing food so we treat ourselves regularly. I had ordered for Ty. He loves the seared pork on focaccia. Oh God you have to find him. You have too."

"We will do everything we can to do just that Jamie, I promise, sit tight we will be there soon. Now keep your phone clear incase he calls."

"Thank you, thank you, see you soon."

Aarik started pacing after the phone clicked off. "She's right Lucien, Tyson doesn't just take off."

"Well we'll go to her and do some scouting around and we will see what we can see."

They were in Aarik's truck since they hadn't wanted to take the time to get Lucien's or go pick up their official ride. Pulling up to the restaurant was difficult since the dinner club crowd had descended on the Quarter. Parking was nil so they went to Aarik's with the intention of walking back over.

"I hope he has called by now. If he hasn't and we find him playing somewhere I am going to beat him so bad he won't be able to sit down."

Lucien smiled at that. Sure Aarik was tough, could knock some heads when he had to, but turning those fists on people he loved would never happen. "Uh huh, lets just get to Jamie and see what's up."

They made their way through all the people, past the shops and clubs. The different music and smells flowed through their cop brains in a kaleidoscope of info to be stored and taken out only if needed. Lucien knew Aarik didn't even see the people around them; he was so wrapped up in getting to Jamie and finding his cousin that even the scantily clad women giving him the clothing dissolving glances couldn't catch his eye. He hoped that this worry was unwarranted not only for Jamie but for Aarik. He wasn't sure his partner could handle another loss, and wasn't it odd if he would need to. Lucien shut down his suspicious nature when he saw the crying woman clutching the to-go carton.

"Jamie why are you out here and not inside?"

"They asked me to leave, said they needed the table and I was upsetting people. I even made some poor child cry because I was crying so loudly, but I just know something is wrong. I feel it. Trust me as a mom I know when something is wrong with my baby."

Lucien knelt down by her while Aarik sat and gathered her close. "We will figure this out."

"Okay Aunt Jamie we need to know his friends, his favorite places, and let's see if we can figure out what he was wearing and we will put out an alert on him. Let's go to your house now and see okay." Aarik said softly as he lifted his aunt and seemed to almost carry her back towards his apartment.

"I can do that. That will be good. He won't come here will he, he would go home."

"I am sure that's right Jamie. Can I call someone to come be with you?" Lucien asked, plowing a path back through the hordes of people.

"I'll call Lexi for you, she would want to be with you." Aarik said when it seemed Jamie had gone blank.

"Yes Alexis is good, call Alexis."

Lucien and Aarik switched places as Aarik pulled out his phone and called Lexi. "Lex, I need you to meet us at Aunt Jamie's place. Ty has gone missing. Right, I know. Yeah. Okay, see you soon."

"She will meet us there."

Back at the truck Lucien bundled Jamie in while Aarik went to the driver's side. He knew they both were feeling urgent even though Tyson was technically an adult and could do what he wanted. If Jamie thought something was wrong then there was a big chance that there was.

Lexi pulled up to the little house, needing to work hard to clear her face of any signs of concern, knowing her aunt needed hope and confidence right now. She glanced up as Aarik's truck pulled up behind her car and couldn't help but feel grateful when she saw the sweet gentle way that Lucien helped Jamie from the cab.

"Oh Lexi where is my baby?" Jamie wailed it.

She pulled the taskmasters look close to her like a second skin. "Jamie calm down. We happen to be pretty tight with one of the best cop's in this city. If anyone can figure it out it is Aarik and you know it."

Lexi saw her words had the desired effect as Jamie's spine straightened and the fear seeped, just a little, from her eyes. She saw the appreciation in Lucien's eyes but ignored the warmth that started from the soles of her feet and spread upwards. This was no time to be dealing with this irrational attraction that she had for him.

She opened the door with her key and led everyone to the kitchen, turning on lights as she went, hoping to stumble over her errant cousin as she made her way through the house, maneuvering her way around the boxes that had to be prepped for Ty's leaving.

"Jamie go see what, if anything, is missing, from Tyson's things and I am sure Lexi is more than happy to make you some tea." Lucien glanced at Lexi.

"Of course, you go help Lucien and Aarik, Aunt Jamie, I know my way around the kitchen."

As she worked she listened to the talk coming from the other room.

"I can't be sure but I think he has on his work boots. I don't see them but he could have packed them. His black jeans and Eagles shirt is gone too. I swear he lives in that shirt."

She hated the shaking she heard in Jamie's voice but felt her stomach knot at the voice that responded. Why did his voice have to be so deep? So smooth? It should be illegal for someone to have such depth in their voice, as if falling into it would be the best thing she could do.

"That's good Jamie. That's great. Anything else?"

"Yeah his coveralls are gone too. I know he has applied to work with the California branches of some of the companies still here building and clearing. Even though Lexi has offered to pay

for his schooling he wanted to help out with that. To do as much as he could on his own."

"Did he have any interviews with any of them?" Aarik asked.

"He had a few I am sure, scheduled for the days following his arrival in California, but nothing here."

Alexis heard them making their way back and shook herself to clear the cobwebs. She knew that Aarik would take care of this, so Jamie needed her attention.

"Okay, Aunt Jamie, come sit down and drink some tea."

"Jamie we are going to go out talk to neighbors see if anyone saw where he went, and follow the trail. We will call you as soon as we hear anything okay." Lucien patted her hand and turned to leave while Aarik said his goodbyes. Like that they were gone and Lexi was left with her aunt, a woman fighting to stay sane and calm when fear was crawling through the house.

Lucien could see Aarik was getting more and more worried as the evening progressed and the clues were few and far between. They had been looking for people that had seen someone matching Tyson's description for what felt like days but was really only a couple hours. He had realized people don't really notice bike riders that much. Flashes that maybe they had seen someone but they weren't sure seemed to be the theme of the day and it was

making the frustration beat through his blood increasing with every beat of his heart.

"Hey Lucien, I think we may have something." Aarik called out from the opposite side of the street where he was talking to three little white haired ladies.

Lucien trotted across the road, smiling a little at the sight before him. Side by side on a pretty wrought iron bench sat three women. Each wore a flowered muumuu in bright reds and greens and each looked like they had been lookers back in the day.

"Lucien these are the Crowley sisters, Beth, Barb, and Bee."

"We are triplets," said the first.

"Been inseparable since the womb," said the middle.

"Well, excepting for when we had some personal time for our husbands," Said the third.

Aarik smiled. "They married the Stamper brothers, another set of triplets, and have owned these three houses for ages," Aarik pointed to the identical white sided houses lining this portion of street. "They also sit out here to enjoy the scenery most every day, weather permitting, and they have eyes like hawks."

Two women cackled while the third said, "Ain't that the truth. See everything around here, even that naughty Reed boy sneaking a cigarette behind the trash bin."

Lucien could see that they did notice everything as one would send out a wave or another would send a nod to everyone that was passing by. "So did you lovely ladies see Tyson on his bike today?"

"Oh we surely did. Bee," the speaker pointed to the middle sister, "said how it was strange to see him on his bike instead of driving that pretty new car sweet little Lexi bought for him."

"Did you see where he was going or if he was with someone?" Lucien asked.

"Oh yes. He rode his bike to the corner and met some man in a truck. Was one of them construction types with that metal frame in the truck bed and a ladder, some ropes, and tools."

"Did you know who it was?" Aarik inquired.

"Never seen the guy or the truck before, but there was a company name. JWG Construction."

Lucien glanced at Aarik, "You ever heard of them?"

"No I haven't but if they are local then Lexi will know, I'll go call her." Aarik stepped a little bit away to make the call and Lucien turned back to the ladies before him.

"Can you describe the guy? The truck? Did you hear anything?"

The one identified as Bee answered this time. "Well he was a big guy, thick around the middle you know. It was a white Dodge Ram, and not the newer ones. Plates were local. LXT756. He

just said 'hey' and tossed Ty's bike into the bed on top of the tools and things. He seemed a little strange actually, he moved like a man who weighed a lot less. Kept bumping his belly awkwardly, like it was new being that size."

"Yeah that sounds strange, thanks ladies."

"Oh we are happy to talk to such handsome keepers of the law any time."

Lucien walked up to Aarik as he got off the phone. "So what did your sister have to say?"

"She said she has never heard of JWG and when she tried to look it up she found a company in Minnesota but they are a small local group, they wouldn't have anyone here or in California for Tyson to work with."

"This feels more and more off doesn't it?"

Aarik grimaced, "Yeah, I don't like it one bit. I say we have Jamie call their cell company and get his most recent calls, and Lexi can hack into his e-mail and see if there is anything there."

"I'll call in the truck description and the plate, have it ran."

"Yeah that sounds like a plan."

Lexi had finally convinced Jamie to go lay down, that she would hold down the fort at the house. The reassurance that the

guys would keep looking had seemed to comfort her but now she was feeling pretty anxious herself. She had found two more JGW companies but both were little local groups just like the first. There wasn't a single one in California. She was hoping that the Crowley sisters had read it wrong, but she doubted it. They rarely missed a thing.

She jumped as the front door opened, realizing she was more shaken that she had admitted even to herself. "Hey guys. What's the news?"

Lucien and Aarik looked grim. "Lucien called the plates in. They belong to a Toyota. The owner didn't even realize the plates were gone because the car is rarely driven and had a cover on it. Any luck finding a JGW company with people here in New Orleans?"

"Not a single one. There is a GW Welding but that's the closest I have found and they don't have any company trucks unaccounted for."

"Do you think you can get into his email program?" Lucien asked her, sounding condescending to her ears.

"Do you think you can breath? Of course I can get into his email." She flipped her hair at him as she turned back to the screen in front of her. A few keystrokes later, her fingers moving so fast they almost seemed to blur, she was in.

"He has a few from girl friends. A couple construction companies but no JGW." She kept scrolling, not too surprised at

the amount of emails he had. He was a pretty socially active guy with profiles on multiple social networks. "Wait, I think I found something. Yup here it is." She clicked the message open.

The men crowded closer to her to get a good look at the screen and Lexi could smell Lucien's sexy cologne. He was brash and crude sometimes but God he smelled like heaven and he didn't seem to mind being there and helping find what could turn out to be a partying teenager.

"So this John guy got Tyson's name from another contractor huh? Doesn't say which one though which seems fishy. Doesn't include the company phone number either though the email is at jgwconstruction. So maybe they have a website with contact info."

Lexi clicked and typed in a new window and sure enough a website came up. "It's the Minnesota firm. They said there was no possible way it was one of their trucks."

Aarik patted her shoulder, "Email back, see if anyone responds."

She used Ty's email since it was still open and almost immediately got a mailer-daemon response saying the address was not valid. "This just seems more off by the second."

"Yeah. I issued a BOLO on the truck so hopefully that gets a hit." Lucien said.

"Lex, do you think you can trace the email?" Aarik asked his sister.

"Yeah, though I would do better on my office comp. I don't want to leave Jamie alone here though."

"I'll stay here with her. We can't do much more without a lead on the company or truck. You go to the tower and work your magic."

She stood, grabbed her purse and kissed her brother, mind already on the upcoming task.

Lucien watched her dash off and felt a little annoyed that he didn't warrant even a nod. "You sure she can do this?"

Aarik laughed. "Man, Lexi could hack most anything given the time. Tracing an email won't be much of a stretch for her."

Lucien was surprised. The woman was an enigma. Just when he thought he had her figured out another facet appeared, confusing him. She seemed to fit so many roles. Ice queen, comp genius, painter, loving sister, bossy executive. He was starting to think he would like to peel back the layers and find the woman underneath.