



# Revelations

Erin O'Reilly

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## **Revelations**

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Editor: Gretchen Walsh

Cover Design: Helen Hayes

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you JM Dragon for telling me there was more to do before kicking me out of the nest.

## **Dedication**

For Carl and Dorothy  
Always remember me as loving you

## **Back of the Book**

Emma Sanders survives in a dark world of fear and shadows created by her mother. Circumstances thrown into her life's path keep her isolated, alone, and far removed from the trappings of modern society. She does what she has to do to endure life in spite of her perceived inadequacies and worthlessness.

When a shadowy figure emerges from the muddy depths of water near her boat dock, light begins to creep into Emma's lonely existence. Cay O'Neill's path twists and turns, bringing her to Jones' Lake and Emma Sanders.

Slowly, Emma allows Cay into her life, rejoicing in the newfound emotion of friendship and other feelings that she can't quite explain. A common enemy threatens the fledgling relationship, but together, they form a strong bond in a fight to stay alive.

Emma Sanders' life is about to take a turn as the light of a once-inconceivable world shines on her.

## Prologue

The woman's booted foot hit the gritty, greasy garage floor as she walked inside Baroni's Auto Emporium. The acrid smell of petroleum products filled her nose and burned her eyes. Her blue orbs scanned the area as she noted all exits and where each mechanic stood. It was risky coming there, but she had no choice. She made certain she knew all her options for escape.

Her feet crunched across the gritty concrete floor until she arrived at a wooden door adorned with a glass panel inscribed with *Office*. She cautiously knocked.

The door flung open and she saw a rather large, dark man. From behind him, she heard a voice say, "You're late."

"Hmm, sorry, there was an accident that held up traffic." The woman squinted past the big man as her eyes rested on an older man sitting at a worn wooden desk.

"I'm not interested in excuses, only results." His chair emitted a loud screech as it scraped on the floor. Rapidly, he came at the woman. "I'd better not hear any more excuses from you. When I give an order, I expect you to follow them exactly as I say. No excuses!"

"What do you need my services for?"

The older man turned to the desk, picked up a large envelope, came back around, and shoved it in the direction of the woman. "All you need is in here."

The woman took the envelope and turned it over, then held it as if she were weighing it. "What about my money?"

Cold hard eyes looked at her. "There is enough there for any equipment you need and the number of a Cayman Island account with partial payment. You'll receive the balance when you deliver the woman to me dead or alive."

"I draw the line at murder."

The man grabbed her arm and squeezed. "Listen, bitch, I don't give a fuck where you draw the line. You'll do as you're told."

She struggled, but the man held his grip. "If you want me to do this, it'll be on my terms."

He squeezed tighter and pulled her closer as his hot cigar-laced breath assaulted her nostrils. His voice dropped. "If you want to live, you'll bring that woman to me. Is that clear?"

Her eyes held steady as her body stiffened. "Quite clear."

He released her before shoving her backward so forcefully that she hit the wall. His snarling words traveled to her as if lashing out from his jabbing finger. "Good. Fuck with her anyway you want, just bring her to me!"

## Chapter One

Emma Sanders, at forty-four, could never remember having a friend. Yet, one memory was clear—as a young child, she remembered her mother rushing out of their burning house protecting her in loving arms. Yellow, red, orange, and blue flames shot out of the roof and windows as shrieks of those trapped inside pierced the night air. Her mother was sobbing as she held her close until she heard the pleas of her brother, Bobby... *Mommy, Mommy, help me.* Then, her mother put her down next to a tall oak tree and told her to stay put. She watched as her mother dashed back toward the house until a blast captured her, driving her body against the rock wall fence.

Sirens blared in the night as engines and ambulances raced their way to the fiery inferno on Maple Street. Firefighters leapt from their trucks, running, hauling long coils of hoses toward the fire hydrants. In seconds, powerful streams of water shot out at the Sanders's home. The firemen surrounded the burning building desperately trying to save those left inside.

As she sat helpless and alone in the warm night air of summer, Emma tried as best she could with her five-year-old mind to comprehend the events happening around her. People in white clothing were crouched on the ground by her mother's side, then they gently lifted her onto the waiting stretcher. She watched as two men loaded her mother into a white vehicle with a red cross and the doors closing her inside. Then, with red lights swirling, she saw the ambulance pull into the street, carrying her mother away from her. Her eyes were round and unbelieving, and she began to cry, "Mommy, Mommy, come back."

A police officer, watching as the flames whipped the night sky, took notice of the child under the oak tree and approached her. "Were you in that house?" he asked, bending down to pick her up in his strong arms.

"Yes." She sobbed as she watched the only home she had ever known collapse into a pile of fiery rubble.

The next days were all a blur for the young girl. Emma went from one neighbor to another, each trying to comfort the inconsolable child. Alone, in the front pew of the church, she sat as the sole representative of her family, most of whom now lie inside five dark caskets that lined the altar area. Although people told her that her

father, Robert, her two brothers Bobby and Jimmy, and her grandparents Robert Sr. and Sara were resting inside, she did not believe them.

Expectantly, she waited and hoped, ignoring the drone of the minister's voice. Even as the creaking sounds of the winches pierced her ears and she saw the coffins lowered into the ground, she still searched the cemetery, expecting all of them to walk out of the shady trees at the top of the knoll or to wave to her from the street. She waited, hoping that her family would come and take her away from the horrible scene. No one came and she finally stood quietly by sobbing. "Mommy, Mommy."

That one horrible night shaped Emma Sanders's life forever.

## Chapter Two

Edward Sanders, Emma's great-great-grandfather, longed to leave the city and take his family to a place free of the filth, choking smoke, and unruly crowds that freely roamed the city streets. Daily, he feared for his family's safety as he watched crime increase to the point that the criminals were running the city. In 1888, he uprooted his wife, Rebecca, three sons, Edward Junior, Richard, and Robert, and two daughters, Emily and Virginia, and moved them two hundred miles west to an unsettled, peaceful valley.

He laid claim to the entire valley and cleared enough land to build a large house for them to live in and a barn for their livestock. Their property included a small river, as well as the surrounding mountains where mixed hardwoods grew in abundance. As more and more people ventured out of the cities and into the country, the demand for lumber was on the rise. After adding a mill to their homestead, it wasn't long before he and his sons had a thriving timber company. Sanders and Sons became the best-known source of lumber in the state.

The family prospered until 1909 when their numbers were reduced to just three as typhoid ravaged the population all around them. Edward, Richard, and Robert were all that remained. Edward fell into a deep depression, allowing the family business to falter until his two sons stepped in and took over the day-to-day operations. When the government decided in the early 1920s to dam up the river and create a lake, it was a windfall for the family. Not only did they make a large profit selling the land, but they also retained the rights to all the lakefront property.

Edward's depression continued off and on for the next eight years, and that affected the company. He held an iron fist on the business, but as the years trickled by and his depression spiraled downward, it became evident he had lost all concept of money management or how to successfully run a business. He ignored his sons' advice, turning instead to unscrupulous advisers who invested vast amounts of his money in the stock market, only to lose it all in the great stock market crash of 1929. The family was nearly penniless as Edward took the easy road out by committing suicide, as did so many others of the time.

Richard, preferring to focus all his energies on the business, never married. After their father's death, Richard salvaged what he could of the lumber mill to get it up and running again. Once more, the family fortunes took an upward turn, although it was necessary from time to time to sell off parcels of land. These sales decreased the amount of trees available for logging. Not able to meet the ever-increasing demand for lumber, the business soon took a nosedive and closed in 1946. In September 1948, Richard developed pneumonia and suffered recurring bouts of the disease over the next year until he finally succumbed to its ravages. Since Robert was the only

surviving member of the family, it became his duty, along with his son, Robert Jr., to take over the business.

It wasn't until the early fifties when Robert, Emma's father, assumed management of the family's properties that it began to prosper once again. He took a long hard look at the assets of the business and realized that lumber would never be their fortune again. It was the intangible that would make Sanders and Sons flourish once more.

Pristine mountains of pine and hardwoods rose up, surrounding the lake, providing a shield from the weather to the lake below. Farmers cleared large sections of land and began raising dairy cows and planting corn and soybeans in many areas. Small towns began to spring up around the lake, offering weekend visitors places to eat and spend the night.

The clear, clean lake water teemed with various species of fish while lush grasses lined the shore. And there was a place in the mountains, known only to the residents, with a spring flowing freely with the purest and best tasting water. The locals used this water, but soon, an enterprising man began bottling it and selling it to the "city folks."

As far as Robert was concerned, their home on the southernmost point of the lake along the peaceful waters was heaven on earth. Robert realized that by using the nearby lands, he could capitalize on the impulses of people from nearby cities who came to the lake on weekends for fishing, camping, and boating. In addition, the surrounding mountains were ideal for skiing, making the area perfect for year-round relaxation and sports. He reversed the family's fortunes as he began building vacation homes on the lakeshore. On the last remaining mountain the family owned, he cleared an area for ski runs, lifts, and a château. He built a store nearby to sell ski equipment and passes.

Once the business was established, he sold everything for a hefty profit, preferring to concentrate on managing the homes around the lake. He envisioned a place where his family could thrive and spend generations running and improving the business. The fire in 1964 ended his aspirations, leaving his wife crippled and small daughter all his dreams and properties.

## Chapter Three

The trauma of the fire, the life-altering injuries to her mother, and the deaths she had witnessed resulted in Emma growing pensive, often uncooperative and vengeful. In her short five years, she had endured a lifetime of heartache and sorrow. With her mother in the hospital and no other relatives to assume the responsibility, she became a ward of the state and social services placed her in a foster home. She didn't understand why she couldn't be with her mother and would often throw fits and tantrums, hoping her mother would come and take her away. The only thing her outbursts accomplished was to have her repeatedly removed from one home and put in another. No one seemed to be able to provide what the troubled child needed to move on with her life.

It was in the third foster home that she woke up in a cold sweat crying out for her father. Her foster mother, Martha Brewster, came rushing into the room angry that this was the fifth night in a row the child woke her up.

"What's the matter now?" she asked. She grabbed the child and roughly yanked her out of bed. "I'm sick and tired of this. Do you hear me? No more or you're out of here."

The woman, tired from lack of sleep, began shaking the small girl, which resulted in Emma screaming louder, her sobs more insistent as she began kicking the woman. The tighter Martha held her, the louder Emma screeched and the more vicious her assaults on the woman became. Her teeth found their way to the woman's shoulder, and she bit down hard, refusing to let go—until the woman's husband, Phil, slapped Emma.

There was no consoling the child. She retreated to a corner of the room where she sat and screamed for her mother. Every time Martha or Phil approached the child, she would let out a piercing shriek. Finally, Phil threw a blanket over Emma, picked the screaming and kicking child up, then forced her to stay flat on her bed while Martha strapped her down. Frantically calling social services, Martha demanded, "Get over here right now and take this child away. She is totally out of control, and I will no longer tolerate her in my home." Soon social services arrived with the police who, in turn, restrained Emma before an ambulance took her to the hospital. The white uniforms of the ambulance workers threw Emma into a panic as she relived the memory of white uniforms hovering over her mother before they took her away. Once the out-of-control child arrived at the hospital, she was strapped down to a bed while a nurse sedated her.

No matter how much sedation the doctors pumped into her, Emma never fully arrived at the state of quiet the doctors and staff required. She fought the medications just as much as she fought the white-clothed people buzzing around her. Doctors, nurses, and psychiatrists all tried to calm Emma without successful results. She continued to bellow so loudly that they confined her to a room with padded walls. A

stained mattress and a toilet were her only comforts. Sedation became a way of life for the small child who was unable to communicate her desperate need to see her mother.

## Chapter Four

Esther Sanders lay in her hospital room in a state of shock. Her entire family, except for Emma, was gone. Encased in plaster from head to toe in an effort to heal her spine from the powerful blow it took in the blast, she could not feed herself, tend to personal cleanliness, or the need for elimination. Reports about her daughter's unruly behavior and the hospital confinement provoked her agitation and led to her vehement insistence on seeing her child.

She pressed the doctors to bring Emma to her, only to bow to their wishes that the child stay away. When she was finally able to go to the ward where her daughter was confined, Esther insisted she visit. Although the doctors and nurses advised Esther about her daughter's condition, what she saw when they opened the door horrified her.

Emma sat huddled in a corner of the padded room that reeked of stale urine. Her daughter's hair was matted and dirty; her clothes, tattered, torn, and filthy—covered with food and what Esther was sure was feces. The nurse wheeled Esther closer to her daughter, so she could reach out to her. Slowly, her fingers caressed her daughter's cheek as tears cascaded down her own. She whispered her name softly, "Emma, Mommy is here."

In spite of the drugged state she was in, Emma recognized the touch and the voice and looked up with wide eyes to the face she longed to see. "Mommy?" she spoke tentatively. "I want to go home." She sobbed.

When she tried to sit in her mother's lap, a nurse barred Emma's advances. "No, you can't do that. It'll hurt your mother." The nurse took the youngster's hand and led Emma to the side of the wheelchair. "Stand here and you can touch her, but you can't sit in her lap."

"Why? I want my mommy."

Esther took her daughter's hand in hers. "Sweetheart, Mommy loves you. Will you do something for Mommy?"

Emma looked up lovingly at her mother. "Yes," she said.

"Let the nice nurses give you a bath and clean clothes. My little girl is so pretty, and she needs to look her best." She ran her fingers soothingly along Emma's face. "Will you do that for me?"

"Yes." Emma finally knew she wasn't alone; her mother was there and loved her. She crawled onto the mattress and slowly closed her eyes before falling into a deep sleep.

Esther sat for a long while watching her only surviving child sleep soundly for probably the first time since that awful night. Even all these months later, she found it hard to comprehend how she and Emma had arrived at this point. She married Robert Sanders when she was twenty-three, having fallen madly in love with him when she met him at the restaurant where she worked as a cashier. After they had

given up all hope, she found out she was pregnant on her thirtieth birthday. Seven months later, they welcomed Robert Jr. into their family. Four years after Bobby's birth, their second child, James, was born, followed the next year by their third child, a daughter, Emma. Their family was perfect and wonderfully happy. The business was a success, and life was truly good to them all.

Now Esther sat in a wheelchair, unable to move her legs, watching her daughter, who was drugged and filthy, sleeping in a padded room for the insane. *How can this be?* Her heart broke as all the sorrow she had felt for the last months came pouring out. She sobbed, not only for Emma, but for all that was lost and would never return. Her despair was overwhelming. *I must find a way to make it stop.*

Despite endless surgeries and rehabilitation, Esther was destined to spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair. As the doctors finally gave her the bad news, Esther was not surprised; in fact, she had known from the beginning. When she felt herself slam against the wall, followed by the lack of sensation in her legs—she knew she would never walk again.

After the doctors released Esther from rehabilitation, she moved her few belongings out to their home on the lake. The private nurse she hired wheeled her into the house. She held her hand up and asked the woman, Linda Gooding, to leave her alone. As she sat by herself in the once happy and bustling house, tears streaked down Esther's cheeks. If she took in a deep breath, she could smell the scent of her husband's pipe tobacco. She gently touched a book that Jimmy had left on the coffee table when they were last there. She saw the pegs by the door leading to the porch where the jackets that belonged to her family hung.

A rustling in the kitchen caught her attention. She turned around, expecting to see her mother-in-law standing there; instead, she saw her caretaker. It was then that she vowed...*never again! I will never allow anyone near enough again to cause me this heartache.* In that singular moment, Esther Sanders sealed her heart to everyone...even her daughter. "Never again," she whispered. "Linda, get in here and take me out to the porch."

Once she had the home adapted with ramps for her wheelchair and she had adjusted to the surroundings, Esther sent for her daughter to join her. Emma, clean and non-drugged, arrived at the home in an ambulance. At first, the child stayed to herself, seemingly keeping distance from her mother. For Esther, that was fine, as she feared her own reactions if she let the child too near.

"Emma, it's up to you to help Mommy, so we can let Miss Gooding go back to the hospital."

"Mommy, I'm just a little girl, can't I go to school like other little girls?"

"No!" Esther shouted. "There will be no school for you right now! You must take care of me just as I took care of you in the fire. Now take the clothes and put them away, like I told you to."

With her head hung, the young child picked up the basket, which was almost as big as she was, and lugged it to the bedroom. Once alone, her suppressed anger burgeoned, and she took a crayon and began marking all the clean clothes as she put them away. Subsequently, with each job she didn't want to do, the six-year-old wrought more damage on her surroundings—and herself—all the while sobbing inconsolably. "It's not my fault, it's not my fault."

It soon became clear to Esther that her daughter was incorrigible and completely uncontrollable...a fact that was unacceptable. She called one of Emma's former doctors and asked that her daughter once again reside in the hospital. "She's just not fitting in at all," Esther complained. "She is constantly destroying things, and now she has taken to hurting herself. I think she needs to be returned to the hospital."

The doctor had no recourse but to agree. He was concerned about the self-mutilation and believed she needed understanding and a cure could be found, but through counseling, not drugs.

Once it became evident to Esther that she could not rely on her daughter to care for her, a formidable determination surfaced in her to become self-sufficient. In a year's time, she felt confident enough to live a solitary life and let Linda go.

In the coming months and years, every time the doctors declared they were satisfied with Emma's progress, Esther would have her come home. Emma would occasionally stay home for as long as twelve months. But in time, she would do or say something that her mother objected to, causing Esther to seek retaliation. Soon, Emma would find herself back in the confinement of an institution for the mentally ill.

With the passing of time, Esther became more and more controlling and increasingly bitter about the turn her life had taken. Her daughter was the only thread left to the life she lost in that fire years earlier. Emma was whole and seemingly unscathed by the events, and for that, she would pay; Esther would see to that. Her daughter would bend to her will, or she would find herself back in the mental ward. Finally, Emma submitted to her mother's demands, allowing her to remain in the home.

Her mother would teach her all she needed to know, so school was never an option for Emma. Anytime public officials inquired about Emma's schooling, Esther would present numerous psychological reports and refuse, for her daughter was clearly unstable. If the authorities came and insisted that her daughter go to school, Esther would simply have Emma confined.

As it was for most women in the early sixties, Esther was a homemaker who tended to the needs of her husband and family. She knew nothing of the business world or of her husband's work, but she learned and took on managing and developing the properties with a savage vengeance, creating many enemies in her wake. She became a tenacious, controlling woman. If a person did not own his or her property, chances were that the Sanders Corporation held the mortgage. No one dared incur the wrath of the woman in the wheelchair.



Emma dedicated her life to her mother. To survive, it was important for her to do precisely as her mother demanded, without comment. She spent endless hours cleaning, cooking, and tending to her mother's personal needs. It was her responsibility to take her mother to the grocery store each Thursday and to church every Sunday. They did not own an automobile; Emma pushed her mother down the rocky driveway and up the dirt road hill into the small community without complaint.

Due to the injury from the fire, Esther's damaged lungs caused her to have pneumonia each winter. Emma's winter job was to be a nurse to her mother, providing her with medications, oxygen, and assistance twenty-four hours a day. With each attack, Esther's lungs grew weaker until one dreary winter night, they finally failed.

A frantic call to 911 brought a medic unit to their home. Emma stood by watching as the team hooked her mother up to monitors and oxygen before placing her on a stretcher, then in the ambulance. The horrors of that night thirty-nine years earlier came rushing back, and she once again felt small, helpless, and alone. The next time she saw her mother was in the church vestibule where she lay in her coffin.

## Chapter Five

Soon after her mother's death, Emma realized she must take on the formidable task of running the family business. Several of the vacation retreats had been sold over the years to help pay for medical bills, but Emma held title to all of the land around their home. She also owned numerous homes scattered around the lake and property in several other communities. It was fortunate for Emma that her mother had hired a management company during the last year of her life.

Before his death, Emma's father deeded to the state the entire southern end of the lake that bordered their house. It became a wildlife refuge, with the only stipulation being that it would remain undeveloped. The area flourished with thousands of varieties of plants—reeds, cattails, water lilies, and more, all lushly waving in the breezes. Numerous species of trees dotted the landscape, with even the occasional live tree standing tall in the shallow, brackish water. Unpaved roads snaked through the area, allowing the angler or the wildlife observer easy access to the refuge. There were strict rules regarding littering and disturbing the natural settings of plants and animals. It was a popular place for visitors from all over the state and country to visit regularly. A sign dedicated to Robert Sanders at the refuge entrance encouraged users to “leave the area better than you find it.”

Over the years, Emma learned to find solitude from her demanding mother by spending many hours conversing with nature. The lake, the refuge, and her gardens—these became her sanctuary. The white fiberglass dock gently swayed in the water as Emma walked toward the railing at the end of the dock. She watched, as she did every evening, as the pinks, purples, reds, and oranges of the sky heralded the end of the day with the setting sun. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath of the richly perfumed late spring air, finding again the solace and peace she sought at the end of each day. A disturbance brought her out of her reverie, and she saw something dark and ominous rising from the cold water.

A shadowy figure with air tanks, a facemask, and wetsuit emerged from the muddy depths and advanced, with flippers slapping against the concrete, up the boat ramp. The water creature stopped and slipped the cap of the wet suit off. Shoulder-length, sandy blond hair tumbled down.

*It's a woman*, Emma thought, as vibrant blue eyes fixed on her. She clutched the front of her gray flower print dress, feeling the eyes boring through her as if the woman were seeing her naked. A sense of danger and uneasiness surged through her body when the woman began edging toward the grass at the end of the dock.

“Bet you thought I was a monster from the deep!”

Her dazzling smile only made Emma more nervous. She shivered, knowing she was in the open with a stranger nearby. “Not exactly, you're trespassing on my property.”

The interloper chuckled heartily at the comment. "Of course I am. I'm lost." A devilish glint brightened the blue eyes. "Oh please, Fair Lady, save me," she said. She gestured with a flourish of her hand in the air before bowing.

Emma didn't know what to make of the woman who had taken off her flippers, then began hopping along the rock-strewn concrete. "I assure you, miss, I am neither a fair lady, nor in a position to save you. This is private property, and you are trespassing."

The woman stopped and looked up at Emma. "You need to lighten up," she said. A smile filled her face. "There are three ways you can think of me...a wacko, a vacationer, or an avid diver. Take your pick...maybe I'm all three."

Emma walked rapidly down the dock taking care not to slip on the algae that had accumulated on the fiberglass. "That is not a great challenge! You are no doubt a wacko. Now, please, leave my property."

By the time Emma was on the grass, she heard a loud boisterous laugh burst from the woman who was now so very close to her. "You're right in one. If you would be so kind as to tell me where Jones's Landing is, I'll be on my way."

She stopped her retreat, turned, looked squarely at the intruder, and pointed north. "About a mile that way." She then spun back around and walked with focused speed to her home. She went up three steps, opened the screen door to the porch, went in, then lifted the hook, thereby ensuring a measure of protection from the stranger. When she glanced back at the woman, she saw her walking gingerly across the rocks until she sat on the dock. Emma was horrified...*no one but me is allowed on the dock! Should I call out to get her off the dock? No, then she would know I'm watching her. What should I do?* Fear squeezed her heart as she continued to watch. Then she noticed the woman was putting on her flippers before going back into the water.

Emma remained in the shadows, watching the brazen intruder until she was certain the trespasser had disappeared into the water's depths. Only then did she leave the porch for the security of her home, locking the solid oak door behind her. Once she was sure she had locked every door and latched every window, she took the shotgun out of the closet. Her mother's words echoed in her terrified mind. *Trust no one, Emma...never let anyone near...ever.* It would be a long night; she would wait for the woman to come back and try to break into her home. The piercing blue eyes burned vividly in her mind, haunting and terrifying her.

## Chapter Six

Jones's Landing was one of the first properties Emma's father developed as a lure for weekend visitors. One by one, fifteen log cabins of various sizes sprang up along the lake and into the bordering wooded area. Robert Sanders made sure each cabin had all the conveniences of home, so tourists could eat, sleep, and relax comfortably. A bait house, constructed next to the two rows of docks, offered not only bait and fishing supplies, but boat rentals, as well as a gas pump for other boaters on the lake to fill their gas tanks. A road led from there to a public boat ramp where adequate parking for dozens of anglers finished off the area. Jones's Landing was the perfect retreat for sojourners and summer vacationers alike.

Railroad tie steps, bordered on one side by a rock wall, made for easy navigation up the gently sloping hill. At the crest of the hill sat a quaint ice cream hut and a large, well-stocked grocery store that included a small dining area. Once the region began to boom as a tourist retreat and the family business became more demanding, Robert reluctantly sold the property. Fortunately, the couple who bought the property stayed and ran the businesses themselves and became an integral part of the community.



Cay O'Neill emerged from the water in a small cove about a hundred yards down the shoreline from Emma's dock and flung her air tanks over the side of the small dinghy. She then nimbly lifted herself into the vessel and removed her flippers before starting the small electric motor. *So that's what she looks like, Cay thought, not bad...not bad at all, I'm sure I can pull this off...my future depends on it.* Her mind raced with all the possibilities as she steered the small craft into the dock at Jones's Landing. She had rented a large cabin, which had a full view of the comings and goings of all water traffic. It was the ideal location for her base of operations.

Stripped out of her wetsuit, she remained in the middle of the cabin, pensive and naked. She reached for the notebook and pen secured in a drawer on the nearby table and sat down in the comfortable chair beside it. When the cold vinyl touched her bare skin, she jumped. After covering the chair with a blanket, she began re-creating the dialogue with Emma Sanders, along with sketches of the surroundings and the woman herself. As she read her notes, she recalled the apprehension she'd seen in the woman's hazel eyes. Cay wasn't sure if she was annoyed or frightened. *I'll just have to find that out now, won't I?*

Sometime later, Cay showered and dressed in loose-fitting, dark blue drawstring pants and a green T-shirt. Her stomach was growling, and she looked forward to the home cooking the store offered. As she made her way up a slight hill,

she thought about the woman she had encountered earlier and her tactics for getting to know her. There was always a way to gain someone's confidence. Some just required more patience than others... Emma Sanders, she knew, would be one of those. *Yes, she will need the kid glove treatment.*

Every time she entered the Beard's store, Cay remembered O'Malley's Grocery, the old mom and pop store that sat on the corner down from her home when she was growing up. Like O'Malley's, the floors at the Beard's store were made of wide wooden planks, worn shiny and slick from years of all types of feet tramping across them. The six-foot shelves for the grocery items planed of sturdy oak stood in rows of three per row. The only lighting that seemed to be bright haloed around the checkout area, archaic by modern standards, consisting of an old crank-handled cash register atop a long wooden counter. The lunch counter resembled an old-fashioned soda fountain counter from an old drug store. Cay could imagine a soda jerk standing behind the counter mixing up cherry Cokes and malteds. Instead, she saw Zachariah Beard with his handlebar moustache, long gray-white hair pulled back in a ponytail, craggy, weathered face adorned with horn-rimmed glasses, and stained apron wrapped around his waist. Each day, as he had for so many years, he stood behind the counter preparing whatever the special of the day was or flipping eggs or hamburgers.

Cay greeted the store's owners, Zachariah and Hannah Beard, with a broad smile. "Good evening."

"Well, hello there, Cay. We didn't think we'd see you tonight." Hannah smiled as she rang up a customer.

Hannah Beard looked as if she were in her mid-sixties with graying hair pulled back in a tight bun. Her face was remarkably smooth, due, Hannah advised, to never letting the sun touch her face. Cay often wondered if it wasn't the tight bun giving the woman a face-lift. The woman was small, yet spry, and had a bevy of knowledge and gossip, which was invaluable to Cay.

"Can you imagine it...I got lost under the water?" Cay laughed out loud as she cast her eyes around the room to make sure no other customers were in the store.

"Land's sake, what happened?" the older woman asked as she approached Cay.

Cay relaxed her stance. "Somehow I got all turned around and ended up down by the point."

"Ah, the Sanders's place. Emma doesn't take kindly to anyone comin' on her property." Hannah then looked Cay up and down. "You're still in one piece, so I guess she didn't see you," she said in all seriousness.

"No, I saw her. She's not very friendly, what's her story?" Cay was pleased to see Hannah's face light up. That meant she had a story and would give up all the pertinent facts—most of which Cay already knew, but there may be a tidbit she didn't.

"Oh, that poor child...her mother died three months ago, and I thought for sure Emma would pack up and go. But she stayed...I guess to watch over the properties. Fortunately, she learned the ins and outs of managing properties from her mother before she passed. Anyway, her mother, Esther, was so demanding of her, it's a

wonder that child didn't die first. Her father, Bob, oh, he was a wonderful, kind man whose family settled this area over a hundred years ago. Then there was the fire, and Esther moved out here from the city. The only place she had left to live, I imagine. Emma eventually joined her mother to take full-time care of her. Come rain or shine, Esther would have Emma push her in the wheelchair to the store every Thursday.

"Now that woman was on the heavy side, so you know it wasn't easy for poor Emma, but she did it and I never heard her complain once." Hannah smiled, then continued. "I remember one time they came in, and Esther was in a particularly harsh mood and told her daughter to stand by the counter until she was done. I was putting flowers in a vase...she was watching me real intent like and told me daisies were her favorite, so I offered her one. At first, she smiled, then nothing short of fear crossed that child's face when she heard her mother's voice. She didn't take the flower...I always have felt sorry for her...I don't think she ever had anyone care for her, not even her mother. Here I am rattling on and on, and I'm sure you have some shopping to do."

"Hannah, you know I always like your stories." Cay winked. "That's why I come in here."

Hannah laughed and waved her hand in the air. "Oh, you!"

Cay reached in her pocket and switched off the recorder before picking up a loaf of bread and some deli meats for dinner. That night, she would make sandwiches and go over the tape and other information, hoping to find the particulars that would lead to Emma Sanders's trust.

*So, she never complains and likes daisies. That could prove useful,* Cay thought as she walked back to her cabin. There was something about the tall, thin woman that Cay was sure she could use to her advantage. Her hazel eyes held sadness, but there was more; they were empty and lonely. The calf-length, gray flowered dress that the woman wore was right out of the fifties. *If ever there was a person in need of a friend, it's Emma Sanders,* Cay thought as she made herself a sandwich and placed it on a plate.

She sat at a small table and took a long swallow of her beer before bringing the sandwich to her lips. The woman on the dock crowded her mind as she thought of all the possibilities that lay before her. *Use the tools you have, Cay,* her father would tell her when she had a particularly difficult case. *The answer is there, you just need to be open to it when you come across it.* "You're right, Papa." Then she began reading the files she brought with her once more before listening to her recent conversation with Hannah.

## Chapter Seven

Emma woke, turning her head in all directions, hearing crackles as she tried to work out the cricks in her neck. She looked around the room and wondered why she was in the front room sleeping with the shotgun in her lap. Then she remembered the strange woman who emerged from the water, and a quiver ran up her spine. She looked up to the clock on the mantel. *It's five thirty, time for me to get up.* She stretched and sighed before rising to begin her day. As she put the shotgun back in the closet, she wondered if the woman would come back in an attempt to kill her.

*Someone is always out to get you, Emma; you never know when he or she will strike. Trust no one if you know what's good for you. I won't always be here to protect you,* her mother would tell her repeatedly, and now, it would seem that she was right. A sense of foreboding sent more shivers through her body.

In the kitchen, she set the kettle on to boil as she began to prepare her usual breakfast...dry toast, fruit, and tea. The menu never changed; it had been her breakfast fare for as long as she could remember. At precisely six thirty, as it was each morning, she did the dishes, showered, and dressed for the day. An hour later, she gathered her gardening tools and headed for the flowerbed and the annoying weeds before seeing to the emerging seedlings in her garden.

She stood in her yard and looked toward the refuge as the familiar sight and sounds of a flock of geese neared, then glided to the surface; she felt at peace. Cool morning breezes made the glassy water ripple gently as a light mist rose from the water. The entire refuge lay partially enveloped in a shroud of fog, lending a surreal appearance to the area. Droplets on various water plants sparkled like shining silver or diamonds in the new sun's rays. To Emma, it looked like what she imagined the forest of the fairies in Middle Earth did and wondered if Legolas, of J.R.R. Tolkien's books, would somehow appear.

She turned back to her chore at hand and placed various garden tools on the grass, knelt down, and began weeding. At some point, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of something, a movement. With a glance toward the lake, she saw a kayak gliding effortlessly across the peaceful water before it disappeared into the refuge. A frown crossed Emma's face as she realized that soon the summer crowd would invade *her* lake, and she would have to endure the constant disturbance of her tranquility. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed something on her dock that did not belong there.

She set the tool in her hand down and got up off the ground. Her heart raced and her breathing quickened as she slowly, cautiously walked down the slippery dock toward the object, scowling all the way. "Who has been on my dock and left garbage behind?" She noticed a large bouquet of daisies wrapped in florist paper resting on her dock. Her eyes scanned the area to see if anyone was lurking around. She bent over and picked up the flowers, breathing in their distinctive scent. *I wonder who...where,* she thought, walking back down the dock, stopping once again when she was on land. With a turn toward the lake, she searched it until her eyes rested on the wildlife preserve. A slight smile crossed her face. *Perhaps the fairies are about,* she thought, before going back, flowers in hand, to her gardening.

The sun was beginning to beat down as she moved along the flowerbed where emerging plants peeked up at her. Emma stopped and listened to the melodic sounds of a wood thrush. "Rain is on its way, thank you for telling me." Through the years, she had noticed the thrush

never sang its song unless it was going to rain. She sped up her weeding, trying to finish before the showers began.

Just as Emma pushed her garden tools down into a bucket of oil-soaked sand, sprinkles of rain began to fall. *A nice spring shower*, she thought, as she picked up and admired the daisies. She went inside and carefully removed the paper and began to clip each stem before finally placing them in a glass vase filled with water. *They're beautiful*, she thought with a smile as she placed the vase on the kitchen table. *Who put them on my dock, I wonder. My favorite flowers...what a nice touch in the kitchen.*

She started into the front room, but paused, then went back into the kitchen and retrieved one of the daisies from the vase. Taking it back into the front room, she pushed her dark, graying hair back from her face as she placed the flower by the picture of her long lost family. A pang of sadness filled her heart for what never was. Her guilt-ridden life would hold no hope or happiness as long as she insisted on holding onto the past. A sigh escaped before she headed for her small room to gather what she needed before walking to the store; it was Thursday, which meant it was shopping day...*come rain or come shine.*



Cay watched, through binoculars, as Emma walked cautiously out on the dock to retrieve the flowers, smiling victoriously when the woman carried them away. It was obvious that the woman was leery of the gift, and she wrote a quick note about confidence before continuing her surveillance. The kayak was not the best for carrying equipment, but it was small enough to conceal close to shore. When Emma reached the end of the dock and looked back on the lake, Cay held her breath, even though tall, thick water plants hid her completely. *No way can anyone see me here.* She had been out every morning for several days hoping to catch Emma outside. *Now I can watch and learn.*

The Sanders's home, built of native rocks with a large screened-in porch facing the lake was unlike any of the other lake houses. She was certain she saw Emma watching her from that porch after their meeting the night before. Many flowerbeds with emerging plants adorned the well-kept, landscaped yard. A flagstone walkway lined with numerous rose bushes led to a large oak tree where two white Adirondack chairs sat. To one side of the grass was a fenced-in area that looked as though it was a vegetable garden. Observing Emma working in her yard, Cay surmised the woman was responsible for the meticulous appearance of the grounds. Somehow, she didn't think Emma would have a gardener or any other stranger on her property. Jones's Landing marked the property line to the north and the wildlife refuge was the southern boundary.

As she studied Emma working in her garden, Cay took in the woman as a whole. When she had seen her the day before, she thought her scrawny, but now, watching her move, she realized she was very fit. She no longer wore a dress, outfitted instead in what looked like men's trousers, held up with suspenders and topped off with an oversized gray shirt with the sleeves turned up exposing slightly muscular arms. The clothes, as was the case from the night before, were clearly from a bygone era. *Whose clothes are those*, Cay wondered. *Are they her father's or mother's?* The woman certainly was becoming more and more intriguing, not at all what Cay expected. Meeting the woman face to face should have answered questions, not created more.

Once Emma finished gardening and went into her house, Cay began to paddle back to her cabin as gentle raindrops fell. She would transcribe all her observations into her notebook before going to the store for some much-needed breakfast.



## Chapter Eight

“Good morning, Cay,” Hannah said as she watched the sandy blond woman stroll casually into the store. “You going to have the usual for breakfast?”

Mike Timmons, a grizzled older man with a substantial beer gut who ate breakfast there every morning, joined in. “Girl, if you don’t change your eatin’ habits, those arteries are going to close up on you.” He let out a belly laugh as he gave her the once-over.

“Mike, you been telling me that every morning for the last week. I notice that you might have a problem, too,” Cay said. She pointed to his greasy plate of eggs, bacon, sausage, potatoes, and biscuits and laughed.

“Well, it’s all Hannah’s fault...she’s too good a cook.”

Cay patted the man on his back as she sat down at the counter next to him. “Thank God for that, or I’d starve to death.” She placed her hands around a waiting mug of coffee and drank the delicious brew.

Hannah placed a plate of fresh biscuits, butter, and jelly on the counter. “How’s the writing going?”

“I didn’t know you was writin’ a book,” Mike said. “Dang, you don’t look like the book learnin’ kind.”

“Gee, thanks for the compliment.” She slapped his shoulder. “Actually, a friend told me it was a good way to relieve stress, and since I came here to do that, I’m giving it a try. To answer your question, Hannah, it’s going pretty good.” Cay began to laugh. “The biggest problem is coming up with an idea.”

Everyone laughed heartily until Hannah began to move away from the counter toward an arriving customer.

When she turned toward the door, Cay felt her heart skip a beat when she saw Emma Sanders walk into the store. *This must be my lucky day. I didn’t think she would be in this early since it’s raining.* She looked the woman over. Much to her surprise, Emma was wearing the same clothes she had on when gardening, even the old worn hat. This puzzled Cay as she thought the dress of the day before was the norm. *I may have to rethink my initial thoughts.* Her mind racing, she didn’t even notice her breakfast set in front of her.

“Hey, girly, you want your food or not?” Zachariah asked.

Cay looked at the old unshaven man puzzled by his question until she noticed the full plate of food before her. “Sorry, yes, thanks.” She began to wolf down the food.

“Golly, girl, you sure are hungry today.” Mike tried to divert Cay’s attention from Hannah and Emma. “What’s so interesting about them? That Sanders gal is nothing but loony, just ask anyone.”

That comment got Cay’s attention. “What do you mean by that?” Although she answered the man, she still tried to make out what the two women were saying.

“Well, she stays out there at that big ole house all by her lonesome. Don’t talk to no one, but let one of us be late with our rent and she’s got the sheriff out after us.” He snorted. “No secret she’s been in and out of the crazy house. She’s our resident wacko.”

Cay turned, coldly leveled a look squarely in the man’s eyes, and gave him an icy stare. “She seems to be talking to Hannah, and I have spoken with her myself, Mike. Maybe she’s particular about talking to just anyone. Because someone wants to be paid on time doesn’t make them loony.” Throwing several bills on the counter, she got up and headed toward the two women.

Mike’s face turned red as he began to bluster and snort before he stood up and put his money on the counter. He made sure his path went close by Emma sneering and muttering *bitch* under his breath before storming out the door.

Cay was standing by the canned goods discreetly listening to the two women’s conversation when Mike flew by. She looked up and captured Emma’s eyes. “What a slob,” she said. She reached into her pocket and started the mini recorder.

Emma didn’t know what to do as her eyes darted around the store—anywhere but on the woman standing near her. Other than Hannah, no one in the store had ever spoken to her, and certainly, no one ever spoke badly of Mike Timmons. He was one man you didn’t want to get on the wrong side of...she had firsthand experience with that. Her eyes cast downward as she whispered, “Yes, he is.” She could feel the pull of the blue eyes looking through her. Again, she clutched at her shirt trying to protect herself.

“Excuse me, Hannah. If I wanted to make a beef tips dinner, would I use this or this?” Cay held up a can of cream of cauliflower soup in her left hand and one of Harvard beets in the other.

A great laugh of pure joy came out of the shopkeeper. “Just how much cookin’ have you done, child?” The phone began to ring and Hannah hesitated, hoping her husband would get it...he didn’t. “Hold on a minute,” she said.

Cay stood there holding the cans and looking at the other choices on the shelf, seemingly perplexed as to what to do. She became aware of Emma standing closer to her and held her breath as she hoped the woman would speak.

A soft, almost inaudible sound came from Emma. “I can help you.” Her body trembled from her bold action, and her reward was a radiant smile.

“You can...I mean you would? I sure would appreciate that. I’ve been here a week and diner food and sandwiches are about to do me in. I think I must have gained twenty pounds. I thought I would make myself a decent meal...well, as decent as the stove will allow in my cabin.”

Emma listened to the soft, low tones of the woman’s voice and marveled at how she was so open. “You said you wanted to make beef tips, do you have the beef already?”

Cay let out a low, joyous laugh. “You need beef?” When she noticed the dour look on the woman’s face, she realized her teasing was ill advised. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t too funny, was it? And all you were doing was trying to help. I don’t have any of the ingredients,” she said.

Emma, not knowing what to say, shuffled her feet. She was certain the woman intended her remarks to be funny, but she could see nothing humorous about the comment. *If you were making beef tips, you certainly would need beef!*

Hannah closed in on the women. “I’m back,” she said. “Oh, I see you’ve been talking with Cay, Emma. Do you two know each other?” Hannah knew this was a time to keep her mouth shut, revealing nothing.

“She trespassed on my property! Now I have shopping to do, please excuse me, Hannah.” Then she turned to Cay. “Hannah has all the answers you’ll need.” She spun around and proceeded down the aisle.

After Emma left them, Cay looked at Hannah for the answer. “Was it something I did or said?”

Hannah patted Cay’s arm. “No, dear, she doesn’t get along well with other folks.”

Little did either woman know that Emma was carefully observing them speaking. *Why did I ever speak to that woman?* She chided herself as she felt her face redden with the thought.

Cay’s eyebrows crunched together. “Why, Hannah? Is it because of her mother?”

“Partly, but I think it’s mostly because she has never been around people all that much. Her mother kept a tight rein on her and never let her out of her sight. I think her mother terrified her into thinking we’re all enemies. Of course, there was that one incident.” She paused and lowered her voice. “With one of the kids whose family lived here during the summer that Esther hired people to clean up after a big storm.”

“An incident? What sort of incident?” Cay could feel her body react with anticipation at finding out what happened.

“Not real sure, just know that he worked there for about two weeks until Esther called the sheriff and the kid was arrested. It was all kept hush-hush. I only know ’cause the sheriff was here when he got the call.”

Cay, rapidly trying to digest everything, rested her arm against her pocket, relieved that the mini recorder was still going. “Mike said she owns properties, but I don’t think he likes her too much.”

Hannah shook her head. “Actually, she owns a great deal of the lake properties, but I think she has lawyers who tend to that. That’s what I heard anyway. People don’t know what to make of her, so they spread stories without any meat to ’em.”

“I know all about that,” Cay said softly.

“Now what was it you wanted to make?”

“I’ve changed my mind...maybe tomorrow.” Her eyes scanned the store for Emma’s whereabouts. She spotted her by the fruit and debated approaching the woman again. “No, I will keep to the plan,” she said.

“What plan, dear?” Hannah asked.

Cay silently chastised herself for speaking out loud. “My plan for the day. I was going to change it, but I think not. I’ll see you later.” Cay smiled and walked outside where she took up a position so she could covertly watch for Emma to leave the store. The day was proving to be the best since her arrival.

She took her cell phone from her pocket and dialed a number, then waited for an answer. “I’ve made contact.”

“Excellent, you know what to do.”

After she closed the phone, she watched as Emma left the store and started down the gravel road towing her shopping basket behind her. “Damn, if only I could have seen what she bought.” Cay, moving in the shadows, rapidly made her way to the cabin and her car.

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As Emma strolled down the road, she was lost in a world of her own, listening to the birds and the rustle of the wind in the trees. She never noticed the car speeding toward her until it was right upon her. Startled, she dove for a grassy area as the car sped by her. With some difficulty, she got up slowly and wiped the mud off as best she could before becoming aware of her torn trousers and the blood on them. As she looked around her, she saw the groceries strewn along the roadway. “Stupid! Pay attention, Emma.” She bent over and began to retrieve a box of teabags.

“That car was traveling way too fast for this road. The driver almost ran me off the road near the store. Are you hurt? Do you need some help?”

Emma looked up and held her hand to shield her eyes from the emerging sun as she tried to make out who was speaking to her. She frowned. “No, no, I can manage.”

A tender touch on her arm made her stop. “You’re bleeding. Let me help.”

The voice and the face were so sincere Emma had no choice but to say thank you. She looked down at the torn trousers covered in blood and shrugged. “I’m sure it looks worse than it is. Probably just a scratch,” she said.

Cay finished reloading the basket. “There, all done. Why don’t you let me drive you home?”

Emma appeared apprehensive first looking toward the small forest green VW convertible parked alongside the road, then into the blue eyes. “I...I don’t know.”

“Come on, I would hate to have you walk the rest of the way and injure yourself further.” Cay gave the woman her most persuasive smile as she lifted the grocery cart into her car. She opened the door and waved to Emma. “Please.”

Emma took one step toward the car, only to stop as pain shot through her leg. Suddenly, the woman was by her side. “Let me help you,” she said.

“I can’t, I just can’t! I don’t even know your name,” Emma protested.

“Cay, Cay O’Neill. And you are?”

For a brief moment, the woman who was gently holding her took Emma aback. “Emma Sanders,” she said. She tentatively held out her hand.

Cay took the offered hand and squeezed. “Pleased to meet you, Emma Sanders,” she said as she gently guided the injured woman into her car.

“Stop here,” Emma said. “I can walk to my house from the road.”

The driver just smiled as she turned and maneuvered her car down the rocky driveway, her eyes taking in all the surroundings. She stopped by the side of the house. “Sit right there until I come around, and I’ll help you into your house.”

Horror and apprehension filled Emma’s face. “No! I can do it myself!” She hastily tried to exit the automobile. “Ouch!”

Again, Cay was by her side. “Let me help you, please. I won’t hurt you...I promise.”

Emma didn’t know what to do. The woman scared her, and she didn’t want her in her house. She grit her teeth and turned in the seat, forcing herself to stand up. “No, I’m fine. Would you please lift my groceries out of your car?”

Cay frowned. “Sure...if that’s what you want,” She grasped the grocery cart from the car and easily lifted it out.

Emma nodded in thanks as she took hold of the handle and began walking toward the door and safety. The pain in her leg was almost unbearable, but she would not let the other woman know that. Once she reached the door and unlocked it, she turned back toward Cay. “Thank you,” she said.

Cay stood there astonished as she watched the door close. She was certain she had made headway with Emma, yet she was on the outside. After she got in her car and started the engine, she sighed. “Well, looks like I need to change strategies. Hmm, I’ll go over everything I learned today...I’m sure the key is there,” she muttered. *Yep, just a momentary setback*, she thought as she shifted gears.

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Emma stood inside her house, secure from the invasion of the stranger as the automobile left her property. There were confusing feelings about the strange woman running rampant through her mind. She thought she saw sincerity in the woman’s eyes and face, yet she hesitated. *Why?* A shudder ran through her body as she recalled similar faces, so kind and caring in the hospitals, only to turn horrid and tie her down and drug her. *It was good that I didn’t let her in; everyone has an agenda.* When she turned, she felt a sharp, stabbing pain in her leg.

She limped to the table and sat down clumsily on a chair. After she carefully tore open the rip in her trousers, she reprimanded herself for allowing the injury to happen. “Stupid fool.”

One good thing about taking care of her invalid mother, Emma had amassed an entire pharmacy of drugs and other medical paraphernalia. She removed her trousers and eased into the bathroom to treat her leg. She opened the large linen closet, pulled out an oversized plastic container that held what she needed, and placed it on the floor. After she lowered the toilet lid, she sat down, only to yelp at the coldness of the seat against her bare legs. She shook her head as she gently cleaned off the wound. "I will have to go back there and see what could have caused this. Strange, I don't remember it happening."

The gash on her lower leg was deep and about two inches long. *Stitches*, she thought as she reached into the bin for gloves and a surgical kit. One thing missing was any local anesthesia, so she would have to tolerate the pain. "No use going to a doctor and paying him to do what I can do myself," she said as she began stitching her leg.

That night, Emma's dreams turned into nightmares.

*Men in white clothes chased her toward a large building. They tried to stop and capture her. Vivid colors filled the skies with a kaleidoscope of fireworks as she found herself lying on her back on hard, cold ground. She knew if she remained very still, the men in the white clothes would pass her by. As the sky brimmed with more colors, the men drew nearer calling out her name... "Emma, where are you?"*

*She was sweating from the terror that filled her body. Ghostly creatures seemed to fly just above her head. Her eyes grew large as she saw a dark, ominous figure standing over her with a staff held in a threatening manner. She knew she was in trouble as the image drew nearer, raising the staff as it came toward her. Evil appeared to be oozing from all around the shape in the form of snakes baring their venomous fangs. From out of nowhere came another figure clothed in the lightest of blue with a white light radiating through and around it.*

*The figure was holding out a hand saying, "Come with me. Emma, I will keep you safe." Then she was standing, her body naked, as the ghostly figures pricked her skin. She raised her arms and flung them at the figures. "Get out of here, let me alone!" she screamed only to have them torment her more, deaf to her pleas.*

*Voices began calling her, wanting her to come with them as the ghosts taunted her with stinging arrows. She saw her mother waving her over, and she floated to her side. Her mother grabbed her... "I have her, boys, come get her, the naughty girl." All the white clothes were around her tying her arms and legs before carrying her off. Then, they stopped. Emma looked up in the sky, saw piercing blue eyes boring down on the men before turning them to stone. Emma screamed... "No! You won't take me!"*

Then she woke, her sheets soaked, her heart beating fast, and her body trembling.

She knew she was burning up with a fever, and that meant an infection. She attempted to get out of her bed to go for aspirin and antibiotics, but when she tried to stand, excruciating pain shot through her leg, causing her to scream before she passed

out. She floated in and out of consciousness for the next two days. Nightmares, ever-present and haunting, were her only companions.

## Chapter Nine

Two days had passed since Cay found Emma injured on the side of the road. Her constant surveillance of the residence produced nothing but a stuffy nose from sitting out in the elements. Emma seemed to be missing in action and didn't even spend the end of her day on the dock.

When Cay heard the alarm go off, she turned over and repeatedly hit what she thought was the button until she finally hit the mark. She dragged herself out of bed and took a quick shower. It was four thirty, and she planned to take the dinghy down to Emma's dock and sit there watching for the lights to come on in the house. If she saw none, she would speak with Hannah in hopes that they would go check on the woman.

Cay had watched Emma's house enough to know that around five thirty each morning, the lights would go on. Now, on the third day, she sat huddled in the dinghy that floated in plain sight, boldly tied to Emma's dock. A swirling mix of emotions scattered across her mind as she hoped the lights would go on to signal the woman inside was okay. At the same time, if she was going to accomplish her job, she needed the home to continue to be dark. Six o'clock rolled around and not one light shone in the residence. *I don't want her to be sick, but I need in and this could be the only chance I'll have.* She guided her small craft back to the docks and considered how she would approach Hannah about checking on Emma. It would be tricky, but she was certain she could convince the woman they needed to.

Hannah looked up from reading the paper as the only guest in the cabins strolled into the store. "Goodness, Cay, you certainly are early this morning. Did you have trouble sleeping?"

Cay greeted Hannah and Zachariah with a smile. "Good morning. Just woke up and thought I would get an early start, Hannah. How are the two of you this fine morning?" She made her way to the counter and took a seat. "I think I'll have something different this morning."

Zachariah frowned. "Girly, ever since you've been comin' in here, you've always had the same thing. Why you want to change?"

The old man saw a smile cross woman's face as she winked at him. "Variety is the spice of life, and I need some spice, so this morning I'm havin' flapjacks and sausage."

No sooner had she said that than Hannah sat down beside her and patted her back gently. "You getting lonely, honey? Can I help?"

Cay tilted her head before speaking, "Now how could anyone ever get lonely with two fine people like you and Zach here to keep her company?"

Hannah laughed loudly before tapping Cay on the arm. "Oh, you flatterer." When she looked up at her husband, she scowled. "Hurry up, old man, get her some

cakes.” She then smiled at the woman next to her. “Tell me, how it is going...the book, I mean?”

“Fabulous! I’m starting to make headway. I might even have a chapter done today.” She paused for a moment. “Have you seen anything of that woman I met in here the other day?”

Hannah saw the serious expression on Cay’s face and scrunched her eyebrows—she had to think of whom Cay was speaking. “Oh, you mean Emma Sanders? I don’t expect to see her before next Thursday. That’s when she comes in here. Why do you ask?” Hannah could never remember a time when anyone asked her about Emma and now Cay was asking in a very solemn tone.

Cay knew she had to tread lightly and not give Hannah any reason to suspect she had other motives. “Last Thursday, I was driving south and saw her from a distance walking down the road pulling a cart. Then she seemed to jump out of the way of a car and take a spill.”

Hannah covered her mouth. “Goodness gracious, was she hurt?”

“I think so. She had a sizable gash on her leg. I drove her home and offered to take her groceries inside and look at the wound, but she refused.” Cay shrugged. “She acted like I was going to steal something.”

“That would be Emma. She’s very frightened of strangers.”

“It would seem so. I wished she would have let me help her...that cut looked real nasty and dirty.” She watched an expression cross Hannah’s face as she began to make the connection Cay hoped she would.

“Goodness, that poor child is there all alone, no one would know if she was sick or not!”

“Maybe you could call her and see if she’s okay.”

“I can’t do that, there’s no phone there.”

Cay took a breath. “No phone? How can that be? Everyone has a phone these days.” She could feel the rapid pulsing of her heart. “That wound was so dirty, I’d worry about infection.” She held her breath, hoping the older woman would take the bait.

“Is that your car out there?” she asked. A nodding head was her answer. “Good!” She hollered into the kitchen. “Old man, I gotta run an errand.”

*Now reel her in,* Cay thought, trying hard not to smile.

“Come on, you’re takin’ me there.”

“Hey! What about this here food?”

Cay followed close behind with a slight smile of victory on her face. *Game, set, and match,* she thought as she climbed into her car.

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Hannah leapt out of the small car, walked quickly up to the side door of Emma’s house, and rapped lightly on the door. She frowned when she received no

answer. Next, she began banging on the door and calling out the woman's name. "Emma, are you in there? It's Hannah, dear, please let me in." Still nothing. She tried turning the doorknob, without success. Fear gripped her as she now was convinced something was terribly wrong.

Cay quietly stood by the older woman's side biding her time. "Want me to go to the front door and try?"

"Better let me go. If she sees a stranger, she won't answer." Hannah patted Cay's arm. "Why don't you come along?"

The worried expression on the old woman's face told Cay she was right on the mark about Emma Sanders's condition. "Why don't I stay here and look around? Who knows, maybe she has a key hidden somewhere."

"Okay, dear, do what you want, but if you find a key, I'll be shocked." Hannah headed for the screen porch and the front door.

As she watched the woman walk away, Cay silently laughed. *Oh, I'll find a key, no doubt about it.* Once Hannah was out of sight, Cay took a small tool kit from her pocket and inserted a slim piece of metal, then another. She held her tongue slightly out the side of her opened mouth as she gently moved the two pieces until she felt the lock give way. With a slow quiet turn of the knob, she opened the door and looked inside, only to find three steps leading to another door. She stretched her arm and tested the interior knob...it was unlocked. She backed out before she shut the door quietly and went to the front of the house.

Hannah was still banging on the door and calling out Emma's name. "Emma, please open the door, I'm worried about you." She was startled as a hand touched her back.

"Hannah, any luck?"

Hannah clasped her hand to her chest. "Oh, it's you."

Sincerity filled Cay's face. "Did I scare you? I'm sorry. Hey, listen, I tried the side door again and it's unlocked."

Hannah shook her head slightly as she wrinkled her face in a doubtful look. "Unlocked?" *I thought I tried that and it wouldn't open. I must be losing my mind.* She shook her head. "I can't believe Emma would ever leave her door unlocked. Are you sure?"

Cay arched her eyebrows and replied, "Well, I turned the knob really hard, and it opened. I didn't go any farther, thought you should be the one to go inside."

A look of horror crossed Hannah's face. "Oh, no, I just thought that maybe someone broke in. Maybe that's why the door is unlocked. Hurry, we need to get inside and find her!" Hannah urged as she briskly walked off the screen porch.

The upper door creaked as Hannah opened it slowly. "Emma, Emma? Are you here?" When she heard no reply, she crept farther into the house with Cay close behind her.

"Hannah, why don't you let me go first...just in case someone else is in there?"

It had never occurred to Hannah that she might be in danger, but when Cay mentioned the possibility, she suddenly shivered in fear. “Good idea.”

Cay moved quietly in front of the older woman edging into the kitchen. What she saw amazed her.

The small, but functional kitchen was in museum condition. The old Frigidaire refrigerator looked like it just came from the showroom, as did the stove. Formica countertops had the sheen of new, not fifty years old. The chrome of the kitchen table still gleamed bright enough to blind someone. The only thing out of place was the vase of drooping daisies dropping petals on the tablecloth. A subtle scent of lavender filled the air.

Hannah just stood there with her mouth open as she looked around the area. “My goodness,” she managed to say. Once she remembered why they were there, she called out, “Emma, are you here?”

Cay peeked into the front room and found the conditions much the same as the kitchen. Rose-patterned wallpaper and several quality waterscapes adorned the walls. The furniture, although dated, remarkably still looked new with a high polish on the tables. “I didn’t see her in there,” she said as she moved toward the hallway.

The first door they came to opened into the bathroom, which was also immaculate. Cay moved a few steps inside and noticed bloody bandages and gauze in the garbage. *Not a good sign.* She followed Hannah down the hall.

She opened the next door and found the bedroom that apparently belonged to Emma’s mother. A wheelchair, with a robe draped over one side, sat in one corner. They saw the sheet turned back with a nightgown laid out waiting for the wearer to return. Cay took in every detail and surveyed the room quickly while Hannah moved on down the hall.

“Cay, come quick!”

Her pace quickened as she went down the hall. Cay entered a small bedroom where she saw Emma Sanders lying as still as death under white sheets. Hannah was standing with her hand over her mouth. Cay moved past her toward the woman in the bed.

“Is she dead?” Hannah whispered.

Cay knelt down, felt for a pulse, and found one. “No, she’s alive. She’s burning up, though.”

Hannah came up to the bed and took Emma’s hand. “Emma, wake up, dear.” She didn’t get a response and gently shook the woman. “Emma, wake up, we’re here to help you.”

Emma began to groan as she struggled to open her eyes. “Mother?” she asked as she tried to focus on who was speaking to her. “Hannah, is that you?”

Hannah sat down on the bed, soothing the disoriented woman as Cay carefully inspected the injured leg.

“Who’s that?” Fearful, Emma struggled to raise her head.

“It’s Cay O’Neill, sweetheart,” Hannah said.

Emma grimaced when Cay started peeling the saturated bandages from the wound. Emma closed her eyes and appeared to doze off until she began speaking again. “No strangers...can’t have strangers in the house, Mother will be angry...you have to leave before she sees you.”

Cay shook her head when she removed the last of the bandages. An area of red hot skin surrounded the sutured area, which was oozing pus. *This is bad.* She stood up and moved to the head of the bed.

Dizzying thoughts whirled through Emma’s head. *How can I let these people stay in the house? I need their help, but Mother will be so angry. No...no more hospitals, Mother, please, I’ll be good. What should I do? I need to get up and stop them!* She struggled to free her upper body from the bedclothes that entangled her. Emma cried out, “Stop!”

Both women stared at Emma, who was obviously dazed and disoriented.

“Hannah, she needs to go back to the doctor who stitched her up and have this looked at. I’m positive it’s infected,” Cay quietly told the older woman. “The fever seems to be making her delirious. That’s a really bad sign.”

Confused, Hannah said, “Oh, dear. I don’t know what doctor she uses...let me go out in the front room and look in the desk.” Then she got up. “Cay, you sit next to her, it seems to calm her if someone is near.”

After Hannah left, Cay cautiously sat down next to Emma wondering what she should do. This was the perfect opportunity to look around, yet she felt the need to comfort the ill woman. Cay took Emma’s hand and looked at her face. Her features were soft with full lips and a square chin holding just the hint of a cleft. Her hair, which had once been very dark, had a few streaks of gray, which seemed to blend flawlessly with the dark. Although flushed with fever, Cay could tell Emma took care of her skin, making her look as if she were much younger than her years. She noticed that her hands were large and calloused, *probably from gardening*, she thought, until she looked around the room, “and all the cleaning.” Cay sucked in a breath as she once again took in the woman’s face, only to shake off the thought. *This is business, not pleasure.*

Emma began to stir, opened her eyes, and pulled back in horror. “Where’s Hannah?”

Cay smiled slightly, trying to give Emma a sense of calm. “She’s out in the front room trying to find your doctor’s name. She’ll be right back.”

The hand she was holding pulled away and grasped Cay’s shirt tightly before the woman rose off the bed. “No doctors...please!”

“Your leg is infected. We need to get you some medical help or you might end up losing your leg—or worse. We can take you to the hospital if you prefer.”

Emma pulled Cay closer. “No! No hospital, you can help me!”

“I...I don’t know what to do. You need a doctor.”

“I know what to do—I just need your help.” Emma fell back on her pillow, releasing Cay’s shirt. “In the bathroom linen closet...plastic container...I need it,” she said.

Cay was bewildered and surprised as she rested her hands on her knees and sighed deeply. “Okay, I’ll help you.” She stood up and headed out of the room, almost running into Hannah in the process.

“Oh, I didn’t see you coming out,” Hannah said, surprised by the woman in the doorway. “I couldn’t find any doctor’s name. Guess we should take her to the hospital.”

Cay led the older woman farther down the hallway. “She refuses to see a doctor or go to a hospital. She’s asked me to help her treat the wound...said she knew how.” Cay shrugged. “I’m not sure we can do it, but I’m willing to try if you are.”

The older woman patted Cay’s arm. “Don’t worry, we can do it together. I hadn’t thought about her fear of doctors, but I’m not surprised. The last time she saw her mother alive was when the ambulance took her to the hospital.” She thought for a moment. “I’m pretty sure she’ll know what to do, after all she took care of an invalid for over twenty years.” Then Hannah smiled fondly. “Now, I’ll go find some aspirin or something like that for the fever.”

“Okay, I need to get some sort of container from the bathroom.”

Cay opened the linen closet and saw the white plastic container. She carefully pulled it out and set it down on the sink; she lifted the lid and immediately gasped at the amount of prescription drugs and other medical equipment it contained. *Maybe she does know what to do,* Cay thought before putting the lid back on and carrying it down the hall.

She stood in the doorway and studied Hannah and Emma speaking softly to each other. Hannah’s voice was soothing and Emma seemed to react to it in kind. She stored that observation before clearing her throat. “Here’s the container, hope it’s the right one.”

“Good,” Hannah said. “Emma, dear, you need to stay awake and tell us what to do. Okay?”

Emma nodded and attempted to open her eyes. “Wash hands...gloves.”

Soon the women were back and opening the container. “Emma, what should we do now?” Hannah asked as she watched Cay put the gloves on.

Emma, lifting her head slightly, pointed to her leg. “Take the stitches out.”

“Cay, dear, can you do it? My eyes are not all that good, and I left my spectacles at the store.”

Cay thought Hannah’s words seemed more to be pleading than asking. She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Sure, no problem.”

Hannah smiled and patted Cay’s arm. “I know you’ll do a wonderful job.”

She swallowed hard, searched the box, and found a suture-removal kit containing tweezers and scissors. With deliberate care, she opened the sterile pack and tried to work up her courage to begin. "I've never done this before."

A somewhat stern voice penetrated the quiet. "Take the stitches out now," Emma said. Her head collapsed back on her pillow.

"You're the boss." Cay began lifting and cutting the stitches. "Okay, that's done. What's next?" She looked squarely into Emma's eyes waiting for instructions.

"In the box...a brown bottle...small...it has long ribbon material in it." Emma tried to focus on what to do. "Pack the wound with it after you clean out the infection."

Cay found the bottle, some gauze pads, a bottle of sterile water, and bandages. She placed them all on the bed beside the injured leg and began to clean the wound. She thought seriously about throwing up as she began to wipe gently across the pus-filled injury. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Emma lying there, as stalwart and still as anyone could be under the circumstances, and marveled at her spirit.

Hannah stood next to Cay and assisted by handing her new gauze pads and giving moral support. "Are you okay, dear?" she asked as she watched the woman pack the brownish strip into the wound.

Cay could only nod. Her stomach was doing flip-flops. She worried if she lost her concentration she would lose her stomach's contents all over Emma's leg, causing an even worse infection.

They were finally finished. "Well, that's the best I can do for you." Cay looked at the pale and far-too-thin woman. *She never flinched. That must have hurt like hell.* "Here, take these." She handed Emma two tablets and a glass of water. "They're antibiotics I found in the container. You'll need to take one every eight hours to clear up that infection and prevent another one. I can't imagine this was all that sterile."

A whispered *thank you* floated up before Emma closed her eyes and released a breath.

Hannah stood by the bed and took the woman's hand. "Emma, dear, you're in good hands now. I need to get back, or that old man will come lookin' for me." She bent over and whispered something, then turned to Cay. "I'll be back later on."

The terror must have shown on Cay's face, for Hannah patted her arm. "You'll do just fine." She moved in closer and whispered, "If we need to, we will get a doctor."

Cay fished in her pocket and took out her car keys. "Why don't you drive back? I have my cell phone, so I can call you if I need you to come back."

"Why, thank you, dear...I'll take good care of your car." Hannah took the keys and headed out of the room.

Emma woke from a sound sleep and raised her head slightly. What she saw horrified her. A stranger, head bent in sleep, was sitting in a chair next to her bed! “Wh-wh-who are you?” she whispered, hoping beyond hope that this person was not going to kill her. There was no movement, so Emma poked the sleeping stranger’s arm. “Who are you?” she asked.

Cay heard the voice and tried desperately to open her eyes, but they wouldn’t cooperate. “Cay, I’m Cay.” She twisted her neck in an attempt to relieve the giant spasm that gripped her. She looked into a face of fear as she opened her eyes and instantly realized what was happening. “Remember I fixed your leg?”

Emma’s head returned to the pillow, and she closed her eyes, trying to recall the recent events. “Yes, the fall on the side of the road, the cut.” Her hazel eyes opened sharply. “It was infected! You and Hannah...where is she?” Emma asked as panic returned to her voice. “Did, did you kill her?”

“No, I didn’t kill her. She went back to the store.” Cay stood up and moved closer before placing her hand against Emma’s forehead and cheek. Emma cowered from the touch. “It’s okay,” Cay soothed. “I was just checking for fever. You don’t seem as hot, I think it has broken.” She took a step back. “How does your leg feel?”

Emma closed her eyes and breathed deeply. “The leg feels much better. I think I’m well enough that you can go back to whatever you were doing before Hannah forced you to come here.” She refused to open her eyes or make eye contact with the woman. “Thank you for all you did. Please leave now.”

As her eyebrows furrowed, Cay tried to figure out what had just happened. “I wasn’t forced to come here. I wanted to...I was worried about you. Why are you so afraid of me? I won’t hurt you.” She surprised herself with the gentleness she heard in her own voice. “All I want to do right now is help you. How about a nice bowl of soup or something to eat?”

Emma opened her eyes, turned her head, and looked into the blue eyes that seemed to beg her to trust their owner. Somewhere deep inside, she desperately wanted the woman to stay, for in a way, she made her feel safe. However, old fears kept rising to haunt her, as did her mother’s words: *The world is out to get you, Emma. I’m the only one you can trust and depend on...don’t let anyone near...ever.* The woman, whose eyes were as blue as the summer sky, had cleaned out her wound, then stayed and slept in a chair by her bedside. *I’m so tired of being lonely,* she thought before speaking. “Soup would be nice.” Her reward was a sparkling smile.

“Great! How does chicken noodle sound? You have some, don’t you?” she asked.

An infinitesimal smile began to creep from the corners of Emma’s mouth, then edged into her eyes. “Yes, in the kitchen...the cupboard next to the refrigerator...left door, second shelf.”

Cay smiled again. “Be right back with the soup.” She stopped in mid-stride and turned back to the woman in bed. “Oh, do you need any help getting to the bathroom? You must need to go, and you could clean up some at the same time,” she said.

Thoughts poured into Emma’s mind as she moved her injured leg. *Do I let her help me or try it myself?* “The leg is good, I can go myself.” She tried to sit up and dangle her legs over the side of the bed, only to have her head spin violently when she leaned forward to stand. After taking a deep breath, she steadied herself and managed to stay upright. *I can’t let this woman see me as weak.* Her mother’s words rang out in her fuzzy head. *They take advantage of weak people, Emma. Never show your weakness.* She repeated her mother’s words silently. “See, good as new.”

Cay looked suspiciously at Emma. She was indeed sitting up on the bed with no outward appearances of incapacitation. Yet something in her eyes belied her fear, her weakness, telling Cay all was not as rosy a picture as Emma was painting. “Okay, if you’re sure. You know, we are both going the same way, why don’t I walk along with you just in case you need a shoulder?”

Emma gathered all her energy and inched her feet closer to the floor and slid her slippers on. She stood for a moment to steady her trembling legs, adjusted her soiled long white nightgown, then began to step forward. “Let’s go,” she said.

Inside the bathroom, Emma rested her back against the closed door. She was certain that she had fooled the woman into thinking she was able to walk on her own. The twenty-foot walk was almost too much, and she could count at least six times she wanted to take the stranger’s arm but chose the wall instead. She shuffled toward the toilet, sat down, and removed the bandage, so she could get a good look at the injury. Satisfied it was improving, she stood and eased over to the sink to wash up. “She said I needed to wash up some, guess she thinks I smell bad.” Emma ran a warm washcloth over her face. “Once she’s gone, I’ll take a proper bath.” She lifted off her nightgown, retrieved her old, worn, cotton robe from the hook on the bathroom door and put it on before making her way back to her room.

Cay found the soup and thought about the woman in the bathroom and the mistrust she harbored toward everyone. *Why do I always get the difficult ones?* The smell of the boiling soup redirected her attention. She turned off the burner, poured the soup into a bowl, and placed that and a large spoon on a plate. After opening several lower cabinet doors, she finally found a bed tray and napkins. With the soup bowl and plate on the tray, she started for the bedroom—then stopped at the kitchen table. She took a not-too-wilted daisy and placed it on the tray alongside the napkin and spoon. *I’ll have to remember to put water in that vase,* she told herself as she continued to the bedroom. She did not expect Emma to be finished so soon and was surprised to find her back in bed.

“Soup time.” With care, she positioned the tray across Emma’s lap. “Be careful, it’s very hot. If you want, I can find some crackers or something like that.”

Emma said no, then picked up the flower resting on the tray and brought it to her nose.

“I’ll put more water in the vase when I take the tray out.” Cay watched as Emma’s eyes glazed over. She seemed to be in some sort of trance. “I hope you don’t mind my bringing the flower along with the soup.”

Emma’s hazel eyes looked up at Cay. “No, I love flowers...I’ve missed my garden,” she said. Then she put the flower down before carefully bringing a spoonful of soup to her mouth, blowing on it to cool it off some.

Cay’s eyes drifted to the partially open robe that had replaced the nightgown. For a moment, she gazed at the cleavage until she heard a gasp from Emma.

“Oh, that is awful.” She spit the soup back into the bowl. “Didn’t you add water?”

Cay’s face flushed bright red. “I...I...I’m not much of a cook. Let me fix it for you and I’ll add the water this time, I promise.” She tried to take the tray. “I’m so sorry. Guess I should have read the directions.”

Emma, for the first time, looked the woman over. She guessed her to be in her late twenties, maybe early thirties, with shoulder-length hair that looked as if it originally had been a light blond. Her body, which was taut and sinewy, made Emma think she might be an athlete of some sort. But it was the face and those blue eyes that held all the mystery.

Cay’s shuffling feet brought Emma out of her musing. “Oh...I’m really not that hungry. I’m sure you need to get back to your own business. I’m feeling much better so you can leave.” The tone of her words held no malice.

Cay had not expected nor anticipated such a turn of events. “Hey, it’s no problem. I can stay here as long as you need help.”

*Be careful, Emma, trust no one.* The thought scuttled through Emma’s mind just as she was about to accept Cay’s offer. “Thank you, but you should go. I’m not used to having anyone in the house with me.” Emma saw the look of hurt on the woman’s face and shrugged. “I’m sorry.” She really wasn’t, but it was all she could think to say.

Cay’s hand went to her eyes and rubbed them while she tried to buy time. She had been so busy watching over Emma that she had had no time to look around the house. She needed to stay...*but how?* “Emma, I’m not going to hurt you. If I wanted to do that, I had plenty of opportunity to do so.” She moved closer to the bed. “It would be awful if I left and you had a turn for the worse.” Emma recoiled as Cay reached down to place her hand on the woman’s forehead. “You feel like you might still have a bit of a fever.” She gave Emma her most sincere look. “Please, trust me, I only want to help.”

Her mother’s words screamed in Emma’s head warning her not to trust this woman even if she appeared to be sincere. She sighed deeply, closing her eyes in an attempt to blot out everything. She knew what she had to do. “Please leave.”

Cay couldn't mask the disappointment she felt with those words. "Okay." She reached for the tray, only to have Emma stop her to retrieve the daisy. "I'll water the flowers on my way out," she said. When she reached the doorway, she stopped and turned her head to look at Emma. *Such sorrow.* "Do you want me to send Hannah back? I know you're more comfortable with her."

*This is such a strange feeling,* Emma thought. *I so want a friend, but I can't, not yet. I need to know I can trust her.* Then her mother's voice began taunting her. *Who'd want you for a friend, you're worthless.* She knew the words were right. "No, I'm fine by myself...if you don't mind. I'm going to sleep now. Please lock the door on your way out." She turned her back to Cay.

Cay stood in the doorway for a minute before leaving. She disposed of the soup, rinsed out the bowl, plate, and spoon, then wiped off the tray and put it back in the cupboard. She brought the vase to the sink, sorted out the dead flowers, and added water before placing it back on the table. Satisfied that she'd tidied the room, she left the house, locking the door behind her. *I can always get back in if I want to,* she thought as she turned up the driveway and headed back to Jones's Landing.

## Chapter Ten

Cay stood outside the house and rapped on the door loudly. It had been twenty-four hours since she had left Emma alone, and for some inexplicable reason, she felt concern for the woman. She waited several minutes before knocking again, harder this time. She rocked back and forth on her feet nervously as she waited for a response. Cay began to worry that the woman inside the house had taken a turn for the worse and was in need of help. She turned her fist sideways, pounded on the door, and called out, “Emma, it’s me, Cay O’Neill. Please open the door, I’m worried about you.” *This is stupid! I don’t need an invitation to go inside.*

She slipped the black leather container from her pocket and began to unzip the fastener. Just as she began to insert the thin piece of metal into the lock, she heard the inside door open. She put the instrument quickly back in her pocket before the door cracked open and Emma peeked out.

“What do you want?”

Cay looked the woman over, noticing she had on the same robe from the previous day. Emma’s hair was dirty and matted; she definitely had a serious case of bed head. In spite of her disheveled appearance, her pallor was much improved, and that alone gave Cay cause for hope that the woman was on the road to recovery.

“I was worried about you and wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

“Don’t worry yourself over me, I’m fine,” Emma said as she started to shut the door.

Cay quickly pressed her hand against the door. “Please...may I look at your wound?”

To Cay, Emma’s eyes seemed to be on fire. “I told you, I’m fine. Now, please, take your hand off my door!”

Cay reluctantly removed her hand. “Sorry. I’ll be back tomorrow to check on you.” She smiled at the woman. “Bye for now.” She then turned and began the trek back down the driveway.

Emma slammed the door shut, locking it securely. She slowly limped back into the kitchen, confused by Cay’s actions. *Why would she come here with Hannah? No one has ever done that before.*



The next day, Cay arrived at Emma’s house at the same time as the day before and knocked loudly on the door. “Emma, it’s me, Cay.”

Several minutes passed before Emma opened the door glaring at Cay. “I told you yesterday I’m fine! Why do you insist on bothering me?”

*She actually looks much better.* Her clothes were clean, and she appeared to have taken a bath or shower. She took Emma's visible irritation at her presence to be a good sign that the woman was on the mend.

"Is there any chance you'll let me see how your leg is healing?" Cay asked.

"No."

Cay smiled. "I see you are feeling better. I'm off now but will return tomorrow at the same time."

"Don't bother!"

Cay waved at the woman and smiled as she headed away.

After closing and securing the door, Emma leaned against it. "Why does that woman keep coming here to check on me?"

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On the third day, Cay rapped at the door. "Emma, it's me, Cay."

With each passing day, the interval between her knocking and Emma answering decreased, and Cay took that as a positive sign that she was gaining her trust. Emma, still in her nightclothes, opened the door with what seemed to be a slight smile on her face.

"You again," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm doing much better today. There certainly must be other things you can do besides come here." Emma saw a playful grin creep over Cay's face.

Cay was dressed in running clothes, her breath slightly labored from jogging the mile to Emma's house. She was running slowly in place as she talked. "Actually there isn't, and I'm concerned about you."

"Why?" Emma wanted to understand what this woman's motives were.

Cay cocked her head and let her blue eyes capture Emma. "Isn't it evident to you? I care about you."

Puzzled and speechless, Emma didn't know how to act or what to say. *She only says she cares; you're a stupid fool if you believe her.* Her mother's scolding voice echoed in her mind.

"I'll be back tomorrow." Cay touched Emma's arm gently before jogging back down the drive.

Emma, still confused, watched the woman's agile body run effortlessly. *No one, not even Mother, cared about me.* She returned to her house. *How can this be? Why does she care about me? I'm not special at all.* Her mother invaded her thoughts, the voice inside her head spinning out its programmed message. *You're such a miserable person no one cares about you. Face it, you're worthless, Emma.*

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Emma watched the clock as the time came and went when Cay should have knocked on her door. A sense of disappointment and loss filled her heart. *Guess she really doesn't care that much about me*, she thought as she finished the dishes while watching out the window. She woke up, dressed, had breakfast, and began anticipating her visitor well before the sun rose. A strange feeling welled up in the pit of her stomach as she paced through the house. *A friend*, she thought, *maybe I have a friend*.

Now sitting at her table nursing a cup of tea, she felt a great sadness and loss. For a moment in time, she had hope...hope that her lonely existence was gone. Her mother's words screamed at her. *If you let someone in, Emma, believe me, they will hurt you. You can't trust anyone but me*. As always, her mother was right. Then her mind filled with fear. *What if something has happened to her? I should do something, but what?*

Cay's green Bug sped down the road toward Emma's house. She had been in a heated debate with her employer and was now late. *Damn him, I have to think of a way out of this*, she thought, remembering some of the earlier conversation.

*"I understand your point of view, but I don't think this is the right way to go about it...she is so mistrusting it's going to take a long time before I gain her trust. How much money are you willing to invest in this?"*

*"Now you pay attention, Ms. O'Neill. I really don't want your input on what I should do! What I want is for you to do the job I'm paying you very well for, and I expect results. That bitch's mother owed me, and now the debt is hers! You are to see that it happens!"*

*"I'm not sure I can gain her trust."*

*"I've heard all about your special ways of gaining trust. I'm sure you can work your magic on this matter. Listen, I took a chance on you, and you don't want to disappoint me...that would be a very stupid move on your part. I'm sure you know my reputation...I take no prisoners. Now get the job done!"*

Cay pulled her ear away from the receiver as the man hung up the phone. She closed her eyes and sighed. "How can I do this?" There was no denying that she felt protective toward the timid woman—but she had a job to do. The success of this job would redeem her reputation and lead to more jobs. "I'll do it because my future depends on doing a complete job." In the back of her mind, one nagging thought pounded: *at what cost?*

Cay slammed on the brakes, and the car skidded to a stop. She didn't bother to close the door, her only thought was to see Emma and explain why she was late. Even before she knocked on the door, she heard rapid footsteps coming her way.

Emma heard the car coming down the drive and practically ran to the window to see if it was Cay. Her heart began beating double-time as she saw the woman exit

her car. She opened the door and couldn't help responding to the infectious smile plastered on Cay's face.

"Hi, I'm sorry I'm late. I had a phone call that lasted longer than I expected. Will you forgive me?"

For the first time in forever, Emma felt playful. "I'm not sure I can, Cay, you did cause me to worry, you know."

*Emma actually said my name.* "Did you?" She allowed a smile to form as a glint appeared in her eyes. "Oh, really, I guess you now know how I felt when I came to check on you, and you took forever to answer the door."

Emma could feel her face flushing hot. To the best of her knowledge, she could not remember ever blushing before. "I'm sorry."

Cay felt a tender smile brush across her face. It was obvious she was making some headway if Emma was embarrassed. She took pity on her and changed the subject. "You look like you feel much better. Is there any possibility of my looking at your wound today?"

Emma hesitated for a moment before answering with a slight smile. "It's fine, really." She wanted to invite the woman in and have a conversation with her. *How I long for someone just to talk with*, she thought as she observed the hurt look on Cay's face.

Blue eyes searched Emma's face for a bit of hope and found some. "Is there anything I can bring you? Do you have enough food?"

In an uncharacteristic manner, Emma nervously reached for Cay's hand. "I have everything I need. Thank you for caring."

Emma's touch, albeit brief, had Cay reacting in a way she found pleasurable. But she shook the feeling off and concentrated on her continuing efforts to win the woman's trust. "Okay, I'll take your word...see you tomorrow." She gave the woman her best smile as she turned toward her car and opened the door, before turning around. "Any chance you would show me your garden tomorrow?"

Taken aback, Emma didn't know how to respond. A moment lapsed as the two women held each other's gaze. Then Emma took another chance. "Perhaps."

"Fair enough." Cay slid into her car and backed out of the drive.

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Once again, Cay stood outside Emma's door but hesitated and was surprised when the door opened. What she saw was Emma, her dark hair pulled back in a braid, looking radiant, in a calf-length, light blue dress. Cay was momentarily stunned as she took in the whole of the woman and realized how beautiful she appeared. Swallowing hard at the sight, Cay spoke. "Hi, you look wonderful!"

Emma smiled slightly, then pulled her dress up past the wound. The bandage was gone and the wound was close to being completely healed, although there would be an ugly scar. She stuck her leg out slightly. "See, it's all better."

“That’s amazing.” Cay’s blue eyes took in the leg, then worked their way up to the woman’s face. There was something different there, a glow that seemed to engulf her whole being.

For several awkward minutes, the two women stood there at a loss for what to say or do.

“So, are you going to give me a tour of your gardens?” Cay pointed toward the front of the house.

Emma, clearly out of her element, had difficulty in knowing what to do or say. She felt foolish at getting all dressed up and greeting Cay the way she did. “Um, well...I guess it would be okay if you looked at it on your own. You’ll have to be careful where you step, I have new plantings everywhere.”

Cay smiled. “Why don’t you come with me?”

“No, no, I can’t.” Emma stumbled over her words.

“Sure you can, Emma. I promise I won’t bite.” Cay’s words were light and playful.

Something wonderful was happening to Emma. For the first time in almost forty years, she felt happy. A genuine smile crossed her face as she stepped tentatively out the door. “I would enjoy showing off my garden. No one has ever wanted to see it before.”

The look on Emma’s face was something to behold as she spoke lovingly of her garden; it was clearly her pride and joy. Emma seemed to be one with nature, moving freely amongst the plants as if she belonged. “Over there, along the wildlife preserve, are my rhododendrons and laurel. In about a month, it will all be a sea of whites and reds,” Emma said, the awe evident in her voice. “By the first week in June, my yard will be different shades of pinks, whites, reds, greens, and yellows.”

“I bet that’s beautiful. What do you have over there?” Cay asked, pointing to a fenced-in area.

“Oh, that’s my vegetable garden...the leaf lettuce is up, as are the radishes, carrots, and beets. I’m sure they’re in need of attention. Later on, there will be tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, and maybe squash. Beyond that is a small barn. I never go near it...it scares me.”

“I just love fresh vegetables, don’t you?” Cay let her expression soften when she picked up the note of fear in Emma’s voice as she spoke of the barn. *Interesting.*

Emma smiled and turned around to look at Cay. “You’ll have to come and have some then.” Her face then contoured into a serious expression. “How long are you staying here?”

“I’m not sure, really.”

“Oh.” In that one syllable, Emma betrayed her sadness. She had made an attempt at friendship, and it was now abundantly clear to her that it might not last. “If you don’t mind, I’m rather tired...I think I’ll go in and lie down.” She didn’t make eye contact, trying to keep her sorrow from showing.

Cay's heart skipped a beat realizing that the woman might be sad if she left. The sudden change in Emma's demeanor concerned Cay. They were getting along so well, and she was sure there was a friendship blooming along with the plants. "Emma, have I done something to upset you?"

"No." The simple, yet unconvincing answer came softly, as she still avoided looking into Cay's eyes. Instead, she concentrated on the emerging plants in her garden.

Cay bent her head so she could see Emma's face and saw fear in the woman's eyes. "I'm not going to do anything to hurt you. Please tell me what the problem is." Mystified by her feeling of concern for the woman, Cay frowned. *For some reason, it's extremely important to me that I don't hurt her in any way.*

Emma finally lifted her head and looked at Cay. "I can't...I just can't."

"Will you tell me why so I can understand? Please."

Emma searched Cay's face and eyes and saw only concern and caring. *Can I take a chance on her?* "It's because of my mother. She always told me not to trust anyone..."

Cay knitted her brow in sympathy. "She was wrong," Although she knew her words were a lie, she could not stop them from tumbling out. "You can trust me...I'll never hurt you or betray you."

"Can I?"

Emma's reward was a brilliant smile. "Yes, you can. Now why don't you go nap, and I'll come back tomorrow and take you out to lunch. Would you like that?" Cay was hoping for a positive response, as it would be her chance to complete the job.

It had been a long time since Emma felt cheerful enough to smile outright, but now a sense of happiness crept into her being. "Out to lunch? You mean out to a restaurant? I'm not sure I can do that," Emma said.

Cay began to understand exactly what the woman next to her had gone through in her life. She knew about the fire and the hospitals, but now she understood how she lived her life—in total fear of disappointing her mother! *She must have been a horrible woman.*

With her fingers landing lightly on Emma's arm, Cay smiled. "How about I put together a picnic basket, rent a boat, and we go out to that island out there?" she said, pointing to a very small landmass in the lake.

A genuine laugh came from Emma. "We can't picnic there. It's more of a bog than an island. And it's filled with snakes."

"Snakes, how can that be? Are they poisonous?"

"Yes, they were trapped there when the lake was created."

Cay joined in the laughter. "So much for that idea."

Emma patted the hand that still rested on her arm. "Thank you."

"For what?"

“I can’t remember the last time I laughed.” Emma lowered her head again. “I’ve never had a friend.”

Cay reached out and lifted Emma’s face. “You have one now,” she said. Her words stung her lips and turned to stab her in the heart. “Why don’t we have the picnic right here?”

“I would like that.” Emma tried to stifle a yawn. “I’m sorry. I really need to lie down.”

“No problem,” Cay said. “I’ll be back tomorrow with a basket full of yummys,” she promised.

Emma stood next to the green car and smiled. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“Me, too.” Cay got in her car and cranked down the window. “See you tomorrow...bye.” She waved as her car edged toward the road.

Emma stood smiling, as the car disappeared from view. Then her mother’s words shrieked in her mind. *You foolish, worthless girl, no one wants to be your friend. They all have motives, Emma! You’re so stupid!*

The feelings that were beginning to stir for the woman who had just left were in sharp contradiction to her mother’s words. “No! You’re wrong, Mother, she is my friend!” she argued fearfully with the taunting voice. “I’ll not listen to you anymore!”

A great sense of tiredness overcame the woman as she went into her home. *I won’t allow you to do this to me anymore, Mother.*

## Chapter Eleven

That night, Cay tossed and turned, punching the pillow repeatedly in an attempt to eliminate an irritating lump that continually pressed into her face. At first, the cabin was too hot, so she opened a window—only to find she needed to pull the blanket up close around her shoulders when the night chill breezed in. The more she was determined to fall asleep, the more awake she became. The face of Emma Sanders kept floating to the top of her consciousness as Cay realized she despised herself for what she was about to do.

She didn't understand why this was upsetting her to this extent. In the past, she had done jobs and used people on a much bigger basis than this, yet now, she felt ashamed. Never before had she allowed herself to care about a target...it was "get in, get out," leaving all personal feelings locked away. The plan for Emma Sanders was now in full motion. For the first time, the prospect of completing a job terrified her.

She paced the wooden floor, her bare feet clapping loudly on the dry wood, as she drank a beer and tried to make sense of her feelings for her newest objective. It was her usual modus operandi to be hard and professional. For some reason, Emma Sanders had gotten to her, and she felt the need to protect the timid woman. She had encountered others just as needy and never had a problem cutting them down when it was necessary. *Can I do that to Emma?*

"Maybe I've lost my edge," she said to herself. She remembered her last case, the one that destroyed her reputation. *Could that be the reason for my apprehension now*, she wondered. *Maybe*, she thought as she raised her eyebrows and curled her lips.

*It had felt wrong from the start...her little voice of reason kept telling her not to take the job, but she ignored the warnings and the red flags that kept finding their way into her consciousness. Willable Industries had hired her to track and connect with Jack Salmon, the head of research and development, whom they suspected of selling prototypes of their latest inventions. It was an easy enough case, one that she had done hundreds of times in the past, yet it gave Cay pause and that was unsettling to her.*

*She arrived at the corporate headquarters under the guise of a newly transferred scientist. Jack Salmon had quite a reputation among his fellow workers as a narcissistic, power-hungry womanizer. He had worked his way up the corporate ladder stepping on anyone who got in his way. He was good at what he did and didn't mind telling others. With this knowledge, Cay was convinced she could gain his confidence, then compel him to include her in his plans.*

*To her, completing the job was all that mattered, and she would do whatever it took to accomplish her task. She did draw the line, however, at using sex as a tool; nothing was worth compromising her body in that way. When Salmon first came on to her, she readily accepted his advances, knowing if she withheld sex, he would give*

*into her demands to be included in his lucrative ventures. Even though the man repulsed her, she allowed the relationship to grow hotter while something in the back of her mind kept screaming to get out while she could. She ignored the warnings; after all, she never made mistakes, she was the best.*

*Cay was at the top of her game, and with that came an air of cockiness and infallibility. Never in her wildest dreams did she think anyone could take her down...ever. Then it happened—and her whole world collapsed around her. Jack Salmon was no fool and had known who she was and why she was there from the start. When it became evident to him that Cay would not have sex with him, he put in place an elaborate plan to make it look as though she was the traitor. They traced hundreds of thousands of dollars originating from a competitor's account to an offshore account in her name. The CFO of Willable Industries received an anonymous letter outlining a maze of corporate sabotage that led straight to Cay O'Neill. Overwhelming and irrefutable evidence implicated Cay in selling out her employers while she tried to pin the blame on Salmon, so she could walk away with a fortune.*

*Eventually, because of her meticulous notes and files, Cay proved her innocence. But it was too late to salvage her reputation. Word had spread like wildfire throughout the industrial and corporate community: Cay O'Neill could no longer be trusted. Her career essentially was over as soon as Jack Salmon presented evidence that exposed Cay as a traitor. She had forgotten the number one rule—never underestimate your target.*

*Although cleared of any wrongdoing in her business dealings, her character and actions looked suspicious once they were tainted. For a year, she lowered herself to following insurance fraud suspects or cheating husbands and wives in infidelity cases for the sleaziest investigation firm in the area. Forced to sell her BMW convertible and give up her expensive apartment along with the lifestyle to which she was accustomed, Cay suffered under the disgrace and many considered her to be poison until a man, who refused to give his name until they met, contacted her.*

*That conversation brought her to this valley and Emma Sanders. Her job was simple really...gain Emma's trust, then take the woman however she could to her employer. In the past, as long as she was paid, what happened after that was of little consequence to her. Now she feared for Emma and that little twist in her professional persona disconcerted her considerably. Once she met the man who wanted to employ her, she realized he was evil personified.*

*It was clear to Cay that Emma would be in serious trouble once she presented her to Borland. *That's never bothered me before.* She finished her beer. *And it can't now. My life depends on it! What an idiot I am to have agreed to work for that man in the first place. If I don't come through, he will kill me, I'm sure of that...and if I hand Emma over, he will kill her. Shit!**

Cay crawled back in bed and glanced at the bedside clock, calculating the time until she would see Emma again. “Ten hours, then I will do what I must,” she said. “Forgive me” were her last words before she dozed into a restless sleep.



Emma opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. That day, her new friend was coming over to have a picnic lunch. She smiled, then closed her eyes realizing that for the first time in too many years she was glad to be alive. She headed for the bathroom and a nice long bath to start the day.

Emma, scurrying around the house, experienced something she had never known. Happiness. *I have a friend*, she thought, as she straightened up the kitchen before dusting the front room. Finished with her chores, she looked at the clock and was dismayed when she saw there were still two hours to go before Cay arrived. With an old quilt her grandma made in hand, she headed outside in search of the perfect spot for the picnic.

As soon as she walked down the three steps to the yard, Emma saw the land before her in a new light, as a place for a picnic. She scanned the area before she decided on a spot under the hundred-year-old oak tree her great-great-grandfather had planted. *Perfect*, she thought as she spread the quilt on the ground.

The day was a glorious, warm spring day with a bright, clear blue sky. Emma surveyed her surroundings, noticing things she had never seen before. Although she kept her yard well manicured, she now saw the house, especially around the windows and the porch. *They definitely need painting*. A momentary sense of fear ran through her body as she considered hiring someone to do the job. *I'll do the painting myself*, she thought just as she heard the familiar sound of Cay's car rolling up the driveway. She waved to her friend while walking quickly toward the car.

“Let me help carry something,” Emma offered as Cay emerged from the car. “I set out a quilt on the lawn for us.”

Cay smiled broadly at the woman. “Great! That’s the one thing I forgot.” She reached inside her car and pulled out a picnic basket and cooler. “Here, can you carry this?”

Emma beamed as she took the cooler, then walked silently beside Cay to the blanket.

Cay took the cooler from Emma and motioned toward the ground. “Now you sit yourself down, and I’ll spread a feast worthy of a queen.” When Cay saw Emma comply, she began to take items out of the basket and arrange them neatly on the quilt.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Cay said. She started placing salads, sandwiches, and desserts on the blanket. “I didn’t know what you liked to drink, so I brought lots of different things. We have soda, tea, water, beer, wine coolers, and lemonade,” she announced. The look on Emma’s face told her she had gone overboard. “Too much?”

Emma shook her head and laughed. “Just a bit, but you meant well.” She took a plate and began to fill it full of food.

Cay’s eyes turned as big as saucers when she saw how much food Emma took. *Guess I didn’t overestimate after all.* “What would you like to drink?”

Emma finished chewing the bite of chicken salad. “Tea would be nice, thank you.”

When Cay handed the cold bottle of tea to Emma, she saw a perplexed look on Emma’s face. “What’s the matter?”

With her eyes cast downward, Emma hesitated before answering. “I...I’ve never had tea like this before.” She cleared her throat. “My mother would buy them for herself, but she told me I wasn’t allowed to have any.” Emma’s face turned crimson by the revelation.

“Hey, you want to talk about it? I’m a good listener,” Cay offered. When she saw that Emma continued to look down, she changed tactics. “Why don’t I tell you about me first?”

Emma looked up and smiled. “I would like that.”

“Good, why don’t you keep eating, and I’ll bore you to death with the story of Cay O’Neill.”

“I doubt your life is boring, Cay,” Emma remarked. She dug into the food once again. “Please tell me everything.”

“Okay. I guess I should begin with I’m the last of nine kids.”

“Nine! I didn’t know anyone had that many kids anymore,” Emma said.

“Well, my mother did...she wanted a girl and wasn’t stopping until she had one.” Cay shrugged. “Of course, my dad was disappointed since he was hoping for a complete team.”

Emma scrunched her eyebrows together. “Complete team?”

“A baseball team,” Cay replied. “You need nine players and his ninth child was a girl.”

“You can’t play baseball?” Emma asked. “I don’t know anything about baseball...sorry.”

Cay laughed. “No problem. Anyway, my mother was reading a story that my brother had for school. The title was *The Cay*, and she thought if she had a girl, that’s what she would call her. So here I am named after a coral island.” Cay winked. “Some days, I’m soft like sand, and other days, I’m razor sharp like coral. An apt name, I think.” Her eyes scanned the lake, hoping Emma wouldn’t see the sadness that suddenly came over her.

She spoke again. “At any rate, my dad is a police officer and so are four of my brothers. One is a lawyer, and three are firemen. A real family affair. I even have an uncle who’s a police commissioner.” She hesitated for a moment; talking about her life was harder than she thought it would be. “I, of course, was expected to join the force, and I did—but it didn’t last. I had a hard time understanding why the criminals

enjoyed all the rights while the cops had to play by the book.” Her mind drifted back to the night she decided to leave the force.

*She stood over the lifeless body of Karin Nicholson and shook her head. On six separate occasions, the police responded to domestic disturbance calls at the residence. Each time, she took the woman aside and pleaded with her to file charges or leave her husband. Karin repeatedly vowed to do just that, but she never did. The words, “he’s changed,” echoed in her ears.*

*“Where are the kids?” she asked before walking toward a bedroom and opening the door. They were there cowering in a corner and clutching each other. “Hey, remember me?” They timidly nodded. When she knelt down to talk with them, a look of horror crossed her face as she noticed the blood-soaked hands of the youngest child.*

*She resigned the next day.*

She smiled sadly. “The brutality of people toward their families was too much to bear.” Her eyes drifted to the tall tree as she fought to rid her mind of the horrible memories. “Anyway, it wasn’t the way I wanted to live my life, so I quit and went into private investigation.”

Fascinated by Cay’s revelations, Emma knew the sorrow on Cay’s face was genuine. “Please continue.” A stirring that was foreign to anything she had ever felt before began to rise in Emma’s heart.

“I’m not boring you?”

“No, not at all,” Emma said.

“All right then, but don’t forget it’ll be your turn when I’m done,” Cay reminded the woman.

“My brother Sean, he’s the lawyer, put me in contact with a company that was experiencing problems with corporate espionage. Since I was new in the business, they were leery of hiring me, so I made them a deal they couldn’t refuse...I offered to do the job free, less expenses. To make a long story short, I was able to uncover the names of the two employees who were making a very good living selling secrets. Soon after that, word got around and I never lacked work.” A look of melancholy came across her face. “I had the best reputation in the field until I came across someone who was better at the game and turned the tables on me.” Cay became very quiet and still. “I lost everything,” she whispered.

Emma listened to the pain in her new friend’s voice and felt sympathy as she cautiously reached across and touched Cay’s hand. “Not everything, Cay.”

Cay looked into the hazel eyes. “No, not everything, but what was most important to me at the time. I lived through it, and here I am today.”

Although Emma moved her fingers off Cay’s hand, she felt the need to touch her again. “What do you do now? If you don’t mind my asking.” She briefly touched Cay again before turning her attention to the apple pie. Her eyes relished the dessert as she took the largest slice.

Cay shook her head and laughed. “Where do you put all that food? I thought I brought too much.”

“It’s very good. I thought you didn’t cook,” Emma said. She frowned as she thought that Cay might have lied to her crossed her mind.

“I can’t believe you thought I did all this. I bought it from Hannah. She made some of the stuff special. Do you like it?”

“Oh, yes, it’s marvelous.” She finished off the pie. “So, what are you doing now...here?”

*Damn, I thought I distracted her...now, what do I say?* Cay’s mind whirled as she tried to put together a plausible story. With her most sincere look, Cay began to speak. “Well, I did some divorce work and insurance fraud, but it wasn’t what I wanted to do. I came here to get away for a bit and try my hand at writing a book about my investigating experiences. That’s about it...now what about you?”

Emma sat quietly as she tried to decide what and how to share her life with Cay. The woman sitting on her quilt was a stranger by all standards. *Yet she seems genuinely concerned about my welfare.* Her mother’s voice began taunting her until Emma closed her eyes and concentrated on making the nagging influence disappear. She looked across to Cay and saw nothing but kindness and compassion. *Yes, I can trust her, she thought, yes, I can.*

Cay waited patiently for Emma to speak. She could see that the woman was having some sort of dilemma with herself. *Maybe I’m pushing her too much...if she tells me nothing, then we both can stay alive longer.* The thought sent pangs of regret through her mind and heart. *For someone who is supposed to be hard as nails, I’m turning into a big ball of mush.* Emma’s voice brought her out of her contemplation.

“I remember the house I was born in...it was white with green shutters and had a large front porch and a big oak tree in the yard, just like this one.” She looked up at the branches above her head before continuing. “Although I think the house seemed, to my young mind, to be enormous, in reality, it probably was even bigger. I remember it had three stories and a weather vane sitting on top of the tallest peak of the house. We kids all had our own bedroom...my brother Bobby had a room on the third floor.” She closed her eyes and could still hear his terrified pleas that always haunted her... *Mommy, Mommy, help me.* “Of course, it’s gone now, so I’ll never be able to find out exactly how big it really was.” Cay saw no expression on Emma’s face as she spoke. “I remember my father as a giant of a man who always smelled like the pipe he smoked. Every night, he would come home, and I would run into his arms, and he would lift me up in the air before hugging me close.” Her hand gently stroked her cheek. “I remember how soft his beard was against my face. It reminded me of my cat Molly’s soft fur. How I miss him.

“My grandparents lived with us...I remember how they always seemed to be so much in love. I think I was their favorite.” She wiped away an errant tear. “My grandmother always smelled of lavender when she didn’t smell like whatever she was

cooking. She let me help her with dinner...I remember making biscuits one night and everyone said how good they were. Grandpa made a big fuss over them, and that made me so very happy.” To Cay, Emma seemed lost in her memories unaware of her surroundings.

“I had two brothers, Bobby and Jimmy...they always picked on me because I was the smallest and youngest, but they would look out for me and make sure I was always safe. I can still see Jimmy’s sweet, trusting smile...he had blond hair, everyone else was dark. I remember my mother saying the stork must have gotten the order mixed up. I don’t remember much about Bobby except...” The look on the woman’s drawn face seemed to tell Cay that Emma was reliving a tragic event. “They all died in a fire,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone as if she were watching and reporting the events but not involved. “My mother saved me and ended up an invalid. She would always tell me if it wasn’t for her I would be dead, and I should be more grateful. Any time I went against her will, she would send me to a psychiatric hospital until I learned how to act properly.

“I was only a little girl, but they would tie me down and drug me, so I would be still,” Emma said as she rubbed her wrists. “After a while, I learned that if I stayed very quiet and made myself very small, no one would tie me down. After years of confinement and isolation, I finally realized if I just did the same thing at home, my mother would let me stay.” She shook her head. “I figured out how to play the game to survive my mother’s wrath. My mother! Can you believe a child would have to plot against her own mother? When I was eighteen, I moved here permanently. I learned the most important lesson of all...never trust anyone.”

“You don’t trust anyone? Isn’t that a lonely existence?”

“Lonely? Maybe, but it was how I survived this long. After I lived here for two years, we had a huge storm that did extensive damage to the property. My mother hired the son from a family that had a house on the lake to do the cleanup. He was the first person in my life, since my father, who made me feel special. Eric Borland was his name.”

Cay froze when Emma said the name. “Did you spend a lot of time with him? Was he your first boyfriend?”

Emma bowed her head, then spoke so low Cay had to strain to hear her response. “I’d rather not talk about him.”

“Okay, no problem,” Cay responded. After a few awkward moments, Cay asked another question. “I understand you own quite a bit of the property around the lake. Do you manage it all yourself? I imagine that’s a big job.”

Thankful for the change of topics, Emma smiled. “My mother made certain I was well prepared to take charge by making sure I knew all about the business. She didn’t trust management companies or lawyers, for that matter.” She formed her words carefully, and before she said them, she paused. “I guess in answer to your

question, yes, I manage it, but the year before Mother passed, she did hire a management firm. It's too big for just me to manage."

Cay retrieved another beer from the cooler before finishing off her sandwich. "Would you like more to drink or eat?"

"No, I've had enough," Emma said as she patted her belly. "This certainly has turned into a wonderful day."

"Not a cloud in the sky and warm...what more could we ask for? I have an idea...why don't I rent a boat, and we can take a leisurely ride around the lake? You could tell me about the lake and its history. What do you say, are you up for an adventure?"

Emma couldn't help but grin at the goofy look on Cay's face. She reminded her of a child full of excitement and curiosity. "Now why would you rent a boat when I have a perfectly good one?"

"You do? I didn't see a boat lift, where do you keep it?" Cay's eyes searched the lake around the property for a boat.

Emma let out a hearty laugh. "It's probably right next to your cabin. I store it at the landing, and they keep it maintained for me."

Cay was amazed. The thought of Emma Sanders skimming across the lake in a speedboat was never a consideration. "What do you use the boat for?" she asked, unable to keep the shock from her voice.

Once again, Emma laughed. "For fishing mostly. Sometimes I go by the properties to check on their condition. I've shocked you, why?"

Cay's face turned bright red. "Well...you see...it never occurred to me that you would be out on the lake in a speedboat."

"Who said anything about a speedboat?" Emma quipped. "It's a small fiberglass boat with a thirty-five horsepower motor plus an electric one for fishing among the weeds. It's just perfect for me. Do you fish?"

"Yes." She shook her head and chuckled at herself and her assumptions. "It just occurred to me that I've been an idiot. I'm sorry for being so nosy and asking you so many questions earlier. You must think I'm quite the busybody." Cay cast her eyes downward. "I'm truly sorry."

Emma watched her new friend's embarrassment and felt responsible. *After all, she did tell me everything about herself...or did she?* "Cay, do you have a boyfriend?"

For Cay, the question seemed to come from left field and she didn't know where the question was leading. She decided to answer honestly. "No, not at the moment."

Emma's brow furrowed. "A pretty young woman like yourself without a special someone...I find that hard to believe."

"Well, it's true. I've never found anyone I wanted to share my life with," she said. "I live a life in the shadows...that makes it hard to form close relationships."

"Surely, you have lots of friends...don't you?" Cay's answer puzzled Emma.

Cay shook her head. “Not really. I have my family, but no real friends.” Then she smiled. “Until now.” Cay surprised herself when she realized the truth her words held.

The past came tumbling back into Emma’s consciousness, and the frightening events were too much to hold inside any longer. In a quiet and unexpected tone, she began to speak as her hazel eyes searched Cay’s face. “No, he wasn’t my boyfriend,” she whispered. “Remember when I pointed out the barn?”

Cay nodded, astounded by the turn of events and the obvious deep pain on Emma’s face.

Emma’s voice began to quiver. “That’s where he raped me. I remember being outside hanging the laundry when he came up to me and asked about a rake in the barn...I told him it was there, and he asked if I could help him find it...why shouldn’t I? He was a nice enough fellow who was kind to me...so off I went. Once we were inside, I turned to him and saw the danger in his eyes and I tried to leave, but he blocked my escape. He grabbed my wrists and forced me down on a bench as he reached under my dress.

“I couldn’t believe that the sweet boy whom I thought was my friend would do that to me. I remember asking him why, and he only grunted and kept thrusting himself inside of me. I began screaming, and he slapped my face and forced himself on me again. Finally, my mother heard my cries and rolled her wheelchair into the barn.” Emma closed her eyes to fight back the tears.

“She screamed and went after him with the rake she found propped up against a post. He just snickered and called her an ugly crippled pigas he stood up and made a big show of pulling up his shorts.

“There was no way she could get at him and move her wheelchair, but that didn’t stop her from shaking the rake and screaming obscenities. She said, ‘You goddamn piece of shit you’ll pay for this. I’ll see to it that you never see the light of day again.’

“He only leered at her and said, ‘You and who else, bitch? There’s no way you can touch me...or is that what you want, old woman? Do you want me to do you, too? There’s no way I’d do an ugly cripple.’ His laugh was hideous.

“I was so overcome with shame I couldn’t move until he turned around and said, ‘I’ll be back to finish the job.’ I lunged at him scratching at his face, but he was bigger and stronger and pushed me away after slapping me across the face. I can still hear his laughter as he swaggered out of the barn...it was so full of evil. My mother screamed at me to call the sheriff.”

Emma rubbed her forehead as if she had a headache. “Once the sheriff came and saw the condition I was in, he went to the Borland home and arrested Eric, over the loud protests of his father. From what I gathered, the rest of his family had left after the storm. We were all in the police station: my mother, Eric’s father, and I when the sheriff fingerprinted Eric. His father pushed me out of the way and wheeled my

mother over to the other side of the room. When she came back, she told me to drop all the charges. I had no choice if I didn't want to be committed again." The tears began to stream down her cheeks. "Why would she do that? Make me let that pervert go?"

Cay handed her a napkin. "Here." She moved closer and put her arm around Emma. "Go ahead and cry, Emma, it'll help release the demons." Soon she was rocking Emma gently as the tortured woman sobbed uncontrollably.

Trying desperately to speak through her tears, Emma blurted out, "She made me give my baby away! How could she do that? She wouldn't even let me see it or know if it was a boy or girl. My own mother did that to me! She said I would never be a good mother, that I was too sick in the head. But I wasn't!" she screamed. "I wasn't."

She pushed away from Cay and stood up to create more space between them. Emma gave Cay a half smile as she wiped away her tears. "Thank you. Other than Hannah consoling me at my mother's funeral, no one has ever cared how I feel."

"Anytime," Cay said sincerely. "It's never a good idea to carry around pain and guilt by yourself...it needs to be shared to lighten the burden." Cay looked up into her tear-stained face. "That's what friends are for."

Emma cocked her head and smiled. "Do you mind if I go out on the dock for a moment?"

"No, not at all," Cay replied. She watched Emma straighten her back as her long strides took her toward the dock. She shook her head and sighed deeply, amazed by the strength it must have taken for Emma to survive everything for so many years. "Now what will I do? How can I undo everything?" She looked out toward the lake and Emma standing on the dock. *Oh, Emma, what have I done?*

## Chapter Twelve

Cay woke up early and put on her shorts, tank top, and running shoes before heading out of her cabin. She needed to think, and running would help her once she was away from the surroundings of the lake. Ever since hearing Emma's revelations about her life's experiences, Cay knew there would be no way she could continue on the path she had set. Somehow, she would have to think of a way to convince her employer that pursuing Emma Sanders would be unwise.

She stood beside a bench and did some light stretching before she began a slow jog down the now familiar highway. Soon, she hit her top speed as her mind clicked through all the various scenarios and their outcomes, realizing there would be no easy answers. She knew beating herself up for taking the job wouldn't do any good, either. She needed to come up with a solid plan of attack. When she arrived at the point to turn around, she knew what to do. She would never convince her employer to stop his quest for revenge. Once she told him she would no longer help in his endeavors, she was certain he would kill her, then go after Emma himself. She would have to find a way to protect Emma...to keep her safe from harm.

"Now I just need to figure out how to do that and not raise any suspicions." When she reached Jones's Landing, she walked around in a large circle to cool down and plan a strategy—she didn't notice the person staring at her. "There's got to be a way!"

"A way? Are you lost, Cay?" Emma asked.

A radiant smile crossed Cay's face. "Emma, I didn't see you there. How are you doing today?"

Emma couldn't help but smile back. "Good, this is shopping day...I go every Thursday," she said, cocking her head in question. "So are you lost? Can I help you find your way?"

Cay smiled broadly. Fate seemed to be showing her a way to solve her dilemma. "I'm not lost, I just need to figure out how I can keep staying here in the cabin. My funds are dwindling." She patted her friend's hand as she saw her frown. "Not to worry, I will find a way." When Cay looked at the full shopping cart, she saw an opportunity. "Are you finished with your shopping? I can give you a lift home if you'd like."

"That would be nice," Emma responded.

"Great! Will you give me a minute to change out of these sweaty clothes? I'm sure I must reek!" Cay exclaimed with a wink.

"Not really," Emma said, not quite grasping the derisive intonations. She noticed the playful look on Cay's face and realized it was a joke. "Oh," she said. "You're joking, right?" A slight tinge of red covered her face.

"Yes, I was. Why don't you come along with me to my cabin while I change?" She motioned toward her residence.

Old fears streamed through all of Emma's being. *How can I go into a stranger's house? What if she tries to hurt me or even kill me?* Panic filled her. "I...I'm not sure," she said. *Emma, you are so stupid, don't you see that woman wants your money?* Her mother's voice ridiculed her once again.

Cay, puzzled by the radical change in Emma's demeanor, asked, "Have I done something?"

Emma's mind was screaming for her to run and hide, but in her heart, she knew she had nothing to fear. *Trust and have faith.* She took a deep breath and smiled. "No, not at all...old fears die hard," she said. "Which cabin is yours?" She went down the hill, with her grocery cart in tow, toward the row of lakeside cabins.

"Over there," she said as she pointed to the last one. "See my car?"

Cay opened the door and suddenly felt embarrassed. "Not only can't I cook, but I'm not much of a housekeeper, either," she said, looking over the disarray inside cabin. After letting Emma enter, she quickly went around picking up clothes and empty food containers. She was glad her notes and equipment were out of sight.

Emma laughed at the sight of Cay trying to clean up the messy room. "Please, stop, it looks lived in. Why don't you go change? I do have refrigerator items I need to get home."

Cay unceremoniously dropped the load of clothes into a chair. "You're right, it does look lived in." She pulled the tank top over her head and winked. "Be right back."

Emma just stared after the woman as she tried to discern what had just happened. The sight of Cay casually standing in nothing but her bra had taken her breath away, and she didn't know why. *I guess it's because I've never seen anyone else like that except my mother. She certainly didn't look like my mother.* She turned her attention to the untidy area. She found a chair not filled with clothes and sat down. She began straightening the table in front of her and before long stood up, picked up some dirty dishes, and took them to the kitchen sink. The hot water was soon running over the dishes as the green liquid soap began to bubble. Her mind drifted back to Cay's saying her funds were dwindling and her mother's warning. *I can put her to a test and see if Mother is right. I'll offer to give Cay some money; if she takes it, I'll know she can't be trusted.* A door closing brought her out of her musings.

Cay came into the large room and saw Emma standing in front of the sink as steam from the hot water wafted up, causing the window to cloud over. "Emma, are you planning on doing the dishes?"

Emma smiled as she turned around. "I thought I could help out a bit while you were changing. It'll only take a moment."

"I have a better idea. Why don't we let those soak, they probably need at least a day, and we can get those groceries back to your house," Cay said.

"I really don't mind."

“I know, but you do have frozen food, remember. Come on, let’s go.” Then she took hold of the cart and opened the door. Cay gestured to the outside world. “After you,” she said with a flourish of her hand.

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Cay brought the shopping cart into Emma’s house and placed it on the spotless linoleum floor. “Do you want me to put these away for you?”

From her bedroom, where she was changing her shoes, Emma responded, “No, I will as soon as I come out...You don’t know where everything goes.” When she walked into the kitchen, she added, “Why don’t you help me?”

Cay turned to see her new friend, who had changed from a calf-length purple dress into her pants and oversized shirt, smiling. “Sounds good to me. Looks like you’ll be doing some gardening today.”

Emma began to take various items out of the bags. “This goes in the refrigerator...oh, and so does the butter.” She put the box of oatmeal and loaf of bread away as Cay came up beside her. “If you can put these in the pantry for me, we should be all done.” She handed the woman several canned items.

“All done.” Cay smiled. “I guess I’ll let you get on with your chores,” she said as she started for the door.

“Cay,” Emma said. “If you need money, I’ll give you some.”

The shock was evident as Cay felt the hot flush of embarrassment cover her face. This was the last thing she expected from the woman and didn’t know how to respond or act. Clearly, Emma was trying to help her out, but this was not the way.

“I’ve insulted you, I’m sorry,” Emma said. She moved away from Cay and bowed her head.

Cay was instantly by her side. “No...no, you haven’t, it’s just I...I can’t take your money. I’ll work something out, or I’ll go back home.”

“Go home? You would go home?” Emma could feel her heart sink.

“Not right away. Let’s not worry about that now,” Cay said and smiled. “Want to go fishing later this afternoon? I heard some of the guys at the landing say the bass are starting to bite.” She bent her head sideways, so she could see Emma’s face. “I’ll buy the worms.”

As hard as she tried, Emma couldn’t resist smiling. “Considering your fortunes, maybe I should buy the worms.”

“Emma, you should smile more often, you have a lovely smile...did you know that?”

The blush on Emma’s face was evident. “No, no one has ever told me that,” she said as their eyes met. “What time do you want to go fishing?”

“I’ll pick you up on your dock about four if that’s okay.”

“Perfect, you can use my boat. Just tell Zachariah, and he’ll take care of everything.”

After she opened the door, Cay turned back and smiled. “See you later.” *I need time to think, but time is running short. I have to do something soon.*

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From her kitchen window, Emma watched Cay get into her car and look back at the house. *You’re a strange one, Cay O’Neill, but you wouldn’t take my money; that’s a plus for you. I wonder...* she thought before gathering her gloves to go work in the garden. “Bet I find a few worms out there,” she said as she laughed all the way out to the garden.

Emma saw all the newly emerging plants fighting their way up through the soil to soak in the warmth of the sun. She knelt down and tenderly held a soft green leaf, feeling life coursing through its veins. As she touched the soft soil, she closed her eyes and began to slow her breathing down, as she became one with the earth. Here in her garden, Emma felt alive; here, all her senses came alive, and she knew she belonged.

Deep in her meditation, Emma didn’t notice Cay’s kayak skim silently across the water in front of her home. Nor did she see the vessel positioned amongst the bulrushes close to the wildlife preserve. Neither woman took notice of the other...each seeking answers to questions and finding none.

Cay sat amongst the reeds, listening to the singing birds, wishing she could go back a month in time. Emma Sanders was an innocent in any vendetta against her mother. Now because of Cay’s actions, she was in extreme danger. Before she could call and refuse to continue in the job, she needed to be sure she could protect Emma. The question was how to get Emma out of her house and away from the danger that was sure to come her way.

Cay looked up at the cloudless sky and sighed. “Nothing will happen to you, my friend.” Then closing her eyes, she wondered, *Did I need you as a friend as much as you needed me?* “Probably,” she said. With a sharp jab of the paddle slicing into the water, she exploded out of the reeds and sprinted full speed toward the landing.

Emma’s mind was at peace, one with her surroundings—until the slapping of water abruptly jolted her from her tranquil state and drew her attention to the water where she saw a distant figure in a kayak gliding quickly along the water. She shook her head. “Summer will soon be upon us.”

She stood up and looked at her house, contemplating how much her life had changed over the last few weeks. *A friend, I have a friend!* Her happiness quickly fell when she remembered that Cay would be leaving. Looking back toward the lake, she smiled as she considered the fishing outing with her new friend. “Guess I better find some worms.” She took her trowel and knelt back down in the garden.

The soil, rich with loam, made it a perfect home for big, fat red worms. “They’re the perfect kind for fishing,” Emma said, carefully pulling a particularly

enticing specimen out of the earth. In no time at all, Emma filled a soup can with dark soil and worms. She put a lid over the can and turned it upside down.

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The familiar pitch of her motor reached Emma before the boat, and her new friend came into view. She felt giddy with the anticipation of sharing her favorite fishing sites with another human being. This was a new adventure, and for Emma, completely out of character. In her heart, she instinctively sensed the rightness of connecting with her new friend. She crouched down and grabbed the small craft as it slid in beside the dock. “You did that as if you’ve done it before.”

“Oh, I’ve done it a time or two, and just as you said, Zach took care of everything. I see you’re ready to go,” Cay casually responded.

“I packed some drinks and sandwiches for later on, just in case the fish are biting so well we don’t want to leave.” Emma’s voice and posture were tentatively anticipating Cay’s reaction. The smile she saw on her friend’s face reassured her. She waved the can of worms in the air. “Oh, and I have the worms, too, right out of my garden.” She handed her belongings and the bait to Cay.

Cay raised her hand upward and offered it to Emma. “Here, let me help you.” Emma took her hand, stepped into the boat, and took a seat. “You’re sitting there?” Cay’s eyes grew wide. “I don’t know any of the places to go, I can’t drive...it’s your boat.”

Emma laughed long and hard. “Of course you can. You should see your face! Don’t panic.”

Cay laughed, realizing how silly she must have sounded. “Okay, then let’s get going...which way?” She slowly navigated the boat away from the dock.

As they moved along the water at an easy pace, Emma pointed out various sites along the lake, including Snake Island, the spot where Cay had wanted to picnic.

“Up close I can see why it wouldn’t make a very good landing area. Are there really snakes there?”

“Oh, yes,” Emma replied.

“Why hasn’t anyone removed them? Aren’t they dangerous to unsuspecting boaters who might stop there?”

“Actually, there was an effort to capture the snakes and relocate them, but they couldn’t find them all and decided to just leave nature to itself. Signs are posted warning of the danger.” Emma pointed down the lake to a small cove. “Head down there, then we’ll stop.”

They sat in companionable silence as each woman cast her line into the water. The clear sky of the early afternoon turned slightly overcast, but the wind blew warm in promise of the summer soon to come. The pronouncement of fish biting seemed exaggerated, as they hadn’t a nibble in the hour they had been on the water.

“Cay,” Emma said.

As Cay cast her line out, landing her baited hook softly on the water, she responded, "Yes?"

Emma sat frozen on the bench as emotion suddenly overcame her. The day had been wonderful, and she was, for the first time since the fire, happy and glad to be alive. But she couldn't stop the tears that were leaving trails on her cheeks.

After several minutes of no response, Cay turned around to look at the woman who had spoken her name. "Emma, what's the matter? Why are you crying?"

Unable to speak immediately, Emma shook her head. "I...I..." She began sobbing. "I don't want you to leave." She swiped her hand across her nose. "I've never had a friend before, and I don't want to lose you."

"I'll always be your friend." She smiled as she cautiously moved forward, trying to stay in the middle of the boat. "I'll figure something out, I promise." She touched Emma's arm lightly, not prepared for how nice it felt.

With glistening eyes, Emma tried to smile. "I'm sorry for being selfish. It's just that I have found what has been missing in my life...someone I can talk with...a friend."

"Silly girl, you're not selfish. I'll tell you a secret," Cay said. "I've needed a friend, too."

At that moment, Emma felt a strong tug on her line but let the fish run until it spit out the hook. She spoke quietly. "Won't you let me help you? I have more money than I can ever use. I should use it to help others...you, my friend."

"You have to understand, I can't take your money. It wouldn't be right." *How can I make her understand without hurting her? Damn, what a mess this has become.* "I've made it a rule of my life not to take money from friends or family."

The look on Emma's face told her story. She was distraught with the idea of Cay leaving the area. "What can I do so you'll stay?"

"Trust me, I'll find a way." Cay was trying to defuse the situation. *I never intended on getting this involved. I need to get a hold of my emotions, both our lives depend on it.* "I'll find the money or another place to stay, I promise. Will you please trust me?"

The tearful woman just stared off at the rippling water. *Why is life this cruel to me? There must be something I can do to help Cay...there has to be!* Cay's words floated around in her head...*another place to stay.* "Of course!" she blurted.

The utterance startled Cay. "What did you say?"

"The solution is so simple. You can stay with me! I have lots of room, and it would be so nice to have someone else in the house," she said. "Don't you see, Cay, it's perfect? Please say yes."

Cay was at a loss for words. Never had she imagined that Emma would ask her to stay at her house. *Things are working out; at least by being in the house, I can keep Emma safe.*

"Please say something, Cay."

“Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Yes!”

“Have you thought about what the townsfolk will think about you inviting a stranger into your home?”

“I don’t care what they think. Never have.”

“Then we shall give it a try.” Cay’s face filled with a genuine smile.

Emma’s face brightened also into a full smile. “Yes, we shall. Would you like one of the sandwiches I brought?” She held up the lunch bag full of tasty treats.

Cay smiled. “That sounds great. All of a sudden, I’m very hungry.”

She passed a ham and cheese sandwich to her soon-to-be houseguest. *For the first time in forever, I feel content and truly at peace.*

## Chapter Thirteen

Cay approached Hannah when she walked into the quaint store. “Hi.” She smiled fondly toward the older woman. Trepidation filled her mind as she wondered how best to tell the older woman that she would be leaving. Even more troubling was admitting to where she was moving.

“Well, hello yourself,” Hannah spoke while giving change to a customer. “The kitchen is closed, but I can find you some leftovers,” she said as she turned toward Cay.

“Oh, no, that’s not why I’m here, but thanks for the offer. I just wanted to let you know that I’ll be moving out of the cabin...and I need to settle up with you.” The confident tone was hiding her anxiousness.

“I’m sorry to hear that, I’ll miss you.”

“Not to worry, I won’t be far away.” She took a deep breath before she continued. “I’m moving in with Emma.”

“Emma!” The shock was evident on her face. “Just what are you up to, missy?” Hannah gave Cay the once-over. “We don’t take kindly to anyone taking advantage of one of our own!” The small woman crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the woman across from her. “Emma is an innocent! Don’t think you can just waltz into our lake and take advantage of someone who is as vulnerable as that child.”

Cay held her hand up. “Hey, wait a minute, I’m not trying to pull anything, and there’s a simple explanation.”

“I’m waiting.” The older woman tapped her foot on the wooden floor as she waited for an answer.

“I’m running out of money, and Emma asked me to stay with her. That’s all there is to it...nothing nefarious at all.”

The look on the woman’s face told Cay she wasn’t buying the story. Hannah took out her ledger, set it down on the counter loudly, opened it to accounts receivable, and quickly wrote on a scrap piece of paper. “You owe us two hundred and thirty-seven dollars and twenty-six cents...in cash.”

“Cash, of course.” Cay counted out the proper amount and laid it on the counter. “I’ll be gone by noon tomorrow.”

“Checkout is eleven.”

“Eleven, it’ll be then.” Cay left the store knowing she would have to stay up late into the night to pack her belongings. Not that there was that much, but packing the delicate tracking and listening devices would take time. Then there was the matter of her phone call to her employer. *I had better do that after I’ve settled in Emma’s house...no sense taking any chances*, she thought as she entered her cabin. She was about to start taking some of her possessions out to her car when the work cell rang.

“Yes.”

“You went fishing with the woman today, how soon before you deliver her to me?”

“Like I told you last time, it isn’t going to be easy.” Cay’s voice was calm, even though her heart was beating double-time.

“Listen to me, bitch, you have till the end of the week! Do you understand?”

“I understand, but you have to understand what’s going on here.”

“I don’t have to understand a fucking thing! You listen and listen well, either you finish the job by the end of the week or you will pay!”

There was a loud click, then silence as the connection ended. Cay looked around the cabin and all that she had left to pack. *He has someone here watching me, damn it all to hell!* She packed everything as quickly as she could and a half hour later had everything stacked by the door. *Before I go to live at Emma’s, I need to make sure no one follows me. There’s no sense in letting them know about my plans, better scout out the area.* She dressed in all black, pushed her gun into the holster at the small of her back, turned out all the lights, and quietly exited the cabin through a window. She stayed in the shadows of the cabin, blending in with the darkness.

With deliberate care, she made her way along the side of the cabin, all the while scanning the area for any movement or sign that someone was there. She was the only resident living in the cabins; therefore, anyone around the cabins or docks at midnight didn’t belong. She froze in place when she detected the faint scent of cigarette smoke. She crouched down and allowed her eyes to rove in the direction from where the wind was blowing, scrutinizing every scent, movement, and sound. Off in the distance, toward the docks, she saw the faint reddish glow of a cigarette.

She made her way in the darkness and spotted a dark figure leaning against a dock piling. The person was making no effort to conceal his presence. *Guess he didn’t think I would know that someone was watching me,* she thought. She crept close enough to make out a man whom she didn’t recognize and devised a plan to confront him. With caution, she moved back a few yards to a tree and stood up, keeping the tree between herself and the man’s line of vision. She felt for her gun in the small of her back and breathed a sigh of relief. Cay walked toward the dock, making herself visible to the man and anyone else watching. She kept the man, who hadn’t seen her yet, in sight. He was heavysset with broad shoulders, dark hair, and about five ten. When he suddenly noticed someone moving toward him, he appeared to be searching for a place to hide, but it was too late.

Cay passed by the man and nodded. “Great night for a walk, isn’t it?”

The man hesitated as he nervously looked around. “Yep,” he replied. He casually put his hand inside his jacket.

In a flash, Cay’s gun was out and pointed at the man’s head. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she warned. “Take it out, barrel first, and throw it far out in the water.”

The man complied. “Okay, I did what you wanted. Now get that gun away from my head.”

Cay pushed her gun harder against the man's temple. "You're in no position to be giving the orders. Why are you following me?"

"I don't even know you. Why would I be following you?"

The gun twisted against his skin. "I'm sure you've been briefed on what I'm capable of doing to those who upset me. Don't push me, mister, or your next lie will be your last," Cay spat out. She cocked the hammer of the gun.

"Okay, the boss sent me to make sure you were doing your job." Cay heard a slight trembling creeping over the man's former bravado.

"Well, why don't you go back and tell *the boss* I don't need a babysitter." Cay continued to twist the gun in a threatening manner. "Got it?"

The man tried to pull his head away from the barrel of the gun. "Yes," he said.

"Good, now you and I are going to walk up the road to your car...then you will get the hell out of here!" Cay scraped the gun across his cheek. "Move it!"

The man led the way with Cay's gun resting against his back. "Is this your car?" She pressed the gun deeper in to his back.

"Yes. The boss ain't gonna like this, he's gonna kill you. Then we'll see who's so smart."

"Just what do you think he's going to say when you go back and tell him you were found out? If I were you, I'd lay low until this is all over."

"Yeah, you should take your own advice if you know what's good for you."

"Open the door and get in! Now you go back and report that I found you out and chased you away. I'll make sure I send flowers for your funeral."

The man slammed the car door shut and started up the engine before backing out of the parking space. With screeching wheels, he left the area but not before giving Cay the finger.

Cay really didn't care what he did as long as he got the message and didn't go back and report his failure.

Once his car was out of sight, she ran back to her cabin and quickly tossed all her belongings into her VW before getting in and speeding off. She would spend the night parked elsewhere, so no one could follow her when she went to Emma's in the morning. Her plan to protect Emma hinged on her putting all of her safeguards in place before she quit her job. Cay parked her VW in the dimness of a hotel parking lot. She mapped out the route she would take to Emma's to ensure that no one followed her. Then she took out her cell and dialed a familiar number.

"Hi, can you do me a favor? I need the name of the owner of a tan Taurus; it's a New York plate, the license number is OGR-8730." As she waited for the information, her mind raced with all she would have to do to protect Emma Sanders. She wrote down the name and address, thanked the person, and closed her phone. *So that was Bruno*, she thought as she fingered her gun. *I won't let anyone harm you, Emma. That's a promise.* Her eyes closed and she fell into an uncomfortable semi-sleep.



## Chapter Fourteen

Cay guided her car down Emma's driveway and was pleased to see the woman standing there waiting for her. The happiness on Emma's face was unmistakable, and for Cay, that solidified her resolve to protect the woman. Cay was surprised when Emma came over and opened her door.

"You came! I have your room all ready."

"Good morning, of course I came." Cay slid out of her car. "I brought you some bedding plants as a thank you gift." She pulled out a flat of impatiens from the car. "I thought you could put them here along the house where it's shady."

"Oh, how wonderful. You're right, they'll be perfect here. Let's get your belongings inside." She took the flat and placed it next to the door before turning back to Cay. Emma took a long hard look at the woman who had just arrived, noticing the tiredness and the drawn lines creasing her face "Are you okay?" she asked.

Although she tried, Cay couldn't stifle the yawn. "Yeah, I'm just a little tired, couldn't find a comfortable position all night long."

"Well, now that you're here, that will change. This is a perfect place to rest—it's quiet and peaceful here." Emma walked over to the car and looked in, trying not to show how excited she was. "What can I carry for you?" With her arms overflowing with Cay's belongings, Emma headed for the door. "Cay?"

"Yes."

"I don't have a television."

"It's not a problem, I rarely watch television."

Emma sighed in relief. "Guess I better tell you everything." Cay raised her eyebrow. "I don't get a newspaper, either."

Cay rested her bags on the ground. "I came here to get away from all that." She pulled the door open to allow Emma inside. "Looks like rain, we'd better hurry."

Once everything was unloaded and Cay parked her car in the barn, the two women looked around the room at all the clutter. "Looks like I need to get busy putting things away."

"All the drawers are empty, as is the closet. I've made up the bed and placed a set of towels on the dresser for you." Emma felt nervous. "I guess I should get the impatiens in the ground. Let me know if you need anything." She started for the door.

"Emma." She watched as the woman turned around. "Thank you for taking me in." Cay's smile turned into a full yawn.

Emma looked at her new boarder. "You're welcome...I'm glad you're here. Why don't you take a short nap when you're done? I think it will do you good."

"I agree." She turned to her belongings and began carrying them into her new room. Once she had everything put away, she looked longingly at the bed. *Yes, a nap is what I need. There will be long days and nights ahead of me, and I need to be rested and sharp.* She stripped off her clothes and pulled back the sheet and covers.

She crawled under them, her naked body welcoming the feel of the soft cotton. She wasn't aware when her eyes closed and the deep sleep overtook her.

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"Emma that was wonderful. Thank you." The meal consisted of creamed chicken complete with homemade biscuits and a fresh-from-the-garden leaf lettuce salad. She stood up and began clearing the kitchen table.

"No, I'll do that," Emma protested.

"Please, let me. It's the least I can do after you prepared that wonderful meal." Cay set the dishes down on the counter, turned on the water, and squirted dish liquid into the sink.

Emma rushed over to the sink where hot water was filling it, causing the lemon-scented soap to bubble and fill the air with its sweet fragrance. She reached out and took Cay's hand. "I really don't feel right about you doing the dishes."

Cay patted the hand on hers. "Tell you what, why don't I wash and you dry? Do you think you can feel right about that?"

"Not really, but I'll try."

"Good, let's get them done. Besides, I have a present for you." Cay began rubbing a wet dishrag over the glasses.

Emma's eyes lit up. "Really, what?" Her voice sounded like a small child who's excited about Christmas.

"You'll see."

Emma waited in the front room for Cay's return from her bedroom. *This is so wonderful. No one has ever been this nice to me. I'm so glad I asked her to stay.* Cay's return brought her out of her musing.

Cay sat down in the chair next to Emma. "Here you go." She handed Emma a package.

She eagerly opened it. Emma's face looked up in question, then back at the item as she turned it over in her hands. "What is this?"

Taken aback, Cay said, "It's a cell phone...Hannah said you didn't have a phone, and I thought if you ever got in trouble, you may need one." Cay was almost apologetic in her explanation.

Emma looked over the item until Cay gently took it and flipped it open. "Oh, I see now. I don't know why Hannah told you that, I do have a phone...I couldn't conduct business without one." When she saw the disappointed look on her friend's face, she added, "This one will be very useful out in the yard or in the boat...thank you for your thoughtfulness."

Cay's face lit up with a smile as she leaned in closer to Emma. "It's really easy to use, I programmed my number in, so all you have to do is press the five. It will automatically dial my number, and you will always have me a call away."

They spent the rest of the evening talking quietly about the phone, its features, and their living arrangement. Emma tried to stifle a yawn, as her eyes grew heavy. “I’m sorry. I think the excitement of the day has finally caught up with me.” Another yawn came as she stood up and smiled. “Good night, Cay. Make yourself at home. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Emma’s words, the words of her friend, enveloped Cay with warmth. “Thanks, I’m sure I’ll have all I need for tonight. If something comes up, I’ll let you know in the morning. Sleep well and don’t let those bedbugs bite.”

Emma paused. “I remember my grandmother saying that before I went to bed.” She smiled. “Thank you for helping me in remembering her love. See you in the morning, good night.”

“Good night.” Cay watched as Emma walked down the hallway. *Good night, my friend.*

Several hours after Emma had gone to bed, Cay made her way outside. The wireless motion detectors and cameras she brought with her to track Emma would now be used to alert her if unwanted visitors came onto the property. When she heard the distinctive crack of a branch breaking, Cay froze in position. After a moment, she slowly turned her head toward the noise. Another moment passed before she crouched down and eased behind a large tree where she watched and listened. Her heart pounded in her ears—until she caught a glimpse of a raccoon ambling its way toward the water. She breathed a sigh of relief before she continued setting up the equipment. While positioning the devices, she considered areas that she and Emma might hide if it came to that. There were three regions that would afford them complete protection. Before heading back to the house, she climbed a pine tree and attached a powerful, long-range listening device that would monitor the property.

When she finally arrived back at the house, she went to her bedroom and shed all her clothes before crawling into bed. Cay knew that this would be the last night for any decent sleep. In the morning, when the opportunity presented itself, she would make the call that would change both their lives forever. *We will either live or die*, she thought as she drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

Cay sat out on the screen porch in a large comfortable rocking chair watching the softly falling rain water the thirsty plants in Emma's garden. Her laptop, resting on a small table, continuously monitored any activity on the property surrounding the house. She heard the sounds of Emma getting up for the day and knew she would soon find her. With a deft move of the mouse, she switched to the story she was writing.

The door to the porch opened, and the home's owner poked her head out. "Good morning, Cay, you certainly are up early." Emma smiled until she saw the laptop. "What's that?" She pointed to the object on the table.

Confused by the question, Cay touched the computer. "This? It's my laptop."

Emma cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. "A laptop? I don't know what that is."

"It's a portable computer."

"I thought computers were so big they filled a room." Her eyes shone with wonder as she looked over at the small notebook-size computer.

"Oh, those days are long gone. The phone I gave you last night is somewhat like a small computer. On this computer, I can do all sorts of things that we used to do with pen and paper like writing, calculations, or reading...I can download an entire book and read it here if I want. I can even travel around the world with it...visiting Europe, the Far East, or just down the street. It's really remarkable how far technology has brought us."

Emma was amazed, for she had never heard of such a thing and wondered if some of Cay's claims were outrageous and exaggerated. "That's all so hard to believe...I'm not sure that I do," she said.

"Tell you what, how about later this morning I show you how it works." Cay smiled, realizing the laptop and the phone must be so very surreal to the woman. *She has spent all of her life sheltered from the real world. Why would she know about any modern technology?*

"Okay." Unsure of what to make of all Cay's toys, she smiled. "I usually have toast, tea, and fruit for breakfast, but I can make you something else if you want." Her voice lacked confidence as her eyes scanned her friend's face.

The scrape of her chair broke the silence as Cay stood up. "Toast and fruit sound wonderful. Shall we go?" She waved her hand toward the house as she followed Emma inside.

An hour later, while Emma tended to her daily chores, Cay retreated to the porch. She checked the surveillance logs and found that nothing unusual had happened. She pulled the work cell out of her pocket, dialed a long-distance calling card number, then punched in the number of her employer. She didn't want him tracing her whereabouts, and the calling card would have an anonymous number.

“Yeah.”

“Borland, this is O’Neill.”

“You better have some good news for me if you know what’s good for you.”

“Not really...I’m quitting.”

“No one quits on me!” he shouted.

“There’s a first time for everything,” she said.

“You’re a dead woman.”

“Ya gotta find me first.” Cay laughed. “Oh, I sent your man Bruno packing, but you probably already know that. I won’t work for someone who doesn’t trust me.”

“As soon as I finish with the Sanders woman, you’ll be next...like I said, you’re a dead woman.”

Cay was certain that once he realized that tracing the number would not lead to her whereabouts, Borland would be furious. “Gotta go, see ya.” She hung up—her heart was pounding; her breathing was ragged and uneven. She had issued a challenge, and now some heinous thug would pick up the hunt for both she and Emma.

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For both women, the day was busy. Emma spent the entire morning in her garden while Cay helped by bleaching the dock, which had become extremely slippery with algae buildup.

Lunch consisted of sandwiches. “Cay, since the boat is still down here, what do you say I show you around the lake this afternoon?”

Before speaking, Cay calculated in her mind how long it would take Borland to organize his assault on Emma. “That sounds like a wonderful idea. I’ve only seen the entire area from the road.” Taking the last bite of her sandwich, she added, “Will you give me some background and other interesting facts?”

Laughing, Emma stood up from the table. “I’m not sure how interesting it will be, but sure. Let me clean up, then we shall go.” She turned and cocked her head. “Would you like to take the fishing gear, too? Maybe we can get some fishing in. I know of a couple of good spots along the way.” She began to gather the plates, only to stop when a hand gently held hers.

“I’d like that,” Cay said as she let go of the hand. “Shall I wash again?”

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The small craft bumped over the waves as it crossed the vast expanse of water. The air hung heavy as the darkening sky threatened rain. “Emma, it looks like rain, should we turn back?” Cay shouted over the roar of the motor.

The whine of the outboard engine flattened, but the boat continued its forward motion before finally stopping in the water. “It’s not going to rain yet,” Emma informed her friend, “most likely later this afternoon or early evening.”

“Now just how do you know that, are you some sort of weather person?” Cay asked.

“No, silly, I’m just observant.” She then pointed to a ramshackle old house. “That was the first house my great-great-grandparents built when they first came to the valley.”

“Do you still own it?”

“Yes, I always thought we should restore it, but Mother said no and that was that. Now it’s too far gone to save.” She restarted the engine and headed farther down the lake.

As they approached the northernmost shore, the wind began to gust strongly, rocking the small craft back and forth. “I think we’d better head back,” Emma yelled out as she turned the boat around. “If it gets much worse, we’ll have to dock at the landing and walk home.”

Cay nodded, bracing herself as the boat sliced back over its own wake.

Once back in the safety of the dock, both women were relieved. “Wow! That came up quickly, didn’t it? Does that happen often?”

“Why, Cay O’Neill, I do believe you were scared.” Emma laughed as she carried the tackle into the house.

Holding the door open wide, Cay shook her head. “You mean you weren’t? Those waves were really knocking us around out there!”

A long, boisterous laugh filled Cay’s ears. “That was nothing, Cay, wait until tomorrow when the weather really kicks up, then you’ll see.”

True to Emma’s predictions, it rained and rained for two days.

## Chapter Sixteen

Cay, perched high in a tree on an old hunter's platform, scanned the area with night vision glasses. The remote detection warning device was set on vibrate and attached to her waist. She huddled under a plastic camouflage sheet, shielding her body from the persistent rain. Other than wildlife, she hadn't observed any movement toward the house and Emma. This worried Cay. Two days had passed since she quit the job, and nothing problematic had happened. *Just what are you up to, Borland? He won't find anyone else to do the job for him...I was the bottom of the barrel.* It was five in the morning when she decided to remove the cover and climb down the wooden slats attached to the tree. She needed to be back in her bed before Emma woke up and discovered she was missing.

As she maneuvered through the undergrowth, her mind went over several scenarios that Borland might use. The original plan to gain Emma's confidence was now by the wayside, and Cay suspected his actions would escalate into a full frontal assault. If that were the case, she would constantly need to be on alert waiting for...what? *How, where, and when will he go after Emma,* she asked herself as she closed in on the house.

She felt the vibrating alert and instantly crouched down, her eyes scanning the area. The alert was coming from the mouth of the driveway; carefully, yet rapidly, she moved in the shadows toward the presumed threat. A vehicle had pulled a few yards into the driveway and parked. She heard the engine cut off just as the headlights went dark. The occupants seemed to be unaware of her presence as she eased into a position behind a tree—she was practically on top of the car.

Her night vision glasses allowed her to see inside the four-wheel-drive vehicle. At first, there seemed to be no one inside until she heard low moans. She moved close enough to peer in the window where she saw two figures lying in the backseat apparently making love. When the cover of darkness enveloped her once again, she scanned the area for other intruders—she found none.

*Now the cat and mouse game begins. It's after five in the morning. Why would they be parking now? Shit, what can I do?* She couldn't confront the occupants of the SUV, fearing their mission was to draw her out. At the same time, she couldn't return to the house until they left. *Emma! She's going to find me gone! Damn!* She left the two lovers and quickly returned to the house, only to see it fully lighted against the tree line. "Shit!" She hastily removed her camouflage clothes revealing her running outfit. Lifting her face so the rain would cover it, she used the discarded shirt to wipe the black away. "I'll come back for these clothes later," she said.

She entered the house through the kitchen door and saw Emma standing there with tears in her eyes. "Good morning," she said. "I went for a run and thought I'd be back before you got up."

Emma's eyebrows creased. "On a run...are you crazy? Not only is it still dark outside, but it's pouring. Look at you! You look like a drowned rat! Get yourself in the shower, and I'll make you a hot cup of tea."

Emma's concern touched Cay. "It was kinda like a stupid thing to do, wasn't it?"

"Yes, now go before you catch a chill," she said.

"Yes, Mommy." Cay laughed as she headed for the bathroom. Once there, she checked her monitors and was relieved to see the SUV had left.

With the rain prohibiting outside activities, the two women had a chance to get to know each other better. Emma slowly opened up more about her past and the horrors she had endured in the mental institutions. Cay spoke openly about her family and different jobs she had when she was at the top. It was during that conversation she touched on the job she had just quit.

"I hated sitting around watching cheaters and liars...I felt so sleazy doing that," Cay said, bowing her head. "A man approached me...he was pure evil...no one with any self-respect would go near him, but I did. He not only offered me a great deal of money, but the chance to get back into the game I loved. I was so desperate I accepted." She sighed. "It was the biggest mistake of my life."

"Bigger than letting the other man get the best of you and ruin your career?" Emma asked.

"Yes." Cay's words were so soft that Emma had to lean in closer to hear.

"What happened?"

Cay lifted her head and smiled. "I quit. The price was too high."

Emma reached over and patted her friend's hand. "Good for you, Cay. Self-respect is too precious to lose...believe me, I know, now that you have helped me regain mine."

The next words Cay spoke were reflective. "Yes, it is...I just hope the fallout won't...enough of the past...what do you say I show you more about the computer? Who knows, you might just like it."

Emma was curious about Cay's not finishing her thought. *What fallout? I will leave that for another time.* "Okay," she said.

Emma's office consisted of a small room with an oak roll top desk and bookshelves lined with ledger upon ledger detailing all the Sanders's business dealings for the last forty years. Cay pointed to the shelves of ledgers and shook her head. "Emma, I can show you how to take all the information you need for the business and have it take up no more room than my laptop."

Emma laughed. "I find that difficult to believe or imagine."

"Would you like me to show you?"

"I...I don't know. Mother always told me to avoid the trappings of the modern world...that it was just a way to throw money away."

“Why don’t you let me show you? Then you can decide for yourself. We could use one of the ledgers, and I’ll set up a database with the information.” Cay was eager to share her knowledge.

“I...I guess we can try. You won’t use a recent ledger, will you?” Emma was fearful of letting the woman know her business dealings.

*She doesn’t completely trust me. Don’t blame her really. If she only knew how I came to know her.* “Nope, we’ll get one of the earlier ones.” Cay then selected a leather bound ledger from 1982. “Is this one okay?” She was pleased that Emma nodded.

Cay was impressed by how quickly Emma learned the basics of a computer and was even more impressed how easily her open mind grasped the concept of what a database was. The questions she asked were intuitive and indicated a clear understanding of the subject.

“Cay, I can’t believe how simple it is to keep records. Will you help me get a computer and set it up for the business?” she asked, excited by the afternoon’s lesson in databases.

“Are you sure you never knew about computers? You sure took to this like a duck to water,” Cay said. “Of course I’ll help you.” She looked out the window and sighed. “Do you think it’ll ever stop raining?”

Emma got up and went to the window. She opened the porch door leaving Cay alone. “Come on out here, Cay, maybe I can teach you something.”

Cay joined her friend on the porch and casually put her arm Emma’s waist. “I’m ready, teach me.”

Emma pointed to the grass, the leaves, and the sky and how they looked. “See the type of clouds that are up there now?” she asked. “Earlier this morning and yesterday, you could only see a gray sky without formed clouds. The rain will be stopping by tonight, and tomorrow will be sunny.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Cay smiled before she hugged Emma.

“You do that. Besides, tomorrow is shopping day, and I don’t like walking in the rain.”

“Emma, I do have a car. By the way, thanks for letting me keep the Bug in the barn.”

“The Bug?” Emma asked. “Oh, your car, yes, it does look like some sort of creepy-crawly beetle.”

Cay laughed again. “Emma, you are too much. What’s for dinner, or do you want me to go pick something up at the diner?”

“While you’re living here with me, you’ll never have to go out to eat again. I thought I would make a stew...it’s a good rainy day meal.”

Cay woke up suddenly, her body cramping from the cold, damp night and the hard surface she had been sleeping on. She had been sitting under the tarp since ten the night before and now, checking her wristwatch, it was five in the morning. She stretched and heard her bones creak and crack while her muscles protested. She scrambled down the tree and quickly, yet quietly, made her way back to the house. Once inside, she opened her computer and scanned the sensor logs. *Nothing*. A sense of foreboding filled her mind as she undressed and crawled under the covers. *Something is wrong...I've overlooked a key aspect, but what?* Her mind, for the hundredth time, started spitting out all the various scenarios she had invented as her head found the pillow and sleep.

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As usual, Emma woke early and was surprised that Cay was not out of bed. Concerned, she quietly opened the door and saw Cay fast asleep. Creeping inside the room, embarrassed yet curious of the naked body, she pulled the covers up over her friend. *Once she smells the coffee, she'll be up*, she thought as she left the room, closing the door noiselessly behind her. Emma went into the bathroom for a quick shower. Her mind drifted to her friend. *Why have you come into my life, Cay O'Neill?* An unexpected image of Cay's naked body floated up, and she quickly squelched the vision.

Once she finished cleaning up the kitchen after her breakfast, she quietly knocked on Cay's door. There was no answer. *Guess staying up all these nights has finally caught up with her*. While she was outside in her garden, her mind kept returning to Cay. Ever since her visitor's arrival, Emma heard her moving about during the night. She speculated that Cay was having difficulty sleeping in her new surroundings. She looked up at the clear sky and bright sun and smiled as she knelt down on the soggy grass and began tending to her garden.

Some time later, Emma when back inside her home listening for any sounds that Cay had gotten up. She opened the door to her friend's room and saw the sandy blond hair draped across a pillow with Cay's face buried under the sheet. She made her way to the bed where she gently nudged her friend.

"Cay, I'm going shopping."

"What?"

"I'm going to the store," Emma said a bit louder.

"Okay."

Emma smiled, then left her friend and her house to walk the mile to Beard's store. *I actually trust her to be there alone*. The thought made her smile. On her way, she wondered if Cay would be awake when she returned. *I wonder if she's ill. She was out in the cold, early morning rain the other day. I'll have to make her my special tea when I get home*.

When Emma entered the store, Hannah immediately came to her side. “Hello, Hannah, it’s good to see the sun at last, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Emma, I’ve been so worried about you.”

Emma’s face wrinkled in question. “Why?”

“Because you have that woman living in your home, what would your mother say? What on earth possessed you to have her come live with you, child? Have you lost your mind? You know nothing about her...she’s just there taking advantage of you!”

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Cay was deep in sleep, her mind filled with terrible dreams.

*She saw a man wielding a hatchet chasing a woman who was screaming and terrified. Cay couldn’t make out the woman’s identity, but she felt she knew her and could feel the woman’s body quake in fear. The man caught up to the woman and wrapped an arm around her as he lifted the hatchet in the air ready to strike the first blow. The woman turned in horror, her face begging for help.*

“Emma!” Cay screamed as she sat straight up in her bed. Her rapid heartbeat thumped inside her ears and cold sweat dripped down her brow into her eyes. Disoriented, she looked around and realized she had been dreaming. Golden light, warm and lustrous, shone through the window, and Cay smiled. “Emma’s prediction for today’s weather was correct.” She suddenly gasped in fear. *Cay, I’m going shopping.*

“Shit!” She sprang from the bed and rooted around on the floor for clothes and shoes to wear. At full speed, she ran out the door. She had picked up her backpack but decided it would be faster for her to run to the store than go get her car. *Damn, how did I let this happen? Oh, Emma, please be safe! What an idiot I am, shit! Damn it all to hell. Run, Cay, keep running faster!*

She arrived at the store winded and sweat-soaked. Cay stood at the threshold for a moment to catch her breath and scan the store for Emma. Cay breathed a sigh of relief when she finally caught sight of her friend apparently in a discussion with Hannah. It was difficult not to hear her friend’s voice.

“You know, Hannah, I don’t owe you an explanation for who does or does not live in my home. As for my mother, she’s gone now, and I make my own decisions. Cay is a good friend. I take exception to your implication that she is up to no good. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have shopping to do.” Emma turned away from the troublesome woman and tried to squelch the anger she felt. When her eyes saw Cay standing by the door, she smiled, then rapidly made her way to her.

“I see you finally woke up, sleepyhead,” she said. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Cay noticed Hannah’s cold glare slicing across the room in her direction. She raised her hand and waved. “Good morning, Hannah.” She couldn’t fault the woman for her suspicions; after all, Hannah was looking out for Emma just as she was. Her

eyes scanned the store and rested on a stranger sitting at the lunch counter. He was slouched over reading a newspaper...the bulge in his back undeniable. *Calm, Cay, remain calm*, she reminded herself as she mentally made plans for their escape. Through the large plate glass window, she saw a dark car with New York plates parked near the building. “Emma, I need to go outside for a minute and cool down, I ran all the way here.”

“Okay, I just need a few items and won’t be long.” She noticed a strange look in Cay’s eyes. “Are you okay? I’m afraid you might be coming down with something after that run in the cold rain the other morning.” Her eyes filled with compassion and caring as her hand began to reach for Cay’s forehead.

Cay caught Emma’s hand and held it briefly. “Nope, I’m fine, just needed to do some stretching, that’s all. Be right back.” Once outside, Cay made her way to the dark vehicle, reached inside her backpack, and took something out. She bent over and extended her arm far under the rear fender of the vehicle. Once she had a tracking device in place, she opened the bag again and took out a knife. Casually walking around to the other side, she faked dropping something, then bent down on the ground, reached under the car with her knife hand, and cut the brake line. Before getting up, she slashed a hole in the back tire, then looked around to see if anyone was watching—no one was. She looked through the window and saw the man covertly watching Emma as another man joined him. *Borland! Damn!*

The big question for Cay was whether the men saw her as well. She decided to operate on the assumption that they did as she continued observing the men and Emma. When she saw her friend head to the counter and Hannah, Cay knew Emma was finished shopping and would be outside shortly. At full speed, she raced to the dock and jumped into Emma’s boat to make sure it was full of gas and ready to go. Cay raced back up the hill toward the store and arrived just as Emma emerged.

“Hey, I’m over here.”

Emma’s head turned when she heard Cay. “What are you doing there?”

“I thought we could take the boat back and maybe go fishing later on,” Cay answered.

“What a great idea!” With her shopping basket in tow, Emma started toward her friend, unaware of the dark eyes tracking her as she crossed in front of the store.

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Cay steered the small craft close to the dock and turned off the engine while Emma grabbed the round piling to stop the forward progress before tying it off with a rope. Both women worked quietly and efficiently to secure the craft before taking the groceries to the house.

Body and mind on full alert, Cay was ready at a moment’s notice to defend and protect Emma and her property. Her first job after helping put the groceries away

would be to boot up her computer and check the security logs. Then she needed to figure out a way to keep Emma safe without alarming her. *Damn it all to hell.*

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Evan Borland and his companion, Tony Giovanni, casually twirled around in their seats to watch Emma Sanders leave the store. As they watched her walk in the opposite direction than they expected, they looked quizzically at each other. Borland hissed, "Get out there and see where she's going."

"I'm going, boss." Tony uprooted his stocky body and walked toward the door.

Borland snorted as he watched the man walk away. *What a loser! Damn Bruno, where the hell is he?* "Zach, I need to settle up."

"Here you go." Zach filled the man's coffee cup again. "When do you want that boat and the gear?"

Evan was about to answer when Tony came up to him quickly. He whispered, "She went in a boat with a woman."

"O'Neill," he said. "Can you make us up some sandwiches to go? Then we'll need the boat. My friend here tells me the fish are practically jumping into the boats."

Zachariah looked at the two men as he stood next to Hannah while she made the sandwiches. "Those two don't look much like fishermen. Besides, the last I heard the fishing is lousy."

Hannah eyed the two men sitting anxiously at the counter. "No, they don't, look like mobsters to me...especially that Borland fellow, never did like him," she said as she continued to make the sandwiches.

Borland stood about six feet tall with a lean body; his short, white, thinning hair accentuated his small, beady eyes that lay hidden behind undersized, oval wire-rimmed glasses. His skin was tan as if he had recently been to Florida. Although his appearance was ordinary, the aura surrounding him was evil. His compatriot was shorter and obviously not in prime physical shape as Borland. His hair was thick and black, combed back and slicked down. His features, although bloated, were rather appealing in a big brother sort of way. Had he not been with Borland, one might think of him as a kind, gentle man.

"Sandwiches are ready, Mr. Borland," Hannah said, handing the man a paper sack.

"Hey, does the Sanders family still live on the lake?" he asked as he passed Tony the bag.

"Yep, same place."

"I need to get the boat ready, give me 'bout thirty minutes maybe an hour," Zachariah advised as he began wiping up the counter.

Borland paid his bill and started to leave before turning back. "I'll meet you down by the dock in an hour and a half. Be on time! I don't like to keep the fish

waiting too long for their last meal.” His laugh was threatening, and that sent shivers up Hannah’s spine.

Outside, the man made his way to his car where Tony was standing shaking his head. “What’s the matter?”

“Someone’s slashed the tire!”

“Well, change it, you fool. We need to check out the Sanders’s place.”

“No problem, boss.” Tony opened the trunk for the spare, then looked down at a puddle of fluid. He fell to his knees, looked under the vehicle, and saw more fluid dripping from a line under the car. “Boss, you aren’t going to believe it! Someone cut one of the lines under the car.”

“Fuck! Goddamn that woman, she’ll pay for this. Get it fixed now!” Ideas about how he would make O’Neill pay for collaborating with Emma Sanders ricocheted inside his mind as he headed toward the water. *I’ll make her sorry...her death will be long and slow.* An evil grin crossed his face as he closed in on Zachariah and the boat that he would use to finish off both women.

## Chapter Seventeen

Over the next hour, Cay paced around the house trying to be inconspicuous as she inspected the window locks and sensors. All seemed to be in place and secure, yet the danger Cay felt would not be placated. She constantly looked out windows or touched the monitor in her pocket, hoping to see the attack before it arrived. Cay occasionally sat at the kitchen table with her laptop open monitoring the activity of the various transmitters positioned around the property. *We're sitting ducks just waiting for the hunter to find us*, she thought as she glanced at Emma who sat in her favorite chair reading a book. *I will keep you safe, Emma, if I have to die doing it*, she vowed silently.

Although Emma appeared deeply immersed in her book, she covertly spent most of the time watching Cay. The woman was acting like a caged animal pacing, seeking a release from its confines so it could go out on the prowl. *Something is going on, I know it, but what?* A benefit of spending time in a mental institution when one is sane is developing a talent for reading people.

When Cay first came out of the water onto her property, Emma sized her up as cocky and sarcastic, an opinion that did not change when they met in the store. But when the woman stopped to help her along the road, Emma's judgment began to change. What she saw was a caring, sincere person capable of genuine compassion. She remembered waking from her sickbed to find Cay sleeping awkwardly in a chair nearby. Her devotion and honest concern for Emma's well-being was real; Emma could see it in her eyes.

Emma closed her book loudly, causing Cay to jump. "Is something the matter?" Emma saw that Cay's face showed a trace of terror.

"No. It's time to go fishing!" Emma declared as she rose from her sitting position.

"Fishing...now? It's the middle of the afternoon, isn't that too early? Besides, we don't have any bait."

"Not to worry, I'm going to show you a new technique for which you won't need worms, minnows, or lures." She walked to the porch door, took her fishing hat off the wooden peg by the door, and settled it on her head. "Let's get going, times a-wastin'. Don't forget to lock the door on your way out."

"But...but I..." was all she could say as Emma disappeared down the steps with her fishing pole and gear in hand. Scrambling to catch up, Cay thought, *Emma, you're making my job much more difficult. Shit, this could turn out to be so dangerous...damn it all to hell! They could pick us off one at a time out in the open.* She grabbed her backpack on the way out, glad that she had stowed away her gun in it earlier. After locking the door, she ran down the three steps and toward the dock.

Emma was already in the boat when Cay caught up to her. Once she climbed in the boat, she surreptitiously scanned the area. She turned to her friend, anxious to get

clear of the dock and out of the extreme vulnerability and threat of danger their exposure put them in. "I'm here, let's go."

Emma deftly steered the boat away from the dock and moved rapidly away toward the wildlife refuge. All the while, Cay watched their backs as the land behind them grew smaller and smaller. Emma noticed her eyes as they darted around the lake and the deep concern etched on her young face.

The craft soon turned in toward the very reeds and cattails Cay had hidden behind in what seemed like ages ago. Emma cut the motor and switched on the electric trolling motor. She slowly maneuvered the boat deeper and deeper into the marshy foliage until tall, dense water plants surrounded them. Soon, Emma eased back on the motor and turned it off completely. Eerie silence mushroomed all around them.

"Are we going to fish here? We can't even see the water." Cay looked around confused by Emma's choice of fishing spots. The grasses thrusting their long arms into the boat made her feel claustrophobic.

For what seemed like forever, Emma didn't speak or move. When she finally turned toward Cay, she asked, "What's going on, Cay?"

"Going on? I don't understand what you mean." Her eyes darted away.

"I may not be up to date on all the modern technology, but I'm not stupid." Her stern voice penetrated the stillness. "Every night since you moved in, you've gone out and not returned until early morning. A while ago in the house you were pacing around like a dog in heat anxious to get out and find a mate." Her voice lowered an octave. "I want the truth."

Cay brought her hand up over her mouth and held it there as she contemplated what to say. She bowed her head before she began to speak. "Do you remember me telling you about the job I took, then quit?"

"The evil man? Yes, I remember."

Cay raised her head and looked into the trusting eyes of her friend, knowing she didn't deserve the trust they held. "The job concerned you."

Emma's stoic gaze remained on Cay. "What about me?"

Her eyes diverted from Emma's stare. "I...I'm so ashamed," she said. She studied the rivulets of water trickling across the bottom of the boat and sighed deeply, knowing that she had to finish the story. "The man wanted me to come here, seek you out, become friends with you, then take you to him."

Emma wanted to run and hide. Her mother and Hannah had been right. *I never should have trusted Cay!* Her eyes rested on a distant tree as she fought the urge to cry out and attack the woman who no longer was her friend and who apparently had never been. "I see." She shook her head. "What exactly did this man want with me?" *Something isn't right, why would anyone want me? I don't know anyone except Hannah and her husband...why me?*

Cay could see Emma's devastation, and it broke her heart. *I hope I can make it right.* "I don't know, Emma, I was never privy to that information. All I know is that he said your mother owed him and now you do."

"You said you quit, the price was too high. What price, Cay? I trusted you, I let you move into my house, I fed you...I thought we were friends." Emma felt defeated; she couldn't quite believe what was happening. Cay was suddenly coming at her, pushing her down in the boat, and covering her body with her own. Her fingers went to Emma's mouth as she whispered, "Shhhh."

The drone of two men's voices, low and inaudible beneath the high-pitched hum of an electric motor, approached the two women as they crouched in the boat. Closer, closer, then the motor stopped—the other boat was almost on top of them. Cay spread herself over Emma farther, as a shield protecting her from what was to come.

A hushed whisper traveled through the grasses and reeds. "Tony, did you see where they went?"

"They disappeared behind the reeds where we came in, boss, they have to be around here somewhere."

Emma closed her eyes, realizing they were in danger and Cay was protecting her.

"Fuck, how did you let them get away? I told you our position was too far away. You're useless. I'd be better off alone."

"I don't hear anything, let's look over there. I'm sure we'll find them. Besides, we know where the house is, we can get 'em there."

"You better hope so if you know what's good for you! Now get going!"

The purr of the electric motor started up again, then grew faint as it carried the men away from Cay and Emma's hiding place. Neither woman moved until nothing but silence surrounded them. Then Cay lifted her body from Emma's and held her hand out to her friend. "They're gone, you can get up now," she whispered. "Did I hurt you?"

Emma took the offered hand, rose up slightly, then slid onto the seat. "No, I'm okay. What's going on? I deserve to know." The fear in her voice was evident.

"Yes, you do. I quit the job because I couldn't do anything that might harm you. You told me you never had a friend, Emma, well, neither have I until you came into my life. I never let anyone in...I think I was afraid of getting hurt...just as I have hurt you now. All I want to do is protect you from that monster, and I will." Her eyes fixed on Emma. "You're worth it to me."

Emma's mind and heart whirled in synchronized confusion. In the space of an hour, she experienced every emotion from happiness to heartbreak, curiosity to bewilderment, rage to tenderness. "I don't know what to think anymore," she said. "How much danger are we in?"

"I won't mince words with you...Borland isn't the kind of man you walk away from or who gives up. It's bad, very bad."

“Borland...Eric?” Fear rose in her throat, choking her.

“No, Evan.”

Emma closed her eyes in resignation and squeezed them tight as if not seeing would eradicate her memories. “His father, what does he want from me? What are we going to do? Run?”

Cay shook her head. “We can’t run. A man like Borland will hunt us down. We will stand and fight. I will protect you. You can count on that. Now do you know how to get out of here and back to your house without them seeing us?”

“Yes, I know this place like the back of my hand.”

## Chapter Eighteen

The small craft, which Emma guided with an oar, zigzagged its way slowly through the water lilies, reeds, and cattails. Several hours later, the boat stopped at the edge of the vegetation, still hidden, although the house was visible from inside their cover. Cay removed a monitor from her bag and checked to see if the area around the house had been breached.

“What’s that?” Emma asked, curious about the instrument Cay held.

“It’s a monitoring device. I set up motion detectors and cameras around your property. This,” she held up the small apparatus, “lets me know if anyone is in the area.” She looked over the data.

“Is there?” Emma’s heart was beating double-time.

“No, it seems to be clear. Is there a way to get to the house without docking the boat?”

“We can go in over there where the wildlife refuge borders my property. It’ll be about a hundred yards to the house from there.”

“Good, we can move along that tree line for cover.” Dusk was quickly approaching affording them added camouflage. Cay stripped off her dark shirt and handed it to Emma. “Here, put this on.”

Emma frowned as she looked at Cay sitting in the boat with a black bra and no shirt. “Why? I can’t do that, you’ll have nothing to wear.”

“Take it, Emma, and put it on,” Cay ordered. Your white shirt will be a dead giveaway and an easy target once you’re out in the open.”

“But what about you?”

“I’ll be fine so put it on, please.” Once Emma had slipped the shirt on, Cay motioned with her hand to go forward. “Okay, let’s head that way. I’ll keep an eye out in case our visitors return.”

Cay silently got out of the boat and pulled it onto the soft green moss that carpeted the shoreline and quietly rested the oar on the boat’s v-shaped flooring. She leaned in quickly and gathered up the equipment, then held her hand out for Emma who had already exited the craft. Hand in hand, they made their way along the edges of light and dark toward the house. Cay let go of Emma’s hand and held hers up to stop the woman when they neared the edge of the trees.

She held the monitor close to her body to deflect the light as she scrutinized the area. Satisfied they were alone, Cay motioned for Emma to stand beside her. “See here,” she pointed to the surreal images on the screen. “This is you and me. It’s how an intruder would look. Remember that.” Her eyes landed upon the entrance to the cellar. “Emma, can we get into the house from the basement entrance?”

“It’s locked, but I have the key.”

“Good, give me the key. I’ll go over there and unlock the doors. Stay put until I motion for you to come.” She handed Emma the monitor. “If you see anything, and I

mean anything, you think doesn't belong, don't move." She raised her eyebrows. "Is that clear?"

Emma nodded and handed over the keys. "This is the key." She then watched as Cay moved in a semi-crouched position silently toward the house. The twin doors unlocked easily, but when Cay pulled them back, a loud screech rang out. Cay froze, holding the doors motionless as she looked back at Emma. She then gently lowered the doors as quietly as she could. Emma held her breath until she saw Cay wave to her to move forward. She quickly looked at the monitor then, in spite of the terror that threatened to immobilize her, Emma bolted across the open lawn until she reached her friend.

"Can we lock this from the inside?" Cay asked in a whisper, motioning Emma inside.

"Yes, bring the lock." Emma carefully started down the steep set of stairs.

Once inside, Cay pulled the two doors shut, thrusting the two women into pitch-black darkness. The large rings were easy enough to find, and she wove the lock through them and snapped it closed. *We need to get off these stairs, Cay thought. If they heard us, they could break in the door or shoot through the wood.* She reached in her backpack and said, "Damn, I forgot the flashlight." Cay blindly felt her way down the stairs. "Emma?" she whispered. "Is there any light down here?" Suddenly, a small weak beam of light illuminated her feet.

"Be careful, the last two steps are shaky," Emma whispered. Once Cay was standing next to her, she spoke again. "Hold on to my shoulder, and I'll lead the way." She directed the small beam of a key chain flashlight at her feet and began to move forward.

It was difficult for Cay to give up the lead and trust that Emma would get them safely to the other side of the basement. Nevertheless, she placed her hand on the woman's shoulder, and they proceeded toward the stairway that led up to the main floor.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Cay checked the monitor. "Let me go first. I don't see anyone inside, but it's good to be careful.

Emma stepped aside. "Here," she handed her the keys, "you need to unlock the door."

Cay slid the key into the lock and turned it gently to avoid as much noise as possible. She turned the knob smoothly and opened the door a few inches before peering inside. "Come on," she said, motioning Emma inside before relocking the door.

Safe inside the house for the moment, she needed to make decisions as to what to do next. Cay took Emma's hand and led them through the house, first to the living room, then to the porch. "Sit. We need to make a plan, Emma. Are you with me?"

"Yes, just tell me what I need to do."

“We need to quickly change into black or dark clothing,” Cay said, shrugging as she stood there clothed in her bra and jeans. “It’ll make us harder to see in the dark. Oh, and make sure you have on sturdy boots and gloves. Meet me back here when you’re done.” She held two fingers up to her lips and added, “Quietly.”

Emma moved from her sitting position and went quickly inside, as did Cay. When they both were back on the porch, Cay hastily checked the monitor again before handing it over to Emma. “I need to go back inside and check everything. Can you stay here and keep watch? Most likely, they’ll come from the water, so you’ll need to listen very carefully. I put a motion light out by the dock, and it’ll come on if someone gets near.”

The words confused Emma. “A motion light?”

“Yes, it’ll come on automatically if it detects motion.”

Emma was amazed that such a thing existed. “Really?”

“Yep, do you have the phone I gave you?” Emma shook her head. “Where is it?” Cay asked, annoyed that she now would have to retrieve the phone for Emma.

“On the table next to my bed.”

“Shit!” Cay murmured under her breath as she sprinted to Emma’s bedroom. Returning in mere seconds, she handed the woman the phone. “I’ve set it to vibrate. If you see or hear anything at all out of the ordinary, I want you to press the number five. I’ll feel it immediately.” Cay stopped for a moment and saw the fear mapped over Emma’s face. She smiled and gently patted Emma’s hand. “Everything will work out, I promise.” She wondered why she was so quick to give out promises she had no assurance she could keep. *There has to be a way*, she thought as she made her way back into the house.

Emma sat in fear, paralyzed by the thought that strangers were stalking her—and in all likelihood, wanted her dead. What she couldn’t figure out was why Eric’s father wanted to take her life. She had dropped the charges and given her child up, what more could he want? *And why?* She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t realize Cay had returned to the porch.

“Anything happen?”

Startled, Emma jumped as terror gripped her body. She was in panic until she heard Cay’s soothing voice. “Hey, it’s only me. You’re safe.”

Emma sighed and smiled weakly. “Are we going to get out of this, Cay?” Then looking into the house she asked, “Why are the lights on? I thought we were keeping them out... they’ll see us!”

“We need the lights on to attract them, or they’ll just sit and wait until we give ourselves away. At least this way we’re on equal footing.” Cay noticed the terrified look on her friend’s face. “I promise you that I will do my very best to see that neither of us is harmed.”

“Okay, I’ll hold you to that.” Emma felt her fear taper slightly, replaced by a small sense of calm.

It seemed as though it happened from out of nowhere. The light by the dock suddenly cut through the darkness. Both women froze in position as they saw a boat and two men pull alongside the dock. Then the faint, whizzing sound of a silenced gun came almost simultaneous with the shattering of glass, cloaking the area and the two men in darkness once again.

“They’re coming for us!” Every part of her wanted to run and hide. Emma longed for the safety of her bedroom closet where she had always found solace when her mother went on a rampage.

“Shhhh.” Cay quietly leaned over to whisper into Emma’s ear. “You can choose to run, or stay and fight, Emma. Whatever you decide to do, I will support you.”

Emma knew the time had come for her finally to stand up and fight back. She had done nothing wrong, and there was no reason that she should allow these men to come onto her property and terrorize her. Yes, she would fight them...she would shed the veil of fear and emerge as a new and stronger person. “I’m with you,” she said. “What do we do now?”

“Just watch and wait. I have a few surprises arranged for them. Here,” she handed Emma a pair of night vision glasses, “put these on, you’ll be able to see them.”

Emma watched as the pair crept along her soggy yard toward the house. Once they reached the large oak tree, one man motioned to the other to go left as he proceeded toward the porch. In surreal slow motion, she saw them both lifted off their feet, shake, then sail backward.

Cay chuckled. “Surprise number one...electrical shock. There will be another.”

The bigger of the two men moaned. “Boss, they know we’re here. We need to get out of here before she kills us!” he said. He quietly turned and started his retreat to the boat.

“Get back here, Tony, you fuckin’ coward!” When Borland realized Tony wasn’t returning, he raised his gun and shot, grazing the man’s leg.

Tony struggled to his feet, holding his bleeding leg as he tried to stop the blood flow. He stood, looking at the man who just shot him, knowing if he continued to the boat, Borland would kill him. “Boss, let’s get out of here and come back when it’s light. Don’t you see they have the advantage now?”

“You spineless piece of shit, get the fuck over here, now! We’ll finish this tonight. Now move your ass.”

As Tony turned and limped quickly in the direction of the dock and boat, a bullet ripped through his back into his heart just as he was about to step into the boat. He slumped into the boat, sucking in a rattling last breath as he reached for the key to start the engine.

Emma gasped as she watched in horror. “He killed him,” she said. “He must be crazy. We’ve got to stop him, Cay.”

Borland continued moving toward the house, carefully stepping over the area where he had been shocked previously—only to hit another shock that hurled him back again.

When it was evident that Borland would keep up his assault, Cay tapped Emma's arm and motioned for them to go inside. "Emma, I want you to sit in that chair and act as if you're reading a book. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes." She went to the chair, sat down trembling, and reached for a book on the table next to her. She looked across from her and cocked her head at what she saw. The plunger, with one of her mother's wigs covering the rubber part at the top, sat upright on a chair. Her eyes focused on Cay in question. The reply was a wink.

Cay positioned herself in the shadows behind the door. They waited patiently as their hearts pounded in fear and excitement.

Again, Borland was back up on his feet and headed for the house, his anger and disdain for the two women swelling to epic heights. "They'll pay with their lives," he muttered as he went up the few steps. His hand poised on the screen doorknob while his eyes searched through the screening for any more surprises. Seeing none, he carefully and quietly tried to open the screen door, only to find it locked. Taking out a thin piece of metal, he slid it between the door and the doorjamb and lifted the hook, freeing the door. He silently opened the door, holding his breath that it wouldn't squeak. He stepped onto the porch and crept toward the opened doorway.

He peered inside, seeing Emma Sanders in a chair and the head of the O'Neill woman in another. He could feel his excitement rise, knowing that he was about to take back what Esther Sanders took from him. His mind flashed back to the day so long ago, when he stood in the police station looking at the miserable cripple, Esther Sanders.

*He had taken the wheelchair-bound woman aside to convince her to drop all charges against his son. "If you know what's good for you and your daughter, you will see that this all goes away," he warned.*

*"Your son raped my daughter, and he will pay for that."*

*"Oh, I don't think you heard me, bitch," he said as he leaned in close to the helpless woman. "Drop the charges, or I'll have twenty guys in here swearing they all did your daughter. She'll be known as the town slut in addition to the town wacko."*

*"You can't do that, everyone knows she's not like that," Esther said, her voice rising.*

*"Keep your voice down! When I'm done with that moron you call your daughter, she won't have a reputation worth shit. Are you willing to take that chance? I guarantee you my son will get off, and everyone will scorn your daughter forever. Go ahead and take me on, bitch. I'd like nothing better than to bring you and that wacko down."*

*"The charges will be dropped," she said in a defeated tone.*

*“Glad you see it my way.” The man snorted before turning and sauntering away.*

Unfortunately for Eric, the rape haunted him everywhere he went. It wasn't until Evan Borland physically threatened someone that he found out why...anonymous letters, including a police report accusing his son of rape, followed Eric's every move. It didn't stop there...every woman he asked on a date would accept, only to cancel at the last minute. It seemed they had received calls about Eric being a rapist. The only job he could find was as a dishwasher in a restaurant. Although Evan repeatedly offered to let Eric work for him, the man held fast to his resolve to make it on his own.

Evan Borland had connections, and it wasn't hard to find out that a private detective was following his son. The trick was finding out who was behind the hiring. A few well-placed body blows to the PI gave Borland the answer—Esther Sanders. Once he had the name, he had to devise a way to thwart the woman's plan to destroy his son at every turn. After being let go from his tenth job that year, the pressure finally became too much for him, and Eric took his own life. That started the downhill spiral in Evan's life: his wife died soon after Eric's death, and his daughter disowned him and left for California and never contacted him again.

Evan swore vengeance on Esther and anyone else who got in his way. Upon hearing the news of Esther's death, he put a plan in motion to kidnap Emma and convince her to sign over all her property to him. If she didn't cooperate, he would simply kill her and initiate his other plan.

As he crept his way ever closer to his target, he thought, *I still have Claire. Soon I'll introduce myself and bring her home.* He snickered as he entered the front room farther and raised his arm, leveling his gun at Emma's head.

The blow to his arm both startled and shocked him as his gun clattered on the floor, sliding out of his reach. He suddenly found himself facedown on the wooden floor, held down securely by a knee lodged in his back. He desperately clawed for his gun screaming, “Get off of me, bitch.” He was astonished when a slender, gloved hand reached down and picked up the gun. “That's mine! Give it back!” He lurched in an attempt to free himself, only to have his hands jerked backward and quickly tied together. Cay was glad she had taken the soft sash from Emma's robe, so the restraint would not leave marks on his wrists.

“I don't think you're in any position to demand anything, Borland,” Cay said as her knee left the man's back.

“Look, Cay.” Emma held the gun in the air. “Isn't this a gun?” Her eyes glazed as she continued. “My finger just fits in this curvy thing. Wonder what will happen if I move it.” The bullet shot silently out of the gun, whizzing by the man's head before lodging in the floor next to his ear.

“Take that away from her! She's a nut case! Can't you see it in her eyes? She's dangerous!”

Cay didn't know what to do. Clearly, Emma was in a world of her own as she brandished the gun around. Then looking Emma squarely in the eye, she saw a momentary glint of unequivocal clarity. She shook her head and smiled as she addressed Borland. "Well, ya know she isn't quite right in the head, and there is no tellin' what she might do to you." Even though Borland was bigger, Cay capitalized on the man's distraction by grabbing the back of his jacket and helping him up before she pushed him into a chair. "I think you might do yourself a favor and start talking," Cay said with venom filling her voice.

"I don't need to tell you a fuckin' thing, the rest of my boys will be here any minute, you two bitches are as good as dead."

Cay was eye to eye with the man. "Now, now, Evan, you know no one else is coming. Only Tony would work for you, and you killed him...oops, *boss*, that means you are at the mercy of two wacko women," she said with a sneer.

"You're a dead woman, O'Neill! Do you hear me, a dead woman!" he screamed as he spat in her face.

Out of nowhere, Emma was at his side, the gun she held resting against his head. "There is no loud talking in my house." Her voice sounded oddly disturbed. "Now say you're sorry to my friend for your tone and for spitting at her. Do you know how many germs are in your spit? You really should be ashamed of your actions, mister. When my mother gets here, she's going to be very unhappy with you." The smile of an insane woman crossed her face.

"Get this loony tune away from me."

"I'm afraid when she gets in this mood, Evan, there is no controlling her...sorry." Cay shrugged as she whispered in Emma's ear, "Don't press too hard, it will leave marks."

The man's anger exploded into full fury. "I know all about your daughter and where she is...I plan on adopting her as my own."

Emma's eyes blazed as she slowly slid the gun along the man's head. "Do you think I don't know where Claire is or how she's doing? The nuns allowed you to send money for her, but they know she's mine. You stupid old man, do you think I would let you get your hands on her? You're nothing but pond scum just like your son. Now get yourself out of that chair." She put the barrel of the gun against his head and pulled back the trigger. "I said get up!"

The man finally stood up, but that wasn't Cay's concern. *Is this Claire person, Emma's daughter she wondered. Maybe Emma really is mad just like I've heard.* Her friend seemed out of control and totally out of line with the perception Cay had formed of the woman. "Emma, what are you going to do?"

The rage burning in Emma's eyes cooled when she looked at her friend. "I'm taking my life back, are you with me?"

Cay could see the determination on her friend's face. Clearly, she neither was deranged nor out of control. *Take your life back, Emma, it's time you do that*, she thought.

"Of course." Cay took Borland's arm and led him struggling outside. She reached in her pocket, took out her monitor, and punched a few buttons to disarm the electricity. "Where are we going?"

Emma's voice was hard and cold. "To the dock and his boat, we're going for a little ride. Be sure you have your gloves on, Cay."

Emma looked down at Tony's lifeless body crumpled in the boat and shuddered. She began to step into the boat when Cay stopped her.

"Be careful where you step, Emma! Avoid the blood at all costs," she warned.

Emma stepped over the dead man and the darkening pool of blood to sit down next to the body. She watched as Cay guided Borland into the back of the craft, then sat him down and secured him in place.

Once the man was firmly in the boat with no chance of escape, Emma whispered in Cay's ear. "Will you go get my boat and bring it back here?"

Cay smiled as she found new respect for the once timid Emma Sanders. This experience was transforming her into a strong, decisive, vibrant woman. "I'll be right back. Are you sure you're okay alone?" Assured of Emma's situation, she sprinted one hundred and fifty yards to Emma's boat, started it up, and throttled it full speed back to the dock.

Once Cay arrived with the smaller craft and pulled alongside Borland's boat, Emma's features hardened. "Tie your boat up to the stern, then board this one."

Cay stepped into Borland's rented craft and sat next to the man. "What do you say, Evan, you ready for a little boat ride?"

Emma nodded as she started the motor and her journey to justice. When they arrived at Snake Island, Emma gunned the motor slightly to beach Borland's boat. "Get him out, but you stay in the boat."

Cay frowned at the order but did as requested. Emma took a knife and gun from the dead man and stepped carefully out of the boat into the water. Once Borland was out of the boat, Emma pushed him forward with such strength that he fell facedown on a small patch of land jutting up from the water. Bending over the prone man, while she remained in the water, she cut the cloth tying his hands together and gathered up the pieces. Borland grabbed for her legs, but she quickly moved farther back in the water all the while pointing Tony's gun at his face.

Borland saw his opportunity when Emma handed Cay the pieces of cloth. He jumped to his feet and lunged for Emma. With calm coolness, she shot his left knee, sending him to the ground writhing in pain, then she aimed near his groin and fired again.

"Emma, what are you doing?" Cay asked. Her heart thrummed in her chest while fear reverberated in her mind for her friend.

“Just stay in the boat, Cay. If you don’t participate, no one can blame you. I know exactly what I’m doing.” Emma moved back toward the boat. “Get my boat started,” she ordered as she nimbly hopped in Borland’s boat. Then she took Tony’s hand, wrapped it around the gun, and fired another round in Borland’s direction, causing him to cover his head.

Emma took the opportunity to scramble into her own boat checking along the way that they had left nothing behind that belonged to them. “Cay, will you back up a bit, can’t leave Borland’s boat for him to get away.”

Cay slowly backed up until the larger vessel was fully in the water. Emma leaned over and held the larger boat, stopping any more forward motion. She noted that Borland was on his feet and threw his gun toward him.

“I won’t leave you here defenseless, Mr. Borland,” she said. He dove for the gun, but the searing pain in his knee drove him into the ground again. “There is one bullet left...you have two choices. You can use it on yourself or on the snakes that inhabit this little bit of land.”

“Or I could use it on you, bitch,” he yelled as he grabbed his knee. Despite feeling warm blood trickling down his leg from both wounds, he managed to stand. He staggered toward his gun. When he finally reached it, he bent over, picked it up, and leveled it at Emma’s head.

“Emma, get down before he shoots you!”

“He won’t shoot me.”

“Get down!”

Delight hovered on Borland’s face as he laughed before squeezing the trigger. Click. “You bitch, you said there was a bullet.”

“There is,” Emma said, “just not in the first chamber.”

Emma continued to pull Borland’s boat until they were several hundred yards from the island. “Stop here.” Then Emma untied the knotted rope and hauled it back into her boat.

Cay maneuvered the small boat beside Borland’s larger one.

“What are you doing, Cay? We need to get out of here.”

“Emma, a good forensic investigator can find all kinds of evidence. I want to make sure what they find doesn’t lead back to us.” With a flashlight, she illuminated areas of the boat, looking for anything they may have left behind. The light fell on a shiny object near the back of the boat.

“What is it?” Emma asked as she carefully made her way closer to her friend.

“Borland’s glasses, damn!” Cay’s mind raced as she calculated all the different ways the police would view the fact that the glasses were on the boat.

“What do we do, Cay? Should we throw them in the water or leave them there?”

Cay mulled everything over in her mind once again before coming to a solution. “No, we’ll leave them where they are. It’ll be more evidence of a struggle

between Borland and Tony.” Cay considered the various scenarios. “Yep that’ll work.”

Emma rested her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Thank you,” she said. “Let’s go home.”

Cay smiled and slowly guided the boat back toward Emma’s house. Halfway there, she took a cell phone out of her pocket and removed the battery before letting the cell slip into the water.

“Why did you do that?” Emma asked. “How can I reach you now?”

“It was the phone I used to contact Borland. Don’t worry, I still have the one you call.”

They then continued across the lake on their way to home and safety.



Early the next morning, Emma moved her small boat and tied it up to the dock where Borland’s boat had been the night before. Then she busied herself in her yard, digging up the area where the larger man bled after the first shot. She worked the bloody grass into the dirt until it was no longer recognizable. Alongside her digging was a bag of blood meal, which she also worked into the soil. *Great fertilizer* was her gruesome thought. Cay, who had removed the bullet from the floor, replaced and cleaned up the broken light bulb and was diligently using bleach to clean off any blood left on the dock or Emma’s boat. She also donned her wetsuit and swam under the dock to clean off any traces of blood that might be there. The barrel used for burning garbage blazed hotly with the week’s rubbish along with two pairs of gloves, two sets of dark clothes, pieces of a cloth robe tie, and the clothes Cay had worn when she cleaned the dock.

Emma looked out toward the lake. “They’re towing the boat now.”

“The investigation will go into full gear now.” The two women had been watching the commotion around the refuge for the last hour. “Now we just watch and wait, Emma. They may come here or they may not—we need to be prepared for whatever happens.”

“We’ve cleaned up everything, haven’t we?” Emma’s voice betrayed her outwardly calm appearance.

“Yes, I’m all done here. I still need to dismantle the sensors and cameras, then we’ll be done. Think I’ll go and do that now.”

“Good idea,” Emma said with a knowing smile. “Before you do that, will you bring me my hat from the house?”

“Sure will.”

As Emma continued turning the soil, she heard an approaching boat. When she looked up, she saw Edward Nester, the sheriff, and his deputy, Pete Greenway. When the men walked in her direction, she gave them a stern look. “What are you doing on my property?”

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am, but did you notice anything unusual on the lake last night?”

Emma looked the sheriff over and frowned. “My lake, last night, when?”

“Not sure yet, Ms. Emma, some sightseers said they saw a boat in the reeds by the refuge. Hannah said she rented the boat to two men yesterday. I was wondering if you saw them since the boat was down here at this end. Hannah said they were asking about you.”

“Me?” she asked. “Someone was asking about me? Oh, dear, why are they asking about me? Do they want to rob me or...kill me?” The men saw the panic written all over the terrified woman’s face.

Cay chose that moment to return and immediately went to Emma’s side. She noted a subtle wink from the woman who appeared to be shaking uncontrollably. “Are you okay?” She pierced the sheriff with a cold look. “What have you two done to her?”

The sheriff, completely taken off guard, apologized. “We didn’t do anything...we were asking about any goings-on in the lake last night.”

“Last night? Hmm, well we played gin until about eight thirty out on the porch. I don’t recall hearing anything.” She patted Emma’s hand that was clutching tightly to her forearm.

“Exactly who are you, miss?”

Cay held her hand out. “I’m Cay O’Neill, Emma’s friend, companion, and caretaker. I live here.”

“Yes, yes, she does,” Emma said, as her eyes wildly searched the men. “Mother told me you’d come after me! Are you taking me back to the hospital? Please, don’t! My friend takes care of me,” she pleaded.

Just then, a breeze blew in from the lake. Sniffing, Edward turned to his partner, “Pete, do you smell bleach?”

“Yup.”

The sheriff was certain it was nothing to do with the crime, but he needed to ask anyway. “Ms. Emma, why were you using bleach out here?”

A crazed look crossed Emma’s face as her eyes widened and her body became rigid. Her voice quavered. “Do you have any idea how many creepy, crawly, slimy things are on that dock at night, leaving behind their hideous droppings that could cause illness?” She hoped her expression would clearly convey how distressed she was by the thought. “My mother said it needed to be cleaned daily, and if I don’t, she’ll take a switch to me.”

“Now, Ms. Emma, there’s no need to get yourself all worked up. I know how neat and clean you are,” Sheriff Nester said. The woman had a reputation for being fanatical when it came to the summer visitors littering her property. *Apparently, she’s just as fanatical about bugs.* He had a faint recollection of being on the property when Emma’s mother was alive and seeing the woman on her hands and knees scrubbing the dock.

Tears began streaming down Emma's face. "Well, if you know that...why are you here questioning me about cleaning my dock?" she asked. Emma sniffled and wiped the tears from her face with her shirtsleeve.

Cay put an arm around her friend. "It's okay, Emma, he's just doing his job," she said. "Did you take your medications today?"

Another look of horror spread over Emma's face. "Oh, no. I forgot! Mother is going to tan my hide for sure."

Cay looked back at the two men. "Do you have all the information you need? We go to bed pretty early around here, and I didn't hear anything unusual. We were up at five and saw nothing then, either."

"We're finished here, but we'll be back if we have any more questions."

Just then, a voice crackled out of the sheriff's walkie-talkie. "Hey, Sheriff, we found another body out here on Snake Island."

"Okay, Rich, I'll be right there." He turned to Emma and Cay and made his apologies. "Sorry to have bothered you. Good day, ladies." Then he tipped his hat and headed for his boat.

Once the boat was out of sight, Emma turned to Cay and laughed. "Did you ever hear the phrase, 'how nice it is to be insane for no one asks you to explain'?" She continued laughing as she took Cay's arm. "I'm ready for a nice cup of tea. Will you join me?"

"Yes, I think I will." As they walked toward the house, Cay added, "You know we need to fill in that bullet hole, make it look like it was never there."

"No problem, I've had to repair the floor before from the wheelchair."

As they entered the house, Cay sat down at the kitchen table while Emma put the kettle on. "Emma, will you tell me something?"

Emma turned around and smiled, although a sense of trepidation fleetingly swept through her mind. "Okay."

"Until yesterday, you had no idea about Borland coming to kill you, but last night, you acted as if it was planned for a long time. How did you know what to do to cover your tracks? And this insane act...we both know you are saner than most. Please help me understand."

Emma sat in the chair next to Cay and her eyes took on a distant look as she stared out a window. "My mother was a controller...if things didn't go her way or if it didn't suit her moods, there would be hell to pay. No matter how hard I tried, I could never please her, and she let me know just how much of a disappointment I was. I never went to school, did I tell you that?" She sighed deeply before she continued. "She would take a switch to me on a regular basis, and with every stroke, told me it was for my own good. After a while, I got used to it...I had to or she would commit me again. And believe it or not, what she did to me was far better than what they did at the hospital." Emma paused for a moment as tears began to fall. "To answer your question, Cay, it was planned, but not for Borland. It was for my mother. I hated her!"

Cay slid out of her chair and placed her arm around Emma. Gently, she bent down and kissed the woman's head. "I'm sorry."

Emma patted the hand on her shoulder before she continued. "Why? It wasn't your fault. I hated my mother for all that she had put me through...for not loving me. After she died, I went through her papers and found the birth certificate for my child and hundreds of pictures of her. My mother had made a deal with the nuns at the convent to care for my daughter and raise her in a Christian way. In turn, she gave them generous gifts of money. Even gave them the retreat they use here at the lake. I hate her for that most of all. She kept my child from me for the last seventeen years."

"I didn't mean to bring back bad memories for you."

A modest smile came to Emma's lips. "Cay, you saved my life, then had to participate in what I did to that man, you deserve answers."

"I didn't *have* to do anything. I could have walked away at any time, I could have alerted the authorities, but I didn't. We are in this together, no matter what." She hugged Emma tighter and sighed. *Together—I like the sound of that.*

## Chapter Nineteen

State police boats and helicopters filled the airways and boating lanes as the investigation into the two murdered men converged onto the lake. Emma and Cay heard the daily repetitive whirl of helicopter blades slicing into the otherwise quiet serenity that surrounded the lake as news teams hovered above hoping to scoop other stations for the big story.

Emma and Cay went about their normal business changing none of their schedules. They sat out on the lawn chatting amicably; all the while, they were intently watching the police comings and goings.

“Do you think they’re done yet?” Emma asked after the fourth day of investigations. “What else do you think they’re looking for?”

Cay patted her friend’s hand. “You need to be patient. By now, they’ve identified Borland. They’ll soon know all about his business dealings and foul temper. He was also a prominent man in the city, so they’ll want to be meticulous in their investigation. After the last two days of rain, any evidence they didn’t collect is probably gone.” She smiled and winked. “Along with any traces of the bleach I used on the dock.” She watched as a helicopter, with a cameraperson hanging precariously out the door, hovered over the small island. “Look at that idiot up there. What they won’t do to get the story,” she observed, shaking her head and laughing.

“Well, Cay, you know sometimes you just have to do what you must,” Emma responded with a quirky smile.

Cay returned the smile. “Yes, I certainly know that.” Her gaze turned to the water again, and she saw a large state police boat heading toward the dock. “It looks like we’re about to have company.” She lifted her head and nodded in the direction of the lake.

Emma followed Cay’s eyes and saw a man tie the boat to the dock before several men exited the vessel. “Interesting, it looks like they’ve sent the militia to question little old me.”

“Indeed it does, my friend. Are you ready?”

Emma reached across to Cay. “I’ve been rehearsing for this moment most of my life. I’m ready. Let’s go see what they want.”

The officers, dressed in dark jumpsuits and vests with the letters SP in large white letters on their backs, stopped when the two women walked toward them. Emma’s facial expression became hard and cold. “Do you people know you’re trespassing?”

Detective Mark Reigns had been with the state police for ten years. He rose rapidly to become a detective and along the way, he earned a reputation for tenaciously leaving no stone unturned. He pursued the most innocuous pieces of evidence in every investigation he participated in. Ambition to rise higher in rank was his sole motivator. He just needed that one big case to make it happen.

With a quick glance, he sized up the two women. The one accusing them of trespassing had to be the owner, Emma Sanders, who most thought to be rather bizarre. The other woman must be the saner of the two, and the one he would have to talk with first.

“Ma’am, I’m Detective Reigns with the state police, and I need to ask you some questions,” the tall, muscular man with a stern-looking face said. “I’ll try not to take up too much of your time.”

Emma’s eyes began to dart between the detective and the six others with him. “Why are you here?” she asked.

The officer saw the older woman cower and retreat to the younger one’s side. He turned to Cay. “May I have a word with you, ma’am?” he said, motioning her away from Emma.

As Cay began to move, Emma clung to her even tighter. “Please, don’t go,” she cried out. “Mother will be so angry that these people are here.”

Cay turned toward Emma and held her hand gently. “Emma, I’ll just be over there. I promise I’ll be back in just a minute.” Her eyes bored into Emma as if she were pleading for understanding.

Emma nodded, letting her hold on Cay go.

“What can I do for you, Detective?”

“Exactly what is your role here, ma’am?”

“I’m Emma’s companion and caretaker,” she said. “Cay O’Neill.”

Satisfied with the answer, he continued. “I understand from Sheriff Nester that Ms. Sanders is...well...a little on the excitable side. Do you think you can help me? I just need to ask her a few questions to clear up any loose ends.”

Cay had been around police most of her life and knew what they said wasn’t important. Rather, it was what they didn’t say that worried her. “I’ll do what I can. Detective Reigns, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I appreciate anything you can do to help,” he said.

“Let me speak with her for a moment and let her know what you want.”

“Certainly,” the man said as he watched Cay walk away. She seemed cooperative enough to him, but there was an edge to her he didn’t like. It was almost as if she was role-playing and already knew why he was there and what he would say. He took out his notebook, jotted down a notation about Cay, then watched the interaction between the two women.

As Cay strolled up to her friend, she winked. “Emma,” she said in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. “This nice man is here to ask you some questions about the man who died. Do you think you can answer their questions without being afraid?”

Emma’s eyes brimmed with fear. “I...I don’t know anything about anyone dying. Why do they want me to tell them about something I don’t know anything about?”

Cay's eyes narrowed. "Emma, listen to me," she said slowly in a very firm voice. "No one is going to hurt you. Will you please try to listen to their questions?"

The look on Cay's face told her something was up, and she should tone it down a bit. "Yes, I will try," she said.

Cay motioned for the man to join them. "Detective Reigns, she's ready for you." When she noticed the other officers snooping around the yard, she glared at the detective. "What are your people doing over there?" she asked. "I thought you wanted to speak with her, you said nothing about the others traipsing around the gardens."

"Everyone, please come back over here," he called out. "I'm sorry, ma'am, no harm intended."

"If any of the plantings are destroyed, your office will get a bill for their replacement."

Embarrassed by the turn of events, Reigns capitulated. "By all means, again, I apologize. I will speak with Ms. Sanders now," he said.

The detective stood by Emma nervously. He always felt anxious when questioning people with mental problems, and the other woman's ranting about his team investigating the yard had worried him, for it was illegal, and he suspected the woman knew it. "Ms. Sanders, do you know anything about the men who died here on the lake?" he asked.

Emma studied the man's face. His head was bald, shaved she suspected, his nose was straight and narrow, lips slightly full. His muscular body was evident underneath the tight-fitting jumpsuit. A formidable opponent, yet in his eyes, she detected an unease, a nervousness that bordered on fear.

"Ms. Sanders, did you understand my question?"

"Oh, yes. I was trying to remember if the sheriff told us anything about the man. Now you say there is more than one...I had no idea. Did they drown in the lake?" she asked, her face a paradigm of innocence.

"No, ma'am, they didn't drown. One of the men, Evan Borland, used to have a house here at the lake about eighteen years ago. Do you remember him?"

Emma brought her hand to her face and wrapped it around her chin as she pursed her lips. "Borland, hmm, there was a boy named Eric Borland who worked for my mother one year, but I don't remember knowing an Evan Borland," she said.

"Can you explain why he would be asking questions about you?"

Emma's eyes opened wide in surprise. "He was?"

"Yes, ma'am," Detective Reigns said. He searched Emma's face for the slightest reaction.

Emma began rubbing her chin as her eyes narrowed. "My mother passed several months ago...maybe he was looking for her. My mother was not a very nice woman, and lots of her renters didn't like her." She looked up into the man's deep brown eyes. "Did you know my mother?"

“No, no, I didn’t, Ms. Sanders,” he said. The look the woman gave him unnerved him. He’d seen that look before in his mother’s eyes just before she was committed. “Ma’am, I understand your mother had Borland’s son arrested.” He hoped for a positive reaction from the strange woman.

Emma’s expression shifted to one of confusion. “My mother? I don’t understand, did Sheriff Nester say that happened?” *Hannah*, she thought. The sheriff had only been there for ten years, and all the previous records were lost in a fire, leaving the older woman the only one with any information.

“You have no recollection of an arrest concerning the victim’s son and your mother?” he pressed for an answer to his question. He saw no hint of the woman knowing what he was speaking of, but he needed to hear her denial before he would believe her.

Emma slipped her hand into her sweater pocket, felt for her phone, and pressed the middle button. “What is this all about? You say you arrested my mother. No, no, that can’t be. I must go to her! Why did you arrest her? I must get a lawyer. Cay, where is Cay?” Her eyes looked wildly about as she began to tremble.

Cay felt the vibration of her phone and immediately sought out Emma’s eyes. When their eyes met, Cay gave her a nearly imperceptible nod and started toward her friend.

“No, ma’am, I don’t think you understood...your mother wasn’t arrested, Evan Borland’s son, Eric, was arrested,” the detective tried to explain. *This has to be an act...she can’t be for real.*

“Excuse me,” Cay interrupted. “Detective, would you look at this flowerbed, it has been destroyed by these people.” She motioned to the team of state police lurking about the property. “I want your address and the name of your superior,” she said, “so I can send them the bill to have all the plantings replaced. I will also lodge a formal complaint.”

Emma looked at the flowerbed. “Oh, no! My beautiful flowers, just look at them! Who could do such a cruel thing?”

Detective Reigns’s face scrunched up in confusion at the other woman’s sudden appearance. “Ma’am, I’m afraid my team is responsible. I will pay for any damages.” He was losing control of the interview, and that irritated him.

Emma turned to her friend. “Cay, do you see this?” she asked, pointing to the trampled flowerbed, before looking around the rest of the property. “Oh, no, look over there, those are ruined, too,” she said. “Are these strangers allowed to just trample over my property? I didn’t tell them they could. Oh, Cay, what are they doing here?” She began sobbing, seemingly devastated, as she collapsed to the ground by the flowerbed.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Cay accused as she bent down to comfort her friend.

“Please don’t die.” Emma’s fingers tried frantically to upright the fallen flowers.

“Ma’am, please, I only have a few more questions.”

Emma, whose sobs were becoming close to inconsolable, appeared oblivious to the world around her as she scrounged on the ground for twigs to prop up her flowers. “Oh, my poor babies...who could have hurt you like this?”

Reigns looked around the area, noticing for the first time how clumsily his people had searched the yard. *An illegal search at that!* He felt fortunate that neither woman seemed to understand that fact. *Or do they?* He suspected the O’Neill woman knew more than she let on. It was obvious to him that the woman at the grocery was wrong about the arrest. He looked down at the sobbing woman who seemed to have reverted into her little world and realized that the whole situation was going downhill fast.

“Ladies, I’m sorry for any inconvenience we’ve caused. Here’s my card, please send me the bill for any damages my people caused.” He tipped his hat and turned to his men. “Let’s go.” He had only stepped a few feet away before he hesitated, then turned back to Cay and Emma. “I may be talking with you again.”

“Just a minute.” Cay approached the man rapidly with his card in her hand. “I don’t have the number of your immediate supervisor,” she said. “I want it before you go anywhere. I will make sure that a complaint is lodged against you and everyone else here.”

The detective stared at the woman whose face was red with anger. “Listen, ma’am. I’m terribly sorry for any damage my team did, and I will take full responsibility, so there’s no need for you to have their names.”

“The hell there’s not.” Cay turned to her friend who was prostrate on the ground unaware of the happenings around her. “Do you see the harm you’ve done to this woman? Do you know how long it has taken me to get her trust anyone, and now you come roaring in here and have destroyed all my work.” She jabbed the card in the man’s face. “Write down the name of your immediate supervisor and chief.”

Reigns reluctantly took the card and jotted down the information. “Here,” he said, shoving it back toward Cay. “Again, please accept my apologies.” Taking a deep breath, he followed the rest to the boat. As the state police boat pulled away, he turned and saw the woman crouched next to her charge in an apparent attempt to bring her back to reality.

Once the boat was out of view, Cay collapsed onto the ground and began laughing. Emma joined in as she allowed her body to relax on the soft green grass. She turned her head toward Cay and captured her blue eyes. “Thank you. I couldn’t have done this without your help.” She reached over and took Cay’s hand and sensations coursed through her body that she had never felt before. Confused by the feeling, she looked over at her friend.

“We made a great team,” she said. She looked up at the bright blue sky and grinned. “Isn’t this a fabulous day?” When Emma removed her hand, Cay thought, *put it back*, hoping Emma would receive the subliminal message—she did not.

For some unknown reason, fear gripped at Emma’s heart as she turned her head to look at her friend. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

Cay, lying on the cushion of new summer grass closed her eyes, reluctant to speak. With a deep sigh, she spoke. “Emma, I befriended you under false pretenses. Fortunately, for both of us, I saw the error of my ways, or we might both be dead, instead of Borland. My betrayal can’t be forgotten or erased...I’m ashamed, and I don’t think I can get past that.” She opened her eyes and looked at the woman next to her. “I need to move on with my life.”

Emma felt her world collapsing around her as she scrambled in her mind for something to say to make Cay stay. She finally spoke, hoping to buy enough time until she could figure out what to do. “Cay, please don’t go yet, what if the police come back?”

Cay listened to the plaintive words of her friend. *I don’t want to leave, I’m happy here, but how can I stay?* “I don’t think they’ll be back, we saw to that just now,” she said with a broad smile.

Emma chuckled. “We did, didn’t we? Did you see the look on his face when you said you wanted his superior’s name? I can’t believe how you went after him until he gave it to you.” She reached over and took Cay’s hand again. “Why don’t you stay for a bit longer...I still need those database lessons, and you did promise to help me set up a computer. Besides, we won’t be finished with the Borland business until the police leave, and the case is closed.”

Cay squeezed her friend’s hand. “For a bit then...”

## Chapter Twenty

The state police boat, loaded with Detective Reigns and his team, eased into a slip at Jones's Landing. The detective wanted to speak with Hannah Beard and get her take on the two strange women living near the crime scene. He would readily admit that the Sanders woman unnerved him, but the other one, Cay O'Neill, he was sure she had a story to tell. When he exited the boat, he walked along the gently moving dock, deep in thought, oblivious of the mass of news media moving toward him.

"Detective Reigns, have you found any more evidence?"

"Are you going to make an arrest?"

"Were the murders mob connected?"

"What can you tell us about the condition of the bodies? Did you get the autopsy results?"

"Do you have any suspects?"

He heard their voices long before he realized the reporters were there. His eyes searched the horde of hands thrusting microphones and the cameras in his face and wondered what he could say to placate them for the time being. Reigns held his hand up in the air as he moved closer to the crowd.

"Right now, we are still in the middle of an ongoing investigation, and it wouldn't be prudent of me to comment at this time. Thank you," he said.

Once he and his team pushed past the reporters and arrived at the top of the hill, Reigns stood by the chief crime scene investigator, Jill Wakeley. "Have you found anything new out there on the island?"

The blond woman shook her head at the man she despised. "We covered every inch, Mark, and there's nothing new. The rain has all but washed away what was there. I just got the preliminary autopsy on Borland, and it seems he died from the bullet to his head, although they did find that he would have bled out from shot near his groin. He had several snakebites, but they were inflicted postmortem. The other man had two gunshot wounds. He died from a shot to his heart that originated from behind."

"In the back? Did we recover the bullet?"

The woman flipped through pages before answering. "Yep, a thirty-five millimeter from Borland's gun."

"What about the bullets in Borland? Where did they come from?" he asked. *Something isn't right. The pieces are not fitting into place.*

"The one in his knee and groin area came from Giovanni's gun, and the one in his head came from his own gun."

"He killed himself? Doesn't that seem strange to you? The other guy is dead, why didn't he just get in the boat, dump the body, and leave? It just doesn't add up, Jill."

The woman frowned at the detective's quandary. "Sure it does, the evidence tells us exactly what happened. Borland fired the first shot, probably an argument over the drug stash we found in the boat. We think Borland took Giovanni to the island to leave him there. He knew about the snakes since he once lived here. Only the plan backfired, leaving Borland on the island instead. Then Giovanni shot him in the knee and groin, so he couldn't follow, and when he turned to leave, Borland shot him in the back."

"But how did the boat leave the island? And why didn't Borland get in it?"

"Look, Mark, there was only one set of footprints on the island, and those were Borland's. The shot to his groin bled heavily. No doubt, the bullet in his knee prevented him from moving very far. He probably passed out. The waves kept rocking the boat more and more until it finally slipped free from the island. You know, it was only on the island less than a foot, it wouldn't take much to set it free, and there was a full moon that night. When Borland came to, he saw the boat gone and the snakes close by...I figure he started slashing out at the snakes, and when he realized they were going to bite him, he knew he was finished and decided he would rather die fast and easy rather than slow and painful. So he shot himself. What other explanation is there? There's no evidence leading us anywhere else," she said. It didn't take much for Reigns to exasperate her. Every case she worked with the man, he always insisted that something else happened.

"I know, I know, but it all just seems too neat and tidy for me. What about that woman Borland asked for in the store? The sheriff said that when he questioned her the next day, she admitted to cleaning her dock off with bleach...that sounds like *other evidence* to me. And we haven't accounted for all the bullets."

"Just what is your problem anyway?" Her impatience with the man was bordering on irritation. "That woman has a long history of mental instability. She's reclusive, and I admit that she's just plain peculiar, but how could you even in your wildest dreams think she would or could have anything to do with this?" By this time, Jill's arms were waving wildly in the air.

Reigns didn't understand how Jill's scientific mind could overlook the evidence. "What's wrong with you? I'm giving you a viable option, and you refuse to even check it out or to consider the possibility." He looked at the story-hungry press tramping up the hill and shook his head. "Don't they ever get tired of harassing us?"

No longer able to contain her indignation, Jill leveled her eyes squarely on the detective. "Now you listen to me, you arrogant SOB, all the evidence leads to only two participants, and they are both dead. I know how to do my job, and I do a damn good one, so don't you ever again imply that I am not doing my job correctly. And that's your *viable option!*" She poked him in the chest. "Get it?"

Reigns grabbed the woman's hand. "Stop that and keep your voice down, don't you see the press headed this way?"

“Good, let them come, I’ll give them a statement and have this case closed and let this town get back to normal.” Her eyes were on fire as her anger continued to grow.

“Listen to me, I’m in charge here, and I say when it’s closed, so back off!” His eyes pinned on the approaching cameras and microphones.

“No, I’m in charge, it’s me you report to and it’s me who determines when the evidence says the case is over.” Jill’s temper was trying to get the best of her. “We’re done here! You finish up and close it out!”

“My team will be finished when I say we are. Now shut up and keep it that way! I’m going to interview the store owner again.”

Jill watched the tall man stalk away and shook her head. She turned toward her group. “Well, guys, it looks as if the detective isn’t satisfied.”

Everyone moaned.

“He’s never satisfied! Damn, do we have to stay in this backwater town another night?” one of the men asked.

“No, our work here is done. There’s nothing left to find. We’ll go home as soon as I file my report.” Jill smiled at her team as they all began to walk toward their vehicles.

As Mark Reigns entered the grocery store, he instructed his men to make sure no reporters got inside. His long strides took him quickly to the lunch counter and Hannah.

The older woman saw the detective approaching her and a slight shiver went through her body. During their previous meeting, she had given him all the information he had requested. Now she wondered if that had been the right thing to do. He was so full of questions about Emma and her family. No one in his right mind would think she was involved in a killing, but that is exactly what she thought he was after, once his questioning was finished. *Emma is one of us, and I won’t allow this stranger to go after her like that...or Cay, either. Today, I keep what I know to myself.*

“Ma’am, do you have a moment to speak with me?” he asked. He noticed the lunch patrons looking at him. “Privately,” he added.

Hannah was all smiles; she loved being the center of attention and having the opportunity to learn more about the dead men. “Why of course, Detective, we can go into the office.”

Reigns followed the woman into a small, cramped room that would better serve as a broom closet than an office. “Thank you, Mrs. Beard. I won’t take up much of your time.”

Hannah raised her hand and waved it in the air. “You take all the time you need, my husband can tend to the customers.” Her face glowed.

“I visited with Emma Sanders earlier, and she has no recollection of the Borland boy being arrested. Are you certain of your facts?” The woman seemed to be a geyser of knowledge, and he was counting on her for some answers.

Hannah looked at the man intently before answering. “Well, let me see now,” she pondered, stalling. *What do I tell him? I have to make him think I’m daft or something...* she thought before speaking again. “It was a long time ago...I was here when Sheriff Collins got the call. Hmm...”

“Do you know where Sheriff Collins is now?” Reigns asked.

“Sure do, he’s down at the memorial park, he died about six years ago,” Hannah replied. “I suppose you could check at the sheriff’s office for records.”

“I did,” he said. Reigns knew there was no record of the arrest or the incident and hoped the old woman would know what happened. “This O’Neill woman living out there, she doesn’t seem like the companion type.” He left it open, hoping the older woman would fill in the story.

“Oh, Cay! Isn’t she a lovely woman?” Hannah said. Initially, she suspected Cay’s motives when she moved in with Emma, but she saw the change in Emma and how happy she was now. “She and Emma are very good friends. I was glad when she moved out there. Emma shouldn’t live alone...she has problems, you know.”

“Ma’am, do you know why Mr. Borland wanted to find Ms. Sanders?” Reigns asked. The woman’s lack of cooperation was annoying him.

“Not really, but he wasn’t just askin’ about Emma, it was the family, too,” she answered honestly. “He came in to rent a boat and get a sandwich. My husband recognized him, and they passed the time for a while over cups of coffee. Then they placed an order, and I made the sandwiches. When I gave him the bag with the food, he asked if the Sanders family still lived on the lake. I told him they did, then he paid me and left with his friend. That’s all I know...oh, I do remember the look on his face, real sour, kinda scary if you ask me. You could talk to my husband, Zach, maybe he knows more,” she said. “I’ll go get him.”

When Hannah met up with her husband in the hallway, she whispered, “Watch what you say to that man.”

Reigns didn’t know what to make of the old woman. *Two days ago, she was the town gossip, bursting with information. Now she really has nothing to say.* He heard footsteps of the shopkeeper. *Maybe he can give me something solid,* he thought as Zachariah Beard rounded the corner. “Hello, Mr. Beard,” he said.

Zach looked at the man’s outstretched hand, then inspected his own flour-covered hand. “Hope you don’t mind if I don’t shake, ’less you want to get flour all over that there blue outfit.”

Reigns withdrew his hand. “No problem. I was wondering if you recalled any more of the conversation you had with Mr. Borland and his friend.”

Zach twirled his moustache, smudging his cheek with flour at each turn, as he tried to recall the conversation. “Well, let’s see. I outfitted him with a boat, gas, cushions, tackle, and bait. He asked if the lake was the same as when he used to live here, and I remember tellin’ him that there were more people. He sorta laughed and said something like he hoped not yet. I told him not yet, and he said ‘good’ that he

didn't like people watchin' him or somethin' like that. Then he asked how the fish were biting, and I said it was pretty much dead but would be startin' to pick up soon. I thought they were both really strange since neither was really dressed for fishin', but they wanted all the equipment." Zach stroked his moustache. "Ya know, come to think of it, that friend of his was sure strange."

"He was? In what way?" the detective asked, trying to contain his excitement. *At last, I might be on to something.*

"Well," the old man said. "It seemed as though he really didn't want to go with Borland, like he was real afraid of him, his eyes kept lookin' all around like he was lookin' for a way out." Zach looked around the small office. "This ain't much of a place, is it?"

"Sir, did the other man do or say anything else that you can remember? It's really important."

Zach shook his head. "Nope." He turned to go back to work, but then stopped and twisted back to Reigns. "When they got in the boat, the other man said somethin' about not wantin' to be there, and the Borland fella told him he better watch out if he knew what was good fer him...or somethin' like that." Zach shrugged. "Anyways, I gotta get back to work."

Reigns stood there dumbfounded. All the information led to Jill's conclusions. "This can't be! I'm missing something, but what?" he asked. Once outside, he looked around for Jill and the forensic team. "Hey, Hal, where's Jill?" he asked of another officer.

"They packed up and left. She said there was nothing more for them to do here."

"Shit! Gather everyone up and meet me in my room," he ordered before heading for his vehicle.

Back in his room, Reigns started his laptop, connected to the Internet, and brought up the state police database. He typed in, *Kay O'Neill*. He waited anxiously until the list began to appear, then started reading all the stats on the thirty-five names his search located. He found five possibilities and searched each one extensively. "Damn!" he blurted out. Not one of the entries seemed to match the woman in question. Then he began searching for Catherine or Katherine and any other variations of the name he could think of. Still, he found nothing remotely close to the woman he met earlier.

The motel room door opened, and as each member of his team filed in, he handed him a packet containing all of the findings about the murders.

"I want you all to go over this information and let me know if you agree or disagree with the findings. You need to read with the eye of an investigator...look for what's not there and ask yourself if it's important," he said. "My gut tells me there's more to this than what we're seeing on the surface...we need to find what that is."

All eyes in the room rolled before they looked at the evidence once again.



It was Thursday and shopping day for Emma and Cay.

“Want me to drive?” Cay asked as they started for the door.

Emma smiled. “Do you mind if we walk?”

Cay opened the door and allowed Emma to exit first. “Not at all. I really would like to walk there instead of run,” she said, laughing.

“Well, come on then, it’s a really lovely walk,” Emma said, striding up the drive.

It was a lovely walk. The crisp morning promised bright blue skies and a wonderful day ahead. Birds sang, heralding the new day to the tune of the wind soughing gently through the trees, making them sway and their new leaves rustle as if they were dancing.

Emma stopped at the spot where she fell and cut her leg. “I want to see if I can find what I cut my leg on,” she said as she looked around the area.

“Probably was a piece of glass or something like that and long gone by now,” Cay said as she crouched down to scan the tall grasses.

“You’re probably right, but I wanted to look anyway. Guess that’s kind of dumb, isn’t it?” Her face began to turn red.

Cay shielded her eyes from the sun and looked up at her friend. “No, it isn’t. Besides it is a great day, and we aren’t in a hurry...are we?”

Emma laughed. “No, we certainly aren’t.”

Cay laughed along with the woman next to her. “Would you like to have something to eat at the store?” Her eyes diverted from her friend to the flashing lights of the car stopping alongside the dirt road. “It’s show time,” she whispered.

Emma turned around to see Detective Reigns getting out of his car. “This is getting ridiculous.” She moved backward toward Cay.

Cay patted Emma’s shoulder as the man drew near. “It’s okay, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Ladies,” the man tipped his hat. “May I be of assistance? Did you lose something? Or are you putting something there?” he asked.

Emma moved behind Cay and peered at the man from over her friend’s shoulder.

“Let’s go, Emma.” Cay took hold of the cart and began moving up the road.

“Excuse me, ladies, I didn’t tell you to go.”

Cay’s eyes narrowed, then she turned around and took Emma’s hand. “Emma,” she said, “I want you to go on to the store now.”

Not understanding her friend, Emma shook her head. “I can’t leave you here alone, it isn’t safe.”

Cay squeezed the hand she was holding. “Please, go to the store and wait, I’ll be there shortly,” she said.

A silent message passed between them, and Emma took hold of the basket and started toward the store.

“Where are you going?”

“Emma, just go, He can’t stop you.” Cay watched as her friend moved quickly down the road before she turned on Reigns. “I don’t know what your problem is, but I do object to your harassing Emma in the way you have!” she said. “It was almost impossible to calm her down after your visit to her property.”

“Ma’am, I’m afraid you’re mistaken. I haven’t harassed anyone.” He had seen people like this one before...so full of self-importance that they think they could cry foul and the whole justice department would stop. *Not this time, not on my watch!*

“If you have something to say or an accusation to make, then do so. Otherwise, leave her alone! And if you do make an allegation, just be sure you have proof to back it up.” Cay’s anger was growing exponentially.

“I know you and that...friend of yours had something to do with the deaths of Evan Borland and Tony Giovanni, and I won’t stop till I find out what. You can’t bully me or threaten me, so stop trying,” he said.

“Well, unless it’s suddenly against the law to walk to the store, I’m leaving and there’s nothing you can do.” She gave him one last look, nodding before she headed for the store.

Emma anxiously paced up and down the aisles waiting for her friend to arrive. The door opened and in walked Cay, looking confident and happy. She greeted Hannah with a hug. “Hi, how are you doing, I miss seeing you,” she said, making the older woman feel important.

“I’ll be glad when all these folks leave...it’s good for business, but they are all so loud and messy.” Just then, two men came in laughing and slapping each other on the back. “See what I mean,” Hannah said as she watched the two men sit at the lunch counter. “I’ll try and speak with you before you go,” she said, patting Cay’s arm.

Cay looked around the store for Emma and a bright smile came to her face when she spied the top of her friend’s head peeking over the shelves. “There you are,” Cay said.

“Cay, is everything okay? I’ve been so worried!”

Cay, touched by her friend’s concern, felt warmth encircle her heart. “I’m fine. You must remember that I have experience in the law enforcement field. He had no right to stop us or prevent us from proceeding.” She looked in the basket and frowned. “Broccoli! Emma, you’re kidding, right?”

Emma didn’t know what to make of Cay’s comment. “Why, have I done something wrong?”

Cay picked up the offending vegetable and laughed. “I’m not particularly fond of this.”

“Oh, do you want me to put it back?” Emma still didn’t understand what the problem was.

“No,” Cay said, putting the broccoli back in the basket. “I was joking with you.”

Emma blushed. “Oh.”

“Come on, let’s finish up here, shhhh, wait. What’s that I hear?”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“I think I hear the lake, and maybe a big record-setting bass, calling us.”

The walk back home was quiet, each woman lost in her own thoughts. The silence was broken when Emma grabbed Cay’s arm and stopped walking.

“Emma, is something the matter?” Cay asked.

Hazel eyes misted over. “Will this ever be over, or will that detective keep hounding us forever?”

“Listen to me. I won’t let him continue to harass you. He has nothing concrete to go on, and if he continues to come after us, I’ll call his superiors and lodge a complaint.” Cay looked at her friend and read the doubt there. “I promise I’ll take care of it. You trust me, don’t you?”

“Of course I trust you, Cay, but I did this and maybe I should just...”

“We did it together. And, no, there is nothing to be done about anything,” Cay said. “Now what do you say we go home, have a nice lunch, then think about walking through the refuge? I’ve never done that, and I bet you can show me all sorts of wonderful discoveries there.” Both women were smiling as they began to walk again.

Emma’s eyes brightened. “Oh, I’d love that, the refuge is so gorgeous this time of the year.”

“Good, it’s settled then.”

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Mark Reigns paced back and forth in his small motel room. The meeting with his team came up empty in finding additional information. Although the case seemed clear cut, he knew there was more to the story, and the two weird women were involved. “But how?” he asked himself through the mirror. “Those two women are nuts enough to have killed them both...and that backwater rube of a sheriff wouldn’t know a viable clue if it fell into his hands.”

*The O’Neill woman could prove to be a problem if the way she acted on the road was any indication. If I could just get that Sanders bitch alone, I know I could make her sing. Shit, how am I going to pull this off?*

He sorted through the stack of papers until he came upon the first report after the initial discovery of the bodies. He looked over the notes regarding the sheriff’s conversation with the two women, which he had read at least a hundred times. “If I stretch it, I could probably make the washing of the dock with bleach the morning after a murder into probable cause.”

He tapped the table with his pen for a long time before picking up the phone and calling Sheriff Nester. “Sheriff, this is Mark Reigns, I’ve been looking over your

reports and have some questions regarding the Sanders woman cleaning her dock off with bleach.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Didn’t you think it was coincidental? You wrote that it was normal behavior for the woman, how did you know that? Did you have independent confirmation of this?”

“Detective, you need to understand this is a small town and everyone knows each other’s business. Ms. Emma is fragile and wouldn’t hurt anything...she is also very phobic and that is why she is fanatical about cleanliness. Have I seen her cleaning her dock before? Yes, but is it on a regular basis with bleach, I don’t know. In fact, I find it entirely believable that she’d be down there on her hands and knees scrubbing algae...I’m pretty sure I remember seein’ her doin’ that once.”

“Am I to understand you have no independent confirmation other than a vague recollection that she did this in the past?” The detective pressed the issue.

“No, I don’t, but I don’t need that...I know Ms. Emma is a bit eccentric, but she isn’t a murderer,” the sheriff said. He didn’t like the man’s intrusion into his investigation.

“Well, that isn’t good enough for me. Since you cannot say one hundred percent that you witnessed her scrubbing down her dock in the past with bleach, I’d say we have enough for probable cause, and I can legally search the premises. You and your deputy meet me at my motel, and we’ll go out there together and conduct a search.”

“But don’t you need...”

“No buts! Just get your ass over here!” Reigns slammed the phone down. “Country bumpkins think everything has to be done by the book. Doesn’t he know that there are ways to circumvent everything?”

*Today, I will solve the big one, and my career will soar, he thought, whistling while he put on his vest and state police jacket. Yep, today, I’m going to make a name for myself.*

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The two women walked down the long driveway that led to the house. They bought all the groceries they would need for the week along with some bait for fishing.

“Cay, do you think we should take some sandwiches with us when we go fishing? We probably will be hungry after walking through the refuge,” Emma said as she looked up through the trees to the bright blue sky. “I think we should go later on this afternoon, and we could have dinner while we fish.”

“Sounds good to me, it should be a fun afternoon with visiting the refuge and going fishing. I hope we catch something today,” she said as they ambled on toward the house.

Emma jumped and moved to the side when she heard the sound of automobile wheels crunching the gravel. She turned and saw flashing red lights spinning from the tops of several cars. “Cay, what’s this all about?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, but we’ll find out.” Her eyes searched her friend’s. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

Cay spoke quickly. “Go in the house and don’t let anyone in.” The cars stopped and men were getting out.

Emma’s eyes grew wide when she saw Detective Reigns and Sheriff Nester surrounded by what seemed like a dozen men. She wasn’t about to go inside and leave her friend to deal with this alone. “What is this all about?” she demanded. “You’re trespassing on my property, leave at once.”

“Now, Ms. Emma, it’s okay, we need to look around your property.” The sheriff spoke quietly, trying to placate the woman. “That’ll be okay with you, won’t it?”

Detective Reigns came forward and stood close to Emma, towering over her in an intimidating fashion. “Don’t be so nice, Sheriff, we have every right to search the yard and house.” He sneered in Emma’s direction as he spoke.

Emma began to cower in genuine fear of the man. “C...Cay.”

For someone who stood only five-foot-five, Cay seemed larger than life as she moved in between Emma and the detective. Her blue eyes pierced the man as they narrowed into slits. “You better have paper.”

The detective straightened his back. “We have reason to believe you two women were involved in the deaths of Evan Borland and Tony Giovanni, and we are here to search the property and house,” he said.

“Emma, please go inside and lock all the doors.”

“No,” Emma responded.

Cay turned to Sheriff Nester. He seemed the most reasonable. “Sheriff, do you have a search warrant?”

“No, but we do have probable cause, and the detective said that gave us the right to search.”

Cay’s eyes held the detective captive as she took out her cell phone and dialed. “Hi, it’s Cay, is he in?” she said. “I’m doing fine, Paige, and yourself? Okay, thank you.” Her eyes narrowed and her face was grim as she waited for the person she called. She finally heard the familiar friendly voice of her uncle.

“Cay, how are you doing, this is a pleasant surprise. It’s so good to hear your voice,” her uncle said.

“Uncle Patty, it’s good to hear your voice, too. Say, listen, I’m having some difficulty with one of your detectives.”

“Which one, sweetheart?”

“His last name is Reigns.”

Detective Reigns's eyes sprang open in sudden recognition. *Patrick O'Neill, the head of the state police is her uncle!* He moaned inwardly.

"Cay, are you involved with that business at the lake?"

"Nope, but your detective here seems to think I am, along with my friend, Emma Sanders. He's here at her house now, saying he's going to search the house and property...without paper."

"He's doing what? Just a minute. I have the report right here, let me take a look." He put the phone on hold to review the details.

While she waited, Cay's face took on a sinister look as if to tell the detective, *you're going down.*

"Cay, from what the forensics and other evidence show, this is an open and shut case. Did you say Detective Reigns thinks you had something to do with it?"

"Yes, that's what he just told me. He also conducted an illegal search on my friend's property, causing damage, too."

"Cay, darling, will you be a dear and let the detective use your phone for a moment?" Cay always loved hearing her uncle's distinctive Irish brogue.

"Sure thing." She handed her cell to the detective. "He would like to speak with you," she said.

Reigns took the phone, listened for a moment, then handed it back to the woman.

"Thanks, Uncle Patty, we'll speak again real soon." Cay closed her phone and looked directly at the sheriff. "You have no right to search without a warrant...this detective gave you bad advice. Will you please take these people and leave the property

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"Of course, ma'am," he said. The sheriff didn't like Reigns and was glad he would be leaving his town. "We'll go now, please accept my apologies."

Reigns stood there flabbergasted. He was defeated and disgraced; yet he knew he was right. "You two be very careful because eventually you'll give yourselves away...then I will be vindicated."

The sheriff had Reigns by the arm. "Come on, you've done enough damage, threatening these women in front of all these witnesses isn't helping you at all."

Reigns wrestled his arm free. "I'm going," he said.

Emma and Cay watched until the police vehicles left the property. "What are we going to do?"

"We go on living. There's nothing for him to find." She wrapped her arm around Emma. "Hey, you were pretty feisty there. It was good to know you had my back."

Emma hugged her friend fully. "Thank you. I will always have your back."

"Let's get these groceries put away, so we can go fishing."



## Chapter Twenty-one

The weeks of summer flew by as the two women fell into a comfortable routine. Cay became *keeper* of the southern part of the lake, encouraging sightseers to stay away from Snake Island and Emma's domain. Emma purchased a Jet Ski for Cay to use in her *keeper* activities, and it paid off. This was the first summer that the lake's summer teenagers did not harass Emma.

Emma sat down in the comfortable white Adirondack chair on the lawn. "Cay," she said, "I can't remember a more pleasant summer." Her face beamed with a smile. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For coming into my life and being here with me."

"In that case, I should be thanking you, too." Her eyes wandered out to the lake and the large boat heading for Snake Island. "Looks like duty calls," she said.

"Go get 'em. I'm going inside to get dinner started."

Cay laughed. "It's Tuesday, must be chicken night."

"I'm not that predictable. Am I?" Emma's face was scrunched up and bright red.

Cay walked back to her friend. "Emma, ever since I've been here, we've had chicken every Tuesday night." She saw the tears begin to well up in Emma's hazel eyes. "Hey, it's not a bad thing. I happen to look forward to Tuesday 'cause chicken is my favorite." She beamed fondly toward her friend. "Will you give me a smile? Please."

Emma sighed. "You know, now that you mentioned it, I might surprise you, change my routine, and stop being so predictable."

This time, Cay laughed heartily. "No way, Emma, it would drive you bonkers."

Now Emma began laughing, too. "Yes, it would." She looked past her friend to the lake. "You better get back to your job. Looks like those folks on that boat might be thinking about exploring the island."

Cay spun around and observed the boat getting ever closer to Snake Island. "Damn, that's all we need, dead vacationers. I'm off to save them." She ran to the dock, mounted her water vehicle, and sped off toward the interlopers.

While Emma watched her friend, her heart filled with a warm, tender feeling. *I'm so glad to have her in my life. She saved me from a life without knowing what friendship or love is all about.* For not the first time, Emma watched as Cay's body moved gracefully toward the dock. As with each occasion she watched the woman, Emma felt her body react in a way that was strange yet pleasurable. *Maybe one day I will ask Cay what that means.* She stood up and walked back to the house and dinner preparations.

The Jet Ski came up to the eighteen-foot runabout. Cay waved in a friendly fashion before stopping next to the vessel. “Are you all planning on going onto that island?”

The older man, who Cay thought must be the grandfather of the three children standing at the bow, spoke. “We thought we’d see if there were any treasures.” He winked and nodded toward the anxiously waiting children.

“Didn’t you see the posted *No trespassing* signs?”

The man looked around. “Didn’t see any, I looked for that before I told the grandkids we would go ashore.”

Cay’s eyes scanned for the signs and saw they were all gone. “Someone is playing with people’s lives. This island is full of venomous snakes. Your grandchildren could have been killed had I not seen you.”

The old man looked doubtful of Cay’s words. “Lady, I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, but I don’t see any warnings, and this place looks safe enough to me.” He then turned to the children. “Soon as I land, we can go on that treasure hunt I promised.”

“Mister, you are making a big mistake.”

“Just mind your own business, miss,” the man said. He maneuvered his boat nearer to the island, then hopped out onto the soggy land. The man walked barefooted to the bow of the boat, and he was about to lift one child out when a snake began to slither toward him.

“Get back in your boat!” Cay warned. “Look to your left, there’s a snake heading for you.”

No sooner had Cay spoken than the snake seemed to take on a defensive attitude. The man dropped his grandchild back in the boat and dove for the water in an attempt to get away. He was fortunate that he and his grandchildren escaped the wrath of Snake Island.

“Lady, I don’t know how to thank you. I’m sorry for how I sounded before. The grandkids, you know, I promised them.”

“No problem, I’m just glad you’re safe.”

Once Cay saw the boat pull away, she reached into a storage compartment for a walkie-talkie. “Emma, will you call the sheriff and tell him someone has messed with the signs again?”

“Oh, no, who keeps doing that? Anyway, after Labor Day all the summer visitors will be gone, as will the sign problem, I suspect.”

“Yep, I think you’re right. I’ll be heading back as soon as the sheriff gets here.”

“Great,” Emma beamed. “I thought we could eat out under the tree tonight.”

“Another great meal, Emma. I ate so much I’ll have to run an extra ten miles tomorrow.” Cay lowered her body to stretch out on the blanket. The gently waving leaves above were hypnotizing her with their movement, allowing Cay’s thoughts to wander. She was at peace for the first time in her life. *Life is good*, she thought.

Emma looked down at the friend and the contented look on her face. “Are you happy here, Cay?” she asked.

“You already know the answer to that, don’t you?” Her eyes fixed on her friend.

“Yes, I do, but every so often, the demons tell me differently.” Emma took her friend’s hand and squeezed it gently. “I’m so happy with you here, I hope you stay forever.” Emma averted her eyes as feelings that she could not explain tried to bubble to the surface. It wasn’t the first time that she felt lightheaded and giddy in the presence of Cay, and since she had no frame of reference for what it meant, she felt vulnerable. *Maybe this will be a good time to tell her what I feel and maybe she can explain it to me*, she thought. She was about to speak when she heard Cay’s voice say the words she had feared would come one day.

“I need to go home for a few days. It’s my mother’s birthday and I said I’d be there.” Cay turned and looked out to the shimmering water that reflected the trees and the clouds, then turned toward Emma. “Will you come with me?”

All warm feelings disappeared as a look of sheer panic tightened Emma’s face when she heard the words: *I need to go home for a few days*. Cay was leaving. The very thought sent ripples of fear coursing through her mind. “You’re leaving?” she asked.

Cay cocked her head in question. “Emma, I asked you to go with me. We’d leave together.”

“Do you mean we’d go away overnight? Oh, Cay, I don’t think I can do that...leave my home for that long.” Her voice was trembling.

Cay sat up abruptly and slammed the ground with her hand before standing up. “Emma Sanders, that is the stupidest thing I think I have ever heard you say! Why on earth couldn’t you leave your home for that long?”

“I’m scared. The only time I ever left here was in an ambulance to the psychiatric hospital,” she said.

Cay firmly grasped her friend’s arm. “Are you the same person who defended her home against a man who broke in intent on killing us? Who coolly and brilliantly did what she had to do to keep us safe? And now you’re afraid to leave your house for two days? Ridiculous! That is absolutely ridiculous!”

Emma laughed as she saw humor written all over her friend’s face. “I’m being kind of silly, aren’t I?”

“Just a little,” Cay said, smiling broadly. “Will you come with me?”

“Yes, I’d love to. Thanks for asking,” she said, her voice still tinged with a hint of apprehension as she sat down in the Adirondack chair.

Cay let out a hearty laugh. “Emma, they’re just people, plain ordinary people...a lot of them, but just people. I think you and my mom will hit it off, and as for my dad, he comes across as kind of rough, but he’s a softy.”

Emma held her hand up. “I know, I know, but you have to understand where I’m coming from. For most of my life, it was just my mother and me. But as you said, I did defend us against Borland, so this should be easy.”

“Atta girl,” Cay said. “Need any help taking the laundry off the line?”

“I can use some help, yes.” She rose from her chair and smiled. “Let’s go.”

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With the rising sun, they headed down the road. Emma’s apprehension grew the farther they traveled from Jones’s Lake.

Cay noticed her friend’s uneasiness, reached over, and patted her hand. “Do you trust me, Emma?”

Emma could only nod; the fear she felt seemed to choke her vocal cords, rendering her mute. The warmth of Cay’s hand on hers made her feel somewhat calmer, but she could still feel her body reacting with panic.

“There’s a small café about twenty miles ahead. We can stop there for coffee and toast.” Cay saw the dread in her friend’s eyes. “I know you’re frightened, but you can trust me to keep you safe.”

Still, the words wouldn’t come. In the last four months, so much had happened to her; yet nothing had prepared her for going out into the world. She saw billboards, street signs, and all the trappings of the outside world from which she had been isolated—and they all terrified her. She didn’t want to tell Cay that she needed to go back home...to safety.

The car pulled up in front of Eddie’s Café and Gift Shop. “Come on, let’s get some coffee and something to eat.” Cay opened her car door, refusing to look into Emma’s eyes. She knew she would see the fear and give in and take her friend home. *It’s time to face the world, my friend*, she thought as she opened Emma’s door. “Trust me, it’ll be all right.” She then held out a hand.

Emma reluctantly took Cay’s hand, got out of the car, and began walking with her friend into the establishment. Her eyes opened wide as they stood in the doorway, and she saw what was inside.

To the right of the entryway, she saw a large room lined with shelves that, unlike Beard’s Store, did not hold groceries. Glassware, china, dolls, cards, books, clothes, and items she didn’t recognize were crammed into the small shelves. In one corner, what seemed like hundreds of balloons rose toward the ceiling. Curiosity overcame her, and she unconsciously gravitated toward the curios on the shelves.

Cay followed close behind, watching as Emma seemed to be seeing the store through a child’s eyes. She tentatively approached an item before reaching out and touching. “Cay,” she said. “Look at this!”

Once Cay was by her side, Emma took her hand and led her all over the store while she stopped, looked, and touched everything. She stopped as her mouth opened in awe. "I've never seen anything like it...how can they make something like this?"

She looked at the black velvet picture of Elvis and Cay tried not to laugh. "I think they make that out of some sort of special paint and glitter, Emma. Sorry I'm not into black velvet."

It really didn't matter what Cay said, for Emma was off investigating a shelf of ceramic outhouse banks. "I had no idea that stuff like this existed," she said.

"There are better shops than this around the lake. I'll show them to you when we get back. What do you say we get something to eat, then be on our way?" Cay turned back and her eyes scanned the gift shop until they rested on a display of fresh flowers.

"Is something wrong, Cay?"

"No, I wanted to make sure they had flowers, so I can buy some for the birthday girl." She lifted her head and breathed in deeply. "Ah, is that coffee I smell?"

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Emma couldn't believe her eyes as they drove down the street Cay's family lived on. Cars parked along one side of the street made it virtually one way, while children darted in and out of the brownstones. Row after row of homes lined the street, with barely visible alleys between them. Small patches of grass, surrounded by wrought iron and separated by walkways, added to the charm of the mostly Irish section of the city. The bustling sights and myriad sounds coming from the city streets were nothing like she had ever imagined. Emma remembered a time long ago and thought...*this is what it felt like when I was a child, on Christmas Day, wanting to take in everything. Amazed by the wonder of it all.*

"I don't know why I was so frightened this morning. That gift store was so wonderful. And did you know that was the first time I have ever eaten out?"

"Yes, Emma, you told me that several times."

"Oh," she said, putting her hand to her mouth. "I'm rambling and boring you. I'm sorry."

Cay stopped the car as a ball rolled into the street. "Do you have any idea how happy it makes me to see you enjoying yourself so much? The answer to your comment, no, you aren't boring me in the least."

After a child ran out to retrieve his ball, Cay started back up. In minutes, her face glowed with a glorious smile. "There it is, Emma, my home," she said with joyful pride.

Emma looked at the house and noticed the only thing that distinguished it from the others was the large 'O' woven into the wrought iron gate. "There aren't any parking spaces. Is there a garage or something?"

“Not to worry, I see there’s one set aside for me.” She stopped her car, put it in neutral, jumped out, and walked toward two worn, woven lawn chairs taking up a parking spot. She folded them and carefully set them against the wrought iron fencing. Cay ran back and hopped into her vehicle before she expertly pulled it into the small area.

Emma was speechless as she watched Cay’s antics. Once Cay parked the car, she turned toward her friend. “Are you ready to meet the family?”

Taking a deep breath, Emma replied, “I guess so. Do I look okay?”

“Come on, get out of the car. You look fine. Remember they’re just people like you and me.”

As they walked up to the gate, Emma saw the statue of the Virgin Mary and the well-kept flowerbeds. “It looks like someone here has a green thumb.”

“My mom takes care of the front, my dad has the back...see, I told you that you would have something in common.” Cay opened the gate, and taking Emma’s hand, they both walked in. The front door opened immediately, causing Emma to step back in fear.

“*A ghrá mo chroí.*” A short round woman with graying hair wearing a dress covered by an apron spoke “*love of my heart*” with a soft Irish brogue.

“Mama, we finally made it. Happy birthday!” Cay said. She presented her mother with the large bouquet of flowers.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Cay’s mother hugged her daughter close. “*A ghrá mo chroí,*” she whispered again. When she released her daughter, she turned toward Emma. “You must be Emma. Come in, come in, and please make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, Mrs. O’Neill, and happy birthday,” Emma said. She felt out of her comfort zone and didn’t know how to react or what to say.

“Annie, child, my name is Annie, you’ll be meetin’ Mrs. O’Neill in a wee bit...just be careful around her, she’ll be tellin’ you all sorts of stories...and most of them are blarney.”

As they walked inside the house, nothing prepared Emma for what came next. What seemed like an army of people moved toward them...all smiling and all talking at once. Emma found herself kissed and hugged by each person who welcomed her. Never in her life had she felt so loved or welcomed. At the same time, a part of her desperately wanted to run and wash all the germs off. *What a strange feeling. The strangest thing of all is I didn’t mind...I welcomed it. This must be what it feels like to have a family.*

She felt the arm of her friend around her shoulders. “Did you meet everyone?” Cay asked. She was happy to be home.

Emma’s eyes were wide. “I think so, but I don’t think I can remember everyone’s name.”

“Don’t worry, you will by the time we leave. Come on, I want you to meet my papa, he’s out back.”

Emma stopped. “May I use the bathroom first?” She held up her hands. “I need to wash them.”

Cay could only smile as she showed her friend the bathroom door. “I’ll be right here waiting when you’re done.”

Annie came up to her daughter and once again wrapped her arms around her. “Your bein’ here makes my birthday perfect. When are you comin’ home to stay?”

Cay pulled her mother in closer, rested her chin on the graying head, and sighed. “Mama, I haven’t finished yet. Remember when you told me we all have a journey?”

“Yes.”

“Well, my journey has led me down a path I need to continue. There is still so much to do. Can you understand? I wish I could find the words, but I’m not sure what they are.”

She touched Cay’s chest over the heart. “*A ghrá mo chroí*, you will know the words by how you feel in here,” she said. “When you feel it there, then you will know.”

The door to the bathroom opened and Emma walked out. Cay looked at the woman, her friend, and smiled as her heart skipped a beat.

Emma saw Cay and her mother and her face brightened to a deep red shade. “Oh, am I interrupting? I’m sorry.”

Annie laughed. “Heavens no, child, we were just sharin’ a bit of love. Now you two run along and see Papa, I know he’s waitin’ for you.”

When they walked through the comfortable home, Emma felt love all around her. Pictures of the family adorned tables and walls everywhere she looked. The home wasn’t immaculate, but it had that lived-in look—and more importantly, happiness was evident. Emma sighed as she began to realize all that she had missed in her life.

“Cay, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Of course not, ask away.”

“Do you and your mother hug often?”

“Yes, always. Why do you ask?”

“I can’t remember my mother ever embracing me or kissing me.”

Cay smiled, knowing the pain her friend must have endured all those years with her mother. “Well, not to worry, my friend, you will get a lifetime’s worth of kisses and hugs here.” Cay leaned in and kissed Emma’s cheek before she hugged the woman close. “There, the first until they all come back and welcome you all over again.” She took Emma’s hand and pulled her along. “Come on, I want you to meet my papa.”

Emma, holding Cay’s hand, went through the warm, friendly kitchen, out onto the sun porch, then down the steps. When she first set eyes on the backyard, she was amazed. *How can this be in the middle of a city?* The flawless yard had the soft green grass that cushions your feet and feels like velvet. Flowerbeds filled with a variety of

fragrant vegetation lined either side of the chain link fence surrounding the area. Trellises stood by the garage, beautiful red roses in full bloom growing on them. By the back of the house was a garden with lettuce and tomatoes growing in abundance.

“Papa,” Cay cried out as she dropped the woman’s hand and hugged her father. “This is my friend, Emma Sanders.”

“Welcome, young lady, I’m glad you could come and celebrate with us today,” he said as he engulfed Emma in a hug.

Her face crimsoned as she stepped away from the man. “Thank you” was all she could manage to say. “Did you grow the roses?”

Sean O’Neill took her by the arm and led her over to the trellises by the garage. “Ah, the Clair Matin roses are my pride and joy,” he said before turning toward his daughter, “along with my dear daughter.”

Emma closed her eyes and breathed in the delightful scents as she gently touched the fragrant roses. “These are beautiful, Mr. O’Neill.”

“I’ll have none of that Mr. O’Neill, young lady, my proper name is Sean.”

She liked the older man, who wasn’t much taller than his daughter, but like her, his body was lean and strong. “Thank you, Sean,” she said. “I see we share the love of flowers.”

“Ah, they are where great happiness and joy fills the world. If only people would take the time to smell the roses and stop what they are doing to see and feel the beauty around them. This is where I find peace.”

“This is where you drink your beer, Papa, who are you tryin’ to fool?” Cay laughed as she wrapped her arms around her father.

“Hey, darlin’, you’ll be givin’ all me secrets away,” he said. He enveloped his daughter in his arms.

Emma watched the interchange between Cay and her father and felt a great sadness as she remembered her father. Then she felt something brush across her cheek and raised her hand to touch it. There was warmth there, as if someone had just touched her, and she suddenly filled with the happiness of knowing her father was with her.



It wasn’t long before Emma found herself gravitating toward the kitchen and Annie O’Neill. “Are you making your own birthday dinner? May I help you?”

“I can always use an extra pair of hands,” she said. “From the looks of you, my Cay must be doing the cooking. You need some meat on those bones.”

Emma blushed. “Have you ever tasted your daughter’s cooking?”

“Why do you think I’m cooking this meal? She doesn’t know how.”

“I know. I do all the cooking. What would you like me to do?”

“Well, you could help by peelin’ the potatoes...it won’t be long before all the daughters-in-law and my sisters and aunts will be crowding in here helping, too,” Annie said. “The cookin’ of the meal becomes a family affair around here.”

True to her word, Annie’s kitchen crowded in with chattering woman all doing a job as if they were filling a longtime role. And true to Cay’s words, everyone greeted her with a hug, a kiss, and a genuine happiness to know her. She marveled at how these wonderful people made her feel as if she belonged there and was now family.

Three hours later, thirty-five people were sitting at various tables around the house filling their stomachs with the scrumptious fare. Cay and Emma sat at the main table with Cay’s parents, assorted aunts and uncles, and Cay’s grandmother. Grandmother O’Neill was quite remarkably fit and spry for someone who was ninety-three years old.

Both Cay’s mother and grandmother made sure Cay sat between them. Emma watched the exchange between the women and felt envious of their relationship. At the same time, her heart filled with sadness for what could have been and for that which was forever lost. Emma listened to the sounds of the people talking around the table and throughout the house, and her mind drifted back to a time when her family would sit together and share an evening meal. For the first time in all the years since the fire, she remembered the last meal she had with them...

*Bob Sanders sat at one end of the table and his father at the other, each flanked by their wives and the children. Emma always sat next to her grandfather, and if she closed her eyes now, she could feel his arm around her as he greeted her. She remembered they had roast beef that night, with potatoes and carrots. Her grandmother had made a cobbler for dessert...Emma had helped her mother pick the peaches from the tree in the orchard. Everyone that night was laughing, as they all were making plans to go to the lake house for a week.*

*Her grandma was speaking. “Bob, we need to get someone out here to look at that cook stove in the kitchen.”*

*“Why? Didn’t we just have the oven control fixed?” her father asked as he looked up from his paper.*

*“Well, something is wrong with it again because when I got up this morning it was on, and I know I turned it off after dinner last night. I’m afraid we’re going to have a fire if we don’t get it taken care of.”*

*“Okay, Ma, I’ll take care of it first thing in the morning,” he said. He tapped his pipe on the ashtray.*

*Emma kissed her father, mother, and grandparents good night, went to bed and fell into a deep sleep until she woke screaming from a nightmare. She felt the loving arms of her mother around her “Shhhh, my sweet, you just had a nasty dream, I promise you everything will be fine when you wake up.” Esther kissed her cheek and turned to leave.*

*“No, Mommy, please don’t leave me,” she cried. “I’m afraid to be alone.”  
Her mother sat beside her. “How about I get you a nice cold glass of milk,  
would you like that?”*

*“Yes,” she said.*

*The next thing she knew her mother was running up the stairs screaming,  
“Bob, Bob, get up! The house is on fire!” Then she ran into Emma’s bedroom,  
scooped her up, and took her outside.*

*“Emma...Emma. Are you okay?”*

*“I remember,” she said. Emma stood up and walked quietly out to the front porch.*

*Cay, along with her mother, saw the dazed look on Emma’s face.*

*“Is she okay?” her mother asked.*

*“I don’t know, Mama, maybe this was too much for her...too many people all at once. I’ll go check on her.”*

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Cay found Emma leaning against the thick white porch railing. “Emma, are you okay?” she asked.

The woman turned her head toward the voice. “I remembered, Cay, I remembered that night.”

“That night with Borland?”

“No,” she said. Tears began to stain her cheeks. “The fire, I remember the fire.”

Cay put her arm around her friend’s shoulders. “Do you want to talk about it or go back home?”

“I remembered my mother saving me and hugging and kissing me. She did love me then, I know that now.”

Cay’s arms remained wrapped around Emma’s shivering body. “Now that you know that, maybe you can begin to forgive and look at how your mother saw life after the fire.”

Cay’s words swirled around Emma’s mind, and she saw the truth in them. She had always wondered why her mother hated her so...because she was looking from her perspective, never her mother’s. “You’re right, it must have been very difficult for her to lose so much...I guess I wasn’t enough to fill the void in her heart.”

“She loved you in her own way. Did you ever think maybe she was afraid to show that love?”

“Perhaps.” She smiled. “I want to stay. I’m enjoying myself. I’m sorry if I embarrassed you when I left.”

“You didn’t. Why don’t you stay out here for a bit longer, and I’ll come and get you when the real party starts.”

“The real party? I don’t understand.”

“You’ll see.” Cay hugged Emma close and held her for several moments before going back inside.

For a long time, Emma stood motionless, still feeling the warmth that Cay’s hug had created. She trembled at the way her body reacted to the contact. It was pleasurable, and once the woman had left, she felt empty. *What does it mean?* She shrugged and smiled. *Whatever it is, I like it.*

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As she sat back down, Cay’s mother asked, “Is your friend all right?”

A bright smile filled her daughter’s face. “She is more than all right...she has found her way at last.”

Annie, puzzled by the remark, asked, “Is this the path you were speakin’ of earlier?”

“Partly, Mama, I feel it’s all connected in some way.” She stared at her water glass for a moment. “I hear the music starting. It’s party time! Come on, Mama, you want to dance a jig with me?”

The night proved to be a raucous event with dancing, singing, and lots of drinking. Cay’s Uncle Patty came up to Emma and took her hand. “Come on, young lady, my name is on your card.”

“But I don’t know how to dance.”

“Ah, but I do, *muirín*,” he said. He called her *sweetheart* before laughing as he led her out to the middle of the living room and began twirling her around the floor.

Emma was having a fantastic time joining in on the laughing and singing with Cay’s family. Taking a breather, she sat down next to Cay and her mother. “Thank you,” she said. “I’ve never had such a good time.” Her bright smile confirmed her words.

“Mama, can you believe that this woman, just four months ago, was afraid of people and would only leave her house to food shop and go to church? Now look at her, a real party animal.” Cay laughed as a puzzled look came across Emma’s face.

“A party animal?”

“Don’t worry, Emma, it means you’re having fun.” Cay took the opportunity to drape her arm around the woman’s shoulders. She closed her eyes momentarily as pleasant feelings coursed through her body.

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For Cay and Emma, the habit of getting up early hadn’t changed just because of a late night. Emma awoke first and made her way to the kitchen to set a kettle on to boil. She sat at the table and yawned before she closed her eyes. She hadn’t heard any movement in the house and considered going back to bed until the door opened to reveal a very glassy-eyed Cay.

“Looks as if you could use a strong cup of coffee or maybe a few more hours of sleep.” Emma couldn’t help laugh at the hungover appearance of her friend.

“Emma, do you have to be so cheery and speak so loudly?” Cay slumped down into a chair and buried her head in her hands. “I can’t believe how much I drank last night. My head is spinning, and my mouth tastes like old socks.”

“Old socks? Cay, what do old socks taste like?”

Watery blue eyes rolled up in disbelief. “It was a metaphor, I don’t know what old socks taste like, probably like stagnant water smells.” Cay got up, headed for a cupboard, and opened the door. “I know there’s aspirin here somewhere.”

A hand rested on her shoulder. “Why don’t you go sit down while I bring you the aspirin, then make you something to eat?” Emma’s voice was soft and soothing.

Cay turned around and tried to smile. “Thanks, that sounds good, but coffee is all I want. I don’t think my stomach is ready for food just yet.” Then she opened her eyes wide. “Damn, I was going to make breakfast for everyone...at least that’s what I remember saying before going to bed.”

“You’re going to cook, or were you planning on dry cereal for breakfast?”

Cay realized how silly she sounded and laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with dry cereal.” She saw the look on her friend’s face and shook her head. “Guess I was overzealous with the pronouncement of making breakfast.”

“Only a little bit, but I will come to your rescue.”

“Just as you did that day I came out of the water,” Cay said. Perhaps it was the whiskey talking or the fact that she finally realized the truth, but the realization was clear. “You saved my life, Emma.”

“As you did mine.” Emma placed a cup of coffee, a glass of water, and two aspirins in front of Cay.

## Chapter Twenty-two

The drive back to the lake was warm and pleasant, and two hours into the journey, Cay pulled the convertible into the parking lot of a diner. “Let’s stop here and get some coffee, I feel like I need a wake up,” she said with a yawn. Even though they stayed a day longer for her to recover from her excesses, Cay was still feeling the effects. At least that is what she told Emma, but she had an ulterior motive, which she wasn’t sure was a good idea now.

Emma smiled at her friend. “You know, I think I will learn how to drive, then when you get tired, I can take over. Will you teach me?”

“Sure will. Let’s go, I can hear the coffee calling my name.”

Once inside seated and their order placed, Emma sighed. “I had the best time at the party, thank you for inviting me. I had no idea...” she stopped in mid-sentence as sadness crossed her face. “I’ve missed out on so much.”

Cay smiled fondly at her friend. “That just means you have so much more to look forward to.”

“You’re right. I hadn’t thought of it that way.” She unconsciously dunked her teabag in and out of the steaming water. “I can’t wait for us to get home. There is so much I want to do...so much I want to change.”

Cay brought the steaming cup of dark brew up to her lips and cautiously took a sip. “I spoke with Uncle Patty, and he said that Reigns is in the farthest eastern corner of the state and not to worry, he won’t be bothering us again. So that chapter is over and done with.” Her eyes were on Emma, who had begun to bloom just like one of the flowers in her garden. She would never fully realize her life without crossing one more hurdle. “Emma, I lied to you about needing coffee...well, I do need it, thanks to my night of overindulgence,” she said. “Ten miles down the road is the convent and school where Claire lives.”

Terror gripped at Emma’s heart as she felt acutely ill and in need of fresh air. “No, it’s not time yet. I’m not ready.”

“Emma, it is time. You’ve lost seventeen years of her life, and it’s time to reclaim what is yours.”

“But what if she doesn’t want to see me or she hates me for leaving her there so long? I just couldn’t take the rejection, Cay, it would kill me!”

“I have spoken with Sister Angelina, and she tells me she is aware of the situation and holds no animosity toward you.”

“How dare you speak to her without my permission? I can’t believe you did that behind my back,” Emma said. She stood up, glared at Cay, and headed for the door.

“Shit!” Cay hastily left money on the table as she charged after her friend, not caring that all eyes in the diner were on the two of them.

“Emma, Emma, wait up! What are you going to do? Walk back home?”

“I did it before you came along, I can do it again!” she screamed.

When Cay caught up to her friend, Cay grasped her arm. “Will you please stop?”

Emma twirled around and slapped Cay’s face. Her eyes widened once she realized what she had done. “Oh, Cay, I’m so sorry.”

Cay’s hand went instantly to her stinging cheek as she stood there in wonder and surprise. “It’s time to stop running away, Emma. Your child needs a mother, she needs you.”

“I can’t.”

“You spent all those years in institutions only to come home to a mother who seemingly cared nothing for you. Now your child, through no fault of her own, sits in an institution waiting for her mother. It’s your choice. Does she stay there and think you hate her, or do you go and show her all the love you never had? It’s your choice, Emma, your choice.” She turned and walked away.

Emma stood there listening, as the words stung her with their truth. Claire’s life was exactly like her own—abandoned and institutionalized. Unlike herself, the child’s exposure to others was in love, not in needles, beatings, and ridicule. When she thought about how she had longed to go home, had longed for her mother and the sanity outside the hospital, she felt ashamed. “Cay, wait up,” she said.

After Emma opened the door and sat down, she looked at Cay. “Will you stay with me when I meet her?”

“Until you feel comfortable, I will.” Cay then started the car and headed toward her friend’s destiny.

The sister waited anxiously for Claire Sanders’s mother to arrive. The woman who called her said that she would arrive that afternoon with the child’s mother in tow. Sister Angelina hadn’t advised Claire of her arrival just in case the mother didn’t materialize. Her thoughts turned to some eighteen years earlier when Esther Sanders came to her with a tale of her daughter’s rape.

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*Emma approached her mother tentatively, fearing what would happen once she told her the news. She had tried to deny what was happening, but now there was no way to deny the facts. She was pregnant, and that horrible Eric Borland was the father.*

*“Mother, I have something to tell you,” she started, only to stop when she saw the glare from her mother’s empty eyes.*

*“Well, speak up, or have you gone dumb along with stupid?”*

*Emma was terrified, but she had to tell her mother and time was running out. Finally, she blurted it out, “I’m pregnant!”*

*Esther just stared at her daughter. She placed her hands on the large wheels of her wheelchair and turned around, leaving Emma standing there alone.*

*She was preparing dinner when she heard her mother return. She held her breath as the chair inched ever so close, and she saw the determination in her mother's once-vacant eyes.*

*"You'll stay here until it's time for the birth. It's winter, so if you wear baggy clothes, you should be able to hide your condition when we go to the store and church. I'll make arrangements for one of the nuns from the convent to deliver the child, then it will be put up for adoption."*

*Emma began to cry. "Mama, don't make me give my baby away, please, I promise I'll be very good, and when the baby comes, I'll take care of it and it'll never cry or bother you. I promise...please, I'm begging you."*

*"There's no discussion, Emma! This is how it'll be...we will not speak of it again."*

*True to her word, Esther let the nun, Sister Angelina take the baby girl without letting Emma know anything, not even the gender of her child.*

Sister Angelina was startled out of her musing when she heard the sound of the bell announcing visitors. Sister Angelina hugged Emma. "We were hoping you would come. Come with me. She'll be so happy to see you. You have a lovely daughter whom you will be proud of, Emma."

The sister knocked softly on a door, then spoke quietly to the teacher. Soon, a nervous-looking girl came out of the room. "Claire, your mother came to visit."

The dark-haired girl with ivory skin and green eyes looked shyly at the two women. It was obvious to Claire that the shorter of the two with blond hair wasn't her mother...no, it was the tall one, she was sure of that. She awkwardly held out her hand to Emma.

Emma could feel her heart racing as she fought the need to run and hide. The teenage girl in front of her was like looking in a mirror at herself all those years ago. Her mother's words screamed in her mind. *No one will ever love you because you're worthless. If you let people in, they will hurt you, you can't trust anyone but me.* Then she remembered the wonderful time she had with the O'Neills and what it was like to be around a loving family. *That's what Claire deserves, and that's what she'll get.*

With tears flowing down her cheeks, Emma tentatively reached out for her daughter's hand. As she touched and felt the warm flesh against hers, she was overwhelmed with feelings of love and tenderness. She then engulfed her child in a hug that told each of them they would never be alone again.

As Sister Angelina and Cay observed the heart-warming scene, they also had tears of happiness.

"Come with me," Sister Angelina said as she led them to a small room used for contemplation and prayer. "You won't be bothered here."

As the sister turned to leave, Cay patted Emma's shoulder. "I'll be close by."

The prayer room was small, and the space available made it impossible for the two women not to touch, but somehow, Claire and Emma found a way. Emma held out her hand and asked, "Will you sit with me?"

Claire slowly inched her way to the chair next to the woman who said she was her mother. When Emma gently took her hand, she was surprised.

Emma was amazed by the girl sitting next to her. *My daughter*, she thought, as mixed feelings of love and trepidation battled in her heart and mind. "I don't remember much about my grandmother on my mother's side, but I do remember her green eyes. You have her eyes and my coloring and dark hair." Emma shook her head. "There's no denying that you are my daughter. I'm so sorry it has taken seventeen years to find you."

For Claire, there was a world of questions that needed answering before she could ever call Emma her mother. The only thing she could think to say came rolling off her tongue, "Why?" before tears began to fall once again.

That one word stabbed Emma in the heart, for it was the same one she would say in the hospitals every time her mother had her committed. This girl, her baby, deserved an answer and wouldn't have to wait a lifetime for an answer that would never come. Emma took a deep breath before she began. "When I was five years old, my life changed forever..."

Claire listened to the woman's life story and wondered how anyone would allow such atrocities to happen. Part of her felt sorry for Emma, but mainly, she felt anger. How could her mother allow the situation to get so out of control that her daughter would be lost to her? "Why didn't you fight for me and demand to keep me? Surely, your mother would have listened."

Emma thought long and hard before she answered. "Just as I was a victim of both the fire and my mother, I think my mother suffered also. The mother I knew before the fire was warm and loving, not the monster she grew to be." Looking at the crucifix for answers, Emma nodded. "I know now that she was, in her own way, protecting both of us."

Claire was confused. "But you let her give me away."

"Yes, I did. At the time, I didn't think I had a choice, but I was wrong. There is always a choice if you are strong enough to make it. I was weak and afraid." Emma bowed her head in shame. "It wasn't until I met Cay that I realized all that I let pass me by because of my fear."

"Cay is the woman you're with?"

"Yes, she's my friend. She came into my life and helped me learn to trust...to love. It's because of her that I had the courage to come here today."

"Otherwise you wouldn't have bothered?" The hurt was evident in Claire's voice.

Emma reached out for Claire's hand. "You have to understand what my life was like before Cay." She searched her daughter's face in hope of finding understanding. When she found none, she continued. "I was lost in a land of fear and

doubt, unable to move forward or back. My mother had died, and I was waiting for the same fate...I had nothing in my life to live for. When I found the papers and pictures in my mother's drawer after her death, I realized I had you, but I didn't know how I would approach you, or if I could.

"That's when Cay came into my life, and eventually, I realized I had the strength to go forward and live." Claire's eyes were watering as she listened to her mother speak. "It won't be easy, Claire, but I would like to get to know you and you me. Do you think that's possible?"

By that time, tears were streaming down the young girl's face. "That's all I have ever wanted...to live in a home with my family." Claire then reached over and put her arms around the woman. "I've waited so long."

Emma returned the hug as tears filled her eyes also. "So have I, my love, so have I."

Two hours later, mother and daughter emerged from the room clinging to each other. For now, it was a start on the road to learning, healing, and hopefully to being a family. Emma knew that when they were back at the lake and Claire settled in, they would get to know each other better.

Cay followed along behind the mother and daughter as they went to Claire's room to collect her possessions. Once in the room, she approached her friend. "Looks like everything is working out," she said before hugging Emma.

"Oh, Cay, it is so much better than my wildest dreams ever could be. I can remember pretending that I somehow found my lost child and how wonderful it was, but this," she motioned to Claire, "the reality of it all...I never imagined such happiness could exist."

While packing her meager belongings, Claire kept an eye on Emma, making sure she didn't disappear. She reached under her pillow and pulled out a photo. "I've kept this under my pillow, so you would always be close," she said. She handed a worn picture to Emma.

"Where did you get this?"

"Once, a long time ago, my grandmother visited me and gave it to me. She told me you loved me very much and someday would come to get me. When I asked why I couldn't go now, she told me it wasn't the right time, it wasn't safe." She flopped down on her bed. "I never comprehended what she meant, and still really don't, but I think that it doesn't matter anymore. She seemed like a very nice lady and spoke about you with love in her voice, so I really don't understand what you told me about her."

Emma began to shake. *She was here; she saw Claire and gave her a picture of me. I don't understand. What wasn't safe or why? Was I not safe or was she protecting us from Borland?* She felt the warm, comforting arm of Cay's arm around her shoulders

“Let the past go, Emma. Rejoice in having your daughter in your life. Let it go, she has.”

Emma turned toward her friend, smiled, and nodded. “You’re right.” She walked over to her daughter and picked up her suitcase. “Claire, since you’re all packed, shall we go home?”

The warmth of that moment filled the room as Emma put her arm around her daughter and kissed her gently on the cheek.

Claire beamed. “Yes, let’s go home. Home is such a wonderful word, I have dreamt of it all my life.”

## Chapter Twenty-three

As the days and months passed, Cay grew restless to find her own place in the world. She watched Emma and Claire form a strong bond of love and mutual respect and was pleased her friend's life was now joyous as she doted on her daughter.

Of course, there were rocky days when Cay was sure the two would never speak to each other again, but those did not last too long. It was clear Emma was out of her element when Claire blew up ranting and raving. She assumed that since Claire lived with nuns she would be quiet and mellow; however, she could be a holy terror once she set her mind to it. It was soon evident that Emma, too, proved to be quite strong in her opinions and wasted no words when voicing them. Both were feeling their way in this new and wonderful relationship they were forming. Neither was sure of what to do or say but forged ahead on instinct alone. From Cay's viewpoint, they went exactly in the right direction.

Emma was true to her word as things around the Sanders's home and their lives began to change drastically. Together, mother and daughter came up with ideas and redid the interior of the house with new furniture and brighter walls. For Emma, it was a struggle to let go of the old furniture and the memories they held.

Cay stood next to her friend as tears rolled down her face. "How can I part with all of this?" she said, motioning to the furniture in her front room. "It's all I have left of my family."

"Emma, your parents and brothers are all in your heart, these are just things from the past."

"I know, but this chair, my favorite one, was where my father would always sit...I just can't give that away...I just can't."

"Why don't you pick out the pieces that mean the most to you, and we can find a way to blend them in with the new?" Cay said.

"That would work," Emma said. "What will we do with the rest of it?"

"How about we store it in the barn for the time being, then you can make a decision later?"

"Good idea, you always have a solution. What would I ever do without you?" she said and smiled. "Guess what? Now that Claire and I both have our driver's licenses, I think it's time for me to buy a car. Will you take us to the dealership? We know just what we want."

The first time Emma got behind the wheel of her new Lincoln Navigator, Cay looked around the vehicle. "Emma," she asked, "isn't this vehicle overkill?"

Emma only laughed and said, "Nope, this way, I can see who's doing what in their cars."

Even more alarming for Cay was riding with Claire. The girl knew no danger as she maneuvered the oversized truck along the narrow, winding roadways. With them both, Cay would press the brake pedal constantly, and on several occasions,

genuinely feared for her life. Despite the lack of driving skills, Emma and Claire would confidently charge down the road, happy to be together.

From her observations, Cay discovered Claire to be a delightful person who seemed to blend flawlessly into the fabric of life on the lake. As much as Emma was a neat freak, Claire turned out to be a constant source of irritation. Clothes, towels, books, and dishes were all over the house, much to Emma's chagrin. What fascinated Cay the most was, although Emma protested, she would pick everything up with delight.

The evening would find Emma and Cay sitting on the porch talking about the events of the days and future plans. On one Indian summer evening, both women stood on the porch as they waved goodbye to Claire as she left with friends to go to a movie.

"There goes our girl." Cay wrapped her arm around Emma's shoulder and smiled when she rested her head there. "Don't worry, she'll be just fine."

"Hmm." Emma felt safe and knew Cay was the reason for those feelings. What she hadn't bargained for was the way the arm around her made her feel. "I like how this makes me feel," she whispered.

"What makes you feel?"

"You holding me close."

Cay felt her back stiffen instinctively. She had tried to suppress the growing feelings of intimacy she felt toward Emma and now apparently the woman was feeling the same way, and that scared her. *I'm not ready for a relationship with anyone.* Thoughts of past lovers and failed relationships whirled in her mind. *Emma deserves better than I can give her.* She turned her head and breathed in the fresh clean smell as she softly kissed Emma's hair. *With Emma is where I want to be, but it's impossible to act on those feelings. That would send her scurrying for the nearest baseball bat.*

Emma had felt the change and posture. "You okay?" Emma asked. She turned her head slightly to see Cay's face—it was clearly troubled.

"Yeah, I'm good. I was just thinking about how everything has come together for you. I'm truly happy for you and Claire."

Satisfied with the answer, Emma sank deeper into Cay's shoulder. "Hmm, it would never have happened without you." She looked up at Cay and saw sadness there. "You have given me so much." She felt her body trembling with overwhelming feelings that all centered around Cay. "For the last few months, I've been ignoring you, I'm sorry."

"You haven't been ignoring me, Emma. You've been getting to know Claire. All is as it should be." Her gaze turned out toward the water as she tried to mask her true feelings. "I need to be moving on."

Emma grabbed her chest as if an arrow had pierced her heart. "No, please, no."

"I need to find my own direction."

“Can’t you do that here?” Her heart was breaking as she wrapped her arm around Cay’s waist willing her to stay. “You belong here.”

Cay turned and felt empty when she was no longer in Emma’s embrace. She gently stroked the woman’s face and brushed away an errant tear. “Emma, I must go, but we will always be friends, and I will always be here for you. Remember, you just need to press the five.”

“But I need you here,” she said. “I can’t lose you.”

“Not anymore. You’ve found your way. Everything in life happens for a reason. Sometimes we don’t know the whys, but if we wait long enough, we’ll understand. My world crashed around me, and I went to work for Borland, so I could come into your life. Together, we formed a friendship, and out of that, you have your life back. Claire is in your life because of Jack Salmon’s greed and how he set me up...don’t you see, it’s all connected...we are all connected. We each have a journey in life and as our paths cross, we change the course, but not the journey. This has been my change in the path, but I still must follow where I am to go.”

Emma listened intently. Although she didn’t like what she heard, she did understand what Cay was saying. “I understand. Of course, who’s to say that your path won’t bring you right back here where you belong? Our paths will cross again and again, there is no doubt in my mind. You’ll be back one day, Cay O’Neill, I’m counting on it.” *I’ll wait for Cay’s return, it won’t take long*, she thought before she put her arm around Cay’s waist once more.

## Chapter Twenty-four

The day was dull and gray much like the faces on the two women who loaded Cay's old, tired VW. Emma brushed a tear away as she looked at her friend who had just emerged from the house with an armload of her belongings. "Are you sure you have to go?"

Cay avoided eye contact as she shoved a plastic bag into the front trunk. "We've been over this, Emma." She slammed it shut and sucked in a deep breath before turning around. What she hadn't bargained for was Emma standing next to the car. The thumping of Cay's heart had her stepping backward. "I need to do this, I thought you understood."

Emma countered Cay's move and stepped closer. "I do," she said. She impulsively flung her arms around Cay. "Please don't go."

*Damn.* Cay melted into the hug and wrapped her arms around Emma's waist. *I don't want to leave. I want to stay here in your arms. What would you say if I told you that?* "I gotta go get the rest of my stuff." She let go and took an elongated step back.

Tears glistened in Emma's eyes as she watched Cay go back into the house. She followed her as far as the kitchen where she picked up a brown paper bag and returned outside.

Emma stood by the car as Cay stuffed the last of her baggage into the backseat. "I wish you could stay longer," Emma whispered. She held out a brown paper bag she had been clutching tightly. "Here, this is for your drive home."

Cay reached for the bag. "What's this?"

"I made you some of those black walnut oatmeal cookies you like so much."

The fond smile of love was unmistakable. "Emma, you worked so hard shelling the walnuts. I thought you were going to save them for something special." She laughed as she remembered how very black Emma's hands were while she labored extracting the nut's meat from the hard black covering.

"This is special...they're your favorite...and you're special to me."

Cay took the bag and opened it, breathing in the delicious aroma. "Thank you. You are way too good to me."

"Because you are to me." Her eyes drifted to the darkening sky. "Looks like you might get rained on." A smile curled around her lips. "You could always stay until the rain passes."

Cay shook her head. "Emma..."

She shrugged, holding back her deep sadness. "I know, but you can't blame a girl for trying." Emma reached out and touched a lone tear that had escaped from Cay's eye. "Drive safely, and let me know when you get there."

Cay engulfed her friend in a hug. "Of course I will." Her heart broke as she felt tears wet her shirt. "Hey, none of that, I'll be back...you can't get rid of me that easily." With forced happiness, she pulled away to look squarely into Emma's face.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Just then Claire came outside. “You didn’t think you would leave without waking me, did you?” the young girl asked.

“Nope, I was just on my way in to do that.” She then surrounded the girl in a hug. “Take care of your mom for me. Okay? And don’t give her too much grief about her driving—you don’t have too much room to talk.”

Claire lurched back and gently punched Cay in the shoulder. “Hey, I’m a great driver! You taught me.”

They both began to laugh before hugging once again. Cay sighed. “Guess I better get going. Remember, you’re both coming to my folks’ for Thanksgiving.” She opened the car door and slid in behind the steering wheel.

Emma, who was standing by the door, reached in and touched Cay’s shoulder. She was desperately trying to hold back the tears. The last memory she wanted Cay to have of her wasn’t of a blubbering idiot. “I’ll miss you.” She leaned in and kissed Cay. “I love you,” she said.

Cay knew if she looked into Emma’s eyes she would not leave, so she patted the hand resting on her shoulder. “Gotta go.” She twisted the ignition key, and the engine began its familiar whir and the gears protested as Cay shifted into first. “I love you, too,” she said loud enough for Emma to hear before starting down the driveway.

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The small green car sped down the highway carrying Cay O’Neill away from the lake. A slideshow of the last six months flashed through her mind. She could see the beautiful lake with mist rising from the placid surface. Jones’s Landing, along with Hannah and Zachariah Beard, burst vividly into her mind’s eye. Then there seemed to be a long pause as the faces of Claire and Emma Sanders lingered. “Emma, wonderful Emma, my first real friend...my first real love.” A smile of regret curved around the corners of her mouth. In an attempt to drive the memories from her mind, she turned the radio volume up as loud as it would go.

It was proving more difficult than Cay ever imagined to leave Emma and Claire behind. She looked at the analog clock on the dashboard and knew Emma would be standing in the driveway waving goodbye to Claire as she sped off to her job at the Beard’s store. *Emma will be alone.* The thought seemed to reverberate around her small vehicle. The tires screeched as the car came to a halt on the dirt and grass shoulder. “What the hell am I doing? I love Emma, I want to be with her—why am I leaving?” She turned the wheel and made a wide U-turn.

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Emma wiped away her tears as she heard the familiar sound. “Cay!” She hurried to the door and flung it open. “You’re back!” she screamed as she ran to Cay.

Cay was speechless. All she could do was hold the woman that she loved tightly. “I got about twenty miles down the road and realized this is where I belong.”

“This is your home, this is where you belong.” Emma’s heart was racing. All the feelings she had experienced and wondered what they meant were now perfectly clear. “I love you, Cay.”

Emma’s words were soft yet full of passion, and Cay swallowed hard. She closed her eyes as she let her body melt into Emma’s warm, loving arms. “I love you, too, Emma.” She let go of Emma and took a step back as her blue eyes searched Emma’s before she leaned in and kissed her lips. In that moment, each woman realized her journey was over at last and the revelation that which was once dark was now full of light.

## About the Author

Erin O'Reilly

Erin resides in the Texas Hill Country on Lake LBJ. When not writing, Erin enjoys fishing, bird watching, and gardening. Her story creation has always involved strong characters that always seem to want to dictate the story and invade her mind at all hours.



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