

~ Charade ~

by J. Brownell

Disclaimer: This story and the characters described exist solely in my head and any resemblance to anything factual is a happy coincidence.

Synopsis: Whitney Eisner leads a double life. In one she is a playgirl who travels and in the other she works for a secret agency that allows people from the future to travel into the past. Her life becomes even more complicated when she is implicated in a series of assaults on women travelers. When one of the women dies and Whitney is the only suspect, she breaks all the rules when she reaches out to Atlanta Detective Lauren Shea for help.

Sex: Yes.

Violence: There is very little and that is described after the fact.

Emails are welcome at ga_onmymind@yahoo.com

1.

She was sitting with her feet propped up on the corner of her desk, staring down at the harried city of Atlanta, and sipping a glass of ice cold Coke. It was late Friday afternoon and like every Friday afternoon, she was waiting for the status reports from the various zones. She hated Fridays. She was Chief of Security for the North American Central Gateway. She had forty-eight centers in three countries under her control. She had tens of thousands of people in her command. Not one of those people could transmit the weekly status reports to the Operations Director at Quantico. It was one of only a few tasks Whitney Eisner could not delegate to someone else.

She let her mind wander to later that night. She still wasn't sure what possessed her to accept Kim's invitation to a backyard barbecue. Maybe it was the wry way Kim asked herself aloud why she was even asking Whitney when she always said no. Maybe it was the faint trace of hurt in her friend's eyes as she waited for rejection. Whitney sighed. Whatever the reason, she was expected at Kim's no later than eight. If she were lucky, she would merely be bored. Whitney wasn't feeling particularly lucky.

"Well here they are-"

She turned to the voice at her doorway the same instant the beeping of an alarm broke the stillness of her office. Her XO stood in front of her desk expectantly, the blue folder at his side forgotten. Frowning, she moved closer to her desk and stared down at the scrolling line of text at the bottom of her computer screen. **Code White. Code White. Code White.**

Well, *hell*. She dropped her hands to the computer touch screen black glass desktop. "Just leave it on my desk, Sam."

Sam nodded once and laid the blue folder on her desk before leaving her office. Whitney quickly typed in the code that brought up the GPS for the Atlanta Gateway. She zeroed in on the blinking red light. She first looked at the accompanying photo. Tracy Warner was California from her sun bleached blonde hair to her Malibu blue eyes.

Traveler R32-H: Tracy Warner, 20
Student American University of California-Berkeley
Arrived 0807 11 November Atlanta Station
Billeted Room 519 11 November-13 November
Requests: None

Whitney frowned as she read the brief synopsis of Tracy Warner's planned stay in Atlanta. Why would a twenty-year-old college student come five hundred years into the past, book a room for two days, and have no itinerary planned? Granted, some people did go on vacation without firm plans, but, not in Whitney's experience, college co-eds. She hit the command key that would show her Tracy Warner's current location.

12441 Long Street, Atlanta, Georgia, North America
Atlanta Police Department Precinct 119

It was at that exact moment that a stabbing pain lanced across the back of her left eyeball. Absently, Whitney massaged her eye as she reached for the phone. She made two brief calls. One to their law firm to get Matt over to the precinct and the other to inform Quantico of the situation. When that was taken care of, Whitney slipped on her dark blue overcoat and grabbed her keys.

She stuck her head into Sam's office. "Precinct 119. Start the paperwork for me, Sam. I want this kid in Quantico in time for supper. She's R32-H."

Whitney forced her mind to remain blank as she rode the elevator down to the underground parking garage. The reasons Tracy Warner was at the police station were infinite in number and rampant speculation was less than pointless. Whatever the reason, it was a situation Whitney had to get under control quickly and get Tracy out of there. And Tracy Warner better pray to whatever god she believed in that reason was one Whitney would understand.

While Whitney dodged the afternoon traffic, she began to construct a logical reason for the sudden appearance of herself and an attorney. For most scenarios, she could be a family member responding to Tracy's phone call. The problem was determining if Tracy had been allowed one yet. Whitney could always pretend someone who knew the family saw Tracy brought in and called her. She could be the older sister dealing with a delinquent sibling.

Matt Lang was waiting for her in the parking lot. They greeted each other like the old friends they were. They graduated from the Academy together. "Have you been in yet?"

He looked like he had stepped off the pages of GQ. His charcoal tailored suit fit perfectly over his gym-toned body. Ray-Bans hid eyes she knew were black and he kept his chestnut hair in the short style favored by the military. Matt was good looking in that way of rich, young men. "It's odd Whitney. If she's in there, she's in there voluntarily. No one knows anything about her."

"So she's not under arrest for anything?" Whitney clarified. She needed to know that more than she needed to know anything else. The arrest of a traveler was a nightmare she was quickly coming to dread as she dreaded nothing else in life. She was waiting for the day it wasn't just misdemeanors one of her attorneys could dismiss with quick legalese.

Matt cast a quick glance to the people walking around them. "So what do you want to do Chief?"

How could she explain their presence? In this place, she wasn't the Chief of Security for the North American Gateway and he wasn't her Atlanta legal advisor. He was a junior associate in the elite law firm of Lang, Dover, and Shi. She was the playgirl daughter of a wealthy family. Usually when something happened, Whitney stayed in the background and let her staff attorneys work their magic. Sam was only as far away as her cell phone should they need help.

Before she could concoct a reasonable explanation for their presence, one side of the double doors opened and Tracy Warner stepped out onto the sidewalk with a police official in tow. Tracy held out her hand to the petite blonde.

Whitney walked up to them with her own hand held out. "Tracy is everything all right? Hi, I'm Whitney, Tracy's sister."

She felt the young woman next to her stiffen as the significance of someone claiming to be a sister Tracy knew she didn't have sank in. Whitney kept her gaze on the police detective. The light afternoon breeze ruffled her short, wavy blonde hair. Bright green eyes were assessing as she took in the obvious differences of Malibu Tracy and dark Whitney.

"How did you know she was here?" The woman asked.

Whitney sent Tracy a smile meant to be both teasing and chastising. "Matt saw you here and of course, he called me. Is this something we have to tell Dad about?"

Matt came over as his name was mentioned. He reached out to ruffle Tracy's hair in a big brother sort of way. "I was concerned kid."

Tracy's face was paling by the second. Whitney linked arms with the young woman. The last thing they needed was for her to make a run for it. Whitney did not want the detective to question their right to Tracy. "Is she free to go?"

The detective glanced between them. "She's not under arrest. Tracy, is this woman really your sister?"

Time was suspended as Whitney waited with bated breath for Tracy to give them away. She did nothing to further arouse the detective's suspicions, guessing rightly that if she tightened her hold on Tracy's arm in any way those careful eyes would catch it. She forced a laugh, as if the question was absurd.

"Yes, half-sister actually," Tracy said finally, her voice strong and clear. She looked up at Whitney for the first time. "Dad doesn't need to know. I was only getting information."

Whitney shot the detective a quick grin. "Okay then, let's go before someone else sees us and calls Dad. You know your mother will think this is my fault."

"Thank you for talking to me, Detective Shea."

Detective Shea's calculating gaze slid over the three of them one last time. "Bye Tracy."

Whitney walked away with a bright smile on her face. She said through clenched teeth, "This better be good, Ms. Warner."

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Shea watched the trio walk away, waiting for any overt sign to justify her suspicions. The tall brunette never released her vice grip on Tracy Warner. If they were sisters, even half, she'd eat her badge. Matthew Lang's presence added to the mystery. The name Lang was already well-known in legal circles. His grandfather, Matthew Lang II, was one of the best criminal defense attorney's in the country. His father, Matthew Lang III, was better known for drunken incidents that landed him on the front of the paper. This Matthew Lang was making his own reputation by his association with Prestige Hotel Suites. It seemed that every time one of their guests had a little legal trouble, Matthew was there in short order to get them out of it. It was just one of several odd perks Prestige offered along with their perfectly appointed suites.

She took out her little black notebook and wrote the name Whitney Warner. Every honed instinct she had was screaming out that something was wrong with this picture. Shea didn't want to get down the road and find out that she should have been a little more protective of the young blonde.

Her desk was covered with files. Some were paper-thin; others were novel thick. A testament to the variety that was life. She dropped down in her chair and reached for the newest file. She flipped the slender folder open and scanned the information Tracy Warner had given her over the last hour.

Tracy came to her with "a friend" story. This friend was visiting Atlanta, met a woman in a bar and took the woman back to her hotel room. She was found by the hotel staff the next morning, badly beaten and barely alive. The friend was still in a coma at the hospital.

Tracy was reluctant to give up any details. She said she just thought the authorities should know someone like that was trolling the gay bars of Atlanta. She didn't want anyone else to get hurt. The name of the friend, of the bar, of the hospital where the friend was currently comatose never

passed Tracy's lips. Only one name was offered and that was the name of the hotel where the assault took place.

Prestige Hotel Suites.

What interested her about the story was that she had heard nothing about a vicious assault in one of Atlanta's pricier hotels. The news motto of "if it bleeds, it leads" guaranteed that a young woman found almost beaten to death would be a top story on any newscast. Shea wasn't a devoted reader or follower of the news, but she was a police detective. That kind of story would have gotten her attention.

When in doubt, turn to the computer. Shea spent the rest of her shift, all one and a half hours of it, trying to track down even one verifiable fact in Tracy's story. She was o-for-a hundred by the time she shut down her computer for the week. In fact, it seemed that Tracy Warner and her sister Whitney were just as fictional as the story she told.

Shea wrote herself a quick reminder for Monday morning and taped the note to her computer screen. She wanted to remember to call Matthew Lang. She knew that he at least was real. One way or the other, Mr. Lang would produce Tracy and Whitney Warner or he would tell her why he could not. Making false statements to the police was serious.

She puzzled over the mystery as she drove home. She wanted to believe Tracy's story if only because Tracy Warner struck her as intelligent and intelligent people didn't go to the police with fictional stories. She seemed to have a good life going. Shea didn't see why she'd screw that up over something like this. So, that left darker mysteries. Like if her story was true, why did no one else know anything about it? There was no comatose woman in any Atlanta hospital that got there by being beaten in a hotel room. There was no police report of a woman, dead or barely alive, being found at Prestige. Ever. While two young women named Tracy Warner were students at UGA, there was no Whitney Warner in any database Shea could access.

Once home, Shea showered quickly and exchanged her tan slacks and red linen shirt for blue jeans and white T-shirt under dark blue sweatshirt. Kim wanted her to come early to work the barbecue. After the week she'd had, she was looking forward to a long night of friends, beer and barbecue.

Kim lived in a Gwinnett suburb northeast of the city. Shea was the first to arrive. She didn't mind being sent outside to fire up the grill. Her mind was still on the puzzle of Tracy Warner. By the time she had burgers and hotdogs grilling over the burning coals, the backyard was filled with two-dozen women. Shea accepted a bottle of Coors absently from someone. Her eyes were drifting over the crowd, idly wondering who was with whom, when her stunned gaze fell on none other than Whitney Warner. The woman had shed her black slacks and dark blue button down shirt for tight, faded blue jeans and red UGA sweatshirt.

Shea cast a quick glance over the sizzling meats and decided she could leave the grill unattended for a few minutes. She was eager to see Whitney's reaction to her presence. She grinned at this unexpected opportunity.

Whitney was standing in a small knot of women that included Kim. Shea wasn't noticed at first and she allowed herself to observe Whitney openly. She was surprised to realize Whitney was gorgeous. Black hair fell around her face in soft, short waves. She saw pale blue eyes that earlier were shielded behind the black mirrored sunglasses tucked safely at the collar of her sweatshirt. Her smile softened the hard planes of her face.

Kim saw her standing with them and asked, "How's the grilling coming?"

Shea was sidetracked from the question by the abrupt change that came over Whitney when she saw Shea was the target of Kim's question. She was intrigued by the flash of panic that crossed Whitney's face briefly before a wall slammed down on her expressions. Icy blue eyes stared at her in an expression Shea would have thought was anger if Whitney had a reason to be angry with her. It wasn't Shea's fault Whitney's little sister chose her to talk to at the precinct.

"Everything's ready when you are," she belatedly replied to Kim.

Whitney held up her empty Coors bottle. "Looks like I need another."

"So do I," Shea said, although she still had half a bottle. "I'll come with you."

Whitney gave no indication that she heard Shea or knew the detective was dogging her steps across the yard to the bucket of ice-cold beer. Whitney shoved her sleeve up to her elbow before plunging her arm into the melting ice. She turned with a bottle in her hand. She said with a jerk of her head to the right, "Over here."

"Where's your sister, Ms. Warner?" Her question had a dual purpose. On the one hand, she wanted Whitney to know she was concerned about the young woman and on the other, she wanted to be in control of the conversation.

Whitney twisted the top off the bottle with a vicious snap of her wrist. "I'm neither her keeper nor her secretary, Detective Shea. It's not my job to know where she is."

"Did she tell you why she was at the precinct today? Do you know about her friend?"

Whitney was silent for several long seconds. Blue eyes skimmed over the party before she turned her gaze back to Shea. "There is no friend, Detective. I'm sorry your time was wasted this afternoon. I'm afraid my sister is unstable and whatever she told you should not be believed."

Shea nodded her head and smiled. "I thought as much. Of course, I checked into her story and found nothing to verify anything she said. Her story had so many little details that I was surprised nothing she said was based on anything factual."

"As I said, she's unstable. I am truly sorry you wasted your time because of one of her fantasies."

Again, Shea nodded. "I did find a few things fascinating. Like the odd coincidence of Prestige Hotel Suites. Tracy claims the attack happened at the one here in Atlanta and then who's waiting

for her when she leaves? Matthew Lang. I'd be surprised if his client list had anyone else on it besides the Eisner's. But you know what I found most interesting, Ms. Warner?"

Whitney simply stared at her, waiting.

Shea took a long drink of her beer. "How'd you get here, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"I drove."

"You have a car?"

"Apparently."

"So you have a driver's license?"

Whitney's eyes narrowed. "If you have a point, make it."

Shea shrugged carelessly. "No point, really. I was just wondering how you got here since you don't have a license in the state of Georgia. In fact, you don't seem to exist at all. How is it that in this day and age you don't have a paper trail, Ms. Warner?"

Whitney stepped so close to Shea they were touching. She leaned in to say softly, "Don't ask me another question without my lawyer present Detective Shea. This isn't idle conversation and we both know it. If you have further need to question me, call Matt Lang."

"My, my. So quick to take offense. Whatever are you hiding Ms. Warner?"

Whitney's smile was quick and dangerous. "I never said my name was Warner, Detective. You assumed that."

Shea could only watch as Whitney spun away from her and quickly headed for the exit. She had her phone out and was already talking to someone as she left the backyard. Shea revised her opinion of Matthew Lang. He apparently had at least two clients. Which made his being outside the precinct with Whitney that much more questionable. Was he really there for another reason and happened to see Tracy? If so, why did he call her sister rather than come to her assistance? If he was there because Tracy was, then the question was why was he there at all? Did Tracy know something someone didn't want her to know? Was there a connection somewhere between Tracy Warner and the Atlanta hotel?

As each question came to her, as each possible answer presented itself, the more Shea wanted to assure herself that Tracy Warner was indeed all right. Her instincts were blaring out a shrill warning she found impossible to ignore. Without a word to her host, Shea hurried to her car. Once she was headed towards the precinct, she organized her thoughts in her head. The first thing she had to do was get Matthew Lang on the phone and demand he produce Tracy Warner.

Before the night was over, she wanted to talk to the young blonde one more time.

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When her phone rang only a few minutes after she arrived home, Whitney thought about ignoring it. The line was her personal one and therefore did not require her immediate attention. She answered because the day was already a lost cause. How much worse could another phone call make it at this point?

Five minutes later, Whitney was muttering angrily to herself as she went down to the terminal center. Her new nemesis, Detective Shea, wanted to speak with Tracy again. Tonight. Whitney's first reaction was a resounding no. She wasn't a lawyer, but she knew Shea needed a legal reason to make any demands on them. It was Matt's opinion that they should not give her a reason to find one. Let her meet with Tracy, ask whatever she wanted to ask while making it clear this time was voluntary. Whitney liked his phrasing on that. Yes, tonight was voluntary. Shea would have to find that reason if she wanted to meet with them again.

She thought meeting at Prestige was suicidal considering Shea was suspicious of the hotel, but Matt had already made the arrangement with Shea. Whatever red flags were raised by Matt telling her to meet them here would only triple if they made a call to change the meeting place now. Shea already thought they were hiding something.

The fifth floor of Prestige Hotel Suites did not officially exist. It was the operations center for the Atlanta Gateway, just as every other PHS worldwide housed the center for that city or area. Her offices, the terminal center where travelers entered and exited the TimeLine, the Warehouse filled with clothes, and her penthouse apartment were the fifth floor. The terminal center itself was dimly lit and guarded by two armed sentries. The only transfers made after seventeen hundred hours were emergencies. Like a twenty-year-old college student who opened a potentially disastrous can of worms.

Whitney's call over to Denise, the Operations Director at Quantico, was brief. She told her what was happening and that she needed Tracy ASAP. Whitney hoped whatever Tracy was currently doing could easily be dropped. Matt wanted a few minutes before Shea arrived to get the ground rules set down for the interview. Whitney could only guess at his rules, but she hoped the first one was for Tracy to let Matt do all the talking.

Without warning, a cubicle slid open. Tracy, wearing the form fitting green coverall that was standard clothing at the Quantico compound, stepped out with a guard in tow. "Ms. Elliot thought you would want to clothe her here, Ms. Eisner."

Whitney nodded at the guard. "She was right. Come Ms. Warner, let's get you dressed to play your part."

Matt and Detective Shea were talking in the middle of the lobby by the time Whitney and Tracy reached the ground floor. Whitney said softly to Tracy, "Let Matt do the talking. He'll tell you when you should speak."

Whitney forced a smile to her face. "Detective Shea, I didn't expect to see you again so soon. Why don't we go into one of the conference rooms?"

She turned and headed to a door behind the registration desk without waiting to see if this was acceptable to Shea. The detective might have called this meeting, but this was her turf and while Shea had a little time invested into this puzzle, Whitney and all the others literally had everything to lose if this got out of control.

The conference room was one of the smaller ones in the hotel. Four chairs were grouped around the matching solid oak table. The color scheme was the navy blue, burgundy and dove gray of Prestige Hotels signature colors. The only other items in the room were a telephone console and dry ink board.

"Let me be frank Detective Shea," Matt said as they were sitting down at the table. "This is the only voluntary meeting. After this, you will need a warrant. The Eisner family regrets that Tracy came to you and that you felt the need to follow up on it. We know a police officer's time is valuable. I assure you Tracy will not do it again."

Whitney had the satisfaction of seeing shock cover the detective's face at the mention of her family's name. The police were notorious for shunning sticky political situations when they could. High profile families meant high profile media attention and the police never came off good in those. Why risk that for a case that did not involve murder, rape, or drugs?

Shea looked at Whitney. "Eisner? I thought you two had the same father."

Whitney clasped her hands on the table and sent a plea of forgiveness to her parents. She didn't know another way out of this. "My father had an affair. Tracy's mother refused to let her have his name."

"She doesn't care that Tracy's here now?"

Whitney shrugged. "She's over eighteen."

"So if I make inquiries into the name Whitney Eisner, I'll find you?"

"Yes, of course. I caution you to act discreetly. I don't want to read that I am being investigated by the police."

Matt cleared his throat. "To be specific, compensation will be sought for any embarrassment to the Eisner family."

Shea opened her notebook and flipped to a page. She uncapped a pen and held it poised over the empty page. "For the record Mr. Lang, do you corroborate Ms. Eisner's assertions that Tracy's friend was not attacked here in this hotel? That she is not in fact comatose at a hospital? That nothing Tracy told me this afternoon was true?"

"It was all untrue. Again, we regret your time was wasted."

Shea nodded as she wrote quickly in her notebook. She shot Matt a sideways glance. "So every statement she made to me today was false?"

Whitney had a sudden bad feeling about the legally worded question. She looked over at Matt and knew from his expression she had every reason to worry. He stood up and motioned for Tracy and Whitney to do the same. "This meeting is over, Detective. Making false statements to the police is a misdemeanor. I recommend you don't try to arrest Tracy for it. With her mental health history, she'd only get a slap on the wrist at best."

They left Shea sitting at the conference room table. Whitney gestured for Matt to accompany them. Whitney handed Tracy over to her guard with the short message to Denise that she would call her in the morning. Once inside her penthouse, she poured them each a glass of Hennessy and handed Matt his before sitting at the other end of the couch.

"How bad is it Matt?"

She knew, of course. This had the potential to explode their lives beyond repair. If Shea persisted in checking into Tracy's story, she could eventually find someone who saw something. All Shea needed was one tiny fact to point to Tracy's story being true for her to open an investigation. Whitney wanted to think they had perfectly contained the attack within the GSA family, but she wasn't willing to bet their future on it.

Matt turned sideways to face her. Like her, he was casually dressed in blue jeans and sweatshirt. "Well, while Ms. Detective was checking into us, I checked into her. Lauren Shea has a sterling reputation within the department. She has a high clearance rate. She's a good cop and I would hate for her career to be ruined over something we both know is true."

Whitney nodded in agreement. "I don't want this to come down to her or us, Matt. Do whatever you need to do to make this go away. I cannot choose to let her know what happened here. There is no way to explain the truth."

At least not in a way that didn't expose all of them.

"Is there anything new in the investigation?" Matt asked.

Whitney drank half the cognac before she answered. "No. It's hit the same dead end the other three hit. They thought they had something when another name popped with the first and third victims. It didn't pop with mine. There's not a lot they have in common beyond the obvious."

The attacks on young single women travelers began six months earlier. The first stunned the GSA because it was the first time a traveler was the victim of a crime while on one of the properties. Obviously, in the two centuries the GSA had been operating, they'd had victims. Muggings and assaults were common, but they had dozens of rapes and twelve murders. Travelers were at the same disadvantages as other newcomers to a city. Whitney and her staff stressed that they stay in crowds, not wander too far from the main roads, and keep their cell phones close. Not everyone listened and in every group, there was that one special person who

thought the rules didn't apply to them. Bad things happened and until the attacks, they always happened outside the hotels.

All four women were alive and in various stages of recovery. The attacks had progressed in violence until the last victim, Tracy's older sister Erin, was only alive due to the medical technology of the twenty-fifth century. Doctors were losing hope she'd recover from her coma.

The cases had too much in common to be coincidence. The biggest being the location of the attacks, namely a Prestige Hotel. They were all gay. All traveling alone. All picked up in a local gay bar and taken back to Prestige, but not to their own rooms. The room they were found in was on one of the unrestricted floors. Travelers stayed on restricted floors so that their odd attire when they arrived and left along with their conversations did not arouse suspicion. Sexual encounters with denizens of the twenty-first century were one in a long list of forbidden activities. The investigators thought the first victim had ignored that rule because of where she was found. By the time Erin was found, they had revised that to the attacker being a fellow traveler.

The odds that all four women left with a stranger only to be taken back to Prestige were too low for them to investigate that avenue. Every one of the travelers who were present with the women had alibis.

"Would you do what Tracy did? If this happened to Corinne?"

Whitney's mind helpfully supplied her with a picture of her older sister lying nude on the floor of a hotel room. Her skin mottled with deep purple and red bruises, hands painfully tied behind her by nylon rope that cut into her wrists, her face unrecognizable. "No, I'd be harassing the investigators on the other side. Tracy had nothing to gain by coming here. She feels helpless and this was not a good way for her to get rid of that feeling."

Matt drained his glass and handed it to her. "I'll call you if I get anymore calls from Detective Shea. Do the same for me, okay?"

Whitney reached for his glass. "There's no one else I would call. Thanks Matt. I appreciate how you handled this."

Matt grinned as he stepped into her private elevator. "That's why you pay me the big bucks."

"Yeah, that must be it," Whitney agreed as the elevator slid shut.

She carried their glasses to her little kitchen and washed them by hand. Matt was lucky he didn't get paid the twenty-first century salary for his position. She wasn't sure how the pretty boy would survive with such a drastic cut in his allowance. Luckily, they all worked for the GSA in some field and all were paid according to rank.

With nothing left to do, she walked up a short flight of stairs to her office that overlooked her living room. She sat at the computer to read the newest postings from the investigators.

The attacks all had one other thing in common-Whitney was onsite at each property the night of the attack. So far, that wasn't a clue being seriously investigated. Her presence there was unexpected and no one, including Whitney, knew until after she arrived that she would be spending the night. The only time she was alone was in her own room for the night. While she may have had the slimmest of opportunity, she did not have a motive.

Whitney finally turned off the lights and made her way to bed a little after midnight.

2.

"Excuse me."

Shea held up her right hand in the universal give-me-a-sec sign and continued typing with her left. She had to get this report finished and on her captain's desk before he decided to use her for target practice. She was already a week late handing it in. She saw someone sit in the chair next to her desk from the corner of her eye. She caught the scent of perfume and shot a quick look into the captain's office to see that it was empty. She had a few minutes she could spare.

"What can I do- uh for you?" She stumbled, unable to hide her shock. The last person she thought would be sitting at her desk on a bright winter day was Whitney Eisner. Hell, on any day if it meant she strolled in willingly off the street.

Sunglasses hid Whitney's eyes, but Shea didn't need to see the pale blue to know Whitney was in tight control of her emotions. The clenched jaw gave that away and so did the fists clasped on her lap. "Is there somewhere we can speak in private?"

The irritation Shea felt from her treatment at the hands of Whitney and her pet lawyer came back in hurricane strength force. She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. Whitney Eisner did exist, she found out. And what she found didn't make her like Whitney any more two months later than she did the day she met her. "Where's your lawyer? As I recall you don't want me speaking to you without your lawyer present."

"He's handling something else for me at the moment. Please, is there somewhere else we can talk?"

Shea wasn't sure what possessed her to get up and motion for Whitney to follow her. Curiosity probably. She wanted to know what brought Whitney to her desk, and alone. Matthew Lang made it very clear that Whitney was off-limits.

The interrogation room was small with only a scarred wooden table, four metal chairs and large mirror across one wall. Green paint was peeling from the floorboards. A gray path was worn in the black linoleum. "I'm sorry my conference room isn't as nice as yours."

Whitney tossed her shades to the table and stared at the mirror. "Mine doesn't have quite the special features that yours does. Is anyone back there?"

Shea's surprise at the question must have been reassuring enough for Whitney. She waved the question away and slowly took off her black leather gloves. Shea watched Whitney glance around the room before she looked under the table.

"This room isn't wired for sound. That would be illegal."

Whitney nodded absently and glanced around the room once more. "I'm not sure where else to go. This isn't the kind of help I ever thought I'd need."

Something in her tone, something desolate, caught Shea's attention. She narrowed her gaze and saw the woman was pale except for the dark circles under eyes. Eyes that darted over the room, over Shea, seeing nothing.

"Is this about Tracy?" Whitney's younger sister had problems. Shea wasn't too eager to get pulled into another situation involving the young blonde.

Whitney stared at her blankly. "Tracy?"

"Your sister? Tracy?"

Whitney closed her eyes and let out a shaky breath. When she opened her eyes, she stood up and reached for her gloves. Shea watched as she carefully pulled the kid-soft leather over her hands. She slipped on her shades. "My sister's name is Corinne. Until that day, I didn't know Tracy Warner existed."

Shea was speechless as every concern she had over Tracy was confirmed. Before she could ask any of the dozen questions bombarding her mind, Whitney withdrew a slim case from her breast pocket. She slipped out a business card and wrote a number on the back before holding it out to Shea.

"If you'd like to know the story about that, call me. Matt will be back by five. Call before then because I may be...unavailable after that."

Shea turned to watch Whitney quickly leave the room. What did that odd little pause mean? What word had Whitney censored herself from saying? And what did her attorney have to do with it? By the time she was in control of her body again, there was no sign of Whitney on the street. Shea went back inside to grab her coat and keys. It wasn't until she was sitting in her car that she wondered where she was going. She dug around in her pocket for the card Whitney gave her.

Whitney Eisner
COS
888.560.1967

She flipped the card over and saw a local number written in precise script. Shea stared at the odd business card while she waited for someone to answer the phone. What did COS mean? Why did

Whitney have an 800 number? From everything she was able to dig up, Whitney was a playgirl. She didn't work anywhere and she lived in a penthouse at Prestige. Why she bothered to get an MBA from Stanford puzzled Shea.

"Detective Shea I'm headed for home. I'll wait for you in the lobby."

Shea blinked at the unexpected voice. "How did you know it was me?"

She could hear the smile in Whitney's voice. "Caller ID."

"Ms. Eisner," Shea asked as she pulled into the flow of traffic. "What's a COS?"

"All your questions will be answered Detective, but not over a cell phone. Just pull under the portico. I'll have someone park your car."

Prestige Hotel Suites was located in the section of Atlanta devoted to expensive hotels and more expensive shopping. A beautiful navy marble tiled fountain was the first sight a guest saw when they turned through the high wrought iron gate that surrounded the hotel. Shea followed the curved brick drive to the front door. Whitney was standing next to a young man clad in a simple black suit.

"Park her next to me, Payne."

The young man took her keys with an excited smile. His coloring, especially the pale blue eyes, identified him as a relative of Whitney's. "Brother?"

Whitney cupped her elbow and led her into the lobby. "Nephew. Peyton, my brother, is Payne's dad."

"Is he old enough to drive?" Shea cringed at the image of her Honda crashed into one of the concrete pylons.

"Yes."

"Has he ever driven your car?"

Whitney laughed as they stepped into the elevator. Shea watched in interest as Whitney used a cardkey to a floor marked G. "No, he hasn't. But only because I don't use the valet service. To hear him tell it, there isn't a car in Atlanta Payne hasn't parked."

The elevator opened into a bi-level room. Whitney walked out removing her gloves. "Have a seat, Detective. I'm having a Coke. Would you like something?"

Shea walked from the elevator slowly, her gaze taking in the beautiful room. The signature colors of Prestige were prominent. The furniture was overstuffed navy leather, glass topped tables and large abstract paintings streaked liberally with burgundy. The carpet was dark gray. A

small platform with desk and computer overlooked the room. The only view was the floor to ceiling window behind the desk.

"What else do you have?"

Whitney came to stand in front of her with a glass. Her smile was amused. "Well, on hand I have Coke and Dr. Pepper and a small assortment of alcohol. However, I can order anything you want from one of the restaurants downstairs."

"Dr. Pepper would be great." Shea slipped her coat off. "This is a lovely apartment. I wondered why you live here. All of this, maid service and restaurants downstairs. How much would this cost me each month?"

Whitney handed her a glass. "I doubt the city of Atlanta pays that well. However, we may be able to work something out."

"Ah yes, the problem you never thought you would have. So if I help you, you'll give me a discount on rent?"

Whitney's smile was bitter. "I expect to be arrested for murder any minute. If you keep that from happening, you can live in this hotel rent-free for the rest of your life. You may then will the suite to whomever you wish."

Only quick thinking kept Shea's fingers locked on the glass in her hand. Otherwise, Whitney's nice plush carpet would be soaked with Dr. Pepper. She stared at Whitney in shock, waiting for Whitney to smile or laugh to show she wasn't serious. Pale blue eyes stared at her in a direct, humorless stare.

"My God, you're serious."

"Very."

Shea took a cautious step back. "Who did you kill?"

Whitney spun away from her and walked over to drop down on the couch. "Nobody. I didn't kill anyone. The evidence is pointing in that direction. As I said, I need help. I can't believe we don't have cops on the payroll. What an oversight that turned out to be."

"Cops on the payroll?" Shea echoed softly. "You mean like Matthew Lang is on your payroll?"

Whitney nodded and took a healthy drink from her glass before staring down into the dark liquid. "Yes, like Matt, but not how you think. This is complicated. Maybe I should begin with your earlier question. COS stands for Chief of Security. I am from your future, Detective. Well, that's not true either. I was born here and except for a few years of training this is where I've always lived. But my people truly belong to the future."

Shea asked the only question that made any sense. "Just how stoned are you?"

"I'm not, but I can see how you would ask that. I can prove what I'm saying. So, for right now, pretend that you believe me. I don't have much time."

Shea nodded and sat carefully on the couch. "Okay, but that proof better be pretty damn good. Otherwise, you'll be spending the night on a psych ward somewhere."

"It may come to that," Whitney said darkly.

Whitney was on her second drink and Shea nursing her first by the time Whitney spilled the whole story. The secret of the fifth floor, the truth about herself and the others, the nightmare rapidly staining her life in blood red. Shea was left numb by the tale. She didn't know whether to want to believe Whitney or to call for help. The story was outrageous and fantastic and had too many details that Whitney said she could prove for it to be anything less than real. If it was real, her life was never going to be the same again.

A chime sounded in the silent apartment. Shea followed Whitney's gaze to the doors of the elevator. They opened and Matthew, looking like any up and coming attorney milling around the Fulton County courthouse, walked into the apartment. His eyes widened as he saw Shea sitting on the couch. He scowled at Whitney. "Do I need to ask why she's here?"

Shea looked at Whitney in time to see her shrug. "You told me to get ready to defend myself. They have their police. I thought I should have mine."

Matthew sighed in exasperation. "How much have you told her?"

"Enough to lose my job, get tossed to the other side, and spend the best years of my life in detainment. I'm fighting for my life, Matt. Don't expect me to play by the rules."

Matthew stared at them for several long moments. He conceded Whitney's point with a slight dip of his head. "You're not under arrest yet, Whitney, but I think it's only a matter of time. For now, they're willing to settle for you wearing a sensor. Think of it as a form of house arrest. Denise fought hard for you."

Shea felt the tension leave Whitney's body. "Thank you Matt. I can't believe the evidence is that strong when I didn't do this."

Matthew set his attaché case and coat down by the doors. "Come, we've got to get you tagged. If you don't show up soon on the GPS, they'll come for you."

Whitney plucked the glass out of her hand and stood up. "I think it's time I gave you some proof Detective."

~~

A skeletal night crew was working in the command center. Whitney nodded at the two sentries standing outside the large room and ushered Matt and Shea past avidly staring agents. Whitney didn't bring visitors to her office after hours. She glanced at the detective's face. She was taking the revelations better than Whitney thought she would in the same situation. Especially given how they treated Shea.

A large map of the North American continent covered one wall. It was sectioned off into six color-coded sections and dotted with dozens of lights. Most were green, but she saw San Francisco and Los Angeles were still orange. She looked across to the senior agent. "Get people to Frisco and LA, now. I want those lights green in ten minutes."

Satisfied, she turned back to Shea and waved a hand over the room partitioned by desks for the senior agents who oversaw the Atlanta Gateway and the itineraries of the many travelers who passed through every day.

"This is where we run everything. Every traveler wears a sensor for tracking. It also tells us if someone tries to take anything back. We control what is taken over. We knew Tracy was with you because her sensor sent an alarm. Meeting with police isn't allowed either, but it does happen when someone's arrested."

Shea sent Matt a considering glance. "That's why you're always there whenever a Prestige guest is in custody."

Matt nodded. "If you check, you'll find no one ever returns for arraignment. We get them back and send them home. They lose travel privileges for a while as punishment."

While Matt and Shea talked, Whitney walked into her office. She opened a drawer and stared over the contents before making a selection. She sat on the edge of her desk to exchange her hoop earrings for the gold ball studs she selected as her sensors. The sensors came in a variety of choices that was left up to the individual traveler. Stud earrings were the most popular with both men and women.

"Good," Matt said as he came into the room. He sat at her desk to use her phone.

Whitney pushed off her desk and walked over to the door to stand next to Shea. "So are you on the team, Detective? I should be surprised they've agreed to let me roam free, but I guess my position deserves nothing less."

"Your position? Are you high ranking?"

"The highest," Matt said as he replaced the receiver. "Whitney's chief of the North American continent."

Matt clapped her on the shoulder. "Denise says you're on radar. Do you need me for anything else? I've got a few legit things I need to do at work."

Several emotions washed over Whitney as she remembered the phone call that sent her ordinary day into a tailspin. Even as she told Sam she had to go over to Quantico, that Denise needed to speak to her, it never occurred to Whitney the summons had nothing to do with her Gateway. Armed sentries took her to a conference room where Denise sat with the two investigators working the assault cases. Whitney didn't give them the chance to ask any questions. Sensing why she was there, she made an immediate request for Matt. Denise suspended the interrogation pending his arrival.

Whitney sat in the conference alone for over an hour, fuming, wondering why Matt wasn't there. She was entertaining herself with images of all the bottom feeding jobs she would give him when he stepped into the room. His tone was brisk as he broke the news that Erin Warner died that morning. He told her to go home and get ready to defend herself against capital murder charges. It took Whitney the brief ride from Quantico to Atlanta to decide she needed a good investigator on her side. She only knew one.

Ignoring the protocol of who they were, Whitney leaned into him for a brief hug. "Thanks for everything Matt. Go, be normal. You'll call me and I'll call you if anything happens."

He gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Keep those studs on at all times. Don't give them a reason to take you into custody. We need you over here."

Whitney nodded, saying, "I promise."

Matt left them alone in her office. Whitney stared at the petite blonde. "So, what do you think?"

"I think I know how Alice felt when she fell down that rabbit hole. This becomes more surreal by the moment."

Doesn't it though? The day went surreal on her when she stepped out of the cubicle at Quantico and hadn't felt right since. She still felt the vibration of shock once she realized she was there for interrogation. She crammed her shaking hands into the pocket of her slacks. "Are you hungry? I can't believe I am, but I suppose the breakfast I had at seven this morning can only last so long."

Shea smiled. "Maybe over dinner you can explain why I'm here."

Whitney blinked at her in surprise. "I told you why. I need help. I have no intention of paying for crimes I didn't commit."

"I don't know you didn't do it."

The words cut even as Whitney acknowledged the honesty of them. If Shea investigated her, she knew only the life created for Whitney for this time period. To the outside world, Whitney led a pointless life indulging her passion for traveling. She vanished for days without warning and reappeared with tales of skiing or snorkeling in some exotic locale. Her friends were by turns envious of her life and saddened by the emptiness of it.

She took a deep breath and looked into Shea's steady green gaze. "Well, maybe if I can convince you, you can help me convince the investigators. I'm not a killer. If anything, there are people who would like to kill me."

Shea's eyebrows shot up under her blonde bangs. "Why do you say that?"

Whitney gestured with her head and walked out of her office. "I don't mean that too seriously, but I think people who hold a grudge against me wouldn't be too upset if I was murdered. My just reward and all that. I have a huge responsibility here and a lot of power. It's my job to make sure nothing interrupts the TimeLine and I take that seriously."

Instead of turning right to head them towards the penthouse, Whitney turned left and began walking down the long corridor that led to the rest of the floor. From the corner of her eye, she saw Shea staring at the sentries. She clasped her hands behind her back. "I have forty-eight of these centers under my command across the US, Canada and Mexico. Each center is staffed by at least fifty people. I believe New York, LA and Miami have over five hundred. At any given time, we have ten thousand visitors in the system. They are monitored from the second they arrive to the second they leave. I, and the rest of my senior staff, are on call twenty-four seven."

They walked into the massive terminal center. Two walls were lined with sliding doors. A long counter, lined with terminal computers, ran the length of the other wall. This room had no windows. Prestige colors were found in the polished gray marble floor, burgundy wallpaper and navy leather chairs.

"These are the terminals. Everyone who comes to Atlanta, comes through here. There is no other way from the other side to enter a city except through the terminal center. However, those of us who live on this side, can go to any terminal in the world from any other terminal. I can be in any GSA city on this planet in less than five seconds."

Shea cocked her head to stare at her. "GSA?"

"Gateway Security Agency. There are six central gateways. I oversee the North American Central Gateway." Whitney turned and headed for the hallway. "Come, let's order dinner."

Shea wandered around her suite while Whitney placed their order to the bistro downstairs. She watched the detective and wondered what price she would pay for sharing their secret with an outsider. On the one hand she was fighting for her life and on the other, she would lose her life here even if she cleared her name. By telling Shea anything about them, she had forfeit her life on this side.

She walked down from her desk. "Before we talk anymore, I want to stress that you cannot tell anyone what I've told you. Matt and I will deny everything under oath. If you persist, you will be picked up and taken to the other side. No one will ever know what happened to you."

The GSA had emergency plans in place for every situation they thought could arise from people in the future visiting the past. Whitney wasn't aware of anyone being snatched by the GSA, but knew there was a protocol for that situation.

Shea tossed her wry grin. "Do I look crazy? Because that's what I'd have to be and what people would think I am if I started telling this story. I don't think I'd look good in sanitarium white."

Whitney refrained from stressing home the point that Shea would never see the inside of a sanitarium. She needed Shea's help. The last thing she wanted to do was scare her. As long as the detective stayed off their radar, she had nothing to fear.

She waved a hand to the couch. "You've taken my revelations surprisingly in stride, Detective. I was thinking earlier that I doubt I would be so trusting if I were you."

Shea kicked off her battered Nikes before drawing both legs up to curl up in the corner of the couch. She laughed as she stared down at the couch at Whitney. "Well, to be honest, learning that you run the country's largest travel agency explains your background a lot better than the playgirl image you've tried to project. I had a chat with Kim a few days after her party. I was calling to apologize for leaving so abruptly. She thought we left together and was all too eager to pump me for information. Do you know the nickname they have for you?"

Whitney shook her head as she internally winced at the names her friends could call her. She was positive that whatever it was, it wasn't complimentary.

"Bond, Whitney Bond. They think you work for some super secret government agency. If you're interested, it's the MBA that blows your cover. The children of wealthy parents who do nothing but play are a dime dozen. Very few have MBA's from Stanford."

It was a stunningly simple truth and Whitney was amused her cover was blown by something that should have been so obvious. They worked hard for the cover stories every GSA person lived. While most of the vital statistics that made up a life were true, a few meant something else if cast under a different life. Like her MBA. She earned it through the same hard work and dedication as everyone else who had one. It looked to the outside observer that Whitney did nothing with hers. Just as it looked to an outside observer that Matt worked solely for the Eisner family. The facts were true, but the picture they made depended on which side of the puzzle you stood.

The elevator chimed and Whitney slipped from the couch. Their meal was here. She said over her shoulder, "Maybe on my next birthday, I should inherit money and let it be known the MBA is why. Would that satisfy my friends?"

Shea's light laughter carried across the room. "Kim will be so disappointed. You have a pretty active life in her fantasies."

A waiter entered the suite pushing a room service cart. Whitney directed the set up of their meal onto the low table in front of the couch. She signed for the meals and sat down when they were

alone. Silence descended as they took off the silver dome lids and prepared to eat. They were having French Dip roast beef sandwiches with au jus sauce, small house salad and crispy homemade potato chips. Once Whitney had the ranch dressing dribbled over her salad and the lid off her sauce container, she moved them back to the reason Shea was in her suite.

"Whatever questions you have, now would be the time to ask them. I have the time to answer them today. I won't tomorrow. My job is demanding and I can't neglect that, even if my life is on the line."

She glanced over at the other woman. Shea was busy with her own plate. She shot Whitney a glance. "Can you get me copies of whatever passes for police reports on your side? We need to know why they think you're the killer. What is their evidence? What do they have on you?"

Those weren't the questions Whitney thought Shea would ask, at least not tonight. She was giving Shea the rare chance to ask her the secrets of her life. She was willing to answer questions that, until a few hours ago, she never thought a civilian would ever be in a position to ask her. She told Shea outrageous things, showed her fascinating images, and all Shea could think to ask was about the case. Whitney was stunned that Shea either believed her or was willing to suspend belief until the case was solved. She stood up and headed for her computer.

"I have copies of all filed reports. It's my right as COS. I'll print you one."

"Good. Print me out whatever you filed in regards to the attack while you're at it."

~~

The evidence against Whitney hovered somewhere between circumstantial and slam the cell door shut behind her. Shea knew if she had a suspect's fingerprints at a crime scene and no legitimate reason for them to be there, she'd have that person in custody. From Whitney's recitation of her day, Shea knew that it was only Matt Lang's legal skill that kept an interrogation from happening. She wondered briefly how Matt managed that.

Whitney's fingerprints bothered her for two reasons. The first was Whitney's assertion she was never in those rooms while she was on the properties those days. When Shea asked if she'd taken a tour of the property, Whitney laughed and said she hadn't taken a tour of the Atlanta hotel. Why would she do that somewhere else? Whitney went on to explain that she wasn't in charge of the hotels and had nothing to do with their management. The fifth floor and only the fifth floor was her responsibility.

It was the placement of the fingerprints that gave Shea pause. They were found on the navy cover of a book of matches from Atlanta Prestige. The only place they were found. A small, easily moved book of matches. Shea was positive even Matt's legal skills couldn't keep the wolves at bay if her prints were found on the bedpost or in the bathroom. They couldn't place Whitney in the room with just a book of matches. They could, and tried, to bring her in for questioning.

Shea sat back after reading the files Whitney gave her and knew she had a choice to make. She either believed Whitney was innocent and went at the case from that angle. Or she had doubts on her innocence and wished Whitney the best of luck in clearing her name. Shea closed her eyes. Various images of Whitney paraded across her mind. She heard Kim telling her that Whitney often left abruptly after receiving a phone call or page. She was gone for days. Shea remembered how quickly Whitney was at the police station that day with Tracy. She saw again the sprawling fifth floor and tried to imagine forty-eight of them. Whitney had to be available to any one of them at a moment's notice. The picture painted wasn't one of someone who had the time to plot attacks on women.

Shea began a list of questions she wanted to ask Whitney when they met tomorrow. She needed to know why Whitney went to the hotels on those days. Who knew she was going. What happened if Whitney could not respond to a call. Did Whitney smoke. She wanted Whitney to take her through the executive's itinerary for the days in question. Where did she go, why, what did she do and who else saw her doing it.

There was a common thread that tied the cases together. Every instinct she had told her Whitney wasn't their suspect. She had no motive and no real opportunity. She just couldn't see Whitney picking women up in a bar, taking them back to where she lived and worked, and beating them senseless. While she could see Whitney talking some woman into going home with her, she could never see Whitney taking them back to Prestige if she was going to assault them. Whitney wasn't stupid. She had the ability to take these women anywhere in the world. Shea couldn't see her taking them to a Prestige anywhere, much less one of her own.

Whitney wanted her to take a leave of absence from her job. Shea wasn't surprised by the request, but was surprised by her own readiness to agree. She was willing to put her career, and her life, on hold for a woman she barely knew. It was intriguing and she didn't mean just the case. It was the idea that people from the future were visiting them, living among them. Shea wanted to know more about that. She had dozens of questions she wanted to ask Whitney about that, but had already decided it was more important to get to Whitney's problem. Her personal questions could wait.

Shea knew getting leave wasn't a problem. Her last partner left work one day, walked in on a robbery at a 24/7 and was still recovering from multiple gunshot wounds. Shea was waiting for a new partner, but knew it would take a while.

Her reputation as a trouble magnet preceded her. Max was the second of her four partners to walk in on a robbery. Connie at least had the brains to act like a surprised customer and wait for a shot. Serena transferred after they were car jacked on a stakeout. Daniel was her first partner once she made detective and his two years with her was still the record to beat. He left after they were hit by a sixteen-year-old leading police on a merry chase in a stolen Mercedes. He spent a week in the hospital.

The department was wondering what to do with her and Shea feared a transfer to a desk job. On the scales, her high clearance rate was being outweighed by her reputation.

She made a few more notes on her list before turning in for the night. She didn't notice at Whitney's, but once she read the files, she realized there were no photos of the crime scenes. She would like to meet the victims and talk to Tracy again. She wasn't sure how or even if Whitney could arrange that. Shea didn't think taking her to the future was an option for Whitney.

She crawled into bed and, for the first time in weeks, was looking forward to the morning. If pushing papers was her future in the department, Shea knew her career as a detective was coming to an end. She fell asleep wondering if Whitney's comment about not having police on the payroll meant she was willing to consider it.

~~

The whispering from her conscience began not long after Shea left her apartment. Whitney wasn't a rule breaker and she'd broken most of the ones she sworn on her life to uphold. She repeated for herself the same line she used on Matt. The lie didn't work as well for her because she didn't believe for one instant her life was more important than anyone else's. And she knew without a doubt she'd throw anyone else who broke the same rules over to Denise in a heartbeat. Whitney wasn't sure what that made her, but she knew she didn't like the feeling.

She tried to read reports, to lose herself in mindless sitcoms and gave in after only an hour. She was angry with herself as she called Denise and asked to meet the Ops Director in her office. She snatched up all official symbols of her office and rank, marched into the elevator and kept her gaze on the selection panel as the doors closed. She refused to look around her apartment and wonder if she would be back. Whatever happened, happened. One way or another she would live with the consequences.

The sub-basement at the GSA headquarters in Quantico was attended by a lone sentry. Whitney ignored the crisp salute from the young woman. The only thing on her mind was getting to Denise's office and tossing her burden onto someone else's shoulders. Denise Elliot was older, wiser, and Whitney's boss. If Denise sided with her, she could live with what she'd done. If Denise didn't, she could live with that, too. What she couldn't live with, as was apparent by her late night arrival, was the uncertainty of it.

The Director's office door was open. Whitney glanced into the room and smiled. A robe clad Denise was slumped behind her massive wooden desk, slippered feet propped up on the edge and her face buried in the steam rising from a maroon mug with the GSA seal. Whitney knocked hesitantly on the door.

Denise lifted sleepy, annoyed hazel eyes to stare at her. Whitney felt like a first year cadet and found herself trying not to shift under the direct gaze. "Come in and tell me just what couldn't wait until the morning."

Whitney obeyed and sat across from her mentor. She wiped damp palms on her jeans. Now that she was here, she wasn't sure how to start. She didn't want to just blurt out what she'd done. Denise was likely to spill that hot coffee all over her lap by the admission. She thought she would pass out if she tried to beat around the bush.

"Whitney?" Denise's voice was gentle and she sat up. She placed her cup on the clean desk and crossed her arms. "It can't be that bad can it?"

"Do you remember that Detective Tracy Warner contacted when she was over?"

Denise frowned at the seemingly left field question. "Vaguely. She's a detective on the Atlanta force."

Whitney nodded. She met Denise's searching gaze. "When I left here today, I went to her. I told her everything about the attacks and us. I asked her to help me."

As the words left her mouth, Whitney felt the tension fall away and relief rush to fill the void. Time stretched as she stared at Denise's blank face and waited for the axe to slice her cleanly from the only life she'd ever known.

Finally, Denise blinked and stood up. She planted her hands on her desk and leaned towards Whitney. Her tone was slow and measured. "I want to make sure I understand this correctly. My North American Central Gateway Chief of Security, fully cognizant of the consequences, willingly revealed our presence to a civilian? Did you really just tell me that?"

Whitney simply nodded. She would not offer excuses or a defense. She didn't have the latter and she refused to hide behind the former.

"Oh my God," Denise said, her soft tone shaded with anger and disbelief. She dropped into her chair with a jarring thud. She closed her eyes and brought her right hand up to massage her temple. "I don't even know where to start the charges."

Again, Whitney could only nod. She sat forward to put her cell phone, pager, and ID on the desk. Denise backed hastily away from the items as if they were covered in nuclear radiation. Her startled gaze flicked between Whitney and her desktop several times.

"Explain why you threw such a promising career away."

Whitney found she could not sit under Denise's demanding gaze one more second. She pushed herself to her feet and rolled her shoulders as she turned to pace. She almost asked why Denise wanted to know when the why of it would change nothing. The hard rules, the ones with heavy penalties, did not come with exceptions. Obeying them was never a choice. She answered Denise now only because she could delay the inevitable if she talked forever.

"When Matt asked me the same thing today, I told him it was because I'm fighting for my life. That I shouldn't have to play by the rules. I truly believed that when I said it. And it is the reason I did it." She shook her head now, disgusted with her reasoning. "I should have found a better way to do this."

"If you could go back to this afternoon, would you do it again?"

The somber question caught Whitney off guard. Technically, she could go back to that afternoon. It was now the past. However, it was a part of the past closed to even them. The last two hundred years, other than the decades designated as open, were closed to them for travel for many reasons and only the unanimous consent of the Council could open it. As far as Whitney knew, that had never happened. But Denise wasn't asking if she would go back.

"Yes. I don't know the better way to do this. The investigators are looking for evidence against me, not for someone else. I won't wait until I'm arrested before I start clearing my name."

The last of her doubts slid away as she realized the absolute truth of her words. Yes, if given the opportunity, she would do it again. If she had other choices, if she had different options, she couldn't see them. At least this way, if she cleared her name, the life she would live on this side would be free.

"How did she take it, this detective of yours?"

Whitney had to grin at how easily Shea accepted her story. She'd shown her nothing really that was irrefutable evidence of time travelers. "Amazingly well. I think she still had a lot of questions over Tracy. Learning the truth, about Matt and me, made that whole incident make sense for her. She's going to take a leave of absence to help me."

Denise sighed and with her cup cradled in her hands again, sat back in her chair. "I don't want to lose you Whitney. Replacing you could take the rest of my posting term. I've got better things to do with that time."

"I'm sorry Denise. I didn't kill Erin Warner. I didn't attack those women. I'll do whatever I have to do."

And that was Whitney's bottom line. She'd broken the rules, gone outside of the GSA for help because she was not paying for someone else's crimes. She'd pay for her own and fully expected to lose her command, but that was as far as she was willing to go.

Denise dismissed her words with a careless wave of her hand. "You'd be sitting in a cell right now if I even thought you capable of these acts. You're not and the people who will be standing on your side should it go that far will surprise you. But you've made a huge mess here, Whitney, and now we have to find a way to cover it up."

Whitney watched in slack jawed shock as Denise sat up and booted her computer. "Sit down. This may take a while."

Whitney sat. Curious, she leaned forward. "What may take a while?"

Denise grinned at her and winked. "We're going to make your detective official GSA. Tomorrow you can announce to your staff that I've hired a security advisor. How did you expect her to investigate this without clearance of any kind?"

"I didn't think that far ahead."

Whitney felt numb as she watched Denise build a life for Lauren Shea in the future. When she walked back into her apartment a few minutes after midnight, she held Shea's new life in one hand and her own in the other. This time when she stepped from the elevator, she let out a deeply held breath as her gaze moved slowly over the room. She wasn't here much. There wasn't much about the room that reflected her personality. She would have missed it more than she knew.

She went up to her desk and left the cell phones, pagers and her ID. Tomorrow her life changed. For better or worse, she didn't know. Before she walked into her bedroom, she turned back to the room lit by a full moon.

Unless they actually managed to hang the murder on her, this was hers.

Home.

Who knew she would cross any line to fight for it?

3.

Nephew Payne wasn't parking cars late the next morning when Shea arrived at the front door of Prestige. This man was slightly older than Payne, probably a college student, and his eyes weren't the trademark Eisner blue. He opened her door before she could and greeted her with a smile too friendly to be the typical valet grin.

"Good morning Ms. Shea. Ms. Eisner left a message for you at the front desk." He plucked the keys from her hand and left her staring as he drove away in her car.

The day just wasn't going as planned. She stopped by the precinct first, thinking her request for leave was a mere formality. Apparently, she wasn't as expendable with the department as she thought. Captain Ross saw her request as a prelude to her resignation and wanted assurances that she wasn't leaving the department. She gave it easily and could look him in the eye when she did. For that moment in time, she had every intention of coming back to her job.

Now, she was finally where she wanted to be all morning and the person she wanted to see wasn't there. Shea felt deflated as she walked into the busy lobby. She wanted to dive into the investigation. Once she made up her mind to believe in Whitney's innocence, she was eager to get her hands on the case. The last thing she wanted was to cool her heels waiting.

Before Shea could join the line of people waiting at the front desk, another smiling co-ed dressed in black slacks and maroon oxford walked up to her and took her arm. "Ms. Shea, I'm Amanda, Whitney's assistant. Whitney's in a meeting right now. If you'll come with me, we should have everything finished by the time the meeting ends."

First shock and then intrigue had Shea following the perky red head down the hallway behind the reservation desk. So, Whitney was on the premises. And what was "everything" that would be

finished by the time the meeting ended? Amanda led her into a small office and gestured for her sit in front of the desk.

Amanda took a folder from a pile and opened it. With a skill borne of practice, she quickly set out several forms facing Shea and marked spots with a hastily crossed X. "Once your suite is ready, we'll decorate it to your preferences. Whitney requested that it be on the fifth floor for obvious reasons. We have special parking in the garage so we are discouraged from using the valet service."

Despite her deeply ingrained reluctance to sign any legal papers she had not read, Shea signed and initialed every spot Amanda indicated. She listened with half an ear as the woman went through the usual benefits of the GSA and the additional privileges of being at the headquarters of the North American Central Gateway. Shea wanted to ask just what position she now held at the Atlanta hotel, but didn't want to blow whatever cover Whitney was providing for her.

Amanda gathered up the papers as efficiently and handily as she dealt them out. She closed the cover on the folder with a bright smile. "All that's left is to get your new ID, a shirt for today, and find out what parking slot is open for you."

Nearly half an hour later, Shea was alone in the elevator, headed for the fifth floor and had traded her white knit shirt for a navy oxford. The GSA dress code was dictated by PHS. Amanda explained that everyone dressed like staff to avoid confusion among guests. Shea thought it was more to keep the GSA members hidden among the hotel staff. When Amanda asked if she knew the way to the command center, Shea said yes. She was reasonably sure she could find the command center once she was on Whitney's floor. She stared at the items in her hand in amazement. She had an official GSA ID card that, in addition to her name, gave her title as Special Security Advisor. She had a parking decal for the GSA parking lot. She had a new cell phone and pager. She would wait until later to read the copies of the papers she'd signed. She hoped whatever she agreed to do didn't include living the rest of her life five hundred years in the future.

The fifth floor was bustling. Shea weaved a path down the long corridor and tried not to stare. The clothing in Whitney's time was...different. There seemed to be a lot of shiny materials with brightly clashing colors. Did they become color blind in the future? As she neared the terminal center, a familiar voice caught her attention. She slowed and stepped into the oddly silent room.

Every eye was on Whitney as she faced off with a husky woman with twinkling neon green hair.

"You were told what you could and could not wear. Your hair is unacceptable for this era. You will change it or you will go home. Those are your only options."

"Do you know how much this cost? I'm not changing my hair. I'm not going home. I've paid for three days." The woman's loud, demanding voice was a shrill contrast to Whitney's cool, controlled tone.

Whitney waved over one of the sentries. "Next time follow the rules and you'll be allowed to stay for three days. Quantico," she said to the muscular man.

"You can't- Hey!" The woman reached for Whitney as she was turning away and Shea stepped forward, grasped her arm and twisted it behind the woman's back.

Shea tightened her grip when the woman began to thrash. The guard snapped a pair of flexcuffs from his waist and between the two of them, they locked the plastic restraints on her wrists. Shea straightened her jacket and turned to find Whitney grinning at her.

"All right, let's get back to work," Whitney said and let her gaze sweep over the room.

Once she was satisfied, she glanced at her watch. "Are you hungry? I'm having lunch sent to my office and you can ask me all your questions."

"What questions?" Shea asked. "Like how did I suddenly become a GSA employee?"

Her tone was teasing and while she did want to know the story behind her new status, she wasn't very concerned about it. Oddly, she trusted Whitney. The woman lied to her during a quasi-official investigation. She was being investigated for assault and murder. And Shea trusted her. The grin she angled up at Whitney fell from her face at the stony expression on Whitney's. A quick shake of her head had the rest of her teasing words dying on her lips. She didn't need to be a mind reader to know Whitney didn't want this conversation continued in the hallway.

The command center was fully staffed this morning. Phones rang. Voices rose and fell over the cacophony. The rich aroma of coffee hung in the air. The large map was dotted with green, yellow and orange lights. Shea followed in Whitney's wake and was surprised when Whitney veered from her open door to the closed one next to it. Her brisk knock was met with a command to enter.

A slim man with a windblown mop of sandy hair sat behind a black glass desk. He glanced up from the paper he was writing and then sat back with a puzzled smile when he saw Whitney standing in front of him. Like Whitney, he was sharply dressed, his button down oxford a slate gray while Whitney's was maroon.

"Sam, I wanted you to meet Lauren Shea. We're going to be locked in my office for about an hour going over what I need for her to do here." She turned to Shea with a smile. "Shea this is my Executive Officer Sam Martin. If you ever need anything and can't find me, find Sam."

Shea held her hand out to the man. Sam had dark brown eyes and Shea caught herself before she shifted uncomfortably under his calculating gaze. Without him having said a word to her, she knew Sam Martin did not like her. The feeling was mutual. His handshake was soft and weak and she suspected he had to fight not to wipe his hand off on his slacks.

"We'll let you get back to work," Whitney said.

Because she was facing Sam when Whitney turned to leave his office, she saw disgust flash in his eyes before he sent her a dismissive smile. "Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Shea."

"Yeah, you, too."

Shea followed Whitney into her office and mentally put Sam on her list of suspects. Whitney walked behind her desk and smiled at Shea. "Lunch is here. I ordered cheeseburgers and fries. Is that all right?"

Shea had skipped breakfast. "I hope it taste as wonderful as it smells."

Whitney reached over and pulled the silver lid off the tray sitting on the visitor side of her desk. "Better."

Shea hoped Whitney was as honest about everything else as she was about the food. As she ate the best cheeseburger she'd ever had, she thought about her questions. When she arrived that morning, her only ones were about the case. Now she had others and she wasn't sure where to start.

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Whitney had only question she wanted to ask. If Shea didn't give her the right answer, then everything Denise did the night before was moot. She waited until Shea was dragging her last steak fry through a smeared puddle of ketchup on her plate. "Did you get your leave of absence?"

Shea laughed and nodded. "Just barely. I thought I was on my way out. Captain Ross made me promise I'd be coming back."

The answer surprised Whitney. She remembered Matt telling her that Shea had a sterling reputation in the department. "Why on your way out? According to Matt, you're one of the best."

Her words surprised Shea, and angered her. "You checked me out?"

Whitney had to laugh at the outraged naiveté. "Of course I did. Just as you checked me out. So, answer my question. Why did you think you were on your way out?"

Her quick grin was embarrassed. "My partners have a short shelf life. No one's died yet, but the attitude seems to be that sooner or later someone will."

"Now it's your turn," Shea said and sat back in her chair. "Why I am suddenly a GSA employee?"

Because she expected Shea to ask that, Whitney was ready with an answer that did not include her late night dash to Quantico. Shea didn't need to know about her attack of conscience. "For you to do this job the right way, you need clearances I can't give you. I talked to my boss and she decided the best thing was for everyone to think you're GSA. She set it up so that if anyone checks you look legit."

"How legit?" Shea asked in obvious surprise.

Whitney sat forward. "As legit as I am here."

She watched Shea sit back and blink as thoughts raced across her mind. Whitney watched the green eyes and wished she could read minds. She was certain she'd be very entertained by Shea's.

"I thought you said if anyone on that side knew about me, I'd be scooped up and never heard from again."

Whitney grinned. From anyone else, that question would hold at least a trace of concern. Not from Shea. Perhaps because she signed papers giving her official standing in the GSA rather than being met by armed men had something to do with her indifference. Whatever, it was trait in the detective she was beginning to admire.

"You have friends in high places now." It was as close to the truth as she would admit.

"And when this is over, they're going to let me just walk back to my little life?"

Again, the question lacked the concern Whitney would expect.

"Yes." She hadn't asked Denise that question. Hadn't thought to. It didn't matter. If Shea wanted to go back to her life, Whitney would break whatever rules she had to for that to happen.

Shea reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a small notebook. "I'm holding you to that. Now, give me a run down on your people here."

Whitney was thrown off by the change of subject. "What people? My parents?"

"Department heads. Supervisors. Whatever you call the people who report directly to you. I think you're being framed. I think it's someone close to you."

Whitney knew she was being framed. Because she was still focused on that, she hadn't thought to wonder who would want to do this to her. Now, with Shea sitting across from her stating the obvious, Whitney was chilled by the truth. Someone close to her, either friend or co-worker, attacked those women and killed one. Why? For what purpose? The questions tumbled in her head.

"Whitney!"

Her head came up at Shea's sharp call. "What?"

Shea's narrowed gaze swept over her face and Whitney knew she was pale. She saw when Shea made the connection. Her face softened and her eyes were a sympathetic green. "That didn't occur to you yet, did it?"

"No," Whitney admitted, "I've been thinking only that I didn't do it. I haven't thought to wonder who did."

Shea smiled and poised her pen over her notebook. "That's my job. Tell me about your people. Start with your XO."

Whitney was reluctant to point fingers at her staff. They were good people and that wasn't just her personal opinion. Everyone who went into the GSA was given psychological tests every step of the way. She doubted someone with that kind of brain defect could reach this level.

"Perhaps you'd do better reading their personnel files. I know them professionally. I know they do their jobs. I don't know them socially or personally." Whitney believed it was impossible that someone from her staff was framing her. So, she'd let Shea explore their lives until she was as sure of it.

Shea nodded and jotted something down. "That works. I need to see the scenes. Can you arrange that?" She glanced up. "Is talking to the victims out?"

Whitney glanced down as a message scrolled across her computer. Code Blue. Medical emergency. She stood up and walked over to open her door. She smiled at the young woman sitting at a desk in front of her office. "Amanda please show Shea to her office. Get her whatever she needs. Let Sam know I'll be off site for a while."

She turned back to Shea. "I've got a medical emergency to attend. I don't know how long I'll be. Amanda will help you with the files. You have my number if you need to reach me."

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Working for the GSA had major perks, Shea decided, as she sat in a plush leather chair behind the black glass topped desk. Amanda stood next to her, leaning at the waist as she touched a corner of the desk. A slim computer monitor slid soundlessly up from the glass and blinked a colorful GSA logon screen at her. Another touch had a keyboard screen sliding down at an angle.

Amanda stood and turned her back to look out at the Atlanta skyline. "If you'll type in a password, I'll show you our site."

With a thought to someone trying to break into her files, she chose her badge number and locker combination. Once it became common knowledge what she was doing, whoever was framing Whitney would want to know the status of her case. She didn't hope to believe Whitney's system was hacker proof, especially if the hacker had every right to be in the system. So she'd put reports on file and later, if it came to it, she could set a trap. "Okay, I'm in."

Amanda spent several minutes showing her the Gateway Security Agency intranet. The first screen that popped was a list of all six Central Gateways. The North American Gateway was the only active link. Amanda sent her an easy smile. "Only Whitney has access to the other Gateways."

With a press of her finger on the monitor, she pulled up the North American Gateway welcome screen. From this one screen, Shea realized she could find anything she wanted. If she wanted to pull up a particular Gateway, she had only to type in the name of the city. Atlanta was already in the box. She scanned down her lists of choices. Administration seemed the best place to begin her search.

As if she understood her presence was no longer needed, Amanda stood up and walked around the desk. "I can be reached on extension 89 if you need me. Whitney is 01 and Sam is 02. Is there anything else I can help you with now?"

Shea skimmed her eyes over the neat, sparsely furnished office. "I need a pen and some paper. If you'll point me in the right direction, I'll get it."

"The credenza behind your desk is fully stocked."

"Great. Thanks Amanda."

"You're welcome, Ms. Shea."

The second her door closed, Shea turned in her chair and began opening drawers. Amanda wasn't kidding about it being fully stocked. Shea gathered items as she came across them. She had several yellow legal pads, a pen and three different colored highlighters on the desk within minutes. She discovered the credenza also held a slim laser printer with reams of paper, a medium sized safe and tiny refrigerated shelf stocked with cold cans of Dr. Pepper.

She took one of the cans and knew she could get used to this kind of service.

Several hours later, Shea had two legal pads half filled with writing. One was scribbled with questions she had for Whitney. The other outlined the command structure of the NA Gateway. She had a much better understanding of Whitney's world. The command center didn't have one staff. It had two. One, consisting of most of the people who sat at the desks in the outer room, ran the Atlanta Gateway. They were responsible for the traveler's itinerary. They made reservations to restaurants, bought tickets to events and arranged for transportation if requested. They handled the traveler's clothing needs while on this side. Confirmed medical conditions and made accommodations if needed. If a traveler had a normal stay, he or she never came into contact with the second staff.

Until today, that staff was Whitney, Matt, Amanda, and the Regional Supervisors that oversaw the six Zones of the North American Gateway. Shea was startled to see her own name listed after Matt's. She knew that touching a name brought up a file for that person. She touched her own name uneasily, wondering what she would find. Whitney said she had a legit cover for this job. Now she would get to see just what that meant.

Personnel files came in two parts. The first was available to anyone who had access to the intranet. The second was only available to those with a password. Shea scanned over her public file with a grin. They had taken the essential facts from her life. She was single, lived in Atlanta

and had just retired as a lieutenant from the Department of Civil Defense. She was now a security consultant for the GSA. Her professional record was sealed per Alliance Code 19-874-3A. Inquiries were directed to Denise Elliot.

Shea unlocked the hidden file with only a little trepidation. Again, they borrowed from her life. Her masters in Criminal Justice now came from the American University-Georgia instead of Georgia State. She still began her career in law enforcement at twenty-one, but in their version she had moved swiftly through the specialized divisions of the DCD. She was a Class One Expert on the late 20th Century and held certifications in Firearms and Forensics. She glanced at her commendations and saw that they, too, mirrored her record. She wondered absently how they managed to gain access to her personnel file.

The only difference between her and the rest of the North American Gateway staff was that they were born on this side and she was not. Shea made a note to ask Whitney why that wouldn't raise a flag for anyone who checked her out. Everyone involved with the GSA was born in this time and Shea had found no exceptions. If she stumbled across someone who wasn't, she would want to know why.

What she found in the personnel files was intriguing. The people who worked the entry-level jobs for the GSA were all teenagers in training at Quantico or college students working internships. Whitney herself was a ticket taker at sixteen, event's buyer at seventeen, and interned as an assistant to the San Francisco Gateway Manager while she attended Stanford. Her first assignment after graduation was as an assistant to the South Pacific Regional Supervisor. She got her first center a year later. She steadily moved up to the bigger centers until she was over New York by the time she was twenty-five. At twenty-seven, she was the North Pacific Regional Supervisor. Five years ago, at age thirty, she was made Chief of Security.

While few had enjoyed Whitney's rise to the top, everyone had advanced degrees in various fields. Amanda, Shea discovered, was a junior business student at Mercer. She didn't wonder anymore how they were able to operate their business for as long as they had without anyone catching on. They hid in the perfect environment and ran it with highly intelligent, uniquely qualified personnel.

Shea backtracked to the GSA senior staff. Sam was the Eastern Regional Supervisor as well as her Executive Officer. She reached for her legal pad of questions. She wanted to know why Sam was both, if she had to choose one of the six for that job and if so why him. She turned her attention to the six Regional Supervisors to see if they crossed Whitney's path at some other point. She'd start at the top and work her way down from there.

Flipping to a clean sheet, she started her search with Samuel H. Martin.

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Nine-year-old Joey Danielson was already dead by the time Whitney arrived at New York's Bethesda Hospital. His father was already in surgery. Because nothing she could do would change either of those facts, she sat next to Joey's mother and held his four-year-old sister as they waited. She spent several minutes in the New York center familiarizing herself with the family of

four and learning the details about the drunk driver who plowed through a crowd crossing a Park Avenue intersection. Three were dead and five injured. Two of the eight were hers.

"Mommy," Andrea lisped, "I'm hungry."

Brenda Danielson was a slim, tall woman with dark blonde hair and golden brown eyes. She'd had a bright, mischievous smile in her file photo. Now those eyes stared at her daughter blankly. Whitney watched her blink, watched reality hit her hard enough to flood her eyes with tears, watched as the woman turned those anguished eyes on hers in a desperate plea for help.

Whitney laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed before smiling down at the little girl who didn't know her world had changed. "Do you like hotdogs, Andrea?"

"Andi," Brenda said hoarsely, "We call her Andi."

Whitney nodded and stood up with Andi planted on her hip. "I'll take her to the cafeteria. Can I bring you back something? Coffee?"

Brenda shook her head, her gaze once more glued to the doors where they took her husband. Because Whitney didn't know what else to say or do for the devastated woman, she took her daughter down to the cafeteria for an early dinner. While Andi ate a hotdog and fries, Whitney called the manager of the New York center for an update. Joey's body had been claimed and was at Quantico. As were the family's belongings. Brenda's mother would be arriving at the hospital at any moment. Whitney's next call was to Amanda to inform her she may be spending the night in New York. She didn't want to leave until she knew Joe Danielson's condition. Should he survive the twenty-first century surgery, she wanted him on the other side as quickly as possible.

An older version of Brenda was sitting next to the woman when they got back to the waiting room. Andi's excited shriek of "Grandma" solved the mystery. Whitney handed over the little girl to her grandmother and asked if there had been any news.

Brenda shook her head. "I know you're busy Ms. Eisner. You don't need to stay."

Whitney sat down next to her and laid her hand over the woman's fists on her lap. "Once your husband comes out of surgery, we need to act quickly. We have an ambulance with medical staff standing by. The doctors aren't going to want to let him go and you're going to need to stand firm on getting him released."

When Brenda faced her, the grief twisting her features, Whitney continued in her calm, reasonable tone. "If you like, I'll handle that for you. But under no conditions can you agree to let him stay. He may survive here. He will survive at home."

"Yes. He'll survive at home," Brenda repeated softly and visibly strengthened. She brushed away her tears. "I'll take care of it."

Whitney nodded and thought, yes, she could handle it now. "I'll be here in case you need me."

Less than an hour later, Whitney was standing slightly behind Brenda Danielson as she went head to head with the Chief of Surgery. As the surgeon began to list once again Joe Danielson's critical condition in detail, Whitney stepped forward. The minutes spent arguing could be minutes off Joe's life. "Excuse me Dr. Brill. Let me make this easy for you. We are his family and you don't have any right to refuse our request. We want Joe moved to another hospital and we've arranged an ambulance for that. If you continue to argue with us, I'll get a court order. We'll move Joe either way, but one leaves you open to legal action."

The man threw her a nasty glare, snatched the chart and dashed off several quick lines. He shoved the chart at Whitney. "You'll kill him by moving him. Just try to sue me when he dies."

Whitney moved the family down to a waiting car while the medical staff moved in for Joe. Whitney stood between the car and the ambulance as she called Amanda. The sun was setting and she saw this long day ending soon. "Amanda, do me a favor. Get Shea and bring her to the New York center for me. We're getting ready to transfer Mr. Danielson. I want her to come."

This was an easy way for Shea to meet Denise. And, maybe if Shea didn't have plans for the night, they could have dinner on that side and talk without interruptions. Although, should something arise that needed her attention, Whitney was only a page away. As always.

The ambulance wailed a path to New York's Prestige. The siren went silent as they turned into the garage of the hotel. Medical personnel swarmed the ambulance and moved Joe quickly onto a freight elevator for his ride to the fifth floor.

Whitney waited for the freight elevator to come back down before taking the family up. Shea was the only person standing in the terminal center when they walked into the room. Whitney sent her a quick smile. She stood in front of the cubicle and watched as the family got on for the return trip. She met Brenda's eyes. "I'm so sorry about your son. I wish I could have done more."

Brenda grabbed her arm. "You did everything. I don't know how I'll ever thank you."

Whitney bit back the words that she was just doing her job. She didn't have to be here. There was no regulation or protocol that demanded her presence when a traveler died. It was Whitney's own rule. She couldn't turn back time and make this go away so the least she could do was make it go easier. "You just did."

Tears threatened again and Brenda fought to keep them from falling. "Joe owes you his life."

"Mrs. Danielson, you and your family owe me nothing. You became mine when you came here. I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

The woman's slight smile trembled. "You did everything."

"Thank you. Now go to your husband. He'll be awake soon."

Whitney stepped back as the door closed and sighed deeply when the light showed green for a successful transfer. Without turning she said, "She's thanking me. Do you know what's waiting for her when she gets to Quantico?"

"What?"

Whitney faced her. "The body of her nine-year-old son. He was dead before I got here. I could do nothing for him, but get his body for his family to bury. How can she thank me for that?"

"She said you saved her husband."

Whitney made a conscious effort to rid her body of lingering tension. "We'll never know that, thank God. All he had to do was survive the surgery."

"Is that what you've been doing since lunch?"

Whitney nodded, too distracted to hear the concern in Shea's voice. "Are you finished for the day? I thought we could have dinner and talk. You had questions."

"Yes, I'm done. I've never been to New York City."

Whitney grinned and took Shea's arm. Before the detective knew what was happening, she had them in a cubicle and the door closed. "You'll have to come back another day. Tonight, you're having dinner in Virginia."

Shea's instinctive step towards the doors became a step back when they slid open. It was easy to forget how disorienting it could be to travel. There was no movement or timer to chart the journey. It seemed to the traveler that the door closed and then immediately opened. Whitney put her hand on the small of Shea's back and led her into the sub-basement. This room looked exactly like what it was—a stripped down, small-scale terminal used only by GSA members. The walls were cinder block and the floor concrete, both painted military gray. The sentry snapped to attention as they walked past.

"Where are we?" Shea whispered.

"Quantico. I want to make sure the Danielson's got off all right. I know Denise wants to meet you."

Whitney turned when Shea stopped as if she hit a wall. Green eyes were darting everywhere and she actually took a step back. "I'm in the future?"

"Yes. Is that a problem? I never thought you would not want to come over. You said you wanted to talk to the victims." Whitney walked over to face Shea. "Do you want to go back?"

Shea's reaction wasn't what Whitney expected. She had not thought about Shea's feelings about coming to the future, but knew if she had, she would never have attributed the fearless detective

with the fear she saw so clearly in her eyes. Perhaps knowing there was a distant future she could visit and visiting were too very different things in her mind.

Shea swallowed and it seemed to Whitney that some of the tension left her shoulders. "You'd take me back if I said yes?"

Whitney nodded immediately. "Yes, of course. This isn't something you have to do. Traveling is second nature to me. I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

She was relieved to see the calming effect her words had on Shea. The woman visibly relaxed and now the eyes looking around were doing so with interest. Shea began walking forward again. "That was pretty quick. I thought it would be like an elevator ride. You know, take some time and be noisy and bumpy."

Whitney grinned at the description. She herself had never given the difference any thought. "We've had several centuries to perfect the system."

"You'll have to tell me the story some time."

Whitney led them to a bank of elevators. Her first reaction was to readily agree with Shea's request. From Whitney's point of view, it was ancient history. The seeds were planted in the last decade of the twentieth century, grew and flourished in the twenty-first, but would not bear poisonous fruit until the twenty-second. It had always been the past to Whitney. For the first time, she saw it as the future. And it was a future she wasn't eager to share with Shea.

She smiled down at Shea's questioning expression. "Maybe," she said and knew she was lying. "When this is all over."

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Whitney's assurances aside, fear was a leaden weight in Shea's stomach. She felt confident on her side that she could counter any attempts made to bring her over. That was in her time and in her town. Now she was on their side and in their time. Shea discovered her trust of Whitney didn't go quite as far as she thought. It was only the blasé attitude of the two women sitting at the table with her that kept her from demanding to go back.

She hid behind her menu as long as she dared and finally ordered something she thought would sit lightly on her queasy tummy. She declined an offer of the fragrant garlic rolls as she did a glass of wine. She didn't want to get lulled into a sense of complacency or have her senses dulled. Although as she listened to Whitney and Denise chat amicably, her senses were telling her she was in no danger. She just wasn't ready to believe.

"So how did your first day in the GSA go?" Denise asked the question in a warm, slightly accented voice. Hazel eyes blinked at her guilelessly.

"It was educational. I do have a question for you. When I was going through the personnel files, I noticed that everyone who works for the GSA was born on that side. How will it look that I wasn't?"

Whitney was surprised by the question, but not Denise. She reached for another roll, saying in a serious tone, "Someone has attacked three travelers and killed one. I don't know who it is. Obviously, I have a problem over there. I decided to assign a criminal expert to investigate."

"When you get asked about me, I'd like to know who made the inquiry. Innocent people shouldn't care why I'm there."

"Agreed," Denise said readily. "You said today was educational. In what way?"

By the end of the meal, Shea was as relaxed and as comfortable as if she was sharing a meal with two of her friends. The conversation had moved from her day in the files, to Whitney's time with the Danielson's, to Denise overseeing her own medical emergency. That one had a better ending than Whitney's and one tiny traveler had an interesting tale about her birth in the 1800's.

"Do you want a lift back to the compound or do you want to see the sights?" Denise asked them outside the restaurant.

Shea was fascinated by lights streaking across the night sky. Personal jets, she was told oh so casually by Whitney, who added that she needed to get her license renewed. Cars, not so different from what she was used to, were still a part of the future. But so were jets that ranged from one-person mini's to family sized.

Whitney looked at her with a questioning expression on her face. "Do you want to stay for a while? We can catch a cab back later."

Denise grinned at Whitney. "Or even stay over."

Whitney grimaced and shook her head at the suggestion. "She can stay over if she wants. My head will be resting on my pillow when I go to sleep tonight."

"You are such a snob. What are you going to do if your next posting is my job? You know that's a real possibility."

She laughed at the expression of absolute horror that washed over Whitney's face.

"No, I didn't know. Now that I do, I will take steps to rectify it. Thanks for the warning."

Whitney's tone was cold and serious as were the bright blue eyes that stared over the top of the car at Denise without blinking. Shea was surprised by her attitude. She would have thought that somebody who moved up the ranks as Whitney had, who held the job she did, would be driven by ambition for Denise's position. "You don't want to be Director of Operations?"

Denise laughed and smiled at her. "Sure she does. As soon as someone figures out how she can do that from her side. Our Whitney doesn't like this side very much."

Whitney pointedly ignored Denise. "Do you want to stay?"

The offer was tempting. There was much about this time Shea would love to explore. She was amused by her own one-eighty about being on this side. However, it was getting late and as Whitney had made it clear she wasn't spending the night here, she knew she wasn't staying alone. With a mental sigh, she added a visit back to her list of things-to-do. "No, not tonight. I still have some questions I want to ask you."

"You should have stayed," Denise said when the three of them were in the car headed back to Quantico. "Whitney's come over more times this week than she has since she's been promoted."

"Do ya miss me? Because, you know, you never call, you never visit. A body could feel neglected."

Shea frowned from the backseat. Was it teasing or sexual teasing she heard in Whitney's voice? She watched Whitney smile at Denise and Denise stick her tongue out at her. Shea didn't want to make assumptions, but she knew she wasn't assuming Whitney's interest in women. She wasn't basing that belief solely on Whitney's presence at Kim's party. Kim went to school with Whitney until Whitney was sent away to school at sixteen. One of the confidences they shared was an attraction to girls.

"Yeah, I miss you. No one else screws up my filing system the way you did. I still get misty eyed when I go get a file and it's where it's supposed to be."

"How long am I going to pay for that? The statute of limitations has got to have expired by now."

"There is no statute of limitations on embarrassing mistakes. Family and friends get to torture you with the memory of those forever."

"Be careful what you remember Aunt Denise. Mom knows a few things on you."

Denise laughed lightly at the threat. "Grace knows more than a few things. Things I know she'll never share with you."

The teasing banter continued, but with the word, *Aunt* Shea lost interest. Her relief that Denise was apparently a family friend bothered her. She shouldn't care what Denise was to Whitney on a personal level. She shouldn't care what anyone was to Whitney on a personal level. Whitney was nothing more than a case for her. She would be nothing more than her boss if she wanted to and was allowed to stay in the GSA when this was over. And maybe if she said that enough times she would believe it.

She stared at Whitney's profile. If she was asked earlier, she would have said without blinking an eye that her interest in Whitney was strictly professional. She might even have convinced herself

the case belonged to her as it happened in her jurisdiction. Now she had to be honest with at least herself and admit that one of the reasons she was drawn to this case was Whitney. She wanted to know more about the woman and that interest had nothing to do with Whitney's intriguing lifestyle or job.

A quick glance at her watch showed that it was still early enough for her to pin Whitney down for some questions. While Whitney used that as one of the reasons for them to have dinner together, Shea wasn't given the chance to ask any of the questions on her list.

Shea had to grin as Denise turned the car into the gated entrance of the GSA. She was five hundred years in her future and had turned down the opportunity to explore this time because she would rather explore Whitney. She was amused she believed this was just another job for as long as she had.

They stopped by Denise's office long enough for Whitney to check one last time on Joe Danielson. Shea wasn't as astonished as she should have been that Joe was already home. She was beginning to believe there was little people in the future couldn't do. Which made her wonder what allure the past held for them.

Denise took her hand in a firm grip as they stood in the tiny terminal. "If you need anything let me know. I want whoever is doing this caught before they do it again."

"Thank you, I will." Shea didn't doubt Denise would be a powerful ally. She needed to remember she could also be a powerful enemy.

Whitney's goodbye hug was quick and soon they were in the cubicle on their way back. Shea was trying to come up with a reasonable excuse to extend the night when the door slid open. She made a mental note to remember that the private elevator to Whitney's suite also served as a door to the future.

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"I'm sorry. I didn't think Denise would take me up on my invitation to join us for dinner. I'm also sorry that I haven't made time to answer your questions. So I'm yours for as long as you need me tonight."

Whitney hoped it wouldn't be that long even as she accepted Shea could take hours. This wasn't something she could keep putting off. Shea had questions she needed answered for her to do her job. Whitney would never have the time she if didn't make it.

"Do you want something to drink?" She asked as she walked into her kitchen. She opened a cabinet and stared over her selection of decaffeinated teas. Sleepy Time seemed appropriate. She was almost envious of the pajama-clad bear on the cover. He at least had the promise of a bed in his very near future.

"Make that two," Shea said from behind her. Whitney shot a glance over her shoulder to find her sitting at the bar. Her smile was amused. "I don't want to be fighting a caffeine high in an hour."

Whitney's mind pounced on the words "in an hour" gratefully. If, when the hour was up, and Shea was true to her word, Whitney would offer a late breakfast up here in the morning. She wasn't needed in her office unless something came up. If that happened, she would respond regardless of where she was or what she was doing.

They took their honey-sweetened tea to the couch. They kicked off their shoes and curled up to face each other from opposite corners of the small couch. Whitney savored her first sip of the tea before she smiled down at her. "I'm ready when you are."

Shea nodded. She held the crimson GSA mug in both hands and stared over the rim at Whitney. Whitney waited patiently, wondering what thoughts were going through her mind as those green eyes stared at her thoughtfully.

"Why is Sam your Executive Officer?"

"He has the most seniority."

"Did you choose your command staff?"

Whitney wished she could see where this line of questioning was going. She was beginning to wonder if Shea found something while she searched the personnel files that afternoon. "No, I didn't. My staff, the whole of the Gateway, was already in place when I took command. As I've had no complaints with any of them, I haven't changed it."

"Have you worked with any of them before? Has one of them ever been senior to you in any way?"

"No, none has ever ranked higher than me. We were all at the Academy at the same time if not in the same class. I'm sure if you checked the records, I've crossed paths with all of them at one time or another."

"Who, besides the senior staff here in Atlanta and the command staff, have access to you?"

Access to her? Whitney frowned into her tea as she thought about that. She was beginning to see where Shea's questions were leading and she didn't like the view on this road at all. Stupid for her not to realize that only someone on the inside of the GSA could frame her. Doubly stupid for her not to realize only someone high ranking could manage it. A someone who, if not a friend, was at least a trusted colleague. The number of people who ran the GSA and Prestige was large, but only a minuscule percentage of those would have daily contact with her.

Whitney took a long sip of tea to moisten her tight, dry throat. She kept her gaze on her cup as she spoke. "No one else. I rarely go the Centers and depending on why I'm there, I see the manager or the Regional Supervisor."

As the silence lengthened, Whitney looked down the couch to find Shea watching her, her gaze compassionate. "Did you really think whoever is doing this is low ranking?"

"Do you really think I've been wondering which member of my staff is a psychopath?"

But one of them had to be. Whitney rubbed her eyes with one hand. "I'm sorry Shea. This has been a long day and I just want it to end. Can we finish this tomorrow? I'll have brunch sent up here and we can talk. I'll give you all the time I can."

She dropped her hand and looked down at the couch into that steady gaze. Shea nodded and stood up. "It has been a long day and I didn't spend hours in a hospital. Here, give me that."

Surprised by the request, she handed over her cup without protest. "Thanks. Just leave them in the sink. I'll get them later."

Whitney stayed curled up on the couch as Shea took their cups to the kitchen and came back to pick up her jacket. "I'll see you in the morning. Sleep well."

"You, too. I'm sorry to end the evening so soon."

Shea held up a hand. "It's all right Whitney. You need time to adjust. Believe me, I understand. Most people don't go from ordinary citizen to murder suspect in one smooth move. It's confusing and frightening and you need time to adjust."

Whitney nodded, believing the words with all her heart. She was stumbling now, playing catch up, but all she needed was time. Time to understand what was happening and if she never knew the why, at least the how and the who. Time. All she needed was time. She smiled faintly. "Thank you. I've been feeling stupid that you've been connecting the dots for me."

Shea laughed and turned toward the elevator. "You were smart enough to know you needed someone trained for this. That doesn't occur to some people until the cell door slams shut behind them. Good night Whitney."

"Night, Shea."

Whitney watched her Security Advisor walk to the elevator. The battered brown leather jacket didn't go with the PHS button down oxford shirt or the tailored slacks, however, it perfectly suited the blue jeans and polo shirt she wore the day Whitney met her. There was going to be resentment, and not just because someone was brought in from what her staff would think was the outside. It was obvious that Shea wasn't really one of them.

They smiled at each other as the elevator doors closed.

Tomorrow would be interesting, Whitney thought, as she headed to bed. She was sure that Shea's impressions of her command staff were going to surprise her. She hoped she was ready to hear what the detective had to say.

The next day began early for Whitney. She was dragged from a dead sleep ten minutes after five. Ten minutes later, she was in Denver meeting with Vincent Hollandale, the Mountain Regional Supervisor, and the local attorney assigned to the Gateway. They were in the center's main conference room and she was sipping some trendy designer chocolate concoction masquerading as coffee. Whitney scratched the day off as a total loss even as the sun was dawning in the east.

"The arraignment's when?"

Not that it mattered. Bail was going to be obscenely high, and that was only if by some miracle it was granted. Matt's counterpart, Michelle Zambrano, was a manic woman in her mid thirties. Her constant pacing and rapid-fire speech grated on Whitney's last, sleep-deprived nerve. The woman was on her second bowl-sized cup of coffee.

"Two this afternoon. I'm not asking for ROR. He has no ties to the city. How high am I authorized to go on bail?"

Good question. Whitney was reasonably sure Ms. Zambrano wasn't asking it hypothetically. She sat back in her chair and rubbed at her left eyebrow. Why did legal issues always give her a throbbing ache behind her left eye? Idly, she wondered if that was something she should have checked.

She glanced over at the attorney. "Well, counselor, how high do you think it will be? This is your turf. What do murderers usually get for bail around here?"

Murderer. Just thinking the word pumped up the volume in her head. This was another first for her. Whitney was getting very tired of these new experiences. Travelers getting murdered. Travelers killing. Travelers getting mowed down in crosswalks. It seemed that death had nothing better to do than haunt her centers.

The woman's laugh sounded like nails on a chalkboard. Whitney gritted her teeth and stared at her coldly until the noise died away. "This is my first murder. I have no idea what to expect when I walk into court today."

It was a simple truth that could be echoed by every GSA lawyer. Maybe somewhere, in some era, someone else had faced this situation. Whitney knew no one on her staff ever had. She nodded in resignation. "I know. Find someone who does know what to expect to go with you. I'll call Denise and see what she says. Right now I think we have to go as high as the bail is set."

Leaving the man to face the consequences of his actions wasn't an option. Which Whitney thought was a crime in itself. He came over to this side and killed someone. She thought it only fair that he be punished on this side. Standing, she gladly set her coffee on the table and met Vincent's somber gaze. "I'll call you when I know something."

The Atlanta command center was dimly lit for the night shift. The third shift workers casually noted her quick stride through the center. Late night and early morning calls happened just often

enough for her presence to rate no more than mild curiosity. She sat behind her desk with a cup of real coffee and read the police report again, slower this time.

A little after midnight east coast time, Rich Edwards procured the services of a working girl. Two hours later, her neighbors called the police to report a disturbance. She'd fought long and loud for her life. Rich bore the scratches and bruises to prove it. Again, Whitney thought it was a shame he couldn't do time on this side. Prisons of this time were gulags compared to the future. Not that it really mattered for him. As a mental defective deemed "fixed", he was on his last chance. It was probably why he chose to snap on this side. He must have thought he had a better chance to get away with it here.

Whitney turned to her computer and logged into Quantico's main system. A query on Rich Edwards returned a long list of criminal offenses, most violent crimes against women. The last was three months ago in an incident that echoed this one. That woman was alive. This time he'd killed and she would be his last victim. Not that she cared.

As she waited for Denise to answer her phone, Whitney began her report on the incident. All she could think was that he shouldn't have been on her side. Unfortunately, traveling was considered a right rather than a privilege. Revocation hearings were lengthy and required meticulous due process. Even had Rich Edwards been in revocation phase, he could have still traveled.

"It's Whitney," she said when a mumbled voice came over the line. "A traveler's being held for murder in Denver."

Whitney winced and moved the phone away from her ear. She held the phone out and activated her daily calendar to see what else the day held for her. The staff meeting at one took up the biggest chunk of her time. She didn't want to postpone it. The meeting was important if only to introduce Shea to her staff.

"Whitney?"

Whitney blinked in surprise to hear her name and glanced around her office. With a sheepish smile Denise couldn't see, she moved the phone back to her ear. "Sorry Denise. I was looking at my schedule for today. Between the time differences, I should be able handle my staff meeting and be at the arraignment."

"Tell me what happened," Denise said, her tone as weary as Whitney imagined hers was when she was in Denver earlier and asked the same question.

Whitney read her the police report and answered Denise's few questions with what little answers she had. "If bail is granted, how high are we authorized to go? The money will be forfeit when he doesn't return."

"Pay it whatever it is. We've got to get him back here. Have you checked to see if he has a record?"

"He does. He's fixed. Maybe this will help the Council to see that people with certain tendencies should not be allowed over here. Granted this is the first murder, but the muggers and the shoplifters cause enough problems. And you know that with crime, once something's done, others think it's a good idea."

It occurred to Whitney that the Council's refusal to do something did not mean she couldn't do something. She reached for her post-it pad and dashed off a quick reminder to herself to give this particular problem over to her Security Advisor. She might as well get everything she could out of Shea while she had her.

"Keep me informed, Whitney. Let me go so that I can get my bosses out of bed and share the bad news. Good luck."

"You, too, Denise."

Whitney glanced at the clock in the bottom corner of her computer. Ten after six. She'd been awake a mere hour. Yeah, this day was a lost cause.

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Parking for the GSA was on the secured fourth level of the underground garage. The decal hanging from her rearview mirror had the guard releasing the barricade before she could stop. Shea returned the quick wave and drove into the small area in search of her space. Slot eight was conveniently located near an elevator. Shea grabbed her laptop and attaché case. She'd decided it was better for her to use the laptop for certain reports.

The elevator opened in the command center. Shea was surprised to see the center was already bustling at seven-thirty. She had hoped to slip in under the radar and was uncomfortably aware of the eyes following her as she headed for her office. Well, either she'd get used to being stared at or they would get used to her.

"Shea."

Shea stopped and turned to Whitney's voice. She frowned at the rumpled signs of a late night or early morning. Whitney waved her into her office and Shea followed her into the room. Whitney shut the door before sitting behind her desk.

"Have a seat," Whitney said as her attention focused on her computer screen. Shea sat down and sipped her coffee, waiting for Whitney to remember she was in the room. Her eyes drifted over the dark circles under her eyes and her disordered hair. Had something else happened? She'd left Whitney less than eight hours ago. Could she have been called to another center for another crisis?

"A traveler was arrested last night in Denver and charged with murder," Whitney said without preamble.

Shea stared at her in shock. "What?"

Whitney sighed and glanced over her desk. Folders, open books, and CD's were spread over the black surface. She snagged a file from the edge of her desk and handed it over to Shea. "That's the police report from Denver and his criminal report from the other side. He shouldn't have been here."

The last was said bitterly. Shea took the file and placed her coffee on Whitney's desk to read the papers. Shea was astonished the GSA had a copy of the officer's report on a homicide that took place just after midnight. She scanned the report and saw a slam dunk case for the prosecution. Despite the resources at the GSA's command, not even they could change the fact that Rich Edwards was found straddling the body of his victim. His criminal report showed a steady escalation in violence against women. It was only a matter of time before he killed.

"Why wasn't he in prison?" With his record, he should have been a lifer already.

"He was found to have a defect. He was fixed. He was released."

The summary was short and brought up many more questions than it answered. Shea stared at Whitney, waiting for a deeper explanation, and shook her head when Whitney simply stared back at her without expression. "Are you kidding me?"

Impatience snapped in Whitney's eyes. "Do I look like I'm kidding you? I told you he shouldn't have been here. I don't live on that side so if they think they can cure people like Edwards, it's their problem when they're wrong. I'm damned tired of it becoming mine."

They stared at each other in the shocked silence that followed Whitney's outburst. Shea closed the folder and laid it on Whitney's desk. "When were you told?"

"A little after five this morning. I've already been to Denver. The staff attorney has no clue what to expect at the arraignment this afternoon. We've never had a traveler commit a murder before. She doesn't think we'll get bail."

"Why do you want to bail him out?" Shea asked cautiously. Whitney's hold on her emotions was tenuous and she didn't want to risk another flash of anger.

"We can't leave him in there. He doesn't exist on this side. What happens when they start questioning him? Look what happened when Tracy came to you. We can't risk exposure. That may offend you, but that's the bottom line. I have to do everything I can to get him released as soon as I can."

Shea was more than offended. That someone from another time could come and do whatever they wanted to someone here without fear of retribution infuriated her. Just because this was the past to someone else, didn't mean they should have free rein to do whatever their twisted minds wanted. "So we're not real to the people in the future is that it? We don't count because we're already dead? Well, the first time around this woman lived at least past midnight last night. He didn't have the right to take whatever was left from her."

Whitney closed her eyes and a brief smile crossed her face. Shock kept Shea rooted to her chair. This was funny? This was amusing? A woman was dead and the GSA was throwing all its considerable support behind the man who did it.

When Whitney opened her eyes, they were dark with sympathy. Her voice was soft when she spoke. "There's a test we have to pass before we graduate from Quantico. Those who fail never leave that side because the test has determined they believe just exactly what you said. They've lived the whole of their lives on this side and yet they still believe what we do here now doesn't really matter."

Shea watched Whitney stand up and walk to her window. She crammed her hands into the pocket of her jeans. "I was born here and I will die here without ever having lived in what is really my time. This is my life and what happens here now is all that matters to me. If we're exposed, it's over here. We have to pack up everything, get into the cubicles and know we will never come back again."

Her eyes were a hard, ice blue when she turned. "Yes, that woman died before her time. And I am sorry for that. I can't change it. I'm not losing my life because of it. Either you understand that or you don't. If you don't, it would probably be better for you not to continue in your job here. This will happen again. I will make this same decision again. I can't change that either."

The minutes ticked off as Shea saw the bigger picture. Whitney's job wasn't to preserve the sanctity of the past or to safeguard the citizens of this time from her travelers. Her job was to keep the current system in place. For whatever reason, people from the future wanted to visit the past. It was apparently a lucrative industry for both sides. It wasn't a system that Shea could support, not when she knew the flaws could be fatal.

However, she wasn't working for the GSA, regardless of what her badge and paperwork claimed. She was working for Whitney. She didn't have to support Whitney in her job, or even like it. "My job is clearing you of murder charges. I don't have to like your job to do mine."

Whitney's grin was quick and wry. "No, you don't. I'd like to expand your job while I have you. I'm not any happier about deviants coming to this side than you are. You're my security advisor. Look over my security and advise me on what I can do to make sure this doesn't happen again."

Shea stood up and reached for her coffee. "Sorry, Whitney. I'm not interested in working for the GSA. I have a job. You'll need to find someone else for that one. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some files to read. Are we still meeting at your place at ten? I have some more questions for you."

Whitney stood framed in the sunlight coming through the window. Her hands were still fisted in her pockets. Shea forced herself to ignore the slump of her shoulders. She nodded and moved to her desk. "Yes, unless something happens. We have a staff meeting at one. You'll meet the command staff at that time."

With a quick nod, Shea left the office and went to her own. While both computers booted up, she spread her lists of questions over the desk. She grabbed a new legal pad and began to read, writing down the questions she needed answered now as she read through the list. She had a sudden urgency to get this job over with and get as far away from the GSA as she could.

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Brunch made it to the suite before Whitney. She was delayed by a call from Denise relating the Council's demand that Edwards be released by whatever means necessary. Whitney's call to Michelle was quick and concise: she was authorized to go as high as needed to make bail. She'd think about what she would do if bail was denied when it was denied.

Shea was sitting at the bar eating when she walked in. Whitney felt again the sting of rejection. Shea wasn't rejecting the job as much as she was rejecting Whitney's life. It hurt to realize Shea's opinion of her mattered. The woman wasn't even a part of her life a week ago.

"Good?" She asked as she sat next to her. She lifted the silver lid from her plate of Crepes Suzette. It was her preferred brunch.

"Very. I'm sorry I started without you. I couldn't resist the smell."

Whitney waved the apology away. "Your questions? I can't promise we won't be interrupted."

The next twenty minutes passed with Whitney recalling what she could of the days of the attacks. What she remembered most was the call in the middle of the night telling her a traveler was badly beaten. Of making the arrangements to get the women medical treatment on the other side. The reason she was there in the first place was a dim memory to everything else that happened.

"What has to happen for your presence to be required on a site?"

"My presence is never required. Most of my job is discretion and judgment calls. My managers have orders to notify me if there is a death, injury requiring medical treatment, or the involvement of government officials. Most of the calls fall under the third heading. Usually if I can go, I go."

"I can understand the fire in Los Angeles. Who called you for Dallas?"

"No one. That was a staffing issue and I went there to demote the two top officers for non-performance. These are my people and I do that in person. It took longer than I thought to get everything settled again. I held ten or more staff meetings to make sure everyone understood the expectations I had of them. I stayed over because I was too tired to go home."

She watched Shea's bold handwriting as she made notes in the space she had left under the questions. She propped her chin up on her hand and closed her eyes. Denver was going to be nightmare if Edwards wasn't released. No, Quantico was going to be a nightmare if he wasn't released. Whitney was clueless how to perform the miracle they expected of her. Once again, she

was reminded that cops on the payroll would come in handy. Maybe she should look into seeing if anyone wanted to be a cop.

A warm hand touched her arm, startling Whitney from her thoughts. She closed her eyes and rubbed her face briskly to get herself back in the present. "I'm sorry. I was somewhere else."

"Did that someplace else have a pillow and a blanket? Your morning started early."

Whitney smiled at the sympathetic tone. "I wasn't dozing. I was trying to figure out what to do if Denver keeps Edwards. Quantico wants him back. I was just daydreaming that if I had a cop or two in there, they could sneak him out to me."

Shea laughed. "And kiss their careers goodbye. Commanders frown on jailbreaks."

"Working for the GSA is the career. Whatever else we do is cover. Like I said, it was just a daydream."

One she would need to find a way to make reality. If the Council continued to allow deviants travel privileges, sooner or later, someone wasn't going to be retrievable. She propped her chin on her hand again. "Of course, I could just have Michelle go in there with some kind of poison. Does it really matter if he's killed here or there?"

Whitney sat up, inspired by her musings. She went to her desk and called Denise. While she waited for the Ops Director, her mind raced with a plan. Of course, she'd only implement it if Denver denied bail. Killing people was one of Quantico's jobs that Whitney would prefer not to assume. However.

She turned to stare out at the perfect blue sky when Denise came on the line. "If Denver denies bail, would the Council give us something to kill Edwards here? Something untraceable in this time."

Denise was silent. Whitney wondered if her boss was appalled or surprised by her request. A part of Whitney thought she should be appalled. Here she was rather calmly devising a way to kill a man and all she could really think was *yes!*, a solution to this impossible situation. Besides, she wouldn't have to actually kill him. That would be Michelle's job. One of the few perks of command was never having to fight the battles.

Denise cleared her throat. "Let me talk to the Council. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

Whitney hung up the phone and continued to stare out her window. Now that the initial adrenaline rush was over, she was uncomfortably aware that she wasn't alone. The screaming silence behind her kept her gaze firmly on the white, fluffy clouds drifting slowly across the sky. What must Shea think of her now? She was a cop and whatever she thought of Edwards didn't mean she wanted to be present as Whitney discussed murdering him.

She listening as Shea walked across the room, mounted the steps and sat down in front of her desk. She closed her eyes before she turned to face her. "And here was I trying to convince you I'm not a killer."

Meeting her eyes was harder than Whitney thought it would be. There were so many emotions she didn't want to see in her green eyes and the compassionate gaze caught her by surprise.

"Your job sucks, Whitney."

Whitney forced a smile to her face. "No, mine's pretty good. Today, if the Council allows us to do this, Michelle's job sucks."

"He's going to die either way isn't he?"

"Yes."

If they did away with mental defects as soon as they were discovered defective, Whitney would prefer the system of the future to the one they had now. She didn't see much difference between a dog who attacked and a human who did. Those who saw the rest of humanity as prey should be treated as any other predator.

"You thought I would be upset, didn't you? You basically plotted a murder right in front of my eyes."

Whitney nodded silently. There wasn't anything she could add to that.

Shea shook her head slowly. "I won't say its justice because a woman is dead. It's not really fair because if they'd kept him on your side, she'd still be alive. I can live with knowing for certain that he'll never do it again. That's the one thing that is never for sure here."

It was only for sure on the other side once someone was labeled a mental defective. Whitney decided to keep that bit of trivia to herself. That Shea wasn't impressed with the future of her world was obvious and Whitney saw no reason to knock the one thing she approved.

She stood up. "Anymore questions before we go back to work? I have reports I need to check before the staff meeting."

And she hoped Denise got back to her before the arraignment. Regardless of what happened in Denver, she wanted to go there knowing they had a plan in place for either outcome. The longer Edward's was held in custody the likelier the chance of someone noticing he wasn't normal. In passing the differences between the times wasn't noticeable, but after a while, someone should begin to wonder why he used off phrases and words and why he seemed lost in the world. Travelers weren't usually here long enough to get tripped up by some small technology that was as alien to them as some caveman tool might be to her.

"No, but I'd like to see the photos of the scenes. Do you have those?"

Whitney gestured for Shea to go down the stairs. "The investigators have pictures. I have video. I'll arrange for someone to set you up with a room. I'll see if I can get copies of the pictures."

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As expected all four videos were strikingly similar: a beautifully appointed hotel suite with only the remnants of police and paramedics to mark the room as crime scenes. For the first viewing Shea let the video play without pause. The scenes began in the doorway looking into the room and showed used medical paraphernalia scattered just a few feet inside the rooms. Next, the camera panned a sweeping view, showing black powder covering all flat surfaces before moving in for close-ups on what little evidence they had to collect. Shea knew from the reports that very little useful evidence was found in the rooms. In fact, except for the area where the paramedics had treated the women and the forensics powder, the suites all looked ready for occupancy.

Shea sat up slowly as her last thought echoed in her head. An empty hotel room. She reached for the remote and slowed the tape. Inch by inch, she watched the camera pan the room and saw there was absolutely nothing to indicate the room was occupied. Granted, the attacker wasn't going to stay in the room after the assault. Even the stupidest of criminals were smarter than that. They weren't usually smart enough to restore the crime scene to a pristine condition. As she saw the cups wrapped in plastic, the towels draped perfectly, the navy foil wrapped mints still on the pillows, she knew the women were in the rooms only minutes before the attacks began.

While it may be easy to gain entry to a hotel room with the doors located conveniently on the outside, the security of Prestige did not appear to be so easily breached. All rooms were contained inside the hotel and access to the rooms was granted only to those with keycards. Shea reached for her pad and began a list of questions. She wanted to know how closely the keycards were monitored, how they were issued, if they were returned and if so, how they were recycled. Could someone keep a keycard from a previous stay and use that card at a later date? Could an old keycard be reprogrammed in a way to bypass the security? Just how easy would it be for someone off the street to enter the hotel and enter a room without the front desk being aware of it?

And how, if someone did manage to do any of those things to get a room, did they know to do it on a night when Whitney was staying over?

No, it didn't happen that way because it couldn't happen that way. Those outside of the GSA, and Shea would count Prestige staffers in that, could never know Whitney's movements so precisely. The only way someone could know with any certainty that Whitney would be somewhere was if they were privy to her schedule or if they knew in advance that a situation would arise that Whitney would attend personally. Only someone very close to her could do either of those things. Only someone intimate with Prestige's operating procedures would know how to bypass security precautions. That someone could never be a stranger.

A quick knock at the door had Shea reaching for the remote and turning off the video. "Come in."

Whitney opened the door and stood in the threshold. "I'm on my way to the meeting. Are you ready?"

Shea nodded and grabbed her notebooks and pen. She ejected the CD and slid it inside a case. "Do you always hold this meeting in Atlanta?"

"Well," Whitney said with a cocky grin, "I am the boss."

"You bring them here because you can?" Shea asked, smiling. She fell in step with Whitney as they left the conference room. The meeting itself didn't interest Shea very much. She doubted she would be attending if she had met the command staff before now. These people were, essentially, business executives and they ran, essentially, a travel agency. Shea hoped it was a short meeting.

"Yes."

Shea didn't have a chance to ask any more questions. Whitney paused by a closed door and opening it, she stepped back so that Shea could enter first. As she passed Whitney, she was told in a soft voice to sit in the chair to her right. The others were waiting as they seated themselves at the table. Shea felt the stares on her and ignored them. She opened her notebook, uncapped a pen and looked to Whitney.

Whitney sat at the head of the table and opened a leather portfolio. She paused in the act of reaching to turn a page and sat back in her chair, her eyes dark and weary as she swept them over the people watching her every move.

"Ladies and gentleman, we've got a problem. Last night a traveler was arrested in Denver and will no doubt be charged with some degree of murder this afternoon." She paused as they reacted to the news. She held up a hand when the man seated across from Shea would have asked a question. "We've had several women attacked; Erin Warner died from her injuries. We have a very big, very serious problem."

She stood up and shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. Even ruffled and weary in casual clothes, her command presence was electric. Carefully, Shea glanced around the table and wondered if they remembered there was a stranger sitting with them.

"Let me introduce our visitor." Whitney moved to the back of her chair and Shea felt her hands come to rest near her head. Once again all eyes were on her. It was hard to force herself to sit calmly under the weight of their combined stares. "This is Lauren Shea, a Special Security Advisor appointed by Denise Elliot to investigate the attacks. She has the authority to investigate anything she thinks has to do with our security. She answers only to me."

Shea's eyes moved from face to face. She hoped she hid her own surprise at being given *carte blanche* better than they did. Anger and outrage were hidden swiftly behind bland masks of polite interest. Was it the fact that she was investigating? Or did they not like the fact that she was at least their equal when she was on their turf? Shea thought it was the latter. They were

used to answering only to Whitney and if the last few days were the norm, they didn't have to answer to her very often.

"Introduce yourselves," Whitney said and moved away to walk down the length of the table. "Lea, you start."

The woman with short blonde hair leaned forward. Her smile was quick and her dark brown eyes shot a teasing glance at Whitney. "I'm Lea Sanders. I'm the North Pacific."

Once again, she glanced at Whitney, her grin hinting at a shared secret. "We were roommates at the Academy."

Shea picked up her pen, wrote Lea's name and the question friend or foe. She smiled at her. "Nice to meet you, Lea."

While the others introduced themselves, Shea wrote their names and added her first impression of each of Whitney's Regional Supervisors. French Canadian Jean-Michel Trudeau oversaw Central. Sam was the East. Siobhan Conner, an elegant black woman, had the Mid-West. The South Pacific belonged to a youthful Mexican named Marcellos Cabrera. Vincent Hollandale, looking every inch the befuddled college professor with his horn rimmed glasses and tweed jacket, oversaw Mountain.

Shea granted that all six were smart, competent businessmen and women, that all had reached their current position by hard work and dedication and that any could step into Whitney's place without causing a single blip in the system. She glanced over the group and wondered if it was as simple as someone wanting her job. Was her replacement already chosen? Was it Sam by default? She made a quick note to ask Denise that very question.

"We have a big problem," Whitney repeated as she sat at the head of the table and picked up a paper from her portfolio. "I expect you to give her your complete cooperation."

The meeting lasted two mind-numbing hours. It felt like days. Shea thought she would cry in gratitude when Whitney ended the meeting and the others left the room with quick goodbyes. She turned to stare at Whitney. "I quit."

Whitney's head snapped up from her notes. "What?"

Shea nodded. "If I have to sit in on these meetings every week, I quit. I feel like I should get a medal for managing to staying awake."

Whitney dropped back in her chair, laughing. "You were very heroic. Instead of a medal, I grant you immunity from staff meetings."

"God bless you. You are a kind and benevolent leader."

She grinned and shaking her head at Shea's heart felt gratitude, she settled her elbows on the armrest and loosely linked her hands together. Shea was amazed by the relaxed image she projected. With all that was happening in her life, both professionally and personally, how could she sit there as if she didn't have a care in the world? The woman sitting in front of her resembled the playgirl Whitney wanted the world to believe she was and seemed nothing like the executive Shea knew her to be. For the first time, she wondered if both personas weren't a part of Whitney rather than a role she sometimes played.

"So, what are your impressions?" She asked casually.

Shea knew Whitney didn't believe for one second whoever was framing her for murder could be one of the people who sat in this room with her for the past two hours. What evidence would Shea have to produce to convince Whitney that someone she trusted implicitly was doing this to her? What would it take for her to believe?

"They seem to know what they're doing." It was the nicest, most non-committal thing she could think to say. She only had suspicions and while she trusted her instincts without question, she knew Whitney would need more to believe.

"They do," Whitney said and frowned as the phone on the table rang. She lifted the receiver, saying, "Yes?"

Her expression morphed from annoyance to blank in the blink of an eye. She nodded silently several times. Finally, in a cool and calm tone, she said, "It'll be done. Thanks Denise."

"They want you to kill him here, don't they?" Her own calm tone surprised Shea. This was supposed to be wrong. This was supposed to be the one line never crossed. Whatever the flaws, whatever the mistakes, justice was only just if it was delivered without bias.

"Yes," Whitney said and stood up. She closed her notebook and looked down at Shea. "The poison is waiting for me in Denver. Do you want to come?"

She did and she didn't. It was one thing to stand here and watch them cross the line. It was something else, something darker, to step over it with them. Morality is the sliver of gray between black and white and it had never been as thin for Shea as it was at that moment.

To her surprise, she heard herself agreeing to accompany Whitney to Denver. If Whitney was surprised, she didn't show it. She nodded and phoned Sam to let him know they were both going to Denver. Distracted, Shea listened as Whitney told Sam that Quantico had provided the poison should the court refuse to grant bail. Because of that, she wasn't sure how long they would be gone.

"Does Sam always know where you are?" Shea asked as she followed Whitney from the room.

"He always knows when I go to another center. If I'm going somewhere for personal reasons, he only knows that I've gone off site."

Shea filed the information away to examine later. Sam was the obvious suspect. He had the most to gain if Whitney was removed from her position and of the six, was the one who would know Whitney's current location with reasonable certainty. He was also the only one who had daily contact with her. There was only one problem to Sam being the attacker and that was his gender. Shea didn't see even a man as slender as Sam passing himself off successfully enough as a woman that he could lure four lesbians to a hotel room. Even the best female impersonators couldn't hide all the up close and personal differences between the sexes.

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Denise was waiting for them when they walked into the conference room in Denver. Normally the Ops Director's presence at one of her centers would concern Whitney. For this, it seemed appropriate. A small steel box sat next to Denise's coffee cup. "Zambrano's on her way. Are you going with her?"

Whitney nodded. "It's my job."

"It's really not." Denise's stare was as pointed as her words.

The argument was old and Whitney knew neither of them would see the other's side. These people, the ones who lived here and the ones who came to visit, belonged to her. She had to do whatever she could to protect them.

"What's in the box?" Shea asked. "How can you be sure it's not traceable?"

Denise reached to flip open the lid. She lifted a plastic envelope containing a tiny green pill. "This is Tritaloxin. She'll put this in a glass of water she'll ask for before they bring him to her. This was invented about fifty years ago my time for heart attacks. The effects are similar to an electric shock to the heart and it's always done under supervision. His death won't be quite instantaneous."

Shea looked at Whitney. "How do you plan to get the body?"

"We're a close family so of course I came when Ms. Zambrano called to tell me my brother was arrested for murder. I want to take him home to Atlanta. Our mother wants Richie buried next to our father." Whitney's tone conveyed true regret for a brother lost in more ways than one.

"Does that always work, claiming to be someone's family?"

There was a shade of doubt to her voice that made Whitney smile. Shea wanted to believe it wasn't that easy. That Whitney couldn't just stroll into a hospital, jail or morgue claiming a relationship to someone without question. "Yes. We have all the information we need to provide a racial and ethnic match. People don't question something that falls within their expectations. Besides, why would someone claim a body that wasn't theirs?"

Shea opened her mouth, but closed it without saying a word when Michelle followed by Vincent entered the room. Whitney was disappointed she would never know Shea's reply. She was sure that whatever it was, it would not be something predictable.

Michelle walked to the table and propped her hands on her attaché case. "My father will join us at the courthouse. He has experience with murder cases."

There was never any doubt that whoever Michelle picked to go with them would be part of the GSA family. Whitney was certain that her contact with Shea was a first for the GSA. In addition to the hotels, the GSA owned a law firm and a medical practice in every city that housed a center. Both practices had clients that were not GSA, just as the hotels had guests from this era. It was rare that someone outside the GSA handled a legal or medical problem and then it was only in an emergency such as the Danielson family in New York.

"Great. However, that doesn't solve the problem if bail is denied." Whitney picked up the plastic bag with the tiny green pill. "This is Tritaloxin. After his court appearance, you'll meet with him and put this in a glass of water. He'll have a heart attack and die. I'll claim the body and this is over."

Michelle stared at her blankly for several seconds and then glanced around at the room before turning back to Whitney. "God, you're serious. You want me to kill him? No."

Denise stood up and Whitney held up a hand to silence her. Michelle was hers and while this problem was both of theirs, the solution was Whitney's. She nodded at Michelle. "Okay. I'll do it. Get me in there."

Without a word, she nodded and sat down at the table to stare at Whitney. Whitney looked at her watch. "Anything else? If not we should be going."

Denise shook her head and shot a glance at Shea. "No, Shea and I should stay here. Too many people might look suspicious."

Whitney looked over at Shea and because she saw relief in her eyes, she nodded. She would only take Shea as far as she wanted to go with this. "All right. I'll have my pager if you need to reach me."

"I think I can handle anything that comes up. This used to be my job remember?"

Whitney ignored the little jab. "Well, Ms. Zambrano, let's go get justice done."

Snow was falling lightly when they walked from the hotel lobby. Michelle's Lexus SUV was idling at the curb and Whitney slipped gratefully into the warmth. It snowed in Atlanta occasionally, but rarely did they have snowdrifts piled like hedges along the streets. Whitney was reminded why, when she had a choice of assignments, she always chose to go south.

"How do I get you into the interview room?" Michelle asked with obvious hesitation.

Whitney turned away from watching thickly bundled people walking with great care down the sidewalk. "My name is Whitney Edwards and you called me when my brother was arrested. Of course I came. I'll claim the body and take it back to Atlanta with me."

The silence stretched for several minutes as Michelle maneuvered expertly over the slick roads. "Have you done this before?"

"Do you mean kill someone in police custody?"

Michelle shot her a quick glance. "Yes, that. Have you?"

"No. But then, I've never had a traveler murder someone. If you know the law in the future at all, you know he's going to die either way. I'd prefer it happen on the other side. I don't want to do this, but I have little choice. He cannot remain in police custody any longer than absolutely necessary."

"If he's going to die anyway, that means he's a defective. Why was he allowed to come here?"

Whitney smiled at the attorney's obvious confusion at the situation. She was a little surprised the woman had not asked for Rich Edwards' criminal record in the future, but supposed there was little reason for her to do so. There was nothing she could read that she could use in trial here. "I've been asking that for years."

And she wasn't any closer to understanding the answer. Traveling was an inherent part of life in the future. Everyone did it, for many different reasons. Some wanted to visit family and friends who lived on this side. Some wanted the chance to see history as it happened. For most of the people, this side wasn't the past. It was part of their present. It was their life and that wasn't something given up without a fight.

"But you're Chief of Security. How can you be overruled when you make a security decision?"

Whitney laughed and shook her head. Was she ever that young? "Because even I have a boss."

The rest of the drive to the courthouse was made in silence. Whitney willed herself to relax. She knew better than anyone that the secret to getting what you wanted from people was to be what they expected you to be. If she was nervous instead of distressed some sharp eyed person would question her presence. She was only suppose to be here because her brother was arrested for murder. She had to project only that.

"When do we do the other thing?" Michelle asked when they were alone in the elevator.

"When we have to," Whitney said and stepped into the hallway. She sent up a small prayer that it wasn't something they would have to do today.

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"Got any suspects yet?"

Shea was staring at the open doorway, stunned that in a few short seconds, events had changed so quickly. She realized she never thought she would be going to the courthouse with them, but didn't know what she thought she would do instead. Surely, Whitney meant more than her waiting at the hotel when she asked if Shea was coming with her to Denver. And how do it go from Michelle administering the poison to Whitney doing it without any discussion? She knew it wasn't her right, but she didn't want Whitney in that position. It wasn't easy to take a life. Those with a conscious were damaged.

"Shea?"

Startled, she turned to face Denise. "I'm sorry, what?"

A slight smile crossed her face. "I asked if you have any suspects."

With a last frowning glance at the doorway, Shea sat down at the table. From Denise's tone, she was making casual conversation rather than asking a serious question. Shea understood. She'd only been on the case less than week. "A few. Whitney's very isolated. Only someone close to her could frame her like this."

Denise nodded thoughtfully and propped her feet on the table. "You think she's being framed?"

The question surprised Shea and earned Denise her complete attention. "Yes. Don't you?"

Denise laughed. "I do yes. But I know Whitney. I've known her all her life. She is many things and more than a few are annoying. She could never be a killer. It's not who she is."

"And yet, should things not go the way you want in that court room, she'll kill him."

Her words struck Denise physically. She jerked as she sat up and blinked as she tried to reconcile what she told herself Whitney was doing with the cold, hard reality Shea threw in her face. Before she could order her thoughts, Shea sat forward with her hands linked on the table. "I know it won't be easy for her. She'll tell herself it's for the greater good. She'll convince herself that she didn't have a choice. She'll do it, but it won't be easy. It won't be something she ever fully accepts had to happen."

"You seem to know her very well for having known her a short time."

Shea was aware that somehow in less than a minute the conversation went from professional to personal. Denise was watching her from eyes narrowed in speculation. If Denise knew Whitney all her life, she probably knew Whitney was gay. "I'm very good at my job. I'm very good at reading people."

Denise stood up and walked to stand at a window showing the snow-capped Rockies off in the distance. "She takes it all too seriously. Too personally."

The memory of Whitney standing in the terminal center after New York flashed across Shea's mind. The woman had lost her son and was thanking Whitney for saving her husband's life. Whitney didn't want her gratitude because in her mind she'd done nothing to deserve it. It was her responsibility and for Whitney, saving the husband could never make up for losing the son. More, Shea thought, because she didn't punch a clock to start her day. "It's her life."

"It's a job," Denise said defiantly and turned to face her. "It's just her job."

"Okay," Shea said agreeably. She didn't know Denise well enough, or Whitney really for that matter, to get in a discussion over Whitney's life choices. She did know Denise was wrong and thought Denise was simply denying what she knew to be true rather than being a believer of her own words. "Do you really think this is going to work?"

Denise stared at her for several seconds before grinning. "Probably. Whitney has a way of making things happen."

Shea didn't doubt that in the least. She'd seen Whitney in action and knew had she looked anything like Tracy Warner, she would have believed Whitney's story. It was galling to know that even with all her training and all her years of seeing the worst of humanity, she could still be so easily deceived. At least she could think Whitney had many more years of training as a deceiver.

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions while we wait?"

Denise shook her head and came back to sit at table. "Not at all. Do you want some coffee or something else to drink?"

The next two hours passed swiftly as Shea asked questions to get an overview of the entire operation. She was surprised to learn that only ten decades over the span of time were open to travelers at any given time. Travelers with Special Exemption Status were allowed into closed time periods, but years marked by war or disease were closed to all.

The figures were mind boggling to Shea. How did they keep track of everyone? She knew from Whitney that travelers wore a sensor, but how did they keep track of those who lived on this side? Did they have free rein to roam all the time lines at will?

Denise shook her head at the question. "No. If someone lives on this side, they can be in this time line or in my time. With permission they can travel to another time, but only if it's two hundred years before or after their birth. Everyone's allowed to use the terminals to travel to other cities."

"How do you know if someone from this time goes to another time? Can't they just in the terminal and go?"

"God no," Denise said with a laugh. "No one's allowed to just wander the time line. Our keycards are, say, like tickets we use to travel. They are embedded with information and if someone tries to go where they aren't allowed, it shuts the terminal down."

The excitement of a real avenue of investigation had Shea sitting forward. "No one? Not you? Not Whitney?"

Denise reached into her breast pocket and pulled out an ID card identical to the one Shea had in her own pocket. She held up the card. "No one. The terminals won't operate without a keycard."

Shea stared at the thin plastic card. It was a key that opened the time line and most keys didn't leave a log of who used it last or when. But this was a computer key and she hoped that somewhere was a log of who went where and when. That it did more than read the encoded information to determine if the cardholder was attempting to go where they weren't allowed. There was only one little flaw that Shea could see. If there were such a log, it would not show that she traveled to Denver with Whitney. But someone had traveled to the cities where the attacks occurred and that someone should have traveled there every time.

"You have a very interesting expression on your face? Want to share?"

The door to the conference room opened without notice and Vince Hollandale stood in the doorway. His face was grim as he gaze fell on Denise. "Bail was denied. Paramedics are on the way to the courthouse."

Shea watched Denise close her eyes and nod her head once. "Okay. I'll go over and get everything ready for the body." She stood up, her face as grim as Vincent's and looked down at Shea. "Call me if anything happens. I'll give it an hour and if nothing's happened, I'll be back."

"Can I get you anything?" Vincent asked after Denise had left.

Shea walked to the door. "Take me with you. I want to know what's happening."

He led her to an office that was a mirror of Whitney's in Atlanta. She accepted a cup of coffee to have something to do with her hands. Vincent sat behind his desk, touched the surface and she jumped as a police monitor sounded in the room. Shea sat across from him and listened to familiar chatter. An officer was checking a suspicious person on Elm Street; several more were responding to an armed robbery at a bank downtown; a woman very matter-of-factly noted the "bastard" at the courthouse died, escaping justice.

Their eyes met across the black glass desk. Later, Shea would remember that her first thought wasn't horror at what they had done, that it wasn't satisfaction for some kind of justice, but fear. If Whitney could look at this as just part of her job, maybe just maybe she'd come out of this all right. Shea was very much afraid that she couldn't.

They had overlooked one very important detail. No, not overlooked. Never considered. How could they know? This was their first execution and everything went according to plan until Whitney attempted to claim the body. Colorado wasn't questioning her right to Rich Edwards. In fact, the police official was very kind as he explained she could have the body tomorrow after the autopsy. It was required because Rich Edwards died in police custody. An autopsy. Someone should have thought of that.

"Ms. Eisner, if they find the poison, what happens then?" Michelle asked when they were in her car on their way back to Prestige.

Whitney didn't turn from her view of fat snowflakes drifting to the snow covered ground. "I'll have one hell of a lawsuit."

She never wanted to do something like that again. She understood why they did it. It was her solution after all. But the jittery nerves and stomach roiling anxiety were feelings she hadn't felt since her first months as a newly minted COS. Over the years, she gained confidence in her abilities and had felt in control right up to the moment the judge denied bail. The shock of what that meant, of what she would have to do, was paralyzing. She watched Edwards shuffle from the courtroom in cuffs and knew it wasn't a contingency plan anymore.

He swaggered into the conference room. He knew who she was; he knew she couldn't leave him there. He sprawled in the chair across from them and smirked at her. He was big. Over six feet easily and the ugly green jumpsuit stretched tight over two hundred plus pounds of rock hard muscle. He was twenty-three so Whitney thought his baldhead was more a fashion choice than genetics, though with his pug face the gene gods had not been kind.

"So whatcha gonna do?" He asked as he grinned at her.

Whitney nudged the glass of water closer to his hand. "There's not a lot I can, Rich."

For a moment, he turned the glass with his fingers and stared at her with flat eyes a summer sky blue. He grinned again and picked up the glass. "Gotta do something don't ya? Can't just leave me in here." With one swallow he drained half the glass. "Can ya?"

Whitney simply stared at him, waiting. She barely had time to wish she had asked Denise how long it would take when she saw it happen. His blue eyes grew wide and the glass dropped to roll on the table. Whitney looked down at the spreading water. Slowly she lifted her eyes from the water to him. "No."

Of all the things Whitney expected to see in his eyes, rage was not one of them. Definitely fear. Maybe horror. Panic and pain from the effects of the attack certainly. Instead there was rage, black and bitter, because he knew what she had done. He lunged for her, would have had her if the poison had not seized his body. His grabbed his heart, sweat rolling down his red face as he labored to draw air into his lungs.

"Bitch," he wheezed and fell to his knees. "You...can't..."

The words he fought to grind out over the pain were drowned out as Michelle called for help. He had stopped breathing by the time officers arrived. Whitney was hustled out of the room as every futile effort was made to save his life.

Barely thirty minutes passed from the time he was brought into the conference room and someone came to tell them he was dead. She never expected them to keep the body and short of stealing it, there wasn't a lot she could do about it today.

Whitney blinked slowly and realized she was staring at a wall. She turned to find Michelle staring at her as if waiting for Whitney to tell her what to do next. Whitney glanced around and saw they were in the secured GSA lot under the hotel. She laid a hand on Michelle's arm. "I don't know if this means much after that, but there will be a commendation put in your file. You went above and beyond today and I am personally very grateful. Thank you."

"It means a lot. But you're the one who went above and beyond."

Whitney opened the passenger door. "Nothing is above or beyond my job."

It was after seven her time and Whitney wished she could go home. She wanted this day over and would be quite happy if it was never mentioned again. She was glad that few people inside the GSA would ever know what she did. She wished desperately there was a way she could forget.

Shea and Vincent were standing in front of them when the elevator opened to the fifth floor. Michelle stepped out, but Whitney stayed. Because Denise wasn't among the welcoming committee, she knew the Ops Director was in Quantico.

She motioned Shea into the elevator with her. She looked at Vincent. "They kept the body. We'll get it tomorrow. Call Sam and tell him that Shea and I are staying here tonight. We'll be back after I report to Denise."

Her weary gaze shifted to Michelle. "Go home, do whatever you have to do to forget this day and I'll see you here at eight in the morning. I don't know what time we'll get the call so I want to be ready to move when we do."

Michelle stared at her a moment before nodding. "In the morning then."

They found Denise writing at her desk in her office. She looked up at Whitney's knock on her open door and sat back in her chair as she waved them into the room. She wasn't smiling as she swept narrowed eyes over Whitney's face. Whitney hoped she looked more composed than she felt.

"You look like hell," Denise said, not unkindly.

"I think you're supposed to when you kill someone. Otherwise you're just a psycho."

Denise opened her mouth to say something and Whitney turned to walk to the window. She didn't want to hear Denise disagree with her that she had killed someone that afternoon, but gagging her boss wasn't a wise career move.

"Where's the body?"

Whitney leaned against the wall and stared at the faint crescent moon hanging over the treetops. "Do you know what they do if a person dies in police custody in Denver?"

She waited for Denise to answer and when she didn't, she turned to her. "Hmm?"

Denise glanced at Shea. Shea looked blank before realization dawned and she said, her voice stunned, "An autopsy. I'm sorry, I should have thought of that."

"Yes, well," Whitney turned back to the moon. "Should they not find the poison and not trace it to the glass of water I asked for, I should get the body tomorrow. Shea and I are staying overnight in Denver. I don't want any slip-ups when they call me to come down there."

"Actually," Shea said, her tone cautious, "I'd like to cash my rain check for supper here. Does it matter where we stay tonight?"

Whitney closed her eyes. Her shoulders slumped as the weight of the day came crashing down on her. She debated Shea's request with a brain zinging from the day's events. Did it matter? No, not really. They could go home for all that anything mattered. They were only a quick ride away from wherever they were and whatever time they were in at any given moment. "Okay. We'll need to get clothes."

"Let me take care of that for you," Denise said quietly and Whitney nodded at the offer. She was more than willing for someone else to be in control.

The moon was high in the starry sky by the time Denise's arrangements for them were complete. A car would take them to the restaurant for supper and anywhere else they wished to go before bringing them back here for the night.

"It's all arranged. I'll try not to need you until tomorrow," Denise said from her side. Whitney cast her a quick glance. Denise laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Just let it all go for the night."

Whitney leaned over to kiss her on the cheek before pushing away from the wall. "Thanks. I'll try to do that. We'll see you in the morning."

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The walk from Denise's office to where the car waited for them was made in a silence Shea didn't know how to break. Several times she almost spoke only to stop when she realized how contrived the words seemed in her head. She didn't want to force a conversation of trivial small

talk. She didn't want to minimize the horror of Whitney's day by treating it as if it was the same as any other.

She glanced at Whitney's face as she slid first into the car. Her heart sank at the blank shock in her eyes. Denise had seen it and had looked so helplessly at Whitney's back as she walked to the window. The denial that Whitney killed anyone died on her lips. Like Shea now, she didn't know what to say. What could anyone possibly say?

In the dark car, where no one would ever know, she reached for Whitney's hand. Long, slim fingers were icy in hers. She found the courage to speak when Whitney didn't pull away.

"He was twenty-one when I stopped him for going eighty in a thirty-five zone. I was still in uniform then. It was two in the morning and scorching. The last thing I wanted to do was get out of my air-conditioned car for a traffic stop. He was driving a red Explorer so new he had driven it off the lot that morning. He was five-eleven, weighed about one-seventy and he looked like an angel with his curly blonde hair. He graduated the day before with honors from Mercer. His girlfriend said yes when he asked her to marry him only six hours earlier. His name was Lucas Miller. I know everything about him except why he came from that brand new car with a gun in his hand. He shot at me and missed. I didn't and I held his hand as he died on the street."

Even after ten years, that night was as clear in her memory as a movie. Her irritation with the stop, the sweat rolling between her shoulder blades like a river and the adrenaline spike when she saw the gun in his hand. Her aim was so perfect it was like he was wearing a bull's eye on his chest. He never said a word as he bled out on that street, his hand in hers, and she stared into his dark, confused eyes until she saw him slip away. They tore his life apart searching for a reason why he did what he did and never found it. He was a good kid with a bright future who made one tragic mistake on a hot June night.

"You don't ever forget do you?" Whitney asked softly.

Shea didn't want to answer that question. Whitney would learn in her own time how to live with what she had done. Everyone did. "He would have killed again. If he had ever gotten free, Rich would have killed again. I'm a cop and I can tell you with a clear conscience you did the right thing. The only thing you could do. That's the bottom line and that's all that counts."

The car drove under the covered entrance to a busy Italian restaurant. The valet opened their door and held out a hand for Whitney to exit the car. Before she stood, Whitney turned to her. Shock was fading in the crystal blue and the fingers held loose in hers tightened briefly. "Thank you."

Shea tried not to stare at the people milling around outside the entrance as they waited to be seated. Hair in bright neon colors twinkled cheerfully in the night. If Shea had given the woman Whitney turned away that first morning any thought, she would never have thought the woman's appearance was mainstream. How could you take anyone seriously when their hair was cherry red and lit up like a Christmas tree? Or in one long braid twisted in a rainbow of colors. As they

got closer, she saw multiple piercings and tiny glowing facial tattoos. It wasn't the meek that inherited earth, it was the geeks and freaks.

Shea's stomach growled and if the long line was any indication, it could be a while before they ate. The brunch they shared earlier seemed days ago. She caught up with Whitney before she could approach the maitre d' to get on the list. "Hey, let's go somewhere else. I'm starving and it looks like an hour wait."

In reply, Whitney took her hand and pulled her with her to the podium. "Whitney Eisner."

The older man smiled at her as he reached for menus. Shea bit her lip when she saw the glowing blue angel on his left cheek. At least his hair was a monk's fringe of snowy white. "Yes, this way please."

The dining area was small, intimate tables lit cozily with candles. Their table with a bottle of wine chilling in a bucket was tucked into a corner. He handed them menus once they were seated. "Jason will be with you shortly."

Idly, Shea watched him weave a path to the front of the restaurant. Her gaze drifted over the room taking in the warm candlelight, tables for two and piano playing in the background. She glanced at Whitney, who was leaning back in her chair scanning her menu. Why would Denise choose such a romantic setting? It was an odd choice even for a boss who had an obviously personal relationship with a subordinate.

"Are you ladies ready to order?"

Shea blinked up in surprise at the young man. Who was staring at Whitney with wide, unblinking eyes. Whitney spared him a quick glance. "We'll need a few more minutes."

He nodded and backed away from the table.

"I usually have the lasagna when I come here. It's very good." Whitney set her menu to the side. She reached for the wine and poured them each a glass. "Do you know what you want?"

"I haven't had spaghetti in a while."

As soon as she placed her menu on the table Jason was back. "What would you like this evening?"

He never took his eyes off Whitney as she gave both their orders. Shea waited until he was gone before picking up her glass. She took a sip and met Whitney's eyes across the table. She was beautiful in the flickering candlelight. Shea was glad to see her eyes were less shadowed.

"So did you want see the sights?"

The question caught Shea off guard. "I'm sorry, what?"

Before Whitney answered, Jason brought their salads to the table. "Do you want to see anything while we're here?"

A very graphic image popped up in her head, bringing a smile to her face. She didn't suppose that was on Whitney's list. She cleared her throat. "I wouldn't know what to want to see here. What does Virginia have?"

"We're not limited to Virginia," Whitney said with a light laugh. "We can go anywhere. Do anything."

Really? She wanted to ask. Could they really do anything? She could admit to herself that she was attracted to Whitney almost from the beginning. Or at least at the cookout when she noticed how beautiful she was even as she was suspicious of her. A body would have to be dead not to notice. Dead and buried. She was feeling very much alive at the moment. Shea took several bites of her salad as she tried to think of something to prolong the night. She didn't want to go back to the compound and spend the night flipping through TV channels. She especially didn't want to leave Whitney alone so soon in the evening. It would be better for Whitney to end the night late and slightly drunk.

Inspired by that thought, Shea looked up from her salad. "I want to dance. I want to see and hear what the music is like in this time."

Whitney cocked an eyebrow, but smiled. "Okay. I think you'll be disappointed. It's not so very different."

They spent the rest of the meal talking about the cultural differences between the times. Shea found Whitney's repeated warnings that there wasn't a chasm wide difference between then and now intriguing. Why go back at all if not for the quaint nostalgia of a simpler time and place? With people going over in droves, there had to be a lure and one that wasn't readily apparent.

She'd been led to believe that Whitney didn't come to this side often, but when they left the restaurant, Whitney gave their driver the name of a club she didn't get from anyone else. If this was a club from her cadet days, how could she be sure it was still open? If it wasn't from her cadet days, how did she know about it?

"Come here often?" She asked as she slid from the car onto a crowded sidewalk. A door opened somewhere close and thumping music spilled out with a group of laughing people.

Whitney cupped her elbow to lead her through the throng. "Not anymore."

Any questions she could have asked were lost as she stepped through the wide door and stared. The Warehouse was an apt name for the club. Her eyes were drawn to the center of the room where an artwork of twisted metal snaked up to the ceiling with staircases branching off to at least five levels. The railings around each level were crammed with gawkers watching others dance on lower floors.

The hand on her elbow slid around her waist and Whitney leaned close to ask in her ear, "Do you want a drink?"

Shea didn't try to compete with the floor drumming music. She looked up, intending to nod and found herself less than an inch away from Whitney's face. Suddenly, her world went from a strobe light flashing, music crashing bar to a dark corner with Whitney's body pressed against hers from lips to thighs. Briefly, so briefly the thought barely touched her consciousness, she questioned what was happening. Then Whitney opened her mouth. Shea didn't care if it was wrong, that Whitney was either her boss or a victim, that somewhere was a rule forbidding a relationship between them. All that mattered right then was getting her hands on Whitney's body the way Whitney had her hands on hers.

And oh how they were on hers. The kiss was hard and demanding while her hands were gentle and caressing. Slowly they moved, from the small of her back to her waist, to her stomach. Shea groaned, lost to time and place, when Whitney's thumbs stroked the curve of her breasts.

"No," she protested hoarsely as Whitney broke away. "Don't stop."

Whitney brushed a quick kiss to her lips. "Do you want to stay here or leave?"

Shea didn't have to think about the answer. Even if the choice had been to trade coming here again for the chance to make love with Whitney, even then she wouldn't have had to think about it. She slid her hand to the nape of Whitney's neck and pulled her easily into a deep kiss. "Where can we go?"

Whitney smiled, quick and bright, as she said, "Anywhere you want to go."

Shea grinned at the standard reply. Maybe one day she would remember that with Whitney the answer to where would always be anywhere. But even anywhere was farther away than their rooms at Quantico. Shea was in favor of anything that was closer. "Here. In your room."

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On the short drive to Quantico from the club, Whitney waited for her conscious to remind her that she was breaking another major rule. It was wrong of her to have a relationship with Shea. She was altering the other woman's life. Had already altered it. Whitney wasn't surprised to realize she didn't care. She didn't want to care. Just this once, she wanted to move outside the lines. She wanted to act instead of weighing the consequences.

She smiled faintly in the darkness. Maybe after breaking their biggest rule, her conscious didn't care what other ones she broke.

"What are you thinking?" Shea asked softly from where she rested in Whitney's arms. She tilted her head just enough for their eyes to meet.

"That you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." What was wrong her that she hadn't noticed that until now? Well, maybe she noticed in some off hand way. But she hadn't really

taken the time to notice her eyes were a pure clear green. That her hair was several shades of blonde. That little crinkles formed on the bridge of her nose when she grinned like she was now.

"You lie. You're thinking about whatever regulation you're breaking."

"Am I that easy to read?" She asked, surprised that Shea knew her that well.

Shea turned so that they were face to face. She stared into Whitney's eyes as if she really could read her thoughts. "You are now. Your first instinct is to always do what you think is right. Tell me why this is wrong for you."

Before Whitney could reply, the car came to a stop in front of the VIP Quarters. Two suites were reserved for them, but Whitney knew they would be using hers. It was doubtful something would come up that needed her personal attention this late in the day. If something did, after the day she'd had, she expected Sam to handle anything that wasn't an emergency. That said, something could come up and of the two of them, she was the one who needed to be where she could be reached instantly.

"Not wrong for me. For you," she answered when they were walking up to the door of her suite. She swiped her ID and opening the door, she stepped aside for Shea to enter first.

Shea turned on the threshold and leaned her shoulder against the doorjamb. A curious smile played around her lips. "Making love to a beautiful woman is never wrong for me."

"I'm changing your life."

Those green eyes stared at her until confusion was slowly replaced by understanding. Shea cocked her head. "Yeah, you are."

The solemn words banked her desire as effectively as water on a fire. The keen edge of disappointment was sharper than Whitney expected. She brushed past Shea and tossed her ID on the bar to pour herself a glass of brandy. She wasn't losing anything, she reminded herself. Barely an hour ago having Shea in her bed wasn't even a fantasy. She never gave the woman a second glance. It was ridiculous to feel like she was losing something she never had.

The door closed behind her. The brandy burned a path to her stomach as she emptied the glass in one drink. She was almost amused that a day she thought couldn't get any worse, did. Her plan to make it through the night, before losing herself in Shea's body, was to drown herself unconscious. There wasn't anything about that day she wanted to remember. She reached for the crystal decanter to take the bottle to bed with her.

A hand closed over hers. She remained still as Shea pressed her body firmly against hers. Soft lips pressed a soft kiss to the nape of her neck. "I prefer you sober as I'm thanking you."

Warmth spread over her body and Whitney knew it had nothing to do with the alcohol. "Thanking me for what?"

Shea dropped both arms to her waist and slowly pulled Whitney's shirt from her slacks. "For changing my life. I want to thank you so much for that. I want to spend hours thanking you."

Whitney put her hands on Shea's. "How do you know that's a good thing? You don't even know what will change."

Shea's arms tightened around her waist and she laid her head against Whitney's shoulder. "I can't play that game with you Whitney. I don't have your years of experience moving through the future and past as if they are present. I only have right now and I only know what's happened in the past. I know I am thirty-four years old and I've spent most of them looking to feel what I felt when you kissed me. I don't want to pass on that just because you think there is someone else in my future. I'd like to think of that as her loss rather than mine."

"So would I," Whitney said softly. She had been taught to respect the future, to change nothing unless absolutely necessary. But that was really no longer a concern. She had changed Shea's the second she turned to her for help. Whatever happened now would never be what happened before. "I'd rather it was her loss, too."

Whitney turned in her arms and pulled Shea against her. Kissing Shea in the bar was one of the few rash acts in her life. With her arm around Shea and their faces so close, she was overwhelmed with the need to feel Shea's lips on hers. She hadn't thought to care if it was something Shea wanted. It was so arousing now to look into her eyes and see desire burning in the bright green. She kissed her on the neck. "I need to take a shower. I need to wash this day off my skin."

Shea's hands moved under shirt and over her back in a slow caress. "Mm, that sounds wonderful."

Whitney thought it sounded like heaven to her and stepped back with Shea's hands in hers. "Do you need anything before this day is officially over? Because once I go into that bedroom, I am not coming back out until the morning."

Shea laughed and leaned in to kiss her quick and hard on the lips. "Once you're in the bedroom, I won't need anything else."

She watched with a growing smile as Shea crossed the room to the bedroom. By the time she had her hand on the doorknob, her shirt and bra lay behind her on the carpet. She sent a half smile over her bare shoulder and walked into the bedroom.

There was a beautiful woman in her bedroom. Whitney was almost certain the last time that happened she was still in Vancouver. She knew for sure it was before she was COS.

"I'm starting without you," Shea called, followed by the sound of running water.

Her clothing was scattered on the floor of the sitting room and bedroom along with Shea's when Whitney stepped behind her in the shower. Before she could move, Shea turned and her eyes roamed hungrily over Whitney's body. Lingering doubts went up in flames.

Shea picked up the travel-sized bottle of bath gel and poured half into her hand. She held the bottle out to Whitney. "I don't want our first time to be in the shower."

Whitney nodded and stared as Shea began rubbing soapy hands over her own body. There was nothing sensual in the methodical way Shea moved down her torso to her legs. She was still staring, frozen, unbelievably turned on when Shea stood up and blinked at her in surprise. "You watched me."

"Yes," Whitney admitted, her voice husky.

Desire clenched tight when Shea brought her hands to her own breasts and caressed the nipples. Slowly, she walked to Whitney. "It's my turn."

Whitney tore her eyes away from Shea's breasts. "What?"

Shea reversed their positions and pushed Whitney to the center of the large shower. With a 'let's go' gesture of her hand, she said, "Come on. It's my turn to watch you."

Feeling foolish, but with a rigid sense of fair play, Whitney ran her right hand across her left shoulder and down her arm. She watched Shea watching her and lifted her arm up to slid her hand up. Whitney grew bold when Shea licked her lips, her gaze riveted on Whitney's hands sliding along tanned skin. The sound of ragged breathing filled the steamy shower. Shea groaned and frustration flashed in her eyes when Whitney stopped the slow caress of her hands at the curve of her breasts.

Whitney wasn't feeling foolish anymore and while putting on a show for Shea was one of the few erotic things she had ever done, she wanted more than her own hands on her body. She reached for Shea and pulled them both under the hot spray of water. "Rinse or our first time will be right here."

Shea needed no more encouragement. They hurriedly washed suds away, stumbled from the shower for towels they barely used and fell on the bed, tongue sliding over tongue. There was no thinking, no hesitating as their hands moved to cup and caress, to tease and torment.

"Oh," Shea breathed as Whitney slid inside her first and she clamped tight on her fingers. She turned her face to Whitney and kissed her. "Faster baby."

With Shea moving her hips to meet her, Whitney thrust faster and harder until Shea arched in her arms, moaning.

Shea stared across the table where Whitney sat in a matching navy robe. When the knock came on the bedroom door, they both jerked awake at the same time Denise stuck her head into the room. Her voice was neutral as she said she needed to talk with them. They found the robes in two suitcases that escaped Shea's notice last night.

Whitney lifted her head from her hands. "Why wasn't I told before now?"

A woman was found on the eighteenth floor of Denver's Prestige at three that morning. Like the others, she was badly beaten. Unlike the others, she was already dead. Everything was exactly the same down to Whitney's fingerprints on the book of matches. Shea dropped her gaze to the gold stud earrings Whitney removed when Denise said she was no longer a suspect. She had forgotten Whitney's every move was tracked. For this attack, she had an ironclad alibi.

Denise refilled her coffee cup and took a sip, studying Whitney's pale face over the rim. The concern in her eyes deepened. "There was nothing you could do. She was dead when they found her."

Something in her dismissive tone made Shea think Denise wouldn't have sent for Whitney even if the woman had been alive. Shea could hear her saying in that same tone that without a medical degree, Whitney would have been of no use to the woman.

Whitney shook head and pushed away from the table. "I should have been there."

They watched her walk into the bedroom and close the door. Shea knew she would go over as soon as she was dressed. It was barely six in the morning, they had spent more time discovering each other than they had sleeping, but she would want to see the crime scene herself and talk to the investigators. She would then wait for the call from the authorities to claim Rich Edwards body. She didn't doubt Whitney would bring the body over personally before going to her office in Atlanta. If asked, she would say she was doing her job.

Shea wished the same could be said for her. She should have expected an attack at the hotel last night. It was a tailor made opportunity. If she had been thinking, they could have set up surveillance and instead of it being over for Whitney, they would have the attacker, too. But Shea was too concerned about Whitney personally to focus on her professionally. Too wrapped up in her attraction. She may not have done her job very well up to now and that was going to change. She looked over at Denise. "Yesterday you told me that everyone needs an ID card to travel. Is there a log kept of that usage?"

Denise tore her eyes from the closed bedroom door. "Yes, of course."

"I'd like to look at it. For both sides."

Surprise shot Denise's eyebrows to her dark hairline. "Do you have any idea how many people that will be?"

"I'm only interested in the dates of the attacks." She didn't add that she was also only interested in the people who traveled to the cities that same day as Whitney. People who made their plans after Whitney was called to the properties.

The bedroom door opened and Whitney walked out ready for work in charcoal gray slacks and maroon shirt. "Shea you need to get ready. I want to go over."

The desire to go with her was strong. Shea shoved it down deep. She needed to keep her focus off Whitney and on the case. Her status as suspect afforded her a special immunity from the attacker. The easiest way to get Whitney out of the way would have been to kill her. For some reason that wasn't an option, but now that she wasn't a suspect, it could be. That wasn't happening on Shea's watch.

She pasted a smile on her face. "You go on. You don't need me in Denver. I'll go to Atlanta."

Distracted, Whitney nodded and buttoned her left cuff. "Okay. You should be able to access the preliminary reports from there. You know how to reach me if you need me."

With an absent kiss on her lips and Denise's cheek, she was gone. Shea found herself suddenly interested in her coffee. It was ridiculous to feel embarrassment now. The shock of her news blunted the realization that Denise caught them in bed. She was realizing it was a vengeance.

"Come to my office when you're dressed," Denise said in a brisk tone as she stood. "I'll have that information for you."

Once again, Shea found herself wondering at the relationship between Denise and Whitney. Denise's interest in Whitney seemed almost maternal. It didn't escape her notice that her suitcase ended up in Whitney's suite. Shea would be astonished if another suite was reserved for her. Denise started their night with dinner in a romantic restaurant. Whatever shock Denise received at finding her in Whitney's bed was covered quickly. Of course, the clothes scattered over the sitting room gave that away. Two bras on the floor made it more than obvious Whitney wasn't alone.

Shea picked up the clothes they left scattered over the floor and dumped them on the bed next to the suitcases. They were extraordinarily thorough, she thought, as she rifled through her suitcase. She had everything she needed for an overnight stay and didn't doubt that every article of clothing would fit. She dressed quickly in black slacks and gray shirt. She threw yesterday's clothes into the suitcase and hoped she would see hers again.

It wasn't until she was ready to leave that she realized she didn't know where she was on the compound or how to get to Denise's office. She scanned the unit for a phone and didn't see one or didn't recognize it in its future form. Well, she was on the compound and as high, thick walls surrounded it, she couldn't get too lost. Someone would be around for directions.

She opened the door and took a startled step back. "Jeez."

The girl standing guard at the door executed a flawless turn on one heel to face her. She wore the green uniform of the cadets. With her wheat colored hair, soft brown eyes and angelic face, Shea thought she looked like a cheerleader. Except cheerleaders didn't wear shiny black combat boots or accessorize with baton and handcuffs.

"Good morning, Ms. Shea," she said, her tone crisp. "My name is Mia. Ms. Elliot assigned me as to escort you around the compound."

Mia moved aside as Shea stepped out and closed the door. Ms. Elliot could have mentioned it, Shea thought darkly. She wouldn't have left the kid freezing on the doorstep while she dressed. Or lost ten years of her life when she opened the door. "Nice to meet you Mia. I was just hoping someone was out this early to give me directions. I'm a little lost."

A black armored Jeep sat at the end of the walkway. Mia fell in step behind her. "I'm sure it'll come back to you. There hasn't been that much construction since you graduated."

Shea felt a flash of panic as Mia's meaning sunk in. Mia thought she was one of them. She forced a laugh. "I graduated a long time ago."

Please don't ask me when, she prayed. She didn't have a clue when she should have been here. She did remember their training began in high school, but she didn't remember if they were fifteen or sixteen. She didn't know and she didn't think Mia would buy that she had forgotten that.

To her surprise, Mia opened and closed the passenger door for her. Shea watched her round the front of the Jeep and wondered if the guard was for her or because of her. Would it be paranoid to think they didn't want her roaming around the compound on her own?

The drive to the Administrative Building was through a maze of three-story red brick buildings and wide-open lawns covered with companies of cadets jogging in perfect formation. The sheer number of kids exercising stunned Shea. When Whitney used the word academy to describe their training, Shea never thought she meant as in military. She turned to Mia and almost asked if all these kids were from the other side when she remembered that was something else she should know.

She was still mesmerized at the sea of navy when Mia parked the Jeep in front of a single story U shaped building. Shea jumped from the Jeep before Mia could open her door. The cold morning rang with chanting voices. There had to be hundreds of them.

"Ms. Shea? This way," Mia said and headed for the double glass doors.

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Distracted by the number of details needed to clear up the events of the last twenty-four hours, Whitney exited the TimeLine in the lobby of Denver's Prestige. She wasn't talking to anyone or reading anything until she had a cup of coffee. Real coffee and not whatever it was they served on the fifth floor. She was halfway across the wide marble floor when the fog surrounding her

brain lifted and she realized the lobby was deserted except for the two desk clerks. A quick glance revealed lights in only a few of the restaurants. All the shops were dark.

She went to the front desk. "Where is everyone?"

The desk clerks, both male and college aged, glanced at each other. The taller of two, Chad by his nametag, swallowed nervously. "Good morning, Ms. Eisner. Who do you need?"

"It's almost six-thirty in the morning. Why are the shops closed?" Whitney knew from a lifetime spent around hotels that the first trickle of guests should already be enjoying breakfast.

He glanced quickly down at his computer and returned puzzled brown eyes to her face. He cleared his throat. "Actually, its...four-thirty, ma'am."

It took Whitney several seconds to understand and she closed her eyes for a moment. "Mountain Standard Time. I forgot I'm not in Atlanta."

"Yes ma'am. Would you like for me to call Mr. Hollandale?"

Whitney smiled briefly and shook her head. "No, don't disturb him. I'll be in Atlanta if anyone needs me."

She decided as she dressed earlier that she wasn't going to the scene of the crime. That was Shea's area of expertise and she'd leave that to the expert. She could add nothing to the investigation and wouldn't understand what the investigators were doing. She did, however, have work to do in Atlanta.

As she walked onto the busy fifth floor in Atlanta, Whitney felt her life settle on its axis. Dodging travelers coming and going, Whitney made her way from the transport room to the command center. With steaming mug of coffee in hand, she went to her office and shut the door. Her desk was covered in the papers and files whose reading took up the majority of her time. Normally the pile that waited on her desk would make her wince, but now she was grateful for the distraction. As she waited for her computer to go online, she reached for the top file on a stack.

She was frowning over the report for contraband attempts when the alarm she set for seven-fifty broke her concentration. She closed the file and almost left it on her desk when she decided to take it with her to Denver. There was something wrong with the report and she could spend the waiting time in Denver to puzzle over it.

The door to Shea's office was closed and Whitney thought only briefly about checking in her with before she left. She wished they'd had a chance to talk about last night this morning, to see if it was a prelude to something more. Her own feelings were jumbled and because she wasn't sure if she was checking in with her Security Advisor or her lover, Whitney decided against knocking on her door. If Shea needed her, she knew how to reach her. Besides, Shea hadn't knocked on her door when she arrived that morning.

Unlike the Atlanta center, Denver was still on stand-by when Whitney walked down the hall to the command center. They would officially go online at six and in the few minutes before they began operations, employees were at their stations preparing for the day. She ignored the stares from the senior agents as she crossed the room to Vincent's office. She knocked on his open door.

"I'd say good morning, but it's not," he said, sitting back in his chair. He looked even more rumpled than usual and Whitney doubted he went back to sleep after he was told of the attack.

Whitney sat in front of his desk. The sun was rising in the picture window behind his desk. It was her second of the day. "No, it's not. Who was she?"

Vincent picked up the file he was reading when she walked into the room and handed it over to her. "A kid. From what the investigator told me, it's the same as the others."

Stacia Innes died between the hours of midnight and two that morning from blunt force trauma to the head. Before receiving the killing blow, she suffered a beating so severe her face was unrecognizable and they had to use her prints for identification. Except for those few differences, the report was the same one she read for the other victims. Hands tied. Body covered in blood and bruises. This one dead; another died. How many more before they knew who and why?

"I can't believe they don't even have a suspect. This is the fifth attack."

Whitney glanced up from the report to see him shake his head. She was told, after the aborted interrogation the day Erin Warner died, that her name would be kept confidential. She was relieved the investigators managed to do that. If anyone found out she was the top suspect respect for her position would plummet. Suspicion was oftentimes more than enough to end a career.

"There's a lot they don't know," she said as she handed him the report. There was no mention in the three typed pages of matches being found with her fingerprints. In fact, this report looked identical to the reports she was given after the attacks. Whitney had to wonder if those reports had information deleted. She supposed, as the only suspect, there were details the investigators would want to keep from her. Didn't the cops withhold some details all the time? Details they didn't want to the public to know? Surely that hadn't changed so much even on the other side.

Vincent nodded and tossed the file aside. "I think they should know more than they do with five victims. Someone can't commit the perfect crime five times."

No, Whitney didn't think this someone was. There were other clues and putting them with the matches made her suspect. She made a mental note to get full copies of all the reports. She wanted to know what else they had to make them think she was attacking women and now killing them. Maybe Shea could see something the investigators had missed.

She stood up and slid the file she brought with her from the edge of the desk. "I'll be in the main conference room working on some reports. Did you know the number of people trying to take contraband over has doubled since last year?"

"Doubled?" Startled, Vincent stood up. "That can't be right."

Whitney frowned at the file in her hands. "Yeah, that's what I think."

Two hours later, Whitney had finished off an excellent western omelet and was frustrated by the contraband report. If there was a clerical error, she couldn't see it. Every number submitted by the centers was correctly entered into the main report. She was logging into the main computer to access the center reports when Michelle came into the room.

"Good morning Ms. Eisner."

Whitney glanced up from the computer screen. The staff attorney was dressed all in black and evidence of her sleepless night showed in her pale face and dull eyes. She was holding on to a huge coffee mug with both hands. Whitney sat back in her chair. "Call me Whitney. They haven't called yet, but I expect this will be over within in the hour."

Michelle nodded as she took across Whitney. "It was on the news last night and I couldn't make myself stop watching it. I kept waiting for them to say he was poisoned. I fell asleep on the couch waiting for the police to knock on my door. Did you ...do any of that?"

"No." After a certain point, her world had narrowed down to one woman.

"I don't see how you could stop yourself."

Whitney pushed the reports aside, linked her hands and sat forward to stare into Michelle's eyes. The difference between the manic woman of yesterday to the one sitting in front of her shell-shocked today was stark. Nothing in the pampered life they led inside the GSA had prepared them for killing anyone. It wasn't what they were supposed to do. Whitney doubted Michelle had handled very many cases that weren't misdemeanors.

"I've attended every death that's happened on this side since I became COS. I've dealt with every local government official imaginable I'd think at this point. Granted, I've never killed anyone before, but other than that, I've done this many times."

Too many times recently, not that Michelle needed to know that.

Michelle stared into her coffee like a woman searching for the meaning of life. Whitney let the silence stretch. She didn't know the right thing to say. She didn't have the words to make this less than what it was, to minimize the horror of it until it wasn't remembered in every second thought.

"I'll resign before I do that again."

Whitney stared at her bowed head. To most bosses, that statement could be taken as insubordination. Employees did what they were told to do or they became employed somewhere else. Unless they worked for the GSA. Resignation meant resigning from more than just the job. It meant giving up friends and family, lives and loves to move to the other side. It meant never coming home again.

"Yeah," Whitney said softly, "Me, too."

Michelle's head lifted slowly until their eyes met. Whitney was oddly comforted to see her own misery reflected in the other woman's gaze. Before either could speak the phone next to her elbow rang. They agreed the call should come to Whitney through the front desk so that that whoever called believed she was a guest at the hotel.

"Hello...Yes, I remember...I called a local mortuary to handle that for me. I'll be taking him back home to Atlanta...I'll be there as soon I can."

She stood up as she hung up the receiver. "It's almost over."

Michelle nodded and hurriedly finished off her coffee. Whitney gathered up her papers and stuffed them in her attaché case. She hoped to be in Atlanta within the hour. To be back into her life in less than two. She sincerely hoped that before the day ended, Rich Edwards was a distant memory.

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By two that afternoon, Shea knew combing the keycard logs wasn't going to net her the attacker. She started out with a broad range of parameters and had worked to narrow it down to a manageable number of almost 3,000 rather than the 98,514 she started with in her first run. She was still stunned the combined number of people using the TimeLine for the five days in question was almost 100,000. Slowly, she was discovering she had seriously underestimated the GSA's presence in the past.

The numbers were staggering. She'd thought it was a few thousand at the most. If you added the people living on the other side with those who visited it was millions. It didn't seem possible that not once, not ever, not even when they went back into earth's more primitive times, that they had never been caught.

She flipped through the two inch stack of names wearily. This was as far down as she could whittle the names. She knew so little about the attacker. She didn't know gender, age, race, or even if they had arrived in the city alone. Finally she cut down the parameters until the attacker fit the profile of the victims. She didn't like taking that route because she didn't want the focus to be so narrow. How could there still be so many names?

"How's it going?"

Shea jumped at the unexpected question and looked up to see Denise standing in front of her. She leaned back in her chair and reached for her Coke. She grimaced as she took a sip of the

warm, flat drink and pushed the can away from her. "I was thinking that now that Whitney's not a suspect, you really don't need me anymore."

The idea was very appealing. With what she knew, she had only a sliver of hope she would find the attacker on her list and that was only if the person traveled to the cities alone or with the same person. Shea didn't believe it was going to be that easy.

Denise sat across from her and pulled one of the earlier query lists closer. "So you think there won't be another attack?"

"I really don't know," Shea lied. There was a lot she didn't know, but what she did know was that Whitney was targeted for a reason. There was an agenda in place and she wasn't sure how last night changed it. That would depend on their knowing Whitney was cleared and what they wanted to accomplish by framing her.

"You're a detective. Play out the possible scenarios for me." Denise never looked up as she turned the page.

There was a tone in her voice that caught Shea's attention. A thread of something that belied the woman's casual all-the-time-in-the-world air as she carelessly turned page after page of names. Shea sat up and Denise dropped her pretense of reading. Their eyes met across the table. "There will be another attack and it won't be like the others. That will depend on why Whitney was targeted. If I were you, I'd assume she's the next victim."

Her words didn't have the shocking effect Shea that they would have on the Ops Director. Denise didn't pale or gasp, she didn't become alarmed or concerned. It was, Shea decided as Denise simply stared at her without a change in her calm expression, something Denise had figured out on her own. "But then you already knew that."

"I need you now more than I did before. Professionally, Whitney means a great deal to me. I may not be able to replace her and that would mean shutting down that Gateway. That has never happened and I'll be damned if I'm the first."

She paused, her eyes losing their fiery gleam and the granite tone of her voice gentled. "Her mother, Grace, saved me. I lost my family when I was very young and I was bitter and angry at the world when I came to the Academy. Grace decided that she was going to be my friend. There is very little that Grace doesn't get if she wants it. When you meet her don't be fooled by her southern belle fragility. She made her family mine and saved me. So personally, there is nothing I won't do to protect Whitney."

Shea nodded as the puzzle of Denise's relationship with Whitney was explained. Whitney called her Aunt that first time they came over and Shea had thought Whitney was only teasing her. Most companies had rules against people supervising their relatives. Perhaps the GSA made an exception because Denise didn't share blood with Whitney. Maybe they didn't know that Denise was an Eisner in everything but name.

Denise cleared her throat, her voice normal when she spoke. "I want you right where you are whether you work for the GSA or not. I don't care if you investigate or pretend to investigate as long as you keep her safe."

"When did you know she was attracted to me?" Shea wasn't all that surprised to have her suspicions about last night confirmed. Denise consciously decided to fan the flames.

At least she had the good grace be embarrassed as she dropped her gaze. "When she came to tell me about you. You have no idea what she risked by turning to you. You were the worst of her options."

Shea got that now that she understood the scope of the GSA. Whitney could have gone anywhere and hired anyone. A jinxed detective on the Atlanta police force shouldn't have been on her list.

"You are staying aren't you?" Denise asked as she once again pretended an interest in the list in front of her. Hazel eyes glanced up at her when she didn't say anything. Shea knew she wasn't asking as the Ops Director, but as Aunt Denise.

"Yes," she said and stood up. She was ready to go home. "And I will be investigating. Two women are dead. Whitney will not be the third."

Shea didn't add that Whitney would be the fourth because to get to Whitney, whoever was doing this had to go through her first.

"She's the only one, isn't she?" The question was matter-of-fact.

Shea gathered up the stacks of papers as she considered her answer. She should say yes because with the evidence she had right then, Whitney was the only one. When she held the ream of paper cradled against her breasts, she looked at Denise and shook her head. "No, she's not the only one."

There was someone else. Someone shadowing Whitney who either blended in or belonged. She was surrounded by people who had made a life at blending where they didn't belong. But people were people in any era and people made mistakes. Last night's proved whoever was monitoring Whitney knew her movements only to a certain point. They were close to her but not as close as they believed.

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When she was younger, Whitney knew she wanted to work for the GSA before she knew she didn't have a choice. She loved roaming the fifth floor of the hotels her parents managed. The best present to her was to be allowed to visit Aunt Denise and when she was a child, she thought Denise's assignments across North America were exotic. At Quantico she skipped all the introductory courses designed to help the undecided. She never questioned what she would do in their world.

She was questioning it now as she sat in the Medical Examiners office. They were waiting for Dr. Warren Branson. They'd been waiting for half an hour and it was getting harder for Whitney to convince herself they didn't find the poison or didn't suspect she had something to do with it. If they believed she was a grieving family member, she didn't think they would have left her waiting for so long. She braced herself as the door opened and she was relieved to see two doctors in white coats instead of the boys in blue.

"Ms. Edwards?"

Seconds passed before Whitney remembered she was Ms. Edwards and she stood as the taller of the two came into the room. "Yes."

"My condolences on your loss." He cupped her elbow gently to steer her from the room. Whitney glanced back and felt a sense of calm when Michelle was right behind her. Dr. Branson led her down a long hall and not even the strong smell of disinfectant could hide the pervasive smell of death. "I'll try to keep this brief."

Whitney was all for brief. For anything that got her out of here. "Okay."

He talked as they walked and Whitney knew she should listen not just because she was supposed to be someone who loved Rich Edwards, but because she needed to know if they were successful. She needed to know because the day may come when they might have to do it again.

"He was in excellent physical health. There's no reason he should have had a heart attack. He shouldn't have died so quickly."

"I'm sorry, what?" Whitney had missed most of the conversation. The smell and the fact that she was about to claim the body of the man she murdered left her with the surreal feeling of being in a nightmare.

Dr. Branson gave her arm a compassionate squeeze and opened one side of double doors for her to enter a room. "I was saying I can't tell you why died."

Whitney had taken several steps into the room before she saw the gurney. She was eternally grateful a mint green sheet covered the body. She spun around and shoved her way out of the room through the second door. There wasn't enough money in the world for her stare down on someone's dead body. "I don't want to see him."

Apparently she wasn't the first person to refuse to view the body of a "loved one". They were taken across the hall to a small conference room painted in soothing shades of blues and greens that did little to soothe her anxiety. After she fumbled the first few questions, Michelle stepped in and it soon became apparent to even Whitney's scrambled brain that Michelle was setting up Denver for a wrongful death suit.

Much sooner than Whitney would have believed, she was watching two sentries from the hotel place the body in a waiting hearse. She shook hands with Dr. Branson and slid into Michelle's SUV. She hoped to never to see Denver again. She thought they felt the same.

Because she needed for this to be over, she handed the transference of the body to Quantico over to Vincent and transferred to Atlanta. It was the first time she'd ever passed a job she considered hers alone to someone else. She walked a quick path from the terminal center to the command center. Amanda followed her into her office with a stack of messages in one hand and stack of files in the other. Whitney accepted both without comment.

Hours passed as she immersed herself in the North American Central Gateway. It felt like she had been away longer than twenty-four hours as she read and filed reports, spoke with her managers. She didn't delve too deeply into why a single day away seemed so much longer than the several days she'd been gone other times. Something inside her had changed, shifting her to a road not on the map she'd followed all her life.

Her office was lit only by the backlight of her desk computer as she bent over the contraband reports. She had Amanda pull all the original reports for the centers and was comparing each line from that report with the final one that landed on her desk. She couldn't quite pinpoint what was wrong. What was even more annoying was the feeling that it was so glaringly obvious that she had to be an idiot to miss it.

Tired, she rested her forehead on her hands and closed her eyes. It was there, laid out in front of her, like a picture just out of focus. What was she missing?

"Are you praying?"

Whitney lifted her head enough to peer over her hands. Shea was leaning against her doorway, the teasing smile on her face not reflected in her eyes. Whitney sat back in her chair and glanced over the papers scattered on her desk. She wasn't even sure anymore she knew what was in each pile. "If I thought it would help, I'd be on my knees."

Shea came to her desk and glanced over the messy piles. "What is all this?"

"Contraband reports. It was too early for me to be in Denver when I left Quantico, so I came here to do some work. The number of attempts is almost double what it was last year. I can't figure out why." The frustration she felt at that had her sitting up and reaching for a page. She stopped and looked up in surprise as Shea grabbed her hand.

"It's almost eight. I came to get you because dinner made it home before you did. You can bring this with you and explain to me what it all means as we eat."

Without waiting for a reply, Shea quickly gathered the papers into one pile and left the office with them. Whitney stared at the empty doorway. She wasn't used to someone taking such liberties with her. She gave orders not took them. She also wasn't used to someone telling her it

was time to come home because dinner was ready. Even her mother had never done that. She was surprised to find herself amused and touched instead of angry.

She was more than surprised to walk into her penthouse and find the lights dim, candles lit and a crisp, white cloth covering her coffee table. Golden wine sparkled in crystal glasses. Something mouth-watering hid under a steaming serving tray. The only thing missing was the soft sound of music drifting in the background. And roses. Surely a table set like this deserved red roses.

Shea was standing at the serving tray. She pulled lids off and picked up a plate. "Come on. I'm starving. I don't know about you, but I forgot to eat lunch."

"Me, too," Whitney admitted and moved to Shea when the shock had worn off enough for her feet to move. She wasn't thinking about kissing her. It wasn't even a passing thought in her head. So it shouldn't have felt so natural, so right to slip her arm around Shea's waist and pull her close for a brief kiss. "Thank you."

Shea grinned and nudged her to the other side of the table. "Okay, contraband. What is it? And why are people trying to take it over?"

There were so many answers to that question. Some trivial. Some devastating. Whitney accepted a plate with grilled salmon, asparagus and buttery croissants from her favorite hotel restaurant. She waited until Shea was sitting next to her before smiling at her. "Contraband is just what it sounds like. We have limits on what can be taken back as souvenirs. Some people aren't happy with that."

Shea nodded and speared several asparagus on her fork. "What can't people take back?"

"I'll get you the book tomorrow," Whitney said with a short laugh. "I think at last count we were up to fifty-four pages."

"Really?" Shea asked as she paused with her fork half way to her mouth. "Is there anything they can take back?"

Again, Whitney laughed. "Yes, lots. Just not things that are illegal."

"Illegal here or there?"

Whitney didn't expect Shea to make the distinction. She would have if she remembered Shea was a detective trained to hear what people didn't say. Keeping her tone casual, she said, "Probably both. I've never had a reason to compare the lists."

It wasn't her area of expertise and she didn't have jurisdiction over those cases. Internal Affairs handled people who tried to smuggle contraband or tamper with history. For the GSA, those crimes were considered treason and were the only offenses where the permanent revocation of travel privileges was mandatory. Additional penalties and punishments depended on the severity of the act. There was no trial, no due process and no appeal.

"And how was your day?" She asked and looked over to see Shea grimace. "Did something happen?"

Shea picked up her wine and turned to face her on the couch. "Denise set me up in a computer lab. I wanted to see who else traveled to the cities of the attacks the same day you did. I can't believe how many people you have in the system at any given time. It doesn't seem possible that you can keep up with them all."

"Do you have reason to believe that we don't?" Whitney never questioned the security of their GPS. She'd never had a reason to even wonder if someone could disable the sensors travelers were required to wear at all times. The device was activated as they were checked in and continuously monitored.

"No. I just meant I was surprised by the scope. My first computer run had almost 100,000 people. And that was after you went to the cities. The best I could narrow it down to was 3000." The frustration she felt at that was clear in her voice.

"So I'm the only one who was in all the cities on those days?" Whitney wasn't surprised if that was the case. The investigators clearly had other evidence that pointed to her and the fact that she was in the only person on scene for all the attacks was certainly a stone on the guilty side of the scale.

Shea stared at her over the rim of her wine glass. "You weren't there last night."

She would have been, if Shea hadn't wanted to stay on that side. She would have been asleep in her room when that kid was beaten to death several floors over her head. She wouldn't have had an alibi and would more than likely be sitting in a cell at Quantico. "Someone's watching me, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Shea said without hesitation. She set her wine glass on the table and slid down the couch to sit behind her. Whitney leaned back into the embrace. Shea rested her chin on her shoulder. "Someone close to you. Someone who knows your every move almost as soon as you make it."

Whitney nodded to let Shea know she understood what she was saying. "Someone here, in Atlanta."

The arms holding her close tightened around her and Shea pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck. "Which helps. Anything that narrows it down helps."

"Then you should ask for a copy of the investigators reports. I don't think the ones I was given are complete. You cops like to hold some details back, don't you? I'd like to know what else they have that makes me the number one suspect."

"I'll add that to my list of things to do tomorrow." Whitney closed her eyes as soft lips brushed a trail from her neck to her ear. Goose bumps broke over her body when Shea asked in a husky whisper, "Want to know what's on my list of things to do tonight?"

The hands around her waist tugged slowly on her shirt. "Um, yeah. What are you doing tonight?"

Her breath caught as her earlobe was lightly bit. "Well, there was a nice, long bath on the list, but that's been scratched in favor of a quick shower. It's been a long day. I think we should get to bed as soon as we can."

"It has been a long day," Whitney said and stood up. She held out her hands to Shea and pulled the blonde into her arms. "We didn't get much sleep last night."

Shea grinned up at her. "Yeah, and that's not on the list for tonight either."

Whitney kissed her and took her hands to lead her to the bedroom. "We're young. I think we'll survive."

7.

Early the next morning, Shea got a crash course in using the cubicles for travel. Along with all the other perks Whitney enjoyed as COS, the elevator in her penthouse allowed her instant access to Quantico and every GSA city across North America. All she had to do to get to Quantico was swipe her ID card and press the bottom right button. A keyboard in the slot reserved for the telephone in a normal elevator allowed her to travel anywhere in the country. She had to use the terminal center for the return trip, but unless she chose otherwise, her penthouse was the default destination. Shea swiped her card with a smile. Given a choice, her destination would always be Whitney's penthouse.

Mia was working at the desk outside Denise's office. "Good morning Ms. Shea."

"Good morning, Mia. I have an appointment with Ms. Elliot." It wasn't really an appointment. Yesterday was a bust as far as leads went. She could, and would if that was her last option, verify the alibi of every person on her final list. But that would take time and her instincts told her she was running out of that. She needed to know what the investigators knew. The fact that she hadn't requested to review their evidence was only one of several mistakes she'd made on this case. At least this one was an easy fix.

Mia nodded and returned her attention to the computer. "She's waiting for you. Do you want some coffee?"

"No, thanks." Shea didn't want to be on this side that long. She wanted to take whatever Denise had for her back to her office in Atlanta. With all the evidence in one place, she could get organized. Once she knew what the investigators knew, maybe she would see what they missed. Whitney couldn't have been their only suspect.

Denise was talking on the phone and waved her into the room. Shea listened with half an ear as the Ops Director berated someone about after hour transfers. Apparently only some transfers were allowed after a certain hour and Shea wondered idly what the magical hour was. She and Whitney had traveled after ten that first time she came over to meet Denise. Perhaps whoever Denise was skinning was someone lower on the food chain than Whitney. She hoped for their

sake whoever it was wasn't one of Whitney's people. She didn't see Whitney letting someone flaunt the rules so brazenly that it came to Quantico's attention.

"I'm sorry Shea."

Shea was staring at a picture of Mount Rushmore. Of all the pictures she could have in her office, Shea thought that was incredibly odd. "That's okay. I haven't heard a good ass reaming in a while. My boss is almost as good as you are."

Denise laughed. "Well, then, you should catch Whitney in action. She's the only person I've ever seen who really can make someone cry. But then when she tells someone their life is over, she really means it."

"I'm sorry?" Shea turned away from Mount Rushmore and her attention completely to Denise. "What does that mean; she really means it when she tells someone their life is over?"

Denise was standing at her desk, rifling through stacks of colored folders. "With our people on that side, she's the final word. You can't be fired from the GSA. You can only come here to this side. Everyone is allowed a second chance, but few take it. There are a lot of restrictions and evals that go into a second chance. If they refuse, which most of them do, it's over to here."

I have a lot of power. Whitney said that the day she came to Shea for help. Shea didn't realize just what kind of power she meant. As in absolute. "They can't appeal?"

With a frown, Denise stood and shook her head, her eyes glancing around her desk. "No. The risks are too high. You see what disgruntled employees can do. We can't take that chance. They come here and live. But their families don't and unless the family visits here, they never see them again."

All Shea could think is how amazing it was that no one had been killed. There would be a list. Of course, Whitney wouldn't need it. She would know, by memory, the name and face of every person she had removed. She would know when and how and why. Shea still wanted the list. The official list that wouldn't be colored with Whitney's guilt for ruining someone's life. "I'd like that list, of people Whitney kicked to this side."

"Okay," Denise agreed readily and sat down at her computer.

Shea wandered over to sit down in front of her desk. "What are all these files?" There had to be at least a hundred of them.

"Somewhere on the bottom are yours. The rest are applications for the Academy."

"They have to apply to the Academy?" Shea reached for one of the files. She thought their attendance here was mandatory. The file was slender and the first page was divided in three parts: personal, academic and medical. She flipped through the rest of the pages and saw a report for every age that included school grades, activities and illness/injuries. The last few pages were

recommendations from family and friends. The family and friends of Josh Turner were generous in nominating him for Prestige.

"Everyone has to come, but we have two curriculums. One for Prestige and one for the TimeLine. The kids are applying for their choice."

"What if someone isn't suitable for either?"

"We offer extra training and tutoring, but if that doesn't help, they stay on this side. They can be whatever they want to be here."

Shea laid the file back on Denise's desk. "Are all the people who live on this side rejects of one kind or another?"

Denise paused in gathering files to look at her across the desk. "No."

That single word, spoken with no inflection, felt like a slap to Shea. She'd crossed a line and even now looking back, she couldn't see it. But it seemed to be their solution to most of their problems. Their own private island of time where they could exile those who didn't fit in or follow the rules. Do what we say, live how we command or lose your life. It was an axe that hung over every head.

"Okay, these are the reports of the attacks," Denise said as she handed over two thick dark red accordion files. She knew then the reports Whitney gave her were incomplete because Whitney had given her only one file. So either Whitney was mistaken that it was her right to have copies of the investigators reports or she was a suspect from the first victim. "This one has copies of the photos and forensic reports from the Crime Lab. Was there anything else you needed?"

Shea hefted the two files into her arms. "If I do, I'll you know."

Denise nodded and reached for papers on the printer. "These are the people Whitney had removed."

Shea blinked in surprise as she realized it was only two pages. The first page held about twenty-five single spaced names and the second half of a page. She really thought it would be more. With all the people they had living over there, she found it hard to believe only thirty-five couldn't follow the rules. She didn't see Whitney giving people unofficial second chances. "Thank you, Denise."

Denise nodded as she reached for a pen on her desk. "Keep me informed."

Shea promised she would and left Denise to the files stacked on her desk. Back in Atlanta, she took over the conference room Whitney used for staff meetings. With Amanda's help, she moved her notes and files to the long table. When she was alone, she separated the files Denise had given her into a stack for each victim. When she had all the reports and forensic evidence placed with each woman's file, she put each one at every other chair along with a blank legal pad for

notes. She didn't usually have five victims by the time she caught a case. Information was cumulative when you got the victims one at a time. Each scene added to the profile. Not only did she have five crime scenes she would never personally see, but the memories of the victims had shifted with time. She sat down in front of the first victim. She hoped that she could see each crime on it's own, make notes as went around the table and then compare the notes for patterns. It wasn't the ideal way to investigate, but it was all she had.

The first victim, Sharon Armstrong, was 23 and a student at the American University of New York-Syracuse. Her weekend visit to Dallas was planned only two days prior to the attack. She came because she was invited to spend the weekend with a woman she met online several months earlier.

She had kept all the correspondence between them and it didn't take long before the conversations became personal and then intimate between Sharon and the woman she knew only as Whit. Investigators found Whit's profile on the personals site where Sharon met her. Police could not trace the account back to Whitney personally, but they were able to trace it to the computer lounge Prestige Atlanta provided for their guests.

The profile itself borrowed generously from Whitney's life while using only the "Whit" form of her name. Sharon had sent photos of herself, but the photos sent as Whit were not Whitney or anyone else Shea had seen at the Atlanta hotel. The woman was later identified as Corinne Eisner Barrett, Whitney's older sister. The invitation to meet her in Dallas was the last email sent. The reservations for Sharon at the Dallas Prestige were handled by someone in Atlanta at three o'clock in the morning. The employee whose user code was used was in Bermuda on his honeymoon. Shea made a note to ask Whitney who had access to employees user codes and passwords.

When Sharon arrived at the hotel, she was given a note that told her Whit had been detained in Atlanta and included directions to the bar and money. According to her statement, Sharon wasn't concerned that Whit wasn't there to meet her. She knew Whit was high ranking in the GSA organization. She'd been told that Whit "practically runs the North American Central Gateway." Sharon was smart enough to think Whit was overstating her job, but young enough to believe she wasn't lying outright.

She checked into her room on the restricted floor and ordered dinner from room service. She arrived at the club early, but could not remember how early exactly, and waited at the bar for Whit. She'd been there an hour and was outside waiting for a cab when a car pulled up next to her. The passenger side window lowered and she recognized the driver. Whit apologized for being late and offered to drive her back to the hotel for drinks. Sharon couldn't remember how many drinks she consumed while waiting for her date, but her tab had her consuming four different flavored martini's in the space of 45 minutes. The blood taken after the attack showed her alcohol level to be .15.

Whit did not take Sharon to her room and Sharon had not traveled enough to know the room Whit took her to was off limit to travelers. She remembers walking into the room, still dazed by the kisses they shared in the elevator, and then nothing as everything went black. Her next

memory was waking up on the other side several days later in the hospital. Subsequent interviews with her had uncovered nothing new.

Shea closed the folder for Sharon Armstrong and turned to the forensic evidence. Clinical detachment had her flipping through the exam photos of Sharon's injuries with little emotion. Had Whitney truly been their primary subject at that time, they would have photographed her hands and body for signs that she was in fight. It's damn hard to beat someone to a bloody pulp without getting cuts and bruises on at least your hands.

Over the next several hours, she read the remarkably similar reports on the other victims and looked at the pictures of the victims. Each woman was more battered, bruised and bloody than the last until Erin Warner died of her injuries two months after the attack. She never regained consciousness, but had spoken with her sister, Tracy, about the perfect woman she met online.

For every victim, the routine never varied. The same online account was used. The same photos sent as Whit. Reservations made with the user ID of an Atlanta employee with a verifiable alibi elsewhere. Computers traced to the guest computer lounge in Atlanta's Prestige. Only the manner of the attack changed as the brutality escalated to Stacia Innes dying on the floor in Denver.

Before she compared the notepads she had for each case, she sat down with her notes and drew up a timeline for the attacks. She wrote down each victims name, where the attack took place, why Whitney was called to the city and the date reservations were made for the victims and the date they were attacked.

Sharon Armstrong	Dallas	Staffing Issues	5/12	5/14
Hannah David	LA	Fire	7/14	7/16
Anne Collins	Vegas	Car Accident	8/11	8/13
Erin Warner	Atlanta		9/08	9/10
Stacia Innes	Denver	Murder	1/13	1/14

Two things struck Shea the second she looked at her list. One was that every attack took place in the west except for the one in Atlanta. Second was that every attack except the last one took place two days after arrival. Turning to her notes from the attacks, she looked for when the reservations were actually made. All but the last was made two days prior to arrival.

How could someone know four days in advance that Whitney would be in the cities when Whitney didn't know it herself? Maybe with Dallas someone knew she was coming to address the staff days before she arrived. Maybe in Atlanta because everyone expected Whitney to be in Atlanta. Those two attacks could have been planned. But Shea saw only two ways for LA, Vegas and Denver to be planned. One was that the fire and the car accident that critically injured a family of five were not as accidental as they appeared on the surface. Two was the five women who were attacked were not the only women lured to this side, they were the only women lured over when something happened to pull Whitney to the city.

Of the two choices, Shea saw option one as the practical option. With 48 centers in her command, something was bound to happen at any one at any given time. The odds of having someone in the city when it did had to be astronomical. However a fire and a car accident were easily arranged and Shea was sure everyone knew Whitney handled those emergencies personally. Dallas may have been seen as a golden opportunity to start whatever the real purpose was for the attacks. Atlanta was simply an opportunity with little effort on the part of the attacker. Denver deviated from the routine in that the reservation was made early the morning after Rich Edwards killed the prostitute and Stacia Innes died that night. Again, it was an opportunity much too good to let pass.

While reading the notes, Shea learned Whitney was the only suspect. There was never anyone else. Investigators peppered the files they gave her with false clues hoping to see the attacker react. The fact that the matches continue to be placed at the crime scene after Whitney was made aware of them kept her out of a cell. All of their evidence was circumstantial and none of could be directly connected to Whitney.

The most amusing, and trivial, fact was that the investigators could not prove Whitney was gay. At one point, she was shadowed twenty four hours a day for two weeks. She was never seen in the company of anyone who was not family or an associate. She didn't frequent bars, gay or straight. They could not positively verify that she was alone every night in her suite, but problems brought to the penthouse after hours always proved her to be alone.

When Shea had learned everything she could from the files, she took them back to her office. Although Whitney was no longer a suspect, or so they believed, Shea did not want to leave anything laying around that could possibly be used to implicate her in the future. It wouldn't take much for someone to suggest that Denver, which had important differences from the other attacks, was a copycat so of course Whitney didn't commit that one.

She'd seen Whitney in her office as she made the several trips it took to bring everything from the conference room. Once she had everything as secured as she could make it, she grabbed her notepads and headed out of her office to Whitney's. Only to watch Whitney dash through the command center and turn right towards the terminal.

Shea followed her without hesitation. It was mid-afternoon and the terminal center was mostly empty. Whitney was already in the cubicle and the door sliding shut when Whitney saw her. Her eyes widened but the door closed before she could stop the transfer. Shea waited a few minutes in case Whitney returned and when she didn't, Shea returned to the command center. She walked to where Amanda sat at her desk outside of Whitney's office.

"Do you know where Whitney went?" She asked her. As her assistant, Amanda knew as much about Whitney's movements as Whitney herself.

Amanda paused in her rapid typing to smile up at her. "To the police station. She got a code white. Guy was at Philips Arena for the hockey game. Matt is meeting her at the station."

"I need to talk to her. Does she have anything planned later? A meeting or something?"

Amanda mouse clicked her way through several screens and pulled up a monthly calendar. Shea wasn't close enough to read all the tiny writing in the blocks, but she could see that not a single one of them was empty. Amanda shook her head and turned to her. "She's free, Ms. Shea. What time do you want to meet with her?"

Shea glanced down at her watch and saw that it was a little after two. She could order up lunch and start planning her next step in the investigation. "Will you see if she can talk to me when she gets back? I'll be in my office having lunch."

Instead of typing her into today's block on the calendar, Amanda made a note on a post-it pad. Shea walked away thinking she could have done that.

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Whitney knew her job would be immeasurably easier if she could ban alcohol consumption for travelers. Most of their arrests were drunk and disorderlies and the few that weren't usually featured alcohol to some degree. She didn't begrudge people on vacation a good time, she just wished they knew their limits. She was grateful that this idiot had chosen her hometown for his lunatic behavior. She knew she could trust Matt to make this go away quickly. It wasn't something she always believed when she was dealing with her other staff attorneys.

She was loitering outside the main entrance when Matt said from behind her, "We're going to have to stop meeting like this. People will talk."

Whitney grinned and turned to face him. His suit was black with thin gray pinstripes. "Maybe I want them to talk."

Matt snorted and whipped off his sunglasses. "Do we know what this one did?"

"No." As they walked inside the station, Whitney told him the little she knew. Adam Bordeaux was twenty-eight and was a frequent visitor during hockey season. He was usually accompanied by the same friend, Michael Walker. Adam was alone this time, but there had been a second reservation on his room that he cancelled when he arrived in Atlanta.

Whitney stood away from Matt as he approached the front desk sergeant. As long as everything turned out all right, it was fun for her to watch him work. His bearing and name always had the police hurrying to assist him even when they weren't sure who his client was exactly. Whitney knew Matt was never called by a traveler and she wondered if the police ever questioned his presence for someone who hadn't been allowed a phone call yet. If they did, they never challenged Matt.

Less than a half hour later, Whitney was walking out with her hand clamped firmly on the arm of Adam Bordeaux. She waited until they were several yards away from the police station before she asked him about the bruises on his face. She knew he got them in custody, but she wanted to know how. His voice was soft as he admitted struggling with the guards at the Arena. He wanted to go onto the ice and fought the guards when they refused to let him. He had too much drink, he said. It wasn't like him to do something like that.

Matt branched off at the parking garage and Whitney continued to the second deck with her charge. Adam was quiet as she seated him in the front of her car and sat with his head bowed as she drove through the afternoon traffic.

"Why didn't Michael come with you?" She asked finally. Her intimate knowledge of their travels always caught them off guard. It made it seem that she knew more than she did and they were too surprised to lie to her. He was right, this wasn't like him. He had literally traveled hundreds of times and his companions had narrowed down from family, to groups of friends, to Michael. He was never on the radar before now.

She knew she hit a nerve when his head whipped to the side to stare at her and when she looked over at him, grief was bottomless in his warm brown eyes. Tears welled as he looked away. "He died last week."

He cried silently as she drove through the traffic and into the underground parking of Prestige. With him leaning on her, she led him to the elevator. It wasn't something she usually did, but she had the elevator deliver them to her penthouse. She had enough sympathy to want to shield him from the stares they would receive if she took him through the terminal center. A beaten, crying man wasn't something a person could ignore.

With a glass of scotch, she sat him on her couch and made a few calls. He was composed when Denise and his mother arrived to help him pack his luggage for the trip home. Whitney didn't know what to say so she said nothing as they left the penthouse. As long as he sought counseling for his grief, she would not press charges. He could travel again as soon as he wanted, but there was a hold in place which meant he needed her approval to do so. Michael was his childhood sweetheart and was killed when his mini-jet crashed, his mother told her quietly. She didn't know he'd left the apartment they had shared much less came over for the game.

She was distracted, her mind lost in the poignant story of Adam and Michael, when her cell phone rang. She answered absently and frowned as one of the hotel security officers told her there was a disturbance on the first parking deck that needed her attention. The elevator was opening on the first level when she wondered why her presence was needed for a disturbance in the parking area. Annoyance quickly shot to the top of her list of emotions. This wasn't the first time some new kid in security called her about a problem that was her parents. She was often confused with the Eisner's who managed Prestige and the Eisner who managed the GSA.

"Over here," a voice called from the middle of the deck.

"What's wrong?" She demanded as she headed in that direction. She paused briefly at the sound of nearing sirens. She quickened her pace to a fast jog, adrenaline spiking as she wondered who the hell called the police. She thought everyone knew better than to call 911. Only the hotel management had the authority to do that and when she was in Prestige areas, even she was required to defer to them.

As the police car careened into the parking deck, Whitney saw the body crumpled on the concrete floor. She rushed over and kneeling down next to the woman, she picked up the knife near her head. Blood smeared on her hand as she brushed dark hair away from her face.

"Don't move!"

Whitney looked up to see the police car several yards in front of her and two cops standing behind the open doors with their guns pointed at her. Realization slammed into her and she stared down at the body. The woman would be dead, killed by the knife she held in her hand. She closed her eyes for a moment in disbelief that she had been so stupid. Opening them, her gaze never left the cops as she slowly inched the knife to the oil stained floor and raised her hands over her head.

She was standing with cuffs on her wrists being read her rights when the first rush of people ran into the parking area. She stared at the guards and wondered if the person who called her was one of them or if the person wasn't even a member of the staff. More police cars skidded into the garage and the air crackled with static from the many radios. Whitney heard the call for the medical examiner as she was being led to the first cruiser on the scene.

As if from a great distance she watched first her mother and then her father rebuffed by officers as they tried to come to her. *Call Matt*, she mouthed and her father nodded. By the time the officers came to drive her to the police station, the press was crowding around the entrance to the hotel. Whitney could only thank God for the high fence that surrounded the property. The street outside the gate was as close as they would get to the scene.

Her thoughts were fractured as she thought of all that had to be done and quickly. Damage control was needed and Whitney wasn't sure anyone at the hotel was in the right frame of mind to get it started. They needed to identify the woman before the police did. If she was a traveler, and Whitney knew she would be, they needed to move her belongings to an unrestricted floor. Under no circumstances could the authorities be allowed on the fifth. They needed to recall all the visitors and get them over to the other side. Having travelers wandering around with the police there was a disaster waiting to happen. They only had a small window of time to accomplish those things.

They would want to get her free as quickly as possible and Whitney had no idea what to expect until that happened. She had never been arrested and while she had responded to many, she really didn't know what the process entailed. She had seen a few cop shows and sincerely hoped her name would allow her to skip some of the more humiliating aspects. She could think of few things worse than being stripped of her clothing as some stranger searched her body cavities. What did that mean exactly, searched her body cavities? It couldn't mean what she thought it did. It really couldn't.

And she was stunned by how easily she been caught. How stupid she'd been to respond to an emergency outside of her authority. She'd been trained to react quickly to a crisis, but the events over the last months should have given her a caution reflex to question something outside her area. Yes, she was called for hotel emergencies before, but she should have relayed the

emergency to the front desk. Whoever was framing her knew her so well they knew she would instinctively respond to an emergency on her own turf. Her downfall was believing herself invincible inside the hotel.

She was taken into the police station through a sheltered back entrance and was grateful there would be no pictures of her handcuffed as she was led into the police station. There would be enough pictures of her hitting the pages and television without adding that to the list. The playgirl image she had so carefully cultivated was going to be albatross around her neck. Another rich girl gone bad.

Whatever her expectations, she never thought she would skip right to an interview room, have the cuffs removed and be offered a soft drink before being left alone. She sipped the coke a police woman brought her and wondered what was happening to her floor, with her centers. Her arrest would paralyze her staff. Thank God for Adam Bordeaux. Because of him, Denise was already on this side and could take control of the situation. Denise would know the primary objective was to protect the GSA and leave her to the lawyers.

She got up to prowl the small space. She avoided her face in the large one way mirror as she walked a circle around the battered, scarred table. Ashamed, she realized that she hadn't really cared about why those women were attacked. She was horrified by the savagery and alarmed as they continued, but she never bothered to look beyond the attacks to their purpose. Why should there be one? Wasn't irrationality the hallmark of insanity? Could a sane person ever hope to understand the mind of the insane? Even as Shea pointed out time after time how she was being framed, Whitney hadn't truly believed her until that moment in the garage when saw the trap sprung so neatly around her.

Questions came to her with few answers. Why would someone attack and kill innocent women just to frame her? Where was the point in that? What did she have that someone wanted so badly they were willing to kill for it? And why wasn't killing her the better choice? What would removing her accomplish that could not be accomplished by killing her? Not to mention being a guaranteed success. The plan to have her removed from her command had not succeeded and there was no guarantee that had she been removed it would have been permanent.

Although, she had to admit, having her arrested for murder just might do the trick. She would have to actually be convicted to be removed because the Council was notorious for overlooking atrocious personal behavior in their Chiefs of Security. People didn't rise to that position without exceptional leadership skills. She knew from Denise that the Council was very happy with her and being accused of murder wasn't enough to change that. People were accused of things they didn't do every day.

Now all she had to do was prove she didn't do it. She paused and shook her head. No, that wasn't right. She didn't have to prove she was innocent, they had to prove she was guilty. And they couldn't prove she did something she didn't do. They may have found her bent over a body with a knife in her hand, but she never used the knife and she could not be connected to someone she had never seen before that moment. A sense of relief draped itself over her and she dropped her

head as the tension left her body. Matt would work his magic and she would be released soon. All she had to do was wait.

And that, she realized as she stared around the small dingy little room, was going to be hard. She wouldn't have to think too much about the tiny space before she imagined the grimy walls smudged with some...thing were closing in on her. Her world had narrowed very quickly from the whole of time to this. She hoped whoever had done this to her was getting a good laugh because when she found them, there wasn't a time or place they could hide.

She turned as the door opened and she stared as Matt walked in the room. He looked as shell shocked as she felt when the police told her not to move. He glanced at the one way mirror and she followed his line of sight. Was that a hint that someone was back there listening?

"What's happening?"

He cleared his throat and came into the room to place his leather attaché case on the table. The fear she could see so clearly in his eyes scared her more than anything else. "They're going to take you down soon to get your prints and mug shot. Do not say anything to anyone. I mean it Whitney. Your Dad has pulled a dozen strings to get you before a judge this afternoon. You'll stay here until the arraignment. If they grant bail, great. You have to be prepared that it will be denied. You have too much money at your disposal and the prosecutor will argue that you have no real ties to the community. All that supposed traveling you do is going to work against us."

The relief Whitney felt before Matt walked into the room vanished with the harsh reality she was facing. Innocent didn't mean free. She nodded and moved to sit down at the table. "I know. How is everything?"

She hoped he understood what she didn't ask. She wanted to be careful what she said in case someone was listening to their conversation. This situation was their biggest fear with travelers in police custody. One could never be completely certain conversations were private.

Matt opened his briefcase and took out a legal pad. He talked as he wrote quickly. "Well, your mother is demanding that your father 'do something Joshua' in that southern aristocratic tone of hers we all love so well. So he's doing something. I don't want to be him if bail is denied. Grace will not be happy."

Whitney had to smile at his accurate portrayal of her parents. No, Grace would not be happy if her youngest child spent the night in jail. Her Dad knew it was in his best interests to get bail because her mother would not be above trying a jail break, consequences be damned.

"I won't be so happy with that myself," she said. Matt slid the legal pad to her and she quickly read the half page note. Denise was in control of her centers. Transferring the travelers out of Atlanta went smoothly. The victim was a traveler, but that was all he knew about her right now. She picked up his pen and wrote *Thank you and thank Denise.*

He nodded. "Do you want anything or need anything? Food? A book?"

"No, but thanks. Will you be in the courtroom for the arraignment?"

"Of course. I'm your attorney."

"Then go get me out of here."

Whitney closed her eyes when she was alone. Matt didn't look optimistic as he left. She smiled softly. If bail was denied, she knew they had a way to get her out. Of course it would be in a hearse, but she would be free. God if she had a choice between that and being in jail for who knew how long, she would put the pills in the water herself.

8.

Two hours after the lockdown of the fifth floor, Shea sat in her office staring blankly at her desk. She still felt the numbing shock that gripped her when it was announced over the PA system that they were at Code Black. By the time she opened her office door, the command center was in chaos. Or what she took to be chaos at the time. Every agent was standing and talking urgently on a phone. She took a step out of her office and her attention was turned to the sound of running feet. Her mouth dropped open as a dozen agents rushed to the terminal center. Turning back to the command center, she caught snatches of conversations.

"...the delivery exit. The police are in front..."

"Complete lockdown. No, we don't know why..."

"...at the fourth deck elevator. Do *not* come to the front entrance of the hotel."

What in the hell happened?

She was turning towards Sam's office when Denise hurried into the room. The Ops Director took a quick scan as she came to Shea. She held up her hand when Shea opened her mouth to speak. "Someone outside of hotel management made a 911 call. Any time that happens, the fifth floor is automatically locked down and all travelers recalled. As soon as he knows what's happening, Josh will call."

Josh had not called. Instead, he walked into Whitney's office fifteen minutes later. Denise was standing behind Whitney's desk coordinating the return of the travelers through Quantico. Normally, travelers came to this side through a regional terminal center, but in emergencies they didn't have time to re-code the cubicles for each transfer. Everyone was going to Quantico and Quantico would see them home. When the tall, ruggedly handsome man walked into Whitney's office, Shea stood up as she recognized the eyes he swept over her. She didn't know he was Whitney's father, just that he was an Eisner. He glanced at her and she knew whatever happened involved Whitney. Mixed in with the shock darkening the crystal blue was fear and disbelief.

Denise ended her phone call as she saw his expression. She stared at him in silence for a long moment. "Where's Whitney?"

He turned to shut the door. "She's been arrested. There's a body in the garage. The police found her kneeling over it with a knife in her hand."

Dread washed across her skin like icy water. Never in a millions years did she believe this would go outside the GSA. Everyone had everything to lose should this get out of hand. Their lives were precarious and by taking this outside of the GSA's control, whoever was framing Whitney had put everyone's life and the GSA itself in jeopardy.

"We need to find out who she is," Denise said finally, hesitantly. She looked over at Shea. "Can you do that? I don't know if they'll let you see the body but-"

Shea shook her head as stood. "There's a pattern to the victims. I should be able to identify her from that."

"We'll have her belongings moved to an unrestricted floor once we know who she is," Josh said, more to her than to Denise.

"No. Deny everything. She's not a guest. You've never seen her before. You don't know what she's doing on your property. If she's a guest that gives her an opportunity to meet Whitney. Let her be a Jane Doe who was trespassing. They can't be sure she wasn't just dumped here and Whitney finding her is circumstantial. They won't be suspicious when they can't identify her."

It was as easy as she thought it would be to identify the woman. Using the pattern she discovered that morning, she found Micah Hansen. She was a twenty two year old college student at the American University of Georgia-Atlanta. She died where she lived. Denise packed up her suitcase and took it over to her parents personally. They would have to wait for their daughter's body. The GSA could not use the family connection ploy that was so successful in retrieving the bodies of travelers. Micah would have to remain a Jane Doe until it was safe for them to recover her. Shea knew Whitney would hate that. The young woman had done nothing to deserve being murdered and now abandoned. But then Whitney had done nothing to deserve being arrested.

Now, two hours later, the fifth floor was still locked down. The evacuation was orderly and unbelievably quick. There wasn't a single traveler left in Atlanta. The few times she passed groups of people leaving, Shea was impressed to hear concern rather than complaints about their visit ending so abruptly. They knew better than she the consequences of discovery on this side.

Whitney was a thought on the edge of her consciousness all afternoon, one she pushed back every time it threatened to move to the front of her mind. If she let herself think about Whitney, about where she was and what was happening to her, she couldn't do her job. She needed to do her job because that was the only way she could help Whitney. Now that she was alone in her office, she allowed herself to fully comprehend what happened that afternoon. They still didn't have all the pieces to the puzzle, just enough to know how it went down. Whitney left on a D&D at ten minutes after two. Matt met her at the police station and bailed Adam Bordeaux. The last time Matt saw Whitney she was leading Adam to her car. Denise was the next person to see Whitney when she was called to the penthouse. She left Whitney there alone while she left with Adam and his mother to retrieve his belongings. She was in Quantico, halfway to her office,

when the alarm sounded informing the base they had a Code Black in Atlanta. She was back in Atlanta in less than a minute. She guessed it was less than a half an hour between the time she left Whitney in the penthouse and the time the alarm was broadcast.

The next person to see Whitney was her father. Prestige had special tracers on their phones that captured 911 calls so that should one be placed, they knew where the trouble was and could hopefully remove all evidence before the police arrived. By the time Josh made it to the first deck garage, the police were already there and Whitney was in handcuffs. Obviously the call made from the hotel was not the first call to police. Josh thought he was in the garage minutes after he knew about the call. By that time, Whitney was in the custody of the first officers on scene. Whoever made the call from within the hotel knew the call would trigger the Code Black. Another sign whoever was framing Whitney was GSA.

"Come in," she said absently to the knock at her door. She sat up when Denise came into the room. She thought Denise left with the Eisner's to go to the arraignment. This was one time Shea wasn't going to bitch about money greasing the wheels of justice. The GSA had enough money to keep Whitney out of a cell until the arraignment and then to pay the bail regardless of how high it was set. Whitney would be charged with some degree of murder or manslaughter that afternoon and be sleeping in her own bed tonight. Thank God for money.

Denise sat down in on of the visitor's chairs and leaned forward to glance over the papers covering the black glass surface of her desk. She looked up with one eyebrow raised. "What is all this?"

"The investigator's reports. My notes."

Denise reached for a sheaf of papers. "These are the reports I gave you this morning? This is how you were able to identify her so quickly?"

Shea leaned back in her chair and watched Denise flip carefully through the papers. "All the women were invited to the cities by a woman they met at a personals site online. The reservations are always made two days in advance, except Denver, and always made in the middle of the night by someone here in Atlanta who is isn't here at all but is on vacation. They know her as Whit, this woman they meet online."

"Whit?" Denise said and looked up sharply. "As in Whitney. She's never used that as a nickname."

"I'd like to think that even if I didn't know Whitney and wasn't with her on your side when Stacia Innes was killed in Denver that I would have at least entertained the idea that she was being framed. They didn't even think it was someone else when the matches continued to be left at the crime after Whitney knew about them. Either your investigators are idiots or they think Whitney is."

"It's neither," Denise said and laid the papers on the corner of her desk before sitting back in her chair. She looked as tired as Shea felt. After running two hours on pure adrenaline, they should

all feel drained. "I know your experience with us would lead you to believe we have a lot of crime, but we really don't. We've never had a traveler kill anyone until Edwards, much less anything like this. We're more at risk to crime here than we are on the other side."

They shouldn't be on this side, Shea thought. Take them out of their world of wealth and privilege and they were sheep waiting to be fleeced. She looked across her desk at Denise and knew that was something she should keep to herself. She shouldn't criticize what she didn't understand and she did not understand why they came into the past. So instead she asked, "What's your plan if bail is denied?"

Denise dropped her gaze to the floor. "Visit Whitney often and line up the best defense lawyers money can buy."

It took a moment for Shea to understand and another few to rein in the surge of anger. "You're going to leave her there? In jail?"

Denise looked up slowly and the dark eyes she leveled at Shea were unreadable. "I don't think the solution we used in Denver is appropriate in this situation, do you?"

"You're really going to just leave her there." A dull disbelief replaced her anger. What else could they do? They weren't all-powerful. If they had any magic at all it was Whitney herself. She was the one they turned to when they needed a miracle. Shea shook her head and stood up. "No, we're not leaving her in jail. I'll have to go in and get her. That should be easy enough. No one's going to want her. She's just a bad front page waiting to happen."

A plan was forming quickly in her mind. She would need transfer papers. They might question a lone detective transferring an inmate, but Shea would use Whitney's playgirl image. The day she couldn't handle a debutante was the day they took her badge. She nodded as she saw it working. She was right, no one wanted the headache an inmate like Whitney would ensure. She looked down to find Denise staring at her. "I need official papers. They'll want to get rid of her so that won't look too closely at them. Can you get that for me?"

The ring of a cell phone broke the still air and Denise reached for hers without breaking eye contact with Shea. "Elliot."

Shea watched her face closely, looking for a sign whether the call was good or bad. She frowned as Denise listened without expression. "Okay. Thanks." She closed the phone slowly. "Do you mean it? You'll risk your freedom for hers?"

"I'm not changing places with her, but yes I mean it. I'll find out where they're holding her if you get those papers." She reached for the phone. It shouldn't take her too long to find out where Whitney was being held. Fulton County had only a few places they kept the special people.

"She got bail," Denise said as her smile spread slowly. "That was Matt letting me know they're bringing her home."

Shea dropped down in her chair as relief left her boneless. She closed her eyes. "Thank you God."

"You were going to break her out," Denise laughed. "I can't wait to tell her."

Her eyes snapped open in horror and she scrambled from her chair to follow Denise from the office. She walked up close behind Denise to whisper, "Fine. I'll tell her you were going to just leave her in there."

"She knew that. But she didn't know you would come in there after her."

Shea followed her onto the elevator. "She doesn't need to know that."

"Oh, but she would want to know," Denise said as the doors slid close.

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They were talking around her as if she wasn't there. With her eyes closed and the shock of being arrested numbing her to the core, she could almost pretend she wasn't. Maybe if she tried really hard she could pretend she hadn't spent the last three hours in police custody. That she wasn't free only because she was able to pay for it. Money kept her out of a cell before the arraignment and money would keep her out until the trial. The only the thing money couldn't do was clear her of the charges. That she would have to manage on her own.

"I'm not going to the other side," she said as she joined the conversation. She opened her eyes to look at her parents. They looked like hell, which she supposed was how most parents look when their child is arrested for murder. "I think getting rid of me is exactly what whoever is doing this wants. I'm not going anywhere."

It was personal now in a way it wasn't before her arrest. Even from the beginning, it was professional to her. If someone from this time wanted to hurt her, using her job against her was not an option. No one outside of the GSA and Prestige knew she even had a job. By taking this vendetta outside the GSA, everyone was in danger. The council could decide that closing the Gateway was the only safeguard they had against detection. Discovery was the only thing the Council truly feared. It was personal now and she wasn't hiding on the other side until it was finished.

Slowly, she looked around the room. Everyone who cared about her was sitting in her living room. Was it unreasonable to think she would want a shower and change of clothes before she had to face her family? As they were all waiting for her in the lobby and followed her home, apparently.

Her parents and Denise sat on the couch. Her mother was holding Corinne's two year old daughter Emily. Corinne sat in the chair from her bedroom. Her husband Andrew sat on the floor next to her. Peyton snagged the chair from her desk and his wife Anna took the one from her guest room. Corinne's four year old son Joel and Peyton's twelve year old son Adam and eight year old daughter Gracie were in her bedroom watching videos. Payne, the oldest of the

grandkids, was working. Sitting behind her silently at the bar was Shea. While they hadn't had a chance to talk yet, having Shea in her welcoming party had gone a long way to settle her frayed nerves.

"You're not going to prison," Grace said. The finality in her tone was something all three of her children instantly recognized. As teenagers, they could beg and plead until they were hoarse, but once that tone came into their mother's voice they knew she was as unmovable as the Rockies. She kissed the top of Emily's sleeping head with her eyes on Whitney. "Even if you were guilty, I would not let you go to prison. There is no way I'm letting go innocent."

Because she knew her mother was the one person who had more power over her than Denise, Whitney met her gaze. "I'm not going to prison. If this looks like it's going to trial, I will move over to the other side. But until then, I'm on this side. I'm doing my job. I'm helping with the investigation. I'm finding who did this."

"We," Josh said as he stood up. "Change all those I's to we."

He reached down to gently take his granddaughter and snuggled her sleepily against his chest. His eyes met the eyes of every person in the room before settling on his youngest. He shook his head when she opened her mouth and smiled when she closed it. "We'll meet tomorrow morning at eight in the main conference room. Some of us know more than others so we'll start from the beginning."

They left slowly, each stopping to hug and kiss her before leaving. Finally when the elevator closed on her parents and Denise, she closed her eyes and bowed her head. "Thank you for being here."

She felt herself being turned on the bar stool and she leaned forward into the arms pulling her close. "Are you hungry? Do want a drink?"

Whitney smiled and shook her head. "To help me forget the horror of sitting in an interview room for a few hours? I'm not that traumatized."

Shea tightened her embrace. "I am. What in the hell were you thinking when you went down to the garage?"

The irritated tone was the right touch at the moment. Whitney laughed as she pulled away and stared into Shea's annoyed gaze. She shook her head. "I wasn't. It's not the first time someone new to security has called me instead of my parents. I wasn't thinking anything beyond that."

Shea leaned forward to stare into her eyes. "You need to start thinking Whitney. You made this much too easy for them."

That wasn't breaking news. Whitney knew that the instant she saw herself over the body and police pouring into the garage. It was a simple, astonishingly effective trap as long as someone didn't mind a little murder as bait. "I know. It will not happen again."

"No, it won't." Shea slipped from the barstool and pushed her legs apart to stand close to her, her arms sliding around Whitney. "Why don't you go take a long hot bath? I'll order up dinner and after I tell you what I learned today, you're going to bed. You need a good night's rest. We're going to be really busy starting to tomorrow. It's not going to be easy to save your life."

"My life doesn't need saving. Killing me doesn't seem to be one of their options."

Slowly Shea leaned into her, green eyes never leaving her face. "I meant this life, here on this side. While I don't think I would mind living on the other side, I know you would hate it."

In the silence that followed her words, Whitney stared at Shea in wonder. Peace was the last thing she should have felt at that moment in time. The life she had built so carefully was coming down one flaming piece at a time. She was as helpless to stop it as she was clueless to understand why it was happening. But she found a steely support in Shea's words to hang herself on even if the rest of her life was lost. Her job set her apart from everyone in her life. Her family was Prestige and her friends could never know her truth. Surrounded by people who loved and cared about her, she was alone. She had given up the search for that someone who could straddle her worlds with her, believing that person simply did not exist. Now that woman stood before her, her acceptance filling a deep well of emptiness Whitney didn't know she had.

Soft hands framed her face. "Where are you?"

Whitney blinked and smiled at the concern in Shea's eyes. She shook her head. "Why would you give your life up for me?"

Shea closed her eyes and leaned completely into Whitney. Soft, warm lips trailed light kisses on her neck and her breath caught in the first sparks of desire. She slowly pulled Shea's shirt from her slacks and slid her hands under the thin linen to caress her back. Gentle teeth snagged her ear lobe, sending the sparks into flame. "I'm not giving up anything for you. This is all for me. Rent-free penthouse. Travel-free trips to anywhere in the world, not to mention anywhere in Time. Interesting job. A woman who is the sexiest woman I have ever seen. This is paradise and I'm not leaving."

"So this is all for you?" Whitney breathed. She lifted her head as Shea kissed her jaw line.

"Oh yeah," Shea said in a low voice. "All for me."

Whitney's eyes snapped open when Shea moved abruptly away. Before she could catch her breath, Shea pulled her to her feet and was dragging her across the penthouse to the bedroom. A small smile played around the corners of her mouth. So much for that hot bath, dinner and conversation. When Shea turned to her in the bedroom, Whitney caught her hands. Surprised green eyes stared at her. Whitney slid Shea's arms around her own waist and clasped their hands behind her back. "I love you."

The bright need in her eyes vanished, replaced by a blank stare. "What?"

"I love you. I don't care where we live, where we are. As long as I'm with you, nothing else matters."

As her smile grew slowly, Shea asked, "Why would you give your life up for me?"

Whitney brought their hands from behind her back. She lifted their left hands and kissed the back of Shea's. "I'm not giving up anything for you. This is all for me. I didn't know how lonely my life was before you. I didn't know how empty I felt inside. Here. There. APD. The GSA. I don't care about anything else as long as I have you."

She let her left hand go and turned the right over to kiss her palm. Fingers slid into her hair, moving slowly to her neck where fingertips brushed the sensitive skin of her neck. As if in a perfectly choreographed dance, they came together in a deep, slow kiss while their hands moved as one to strip away their clothes. Whitney took a small step back when skin was pressing against skin. "Shower?"

Long slow kisses and slippery caresses kept them in the shower until the water ran cool. As much as she wanted to pull Shea to the bed, Whitney knew they needed to have dinner. She had skipped lunch and declined all offers of food while in police custody. The last thing she wanted while she waited to know if she was going home or to jail was a greasy burger. Now, clean and free, she was starving. She quickly dried off and pulled on her robe. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Whatever you're having," Shea said with a quick smile and draped a towel over her head to briskly rub her hair.

Grinning, Whitney left her alone in the bathroom and was walking to the phone on her bedside table when she heard the elevator chime. She was halfway to the bedroom door, annoyed at the interruption, when she stopped as she realized what she was doing. Did she learn nothing that afternoon? Occurrences out of the ordinary were no longer mere annoyances to be dispensed with as quickly as possible. Without taking her eyes from the half open bedroom door, she backed into the bathroom. "There's someone out there. I heard the elevator open."

In the blink of an eye, Shea pulled on her detective persona along with the terrycloth robe. "Stay here." It was not a request.

Whitney followed her from the bedroom, moving to pick up the cordless phone while Shea paused long enough to pick her gun up from the bureau. Whitney watched as she checked the safety and edged to the half open door silently. Whoever was out there wasn't making any attempt to hide, Whitney thought as metal clanged against metal. Of course having them trapped in a room with only one exit would give whoever it was a false feeling of confidence. Her eyes never left Shea as the woman eased the door open soundlessly. Whitney gripped the phone tighter, her thumb poised over the 0 the second this looked out of Shea's control. She watched in surprise as Shea froze a second before easing back into the bedroom. She shut the door without making a sound and slid the safety on the gun.

"Who is it?" Whitney whispered.

Shea's head snapped around at her voice and the gun made a solid thunk as she put it back on the bureau. "I told you to stay in the bathroom."

Whitney replaced the receiver. Obviously they weren't in any kind of danger. "Who's out there?"

"You stay where I tell you to stay. The bullets in my gun are real, Whitney. My reflexes are good, but in this situation I'm compromised. I'm going to point at anything that moves and I need to know it's not going to be you. You stay where I tell you to stay."

The first rush of anger at Shea's harsh words faded as understanding sunk in. While walking a high wire of tension, Shea was going to respond to a sudden noise from any direction. Even the best cops make mistakes. "I'm sorry. I thought I should get the phone so I could call for help if it was needed."

Shea closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She was calmer when she opened them a few seconds later. "It's a waiter. Someone sent dinner up for us."

The elevator chimed and Whitney brushed past Shea to walk into the living area. A white tablecloth was draped over her coffee table with places set for two. Red roses and a bottle of wine chilling in ice flanked a large covered platter and bread basket. Curious, Whitney lifted the lid from the platter and the smell of Chicken Alfredo hit her empty stomach hard. This was from her mother. Her dad would have sent up hamburgers and fries. She pulled one of the roses from the vase. He barely remembered to give roses to her mother and she was fairly certain he thought Shea was only her security advisor. She turned and found Shea standing close behind her. She held the rose out to her. "Dinner is served."

Shea stepped close and kissed her as she took the rose. "Smells wonderful. Are you on some list where they bring dinner up to you at a certain time?"

Whitney laughed and moved away to serve the meal. "No, that would be a waste. I'm not here half the time and I would never remember to cancel it. I'd say this is my mother's doing. She hates that I eat a lot of hamburgers and if you weren't here, she would have probably sent up baked chicken and several steamed vegetables."

"She choose well," Shea said and picked up the wine bottle to fill both glasses. "Of course I'm so hungry a ham sandwich and chips would look good right now."

Once their plates were loaded with the creamy pasta with grilled chicken slices and broccoli floret's, Whitney sat on the couch. The breadbasket held thick slices of buttered garlic bread and Whitney placed one slice on each plate. She picked up her fork. "Okay you know how my day went. How was yours?"

Shea sat beside her. "Has anyone ever called you Whit? Anyone at all?"

"No," Whitney said, her tone conveying clearly that no one ever would. "Why?"

While they ate, Shea told her what she learned that morning. Whitney listened in horrified silence as she learned of the profile using her sister's picture that was luring vulnerable young women over to this side. How many, she wondered. How many came over before the first was beaten unconscious? Surely the first victim wasn't the first to answer the ad.

She felt ill as Shea told her that the car accident and fire were probably staged. Two people were critically injured in the accident and should a fire in one of the hotels or any other catastrophe threaten to expose the fifth floor, charges hidden in the floors were triggered to level the building. It had been done twice, both times because of an earthquake. This wasn't something someone had just dreamed up, but had spent a lot of planning. Why? For what purpose? What did they want so badly they were willing to kill for? And how much farther were they willing to go? Whitney was afraid there was no risk they weren't willing to take. There was no one more dangerous than someone with nothing to lose and that was whoever was doing this. People had died, lives were ruined and their very existence on this side was threatened. Someone would pay for that. Even if the one behind all this never did anything else, Whitney would not stop searching until she found him or her. She wanted justice for the women and peace of mind for herself. She wanted the punishment to be so steep that no one would ever try this again.

"Are you all right?" Shea asked, her voice low and concerned.

Whitney nodded as she stared into her glass. "Yeah. We've got to find who's behind this. Before anyone else dies, we've got to end this."

Shea slid put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her back to nestle against her. She laid her head on Shea's shoulder, thinking how nice it was to share a meal with someone before they went to bed. This was a luxury she'd never had before and realized it wasn't something she thought would ever be hers. There were a lot of dreams she'd never had because she thought they were her price to pay for her life. She closed her eyes and breathed deep the clean scent of Shea. And pushed away the thought that she had this only because of the attacks.

"We will," Shea said and kissed her on the head before resting her own against Whitney's. "The hunt starts tomorrow."

9.

Sleep was elusive for Whitney and when she did sleep, her dreams were a montage of violent images taken from recent events in her life. Interspersed with the grotesquely colorful snapshots of brutally beaten women was the classic nightmare of her dream self running in place from a faceless pursuer. Every time she looked over her shoulder the menacing shadow was one step closer. She was wrenched from her tortured sleep for the last time shortly before five the next morning, her skin slick with sweat and her heart pounding.

She was home. She was safe. For now. It was the last words that had her slipping from bed and gathering clothes in the dark before closing herself in the bathroom. Shea was still sprawled on

her stomach in the middle of the bed when, showered and dressed for the day, she quietly left the penthouse.

Whitney passed the command center to walk down to the terminals. After a slow scan to assure herself this part of the operation was running smoothly, she reversed her steps to the command center. Everyone knew what happened yesterday. There wasn't a person in her entire Gateway who didn't know they had a Code Black yesterday and she was sure all of them knew she was arrested. She stopped short of the glass of the command center to steel herself against the silence and stares and with a deep breath, walked into the room. There was no hesitation in her steps as the clattering of computer keys trailed off and phone calls ended abruptly. She turned as she reached the front of room to face the silence.

"Good morning," she said and let her eyes sweep the room.

Those who were standing slowly sank down to their chairs. Low murmurs of "Good morning" echoed from around her.

She met every gaze in the room and felt relief as she saw nothing more than concern. "Yesterday afternoon what I thought was a security guard called me to the first parking deck where I found the body of a young woman. Police arrived very soon after I did and I was arrested. The woman was one of our travelers, something the police do not know and cannot be told. You are to speak to no one about this. Are there any questions?"

Heads shook silently across the room. Whitney waited, giving them the chance to ask any questions they had, and nodded. "Okay then. Let's get this day started."

Without another word, she walked into her office and shut the door. She had a lot to do and very little time to get it done.

Several files and a stack of messages waited on her desk. As she scanned through the brief notes, tension seeped from her muscles as she saw the only significant event yesterday happened to her. It was a tortuous thought while she sat helpless in the interview room, that something would happen and she would not be there. Even knowing Denise was on this side and was more than qualified to run not only the Atlanta Gateway, but the whole of North America, the thought persisted that something important would be missed if she wasn't there to handle it.

Whitney moved quickly through the messages. It was too early for her to make calls and because she wasn't sure when she would be in her office again, she sent emails. They lacked the personal touch she preferred to use with her staff, but it was the best she could do at the moment. She didn't want to leave anything hanging.

She was startled when her door opened without warning and she sat back, the folder in her hand forgotten as Denise came into her office. She took one look at her boss's face and knew she wasn't the only one who spent the night in restless sleep. "Good morning."

"No, it's not," Denise said darkly and dropped down in the chair in front of Whitney's desk. "Coffee. Black."

There was a small snack area off the command center and Whitney brought her a glazed doughnut to go with her black coffee. She sat behind her desk and sipped her own as she waited for Denise's brain to kick into gear. As her narrowed gaze traveled over the rumpled clothing Denise wore, Whitney tried to remember what the Ops Director was wearing yesterday. She could almost believe Denise spent the night on this side and came to her office before going home to change.

"Grace is terrified. She thinks you'll either go to jail or be killed. I was here until midnight talking to her last night and nothing I said helped. She wants you on my side, permanently. I don't completely disagree with her."

Whitney looked at Denise over the edge of her coffee cup. She said in a calm tone, "The only way that happens is if I'm dragged over by guards."

With a deep sigh, Denise closed her eyes. Whitney waited, wondering if it would be her mother's best friend or her boss who would speak to her next. When the hazel eyes opened, Whitney saw the woman who had been as close as family to her since the day she was born. "Then there are concessions you'll have to make. If you don't agree to them, I will have you taken over. I can do that just on the fact that you were arrested yesterday."

She would, too. Whitney saw the truth of that in her eyes, heard it in the steel edge of her voice. She saw and heard something else, a dark terror almost hidden in the shadows of her eyes and lacing her voice, a something that had Whitney pushing down on her anger. They had every reason to be terrified. Someone wanted her removed and they were willing to kill for it. Sooner or later, it was going to be easier to just kill her to get her out of the way. After yesterday, she was betting on sooner. "Okay."

Surprise had Denise staring at her wide eyed. "Okay?"

"If I'm not next, I will be soon. I'll do whatever Shea thinks is necessary."

"I wasn't expecting that," Denise admitted. The gaze she leveled at Whitney was full of mistrust.

She met Denise's stare. "I didn't get it before yesterday. I do now. I'm cleaning up what I can right now. Go home and change. We're meeting at 8 in the main conference room."

After Denise left, Whitney moved quickly through the rest of her work. When she closed the last file, she sat back in her chair and stared around her office. Her mother had decorated it for her before Whitney chose Atlanta as her headquarters. The three signature colors of Prestige were reflected in the dove gray walls, maroon covers on the filing drawers and thick navy carpet. The only personal touch was the frameless watercolor paintings few people knew were done by her mother. She felt at home as soon as she walked into the room and over the years it had become

her haven. She knew what she was doing here. She could be herself here in a way she could never be anywhere else.

She was bitterly angry at whoever was sabotaging her life. She didn't feel like she was going to a meeting; she felt like she walking out on everything she was. Without telling a single soul, without making sure her Gateways were in good hands, she was walking away from them without knowing when she would come back or who she would be when she did.

"Come," she called to the knock on her door. Whatever it was would have to wait or be handled by Sam.

Before the door opened she would have thought Shea would be one of the last people to come into her office but when she closed the door, Whitney knew she should have expected this. It was unreasonable to think she could leave without a word that morning and Detective Shea would not track her down as soon as she was dressed. She watched Shea sit in front of her desk and was surprised to see a calm gaze staring at her. If she was angry with Whitney she was hiding it well.

"Almost done?"

Whitney glanced over her desk and knew the answer in heart was no. She nodded and sat back in her chair. "As much as I will ever be."

"You said last night that you wanted this to be over. How far are willing to go to do that?"

"As far as I have to go. I don't want anyone else to get hurt. I don't want my parents to live in fear that I'll be hurt or imprisoned. Why? Do you have a plan?"

A small smile crossed Shea's face. "I do, but first I want to know what the consequences are for you. Denise is coming to this meeting right?"

Whitney looked down at the clock on her desk. Eight was only minutes away. She stood up and walked around her desk to stand next to Shea. "Yes. She came by before you were here. My mother wants her to take me over to her side. I think Denise spent the night here."

"I'm surprised your entire family didn't spend the night with you," Shea said and slipped both arms around her waist in a loose embrace. Whitney leaned into her, thinking their bodies fit together as snugly as two pieces of a puzzle. Their lips met in a slow kiss as Shea's hands pulled her closer, tighter. Everything was so easy with Shea, so natural. She felt as if she was kissing someone she had known forever instead of someone she'd known for such a brief time.

"We have to go," she whispered against Shea's mouth. She told herself that once this was over, she had the rest of her life to spend in Shea's arms. That she could spend every moment of it kissing her.

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She'd fallen asleep hours after Whitney, her mind turning over all the possibilities. There was too much they didn't know. Too many why's and how's without answers and she didn't know where to look for them. Yesterday had rocked her. It wasn't the dead woman thrown away like garbage in the parking deck or the fact that Whitney was arrested. No, what shook her more than anything was how easy it would have been for that body to be Whitney.

In the darkest part of night, with Whitney moving restless next to her in the bed, she finally asked herself why the body wasn't Whitney. It should have been. Killing her should have been so much easier than framing her. It would be easier and faster with less chance of failure. All they really had to do was catch Whitney alone and mask her murder as a carjacking or mugging. Because of who she was and all that was at risk, the family would not encourage a lengthy investigation. Denise would try to do that from her side, but the GSA was not set up for criminal investigations. Whoever was behind this had to know that, had to know keeping her alive was riskier than killing her. So why wasn't she dead?

Reasons lined up in her head and each was explored and rejected until she was left with only one. Shea believed the reason someone wanted Whitney out of the way was professional and the reason she was being framed was personal. The fact that Whitney was the target meant whatever was at stake here could be accomplished only if Whitney was removed. The fact that she was alive instead of dead meant someone loved her too much to kill her. Narrowing down the suspect list should be simple with that factor. The number of people who had access to Whitney and cared about her were minute.

They needed to force an action. The only way Shea could think to do that was to give them what they wanted and see what they did with the opportunity.

Grace was standing at a serving cart when they walked into the conference room. Whitney went to her mother as Shea walked to the long table. Someone was busy. Notepads and pens were placed at every chair along with cups and saucers. Shea picked up a cup and waited, watching Grace hold Whitney. While the rest of her family was shocked and angered by what was happening to Whitney, her mother listened with fear. Shea got the impression Grace already knew most of it and pegged Denise as the likely informer.

"I want you to go over," Grace said as she stepped away from Whitney. "You're not safe here."

Whitney's smile was fleeting. "You don't know I'm any safer there."

From her shocked and panicked expression, Shea knew that wasn't something Grace had considered. Her absolute need to believe her daughter was safe on the other side blinded her to the realization that Whitney may not be safe anywhere. With cup in hand, Shea walked over to the serving cart where she found to her delight Grace was offering several different kinds of cookies along with the choice of coffee or tea.

"She's safer here," she said casually as she filled her cup from the carafe of coffee. Did she want a delicate shortbread cookie or see what cookie was hiding under the milk chocolate? She

glanced at Grace as she reached for a chocolate covered cookie. "Unless you can get her thrown in a cell at Quantico with guards we can trust."

Whitney plucked the cookie from her hand a mere second before she bit down. "If I go, you go."

Shea grinned and took her half eaten cookie back. Chocolate covered shortbread. The best of both worlds. "That goes without saying."

Whitney laughed and walked to sit down at the head of the table. "No, it needs to be said. I don't want you thinking you can give her ideas like that and skip away with me left sitting to twiddle my thumbs."

Grace was smiling at her and Shea saw relief in her eyes. She smiled and scooped up two cookies. "I rarely skip."

Shea took the chair to Whitney's left. Grace sat down on her right and Shea let their conversation drift into the background as she made notes. They would only get one shot at this and any mistakes could have devastating results. It wasn't just making sure Whitney walked away from this alive, they had to make sure they got everyone involved with the plot. All that happened wasn't the work of single individual. She wasn't convinced that two people alone could pull it off.

The conference room filled quickly with Whitney's family the closer the time got to eight. Once everyone was seated, Whitney turned to her. "Let's hear your plan."

Shea had hoped to speak with Denise in private before she brought up her plan. Because that didn't seem to be an option, she looked across to where Denise sat beside Grace. "Is there a way to make it appear that Whitney has been removed without her actually being removed?"

Denise shot a puzzled glance at Whitney. "Appear to be removed how? To who?"

"We need for everyone, *everyone* outside this room, to believe she's no longer in charge. They want her removed, so we remove her. Then we monitor everything. All phone calls, all transfers, all computer usage. Anything and everything. I believe once she's gone, there will be actions that will lead us to those behind this."

"Those? You don't think this is one person?" The question came from Whitney's dad and from the controlled anger in his tone, Josh Eisner was ready to hurt someone.

Shea could handle that emotion a lot better than Grace's quiet desperation. "No, I don't. I thought it was maybe two in the beginning. Someone here monitoring her and then alerting someone else. I think it's more than that now. We need to get all of them."

Denise pulled a notepad closer and clicked open a pen. "She was arrested yesterday and I can remove her for that. This has happened only a few times in our history, but in those instances the

COS was taken over to be held on the other side. But that's mostly to keep our people out of jail. We can leave her on this side. I'll need a media link to make the announcement."

"What has to happen for them to believe she's been removed? Are her access codes frozen? Is she barred from traveling? We can't overlooked anything. Her life depends on them believing this."

The planning took several hours and in the end only Denise, Whitney and Shea remained. The others slipped away as they were needed within in the hotel. Their presence was informational at best as Whitney had no authority with Prestige and her family had none with the TimeLine. Shea flipped through her pages of notes, checking and doubling checking that every conceivable precaution was being taken. All of Whitney's codes would be de-activated, she was barred from the entire fifth floor except for the terminals, and all travel within in the TimeLine required Denise's approval. Once she was back at Quantico, Denise would provide them with new codes and arrange to manage the North American Gateway herself from that side. By doing that, she could monitor all communications and movement without arousing suspicion from anyone on her side.

"Will they believe you're just letting her stay free?" That was Shea's main concern. Whitney's safety was contingent on everyone believing she was powerless. If Denise was really concerned about her fitness as COS, wouldn't she constrain her in some way?

"Nepotism is alive and well in the GSA," Denise said as she stood up with her notepad. "It's expected that I'll give her preferential treatment."

Denise walked to Whitney's side and leaned over to press a kiss to the crown of her head. She looked at Shea as she said, "I'll call when I have everything ready on the other side."

Shea nodded and waited until they were alone to reach for Whitney's hand. "Are you all right with this?"

"I have to be because the alternative isn't a choice."

"This will be over before you know it."

"And if it's not?" Whitney asked, her eyes as bleak as her voice. "I can't be suspended indefinitely. Denise will either have to replace or remove me. If they're smart, and I think we all agree that they are, all they have to do is wait."

Shea wasn't about to admit that was the only real flaw in her plan. She was hoping whoever was behind all of this would believe Whitney had been removed and would not think to question if it was a trap. In her experience, criminals rarely questioned the timing of good fortune. She was hoping that was as true for the future as it was in the present. "This is what they wanted. Why would they question that?"

Whitney sat back in her chair and looked down at their hands. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. I have nowhere to live. Nowhere to work. Nothing to do."

"None of that is true. You can live anywhere. Your suspension, if you want to call it that, isn't real. And last but certainly not least, you're going to be very busy combing through everything with me. Some things will stand out for me as being out of the ordinary, but I'm not going to catch the little things. It's the little things that people usually trip over."

"Now," she said and pulled Whitney up with her when she stood, "Let's go pack. Any idea where in the world you want to stay?"

Whitney gathered up her notes. "You can stay in the penthouse. One of us should be onsite."

Shea shook her head. She wasn't staying alone in the penthouse for any reason. "I think it's best if no one stays there. We have a better chance of them acting if they believe there is a void in the power structure. Denise can't be expected to give your Gateway her undivided attention."

"How many people do you think is involved in this conspiracy?" Whitney asked as they left the conference room.

Conspiracy. That was a new word for Whitney. Her tone had changed, too, Shea noticed. Gone was the hesitation and doubt, the true disbelief that someone was doing this to her life deliberately. Now she believed and in that belief Shea heard a dangerous need for vengeance. "It's hard to say. We don't know what they want."

She hesitated before she used her keycard to the fifth floor. For a moment, Shea saw Whitney's life as she must be seeing it right now. Her place in this world and her right to move freely in it were in question for the first time in her life. Whitney's life seemed aimless to those on the outside looking in and it wasn't going to be easy to live that life for even a few days. The GSA was her life. To lose one had to feel as if she'd lost the other.

Shea followed her off the elevator and across to the bedroom. Her stay here at been unofficial at best. She recalled, vaguely, Amanda saying a suite was being created for her, but there had been nothing said after that one time. Watching Whitney walk in front her, Shea knew she hadn't cared enough to ask. As long as Whitney wanted her in the penthouse, Shea was more than happy to be there.

"You can stay with me," she offered before realizing the thought was in her head. She had given her house very little thought once Whitney came into her life. She was lucky she didn't have pets who required her attention. Of course, if she had a pet, her mother would take care of it when she picked up her mail. It was a familiar routine for them by now and Melinda had long stopped asking her daughter about the assignments that kept away from home days at a time. Shea wasn't sure how she would have explained this one.

Whitney brought out several suitcases from the closet. She glanced at Shea absently. "Where are you staying?"

Shea sat on the bed to watch. Her packing would take only a few minutes as everything she had here was provided by the GSA. She missed her clothes, she realized. She missed her house. "I'm going home. Did you think I was living in my car when you met me?"

At Whitney's blank stare, Shea laughed. Obviously where she lived and what was happening to it while she was here had never crossed Whitney's mind. "There are some things you should know before you decide. I don't have maid service and I prefer cooking food to delivery."

"Well, you should know before I accept that I can't cook and that's not a skill I've missed."

"If you don't cook, you clean."

Whitney grinned. "That I can do. Will you have to explain me to someone?"

"My girlfriend already knows about you."

Instead of shock or anger, Whitney's grin turned into a smile that became a laugh at Shea's disappointment. "You weren't the only one who talked to Kim after you followed me that night. According to her you're single but have been given uncountable opportunities to change that."

Kim had said almost the same thing to her about Whitney. "I'm going to be the envy of everyone. I got the wealthy playgirl. You got the workaholic cop."

Whitney came around the bed to stand in front of her. Cupping her face, she said as she leaned down, "I need to do something nice for the city of Atlanta. They kept you busy until I found you."

"You weren't looking for me," Shea whispered.

"I would've been. Had I known you were out there, I would have looked for you everywhere and in every time."

Shea wanted to pull her close, to deepen the kiss until they were breathing hard and pushing away clothes in a desperate need to touch skin. Her last shred of sanity kept her hands on Whitney's hips. They had too much to get done today to let themselves be sidetracked.

They left the penthouse less than thirty minutes after they arrived. As she watched Whitney pack, Shea noted that she packed as if she was only going on a trip. As if the thought she might never live here again hadn't crossed her mind. Shea was sure that it had, that she had to think she was walking off the fifth floor as Chief of Security for the last time.

Her car was parked next to Whitney's sporty BMW. Whitney walked to the trunk of her Accord without hesitating at her own car. Shea bit down on the offer to let Whitney take her car. As much as it saddened her to see Whitney letting little pieces of her life go, the loss was only temporary.

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Shea had a life. Whitney was embarrassed that she had given that life absolutely no thought. She had not thought about the job Shea left at her request, about where she lived or the people who missed her while she was gone. She'd pulled Shea so completely into her life that she had forgotten Shea had a life of her own. She sincerely wished she had remembered that before she fell head over heels. Shea had more than proven she could fit in Whitney's life. Whitney wasn't so sure she would fit so completely into Shea's.

"Oh. Hmm."

Whitney looked away from the window at Shea's flustered words. They were stopped in front of a two story red brick house on a street lined with two story red brick houses. Several tall oak trees shaded the house and small front lawn. A dark green minivan was parked on the sloping drive.

"What's wrong?"

With a sigh, Shea pulled up next the curb in front of the house. "My mother's here. She takes care of things when I'm working. She shouldn't be here now."

Whitney sat in the Accord for a moment while Shea went to the back of the car. Not a just a life, but a life with parents and probably a sibling or two. Slowly, she followed Shea across the yard to the front door and on the front step, Shea turned to look down on her. "Who do you want to be?"

"What?" Whitney asked blankly.

"To my mother, who do you want to be?"

"Whoever you want me to be. Whoever won't complicate your life too much." Whitney couldn't even think of who she could be in Shea's life. Did cops even bring people from work home with them? With witness or suspect being the two main options, Whitney hoped Shea didn't bring people from work home with her.

The front door opened onto a small landing. Forward was a set of stairs that disappeared into the second floor and down was empty space that would be a cozy living room should Shea add a couch or chair. A large closet resided under the stairs and Whitney watched in amusement as her suitcases were hastily shoved inside. Shea called out, "Mom?"

"Laurie?" The concerned reply came from the back of the house followed by the sound of footsteps on the hardwood floor. "What are you doing here?"

An older version of Shea came down the wide hallway drying her hands on a dish towel. She was barefoot and dust or dirt streaked the jeans rolled to mid calf. Her bright yellow T-shirt was smudged with dirt and sweat. She used the back of her hand to brush damp curls away from curious green eyes. "I thought you would be gone for a few more days. I'm spring cleaning."

"I can do that, Mom," Shea said in a tone that said this wasn't a new topic of conversation between them. "This is my mother Melinda Shea. Mom, Whitney Eisner."

Whitney knew instantly that Melinda Shea had seen the news some time in the last twenty-four hours. The curiosity changed to alarm and without her gaze ever leaving Whitney's face, she reached out for her daughter's arm. "Nice to meet you. Kitchen. Now."

"Why?" Shea asked and resisted her mother's efforts to pull her down the hallway.

Whitney sat down on the third step of the staircase. "She's seen the news. She knows I was arrested yesterday. I was hoping you didn't bring suspects home from work with you, or witnesses either. That can't be safe."

"Of course I don't do that," She said to Whitney in exasperation and turned to her mother, saying in the same tone, " She's not guilty Mom. It's a mistake."

"She was found leaning over a dead body."

"Her family owns the hotel. She lives there. She's not guilty."

"How can you be so sure?"

Whitney propped her hands on her knees and rested her chin on her fist. She couldn't wait to hear Shea's answer to that. Whitney found herself liking the way Melinda Shea's gaze never wavered from her face. She was almost vibrating with tension and Whitney was sure if she made a move on Shea she'd find Melinda blocking her path.

"I love her."

"God, Shea," Whitney said and was a half step behind Shea when her mother took a staggered step back. "That was the best you could come up with? 'Hi Mom, meet my new girlfriend, the woman arrested for murder yesterday.' Your people skills need serious work."

"How was I suppose to know she knew your name?" Shea shot back.

"Because I was one of the top three stories in the news yesterday, if not the top? Because my face is probably on the front page of the paper? The same way you knew it when Matt said it that night in the conference room? Any or all the above."

Between the two of them, they led Melinda back to a sunny kitchen and sat her down at the a high café style table. The smell of lemon scented cleaner hung heavily in the air and bottles of different cleansers were scattered over the long, navy tiled counters. Sliding glass doors that led to a large backyard sparkled in the afternoon sun.

"Girlfriend?" Melinda asked as Shea poured a glass of chilled water and handed it to her mother. "I thought you were on a case."

The glance Shea sent her way was a little panicked. Whitney sat down at the remaining chair at the table. "She's been helping my family. We're having some problems with the hotel, as you can see from yesterday. Shea and I had just started dating and when I asked her if she knew someone very good and very discreet, she offered to help us herself. We're very grateful to her for that."

Melinda relaxed slightly, but her eyes were wary as she glanced between them. "What's going on with your hotel?"

"We've had several young women attacked. We're business people and we've failed miserably at playing detective. It seems we asked for Shea's help a moment too late."

"The newspaper said you don't have a job at the hotel."

Whitney was rarely bothered when an outsider believed the image she cultivated as a playgirl. There wasn't an equivalent of her job in Prestige, nor would she have had the time to pretend if there had been one. The people who believed the hype didn't matter to her so why should their opinion? She couldn't be so callous with Shea's mother. She didn't want her to think she was a playgirl or that she was just playing with her daughter. She glanced over at Shea and found no help in that area. It was obvious lying on the spot wasn't one of her better skills. At least not to her mother.

She smiled at Melinda and hoped she looked faintly embarrassed. "I'm the baby of the family and it's easy to drift when there are no expectations. My brother and sister knew they wanted to be a part of the family business since they were children. I have an MBA from Stanford so while I'm new to the business, I won't exactly start at the bottom."

Please, she prayed, don't ask what I do. While lying was one of Whitney's better skills, she was used to lying to people who didn't matter to her or perpetuating the well-laid lies of her life to those outside the GSA. This was new and she found her skills weren't quite up to the test of lying to Shea's mother.

Before Melinda could ask another question, Whitney's cell phone beeped. She pulled the phone from her pocket as she slipped from the high chair. "I'll take this in the other room."

Her relief at the interruption was short-lived when she saw the name in the caller ID. She thought briefly about ignoring the call; it promised to be the first of many. She walked to the window farthest from the kitchen and leaned against the wall to look outside at the bright sunny day. "Hey."

"What the hell is going on here?" Lea demanded. "Where the hell are you?"

Maybe they should have stayed to listen to the announcement. She knew the gist of what Denise said, but it occurred to Whitney she may need to know what was actually said. "In Atlanta. I'm staying at a friend's house."

"What is going on? Denise can't believe you killed someone yesterday."

"It doesn't matter what Denise believes. I was arrested. There's not a lot she can do about that."

"She could believe you're innocent. Instead, she suspends you. No one's ever been suspended because they were suspected of doing something. What else is happening here?"

The frustration in her friend's voice pushed Whitney to tell her the truth. It was on the tip of her tongue, but she bit it back as the images of beaten and murdered women flashed in her mind. She closed her eyes, promised she would make amends to those she lied to now and said, "I wish to God I knew, Lea."

"Come here," Lea said softly. "You can stay with me."

"I'm sorry, I can't. I'm out on bail and I can't do anything to get that revoked. If there's even the slightest chance I'll be locked up again, I have to go over. You know how much I would hate that."

Lea sighed, "Yeah, I do know. Keep me in the loop, will ya? I can't believe I had to hear about it through a netmeeting . You should have called me."

"I know and I will keep you in the loop. I'll call you later, okay? I've got to go."

As soon as she closed her phone, it beeped again. She slid the phone in her pocket after she checked the caller ID. When Shea said everyone had to believe she was out, Whitney didn't realize that would include those she considered her closest friends inside the GSA. Lying to all of them was going to be hard, but admitting the truth when it was over was going to be even harder. How do you tell a friend you didn't trust them?

"Everything all right?"

She turned as Shea crossed the room. The beep of another phone call brought a faint smile to her face. "Yeah. That was Lea. She thinks something else is happening here because no one's ever been suspended like this. The next call was Mark, which I let go to voice mail. I don't know who's calling now. When this over, Shea, how did I tell my friends they were suspects? That I couldn't tell them the truth because I didn't know it wasn't them?"

Shea stepped close to slowly move her hands up and down in her arms. "You don't have to tell them. You're the victim Whitney. You're the last one who has to explain anything to anyone. Besides, anyone who doesn't get that your life and everyone in it is under a microscope is a fool."

"I guess," Whitney said and raised both hands to massage her eyes. It wasn't just the left eye that ached anymore. She cleared her throat and forced a smile to her face. "I'm surprised your mother trusts me enough to let you be alone with me."

Shea laughed and pulled her into a comforting hug. "She doesn't. She just trust me to be able to protect myself."

This time when her phone beeped, Whitney knew she couldn't ignore the distinctive ring. She pulled the phone from her pocket, saying, "That's Denise."

Shea stepped back with a quick nod. "That should mean she's ready for us. Let me tell my Mom we're leaving."

Whitney started walking to the front door. She flipped open the phone and said, "We're on our way."

10.

Denise set them up in the private conference room behind her office. Shea wished there was a way to secret Whitney from one side to the other, but she could only come over through a hotel and there had never been a reason for more than the sub-basement at Quantico. It was her keycard that got them onto the elevator, that made the transfer to Quantico and Shea hated that it gave Whitney's staff the impression she was being escorted. Some looked away as they passed while others clearly wanted to speak but didn't know what to say. Shea couldn't decide to be angry they didn't try or glad their silence allowed Whitney to move quickly past the stares.

The first decision was how to organize the massive amounts of data generated in just one day by the six zones. Everything was monitored and archived. Every call was taped. Every transfer documented. Every keystroke captured. All of it was compressed onto tiny transparent discs with one copy made before the master set was sent to the Council. When Denise handed her the set for that day, Shea could only stare. Each zone had its own case of nine discs. She was stunned until she read the first label.

PACIFIC ZONE, 1ST SHIFT, PHONE CALLS. PACIFIC ZONE, 1ST SHIFT, TRANSFERS. PACIFIC ZONE, 1ST SHIFT, COMPUTERS.

Her relief lasted until she opened the first disc and saw it was a simple log that noted the time, user and hotel of a call phone. The Pacific Zone, 1st Shift made 18 pages of phone calls. She found it hard to be grateful they could at least sort the entries by time, user or hotel. They would never be able to analyze everything properly. It wasn't enough to know a call was made, when a transfer was made or when someone logged onto the computer. Each piece was part of the puzzle and they needed to know how they linked before they would be able to see the whole picture.

Five hours after they walked into Denise's office, Shea pushed away from her computer screen depressed by how little they actually got done. She was beginning to think the best thing for them to do was print everything out. She could highlight and mark paper. The only way they would ever keep up was to actually stop time.

She froze before turning to Whitney. "You guys can't...stop...time, can you?"

Whitney grinned and shook her head. "No."

Disappointed, Shea laid her head back on her chair. "No, of course you can't. Because if you could you'd go back in time and stop the first attack."

"No we wouldn't." Whitney was waiting with her hand when Shea jerked upright in her chair. "We learned very quickly and at great cost that the past is a chain of events and that removing a link rarely breaks the chain. You can't stop someone from doing something simply by changing how or where or when they do it. You have to stop them from wanting to do it and with all the we have accomplished, changing the intent in someone's heart is still beyond us."

It was a truth Shea didn't want to hear and one she found hard to deny. How much better life would be if the desires that dwelled in the heart were always right and good and kind. She had a job because some hearts were filled with evil intentions. The first attack wouldn't have been Sharon Armstrong in Dallas. The first would have been someone else, somewhere else. Maybe she couldn't change the fact that there would have been a first, but Shea was determined that Micah Hansen would be the last.

"We've got to come up with a better system than this," She said more to herself than Whitney. How to do that was overwhelming. If only she knew what wasn't important or had a way to narrow down information to some workable degree.

She looked up as Whitney slipped from her chair and walked to stand behind her. She closed her eyes as Whitney began a light massage on her shoulders. "Let's go home. We can have a late supper and brainstorm."

Shea pushed away from the table and stretched. Brainstorming did not sound like something she wanted to do with the rest of her night. She watched Whitney tidy the area around her computer terminal, her eyes sliding down over the button down shirt and linen slacks. No, she didn't want to deal with Centers and phones calls and murder any more that night. Home, Whitney said, and this time she meant Shea's. "Is it presumptuous of me to think you're sleeping in my bed tonight?"

The look of surprise on Whitney's face when she turned to Shea was the only answer she needed. Whitney glanced at the doorway before moving closer. She slipped a finger through Shea's belt loop. "Only if it's presumptuous of me to think I'm sleeping in your bed tonight."

Shea's eyes fluttered shut at the low, promising tone of Whitney's voice. She could feel Whitney's skin under her hands, her lips on her Whitney's body. She opened her eyes. "I don't think we'll get much sleep."

Whitney shot the empty doorway another glance before slipping an arm around her waist to pull their bodies together. One hand slid up to almost cup her right breast. Her thumb carelessly stroked her shirt, each brush bringing her closer to touching Shea. "Well in that case I guess I should sleep in your guest room You need your sleep."

Shea covered her hand and moved it up so that both their hands were on her breast. "I don't have a guest room."

"No? Is there a couch I didn't notice?"

Shea bit down on a groan as Whitney began to move her hand in a slow circular motion. She could feel both nipples pressing against her bra. She whispered, "No, no couch."

"A comfy chair? Hammock in the back yard?"

"...No..."

Whitney brought her hand up to Shea's chin and tilted her face up. Amusement mixed with the desire in her eyes. "I hope you don't have a lot of sleep-overs."

The first flippant remark that came to Shea's mind was brushed away. Thanks to Kim they both knew the other wasn't into one night stands. Shea knew that even had she been, Whitney was the last woman who would trip over someone else's past. She only cared about the present. Shea she slipped one hand behind Whitney's neck and pulled her down into a deep kiss.

They broke apart, startled by the trilling ring of Whitney's cell phone. Lea. Again. Shea frowned as Whitney leaned back to answer the call. Was this the third or fourth time Lea had called that day? As she had during the previous calls, Shea pretended that she wasn't listening and turned to her desk area to close down her computer for the night. The conference room was behind Denise's office so presumably their data was safe, not that they had found anything to alarm anyone, but Shea still felt better going through the motions. While they didn't know what they were looking for yet, there was someone who did.

"I can't risk it Lea. I'm sorry."

She didn't sound sorry; she sounded angry. Shea gave up the pretense and gave Whitney her full attention. This call was going down the same path as the others with Lea trying to tempt Whitney out to LA. It was a sentiment Shea seemed to understand better than Whitney. If she was Lea, Shea was certain she would be trying to get her friend out where she could pamper and distract her just as Lea seemed determined to do. Unfortunately for Lea, Whitney's guilt was manifesting itself as anger.

"You'll make this up to her," Shea said when Whitney ended the phone call minutes later.

"How?" Whitney snapped in frustration. "How do I ever make this up to any of them? Nothing is ever going to be the same again."

It wasn't a point Shea could argue because Whitney was right. Nothing in her life would ever be the same again. The turning point would not be the unmasking of the killer or even the revelations that would follow. No, that particular moment in time was the instant the plan to commit these acts was made. Whitney was beating herself up for deceiving her friends and Shea feared when she would have to believe one of those friends made the decision that changed her life so that it would never be the same again.

Shea took Whitney's cell phone and with deliberate care, turned it off. When Whitney reached for it, the surprise so clear in her eyes, Shea slid the phone into her own front pocket. She didn't

want any more distractions. She wanted Whitney's complete attention for the rest of the night. Tomorrow she could belong to the GSA again. Tonight Shea wanted her all to herself.

"If you're very good tonight," she said softly as she slipped her arms around Whitney's waist, "I'll give it back to you in the morning."

The battle between duty and desire was hard fought with emotions crossing her face too fast for Shea to decipher. She would never know how closely desire edged out duty, how narrowly the need for what Whitney wanted defeated the need to be who she was. As Whitney's lips pressed down on hers, she didn't care. Sometimes winning by the thinnest of margins made the victory all the more sweeter.

Whitney moved away first. "So you claim to cook. What are you cooking me for dinner?"

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Letting go of the deeply ingrained responsibility Whitney felt to her job wasn't as hard as she always assumed it would be. She never would have guessed that walking away with absolutely no desire to look back would be so easy. Never would have imagined the relief she felt as Shea drove away from the hotel that whatever happened that night was someone else's problem to solve.

"I know I said I preferred cooking when I'm home." Shea said as she maneuvered through the last of the rush hour traffic. "But I have no idea what I have at home for food, much less if it's still good. So pick a drive thru for tonight and tomorrow we'll go shopping. I promise you a home cooked meal tomorrow night."

Whitney stared out of the passenger side window and watched the passing parade of brightly lit signs promising everything from All-American favorites like burgers and chicken to ethnic foods from around the world. The hunger she felt burning wasn't something she could pick from a menu board and request with a soft drink and fries. "Let's have something delivered."

"That'll take forever. Choose-burger, chicken or taco?"

Whitney looked over at the woman driving the car. The urge to touch her was overwhelming and she reached over to run her fingers through Shea's silky hair. Her smile was fleeting at Shea's questioning glance. "I can't think of anything else but tasting you right now. Feeling you under my hands, on my lips. I can't wait even the few minutes it will take for drive-thru."

Her words had the same effect on Shea as if she had touched her some place more intimate than the curve of her ear. Startled eyes flew to Whitney's face and she took a quick breath. Whitney let her hand fall to the back of her neck, her fingertips a whispered caress against her skin.

"God, how do you do that?" Shea asked in a rough voice.

"Do what?" Whitney knew exactly what she was doing, to both of them, and was enjoying every second. Shea's breathing was shallow, faster. Her hands moved restlessly on the steering wheel.

She was squirming in her seat. Whitney closed the space between them and put one hand high on Shea's thigh as she leaned in to whisper, "What am I doing?"

Shea braked a red light. Without taking her eyes from the road, she dropped her right hand from the steering wheel and found Whitney's breast. Now she did turn her head to Whitney, smiling as Whitney gasped at her touch, and locked eyes. "You make me so wet, so fast."

Whitney moved the hand on top of Shea's thigh to the inside of her leg. She leaned in for a lingering kiss on Shea's open lips, her fingers slowly tracing the seam of her pants all the way to the V of her legs. The hand lightly touching her breast fell on hers and Shea linked their fingers to still her exploration. "I want you so much."

Want was such a pale word to describe feelings she'd never felt for anyone. There were other women Whitney had wanted to the distraction of almost anything else. Women who had dominated her thoughts. Women she knew she had loved. But she couldn't remember a single one who pushed her to this place where the need to touch was a compulsion she couldn't resist.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the car in the next lane move forward. "You'd better drive before you cause a traffic jam."

Shea jerked to her gaze the road. Once they were driving again, she kissed the palm of Whitney's hand and let her go. "We should probably keep our hands to ourselves."

"Okay," Whitney agreed and laid her hand on the nape of her neck. "You do that."

She was good for the rest of the drive, or at least as good as she could be. Her fingers wandered through Shea's hair, stroked her jaw line, skimmed the shell of her ear and she knew all were pushing Shea to the edge. Whitney wasn't surprised when Shea all but dragged her into the dark house and up the stairs to her bedroom. She wanted Shea's hands rough and hurried on her clothes. Every touch in the car was meant to push Shea to this point and Whitney reveled in the sensation of having her shirt ripped open.

"I want to feel you," she whispered and zipped open Shea's slacks. The hands pushing her shirt off her shoulders stopped as her hand slid under Shea's panties. They both gasped when she stroked her with one finger. Shea's head fell back and her hands gripped Whitney's shoulders tightly. Whitney leaned in to kiss the base of her throat. "I want to touch you first."

Shea's hands gentled on her shoulders as Whitney kissed her jaw line and she shifted, standing with her legs wider to let Whitney's fingers slide deeper. Whitney groaned as barely the tips of her fingers reached where she wanted to go. She needed to be in Shea, needed to feel her hot, wet and tight around her fingers. She pulled back and reached for Shea's slacks. "These have to come off. Now."

Shea balanced herself with one hand on Whitney's shoulders as Whitney yanked the slacks off and tossed them over her shoulder. Whitney stood up and Shea slipped her arms around her and pulled her close. "Why do you get to touch me first?"

Whitney dropped her hands to caress Shea's bare ass. "Because I said it first?"

"I want to touch you more," Shea whispered as her hands slid under Whitney's shirt and pushed it off her shoulders. "You got to touch me in the car."

Whitney let her shirt fall to the floor. "Is that how you want to touch me? How I touched you in the car?"

"No. I want to touch you like this." She stood still as Shea's hands roamed over her, kissing the skin she bared as she removed Whitney's clothes. Her skin was burning with every stroke, every brush of Shea's lips and she was trembling with the effort to keep her hands to herself.

Whitney waited patiently until Shea was standing up from taking off her pants. She pushed Shea back onto the bed and was on her before she could do more than catch her breath. "I can't wait anymore."

"No?" Shea whispered. She took Whitney's hand from her shoulder and trailed it down the front of her own body. Whitney closed her eyes, enjoying the satiny feel of warm skin against her palm. Her breath caught and Shea moaned low in her throat as she took their hands lower. "Tell me."

Whitney couldn't think. Shea's fingers brushed across her hand as she stroked her, feeling Shea move against her hand. She whispered words she would never remember as her fingers opened Shea and slid deep inside her. Slowly, Whitney moved inside her, following Shea's movements and listening as she her breathing grew ragged, as she became tight around Whitney's fingers.

She moved up on one elbow to watch Shea as she arched up, Whitney's name a tortured groan on her lips. "Oh baby, you are so beautiful."

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Now this was the way to end the day. Sated and sleepy, warm arms holding her close as Whitney slept behind her. She dropped off quickly and it was only Shea's spinning mind that was keeping her awake. Another day had ended with them no closer to clearing Whitney than they were when the day began. They'd lost more time, something they didn't have to spare, and had learned nothing. Every second lost felt like one gained for the other side. Not every crime was solved. Here in the dark, Shea could acknowledge her fears that this might be one of those. She couldn't bear to think about the kind of limbo Whitney would live in if that happened.

There had to be a way to cut down the data without losing something vital. She didn't want to eliminate anything until she was beyond certain that it was useless information. How could she get to that point? Not every scrap of data from every zone was important. There had to be some centers where none of the data mattered. But, she thought as the first tingles of a true avenue of investigation chilled her skin, there was one where all the data mattered.

Atlanta.

It didn't begin there, but everything that happened was connected to it. Because of Whitney.

Shea moved carefully away from Whitney and turned to face her when she was sitting on the edge of the bed. The light from the full moon fell across her sleeping face. She was the key. She was the reason this was happening. Shea didn't have to trace the evidence back to Atlanta. She only had to follow the trail from there.

Quietly, Shea picked up her robe up from the foot of the bed and wrapped herself in the cool silk before kneeling on the floor to search their scattered clothes. She found what she was looking for next to the half open bedroom door. She wondered how her slacks ended up so far away from the bed. She was almost certain that was the last of her clothing removed. With Whitney's cell phone in hand, she crept into the hallway and made her way downstairs.

A single light was burning over the stove. She saw the note held to the fridge by a Braves magnet as she opened the door for the pitcher of water she kept chilled. She recognized her mother's handwriting immediately.

Honey, your cupboards were bare! I hope you don't mind that I did some light shopping for you.

Love, Mom

Looking inside the fridge, Shea saw her mother's definition of the word light really wasn't the same as hers. She leaned down to scan the brimming shelves and realized she was starving. After she made her phone call, she was going to rummage around for a quick snack. Tomorrow morning she would surprise Whitney with a home cooked breakfast. She had all the ingredients for a stuffed omelet.

She took her glass of water to the table and opened Whitney's phone. She didn't bother being disappointed or surprised that there was no password required to use the phone. It didn't look any different from other cell phones, but Shea knew their had to be a fundamental one when she pushed the second speed dial button and waited to be connected to a phone hundreds of years in the future. For a group harboring the secrets of the GSA they were astonishingly lax in security.

"Hello?"

"Denise its Shea. Do you a few minutes to talk?" What time was it anyway? Shea twisted around to see the time display on the microwave and thought it felt much later than 9:30.

"Is Whitney all right?"

Shea smiled, glad that would always be Denise's first concern. "Yes. She's sleeping and I was thinking about all the data we went through today. We're getting no where and I was trying to find a way to cut it down without losing anything. I think I found it."

As she spoke with Denise, the more convinced Shea became that they would find the answers in the data for Atlanta, or at least the bread crumbs to follow. There was still a lot of data with just

the focus shifting to Whitney's home base, but again Shea thought she could narrow that down as well.

Denise was silent for a moment before saying cautiously, "Are you sure? That's very specific. Do you have a suspect?"

"No," Shea said truthfully and it stung to admit that. "But it started with Whitney. The answers have to be at her center."

"They're all hers."

They were all hers, but none were as connected with her as Atlanta. This was always home to her regardless of where she went in the world or what she did. She grew up in and around the hotel. Prestige Atlanta was the Eisner family. It was a connection Shea knew she should have made immediately. "Can you have everything ready by morning?"

Papers rustled in the background. "Yes. It'll be waiting for you."

"Thank you Denise."

"If you need anything else, call me. I don't care about the time."

Shea promised she would and hung up. Tomorrow. They would have answers tomorrow. Maybe not all of them, but there was only one she wanted to know more than all the others. She wanted to know who. Which friend betrayed Whitney? Which someone near if not dear to her had done this? Shea closed her eyes and rested her face in her hands and almost wished tomorrow would never come. Nothing cuts quite as deep or hurts as much as betrayal from someone you believe will never hurt you.

"Shea?"

Her head snapped up and she stared at Whitney standing on the threshold to the kitchen. She looked sweet, sleepy and tousled in a too big thigh length dark blue T-shirt. Shea turned in her chair as she crossed to the table. Whitney stepped between her legs and leaned to rest her head against her shoulder. "Why are you awake?"

Whitney kissed her on the neck. "The better question is why you aren't sleep."

Should she tell her? Whitney moved back to meet her eyes. The debate with herself was short. There was nothing for them to do that night. Surely Denise would need some time to pull the dates she wanted. So she kissed Whitney lightly on the lips. "I'm hungry. I thought I would see what I could scrounge up for us. I'll be honest. I wasn't hopeful, but my mother went shopping so how would you like that home cooked meal tonight?"

"Mm, I would love it. What can you do that's light?"

Shea thought about the omelet she was going to surprise Whitney with the next morning. "Omelet? A little ham, some cheese, maybe a veggie or two?"

"Perfect. I'll see what I can find for toast."

In the five years Shea had lived in her house, she didn't remember sharing her kitchen with someone else. She usually had dinner ready by the time a date arrived. The kitchen was large with most of the space taken up by the L-shaped center counter. Their bodies brushed as Whitney moved around her gathering plates and silverware to set the table. It was an intimacy that had always left Shea vaguely uncomfortable even when the woman was sharing her bed. She'd known Whitney so much less than she knew most of the women in her past and yet, Whitney belonged in a way the others never did.

"Why is my phone down here?"

"What?" Shea turned slowly from the stove and tried to kick her brain out of neutral.

"And it's on," Whitney said, turned to look at her. "Why did you call Denise?"

"How...?" As far as she could see Whitney hadn't pressed any buttons that would tell her who she called.

"You have cell phone. There's only one reason you'd use mine. Why did you call Denise? You could have used your GSA phone."

And if she had remembered that, they would not be having this conversation. Shea spent the next few minutes finishing their dinner and trying to find a way to tell Whitney what she told Denise just in a different way. She didn't want to keep pointing out that this was all happening because of Whitney. Once they were sitting at the table with the omelet divided between their places, Whitney sat with her arms crossed and her eyes on Shea.

She sighed and picked up her fork. "There's a lot of data and I was thinking about how to narrow down the search. We're never going to get through even one zone much less all of them in a single day. It occurred to me that following the trail out of Atlanta would be a lot easier than trying to find the one leading to it. I've asked Denise to pull the days before, of and after each attack. We can widen that later if we have to, but I don't think we will."

Whitney picked up her fork and they ate in silence for a few moments. "Why didn't you want to tell that?"

"We can't do anything until tomorrow. I'm sorry, I just didn't want to talk about it tonight. That makes me sound selfish and cold, but there it is." The explanation was a lot closer to the truth than Shea would have thought possible. It was more than just not wanting to keep telling Whitney this all happening because of her. She had Whitney in her home and she wanted to enjoy that for as long as she had her without it being tainted with the reason why she was in

Shea's home. Would it be so wrong for her to pretend Whitney was here because she wanted to be?

Whitney forked up a piece of egg with ham and cheese. "This is really good. I could get used to this."

"Yeah?" Shea asked with a smile, her eyes locked with Whitney's.

"Oh yeah," Whitney said with a slow smile and a subtle darkening of her eyes. "So did you want to talk about something else instead?"

Shea's eyes dropped the V of her T-shirt. "No."

11.

Someone she knew was a murderer. A colleague definitely and may even a friend. As they drove to Prestige the next morning, Whitney was torn between wanting the day to be over and never wanting it to begin. Shea's absolute confidence that she would find some answers today left Whitney feeling sick to her stomach. She wanted this to be over. God knew no one wanted that more than she did, but she wasn't ready to discover which of her friend's was a cold, calculating killer. She didn't think that was something she would ever be ready to face.

"When are you going to tell me what we're looking for?" She asked Shea as they walked onto the elevator in the lobby of the hotel.

Shea swiped her ID card for the fifth floor and Whitney was amused that she did it as naturally, as absently, as if she had been doing it all her life. She'd never thought about it before, how someone from this time would adjust to their world, but if she had she never would have thought anyone would do it as seamlessly as Shea.

"I'll know it when I see it."

"But will I know it when I see it?" She wasn't a trained investigator. She couldn't help but think she was more of a hindrance to Shea than anything else. She knew nothing of police procedures and investigations and even now had little interest in learning.

Shea smiled at her. "Yes, I think you will. You'll know it's wrong before I do."

The elevator opened onto the fifth floor before she could ask another question. Whitney steeled herself before stepping out and reminded herself that whatever her employees thought, they would know soon that it wasn't true. But slivers of doubt made her honest enough to admit that when it was all over, the truth may not be enough to save her life on this side. There wasn't a single instance in living memory of a COS being removed so it wasn't going to be easy to convince people there wasn't some truth to the accusations.

The door to Denise's office was open and the room empty. Whitney hesitated in the doorway. This office was the equivalent of the principal's office for the student corps and Whitney was

amused her instinctive reaction was to wait outside until she was invited in. She headed for the conference room, saying, "She's probably at the morning Assembly."

Hot coffee and warm pastries were waiting for them in the conference room. The stacks of discs from yesterday were gone, replaced by a single container. Shea picked them up before she could and flipped open the lid. Whitey poured two cups of coffee and took one with her as she sat down.

"Good morning," Denise said as she walked into the room. "Is that everything you wanted Shea?"

Shea shot her a quick smile and sat down next to Whitney. "Yes, thank you."

"What are you looking for?"

Whitney watched Denise take the cup she'd poured for Shea and come to stand behind Shea's chair. Shea selected a disc from what seemed to be the middle to Whitney and slid in into the computer. "I don't know yet."

Whitney met Denise's questioning gaze and shrugged, letting the Ops Director know she was in the dark as well. Denise dropped one hand to Shea's shoulder. "Good luck finding it. I'll be in my office if you need me."

"Denise," Shea called and turned to face her. "Don't let anyone back here okay?"

This time Denise didn't look at Whitney. She merely nodded and turned away.

"Do you know who you're trying to keep out?" Whitney asked and sipped her coffee, waiting to see what Shea did next.

"Everyone who wasn't in the conference room with us yesterday."

As the disc loaded, Shea reached for her clipboard with the notes she'd taken yesterday. She'd been irritated with how they archived their data. Whitney's reply that they'd never had to a reason to comb the data was met with a muttered curse and a stare bitter enough to curdle milk. As hour after hour passed with them painstakingly breaking the codes for every entry, she more than shared Shea's disgust with their recordkeeping. She wasn't looking forward to a repeat of the process today.

"Come here," Shea said and wrapped one hand around the metal arm of her chair to drag her chair next to her own. Whitney barely had time to balance the cup of hot coffee in her hand. The dark glare she shot at Shea went unnoticed as Shea opened the folder on the disc. "I think the phone calls are the key to this. We may get lucky and be able to place someone where they shouldn't be, but I doubt it. Denise said anyone could use the terminals for travel on this side and the people we're looking for aren't sitting in the terminal centers manning computers. They can be at other centers during the day, even if it's not there own. I'm sure you're all friends."

Whitney continued to sip her coffee, watching as Shea sorted the data by time and listened to the distracted tone that told her Shea was speaking more to herself than to Whitney. Here was the cop, she thought, and enjoyed watching Shea. She wished she could go back in time and could re-meet Shea outside the police station again with Tracy Warner. Her only thoughts then were to get the hell away as fast as she could. Now she'd like to watch her in official cop mode.

"Well?" Shea asked and stopped flipping through the pages of her clipboard. "Aren't you?"

Whitney had no idea what question was asked. "What?"

"Friends. You're all friends right?"

"Who are friends?"

Shea sat back in her chair and frowned at her. "You're not even listening to me."

She couldn't deny the accusation so she smiled and decided to keep her thoughts to herself. "Sorry, no. In all fairness you aren't really talking to me."

"Yes, I am." Shea said. "I think we should print this and just write the names out beside the entries. If there's a pattern we'll see it faster."

What pattern, Whitney wanted to ask. What were they looking for? She didn't see how phone calls could be incriminating. Calls between centers and employees happened hundreds of times a day. How would they ever prove that a certain call wasn't business related when anyone could call anywhere at anytime? Instead she stood up and said, "Okay, starting printing and I'll get the pages."

They used a thick stack of paper to print the phone calls on the discs Shea had Denise pull. Whitney handed Shea her half with a grimace. "I don't think this narrowed it down as much you thought it would."

From the expression on Shea's face, neither did she. She stared at the papers and Whitney could almost hear the gears turning in her head. "Let's do this."

Shea got up and rifled through the cabinet drawers until she found a handful of colored highlighter pens. She came back to the table and handed several to Whitney. "We're going to write the names out beside the entries. Both-who called and who they called. If something looks wrong to you, mark it."

Whitney straightened her stack and wished Shea had a better plan than for her to mark it if it looked wrong. She settled down with the pen and using her notes from yesterday, began lining the margins with names.

Two hours later the only pattern emerging was that her employees made more personal than business phone calls. For every call made to a GSA number were two made to a non-GSA one.

Dozens were made to 900 numbers. When this was all over and if she was still COS, there would be changes made. "Most of these calls have nothing to do with my centers. I'm surprised anything gets done."

"Ignore them for now."

"Why?" Whitney asked in surprise. "I get that whoever is keeping tabs on me is GSA, but that doesn't mean whoever they're calling is."

Shea didn't look at her as she shuffled the top page to the bottom of the pile. "Call it a hunch. If it's someone outside the GSA that means Prestige and I don't see a lot of mixing among the staff members. This is GSA all the way."

Whitney would have loved to argue the point, argue anything that would delay having to return her attention to the endless list, but she had to agree with Shea. As far as she knew the only mixing that happened between the two staffs was familial. Even as a child, she'd preferred the fifth floor while Peyton and Corinne enjoyed the amenities offered in a five star hotel. She knew it had been the same for most of the people at the Academy with her. But it was hard for to accept that someone who grew up wanting to be GSA would betray everything that it meant to belong on the fifth floor.

"Lea's on her way over here. She's been looking all over you."

Whitney turned in her chair to look at Denise. "She's been trying to get me out to California. She's angry with you."

"Well, she knows you're on this side. Do you want her to know you're here or should I say you've off the compound."

She made the easy choice. She dropped her pages on the table with a thud and stood up, relieved that she had a reason to leave. A cowardly if legitimate reason. If Lea was looking for her, Whitney knew she could be found now or would be found later. Now was more convenient for her. "I'll be here. Do you mind doing this alone for a while?"

Shea shook her head, her attention never wavering from the task at hand. "Just don't let her in here."

Whitney followed Denise from the room and closed the door softly behind her. Familiar maroon folders were stacked and scattered on Denise's desk. Applications to the Academy. She remembered completing hers, remembered the bone deep fear that she wouldn't be accepted for the GSA. She decided, during the interminable six month wait, that she'd stay on the other side if she was slotted for Prestige.

"I was going to stay here, you know, if I didn't get the GSA. I never thought that was a decision I would have to make again." She was barely surprised that this time her choice would be based on wanting a future she never envisioned as a child.

"You don't have that choice this time," Denise said and tapped her pen against the acceptance letters waiting for her signature. She bit down on the smile she felt as she watched Whitney spin with shocked horror on her face. "You've done your job Whitney. You did everything you were supposed to do and if you can't stay on that side in your current position, you do have the option of retiring from the GSA."

"Retire?" Whitney repeated dumbly and reached blindly to steady herself on the back of a leather wing chair. "I can retire? How?"

Denise reached for a maroon folder sitting by itself on the credenza behind her desk and held it out for Whitney. "It's not what the Council wants obviously. They have plans for you. Maybe you have plans for yourself, away from the GSA."

When Whitney only stared at the folder, Denise placed it on the edge of her desk. Slowly, Whitney moved around the chair to sit down and her eyes never strayed from the corner of Denise's desk where another future she never envisioned lay waiting for her to pick it up. "What would I do?"

"Anything you want."

"Can I get in on that?" A female voice drawled lazily from the doorway.

Whitney's surprise was genuine as she looked over her shoulder. Lea, dressed for play in blue jeans and white knit shirt, was leaning on the doorjamb with her arms crossed. Whitney had forgotten she was waiting in Denise's office for Lea. "What are you doing here?"

Lea pushed away from the doorway and went to Whitney, casually running her fingers through her short dark hair. "What are you doing here? You hate this side."

"I'm not an accused murderer on this side."

Anger flashed in Lea's dark brown eyes. "You're not a murderer on either side. Come, have lunch with me."

"Are you playing hooky?" Denise asked.

"I took a personal day," Lea said without glancing up. She held her hand out to Whitney. "Come on. We haven't had lunch on this side since we were promoted."

Whitney allowed herself to be pulled from the chair, from the room, from the building and into a car Lea had waiting outside. The small shaft of guilt she felt for leaving everything on Shea was shoved away with the rationalization that Lea would only get more insistent with time.

"So," Shea asked once they cleared the gates, "How are you really?"

"I've been better."

"Okay. Tell me what's going here. Why do they think you killed someone?"

"Because I'm the one they found kneeling over the body with the knife in my hand."

"What?!"

Whitney instinctively flung out her hand to brace herself against the dash as Lea slammed on the brakes and twisted in the seat to stare at her. She smiled at her friend's slack jawed incredulous stare. "I guess that wasn't part of the net meeting."

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Whitney was right. Her staff was making a lot of calls that weren't to other GSA numbers. Curious, she picked up a green highlighter to mark off those calls. Several pages were more green than white when she reached the last number on the list. Was she being hasty by ignoring those calls for now? There were so many maybe she was being premature in eliminating them on nothing more than a hunch.

Most of the area codes were local, she saw as she flipped through the pages. How many times had she called a friend or family member from work? Ordered in lunch or dinner? Called her bank, a doctor? Some times a phone call was the only way to take care of life's little details when you had a full-time job. She knew she wouldn't come out squeaky clean if someone tracked her work phone usage.

She had to trust her training and her experience because both were telling her to look at the GSA. She just wished her instincts could help her narrow it down a little more than that. The GSA had enough people to create their own city. She kept underestimating them. Their scope was always deeper and farther than she could imagine. When she asked for the calls made on the days surrounding the attacks, never did she think it would be hundreds of pages. How did she narrow that?

Okay, she thought and rested her chin on her hands, the trail was hidden somewhere in these calls. She asked for the day before the attacks because she believed the first three attacks were pre-meditated. She didn't think she was wrong, but maybe thinking there was contact between the killer and the watcher in Atlanta before the attack was presumptuous. Surely all of her staff, and Shea meant every senior person in every center, knew which emergencies Whitney handled personally. They didn't need to know where she was before the attacks. She would be contacted wherever she was and that she was on her way was all the killer needed to know.

Shea flipped to a clean piece of paper and wrote down the names of the women attacked, where it happened and what brought Whitney to the property.

The first attack followed a planned meeting between Whitney and the staff of the Dallas hotel. Surely something like that took days to set up. She was demoting the two top officers. Wouldn't that be something you would do before the staff meetings? She would contact those involved, the demoted and the promoted, so that when she met with the staff the major changes would already be in place. That had to be enough time for Sharon Armstrong to be lured over to Dallas.

Whitney's watcher would only need to contact the attacker if Whitney was called away for any reason. Nothing had and Whitney was right where they wanted her to be when Sharon was found unconscious.

The next two attacks, Hannah David in LA and Anne Collins in Vegas, were accidents that didn't seem so accidental now. A fire in the hotel and a car accident were easy enough to arrange. It was also easy enough to arrange in advance Hannah in LA and Anne in Vegas. Again, no need to call unless Whitney left and she was once again right where they wanted her to be.

Erin Warner was more calculated than arranged. There was no need to monitor Whitney in Atlanta. They could have arranged an attack there at any time and that was why the first attacks happened at other properties. They wanted everything to point to Whitney so that when they finally did attack in Atlanta she would be the only suspect. Maybe they always meant to move it to Atlanta, but Shea believed it was an escalation. The investigation into Whitney wasn't moving fast enough, or in the minds of whoever was behind this, wasn't moving at all. Whitney was continuing to live her life as if nothing was happening and that was a problem. So they move it to Atlanta and this time there are consequences for Whitney. She's pulled over for questioning, her movements are monitored, but those are just personal inconveniences. Professionally she is still in charge.

Denver and the second attack in Atlanta were opportunities seized. There wasn't time for the careful arrangements that had been so successful in framing Whitney. There was no one in Denver to watch her and instead of Stacia Innes tightening the noose around Whitney's neck, her death exonerates Whitney of all the attacks. So they move back to Atlanta, kill Micah Hansen and throw Whitney to the civilian police. The GSA can't ignore this as they've ignored everything else. One of their top people is arrested and arraigned, possibly the worst scenario the GSA has ever faced. For the first time they have to play by the rules and now it's more than just Whitney's job on the line.

Shea scanned the papers crammed on every space of the table. Some lined liberally with green ink and others edged with names in the margins. The last two attacks were hurried. Unplanned. Mistakes.

It took her more time than she thought to separate the pages out by date. Later, if needed, they could go back over the earlier attacks. Once she knew what she was looking for she could go back and track down every call made. Now she had to find what she was looking for and she knew where to look.

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"Do you remember that bar in... What city was it?" Lea paused in dipping a thick tortilla chip in salsa, her brow furrowed as she tried to dig a small town south of the border from her alcohol soaked memory. "Anyway, I know it was Mexico. You were fascinated with that flamenco dancer? She thought you were crazy."

Whitney laughed as the very distant memory struggled to surface. "I was sixteen. I was crazy. We should never have been allowed to go there on our own."

Lea stared at her in wide-eyed amazement before she collapsed on the table in laughter. "Allowed?" She asked when she could breath again. "We were *allowed* to go to San Diego for a school conference. We went to...God, what was that city? I can't believe we got away with it. Your memory is quite selective."

"Plausible deniability," Whitney said and divided the rest of the pretty red drink between their glasses. The conference in San Diego wasn't their first escape from a school function. They always disappeared on overnight trips. They weren't always as successful getting back as they had been at getting away. Whitney remembered that it was her quick thinking that kept them out of trouble more than Lea's. And Lea's slick planning that got them into it.

"Yes, you said that even then. Always thinking like an executive. And look at you now. Chief of Security."

Whitney drained her glass. "Pretty soon that will be former Chief of Security. Or ex. Maybe disgraced. I like that one. Disgraced Chief of Security Whitney Eisner."

Lea reached out to lay her hand on Whitney's arm. She stared at Whitney with the faith of a true believer. "Denise won't let that happen to you."

Whitney wanted to believe. A life she would enjoy living was so close and now that she had seen it, she didn't think she could go back to the way it had been. If she had never known Shea, she could have lived her life and thought she was happy. There wasn't a single thing she would have changed and would have been sincerely surprised if someone had ever suggested it was lacking some essential element. As easy as it is to not miss something you've never had is how hard it is to let it go once you have it.

Shea. Whitney blinked as she realized where Shea was and what she was doing. How long had she been gone? A glance at her watch was no help because she was so eager to leave the conference room she didn't check the time. It had to be hours. She smiled across the table at Lea. "I needed this. Thank you. But I have to go back now."

Lea stared at her for a few moments, a sadness in her eyes that the alcohol couldn't mask. "You really can't come back with me? Just for a few days?"

"You make me want to," Whitney admitted. She didn't remember the last time she'd sat down with a friend and talked about nothing at all. She enjoyed the afternoon with Lea, as silly as it had been. The request for her to come to LA, a request Lea made with every phone call, was the first thing she said when they sat down at the table. It annoyed her it at the time and Lea had taken her biting reply in stride. "I really can't Lea. I'm restricted to Atlanta and if I do anything to get caught outside of it, my bail is revoked. I will not be locked away in a cell."

"Promise me you'll come out when this over. We can find that little town in Mexico. Get you a second chance with the Flamenco dancer."

"I promise." She would go to LA, but she would only go to Mexico if that was what Shea wanted and any Flamenco dancers that were picked up would be going home with Lea. She wished briefly she could tell Lea about Shea, but had decided in the car on the way to the restaurant that was something she needed to keep to herself for the moment. How she became involved with Shea was wrapped up in the investigation. Whitney didn't see how she could talk about one without revealing more than she meant to about the other.

By the time they said goodbye in front of the elevators, Whitney felt centered enough to face the stacks of paper in the conference room. She owed Shea something for stranding her and as she walked to Denise's office, she thought it would be nice to let Shea decide her own surprise. The last time Shea cashed in an IOU, they spent their first night together.

As she made her way down deserted corridors to Denise's office, she wondered how much longer Shea wanted to comb through the logs today. Until she found something was Whitney's guess. She'd been certain she would find something today and Whitney could see her staying until she did. Whitney knew she should want that herself, but she couldn't get past the reality that whatever they found would expose someone she knew as a killer.

The last thing she expected when she walked into the conference room was to find Shea working at the computer and all the papers gone. She paused in the doorway for a moment to watch. Shea was scrolling quickly through pages Whitney saw were logs and every time she stopped, she made a note on the clipboard. A cold dread swept over Whitney and for several long seconds all she heard was a roaring in her ears. One thought resonated in her mind: Shea found something.

"Who is it?"

Shea spun to face her and her surprise changed quickly to cautious concern. Her first attempt at smiling failed and the smile she finally forced was strained. "You're back."

The fear she saw in Shea's eyes had her taking a single step back. She didn't want to know who it was before and now that she knew just how bad it would be, she would have given anything to still be in that restaurant with Lea and plotting an escape to Mexico. To anywhere but here. Shea continued to watch her and the silence grew in volume as neither did anything to shatter the moment.

"Who is it?"

Why did she keep asking that? She didn't want to know. As she stood at the threshold of truth, Whitney accepted that she could live her life out without ever knowing who had betrayed them. She would give a murderer immunity. She would deny the families of the wounded their justice and those of the dead the closure they needed. She could walk away from everything right then and never regret it. In that acceptance she found the courage to step forward, to move into the conference room and ask one more time, "Who is it Shea?"

Shea stood up. "We have two names right now. Denise is on the other side with the detectives picking them up."

Them. In the end, how many would "them" be? "Please don't make me ask their names again."

"Amanda and Matt."

Shea rushed forward as she stumbled back a step. She shook her head and held up her hand to stop Shea in her tracks. "Matt? Lang?"

She truly thought she was prepared for anything. Wasn't that the problem, that it could be anyone? Except she hadn't believed that it could be anyone. Not someone she trusted. Not someone she needed. Not someone who was a friend. She had been prepared for it to be anyone except someone she loved.

"Come, sit down," Shea said and took her arm to lead her to the table. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Matt?"

Shea sat down facing her and the hands she wrapped around Whitney's were warm against her ice cold fingers. Concern darkened her eyes to a forest green. "I found the first link in the Denver attack. They weren't as prepared for that one as they were for the others and your movements were erratic, mostly because I was with you. Every time you went somewhere that day, Amanda called Matt. There's a clear pattern of calls between Amanda and Matt, enough so that I was suspicious and asked Denise if there was any reason she should be calling him at least four times a day."

"No," Whitney murmured, "There's not. She should never call Matt."

Shea nodded. "I'm trying to pin down who Matt calls, but there isn't anyone. He must email or has another phone because there are times he doesn't call anyone after she calls him. I really thought he would call immediately after she called him."

"And Denise is bringing them over for questioning?" She must be in shock. It was the only reason to explain how she could sit there calmly asking questioning when inside she was screaming.

"Yes. Denise and the detectives are bringing them over now. Another group is searching their homes and offices."

She had only been gone a few hours. How could so much happen in such a short amount of time? Lives had changed and some, for all intents, were over in just a few hours. She sat back and pulling her hands from Shea's, buried her face in her hands. She knew who now and soon, she knew, she would believe it. All that was left to know was the why. She didn't see how she would ever understand that. She wanted to be in the room when Matt shared that little secret. She wanted to be looking in his eyes when he told her the reason three young women were brutalized and three were now dead.

She pushed herself to her feet and met Shea's surprised gaze. "Let's go to interview. I want to be there when they bring them over."

"I think we should stay here. We still don't have all the pieces."

"Then stay here and find the pieces. I'll come back for you."

Hers was the first face Matt and Amanda would see when they cubicle doors opened. Shea swore behind her and she heard movement as she left the conference room. She was several steps away from the hallway when Shea caught her arm and pulled her around to face her.

"Whitney..."

"You can't stop me. There isn't anything you can say. I will be there. I will hear what they say. Your only choice is if you'll be there with me. I am going. Now."

Shock was fading fast and fury was rushing in to fill the void. As Shea fell in step behind her, Whitney let the icy rage burn away everything she felt for Matt. Turning her head slightly, she said, "Don't let me within arm's reach of either of them. I'll kill them with my bare hands."

12.

Five interview rooms were lined in a row down the hall from the terminal center in the sub-basement at Quantico. Shea followed Whitney into a narrow corridor lined on one side with cinderblocks and one way glass on the other. Like everything else on this level, no expense was spent on color or comfort. The rooms held a single metal table and four matching chairs. As she watched Amanda sitting alone in the interview room next to Matt's, Shea wondered what the penalty was for Treason.

Denise and two investigators were talking with Matt. Whitney placed her palm on the glass. Instantly, the lead investigator's voice filled the space and Shea listened as the same Miranda rights she read to suspects were read to Matt. The more time she spent on this side the more she believed Whitney's assertions that the difference between the two time periods was minuscule at best. Probably because the distance wasn't really hundreds of years, but mere seconds.

"Do you understand your rights?"

"Of course I understand my rights. What's going on here?"

Shea focused her attention on Matt. His confusion seemed real. He was either a good actor or he really didn't have a clue why they brought him to this side. Usually, with the guilty, there were two main responses: jittery fear edged with panic or cocky arrogance. His puzzled gaze moved easily, slowly from face to face as he calmly waited for answers.

"How well do you know Amanda Gaines?" The first investigator asked. He was tall, slender and his young features pegged his age in the late twenties to early thirties.

"Whitney's assistant? I've spoken with her a few times. I've seen her at Whitney's office."

"That's it? You've spoken to her a few times and seen her at the Gateway?" The second man was shorter, rounder and older. He walked around the table to lean over Matt's shoulder. "There's nothing personal between the two of you at all?"

Matt stared across the table at Denise before turning his head slightly to look up at the man. "No."

"Then why does she call you three and four times a day?"

"She doesn't. She has never called me. She wouldn't have a reason to call me. I'm the staff attorney. If they need me, it's not a college kid who calls me. It's usually Whitney herself."

"He's right," Whitney said softly. "I would never ask Amanda to call him."

Denise opened a folder and slid the top sheet across the table to Matt. Shea could see highlighter marks scoring the page and recognized it as one of the pages she took to Denise. "Explain this please."

Matt pulled the paper to him with the tip of one finger. He bent his head to read it and then with his head still bent, he glanced up at Denise. "Explain what?"

"Those are calls from Amanda's desk to yours. That's just one day. The day after Rich Edwards killed that woman in Denver."

Matt pushed the paper back to Denise. "No, those are calls from Amanda's desk to my assistant's desk. Even if you can prove Amanda made them, you certainly can't prove I took them. Now, I'm not answering anymore questions until you tell me what this is about. Amanda's not calling me, but what does it matter if she did?"

"You said you couldn't find any calls from Matt after Amanda's calls. Did you check to see if anyone else at the law firm was making calls that coincided with hers?"

"No."

"Please do that now."

Shea hesitated. She wanted Whitney to come with her to the conference room. Whitney was livid during the march to the sub-basement and finding Matt already in the interview room only fanned the flames. She had no doubts that Denise and the investigators could intercept Whitney if she tried to storm the room. That wasn't why Shea didn't want to leave her alone. She was hurting and it showed in the arms she had wrapped tight around herself and in the emotion she couldn't quite control in her voice. Suspecting Matt was tearing her apart.

"Please Shea, now. If Matt isn't her contact, someone else is and they may already be gone. We don't know where they took him down and if it was in his office, everyone else involved knows we have him."

Shea stepped close to Whitney and slipped her arms around her to pull her close. After a moment, Whitney whispered, "I don't want it to be him."

Shea knew that now, but hadn't understood the depth of Whitney's feelings when she found the first links in the chain of phone calls. Matt was more than a colleague and friend. Maybe when so few people in the world know who you really are, those that do matter all the more to you. She kissed Whitney's cheek. "I'll be quick. I know what I'm looking for now."

The conference was just as she left it when she followed Whitney down to the sub-basement. Shea sat down and opened up the log with Amanda's call and jotted down the times. Next she pulled up the logs for Lang, Dover and Shi and began the search for outgoing calls made within ten minutes of Amanda's incoming. She was as quick as she promised and was surprised when her search led her once again to the name Matthew Lang. This one father to the man sitting downstairs in interview.

Matthew Lang III was well-known in police circles and not for the same reason as his son. As a lawyer, he had seen the inside of many courtrooms, but as a defendant. His problem with alcohol had led to countless DUI arrests, disorderly conduct charges and three high profile crashes that killed one unlucky sixteen year old boy. What problems the Lang name couldn't fix, the Lang money could and did.

After that, searching the logs became a frustrating game of connect the dots. Matt's calls were answered in the terminal center of the Denver hotel with calls following to the terminal centers in NYC, Chicago, Boston, Dallas, Seattle, Las Vegas and Miami to end in LA. Some people were more careful than others. The calls from Denver, Dallas, Vegas and Miami were all made from the hotel lobbies. Shea didn't recognize the names of the people who made the calls from NYC, Boston, Chicago or Seattle.

Shea knew a group was running the operation. It was too far flung to be only one or two people. It never crossed her mind that it could be this involved. She looked over the list and noted that not only was every hotel where an attack took place listed, but it was also the place where someone was very careful not to let their calls be logged.

Whitney and Denise were in the observation area when Shea went back down. Matt and Amanda were still in separate rooms. Both were writing on notepads with an investigator sitting at the table with them. She walked to stand slightly behind Whitney and asked, "What are they doing?"

"Re-constructing their movements on the day in question." Whitney glanced back at her. "I can't imagine they will remember anything useful. What did you find?"

Shea looked between the two interview rooms. Amanda was chewing on the end of her pen, her eyes bouncing around the room as she talked to the investigator. Matt was tapping his pen against the table, his gaze intent on the notepad.

"We have the wrong Matt," She said and handed the list over to Denise with a smile. "You can name your price if you let me pick him up."

"The wrong Matt?" Whitney spun to face her. "The right one would be his Dad. Son of a bitch."

With that, Whitney was out of the observation area and hurrying around to Matt's interview room. Denise stepped in front of her when she would have followed. Shea waited as Denise read over the paper. "Why do you want to pick up Matthew?"

"He's a menace. I only wish I could pick him up with my APD badge. He would be so smug, thinking he'll get off again. He always gets off."

Denise turned to watch Whitney wave the investigator out of the room. She could have activated the comm system but it was easy enough to know what was said by their facial expressions. As Whitney spoke, Matt's shocked face slowly set into grim, stony lines. He seemed more resigned than surprised and Shea wondered how much Whitney was telling him. She didn't know if Matt now knew why he was brought over for questioning. Whitney would want to tell him all. He was who she turned to for help, or had until she needed more help than he could provide. She would want to pull him now, tell him everything and Shea's only concern was where his loyalty. Did it lay with his family or his job?

Denise turned to face her. "Go get him. You can use your APD badge. He'll never be able to make a complaint against you and he'll let you take him into custody without a fight. I can guarantee he will fight us every step of the way." She turned to leave the room. "I need to get with my security chief. We have traitors to round up."

Shea made her way to the other side of the interview rooms and stopped just outside the open door of Matt's room.

"This is crazy Whitney. What possible reason could my Dad have to want to hurt you? You don't have any control over him."

It was an interesting question, Shea knew, and one they would have to answer at some point. Maybe it was a good thing Matt Lang III was a part of this. She could break him. He was a man used to getting his own way and one who was more than willing to let others pay for his mistakes. She didn't see him keeping the faith with his companions if he could use what he knew as leverage to save himself.

"I don't know the reason Matt. We don't know who all the players are yet much less what game they're playing." Whitney's tone was full of sympathy and concern with traces of anger and frustration.

Shea knocked once on the open door. Both turned to her and in Matt's eyes, she saw dull shock. He needed a stiff drink and a dark room. "I need to talk to you for a moment Whitney."

Matt stood up. "If it's about my Dad, you can tell her here."

Shea looked to see if that was what Whitney wanted and she got her answer when Whitney stood next to him with his hand in hers. "Denise wants me to pick up Matt. She thinks he won't resist if I use my APD badge."

"That's an excellent idea. Let me go with you. He'll think I'm there as his counsel. We only have to get him into the car."

Shea wanted to say no. She still didn't know where his loyalties lay. If he tipped his father off and Matt was able to elude them, he could tip off everyone and they would never know who all was involved. Her gaze fell to the their hands. He was using both of his to hold Whitney's. Whitney trusted him and Shea trusted Whitney. "Okay."

"Thank you," he said and released a deep breath. He checked his watch. "He should be at his club now."

"Okay. Let's go."

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Her brain had stopped. Whitney sat in front of Denise's desk with Shea's list in her hand. So many names, so many hotels. She just couldn't comprehend that it wasn't a few people, that it wasn't a few hotels. What the hell was going on?

When it was over, when she knew everything she didn't know now, how obvious would it all be? She should know. There had to be clues, there had to be something she should be questioning. Shouldn't there?

She closed her eyes and dropped her head against the chair. Was there anything different over the last few weeks, the last months? Anything unusual? No, the question wasn't was anything unusual, it had to be what was unusual. She mentally flipped through the files in her mind, searching for something regardless of how small that was outside the norm. It came to her like a movie replaying in her mind. She saw herself sitting in the main conference room in Denver with the contraband reports spread out in front of her. The reports were off but she couldn't pinpoint why. She remembers thinking that whatever was wrong was obvious. Shea had lured her away to dinner that night and she was arrested the next day. She never went back to them.

Contraband was a polarizing subject within the GSA. Protectionist thought they were already bringing too much from the past into the future and Abolitionist thought they should be able to bring over anything they wanted. Both sides were constantly introducing legislation to advance their cause and Whitney couldn't remember either winning more than a point occasionally.

The increase in the number of attempts was significant. Significant enough that it caught her attention even with what was happening in Denver. She didn't get why someone would try to take over a banned item when that alone was enough for permanent revocation of travel privileges. Of course, should someone find a successful way to smuggle contraband, they could name their price on the black market. Aged wines and liquors and street drugs were always popular items for would-be smugglers in all times. Every era had something extinct, limited or prohibitively expensive that someone tried to take back with them.

What if someone found a way? No, that didn't make sense. Why would they be bothering with her if they had a way around the security? Why bother with her if they didn't?

She opened her eyes as a hand laid on her head. She looked up at Denise. She looked as tired as Whitney felt. The day has been nothing more than emotional roller coaster. "What's your stand on contraband?"

Denise moved to sit behind her desk, her shuttered gaze giving away nothing. "Officially or personally?"

The question surprised Whitney. She didn't think there was a difference. "Both."

"Personally, I think we already take back too much. I know they say little things don't make big changes, but I believe we're discounting the effect little changes can have over a long period. A trickle of water can forge a river through stone given enough time. Officially, I follow the directives of the Council."

It wasn't something Whitney had ever given much thought to before now. They meaning the Council and all the leaders who had come before-set the rules and it never occurred to Whitney to question them. The people in charge always knew what was best, or so Whitney had been taught to believe. It never occurred to her to question authority, but she should have the closer she got to the top. Obedience was good for employees, but it never should be blind. She looked at Denise. "You're right."

She pushed herself up from the chair. "I need to go to my office. Do you want to walk with me?"

Denise's gaze flickered to her computer screen. "I think I should stay here and monitor everything that's happening. What do you need from your office?"

"Some reports. I won't be long."

The day was over on the fifth floor and as Whitney stepped from the cubicle into the empty center, she silently cursed her timing. Her appearance was bound to start rumors even without following so close on the heels of Shea and Matt. Especially if those who saw them leave were also the same people who saw Matt and Amanda escorted to the other side.

Her walk down the hall to her command center and across the room to her office was made in a nerve stretching silence. The younger employees tried not to get caught staring at her and hurried

past her with their heads down. Whitney tried not to think about what that meant to her being in charge again, but it was hard. Her reputation was being damaged and because of the possible danger to herself or someone else there wasn't anything she could do until it was over. By then, that could be the same word used to describe her career. No, not over, retired she reminded herself as she ignored the startled stares that watched her walk to her office.

"Whitney?"

So focused was she on getting to her office that she never noticed Sam's door was open. He was standing in his open doorway and she stopped a few feet from her own office. So close. She managed a fleeting smile. "Hi Sam. I need to get some reports."

As Sam watched her, his face showing nothing more than polite confusion, Whitney realized she had a dark place inside herself where she believed Sam would be implicated in whatever was happening. It wasn't a conscious belief. She never sat down and went over her staff and tried to decide who she thought was or wasn't involved in the attacks. But standing in front of him now, she found herself surprised and strangely unrelieved that he was innocent. What was it about Sam that made her want to believe he could commit cold murder?

"Everything is running smoothly," he said and followed her into her office. "I hope you're not worried."

"I'm not worried. I know you're doing a good job," She answered him absently. Her desk was covered in folders and she did remember leaving it that when she was called down to the parking deck. She didn't leave them scattered like they were, some open, some barely hanging on the edge. She moved behind the desk and stared at the results of a hurried, messy search. She slowly lifted her eyes to Sam. "Someone's been in here. Who was it?"

Sam stared at her blankly for a moment. "No one has a reason to be in your office."

"Sam, two people were taken over for interview this afternoon. They went through this terminal. Who are they?" Again she got a blank stare and wondered again why she thought him capable of any of the things that happened. He did his job, nothing less and never, ever anything more. Maybe it was easy to believe he was involved in the attacks because it would explain why he bothered with a job he didn't enjoy.

Whitney reached for the files she needed. "You should go finish the day end reports. I need to get these files back to Denise."

Indecision flashed over his face and he stared at the files as she pulled them together. "Maybe I should take them to Denise. I don't think you're supposed to be here."

"Denise knows I'm here, but feel free to have me escorted back." Her tone made it clear that while he was free to do that, she didn't recommend that he do so. She was already sure that if she came back as Chief of Security, Sam would no longer be her XO. The fact that she believed him capable of murder was reason enough to move him in a less sensitive position.

Without another word, she left her office with the folders and walked to the terminal center. She felt Sam following her every step and when she turned in the cubicle, he almost stepped back quickly enough to avoid being seen.

Denise's office was empty. Whitney walked through to the conference room and wondered what had pulled Denise away. The Ops Director had a lot of the balls in the air at the moment and would be expected to keep the Council apprised of every new development as it happened. They would close her Gateway if something didn't break soon. History had proven the Council to be proactive and pre-emptive.

Whitney sat in front of a computer and flipped through a clipboard until she found a clean sheet of paper. She clipped Shea's list to the edge of the sheet and logged into the administration section of their intranet. Using the list as her guide, she checked the contraband stats of every hotel. She was more angry than surprised that every one except Atlanta was well over of the average percentage of less than five percent. Denver and LA were almost twelve. Was this happening because they needed Atlanta to do whatever they were doing? Were three woman dead because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time?

She heard someone in Denise's office. "Can you come in here a minute? I think I've found a clue."

Shea walked into the conference room followed by Matt. "A clue? What kind?"

They stood behind her as she showed them the numbers. She turned to look up at Shea. "I don't know what the magic number is, but I want to go over every center's numbers. Once we know which hotels are likely to be involved, we can check the phone logs and try to match up calls between the hotels to catch whoever is involved at that location."

"Or," Matt said, "We can make the people we have in custody name names. Your way sounds time intensive and I don't think we have a lot of that."

Whitney stared at him a moment, trying to decipher the tone of his voice. There was something behind the tight control, something a little less than angry and a little more than bitter. "I'm sorry about your Dad."

He shrugged his shoulder and dropped into the chair next to hers. His black eyes looked bottomless and nowhere did she see a trace of sympathy or concern for the man who had never really been a father to him. "It was going to happen. Sooner or later he was going to do something that we couldn't fix. My grandfather will be relieved that at least this won't make the front page of the *Atlanta Constitution*."

Whitney didn't know how to respond to that, but was relieved herself that Matt could find a silver lining in his father's disgrace. The silence was stretching uncomfortably when he suddenly kicked the leg of her chair hard enough to move her an inch.

"I know you had your reasons, and one day I'm sure I'll forget it all, but I'm pissed you thought I was involved in this. You know I only care about something when it's about me."

The last was said with a teasing smile that told Whitney she was forgiven. She met his stare head on. "I was devastated. If I'd had to rank everyone in order of their likely involvement, your name would have been the very last one on the list. I thought I believed that no one in my Gateway was doing this intentionally until I ran into Sam when I went to my office. I didn't realize I thought him capable of something like this."

"So did I," Shea said and had both of them looking up at her. "There's something...sinister about him."

"Well, as he didn't know Amanda and Matt were arrested today, I was thinking more along the lines of clueless. He's gone when I'm back in charge."

"When will that be?" Matt asked.

"That's up to Denise."

"What's up to Denise," the woman herself asked as she walked into the room. She walked to Matt and laid her hand on his head. Her face was serious as she down at him. "I'm sorry."

Matt just nodded his head as he stared down at his feet.

He would be getting that a lot, Whitney thought, and not once would it be about his arrest that afternoon. His Dad was an embarrassment his entire life and now he was a traitor. As small a comfort as it was, it appeared it was not distinction Matt would have to bear alone.

"When is my suspension over?" She asked to get the attention away from Matt.

"I can't tell you that," Denise said and the eyes that met Whitney's were frustrated. "I proposed tomorrow because, with everything happening, I really need you. The Council said no. They want you out until they're sure you're safe. Which is looking like it will be when this is all over. We just have to figure out what 'this' is."

Whitney held out her papers. "I think they found a way to take over contraband."

The hand Denise was reaching out froze and the expression on her face was pure disbelieving shock. She whispered, "What?"

"If they did, that would be why my Dad is involved." Matt shrugged when they stared at him. "He thinks we should be able to take back anything we want."

"Okay," Denise said and slowly took the papers. "Explain this to me. You think they've found a way or you're sure they found a way? Because if they have, how they did it doesn't matter. We're all going to be too busy packing for the big move over to care."

"That's not funny."

Denise's smile was grim. "I'm not kidding. Let's do this quickly."

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Even quickly, less than twenty minutes, wasn't enough for Denise. Shea and Matt were left alone in the conference room when Denise took Whitney with her to wherever she was going next. Shea stopped trying to follow their verbal shorthand after only a few minutes. Her knowledge of the inner workings of the GSA was less than simple. Matt's, too, if his blank expression was any indication.

Denise told them to go home and come back at nine the next morning. Shea didn't want to leave without Whitney, but the choice didn't seem to be either of theirs. And unlike Shea's drive across town, Whitney's home was a simple elevator ride away.

"Can I drop you somewhere?" She asked Matt as she stood up to leave. He didn't have a car and could catch a cab outside the hotel. Shea didn't want to leave him abandoned like that.

Matt sighed deeply and looked up from his feet. His dark eyes were unbearably sad. "I don't know where to go. We all live together, my family, and I don't want to face my mother tonight. I guess I can get a room at the hotel."

Shea held out her hand to pull him to his feet. "That's an option. My guest room is pretty bare but it's yours if you want it."

She didn't know she was going to make the offer until she had already done it. She didn't often invite strangers to stay her home and Matt would be the second in as many days. She knew she'd done the right thing when relief lit his eyes.

"Thanks, Shea, I'd like that."

As they transferred over to Atlanta and rode down to the underground parking together, they debated what to have for a late supper. They agreed on pizza and Matt made the call while she drove them away from Prestige. This, she realized, was why she invited Matt into her home. She didn't want to be alone. The day had been long and alone, she thought the night would be endless.

Once home, Shea found a pair of jogging pants and T-shirt that would fit Matt and sent him off to the guest bathroom for a long, hot shower. His day had been long, too, and she knew if she was in his place, she would want to wash it away. He'd been taken into custody, accused of treason, and aided in the arrest of his own father. That kind of day left a thin coating of nasty residue on the skin.

She took her own quick shower and changed into sweats and T-shirt before going to the kitchen. She pulled down plates, found napkins and sent her mother a mental thank you for the cold drinks she found in the fridge.

And thought about Whitney.

Where was she right then? What was she doing? Shea was afraid of the answers. She hated the uncertainty of what the next few hours and possibly days held. She believed Denise completely when she said she wasn't kidding about the whole of the GSA being moved over if someone found a way to take over illegal items. She also believed completely Whitney would fight it to the end, but would go eventually. She didn't make it to her position by defying orders.

Shea wasn't sure what her options would be if there was a GSA exodus. Whitney had said she was as official with the GSA as Whitney was herself so it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that she would be included in the recall. However, she wasn't as official as Whitney and while Whitney's family and friend's would go over with her, Shea's would not. She couldn't leave her family. She wouldn't let her parents live the rest of their lives wondering what happened to her and fearing the very worst.

The buzz of the door bell interrupted her thoughts. Matt was coming down the stairs as she walked to the front door. She smiled at him. "Great timing. I'm set up in the kitchen. Go grab a seat and I'll be there in a sec."

Now that she had him, she wasn't sure what to do with him after she fed him. Her guy friends were all fellow cops and any time she spent with them away from work usually included a softball field. Maybe Matt played. They could talk about that.

"I hate the uncertainty," Matt said as she walked into the kitchen. "I wish I knew what was going to happen."

Shea paused she walked to the café table. It was like he read her mind. She boosted herself up on a chair and flipped open the lid. "Yeah, me, too. Do you really think they'll completely close the Gateways?"

He laughed and sat across from her. "They can't completely close it. There will always be at least one Gateway open. Whitney just knows it won't be in this time."

Shea pulled a gooey slice of the Pepperoni Lover's pizza and put it on her plate slowly. "I don't understand. Why do you need at least one Gateway open?"

His hesitation was less than a second, a slight freezing of his hand before he reached into the box for a slice. Shea knew she wouldn't have seen it all if she wasn't watching him. He flashed a grin as he pulled the gooey cheese strings off the sides. "I haven't had pizza in a while."

Shea let him finished off two slices while she toyed with one. She was certain she wasn't prepared for the reason there would "always be at least one Gateway open." It didn't sound as if that was to keep the vacationers happy on the other side.

"I can't tell you about the Gateways," he finally said when they ran out of stilted topics of conversations. "I don't think Whitney should tell you, but if anyone does, it should be her."

She never asked Whitney why they were in the past. She had thought about it, had been intrigued and fascinated that they could do it, but she had never actually asked the question. She met Matt's direct stare with one of her own. "You're not coming back here to watch the Braves play baseball are you?"

"We are now."

13.

Whitney paced in the small hallway behind the interview rooms. She had muted the sound because if she heard one more of her employees offer the we-didn't-hurt-anyone defense, she was going through the glass. She was past being astonished that, at last count, twenty-three of her employees were in custody. They were turning on each other in a sickening display of self-preservation and Whitney expected the list would only grow longer.

She stared down at the most recent list. She knew some of the people, recognized the names of others, and some she didn't know at all. They ranged across the administrative levels with the most senior being three center managers and the most junior being five interns. Of which her own, Amanda, was one. They were young and old; black, white and brown; male and female. How, Whitney wondered, did such a disparate group come together?

Most had done it for the money. *"It's simple economics, supply and demand. There was a need and we met it."*

Some for the thrill of doing something forbidden. *"It was fun. It was easy. It was a game."*

None seemed to know it had cost three young women their lives. *"What? I didn't kill anyone. I don't know anything about that."*

Whitney was very afraid the last was true. As the hours passed with no new names to add to the list, she had to acknowledge the possibility that the true leaders of this band were invisible to even their own.

They were brilliant, whoever the framers of this conspiracy were. Whitney deeply resented that she had to admit that. They had exploited the few unavoidable holes in the GSA sensor net to the max. Contraband was secreted into every delivery that was made on the other side. Because employees were often crossing over without notice, they didn't wear the sensors that monitored the travelers. After hour emergencies were faked and employees visited friends and families frequently. The system worked perfectly for two years, but then demand began to outstrip supply and they needed a better plan.

According to every person they had in custody, that plan was the increase in attempts over the last year. They'd been experimenting with materials to shield the contraband from the sensors. The fact that nothing had was the only reason her Gateways were on standby rather than being closed. When and how the decision to remove Whitney as COS was made were questions those they had in custody couldn't answer.

Whitney was more interested in why it was decided they would have more success with her out of the way than she was in the when or how. Even now, knowing what she knew, she still didn't understand how removing her would have achieved their goal of increasing the supply. The rules were the same regardless of who was in charge.

She turned as the door opened. Denise, looking years older than she had that morning, came to her side. "How many?"

"Fifteen so far."

"I'm still ahead," Whitney said bitterly. They never considered, not even once, that it would take people on both sides of the Gateways to pull something like this off successfully.

"You're all mine, so no, you're not ahead. You'll never be." She leaned forward and stared into Room 3. "God, he's crying like a little girl."

A faint smile crossed Whitney's face at the disgust dripping from her words. "They had to drag one girl, one of the interns, out. I think she broke a nail trying to dig her fingers into the doorframe."

"Why aren't you listening?"

"Three women are dead. Three women's lives will never be the same. Six families are devastated. And they keep saying nobody got hurt. I couldn't take it anymore."

Denise slipped one arm around Whitney's waist. "Once we get Vince over here, we'll catch the people responsible for that. They're all responsible for the consequences here, but we both know some more than others."

Whitney stared at their reflections in the glass and heard nothing Denise said after she said the name Vince. She shook her head as if it that would clear the static. "What?"

"Oh don't worry. It won't matter who did or didn't know everything. Ignorance will not be a defense."

"*Vince?! Hollandale?!*" Whitney spun away from Denise. "He's involved in this? My Mountain Regional Supervisor? That Vince?"

Whitney's strident, incredulous tone carried through the glass and had every person in the interview rooms staring wide eyed and open mouthed at them. Denise grabbed Whitney by the arm and dragged her from the hallway.

"When did you know?" Whitney demanded and jerked her arm away from Denise when they were in the terminal area. Her brain felt like it was trying to shift into a mode where she could comprehend that one of her Regional Supervisors was a traitor.

Denise crossed her arms and simply stared at Whitney with eyebrows arched. Understanding, Whitney took several deep, calming breaths. "When did you know?"

"Mia told me less than an hour ago. I forget who gave us the name. My reaction wasn't nearly as violent as yours, but close. I thought you knew. You were in the observation area when it was said."

"You thought I knew," Whitney repeated numbly. "And that I was what? Standing quietly behind the glass and knew that Vince was involved? No. I want to interrogate him."

Denise shook her head emphatically. "That is not going to happen."

Whitney shoved both hands into her hair and paced in a circle. Every argument that came into her head was rejected almost instantly. If she didn't remain cool and calm, Denise wasn't letting her into the same room as Vince even with a company of guards.

"As entertaining as it is to watch you try to think of something to change my mind, there isn't anything you can say." Denise walked over and placed her hands on Whitney's arms. "You need to go home. When was the last time you slept? Or ate?"

Sleep? Eat? Was she was kidding. "When did you?"

"That's fair," Denise said and slipped her arm through Whitney's. "Let's go to my office and I'll have something sent up."

Whitney didn't want to eat or sleep. She wanted Vince sitting across from her in a small room. She wanted to dare him to say no one got hurt so she could lunge across the table and choke him. She thought she would feel so much better if she could just choke one person. Because she knew thoughts like that only put her on their level, she pushed it out of her mind. "Councilwoman Riley was in and out during the interviews. Are they saying anything to you?"

"The Council never says anything until they know everything."

"How much more do they need to know? There are holes in our security. We're going to need to plug them, but how? We need those deliveries to this side. We need to be able to move from side to side quickly."

Denise didn't answer until they were sitting in her office and she had ordered two meals from the cafeteria. "We don't know everything. Someone wants you out of the way and we don't know why or who. That is a high priority with the Council right now."

Whitney dismissed the possible threat to her life with a wave of her hand. "They can't be trying to get rid of me anymore. With all the people we've rounded up and with that we know, I'm the least of their problems."

Their biggest problem, from Whitney's point of view, was that all of her centers were standby and the only people crossing over were the investigators. Everyone wasn't only stuck on that side, they were stuck in their own city unless they used planes, trains or automobiles. For the PHS members, the edict from the Council to suspend everyone's travel privileges didn't change their lives much. They used the centers for mainly vacation travel. Her GSA employees were used to more unfettered access.

"What time is it? And on what day?" After she showed the Council her findings, everything seemed to move at supersonic speed. While Amanda and Matthew Lang were grilled by the Council, Denise sent companies of cadets over to emergency transfer all the travelers. By then they had several names from Matthew and Amanda. Whitney had listened to the interviews until she couldn't listen anymore. Was it still yesterday? Was it tomorrow? Without anything to mark the passing of time, she didn't know anymore.

Denise smiled at her. "It's a little before four in the morning on the day after. I don't know what they'll call yesterday, I like Armageddon myself, but this is the day after it. You're going home after we eat breakfast. Your mother has called me five times since the evacuation of the fifth floors."

"You're sending me home because my mommy called?" The absurdity of the moment made Whitney laugh and lifted the dark clouds over her head for instant. "Really?"

"Really," Denise said seriously. "You don't have to stay over there, but take a bath, change your clothes. Let her see that you're not in shackles. She'd be over here if she could come."

Whitney realized with a stab of guilt that she had given the people on the other side no thought whatsoever. Her third shift employees were told only to go home while cadets swarmed the fifth floor to take control of the gateways. Anytime the fifth floor was locked down, hotel management was notified and in Atlanta, that meant her parents. Shea had left with Matt and both had slipped from her thoughts as the elevator closed behind them. "Okay. Do you want me to bring Shea and Matt back with me? You told them to come back this morning."

A cadet pushed a serving cart into the room and Whitney slumped in her chair as Denise thanked the young man and set up the meal at her conference table. Suddenly the thought of going home was very appealing. The shower would be quick and hot and then she wanted to slip into a bed warmed by Shea.

"You can bring Shea. She deserves to know where her investigation led us, but we really don't need Matt at this time."

The wafting smell of food tempted Whitney from her chair and pulled her to the conference table. Scrambled eggs, bacon and toast had never looked so good to her. "I think I'll grab a few hours sleep before I come back. All of the sudden I feel like I've been up all night."

Denise pushed a cup of coffee across the table to her. "Grab as many as you need. I know how to find you if I need you."

Whitney grinned and reached for the cup. "Of that, I have no doubt."

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Shea woke up alone the next morning and confused. She'd had the most vivid dream about Whitney showing up in the middle of the night, exhausted and mumbling. Shea didn't understand a single word she said as she guided her upstairs, stripped her down and tucked them into bed. She fell asleep basking in the sweet knowledge of knowing Whitney could have gone anywhere and had chosen to come to her. Disappointment cut deeply with the realization that it was nothing more than a dream.

There was one houseguest she didn't imagine and thinking about Matt pushed her from the bed. Just because she had slept late didn't mean that he did. She took her robe from the hook on the back of her bedroom door and pulled it on as she stepped into the hallway. The rich aroma of Colombian coffee hung teasingly on the air. Shea followed the smell gratefully and as her feet hit the ground floor, she caught the whiff of bacon. She heard metal clang and footsteps on the floor. She was several steps from the kitchen when she heard the voices.

"How many so far?" Matt asked.

"At least forty-eight. Denise was still working when I stumbled out to come home."

Shea caught her first instinctive rush forward when she heard Whitney's voice. She stood outside the kitchen and closed her eyes. It wasn't a dream that Whitney had shown up ringing her doorbell early that morning. Breathing deep, she walked into the kitchen and stopped at the cozy scene in front of her. Whitney was sitting at her table pouring syrup over pancakes. Matt was standing next to her with a dish towel thrown over one shoulder. Both smiled when she walked into the room.

"She lives," Whitney said.

"Something smells heavenly." Shea crossed to Whitney and took her fork. She leaned in for a good morning kiss and then took a bite of Whitney's breakfast. "Tastes heavenly, too."

Matt walked over to hand her a cup of coffee. "Good morning. I hope you don't mind that I made myself at home in your kitchen. Whitney was looking for peanut butter to go with the Ritz crackers she found. Do you want to share hers or some of your own?"

Shea sipped the coffee gratefully. She saw he'd used her coffee maker and her beans, but her coffee never tasted like this. "You can you make yourself at home anytime. My coffee is never this rich."

Whitney nipped the fork of her hand. "She wants her own."

The moment was sweet and homey, something Shea was pretty sure she'd never had in her own kitchen. Matt moved with surprising efficiency and Shea wondered how often he found himself in strange kitchens the morning after.

"Whitney was just catching me up on the news."

Shea looked at Whitney over the edge of her coffee cup. "Fill me in."

The truth was anti-climatic. Shea ate Matt's wonderful pancakes and listened as Whitney caught them up on all that had happened since they left her. It was a lot in what was really only a few hours. Almost all crime came down to some form of greed. Someone wanting what someone else had or wanting more than they already had of their own. Shea was a little disappointed that this case wasn't going to be different.

The scope of it, almost fifty people and from both sides, didn't surprise her nearly as much as the fact that the GSA learned that in less than nine hours. "How did you get that information so fast?"

"Deals. Basically it was save yourself by giving up someone else. We still don't know why I was targeted, but Vince should be able to clear that up."

Whitney sounded casual as she said his name and Shea didn't see anything or hear a trace in her tone that she was stunned by his involvement. Maybe after a certain point, who was involved didn't matter anymore. Shea thought from the beginning one of the six regional supervisors would be involved, but Vince wasn't the one she would have picked. His air of absented-mindedness was a good act.

The peal of her doorbell rang through the house. She glanced down at her robe as she slid off her chair.

"Do you want me to get it?" Matt asked. He was wearing his slacks and shirt from the day before, but the shirt was unbuttoned and his feet were bare.

"Thanks I've got it." Anyone who knew her would be surprised to find a half dressed man opening her door. Automatically she checked to see who was standing at her doorstep and then stood with her hand on the doorknob as she tried to decide what to do. Finally, she opened the door and stepped back to gesture the two women into her home. "Denise. Mrs. Eisner. Good morning."

"Good morning Shea. I'm glad we didn't wake you."

Shea was mortified as Whitney's mother stared around her empty living room. She could only imagine what was going through her mind. She could still cringe at her own mother's scathing comments to her decorating, or lack thereof. "We're in the kitchen having breakfast. Would like something? Matt is amazing."

"He should be," Grace Eisner said. "He only agreed to go to law school after his grandfather allowed him to attend culinary school in France."

Shea led the way to the kitchen and immediately went to the coffeemaker. She'd let them into the house. It was Whitney's job to ask what they wanted.

"Did I or did I not tell you to see your mother when you left my office?"

"You were serious? It wasn't even five in the morning."

Shea turned to see Grace standing behind her daughter and slip both arms around her for a hug. She kissed Whitney's cheek. "Do you really think your Dad and I went back to sleep after we were called about the lockdown?"

Denise came to Shea for one of the two cups of coffee she had poured. "Do that to me again kid and you'll be running the North American Central Gateway from Anchorage. Thank you, Shea. Sugar? Grace takes hers black."

Shea slid the sugar container across the counter to Denise and took the second cup to Grace. She took her seat at the table.

"Thank you Shea. Good morning Matthew."

"Good morning Grace, Denise." Matt came to the table and laid a hand on Shea's arm. "Thank you, for everything. I think it's time I called a cab and went home."

"I've spoken with your grandfather. He knows everything," Denise said in a gentle tone.

Matt nodded as he looked down at his hands. "Yeah. Thanks. I wasn't sure how to say it."

Whitney reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out her car keys. She handed them to Matt. "Do me a favor and get my car back to the hotel when you're finished with it. Call me, for any reason."

Again he nodded and touched her arm before quickly leaving the kitchen. He was strong, Shea thought, when they went to his father's private club. Whatever his feelings, he kept them hidden under a calm exterior and even after his father understood why they were there, he didn't flinch at the torrent of venom his father spewed over him.

"That was a nice thing you did, bringing him home with you. Thank you."

Shea looked at Whitney. "He was going to get a room at the hotel. That didn't seem right after the day he had." Now Shea smiled at Grace. "Not that your suites aren't beautiful."

Grace moved from behind Whitney to sit across from Shea. Dark blue eyes drifted from her daughter's face to Shea. "No, but they are lonely. You're right that he deserved better than that."

Shea shifted under Grace's steady gaze. Why did she feel as if Grace wasn't talking only about Matt? Her daughter spent countless nights in a hotel room and from the investigators reports

when they had Whitney under observation, she was spending most of those nights alone. It would be easy for Grace to check on her daughter's love life. All she had to do was monitor Whitney's orders from the restaurants and she would know when she ordered dinner for two.

"What did Vince say?" Whitney asked. "Did he crack yet?"

"He wants to talk to you."

"Yeah?" Whitney asked as an evil grin spread slowly over her face. "I get to be alone with him in a room so small I can strangle him without ever leaving my chair? Awesome."

"Whitney!" Grace said sharply.

"I thought that would brighten your day," Denise said dryly, amused. "He wants immunity."

"Does he really? He should have remembered what we do to traitors."

"He seems to think he has something to trade."

Whitney stared at Denise for a moment. "And if he does?"

It wouldn't matter to Whitney, Shea thought as she looked at her. The heat in her eyes was a sharp contrast to her cool tone. Whatever Vince thought he had, Whitney would fight before she would let him use it to walk away scot-free.

Denise sipped her coffee and answered as she stared down in her cup. "That would be the up to the Council."

"If they let him walk, my resignation will be on your desk within the hour."

~~

She was holding a sheaf of papers when he was brought to her. She continued to stare at the neatly typed list of forty-nine names as chains rattled from the restraints shackling both hands and feet. Across from every name was a city and all but two were west of Dallas. In the instant it took from her to look up from the list to his face, she forgot the audience watching her behind the mirror.

"You do know what we do to traitors, don't you Vince?"

Her conversational tone startled him and the eyes that flew to her face were wide with shock. By her judgment, his shock was genuine. "I'm not a traitor."

"Yes you are. You were very good, too. We almost didn't catch you. Are you curious who gave you up?"

"I want immunity."

Whitney put the list on the table and turned it to face him as she slid it across the table. "Who. Is. Missing."

He paled as he saw the list and Whitney felt a small measure relief. They had most of them. Maybe not all, maybe some would never be discovered, but she had to believe they had most. "See? There you are. Traitor. Now give me names and you can live out the rest of your life in a cell."

"I want full immunity," he almost whispered, his head still bent over the paper. "I'll tell you everything for that. These people don't know it all."

"Look at me," she said just as softly and waited until she could look into his eyes. "The only choices here for you are death or life in solitary confinement. Pick one."

"There's one name you don't have. One name you will want more than all the others." He sat back and met her gaze. From somewhere, he found a well of calmness and pulled it around himself like a shroud "Give me full immunity and I will give you that name."

Whitney reached for the paper as she stood up. "I was very disappointed that everyone else gave names. Thank you, Vince. I wanted just one person to choose death and the fact that it's you makes up for losing everyone else. I need someone to die for this so thank you."

She wouldn't have said that he had any color left in his face, but he grayed as she spoke. Panicked eyes darted around the room and before she could skirt the table, he slammed his bound hands down. "Wait! Wait! Just wait."

"Well?" She said as he stared up at her. "I'm waiting."

Her tone was impatient, dismissive, a clear statement that she had better things to do and other places to be. Hate twisted his face into an ugly sneer, streaked red across his cheeks and burned in his eyes. "I knew we should have killed you."

Whitney laughed and leaned down to smile in his face. "Yes. You really should have. Hindsight, what a bitch right? Now, tell me what you want to tell me or watch me leave."

"I want a immunity. You have to give me something."

Whitney let her own fury show on her face, in her eyes. Slowly, she moved to him and put her hand on the front of his neck. She stood there with his gaze locked to hers, her fingers doing no more than laying against his skin until she saw fear flicker in his eyes. "You're not getting immunity. Do you understand? You know nothing I want so badly that I would let you walk away from this room free. I am giving you something, Vince, something very precious to you. You're getting the chance to save your life, which is considerably more than you gave Erin Warner, Stacia Innes and Micah Hansen."

Deliberately, she tightened her fingers around his throat. "Choose and choose now."

Fear faded and something evil slithered into the eyes that never left hers. He smiled and leaned forward. "Lea Sanders."

He had been so cocky in his demands for immunity, so sure he had something worth trading, that Whitney was prepared for something outrageous. Her first response was to laugh and somehow she managed to do no more than meet his smile with one of her own. "That wasn't so hard, now was it? Lea Sanders. How is she involved?"

Vince stared at her as she dropped her hand and moved back to her chair. It wasn't quite open mouthed, but his blank expression was enough for her to know he didn't expect that reaction from her. "You don't believe me."

"I don't not believe you," she said and picked up her pen. She gestured to the mirrored wall. "Investigators are even now checking your claims and moving to take her into custody. One way or the other, we'll know the truth."

He laughed briefly, bitterly. "She's already gone. You won't find her."

"Let us worry about that." She flipped open her notebook to a clean page. "I'll get to the how and when and what later, but right now I want to know why. Why are three women dead instead of me?"

"You'll have to ask her. She didn't want you dead, just gone." He was sullen now. He had banked his freedom on his knowledge and not only didn't that work, her reaction wasn't what he hoped so he lost his consolation prize as well. Whitney watched him sink in his chair and smiled as he tried to cross his arms. He'd better get comfortable in restraints. He would never leave his cell without them.

Less than an hour later, Whitney left him alone in the interview room. She knew one thing absolutely, Vince believed Lea was not only involved, but set up her black market business as soon as she graduated from the academy. He never floundered, never veered, never misspoke as he detailed his involvement in what he called Lea's Game. Whitney decided it was better for both of them if someone else interviewed him. Every time he laughed, she saw her hands around his throat and he was relaxed now so he was laughing a lot.

How, she wondered in amazement, did he hide his oily and sleazy personality behind the studious college professor for so long?

She didn't make it to the observation area behind the interview rooms. Shea and Denise turned the corner to the interview rooms when she stepped outside. She saw the Council members huddled at the end of the hallway with two of the investigators.

"If this is true..." Denise said.

Whitney handed her the notebook. "Then it's true. What do we know so far?"

"That if she left Atlanta yesterday, she didn't leave through the system. We have her coming in and that's it."

Born, bred and now living in LA, Lea had always complained Atlanta was too small and too slow. She would visit Atlanta in those times when she couldn't persuade Whitney away from home, but the pace of southern living chafed against her need for constant action. She loved it when Whitney was in New York and when she became COS, Lea tried everything to get her to make her base on the west coast. Not LA, Whitney remembered, but San Francisco. She'd jokingly said LA wasn't big enough for both of them. Why would she now remain in Atlanta without telling anyone?

"Have you checked the hotel register to see if she stayed there?"

Denise simply nodded and Whitney knew if Lea spent the night in Atlanta, she didn't stay at Prestige.

Behind Denise, Whitney saw the investigators break away from the Council members to walk towards the them. She stepped back and away to give them access to the interview room. Denise handed them the notebook Whitney used for her notes in her interview with Vince.

"Lauren," Councilman Asher called, "A moment please."

Whitney wasn't sure which surprised her more, the command or the fact that Shea was already heading toward the Council. Denise stepped in front of her when she would have followed. "They didn't call you. Relax. They're not going to drag her off. They are very impressed with her and have offered her a job. She accepted on the spot."

Whitney kept her wary gaze on Shea. "What job?"

"The one she already has, except for me instead of you. As you said, we have holes to plug."

Whitney didn't have direct contact with the Council. Six of the seven oversaw one of the Central Gateways. Councilwoman Riley was over all five of the North American Gateways that were open across time. One of the seven, Whitney wasn't sure which, held a position similar to Denise's with the exception of seniority. They each had an equal voice in all operational matters and their rulings were final. With the next Change of Command, Denise would take the place of the retiring member. If Whitney was chosen as the next Ops Director, she would sit on the Council herself one day.

They still followed the PHS dress code. For some reason, that always surprised Whitney when she saw the burgundy, navy and gray shirts, and touched and amused her as well. She rarely thought of the Council as one of them, but they were, at least once upon a time. All were born on the other side and had worked their way through the system of their times. Whitney knew two were born before Columbus found America. Maybe that was why she was often relieved there was a buffer between her and them. Even her flexible mind had trouble bending to that reality.

As she watched Shea speaking with them, she felt a jolt of panic. "Who do they think she is?"

Denise followed her line of sight. "Who I made her to be."

14.

She was sitting with her feet propped up on the corner of her desk, staring out of the plate glass window behind her desk and sipping a glass of ice cold coke. Shea leaned in the doorway of Whitney's office and smiled at the woman lounging in her leather chair watching the fluffy white clouds go by with seemingly not a care in the world.

"Must be nice to be you," she teased and watched Whitney adjust her body so that she could turn lazily in her chair and keep her socked feet on the desk.

All six of the Central Gateways were scheduled to go back online at six their time zone the next morning. They had been down for two months as computers were upgraded and all GSA employees were trained on the new security procedures. It wasn't going to be as easy for someone else to do what Lea had done. Even Whitney, and the other five Chief of Securities, couldn't do whatever they liked whenever they liked within the system.

"It's a little slice of heaven." Whitney dropped her feet to the floor and turned to sit up in her chair. "How did we do?"

Shea sat down in front of Whitney's desk and handed her the clipboard. They were on the downhill side of a twenty-four trial run. Every center had run three fully staffed shifts with volunteers acting as travelers. Some of the volunteers were members of the newly created Internal Affairs division. IA agents, acting as travelers, would attempt to penetrate a center's security by any means fair or foul. One day the IA agents would be trained through Quantico, but for now they were recruits trained by Shea.

"Not bad," Whitney said as she flipped through the pages showing the perfect scores for each shift from every center. She handed the clipboard back to Shea. "The real test will be several months down the road when everyone has relaxed."

The last two months were manic as the plans to correct the faults brought to light during the investigation were conceived and implemented. Daily logs would be more detailed and information easier to extract. Phones would be blocked from anything except local and center to center calls. All calls would be taped. Access to the system after hours was severely restricted and the Chief of Security had to personally authorize any transfers after normal operating hours. Employee only areas were restricted to on duty personnel and for personal travel, GSA and Prestige employees had to follow the same procedures as any other travelers.

"I thought you would be pacing between the terminals and the command center." Shea woke to find herself alone in the penthouse at three yesterday morning. She was annoyed Whitney was at her desk working and as far as she knew, Whitney hadn't slept yet. The last place she expected Whitney to be when she came looking for her was in her chair staring out the window.

Whitney closed her eyes with a slight smile. "My presence makes them jumpy on a normal day. I didn't want to add to that so I've been monitoring from here."

Shea stood up and walked around to stare down at the black glass desk that doubled as Whitney's computer. She had divided the screen into four blocks. One was a miniature map of North America dotted with green lights. Another showed how many travelers were currently in the system. A third was scrolling data and Shea leaned close to see that Whitney was monitoring the North Pacific Regional Supervisor's computer.

"Have you been monitoring Sam all day?" She asked quietly. She wished she had thought to close Whitney's office door before she came into the room. They didn't try to hide their relationship. It would have been impossible with Shea now living with Whitney in the penthouse, but they refrained from public displays in front of staff members. Because she couldn't kiss Whitney, Shea knelt beside her and laid a hand on her leg.

Whitney put her hand on Shea's and linked their fingers. "Yeah. I don't think he believes the reasons I sent him there, but he's doing his job. I can't ask for more."

With one of her Regional Supervisors in solitary confinement and another hiding somewhere in time, Whitney had elected to send her XO to replace Lea as the North Pacific Supervisor. Officially, Sam's presence was meant to stabilize an area that had seen several key people arrested. Whitney had two Executive Officer's now, one for each coast. She had struggled with finding new personnel to fill the open slots and it was only when Denise threatened to do it for her that she finally made her selections. On her early lists, any contact with Lea regardless of how incidental was more than enough for Whitney's rejection.

"You do know that Val is half in love with you don't you?" Valerie Collins, a cute little blonde with big brown eyes, was the new East Coast Regional Supervisor and XO. She managed the Miami Gateway before her promotion and would have been the youngest Regional Supervisor if Whitney hadn't already claimed that title.

Whitney grinned. "I do. It's an occupational hazard. But you don't know that she's half in love with you, too."

She laughed when Shea's face blanked for a moment in surprise. She leaned forward to whisper, "I don't think she realizes we're together."

Shea stared in the crystal blue eyes and knew there were still times that she didn't believe it herself. It was happening less often, but there were times when it would hit how different her life had become. She was living in Whitney's penthouse and Matt was happily renting her house. She had an office next to Denise's instead of a badge with the APD. Her mother was absolutely delighted she had retired from the force and that she had a cushy job with her girlfriend's family. Melinda and Grace had bonded at the first dinner between the families and Shea knew from her mother that they spoke at least once a week. She tried to not to think about that too much, but knew that some of it was Grace covering her when she was at Quantico and unreachable for mother.

The biggest change was Whitney herself. Shea had stood on the sidelines and watched in pride and amazement as Whitney reclaimed her life. She was more much than the playgirl and busy executive Shea thought her to be. Most of the security changes were her ideas and she had the list ready the day after she interviewed Vince. Shea wasn't under Whitney in the chain of command, but neither was she over her and Shea believed Whitney's attitude wouldn't have been any less accepting if Shea wasn't sharing her bed. She saw Shea as standing shoulder to shoulder with her protecting the Gateway and anyone who did that had Whitney's total support. Shea was beginning to not only understand Whitney's allegiance to the GSA, she was sharing it.

Shea stood up and held out her hands to Whitney. "What do you say we order up a light meal as we wait for the final scores? We can monitor everything from the penthouse."

The best change was how her days ended now. She wasn't going alone to a place that wasn't really a home. She didn't have folders with her so that she could fill the lonely hours until she fell asleep. She loved walking with Whitney from the command center to the penthouse as they talked about what happened that day. They had settled into a routine of ordering supper and changing into shorts and T-shirts as they waited for the meal to be brought up. What happened next depended on what happened that day. Some times they worked and some times they talked. Most nights ended with foreplay in the shower and mind blowing sex.

Shea resisted the urge to do more than pull Whitney to her feet. It was hard to keep her hands to herself when Whitney was near. They just naturally wanted to roam.

"I say yes." Whitney quickly closed down her computer and pushed her chair under the desk. "Once that final score comes, this day is officially over."

Shea followed Whitney from the office and into the doorway of the one next to hers. Valerie had made Sam's office her own with colorful prints of famous cities and lush plants in earth toned pottery she made herself. Shea slid her arm around Whitney's waist from behind as Valerie looked up from her computer screen. As childish as it was, she wanted Valerie to know they were a couple. Valerie's bright smile dimmed considerably as she stared at Shea's hand.

"We're going to the penthouse for the night. I have every confidence that you and Sam can handle the rest of this and get the reports over to Denise, but call us if something happens. Whatever it is."

Valerie's eyes darted between Whitney's face and Shea's hand as Whitney spoke. After a long pause, she nodded and forced her smile to brighten a few degrees. "You got it Chief. Have a good night."

Shea backed away from Whitney as they turned to leave the office. The look Whitney shot her was both amused and embarrassed. Shea grinned and lifted both eyebrows in silent question. Whitney just shook her head and headed for the doors.

They were three steps from the hallway and only minutes from the penthouse when the lights flashed red three times. A six inch monitor that ringed the top of the room snapped from

scrolling local weather and news reports in bright blue to warnings in neon red. Whitney stopped so fast Shea ran into her back. Without a word, they both spun around and headed for Whitney's office. Shea noticed Whitney looking around and followed her gaze to see the agents sitting at the computers typing furiously.

Three red flashes meant someone had breached their security. That it was happening here meant the breach was along the North American TimeLine.

"Son of a bitch," Whitney said bitterly as she rounded her desk. "I'm gonna kill whoever this is."

Shea turned to a sound in the doorway and waved a white faced Valerie into the room. She turned around just in time to see whatever data Whitney read on her screen sucker punch her into stupefying shock . She looked up and stared at them for several long seconds, each blink bringing a different emotion until her eyes were dark with rage.

"Lea's RIC just transferred someone from Rome to LA. I hope to God it was her."

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Whitney knew if she gave Lea the chance, Lea would do something this stupid. Everyone had argued against leaving Lea's RIC active. She was the only who still held the Retinal Identification Card they had all carried before and Whitney didn't think her former North Pacific Regional Supervisor would be able to resist returning to LA from wherever she had gone to hide.

Under the old system, Lea would have been able to use her RIC to exit the fifth floor and stroll out of the hotel before they could arrive. She wouldn't know until she tried to get on the elevator that the fifth floor was locked down and only those with Whitney's rank or higher had access.

"Let's go," she said to Shea and rushing around her desk, began to sprint to the doors. "Contact Sam and tell him what he has and tell him I am on my way. I want her in restraints by the time I get there."

Volunteers were loitering in the hall between the command center and the terminals as they waited for the drill to end. They quickly flattened themselves against the wall as they ran past. Whitney had prayed for this day, had begged that it would come before they were back on line. This was the only thread they were unable to tie off from the investigation. The thought of going back online with it still dangling had been unbearable.

Whitney waited until the cubicle slid shut before saying to Shea, "She's mine. You can have her when I'm done, but right now she's mine."

Technically, Lea fell under the jurisdiction of Internal Affairs and she belonged to Shea. The cubicle opened before Shea could respond. Whitney didn't move, she simply held her hand on the door to keep it open. A husky woman wearing a long, black wig and oval framed glasses with tinted blue lenses was struggling with the security detail as they tried to fasten flexcuffs around her wrists.

"Stop fighting it," she said sharply, loudly. Everyone froze and those few seconds were all one quick thinking guard needed to bind her wrists together. When she was sure she was in control, Whitney walked carefully to stand in front of her. She reached for the wig and snatched it off her head. "Welcome home Lea."

Lea's short blonde hair stood up in spiky tufts. Her eyes were filled with bitter hate when Whitney pulled the glasses away. Lea spit in her face and said, "Fuck you."

Whitney backhanded her across the face before the thought to do so had crossed her mind. Two guards kept Lea from falling to the floor. She grabbed a handful of Lea's T-shirt and pulled it up to wipe away the spit. Whitney could see she had bulked out her athletic frame with padding. "Nice disguise. Three months ago it would have worked and you'd be free on the streets right now. Did you really think we wouldn't change anything after what you did?"

"I want a lawyer." Lea pulled herself away from the guards to stand on her own feet. Blood welled in a small split in her bottom lip. "I have nothing to say to you."

Whitney laughed. "You want a lawyer? How would you like Matthew Lang? And by that I mean the second. He has just gobs of time on his hands these days."

The whooshing sound of multiple cubicles sliding open came from behind them and Whitney knew without turning around at least one of the new arrivals was Denise. "She wants a lawyer."

Denise came to Whitney's side. "I don't think Matthew is going to want to waste any of his single hour out of solitary confinement on her but it never hurts to ask. Maybe he prays for one last chance to see her face to face."

Whitney shook her head. "Five bucks says he wants the shower and yard time more."

"You can't deny me a lawyer," Lea said angrily. "I have rights."

Whitney never took her eyes from Lea's as she stepped deliberately within inches of her. "All that time you spent looking for ways to break the rules and to get around them didn't leave you very much time to learn any of them did it? You should have stayed in Rome. She's yours Shea. Get her out of my time."

Whitney didn't turn to watch as Lea struggled against the guards shoving her to the cubicles. She shut out Lea's shouts and waited until the terminal was quiet before she took a deep cleansing breath. She had wanted to do more than slap Lea. It had taken finding Lea's secret bank accounts and seeing the records of her very profitable black market business on Lea's computer for Whitney to finally believe that her best friend and most trusted advisor was the person who betrayed her. The cut had gone very deep and Whitney wanted to inflict that same kind of pain on Lea.

"Are you coming?" Denise asked.

Whitney looked around the terminal. Stunned employees were watching her and waiting to see what happened next. Her gaze fell on Sam standing near the double doorway that led to hallway and the rest of the fifth floor. "Have those centers that are finished with the drill send everyone home. Set the third shift security as soon as the floors are cleared. When the active centers hit five, end the drill and lock it down. I'll be at Quantico if anything else happens."

Sam nodded and clapped his hands as he called, "Okay everyone, back to your places. We're not done here."

Denise was the only one left and Whitney walked behind her into the cubicle. "How do you think Lea knew the centers were operational?"

"I'll add that to the questions we're going to ask her," Denise said and walked out of the cubicle as it opened. She headed for the hallway that led to the interview room and Whitney headed for the hallway behind it.

The observation area was jammed with people. Whitney edged into the room and found herself standing next to Councilman Archer. He smiled down at her. "Ms Eisner that was very well done. I voted with you to keep the RIC active. I wish I could have been there to see her face when she walked into the trap."

"So do I, Councilman. It had to be priceless."

"Yes," He agreed with a short laugh and turned his attention back to the interview room. "I'm sure it was."

Lea had been stripped of the padding and was shackled hands and feet with metal restraints. She was alone except for two guards. The shock and fury were gone from her face and she seemed lost as she stared down at the wooden table. What had she been doing all this time? One bank account was emptied the same day Lea came to Atlanta to talk to her so she wasn't reduced to panhandling on the streets for food but it wasn't enough to keep her indefinitely in the manner she was accustomed to living. Lea's family had been warned not to assist her and the Council had laid their lives open to be sure they didn't try to do it anyway. Did she come back to LA hoping her family would hide her? In the usual world, that's what families did but Lea forget there were two families here and the GSA had more clout than the Sanders.

Lea jumped as the door opened and Shea, Denise and Council members Winston and Stand filed into the interview room. Now that she could see more clearly, Whitney glanced around to see she was surrounded by the rest of the Council. Where else would they be?

Under different circumstance, Whitney would have enjoyed watching Shea skillfully and cleverly box Lea into a corner. She tried to deny her involvement at first and then lie about the extent of it, but as each damning piece of evidence was laid out for her, she arrogantly admitted the truth. Grinning, kicked back in the chair as far as the chains would allow, she summed it up by saying, "I did what everyone said couldn't be done and I did it for years."

Denise and the Council members had faded back as Shea took the lead in the interrogation. Now Denise stepped forward. "Why didn't you kill Whitney? That was your biggest mistake."

Whitney watched her friend's face closely as she waited for the one answer she wanted more than she wanted any of the others. Three women were dead instead of her and she wanted to know why. Lea shrugged, saying, "I loved her. She's my friend."

"Did you ever think about recruiting her?" Shea asked.

Lea laughed and glanced at the mirror as if she knew Whitney was there. "God no. She's a True Believer."

Shea frowned and leaned forward on her elbows. "What does that mean?"

Lea tried to wave her hand and grimaced at her bound wrists when both arms moved. She settled for a careless shrug of her shoulder. "She actually believes that what is happening on the other side is happening for the *very first time*. She'd have some mental defect in some other world, but this one? They make her the leader."

Whitney was chilled by how casually, how easily Lea dismissed their treaty with the past. She wasn't supposed to be on the other side. She should never have left Quantico when her training ended. How did no one catch that?

"You lied during your exit interview?" Denise whispered, shocked. Her face had lost every drop of color.

Again Lea laughed and shook her head as she glanced to Denise's face. Grinning, she leaned closer to Whitney and her voice was barely above a whisper as she asked, "I killed three women and she's still stunned that I lied to her so that I wouldn't be trapped on this side. Probably more that I lied than about the deaths. How seriously screwed up is that?"

Whitney listened numbly as Shea turned the interview to the murders. The idea to frame Whitney was Lea's and she thought her execution was brilliant, flawless. She detailed how she lured women she met through her personal ads to the other side. Employees who are suspended have their travel privileges suspended and their RIC's confiscated until the suspension is lifted. Lea used their cards to travel to the centers and used a housekeeping keycard to gain access to the unrestricted rooms. She laid the blame for their deaths at the feet of the investigators. She wouldn't have had to resort to murder if they had removed Whitney after the first few assaults. When that still wasn't enough, she killed Micah Hansen in the parking deck and made the 911 call.

When Lea was finally led from the interview, Whitney understood why Vince called it Lea's Game. That's really all it had been for her and it was obvious that she enjoyed the end most of all. Whitney wondered, as Lea vanished with her guards, when Lea would realize she was not offered the chance to live out the rest of her life in solitary confinement in the underground jail

currently housing her fellow traitors. Whitney thought she knew Lea well enough to know that she wouldn't realize she'd been sentenced to death until she was a dead woman walking.

There was one last thing she needed to do before she could consider the investigation closed. She had resisted doing it because she was afraid of how Shea would react. Now she knew Shea needed to know to understand.

She waited until they were alone in the sub-basement, supposedly headed home, when she took Shea's hand. "I want to show you something."

~~

Shea was exhausted. The mania of getting the centers upgraded, the intensity of the twenty-four drill and now Lea's revelation had left her ragged and empty. She wanted to go home. She wanted a hot shower and a simple meal before she fell face first into bed. She hoped whatever Whitney wanted to show her was quick. She didn't plan on falling into that bed alone.

"Do you remember when you asked me if we could go back into time and I told you we wouldn't even if we could? That it wasn't that easy to alter time?"

They walked from the Admin building and crossed the wide neatly mowed lawn to another three story red brick building. It was night already and Shea watched several lights zip across the star filled sky. "Yes, I do. Can I get a license to fly one of those? That looks like fun."

Whitney looked up. "Sure. And it is fun. I'll make the arrangements."

The Burton-Holt Building was empty and its long hallways lit with low lighting. Their steps echoed as they climbed the massive staircase in the main foyer. The third floor branched out into three hallways and Whitney walked into the one in front of them. It was short and ended at double doors.

Whitney turned to face Shea and Shea was alarmed by the fear she saw so clearly in Whitney's eyes. "I want you to know that whatever you feel about what you see in this room, that it's okay. You won't be feeling anything the rest of us didn't feel."

Shea stayed where she was as Whitney pushed the doors open and walked into the large room. Whitney vanished into the dark room and Shea stepped closer to peer into the blackness. She could hear Whitney moving and was stepping into the room when the walls flashed for an instant to blinding white before settling into shapes of dark red edged with bright green. A few of the edges also had a thin layer of blue after the green. Shea moved back, her eyes roving over the four giant plasma screens. It took several minutes for her to realize the dark red shapes were continents.

Confused, she looked around for Whitney. "What is this?"

Whitney was standing on the other side of the room, her gaze locked to the Mercator map stretched across the wall. "There's a little more green now than there was when I first came here. A lot more blue."

Turning to face Shea, she put her hands behind her back. Her face was calm, but her eyes were stormy. "Lea was right when she said I'm a True Believer. She thinks that your time doesn't matter and I think it's priceless. I wonder, what will you think?"

Shea didn't know what to say to that so she said nothing. Her eyes never left Whitney's face. Whitney gestured to the map. "The blue is water. It's not potable. We can use it, but not to drink. The green is land. It's barren. We can live on it, but not for food. It's taken almost five hundred years for us to reclaim what we have."

Whitney came to her side and let the silence stretch.

Shea felt her skin ice over as she stared at the map bleeding red. She didn't want to ask but thought Whitney had said as much as she could. "And the red?"

"Nuclear Radiation. The Nuclear Holocaust is less than two hundred years away. The door to the past was found less than a year before and those in charge of it began to sense what was happening. Families were handpicked and sent back into time. We are the descendants of those of families."

Her voice was calm and normal. Shea stared at the devastation spread over the fifteen foot high walls and wondered how her voice could be so normal as she said the words. Nuclear Radiation. Nuclear Holocaust. Water they couldn't drink; land they couldn't till. Tiny slices of green and blue outlining massive continents of red. "So it was all destroyed? Everyone and everything?"

"Yes."

"On the way over here, you were reminding me about our conversation on changing time and how it's not easy to alter it. What did you want to add to that?"

When Whitney turned to face her, Shea had to force herself to turn away from the map. All she could see in Whitney's crystal blue eyes was sorrow. For all that was lost. For all that may never be regained. "We cannot change that ending because we then risk changing our beginning. Can you imagine if the world leaders, if their militaries, had known about that door to the past?"

Ironic to think that what didn't happen could be worse than what did. And Shea understood much better Whitney's adamant protection of their presence in the past. Without food and water, the future they managed to save would be lost. Whitney could live in the present without thinking of it as the past because it wasn't the past to her and never had been.

Whitney shoved her hands into her pockets. She glanced once at the map and looked away. "Are you ready to go? I hate this room."

Shea didn't need to look at it again. She would never forget it. "Yeah. Let's go home." Shea stood outside the room as Whitney shut down the lights and closed the doors. "I am so tired and tomorrow is going to start very early. I am glad I get to work on east coast time."

Whitney stood outside the door and stared at her with a look of baffled suspicion. "You're being really accepting of this."

Shea took Whitney's hand in hers and started them downstairs. "I'm really tired. I may wake up in the morning screaming my head off. But for now, it explains some things. I didn't get why coming to the past was such a big deal. I kind of get it now. Maybe not completely, but I get it. I may have questions later."

Whitney's hand tightened in hers and she walked close enough to bump shoulders as they walked out into the clear, cool night air. "What I can't answer, I'm sure Denise can."

Shea doubted she would have questions that Whitney couldn't answer. She'd spent two months moving easily between the times and not once encountered a situation that gave her reason to question what they were doing here. She enjoyed her job and loved her life.

She dropped Whitney's hand and slipped her arm around her waist to pull her closer. "Did you hear the message from Kim? I think after the week we're going to have a baseball party with friends sounds awesome."

"I did and it does." Whitney draped her arm around Shea's shoulder. "Are you ready for the questions we're going to get? Maybe we should invite Kim to dinner this week and let her know we're together before Saturday. Have you ever seen her in the yippy dog mode she gets in when she's super excited? She makes me dizzy bouncing around the way she does."

Shea laughing, thinking that was the perfect description for Kim when she was excited. "How does Thursday sound for the dinner? I'll call her tomorrow."

"I'll call her tomorrow. You can't call her from your office."

"I keep forgetting that, don't I?"

"You'll learn."

Shea watched pinpoint lights zip and streak across the night sky. Yes, she would learn. Lucky for her, she had all the time in the world.

The End
