

*Sneak peek: Chapters 4-6 from OF DREAMS AND DRAGONS by  
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## Chapter 4

### A SLAB OF GREY

—SKY—

I wait by the window, watching my breath fog the glass. My palms are slick with sweat. My chest is heavy. Every second, I imagine the man with the cane walking back down the street, returning before the police arrive. Every second, I imagine what I may have to do to protect my family. I think of Pat's gun again. I don't want to use it. But I will if I must.

A minute goes by. Another. And after what feels like forever, a police car pulls up by the sidewalk. I recognize the officer who gets out. Dean Lancaster, a tall blond with a guy next door look. We met before—on the job. The fire department was called in to offer back up on a car accident with suspected fatalities. It involved a messy body extraction and the jaws of life. He was on duty at the time, and we all went out for drinks after our shifts ended. One thing led to another, and there was kissing involved, but it never went further than that. My choice. Not his. And I've been trying to walk the line of friends with him ever since.

He's been trying to erase that line all together.

When he walks up to the porch, I open the door and invite him in. We sit on the couch as I explain all that's happened.

"Can you describe him again?" asks Dean, putting a hand on my knee.

I stand up, slipping away from his unwanted advance, and go through the very detailed description I already gave. Tall—at least 6'2", graying short beard and hair, cold gray eyes. I describe Mr. Pike's face in exacting detail, down to

the mole on the lower right corner of his jaw, and everything he was wearing, down to the tri-colored wood of his walking staff.

Dean frowns. "That's not much to go on. It could be almost anyone. But we'll do what we can."

"What do you mean? I gave you so many details a sketch artist should have no trouble capturing his likeness."

He pats my leg and stands. "I just... I just don't see how this will be enough."

I stand to face him, and notice there's something about Dean's eyes, about his expression, that makes me think of how my fingers slipped off my phone. Something's not right.

"Look," he says, "I'll come by again tonight to check on you. Maybe we can get some coffee or a late dinner, talk more about this."

His words barely register. My mind is on one thing and one thing only. Protecting my kids. "You need to find him," I say. "And until you do, we need protection."

Dean rubs his stubbled chin, then nods. "We'll leave a patrol outside the house. Let me know if you learn anything more about this Mr. Pike."

I sigh and nod. "I will." Though I doubt it will help. Whatever voodoo this man works, it's good at protecting him.

"You need to find Pat," Dean says. "Ask him about this. I'll check around town too." He glances at my head, the bandage there, and his voice turns soft. "You know, if... if you file a report—"

"This wasn't him," I say, covering my cut self-consciously. "I fell down the stairs carrying laundry. It looks worse than it is." A lie. Always a lie. But if it's a lie you've told yourself so many times you've started to believe it, does it still count as a lie?

"Right. Well, if you remember that happening differently, give me a call." Dean grins, his tone shifting. "So... what do you say to that dinner?"

His words pull me away from the things that matter. I meet his gaze, my face

serious. "Dean. I'm not interested. I told you so before, and I'm telling you again. Back off."

His jaw stiffens. "Look, Sky, things will go a lot more smoothly if you just... co-operate. Remember, this investigation can go easily, or —"

"Or I call your boss, Nick, and let him know your impeding this investigation and sexually harassing a victim. I suppose it could go that way, if you'd like." I raise an eyebrow.

He frowns, then turns sharply and heads to the door just as Blake runs in.

"What happened? What's going on?" he asks, pushing the black hair out of his eyes and glaring at Dean.

"I'll let you two talk," says Dean. He checks his watch, then leaves the house, closing the door behind him.

Blake turns to me. "What's going on? Why was he here?"

I push thoughts of Dean away and explain everything that happened for the second time tonight. When I reach the part where I described Mr. Pike to Dean, I sigh in exasperation. "Can you believe he thought my description wasn't good enough?"

Blake's eyes glaze over a bit and he frowns. "Well, to be honest... he's right. That's not much to go on."

I flinch. "What'd you say?"

"Hmm? Oh, I know you don't want to hear this, but I agree. That's not much to go on."

*That's not much to go on.*

Dean used the same words. The *exact* same words.

"Wait," I say, my whole body shaking with stress. "What did you hear, exactly? How did you hear me describe Pike?"

He shrugs. "Average height. Average build. Like I said, that's not much to go on."

I remember my phone. The way my fingers slipped off.

“But don’t worry,” says Blake. “We’ll find him. Nothing like this will happen again.”

For the first time in a long time, I don’t believe my best friend.

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Despite my best efforts to describe Pike, Blake doesn’t hear what I want. When I tell him this, he just shrugs. “I’ll grab some coffee,” he says. “Something tells me, we’re both gonna need it today.”

He runs to Black Oak Coffee Roasters—a locally owned coffee house with the best lattes in town and great latte art—and when he returns, we spend an hour digging a hole in the backyard in which to burry Marshmallow. We wake the kids and get them breakfast before breaking the news to them, and through tears and sorrow, we have a mini funeral for the faithful Marshmallow. He got hit by a car, we say. It is a small lie, but a big kindness.

Then I manufacture a fake smile and go about making the day as normal as possible for the littles: Launches packed. Backpacks ready. Hugs and kisses exchanged. And after the kids are all dropped off at school and daycare—with warnings to the offices that the kids need to be watched extra carefully and not leave with anyone not on the list—I make a quick stop at Home Depot and head back home. With a fresh pot of coffee brewing—nothing as good as Black Oak but it’ll have to do—I get to work changing all the locks in the house and making sure the windows are secure. I’d love to get an alarm system put in, but that’s not happening right now, so I make do the best I can. Satisfied that neither Pat nor Mr. Pike can just waltz back in here, I lock up the house and climb back into

my car, sagging against the steering wheel as I try to keep my wits about me.

Before I try starting the engine, I pull out my phone and call Pat, knowing he would have been passed out somewhere earlier. The call goes to voicemail and I leave a stern message. He needs to call me back now. We have something to discuss. Then, I drive.

It doesn't take me long to reach my destination, and a light trickle of rain splashes against my face as I walk through the expanse of grass with gray granite slabs marking the end of a life every few feet. With head bent, eyes to the ground and my coat pulled tightly around me, I make my way to the one grave I care about in a sea of them.

The rain obscures my tears as I kneel in the grass and rub a hand over the headstone I came for. Laura Knightly. Beloved wife and mother. She died too young, leaving behind too many who needed her. I lay a flower next to her name and speak in a hushed voice, though I see no one around me.

"I miss you, Mum. Things were different when you were here." And they truly were, because Laura Knightly was a good mother. She protected us all from Pat's wrath and alcoholism as best she could. I don't know why she never left him. Maybe her religious beliefs prevailed. Maybe she, like me, worried what would happen to the kids if she did. Maybe she was charmed by his good days, because he did have them. Days when he taught me how to shoot his gun. Days when we would work on repairs around the house or put together cheap furniture. But the day she died changed everything.

We lost a mother. Pat lost his wife. And then he lost himself completely in drink and anger. There were no more good days. And he blamed me.

He blamed me for stealing her attention from him when she was alive, and he blamed me for her death, though it was complications from birthing Kara that ended her life. But then, he blames me for everything wrong in his life. I am his scapegoat, whether it's poor weather or stock market changes, I'm responsible.

It's been nearly two years since my mother passed away. Since then I've made it a habit of coming here once a week, and though on hard days like this I'm tempted to forgo the ritual altogether, in truth, it's on hard days like this that I need to visit the most. Because I find a kind of peace here, even if only for a while.

"Is today the day, mum?"

Like always there is no response, and like always I am left wondering. "What did you mean that day?" I ask again, remembering the day Kyle and I played outside many years ago, how he ran out onto the road without a care, how a car came speeding, me too far away to do anything, and then how in an instant I was across the street, holding Kyle in my arms, safe. My mother found us only moments later, and through tears she said some things I barely remember. But what she said last, I remember still. "One day, little feather, your true self will be revealed, and even though those closest to you will turn against you, you must promise me something. Promise me, that when that day comes, you will remember what's in your heart. Promise me, you will never forget who you are."

I asked her what she meant, but she said no more. And now every day I wonder, is today the day?

Is Pike's arrival simply the precursor to something more? Something my mother tried to warn me about?

I don't know, and I don't bother worrying more. I swore to my mother I

would take care of the littles. Keep them safe. Make sure they had a chance at a good life, and that is what I intend to do. First, I need to find that bastard, Pat, and force him to tell me what evil deal he's made. Then, I make him pay up, no matter the cost.

The smell of rain and freshly cut grass invigorates me, and I stand, ignoring the tickling numbness in my legs as my blood gets moving again. I clutch my jacket around my chest and walk back through the cemetery, the rain fizzling into barely a drizzle. It takes several moments before I realize I'm no longer alone. A man sits nearby, leaning over a grave, a silver flask clutched in his hand that he takes long swigs of. His coat is black and long and whips in the wind, revealing pants and a shirt that are just as dark. Even his short hair is raven black. The only bit of color he wears is a blood red scarf... a streak of fire in the windy rain.

"Those we love don't go away; they walk beside us every day," a deep voice says, startling me. It's the man with the scarf, but I can't tell if he's speaking to me or to the grave. His voice is resonant, and his accent sounds British. "Unseen, unheard, but always near. Still loved, still missed, and very dear."

My eyes mist as I pause to look at him. "That's... that's beautiful. Who said it?"

He shrugs. "Not sure," he says, still facing away from me. "I saw it on Etsy once."

I can't help but smile at his unexpected answer, and it feels good. It's the first real smile I've had in a while, so unlike the fake ones I put on for the kids and Blake.

"Thank you," I say to the back of the man's head.

"For what?" He stands and turns towards me, his piercing blue eyes taking me in with one look.

"For reminding me there are still things to smile about," I say.

He tilts his head towards the graves we are surrounded by. "Lose someone recently?"

"No... not recently. But I don't think time makes as much of a difference as people say."

He nods, his face flickering with a glimpse of his own grief so fast I almost think I imagine it. "I don't suppose it does," he says. "For what is time, but a measure of things that have already happened or have not happened yet? What is time, but a measure of nothing."

"Another Etsy quote?" I ask, trying to lighten my voice, but failing.

"Actually, I made that one up."

A smile plays at my lips. "A philosopher, are you?"

"More a collector of philosophy, and purveyor of fine ideas." He winks at me, and I grin.

"Is that a lucrative career? High demand?" I tease.

He chuckles and reaches to shake my hand. "I'm Kaden, by the way. Kaden Varis."

"Sky," I reply, slipping my hand into his. "Sky Knightly." His grip is firm, but reserved. Controlled.

After too long a moment, I drop my hand back to my side reluctantly. His warmth beat out the cold of the day for just a moment. "I lost my mum," I say suddenly. "It's been a few years, but it feels like yesterday." I don't know why, but I feel like I can share with this man. Perhaps because he is a stranger. He doesn't know my history. My problems with Pat and



the kids. I can hold my grief close to me a little longer, in my own private space.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Though words such as those are never sufficient, are they? I too lost someone dear. An old friend. Like a brother."

I glance at the gravestone he's standing over. Chadwin Morrison, it says. He died at twenty-six years old, just one year ago today. So young. So tragic.

"It's never easy, is it?" I say.

"No, it never is."

My eyes focus back on him. "Are you from Ukiah?" This is not a big city, and he doesn't look familiar. I'd remember a face like his.

"No," he says. "But I was in the area on business and I came to pay my respects. Did you know, the French don't really say, 'I miss you.' They actually say, '*tu me manques*,' which translates to, 'you are missing from me.' He pauses, searching my face for something I don't understand. "I think they may have the right of it, because when I'm here, with him... or his spirit or memory... whatever you want to call it... I feel more complete than anywhere else."

"Complete. That's a good word for it," I say, thinking of my own feelings. "Like you don't want to leave, because the world out there is wrong somehow. And sometimes... sometimes you just wish you could forget the person who is gone, because then it might be easier to live without them."

He nods, his eyes losing focus as he thinks of something—or someone—far away. "It is true, what you say. But I read another quote, one that has stuck with me, particularly in times of grief. 'If you can't get someone out of your head, maybe they are supposed to be there.'" Kaden

pulls a hat out of his jacket, a sleek black beret, and puts it on. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Sky. I hope one day you'll find peace in the world of the living, and not just the world of the dead." With that, he walks away, and the sky turns darker once again, pouring down on me as I walk back to my car.

I'm about to start the engine when my phone buzzes. I check the screen, hoping it's Pat.

It's Blake. His voice is hurried. "All hands on deck at the station. We've got a fire and need you here immediately."

## Chapter 5

# EYES IN THE FLAME

—SKY—

There are technically four firehouses in Ukiah, but only two are staffed full time. Even only running two, we are constantly short staffed, and rely heavily on volunteers to keep our department going, which is why it's not surprising to get called in on a day off. What's surprising is the time of year. This isn't fire season, but that doesn't mean fires don't happen.

I primarily work the South Station, which I prefer. The north is more plush. It's a house with a kitchen and living room, big screen television, bedrooms and a real home feel. The running joke is that it's Club North. The South Station is where all the personnel offices are located, so it's not just the two to three firefighters on duty, but also the fire chief and everyone else. It's more political, but you also get to know more about what's going on. I like being in the know.

However, on weekends, the South Station feels empty, cold, and sterile. It doesn't have the home-like feel of the North Station, which I don't like. But today there's a larger group than normal when I arrive, as everyone prepares to assist on this fire.

Blake arrives at the same time as me and frowns when he sees me. "How's the head?"

"Hard as ever," I say, smiling through the headache I still have.

"I'll take a look at it later," he says as we enter the garage. "Make sure it's healing."

Blake, with his dark hair, blue eyes, and aristocratic features, is more

like a movie star firefighter than a real life one. When we went through training together, he was worried his sexuality would be an issue at the station. You work so closely with your crew, sleeping and living together three or more days a week, covering for each other, protecting each other on the job. We both quickly saw that as long as he did his job—and Blake is an amazing paramedic and firefighter—he'd be treated with the same dark humor and respect everyone else is. That is to say, he gets teased as much as anyone. No one cares that he's gay. But he gets ribbed a lot for his excessive use of hair gel.

It was always Blake's dream to be a firefighter. For me, it was a way out of the life I'm stuck in. A way to help others and a way to do good. But also, it's a way to stay close to Blake, to the only adult family I really have. Our crew is a second family for me, and one that treats me a lot better than my real family. And... there's something about the fire that has always called to me. It draws me in. It's a living, breathing thing that must consume in order to live. Fire has always fascinated me. The secret truth is, you won't find a firefighter anywhere who isn't at least a little bit a pyromaniac too. It's the love of fire that seduced us to this job, not the desire to kill it.

I head to my locker to grab my gear. Steve sees me first and laughs. "Well, folks. Dragon Girl is here. So today should be eventful."

I roll my eyes at him. "Don't be stupid, Steve."

Steve's been in the department a long time, and is a staple here, which is why he gets so much support from the chief when his kids interfere with his shifts. He swings an arm over my shoulder and squeezes. "Everyone loves being on shift when you're here, DG. What firefighter doesn't want a good fire now and then? Especially this time of year."

"I think tales of my fire-attracting nature are highly exaggerated," I say.

The chief walks over to us and smiles. "Actually, I ran the numbers on a lark. Statistically we have 60% more fire calls when you're working."

My jaw drops. "You ran the numbers? That can't be true. That's impossible."

We get called out for just about anything. Car accidents, support for paramedics, support for police... you name it, we're there. But fires are what we all live for. It's kind of messed up, when you think about it. Any of us who work in emergency response basically depend on tragedy to strike for us to practice our skills and do our jobs. We don't wish for bad stuff to happen, not really. We just hope that if it's going to happen, it happens on our watch. There's nothing worse than a firefighter who's gone too long without fighting a fire. We start to get bitchy and restless.

But there will be no rest today.

I pull on my pants and boots, then my jacket and climb into the fire engine. Connected to the back of my seat is a tank—a Self Contained Breathing Apparatus—that I'll strap on as we drive, so I'm ready to roll the moment we get to our destination.

I'm sitting in the back, with Blake—who's our engineer—driving, and Steve navigating. Once we get there, Steve will call the shots. Blake will work the engine. I'll assess and be ready to respond.

But we'll have to wait for the South Station to arrive before we can go in. There needs to be four firefighters present at all times, two to enter the building, two to stay outside.

My heart pounds against my ribs as the sirens blare into traffic, clearing our way. We get as much information as we can before we arrive.

It's an apartment complex on North State Street. Four stories. Possible casualties.

When we arrive, there's no visible fire, but we can see smoke pouring out of a corner window. When you work an area like Ukiah you have to get to know the buildings, houses, structures, so you know what to look for when tragedy strikes.

This building has four units on each floor, for a total of sixteen. We need to isolate the unit that's at risk and protect the others, plus make sure the whole structure has been evacuated. The rain has completely subsided, and the day has turned warm and sunny—not an advantage for us.

Fires are living things. They hunt. They feed. They move through space with intention. A good firefighter understands the fire. Respects the fire, even. And learns to anticipate the fire's next move.

"Time to fight the dragon," Steve says to us, a gleam of that familiar excitement I know we all have reflecting in his eyes.

We share a smile, then get busy. Blake works the engine, getting the hose ready, while I walk the periphery to assess any risks. I've determined the point of origin and am about to holler to Steve, when something catches my eye. A man lurks in the shadows near the building. He's dressed in black and I can't see his face. "Sir, I need you to come with me," I yell.

He doesn't respond.

I run forward. "Sir—"

He steps back. Into the shadows. And he's gone.

Dark smoke hangs in the air. The fire's spreading.

I walk forward, searching for the man, but finding nothing.

Then I hear a scream on the second floor. It sounds like a young girl.

"Steve! We've got a child in the building. I'm going in."

This is risky. And dangerous. And the only time we're allowed to break the rules and go in before there are four firefighters present.

I know Steve will join me soon, but I don't wait. I can't. There's a girl up there, and I need to get her out. With ax in hand I push through a door and take the most direct path to get to the second floor. The mission is simple and direct. Get the girl and get out. We're not trying to stop the fire right now, just rescue the child. The fire will come later.

Flames envelop the space in front of me and I step back to avoid the blast. My suit will protect me, to a degree, but still I feel like I'm boiling alive.

The flames rise up and I avoid them to find the stairs. I move carefully, checking the stability of each stair, each door and wall, before inching forward. One mistake could be fatal.

When I get to the second floor and locate the unit, I use the ax to break the door in.

"Sky?" Steve yells.

"Up here! Second floor!"

I do a quick search of the living room. The flames are licking at my feet as sweat trickles down my back, arms, face. "Hello? Anyone here?"

I hear a sob, but it's fading, which isn't a good sign. I think it's coming from one of the doors in the hall, likely a bedroom. I rush forward with more speed, and miscalculate the structural integrity of the unit.

The floor breaks under my right foot. I fall hard against the ground, my ax flying from my hand as I use my arms to break my landing. I try to stand, but my foot is stuck in the hardwood floorboards. "Steve!" I call for my backup, but don't hear him. I know the girl is in that bedroom, and that she's likely running out of air. I pull at my foot, desperate to get unstuck. The wood groans and burns around me.

Panic fills me, but I push it aside. You can't afford to let fear take over with a job like this, it would be paralyzing and deadly. I can still hear the girl cry if I strain, but it's so faint.

And then... it stops. Nothing. "Hello! If you can hear me, yell. I'm coming

for you. Don't give up."

Fun fact, most people don't die in fires from the fire itself, but from smoke inhalation.

It's not really that fun of a fact, now that I think about it.

I'm moving so deeply into the fire that I know I have to find her or leave, and soon. I don't have the equipment to contain or control what this is becoming.

All I hear is the crackle of flames eating into the apartment and the tearing of wood as it falls apart. My radio comes to life, Blake's voice on the other end. "Sky, get out of there. Steve can't get in. We're using the ladder, but the structure isn't sound. Get out now!"

I reach for the ax. It's just out of reach and I push myself to stretch further until it's just barely in my grasp. Carefully, I pull it towards me until I can hold it securely.

With measured blows, I break apart the wood keeping my foot trapped and pull myself out, then stumble towards the bedroom door and push it open.

I see her there, on the other side of a wall of flames. She's unconscious, doesn't have much time left.

So I rush forward.

And the ceiling collapses.

Beams of wood crash down between me and the girl, and I fall back just in time to avoid getting buried under the bulk of the debris. A large piece of stone ricochets off the wall and hits my mask with a loud crack. I scream in pain and suck in a lungful of smoke. The mask is broken, obstructing my view, so I tear it off and try to avoid taking deep breaths.

There's a window on the other side of the room, near the girl. If I can get there, I can get us out and use the ladder to get down.

Smoke fills my lungs. The room is a burning inferno, the wood turning to ash. A rush of dizziness sweeps over me. The smell of fire fills my nostrils. From



the corner of the room, something moves. A flicker of a shadow, then the silhouette of a person. A man, I think. He faces the flames and I look to where he's looking, into the fire. And there... there I see the impossible. I see eyes in the flames. Red and burning. A set of teeth. A pair of claws. The world around me narrows in, growing darker, and I fall...

Arms pull at me.

My body is lifted.

Fire above me.

Smoke.

I'm choking.

I can't breathe.

And then.

Light.

Sky.

Wind.

I suck in air, but it feels as if my lungs are full and can't take it all in.

Someone sticks a mask over my face, and oxygen forces itself into my reluctant lungs. Blake? I try to speak, but I can't.

"Gotta get you to an ambulance... "

I'm fading. My mind blinks out. And in the darkness, I see the beast writhing in the flames. Hungry. Waiting. Hunting.

And then I remember her... and my eyes pop open, and I pull the mask off my face, choking out words as I do. "There's a girl in there. Save her."

Blake stands over me, his eyes downcast. "I'm sorry, Sky. We can't go back in. Not until we put out the fire. The foundation is collapsing. It's... It's too late."

## Chapter 6

### PAIN IN THE PAST

—SKY—

The fire takes hours to put out. I stay, but only as support. I'm not allowed back in, and my condition is monitored. In the end, amidst the ash and ruin of the apartment complex, they find the remains of a girl trapped on the second floor, her body as charred as the house. An autopsy will be done, but it's likely she died from smoke inhalation before the flames ever touched her.

The fire will be investigated as to cause, but likely it was carelessness. Someone left a candle burning or the stove top on. Or a cigarette fell from a drunken hand.

The hardest part is when a middle-aged couple arrives on the scene, their faces filled with fear and shock. They live here, they tell us. Their daughter, she was home alone working on a school assignment while they were out of town for the day. A trip to Santa Rosa. She was old enough to be alone for the afternoon. They never imagined anything would go wrong.

Blake is the one to break the news, while I stand by his side, knowing how he feels. I've been in his shoes.

The man breaks first, falling to his knees, tears streaming down his face. The woman grabs her husband's shoulders, her face frozen in shock.

I wince at the ferocity of emotion I bear witness to. I am to blame. I should have gotten to her in time. They didn't deserve to have their lives ruined like this. That girl didn't deserve to die today. What did any of them do to deserve this?

I walk away as Blake goes into the details, trudging my feet along the grass,

reliving my time amongst the flames, and what I saw within. My mind loses itself in a haze, and I don't know how much time goes by until Blake pats me on the shoulder. "Head home. We'll finish up at the station."

I nod, still dazed. It takes about fifteen minutes to reach the station, to grab my things and my car. By the time I arrive at Mrs. Ruby's, the kind old lady next door who sometimes watches the kids while I work, the sun has already set. The day has felt eternal and never ending, and I still have to find Pat. My twenty-four hours is almost up, and I don't know what the man who calls himself Mr. Pike will do when he shows up and Pat isn't here.

I move in a haze as I lock Kara and Caleb into their car seats, my mind torn between my personal problems and the fire that took a young life today. I look at Kyle, who sits next to his siblings with earbuds in his ears, lost in his own world. The girl was about his age. I try to imagine myself in the position those parents were in today. I shudder at the thought and push it from my mind. These are my kids and I will do whatever it takes to keep them safe. Losing them would kill me.

Blake arrives home shortly after me and makes dinner — bless his heart — while I call every place Pat might be. Every dive bar in town. But no one has seen him.

Which means he likely hit a liquor store and is hanging somewhere with the homeless to avoid detection. The homeless are invisible to most, their plight swallowed up by the self-enforced blindness of a people unwilling to look that kind of fate in the eyes.

Once the littles are in bed and Kyle is upstairs playing video games, Blake brings out a bottle of something strong and pours us both a glass, then holds his up. "May her family find healing, and may her spirit find peace."

I can't keep the tears in anymore, and the taste of them bleeds into the alcohol as it burns down my throat and numbs me just a little.

A few drinks in, I can see the sorrow on Blake's face, the sadness trapped

behind his tough exterior. He does it for me, I think. Staying composed.

"It's okay to cry," I say to him, finally, the drink making the world a bit fuzzy around the edges. "You don't have to be strong for me. We have the right to grieve together," I say, reaching for him.

He wraps an arm around me, and I lay my head on his chest, and together we let our pain out.

We must have both fallen asleep at one point, though it's not that late, only eight by the time I wake up and head to the bathroom. I'm washing my face and changing the bandage on my head when I hear glass breaking. A far too common noise in a house full of kids. "Kyle? What happened? I won't be mad, but speak up."

I follow the sound, walking into the kitchen, and I see the middle window is shattered, broken glass splayed over the tile. Pat crawls through the opening, huffing and puffing until he sprawls onto the floor. He's shirtless, smells of drink, and I notice he wrapped his shirt around his fist to break the glass.

"You bastard," I scream. I look around for something hard to hit him with and find Kyle's baseball bat lying by the door. I grab it and hold it up.

Pat throws his arms in front of his face. "Now come on. I just wanted to get some food."

"So you broke into the house?" I'm livid. I can't afford to replace that window. And I've been trying to reach him all day, but instead of contacting me, he breaks in like a thief to steal food I need for the kids. Food *I* paid for.

"Well, I know you don't want me around. Figured I'd sneak in and grab some grub. But hey, since we're all here, wanna share a meal with good ol' step-dad?" His voice is slurred and his footing unstable as he tries to stand. I'm surprised he made it through the window without injury.

"You want food, Pat? Then tell me something. A man came to the house early this morning looking for you. Calls himself Mr. Pike." I pause and watch his face for any signs of recognition.

His eyes go wide and he reaches for the window. I get there first, slamming my bat down on the window sill. I'm not trying to hit Pat, but his hand gets in the way and the bat smashes into his fingers. He falls back cradling his knuckles. "What'd you do that for?" his voice is a shrill whine.

"Sky? What's going on?" Kyle stands in the doorway of the kitchen. "Everything's fine," I say. "We're just having a grown up talk. Go get ready for bed. It's getting late."

"It's only eight," Kyle says. "I'm allowed to stay up till nine, you said."

I sigh. "Fine, but you have to stay in your room reading a book, remember?"

He looks at me, then Pat, then me again. "Why's Blake sleeping on the couch?"

"Kyle, go to bed. Please." I'm trying not to let my frustration show, but this has been the day from hell already, and I'm afraid it's just going to get worse.

"Okay, fine." He finally leaves, and I hope he's not spying in the other room. There are some things a kid his age doesn't need to know.

I turn back to Pat, lowering my voice. "Tell me everything. Now. Or I swear to god I will beat you with this bat and not think twice." He flinches at the threat and I press my advantage, remembering his fear of me yesterday. "Who is Pike? What deal did you make?"

Pat looks ready to run again, but seeing my resolution, he reconsiders and slumps into a kitchen chair. "It was... just a favor."

"What kind of favor?" I ask, raising the bat a little higher.

"I was in trouble, all right? Bad trouble." He sighs, acting the consummate victim. "Some people wanted money from me. Said I owed them for a deal gone bad, but they knew there was a chance of that from the start—"

"Stop making excuses for once in your miserable life!"

"Look... these people, they were trouble. And Mr. Pike, he made the trouble go away."

I scowl at him. "How?"

"I don't know," he says. "You don't ask questions. That's his way. He fixes it, and that's all you need to know."

"And what did you offer in return?"

"I..." he pauses, biting down on his lips.

"What?" My voice is cold, low, scary.

He doesn't answer. He looks away, avoiding eye contact.

"What!" I raise my voice and the bat.

Spittle flies out of his mouth as he talks. "You gotta understand. I would have been killed. They would have killed me, and then where would we all be? What would have happened to the kids? To Laura? I had to think of the family!"

Right, like his motives have ever been that self-sacrificing. But his words send a chill down my back. Whatever he did, it's bad. And not bad for him, because Pat never makes deals that would be bad for him if he can help it. "Pat, shut the hell up and tell me what you did."

His head falls forward. "I offered one of the kids, okay? In exchange for Pike making the problem go away, he could come and take one of the kids at his chosen time."

The bat falls to the ground and I fight the urge to vomit as all the blood drains from my face. My voice is barely a whisper now. "You offered... I... I can't believe it... how could you?"

"It's the only offer he takes, okay? He makes your problems go away, and then, when the time is right or his need is great or whatever, he comes to take a kid."

"For what? Why does he want kids?" A dozen reasons flood my mind, each worse than the next. What kind of child slavery ring is this bastard running?

"I don't know, I swear!" He's sweating now, and his eyes dart around the kitchen, likely looking for something to drink. "To be part of their cult, or something. That's how they recruit, I think."

My knees are shaking and I sit down in a chair across from him. "This can't happen, Pat. Pike is going to go away, and you're going to make sure he does. He's not taking one of *my* kids."

"You can't stop him," Pat says, his voice defeated. "He can do things no normal man has any right doing."

I think back to how I couldn't call 911 on my phone, and how Dean and Blake couldn't register my description of him. "Which one?" I ask. "Which of the kids does he want?"

"The youngest," he says. "He likes them young, impressionable, I think. So they take to the training better."

Kara. He's coming for the baby. My baby. The baby my mother died to give birth to. She was told she shouldn't carry to term, but she insisted. She knew she was too weak, but she didn't care. As she lay in the hospital bed hooked up to machines, her skin so pale and translucent I could see her veins, she held my hand and looked into my eyes. She was delusional. Calling me by another name. "*Elliana*." Grasping for me. "*Elliana*." Screaming at me. "*Elliana. I am scared, my friend. I am scared.*" I could see the terror in her eyes. I swore then and there I would take care of the little no matter what.

When the machines started to beep faster, and the doctors and nurses came to rush me out, I knew it was over. Hours later they handed me a baby so pink she looked like a tomato, and I held her in my arms and whispered in her ear even as tears still poured down my face. "It's a big scary world out there, I know, but I'll protect you, okay? I promise." She seemed to smile then—though the nurse said it was just gas—and I don't know if I've ever been as happy and as sad in the same moment since.

Strength returns to my limbs and I stand, emboldened by a new determination as Pat sits there and weeps his tears of self-pity. He reaches out and tries to touch my hand but I push him away. "I don't want your tears. You sold one of your own children to save your skin. One of *my* children. The child

Laura gave her life to save." He flinches at the name of my mother.

"Please," he begs. "Please find a way to save her. The place she'd go. The things she'd have to do... "

"What things? What place? What do you know of it?"

"I wasn't always a useless drunk," he says, surprising me with this brief moment of self-honesty. "I used to work for people... people with power. I knew things. Too many things. I was a liability when their system of power crumbled. This man, this Mr. Pike and his ilk, they enslave children into a life you can't imagine. She'll be brainwashed or worse."

A knot forms in my gut and I pace the kitchen floor. I need to find Mr. Pike before he comes back for Kara. Whatever this child trafficking ring is, it needs to end now.

My phone buzzes, and I check the message. What I read makes me curse under my breath. I hoped something like this wouldn't happen, but of course it was a fool's hope.

"How would you find him?" I ask, clenching my jaw, my knuckles turning white around the bat, an idea—probably a very stupid idea—forming in my mind.

Pat rubs at his nose. "Well, he's looking for kids, right? If any are missing, that's where to start."

I was thinking the same.

I look down at my phone again, rereading the message from the station.

*Calling all available personnel for an immediate search and rescue. A child has gone missing in Low Gap Park.*