

## STARK & STERN

By

N.E. Nordstrom

### PROLOGUE

*“I know the reputation you have of being alive, when in fact you are dead.”*

Timothy Preston Royal the Second woke with a start and a confused sense of displacement. Remaining motionless, he moved only his eyes, which he used instantly to do a quick sweep of the room. He had heard the long forgotten words from the Book of Revelations clearly, as if his wife had just uttered them. His eyes strained against the darkness in search of the speaker. He hadn't realized he was holding his breath until he let it out with a whoosh of relief. No shadow moved with evil intent, or with any intent at all, as his search proved he was alone. His search, he was pleased to note, had also illuminated his current whereabouts.

He was in his bed, in his home, and it was just after 1 a.m., 1:17 to be exact. This he learned when he saw the numbers on the clock, the well-shined grain of his bedside table mirroring their glow. His momentary confusion upon waking dissipated quickly. As reality reasserted itself, the words that awoke him faded from memory.

Stretching his arms well above his head, he yawned loud and wide then wiggled into a sitting position. For a moment, he felt lost as to why he was awake in the middle of the night. As a sound sleeper, he rarely woke before his alarm told him to. Suddenly, belatedly, he checked the bedding next to him with both eyes and hand, and with a small hiss of surprise, found it empty. As it should be, he reminded himself with a deprecating shake of his head, seeing as he had come home to an empty house and had eventually retired to an empty bed.

It occurred to him in that moment that in all the years he and Trish had lived in this house, he had never spent a night in it alone. Always there had been someone at home, whether it was his wife, one of their two children, or their live-in housekeeper, Mrs. Peatra. It seemed odd, even at this hour, to consider that he had the place to himself. As he started to slide back under the sheet, with every good intention of returning to sleep, an idea sneaked into his head and filled it with a tempting reminder: he was *alone*.

Timothy needed to give the consequence of this home-alone status some thought. He sat up straighter, plumped his pillow against the deep mahogany headboard, and leaned back against it. The room had an odd luminosity to it, a mingling of night and ambient household light. Although Timothy's eyes adjusted to the dimness, he did not see his room. Instead, he was lost in visions of the deli-sliced roast beef and the fresh-baked Italian bread that Trish had left in the refrigerator, along with a note for the gardener to take them home to his family. If Timothy remembered correctly, there were tomatoes and pickles and even some romaine lettuce left in the fridge, as well.

And chips, the recollection made him grin, completely unhealthy for him, corn chips!

He decided his wife must have confiscated them from one of the children, as they were always trying to sneak junk food into the house. She expected the gardener to take those as well as she wasn't as concerned with Ira's family eating processed food as she was with her own.

Well, Timothy thought in a display of serious consideration, he'd show Ira and his family compassion and save them from the artery-clogging food.

A small smile began to spread across Timothy's face and in apparent response, his stomach made hungry gurgling noises. He realized, as he swung his legs out of the bed, that he was breaking Trish's steadfast "no eating after dinner" rule, but didn't feel at all guilty about it. His wife was to blame, he decided, as she was the one who had left the food there to tempt him. With this logic, his feet searched out and found his slippers and he stretched as he got out of bed.

He chuckled with pleasure as he started to grab his robe, which he had flung over the back of the winged chair by the window, but then thought twice about it. No wife, no kids... then no robe, Timothy decided. To ensure complete culpability to his crimes, he kicked off his slippers, wriggling his toes in the deep pile of the carpet before silently padding out of the room.

At the top of the long, curved staircase, he stopped and considered again his solitude. He should be with Trish and the kids right now. Although his wife could be a pill at times, she was not only his spouse, his love; she was his best friend. He missed her and he missed his kids. Instead of roaming his empty house, he should be at the cabin, smelling that fresh pine-filled air and resting up for the upcoming day of hiking and fishing.

Frustration began to rise as he considered the reason he wasn't currently enjoying a well-earned vacation. It had been asking too much of Timothy to delay a day so that Finley could come and say hello. Who does that?

“Egotistical jerk,” Timothy muttered under his breath. It had all worked out, he decided as he started down the stairs, but only through compromise. He had sent Trish and the children ahead and planned to follow a day later. In a few hours, he’d have Joe, the company pilot, fly him out to Yosemite where he’d kick back, and enjoy what was left of his vacation. Thinking of his family had him remembering the surprise he had down in his study. He had mentioned the baseball bats to Trish but he knew they weren’t of interest to her, or to the kids either for that matter. However, if his instincts were right, if the appraiser agreed, he felt confident that they’d be impressed in the end.

In the meantime, his reward for his sacrifice was having a sandwich in his kitchen, in the middle of the night. He chuckled softly and took the last few steps into the grand entry, heading back to the kitchen, lost in thought of family, fishing, and food.

He pushed open the double doors and stepped into the kitchen, flipping on just a few of the ceiling lights and as he did so, he lit on an idea. He felt certain he knew where Mrs. Peatra kept the Panini pan. Wouldn’t that be the perfect touch, especially if there was Muenster cheese in the fridge?

He headed to the refrigerator and gave a restrained “whoop!” when he saw that indeed the meat was still there, along with the vegetables he was hoping for, and, best of all, his beloved cheese. He grabbed what he could, and taking two trips, piled the food on the oversized kitchen island. There he found the reusable bag Trish had put out with the leftovers and GMO contraband for the gardener. He grabbed the bread, leaving the chips for the moment, and placed it with some mayonnaise and mustard on the island’s pocked-marked butcher-block top. He closed the refrigerator with his foot and headed to the butler pantry. He flipped the switch and considered the goods. It was loaded with canned fruits and vegetables, various serving platters and bowls, and all the specialty cookware that Mrs. Peatra was so adept at using. There he found the Panini pan.

He stepped out, chuckling as his stomach once again made anticipatory noises. He started toward the stove on the other side of the island but as he did so he realized he was not alone. He stopped, mid-step, and considered the man who stood across from him. He seemed vaguely familiar. Timothy’s mind clicked through snapshots of the people in his life. This man was not family, nor friend, that was immediately obvious. Work acquaintance, business associate, club member? Timothy Preston Royal the Second may constantly acquiesce to his wife’s demands,

but this house was theirs due to his success. Highly respected at work, his was a clever and formidable mind, known for being able to remember detailed and complex information quickly and easily. This skill had enabled him to save their client hundreds of thousands of dollars and earned him a stay in town to shake the hand of the one and only Theodore Finley. Now his excellent memory for faces was being tested.

Quickly pictures of those he whom he can into contact with flipped through his mind as the man across from him gave him an awkward smile. The slideshow in his head slowed, then stilled and he stepped forward, gripping the Panini pan tightly.

“I know you...”

“Er, hello Mr. Royal,” the man shifted uneasily from one foot to the next.

“What the hell?” Timothy took another step, considering the man in angry confusion.

“What are you doing in my...”

His skull exploded, with pieces of it spraying on the bead-board paneling of the kitchen walls, over the refrigerator and across to the stove, and even above on the puck-lighted kitchen ceiling. Timothy crumbled with a look of stunned disappointment. A baseball bat dropped on the marble floor with repetitious banging as it bounced then stilled, not quite silencing the running footsteps that faded as the black consumed. On the butcher-block island, the roast beef and Italian bread, bloody and brained, grew warm and stale.

## CHAPTER 1 – WEDNESDAY MORNING

### *Eight Years Later*

Emma didn't notice that her bagel had grown cold. She held a piece of it in her hand, lost in the dream from the night before. As usual, as it did whenever she dreamt of Jason, it left her yearning for what could never be again. In the dream, they had lain together in a silky bed of white with streams of sunlight breaking through softly billowing sheers. It was Sunday, a warm, summer morning. Their hands and legs entwined, they spoke quietly of love, of their beautiful daughter, and of the future they'd build together. His hair smelled of the Prell shampoo he insisted on using; his skin had a slight tangy scent of sweat and sex. They had lain on the cool, soft sheets, and stroked and whispered in the golden light.

He was forever young, and in her dreams, so was she. His body was strong and hers was firm, and they made love with the intimate knowledge of two who knew each other well. They could hear their daughter down the hall, giggling as she watched morning cartoons and they smiled at each other, knowing that their love had made that magical creature. His touch, those calloused hands, had made her yearn, had made her moan, and, unexpectedly, had made her laugh aloud. Always, always he filled her with such love, filled the dream with such intense emotion that she woke in tears.

The tears slid now as reality refocused and reminded her that her husband no longer slept next to her. In all the years since he had died, the dreams had never lost their power to fill her with bittersweet longing. She had been so loved and had so loved in return that it seemed incomprehensible to her that their love had not somehow protected him from the drunk driver whose careless night of partying had snatched him away.

She grabbed a napkin from its holder and blotted at the tears, dropping the uneaten piece of bagel back onto the plate as she did so. She crumbled the napkin and huffed her streaky bangs away from gray eyes sheltered by long and still-damp lashes. Her hair, cut in a variety of layers that framed a slightly round face, was just long enough to tuck easily behind her ears. Currently it was forced into a short stubby ponytail, which she now split in two. She tugged in separate directions to tighten it back to her scalp as she considered her breakfast and then indulgently thought back to the dream. Her breasts felt full and she could all but feel his hands upon them.

She was pulled back again by the ringing of the telephone. With a sigh, she stretched from her chair and reaching up on the kitchen counter grabbed the receiver.

“Can you come over?”

“Honey, I need you to speak up.” Emma, balancing the phone between her shoulder and cheek, gathered her breakfast dishes. “Why are you whispering?” She could hear muffled speaking.

“Can you come over? Like, I mean, now? Please?”

“Bianca, is everything okay?” Even as she asked, concern evident in her voice, Emma had already turned and reached over the counter to place her breakfast dishes in the sink in preparation to leave. “Sweetie, why are you whispering?”

“It’s Mama,” Bianca said and then Emma heard her whisper with impatience to someone else, “she’s coming over... right, you are coming?” this she asked Emma in a low voice.

“Consider me on the way.”

“Thank you, Emma, thank you.” The evident relief in Bianca’s voice about broke Emma’s heart. “I was telling Gray. He’ll meet you out front.”

“Bianca, honey, you’re scaring me.” Emma grabbed her purse and searched for her keys. “Is your mom hurt? Are you guys okay?” Emma covered the phone with her hand as she called out to her daughter, “Mia, get down here. Quick!”

“Emma, I, well, I don’t know how to explain it,” Bianca whispered. “Nobody’s hurt. It’s just... I’ll explain when you get here.”

“I’m on my way, baby, don’t worry,” she reassured. After recent events, fear was now stirring butterflies in Emma’s stomach. “I’m just going to let Mia know. Would it help if Mia comes with?”

“No, no, we should be at school. Tell Mia I’ll explain when I see her. It’ll make more sense when you get here, okay?” There was a slight pause and then Emma heard a small hiss. “Oh my god, Emma, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. No,” she said firmly, “no one is hurt, okay. Honest,” her voice thickened. “It’ll make more sense when you get here, I promise.”

“So you said, sweetie. I’m on my way.” Emma put down the house phone, while grabbing her cell phone that was in a charger right next to it and slipping it into her purse.

Mia had come downstairs and had been watching Emma closely. She saw the concern on her mother's face and ran back to the stairs to grab her school bag off the lowest step.

“Where are we going?” she asked as she confirmed she also had her cell phone.

“You’re going to school,” Emma said firmly. The two moved quickly out the sliding glass door and across the small patio in the back of their townhome. She opened the gate on the other side and stepped back to let Mia through first.

“What? No way! Something’s wrong. I want to come with you.”

Emma closed the gate and regarded her strong-willed, sixteen year old daughter. Mia was so young, the braces making her seem even more so, and if she only knew how her punk-spiked blonde hair made her appear cute and sweet rather than edgy, she’d be embarrassed.

That aside, it had only been a month ago, Emma remembered with a tightening in her stomach, when the worst a parent could imagine seemed to have taken place, and although it hadn’t been Mia in trouble, the fact that it had been Andy’s daughter had made it just as terrifying. The residual frustration and fear still kept a greasy hold on her belly and she remained impressed with how well the Stark family was coping with it all. Now, recognizing the resolute look on her daughter’s face, she realized that Mia had spotted the lingering worry.

“All I know, Mia,” Emma said softly, “is that Bianca asked me to come over and that it has something to do with Andy. She sounded…” Emma hesitated. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“If it was nothing, Bianca wouldn’t have called, right? You said she sounded…?”

“Scared.”

The word was enough to fuel Mia and she headed toward the passenger side of her mother’s car.

“Of what? Why?”

“I don’t know, honey, Bianca didn’t say.” Emma pushed a button on the key fob and unlocked the doors. “Mia, you have school and it’s not too late to catch the bus. Bianca can meet up with you there and explain then.”

“Or, we go to school together and she can explain on the way. Mom,” Mia gave a heavy sigh, “you’re not the only one dealing with what happened. Please. I want to help.”

“Alright, then let’s go.”

The two climbed into the white Versa. As Emma started the engine and backed out of her assigned space under the carport, she glanced over at Mia.

“Here’s the deal: I don’t know what we’ll find so if I decide you shouldn’t be there, you’ll leave, you hear? You will not argue. We will not discuss it. If I say go, you go. Understand?”

Recognizing the rarely used I-will-not-tolerate-any-disobedience tone of her mother’s, Mia nodded. Emma had a habit of resting her hand on the gear shift between the seats and did so now. She smiled softly when Mia reached over and put her hand on top.

“Has Bianca mentioned anything?” Emma asked as she maneuvered through traffic.

“About what?”

“I don’t know, such as anything new at home, anything different about her mom?”

“Nope,” Mia shook her head. “As far as I know everything’s fine. I saw Andy yesterday at the market. I told you that.” She was quiet a moment. “You know, maybe there was something...”

“Something?”

“I just kinda remember thinking that she, like, seemed off.”

“How so?”

“Like maybe she was distracted or something? I don’t know how to explain it. Andy was Andy, you know. She was being like all funny and stuff; giving me a hard time about Mrs. Ainsley’s class. I told you what I said about Don Quixote. Bianca must have told Andy ‘cuz she says to me that we should go miniature golfing sometime.”

“What? Why?”

“They have a windmill there.”

“Right!” Emma smiled. “Oh, that is kind of funny.”

“I guess,” mumbled Mia who knew it was only because she was the punchline. “It was an honest mistake.”

“Oh sweetie,” Emma chuckled. “I’m not laughing at you, truly.” She sighed and squeezed the hand that held hers.

Soon they were turning down the street to the house that was like a second home to them both. It was a rambling ranch-style with a variety of flowers randomly nesting throughout the simple landscape. The front patio was partitioned off from the street by an arch-driveway with one end of the arch extending back to a tucked-in double-car garage. There they saw Bianca’s hand-me-down Bronco and Andy’s old Chevy truck.

As was her custom, Emma drove past the first entrance to the second and followed the curve around until her car was facing the street again.

Gray, Bianca’s brother, had been pacing out in front when they arrived. At fourteen, he was growing fast, was now easily taller than Emma, and still had some growing to do. His sun-bleached brown hair, worn in a long shaggy style, swept across his forehead and over his ears. When he saw them, he raised a hand and then turned and went into the house. By the time they had parked and gotten out of the car, both Gray and Bianca had come to meet them.

Emma had a fleeting thought that Andy sure had beautiful children. Bianca was almost as tall as her mother, and just as long legged. Although her hair was straighter than Andy’s she wore it back, just as her mother usually did, in this case, the long dark hair was held in a high ponytail. Emma took this in quickly as she suddenly found herself wrapped in Bianca’s arms. A quick look at Gray’s face and she saw the worry there in his hazel eyes, as well. She gave Bianca a hard hug then pulled back slightly. The girl’s eyes were red-rimmed and full of concern.

“No one’s hurt?”

“No. I didn’t mean to make you think...”

“You didn’t. I just wanted to be sure. So,” her eyes moved from one sibling to the other, “what’s going on?”

Gray, looking pathetically uncomfortable, turned to Bianca who, in a habit strongly reflective of her mother, jammed her hands into the pockets of her skinny jeans.

“I wasn’t sure whether or not to call you.”

“It was the right thing to do,” Gray said, the tone of his voice moving unexpectedly from bass to tenor. He blushed at the transition and then he, too, jammed his hands into his pockets.

“It’s just kind of hard to explain. It’s like…” Bianca turned to Gray helplessly.

“Well,” he took a deep breath and shifted on his feet, “it’s like she’s missing time.”

“What?” Emma didn’t know what she had expected, but it wasn’t this.

“How do you mean?” Mia gray eyes were sharp as she pulled out her cell phone.

“Actually, that’s a good way to put it,” Bianca said, nodding at her brother. “Say you mention something that happened like a few weeks ago. She has no idea what you’re talking about! Like for example,” Bianca swept a stray strand of hair from her face. “I said something to her about that agent, Rock…”

“Stone,” Emma and Gray automatically corrected.

“Right, Stone, I knew that.”

“Rock!” Gray snickered.

“Oh… my… god, Gray!” snapped Bianca her eyes filling in frustration.

“Geez, Bi, I didn’t mean. Oh my god!” Gray shook his head and his face turned red.

“Kids,” Emma put up a hand and then met Bianca’s dark eyes. “Bianca?”

“It’s so silly.” Bianca wipes her eyes on the red hoodie she wore. “It’s just, it’s kinda scary, you know? I mean like at first it was kind of funny, you know, she’s getting old and stuff.”

“Old, right,” Emma, who was just a couple of years younger than Andy, dismissed that quickly.

“Well, you know, she just wasn’t remembering little things, okay? That happens when you get old --,” she caught the look from Emma and qualified, “—er, so no big deal. But now, well, she’s not remembering *lots* of things. I googled it. I don’t think she has Alzheimer’s…”

“Alzheimer’s? Bianca, your mother is barely in her forties! It’s not impossible, but that would be young.”

“But that’s what it’s like. Okay, so we went bowling with that Agent *Stone* and his sons, right?” Bianca gave her brother a sideways look. “Well, Blake and Parker come over here all the time, so I happened to mention that maybe it would be nice to, like you know, go bowling with them again and that she should give this guy a call.”

“She likes Blake,” Gray said under his breath. “She thinks his cute. She wants to go out with him.”

“Gray!” Both Mia and Bianca punched him. Mia peeked over at Bianca and winked.

“Anyway…” Emma encouraged Bianca pointedly.

“Anyway, that was this morning. Harold had called last night and she had already gone to bed, right? So at breakfast I'm giving her Harold's message and that made me think of that Agent Stone...”

“Agent Nash,” her brother corrected. “Stone’s his first name.”

“What...ever, Gray! So it reminded me of *Agent* Nash and maybe we should go bowling with him and his kids again.”

“I’m not understanding the concern.” Emma said. “What does Harold have to do with this?”

“Harold? Nothing, I’m just saying I had mentioned him to Mama and asked her about going bowling again and Emma...” Bianca paused dramatically, “Mama... had no idea... who I was talking about. I mean, she knew Harold, but she had no idea who Agent Nash was! I thought maybe I had called him by the wrong name *because*,” she stressed before Gray could cut in, “that apparently happens sometimes. So I said, ‘that agent we went bowling with.’ And she just stared at me, I mean like *stared* at me, and then she said, ‘I have no idea who you’re talking about.’ Can you believe it?”

Silence fell among them.

“She was teasing you?” Emma suggested finally.

“No, Emma.” Bianca, her brown eyes wide and serious, shook her head. “She truly didn’t remember him.”

“I don’t understand,” Emma said after a moment. “How could your mom *not* remember him, we practically saw him every day when we helped on that case. Plus, let’s be honest, he’s a good looking man, and there were definitely sparks...”

“Ew!”

“Stop talking!”

“Gross, Mom!”

“Okay, okay,” Emma smiled but shook her head in confusion. “And you’re saying there are other things?”

“Yeah, like I got in trouble a while ago cuz I didn’t do some homework,” Gray said shaking his head. “Stupid me, I said something about it and Mama got mad at me all over again. It wasn’t fair.”

“Well, that’s not like her,” Emma agreed.

“And tell her about the other thing,” Gray encouraged Bianca.

“Mama doesn’t remember that I have my license.”

“Not possible!” exclaimed Mia.

“She doesn’t.” The drama had left Bianca, leaving only the hurt.

“She doesn’t,” Gray confirmed. “She didn’t even know Uncle Hollis had gotten the Bronco running.” He gazed at it longingly.

“I called the store last night and told her I’d get milk for dinner,” Bianca explained in a low voice. “She laughed and asked if I was like planning on calling Uber or something. I thought she was joking but then she got mad. So when she got home I showed her my license.”

“What did she say then?” Mia whispered.

“She just looked at it and then said she wasn’t feeling well and went to her room for a while. She hasn’t mentioned it since.”

“She thinks we’re taking the bus,” Gray added.

“Oh kids.” Emma shook her head. “This isn’t making sense.”

“What about older memories?” Mia asked. Emma saw her typing into her smartphone. “It could be a sign of dementia if she doesn’t remember some things but remembers others.”

“Okay, listen up,” Emma spoke firmly. “Contrary to what you might think, your mother and I aren’t old, not even close. Haven’t you heard? Forty’s the new twenty!”

“Right, Mom!”

“Ha... oh, you’re serious?”

“I don’t think so,” Bianca said gently.

“Okay, the new thirty.” Emma amended. “So when did this all start?”

“Don’t know,” Gray shrugged, “Guess there’s been little things for a while, but mostly last night...”

“...and this morning,” Bianca nodded. “It just... after I asked about bowling...”

“Yay, it’s like all of a sudden she’s just gone mad.”

“Well, I doubt that.” Emma smiled at Gray. “Did you call any of the family?”

“You were closest,” he rationalized.

Emma took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. “Alright then, I’ll go in and see what’s what. In the meantime,” she stated firmly, “off to school.” Among moans, groans, and offers to help she took out a pad and pen from her purse and jotted down a note. “Take this to the office.

Let them know if they have questions to call me. I'm on your contact list so it shouldn't be a problem. Go get your things and I'm assuming, Bianca, you're okay to drive?"

"Yeah, I'm fine and our stuff is already in the Bronco."

Emma turned and gave Mia a quick hug and although she knew it made him uncomfortable, she reached up and gave one to Gray, as well. His level of concern reflected in his willingness to return it. She then turned to Bianca and pulled her close.

"No worries, alright?" she said, looking at both Stark children.

"Thanks, Emma." Bianca smiled and Emma could see the relief. "I didn't know if I should call. I was just... it's just so weird. We were leaving for school..."

"...when we started talking about Mama..."

"...and that's when I thought maybe we should call you."

"You did the right thing. Now off you go. Remember, we'll get this figured out and it'll be just like your mom always says, 'no big deal'."

Bianca and Gray smiled. After giving her mother another quick hug Mia followed them to the old, barely green Bronco and climbed into the front seat, claiming seniority over Gray.

"But I'm too tall to sit in the back!" he complained.

"Not yet you aren't," Bianca declared as she turned the key and the Bronco grumbled to a start. They backed out of the drive, waving at Emma as she watched them rumble down the street.

Emma loved Andy's house. There was such color and warmth to it and it reflected beautifully those who lived within. Although she missed having a large place of her own, the townhouse she and Mia now called home was a far better fit for the two of them.

As she came to the large porch, she noticed that the kids had left the front door opened. This wasn't unusual as most visitors rarely waited for an invitation. Emma entered the foyer and closed the door quietly behind her. A quick glance in the office on her left, with its floor to ceiling bookcases, and in the formal dining room on her right, with its beautiful long plank wood table told her Andy wasn't in either. She continued through an arched doorway that led into an open floor plan where the kitchen overlooked the dining room and on into the family room. An old diner table separated the family room from the kitchen. It was positioned in front of an oversized sliding glass door that gave the space plenty of light.

Emma noticed that the glass door, which led to an oft-used covered patio and large, overgrown backyard, was closed against the chill of the November morn. The irony that the front door had been left open to welcome that same chill was not lost on her.

She dropped her shoulder bag on the back of an L-shaped couch in a warm brown tone; smiling at the family's massive dog sprawled across it. She gave him a quick scratch behind the ears, along with a few praising "good boys" since his tail appeared to be wagging at hyper-speed. Such pleasure at seeing her had her fearing his enthusiasm would present itself in a welcoming leap but instead he simply stretched to receive the devoted attention that had suddenly come his way.

With a sigh, Emma gave Kitty one last pat on the head and then went over and took a seat on a tall stool tucked under the soap-stone topped peninsula that separated the kitchen from the dining area. Across from her Andy stood staring out the glass door, a wooden spoon held in her hand. She was a tall woman, made more so by boots that offered her an additional few inches. She wore her hair long and, as it tended to curl randomly, usually held back. Today it was in a low ponytail. Emma thought her beautiful and envied the tanned skin and the black eyes that seemed so exotic compared to her own paleness. Her friend hadn't moved or acknowledged her presence since she had entered the room.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked softly.

"Something's wrong, Em," Andy said slowly in that husky voice she was known for and appearing unsurprised by Emma's visit.

"Yes, I think that's true." Emma reached over and easily removed the spoon from Andy's hand, drawing her friend's attention away from the window. As there were no dishes on the counter, she wasn't sure how Andy had planned to use it.

"Bianca has her driver's license."

"Yes, yes she does."

"She says she's had it for a while now."

"That would be right."

Andy covered her stomach with her hand and shook her head slowly.

"Why can't I remember that?" she whispered, her dark eyes troubled and searching. She watched as Emma laid the spoon on the counter and then rubbed at her forehead. "It gives me a headache when I try to remember, but how could I forget something like that? It's not possible."

“And you don’t remember?”

“No.”

Emma considered everything the kids had told her. She saw Andy daily, they owned a paper craft store together, for god’s sake, she thought. They weren’t just business partners; they were best friends, as well. She would know if something was off, should know if something was off.

“Emma,” Andy gripped the edge of the counter and leaned forward, “I’m not saying I’m fuzzy on the details, I’m saying there aren’t any, nada! How is that even possible? Then this morning Bianca’s talking about some ‘agent’! What agent?” she shook her head as if such a possibility was inconceivable.

“Nash,” Emma supplied. “Special Agent Stone Nash of the SI-U.”

“The psy-what?”

“Strategic Investigation Unit, SI-U.”

“You know him, too?”

“You don’t remember him?” When Andy shook her head, Emma asked. “And you don’t remember Bianca getting her license? I mean you don’t remember any of it.”

“No.”

“Okay,” Emma nodded slowly, “tell me the last thing you *do* remember.”

“That might help,” Andy considered. “Kind of like reverse engineering. Let’s see.” She struggled to calm her nerves and think clearly. “I remember a meeting with Margaret and it running long. She was having a good day so I didn’t want to cut our session short.”

“Her life story,” Emma nodded. One of the services their craft store, Memory Corner, provided was the recording and writing of life stories, a fun and lucrative side of their business.

“Right. She was doing so well. No, wait... I remember after that, later that night, much later, I called Harold and we talked. It was after midnight and he agreed to stop by the office, which he did, yesterday, right?” Andy’s eyes were bright with expectation. “How can I remember yesterday, but not this other stuff?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that,” Emma replied slowly.

Andy didn’t miss the note of uncertainty in Emma’s voice. She reached up, pulled her hair loose, and scraped all the curls back into a ponytail, not willing to look at Emma as she did so. She sighed.

“I take it that I’ve got this wrong somehow?” Her stomach clenched and she felt the knot in her head expand. “You know when you’re driving somewhere familiar but suddenly your landmarks seem off. It’s as if you know where you are and feel lost all at the same time. That’s how I’m feeling. Damn, Emma. I can completely remember us meeting with Harold. I’m kind of fuzzy on some of the details. I know we were helping him with a case and I had figured something out that I wanted to share with you...”

“And you did. The Anderson case. We closed it.”

“We...what? Since yesterday?”

“Since a month ago, Andy. I... well...your meeting with Margaret? Calling Harold in the middle of the night and the Anderson case? That all happened a month ago; back in October. It’s November. Thanksgiving is next week.”

“What? Not possible!” Andy snapped. “Crap, I feel sick.” She straightened and the heat of frustration lingered in her voice, “You’re saying an entire *month* has gone by? That we’ve closed a cold case, I completed a life story, the kids celebrated Halloween, and what, and Bianca got her driver’s license? Where have I been for all that?”

“Right here. Andy, I promise you, I had no idea anything was going on. You, well, you were you. Nothing out of the normal. Work, the kids, all of it. You even had a barbeque to celebrate Bianca getting her license.”

“This doesn’t make sense.” Andy suddenly started pacing around the kitchen. “I don’t remember any of it, not a thing! And you say I participated in all of it. How is that possible? Something must have happened... like I was abducted by aliens... or something! What am I, some sort of X-Files character?” she snorted and then suddenly her eyes widened. “Oh my god, Em,” Andy ran her hands up and down her body and around her head. “Was I in an accident? Did I get hurt? Did I hurt anyone else? Something must have happened, right, that made me forget the last month of my life!”

Something clicked in Emma’s brain and she considered Andy carefully. Recognizing the look, Andy moved to the counter, leaning toward her friend.

“What? What? You’ve thought of something. You know something.”

“No, no,” Emma shook her head, thinking it was best to keep her thoughts to herself until she could do some research. The intensity of Andy’s stare, as if trying to read her mind, had her

repeating more forcefully, “No Andy. I *don’t*. But we need to find someone who does. You need to see a doctor, but knowing you, you haven’t got one, do you?”

“No,” Andy answered with a sigh and stepped back. She tilted her head from side to side to relieve the tension.

“Well, that’s the only thing I can think to do.”

“I’m not completely against the doctor idea,” Andy admitted. “My head is killing me. I just can’t... I can’t think this through. It doesn’t make sense.”

“I’m with you there.”

Andy tried to quash the sense of panic she felt. To steady herself she took several slow, deep breaths while Emma, as was her nature, searched for answers and options.

“Jesus, Em,” Andy finally said in a whisper. “I feel like I’m in a ‘Twilight Zone’ episode. It’s as if everything *seems* normal, but it’s not. There’s this stranger who lived my life over the last month and I’ve been locked in some sort of time-vault until now.”

“I can’t imagine.

Andy shook her head and tears filled her eyes.

“Bianca has her license?” Andy turned and grabbed some paper towel and wiped at the tears that had begun to spill. “What kind of a mother forgets something like that? And Em, the look on her face! God, it all makes so much more sense now, the shock on Gray’s face when I got angry with him about some missing homework and I’m thinking now that I’ve probably punished him twice for it. And Bianca,” Andy bent over slightly as if she’d been punched. “Oh my god she was so hurt when I didn’t remember.” Andy put her elbows on the counter and lowered her head into her hands.

“Hey, wait a minute... I have an idea.” Emma moved to the couch and grabbed her cell phone out of her purse. Andy straightened.

“Tell me you know someone who can fix this.”

“Maybe, and if not, he can point us in the right direction.”

“Who?”

“Doc Phillips.”

“Oh my god, Doc! Em, that’s an excellent idea.” Andy came around the counter and sat on the stool Emma had just vacated. “Do you think he’ll see me?”

“Yes, actually, I think he will. Our hope, however, is that he’s home and not off playing golf; kind of his thing now that he’s retired.”

“Call him there if he is!”

“Sure, I’ll be happy to.”

“Crap, sorry. I’ve got a stomach full of hornets, and don’t correct me. Whatever is happening is more vicious than a bunch of butterflies.”

“Hello Doc, its Emma Stern,” Emma spoke into the phone. “I’m sorry to be calling so early...oh, oh good then. Well, the thing is...”

As Emma talked with the doctor, Andy closed her eyes, letting the conversation wash over her. Dr. Martin Phillips had met Emma as a child and had been her doctor ever since, up until he retired some years back. As a family friend, he was at many of their gatherings so Andy was acquainted with him, as well. Now she could hear the chirp of his voice and occasionally Emma would say things like “sure” and “right” and “I understand”. Noticing a change in her tone, Andy zeroed in on Emma in expectation.

“That’s excellent, Doc... Yes, absolutely.” Emma returned Andy look. “About thirty minutes?” At Andy’s nod Emma confirmed it, “We’ll see you then, Doc... Thank you.”

“So we’re good?” Andy asked.

“He said to come on over. He’ll do what he can.”

The two stared at each other in uncertain silence. Kitty came over and plopped down at Andy’s feet causing her to break eye contact. She bent and gave the dog belly a rub.

“Give me a moment,” she mumbled

Emma was startled when Andy stood and quickly dashed down a hallway off the kitchen. She waited a moment or two and then went to what she knew was Andy’s bedroom. Kitty led the way, leaping onto the bed, dislodging one of Andy’s cats from the middle of a pile of pillows. Emma entered the large master suite and peeked around the open bathroom door. She rushed in when she saw Andy on the floor next to the toilet. As Andy flushed it, Emma opened the cabinet beneath one of the two sinks and grabbed a wash cloth. She ran it under cold water and then wringing it out, went over to Andy who was using toilet paper to wipe her mouth.

“Here,” Emma handed over the wet cloth. Andy scrubbed at her face then folded the cloth twice and held it against her forehead.

“Christ my head hurts,” she said, resting it on her arm across the seat of the toilet. “I hope he has some answers for us, Emma,” Andy continued, her voice muffled. “My poor kids.” She lifted fearful eyes. “They must be so... I don’t know. Scared? Confused? We’ve got to figure this out.”

“We will, we will,” Emma assured her.

Andy took several steadying breaths sizing up her friend as she did so.

“You’re wearing yoga pants,” Andy stated, noting that Emma’s blonde hair was in a ponytail, the shorter ends held back behind her ears with bobby pins. A fitted Lycra top in fuchsia brought out color in her cheeks and accentuated her gray eyes. “Not exactly what you wear to work, nor would you show your face there without makeup.” She studied her friend carefully, “You were on your way to yoga class. The kids called you.” Emma nodded but Andy was looking at her closely. “There’s something else,” she said seeing the familiar shadow in her friend’s eyes. Her heart tightened. “Jason?” she asked quietly.

“Another dream,” Emma admitted. “A wonderful, beautiful dream that I hated waking up from. It’s just such a...”

“Slap in the face?”

“It is, you know. Reality is like this mad slap after something so beautiful. However, there it is. After all this time, you’d think it’d get easier. And it has, I guess.”

“It has, Em. It used to be you’d have one of your Jason dreams and it just colored your world so bleak. Now,” Andy tilted her head, “it seems different somehow.”

“I guess. It’s just hard to let it go and get back to reality.” Emma considered Andy in return. She was wearing worn blue jeans, knee high black boots, and a crisp white blouse cut to remain untucked. Minimal makeup was Andy’s style and after the repeated face scrubbings, she no longer wore even that. “Although I envy the fact that you can go without makeup and still look fabulous, I will say you’re looking a little pale. On the other hand you look like you were planning on heading out yourself.”

“That had been the plan,” Andy nodded. She stood, reached down, and grabbed Emma’s hand to help her off the floor. She went to the sink and rinsed out her mouth, ran the washcloth over her face again, and re-ponytailed her hair. She checked herself in the mirror. Her eyes were huge and her cheeks lacked color. Her blouse was a tad wrinkled, but she tugged at it and

decided she was presentable enough, her standard goal when she got ready in the morning. Andy caught the concern in Emma's eyes.

"Let's go," she said and led the way back to the family room. "Now I know why I don't get sick. Tossing my breakfast, yuk," Andy shivered with disgust. "I will admit, though, I feel somewhat better. I think knowing we're doing something helps."

"I hope Doc can help."

Back in the family room, Emma picked up her keys and purse, watched as Andy moved to a chair next to one of the kitchen cupboards, and did the same.

"He might not have answers, but he'll be able to point us in the right direction. Emma, I feel like," Andy shook her head, "I feel like I've gone down the rabbit hole or something. I woke up this morning with plans to go to the shop and sit with Mavis on scheduling next month's craft classes. Now I find out it's *already* next month!" Anger wormed its way through the fear. Anger was more doable in Andy's mind. "Let's meet with Doc Phillips and hear what he has to say."

"Works for me," Emma said as they left the house.

As they headed to Emma's car, Andy threw an arm around Emma's shoulders and gave her a quick squeeze.

"I'm not sure how I'd be dealing with this freak-fest if I didn't have you here. The kids made a good call."

"Ah, shucks," Emma grinned, "guess you're finally realizing how lucky you are to have me for a friend!"

"Yes, I am. You're my Glenda..."

"Who? Oh, from 'The Wizard of Oz'?" Emma chuckled. "If only I had a magic wand."

"Ha, I thought you were going to say 'if only I had a brain', like in the song and I was going to say that lucky for me you have a brilliant one!" Emma chuckled but then saw a familiar vagueness sweep Andy's face.

"What?"

"What?" Andy caught the knowing look from Emma. "Oh, well, oddly enough, in the middle of this rather bizarre situation we have before us, this song keeps playing in my mind. What do they call it an ear wig or something?"

"Ear *worm*." Emma unlocked the car. "That's what it's called," she said as they got in, "when you can't get a song out of your head."

“Ear worm? Sounds Trek-ish, doesn’t it?”

“You’re all over the place today with your book and movie references: ‘Alice in Wonderland, ‘Twilight Zone’, ‘The Wizard of Oz’, and even ‘Star Trek’. You even mentioned ‘The X-Files’.”

“That’s me, traveling all universes, here, out there, and those creepy alternate ones in between.” Andy gave a tired smile. “Anyway... I’ve got one of those ear worm thingies... just bits of a song that keeps running through my head, which is frustrating ‘cuz I don’t even know the words.”

“Do you know the title?”

“Yep.” Andy leaned back against the head rest and closed her eyes. “You probably know it, too, ‘Royals’? It was popular a while back. I just get pieces of it and then in the chorus there’s this part that goes...” Andy sang the only part she knew. “Odd.”

“Comparatively speaking to this morning? No, not so much.” Emma started the car and pulled out of the driveway.

“Well, what the heck, Em? How can I remember a song I barely know at best but not Bianca getting her license? This is just wrong.”

“I have no idea but we’ll work it out. And knowing you, the song may play into something else altogether. Right? Remember too, that song’s been out for a while. It’s not like you’ve forgotten everything.”

“True,” Andy accepted the explanation because it was convenient. “So Bianca said Harold called last night. Are we working on a new case?”

“Nope, maybe he was just checking in, you know? We haven’t worked a new case in a while and we still have that one waiting in the corner of the craft room.”

“Have we pissed Harold off or something? We usually go from one case to the next. Why haven’t we?”

“Don’t know,” Emma answered, although she had a good idea of the reason. “Let’s take it one thing at a time and see what Doc has to say.”

“Fine by me,” Andy said quietly, leaning back again and closing her eyes. Her head continued to throb on a low note, while Lorde’s “Royals” played accompaniment in her mind.

## CHAPTER 2

Special Agent Stone Nash was a confident man. The FBI, along with the California Department of Public Safety, had recently put together a new Strategic Investigation Unit. When approached almost two months back to head the joint task force he agreed instantly. He uprooted his two teenage sons, along with their indispensable housekeeper, and moved north from Los Angeles to the Bay area. He moved with full certainty that he was the right man for the job, and it was the right time for a change.

The move would do him good; them good. That was what had first come to mind when told of the promotion, of the required move. He was done with constantly envisioning righteous scenarios where history was re-written and a self-pitying life saved. The imaginary confrontations staged in his mind left him exhausted yet he couldn't seem to stem their flow. What was that about sanity and the expectation of a different outcome? The fact was Deirdra had written the end of her story with no thought to the turmoil she'd leave behind; leaving all of that behind would be best for him and the boys.

He was convinced this was truth when he left Director Marino's office. He was done with the feelings of guilt, betrayal, and the constant roller coaster of pity and disgust. The move was an opportunity to put it behind him. And his boys? Somehow, he'd done something right along the way there as they were turning out to be fine young men. They, along with Stone's work, had saved the sanity Deirdra so desperately clawed at in his mind so the move was an opportunity to finally put her to rest. He had felt a sense of relief with that thought, along with a passing sadness in knowing no one would be visiting her on the grassy slopes of Rose Hills Cemetery once they moved.

Now he had something new to occupy his mind. The SI-U, as it was referred to, was responsible for investigating high-profile, unusual, or time intensive crimes where resources more than what were available through the DPS were needed, but less red-tape and prying eyes from the FBI would be beneficial. As the task force consisted of detectives and agents from both agencies, mutual cooperation was assured. With the SI-U, there were no concerns of territorial-toes being stepped on, which meant investigations could remain fluid, with far less bureaucracy.

Stone had two weeks to set up his headquarters and hand-pick his team. Any doubt anyone might have had as to the value of the unit, or the talents of those who made it up dispelled quickly when the SI-U closed its first case with spectacular results. It had been a particularly heinous crime involving the rape and murder of several teenage girls spanning over five years and multiple states. That the SI-U had been able to identify and capture the killer with some outside help was not lost on Stone. Knowing when to ask for assistance was part of doing a job well, he would argue, even if that aid came from a rather eccentric trio of civilians.

Seeing as Passmore & Associates had come so highly recommended by the Chief of Police that Stone had felt it had been more of a directive than a recommendation was also not lost on the new SI-U director. Although he had questioned the need, especially as it had been their first case, he had decided to allow each member of his team, including the civilians, to play to their strengths and do their job; they had done so with spectacular results.

Now, a certain brunette from that trio was on his mind as he entered the Old Harold P. Waring Municipal Building in downtown Larkrise, a suburb of San Francisco. He strolled immediately to the elevator and was thankful when the doors opened on his arrival. Going into the cabin, he punched the button for the sixth floor, ignoring the two women who had quickly followed him onto the elevator.

Stone grimaced as he thought back to his last encounter with the leggy brunette. It had been stupid to stop by her house. More idiotic was claiming he was doing so to thank her for her assistance. He let out a disgusted sigh and scratched at the salt and pepper stubble that wrapped around his jaw. What had he been thinking? His gut twisted and he knew exactly what he had been thinking. The outcome of that night not so long ago was as etched in his mind as it must be in hers. She had been completely terrified, rightfully so. All had felt the overwhelming relief, for her, for her daughter. She had turned to him with such joy, taking her into his arms had been an automatic gesture. The benefit of feeling that body against his had been a perk, but the kiss?

Jesus, that had taken him by surprise and even knowing it had been an impulsive act on her part, he had to admit, it still lingered on his mind. It was for this reason he had sought out an excuse to see her. It equally explained why he hadn't put the thought into it that he should have.

He had convinced himself on the drive to her house that he was just checking up to be sure she and Bianca were okay. Women loved that sort of thing, he'd told himself. Pleased to see him, she'd invite him into her home. He'd probably have to make some small talk, not something he liked to do but he was more than capable, and then he would ask her out. Or not. Staying in and further exploring the kiss was an option, as well. That was the thought, all the thought, he had put into it. With the plan in place, he had pulled into her driveway, past several cars, and confidently marched up to her front door.

All good intention fled when Andy had answered the door with that, he had no problem admitting it, sexy half smile of hers. It had come slow and full of promise. However, that smile had also held that singular sense of knowledge she seemed to have, as if she knew more than she was willing to share. His reaction, so strong and swift at seeing her again caught him off guard and from there it all went south.

It had been an awkward and stilted conversation, made worse when he refused her invitation to come inside. He could smell the barbeque and hear the laughter of guests, which explained the cars in the driveway that he had ignored. Her face was a study of bewilderment when he gave her a chilly "thank you for your services" with the only thing missing was him tipping an imaginary hat and calling her "ma'am". Confusion had clouded those amazingly dark eyes and she had given an equally awkward, "your welcome". With starched pride keeping his back from bending in any conceivable manner to alter the cool temperature he had created between them, he had simply turned and left. Idiot, he thought with renewed embarrassment.

He hadn't seen her in the weeks since and wasn't sure what he wanted to do about it.

The scowl that deepened a groove between his dark eyebrows didn't dissuade his elevator companions from appreciating the dark hair with its streaks of gray around the sides and throughout his sideburns. Although his background was FBI, his mode of dress was not. A man who preferred plain and simple, Stone kept to old Levis, a fact the women much appreciated, along with well-worn work boots. As was his custom these days, he wore a long sleeve dark tee under a plaid shirt and his familiar blue/gray tweed jacket. As November had deepened the cold that had arrived the month before, he wore a black coat, of equal length as the jacket, which kept

him warm with its fleece lining. He wore no hat so that his hair, thick and dark, waved back from his forehead to land just over the collar of his coat.

He heard a slight sound and realized the elevator had stopped on the fourth floor. He stepped aside and gave a nod. Although his smile barely passed for polite, two dimples winked on either side of his mouth causing the women to smile wide in return.

“Excuse me,” he said as he held the doors open so they could pass. Both of the women, regardless of the fact that the open doors were easily wide enough, felt the need to pass by so close to Stone that their clothing whispered against his. Each smiled up invitingly and both were disappointed by the blank look they received in return. He gave them another nod, pressed the “close” button, and continued his ascent.

He forcefully pushed aside thoughts of Andy, which seemed to cloud his mind quite often these days. It was time to focus on the job and he knew he had plenty of paperwork to clear off his desk. His plan to come in early had been waylaid by a teenager who had once again overslept and missed the bus; a fact Stone realized belatedly when he saw Parker’s backpack still by the front door. Trying to get the fifteen year old up and moving in ten minutes had been a tall order, but Stone felt a sense of parental pride when he dropped Parker off at school just as the first bell rang.

The elevator heralded his arrival on the sixth floor and Stone stepped off. Since SI-U headquarters commanded the entire top floor, with a completely open format, he was able to scan the layout easily. It was a large space with a bank of oversized arched windows, floor to ceiling tall, on one side, and a row of meeting rooms on the other – two of which could be used for interrogations. Stone’s office anchored one end of the floor while the kitchen was on the other, next to the elevator. In between were the desks of his team, a few of which were unassigned with the idea of being filled later if needed. The desks where his two IT nerds worked their weird magic was housed there as well. The three clear panels of their murder boards fronted the desks, along with wide-screen TV’s above each.

His office in the far corner was walled by glass, except for the aged brick of the building itself as his back wall. Because of the glass, he could easily see the man sitting behind his desk. At a lanky six-two, Stone covered the distance from the elevator to his office door quickly but slowed when he recognized his visitor.

“Stevenson.”

“Nash.” The man acknowledged in a grumbling voice that spoke of his many years as a smoker. He’d turned to look out the tall windows and now nodded to the chairs in front of the desk. Stone shrugged out of his coat, hung it on a black painted coat tree in the corner, and sat with a small smile as he considered the man before him. Mike Stevenson was a barrel-chested man of average height who tended to be perpetually stone-faced, making him a mean poker-player, as Stone well knew. Many described the Chief of Police of San Francisco as a cop’s cop with a reputation for taking a direct, no-nonsense approach to law enforcement.

“What’s brought you out to the ‘burbs?” Stone asked. He saw the file that Stevenson was fingering on his desk. “New case?”

“Cold case. Before we get to it though... first time I’ve seen your new digs. Can’t say you’ve got it bad up here.”

“No,” agreed Stone as he took in the view as well. “No complaints from me.”

“Wouldn’t think so,” rumbled Stevenson. He turned his chair and his measuring gaze back to Stone. “I want to commend you on closing another case. That makes what? Eight, nine you’ve closed so far?”

“An even ten,” Stone nodded, relaxing but remaining curious.

“You came out strong.”

“Had some help.”

“Speaking of Passmore, I assume. That’s why I recommended him. Good cop. Still has skill; should put it to use.”

“Along with his team.” Stone saw Stevenson’s lips curl on the ends.

“Yes, yes, he’s got himself a good team; interesting as well, to say the least.”

“To say the least.”

“What you’ve done has not gone unnoticed. SI-U’s proving its worth.”

“I’ll pass it along,” Stone pointed to the case file. “If it’s a cold case, why not pass it on to Passmore? I hear he gets his pick.”

“He does but he looks good, we look good.” Stevenson had a head of gray hair that he kept closely cut, and now he gave it a rub. “We keep them busy.” Something struck Stevenson as funny and he smiled fully, changing the look of the man instantly. Stone knew he was a grandfather and the smile promised a devoted one. Even the dark blue eyes lighted, slightly. He turned to look at Stone. “Nice work if you can get it and as long as he closes cases that no one

else has, well, then, who's to complain. As for his team...those two gals keep the rest of us on our toes."

"Sounds like you've had a... run in or two."

"Story for another time," Stevenson chuckled and returned his gaze to the window. Then he shook his head and his face settled back into the tight mask that Stone knew well. "They took that rape/murder of yours. Said it then, say it now, your team, his team, all performed well, Nash. What a case, what an ugly, sick son of a bitch," he shook his head with disgust. "As I said, you lived up to the hype."

"Good to hear," Stone smiled easily. "And I can say that Harold, Andy, and Emma did as well." He considered what Stevenson had just said. "Hype?"

"Hell, Nash, you don't start a task force like this and not expect politics to kick in. It's one of the reasons I wanted you to work with Passmore. He's known, has a good rep, and he knows people. Harold and those two gals aren't just proven, with a highly successful track record, they're well liked. Get him on your side, and you'll fit in nicely with the popular kids, as they say."

"You're saying we needed to pass muster with Passmore so others would want to work with us?" The idea confounded Stone.

"Not quite, son, it's more about transitioning smoothly. You think you were the only one up for this position, that those out there," Stevenson nodded to the empty desks, even as members of Stone's team began to wander off the elevator, "were the only agents and detectives available for the unit? And then there you go hand-picking a team that wasn't exactly what we had been expecting. There were, are, others who feel they have more right to be here than those who are. You've got the politics of it," this he said in a low grumble, "that need to be played." Stevenson shook his head, leaning back in the chair until it creaked a warning and watched the members of Stone's team as they moved about from kitchen to desk. In the open space, even with the office door closed, the smell of coffee began filling the air.

"I chose a good team," Nash stated without qualm.

"You chose well, as did Marino and I," Stevenson clarified. "This is our baby and so far, it's developing well. However, that first case blew everyone's expectations out of the water. We sure as hell didn't expect you to find more bodies. Damn, it got to the point I didn't want to read your daily reports. So many young girls." Stevenson remained silent for a moment then

continued in a more reflective voice, "I'll tell you what, son, closing that case gave folks answers, and with those answers, no matter how ugly they were, those answers gave them closure." He turned and peered directly at Stone. "That, Nash, is why we do what we do. Why we are willing to see what we see, know what we know, and still come in each day knowing we're likely to be seeing it again."

Stone instantly thought of Andy and Bianca, and nodded in agreement. After a moment, he cleared his throat.

"I'm not complaining about the recognition," he said, "but you didn't come up here to pat me on the back. What's the case and why isn't it going directly to Passmore?"

"Timothy Royal murdered eight years ago. Let's just say his widow is a friend of Mayor Richards and she's cashing in her chips. She wants the best, and these days, that's you."

Stevenson tossed the file across the desk. Stone reached for it and gave it a cursory look. He'd not met the mayor of San Francisco but heard he had a reputation for meddling, which was why Stevenson had suggested the SI-U be housed a distance away from City Hall. He considered the Chief and their conversation. For this reason, he wasn't surprised when Stevenson added, "That being said, you may want to bring Passmore in on this."

"Why not give it to him directly?"

"You have resources Passmore doesn't, which may be needed. As for why include him, cold cases are a different breed. They're his area of expertise. Plus," he continued slyly, "Passmore knows the Widow Royal so you might find him helpful there. She wields some power and that could be problematic, or not, who knows? Figure it's best to be prepared. It's your unit," he shrugged, "your decision, but it may be worth having him look over the file and get his thoughts."

"The women that work with him, Stark, Stern, what do you know of them?"

Stevenson considered Nash carefully, his face impassive.

"As much as you. Civilians. One widowed, one divorced. They own some sort of craft store my wife loves. They've got a few teenagers between them. I'm sure you've vetted them, as has the DPS and, by the way, as has the FBI." Stevenson kept his face neutral. He knew the women. They were attractive, personable, and intelligent. Yet there was something more... they had unique qualities that could be... unsettling, he decided. "Why do you ask?"

“Curious. That’s all. They’re…” Suddenly Nash felt at a loss to explain his reason for asking. He waved his hand and just shook his head.

“Well, as I said, it’s up to you. Use them or don’t. But I’m expecting the same result on this,” Stevenson pointed to the file, “as you’ve given me on the other cases. You’ve set a high bar, Nash, and I expect you to continue to meet and rise above it.”

“Understood.”

“Everything we have on this will be sent up. Until then, the gist of it’s in the file. You find what’s been missed.”

Mike Stevenson, seemingly strong and sturdy, pushed against the desk and the chair rolled back easily. He stood and slowly maneuvered around to Stone who had risen, as well. There was a reason Stevenson had been riding a desk for the last fifteen years, easily identified by the hitch in his step; constantly reminded by the wrench in his hip. His was the cautionary tale told yearly to new recruits as they went through academy. “You think you’re gonna cowboy it up like they do on those dumb-ass cop shows? Well, here’s what happens when glory goes before procedure and training!” They’d then show crime scene footage of Mike slumped on the floor, his partner lying dead next to him. He knew they showed it and he hoped to God that each one of those young men and women took a lesson from it.

“Glad we understand each other,” he said now. He lumbered around Stone to the office door where next to the doorframe leaned a simple black cane, its handle dulled with use, the tip scooped, and showing streaks of white. He rested his weight on it and sized up his surroundings. “You’ve got it good here, Nash. It’s up to you to keep it.”

“That’s the plan, Chief.”

“Well, let’s see if I’ve dawdled long enough to have missed the Mayor. He’s been trying to hunt me down all week and truth be told, I figure it’d never occur to him that I’d come out this way,” Mike chuckled softly. “Wanted to see your new digs, so why not kill two with one, eh?”

Stone chuckled, understanding why the Chief had taken so long to hand over the new case. He watched as Stevenson made his way out onto the floor, stopping to say a quick hello to members of his team before getting on the elevator.