

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

Kavanagh Mysteries

Book #1 Paint the Town Red

Copyright 2016 by Isaac Innes

Cover illustration by Della Boynton Designs. Copyright 2016

Edited by Robin Jones and Gay Sherman

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof, in any form.

Published by Bon Publishing Company in association with Produx House, Corp.,

P. O. Box 3847, Ft. Myers, Fl. 33918

Ajay Kavanagh Mysteries
Book #1 Paint the Town Red
By
Isaac Innes

Chapter One

Ajay was a big man and built solid. He spent time at the gym, and it showed in the roll of his broad shoulders under his long black coat and in the solid stride of his muscled legs as he ran. That size worked against him now as he tangled with pedestrians. Struggling to avoid a hotdog vendor, Ajay barely missed running into a homeless man pushing a shopping cart full of aluminum cans.

“Stop, Pokestas!” Ajay shouted in anger and frustration.

The man Ajay was pursuing shouted back, “Like hell!” He punctuated his words by making a crude sign over one shoulder.

With a cardboard box clutched possessively under one arm and his seedy jacket and filthy scarf flapping like demented pigeon wings around his narrow frame, Pokestas negotiated the crowded city sidewalk with the boneless agility of an eel. The row on row of old store fronts and turn of the century apartment buildings made a wall on one side. The bumper to bumper rush hour traffic made yet another kind of barrier blocking his escape.

“You’ve got nowhere to go!” Ajay shouted over the heads of the crowd, hoping it was true.

“I do so!” Pokestas shouted back as he vaulted a low bench covered in snow, slithered along a car hood, and tried to breach the wall of cars and trucks at a standstill in traffic.

“I know where you live!” Ajay snarled as he dared to try and follow him.

“I know where you live, too!” Pokestas laughed.

Ajay wove in and out of the cars, risking crushing injuries as he climbed, slid, and sidestepped as fast as he could manage between bumpers.

“Ajay!”

The familiar voice brought Ajay’s head around only long enough to identify his foster father behind the wheel of his old yellow cab.

“Hi, Da!” Ajay called back but didn’t slow his steps as he explained, “Working, now! Talk, later.”

Ajay slipped on a patch of snow and splashed into a puddle of freezing water as he reached the opposite side of the street. Almost going headlong into a street sign, he caught at the post with black gloved hands, used it to regain his balance, and pushed off as he propelled himself forward.

“Pokestas!” Ajay shouted between panting breaths that smoked in the cold air. “Stop; or I’ll—I’ll—”

“What’re you gonna do, *No Badge Kavanagh*?” Pokestas shouted back.

Pokestas turned as he ran to waggle now empty bony fingers at Ajay, his narrow face split with a wide grin. He uttered a wild laugh of derision.

“Damn it!” Ajay swore. He stopped dead in his tracks, turned on his heel, and looked frantically back the way they had come.

An overfull garbage can, a narrow steam vent, and a covered sewer grate were all discarded as possibilities in a split second of logical consideration. The garbage truck with the open rear parked at the curb was a more chilling prospect. As it began crushing its contents with loud grating and popping noises, Ajay eliminated it with relief as having been too far away from the fleeing man.

In a swirl of black coat and flying snowflakes, Ajay turned and began running after the man again, certain that he had been tricked. “Pokestas! Stop!”

Pokestas threw a startled look over his narrow shoulder and began running at top speed once more. He had gained ground during Ajay’s confusion and he didn’t look as if he was tiring. Ajay, on the other hand, felt the burn that told him he was nearing his limit. It was only fury keeping his legs moving at that point and determination not to let Pokestas get away with his box.

It was a crack in the sidewalk that made Pokestas stumble and almost go down. The time that it took for him to recover was time enough for Ajay to catch him hard by one arm, propel him into an ally, and shove him up against a stinking garbage dumpster.

“Ajay!” Pokestas exclaimed with a confused, good-natured smile. His body was a coiled spring under Ajay’s hands, though, and the box tucked into his jacket was clutched possessively. Strangely, almost every one of the man’s fingers was bandaged.

“Pokestas!” Ajay almost purred as he leaned over the skinny man threateningly. “I’ve heard you’ve been making some illegal sales again. That true?”

“Me? I gave that up for religion, remember?” Pokestas insisted with a poor attempt to make an innocent expression.

Ajay’s dark blue eyes were hard under his windblown, black hair. “Funny, but I don’t remember seeing you at mass.”

“Wouldn’t you have to be there to see me?” Pokestas retorted, dropping innocence for a sneer of contempt.

“Keep it coming, Pokestas!” Ajay growled as he held the man’s ragged coat lapel in one fist while he ripped open the box. “Your cell mates will think you’re a riot. Maybe they won’t—”

Needle sharp teeth sank through Ajay’s leather glove and into the flesh of his hand. He howled in pain. Inside the box, a white toy poodle, covered in pink ribbons and painted with pink nail polish, snarled as if it were a dog ten times its size and fearlessly defended itself.

“You can have the damned monster!” Pokestas exclaimed as he suddenly flipped the box out of his coat at Ajay.

Ajay released Pokestas as he frantically tried to catch the box before it and the dog hit the pavement. Pokestas took advantage of that opportunity and bolted for the street.

“God damn it! Stop!” Ajay shouted, meaning both Pokestas and the dog as he held the box close to his chest and tried to get a hold of the biting poodle. “It’s okay pooch! I’m the good guy! Son of a... Look, you little—! I’m trying to save you!”

Finally, Ajay resorted to stuffing the dog back into the box, shutting the lid, and wrapping his arms around it to hold it closed. He leaned against the old brick wall then, feeling the throb of bitten hands, the cold from his wet pants and shoes, and the burn of overworked lungs as he tried to catch his breath.

“What’re you gonna do, *No Badge Kavanagh?*” Pokestas’ words still rang in Ajay’s ear, the inescapable truth in them giving Ajay’s triumph a bitter aftertaste.

Ajay’s badge had been gone for months now, taken away by a police department that had lost too many cases due to Ajay’s failure to follow procedures. He hadn’t faulted them. A court of law needed proper evidence, not Ajay’s good intentions. Those good intentions hadn’t been enough to convict criminals.

Despite failure, Ajay hadn’t been able to forget his dream of becoming a good detective. As a private detective, though, he was limited to gathering evidence as a civilian and presenting that evidence to the police, or a client, for further action. He wasn’t supposed to chase suspects through dangerous traffic or confront them nose to nose without a gun or police authority to back him up. Pokestas had known that and would have been within his rights to have Ajay arrested for assault. That is, if he hadn’t been holding onto a stolen dog at the time.

The camera and recorder in Ajay's coat pockets were the tools of his trade. He was supposed to use them to catch Pokestas in the act and to make a case to put him behind bars. With the image of a grief-stricken Mrs. Anthony in his mind, though, and confronting Pokestas taking the elderly woman's most cherished pet, Ajay had thrown all procedure to the wind in an instant. Just like in the past, it had become about stopping a criminal from hurting an innocent.

Ajay cursed his lack of discipline. He pushed away from the wall and carried the snarling poodle back to his client. Maybe he hadn't put a criminal behind bars, he thought, but he could still feel good about closing his case and saving the dog from being sold illegally.

A little time later, Ajay found it hard to hold onto that good feeling. After returning Mrs. Anthony's beloved poodle, she tearfully thanked him for rescuing her dog and paid him with a cookie, a cup of milk, and a long story about her grandchildren. When she saw him to the door afterward, she said as she reached up to pat his cheeks as if he were four years old, "You are such a good boy, Ajay. I can see why your father is so proud of you." Ajay couldn't find it within himself to insist on something more monetary.

Growing up in a part of the city where people lived in the same homes for generations, Ajay's family, especially his father, was well known by everyone. If his father's cab stopped long enough, people gathered and talked through his window. If he was done for the day, his seat at the local bar was sacrosanct and surrounded by friends. At church, he and his family had their place on pews that had sat generations of Kavanaghs before them. Ajay could imagine his father saying to the many people that he knew: *I am so proud of my boy*. It was harder to understand why.

After Ajay's failure as a police detective, he had taken on crime singlehandedly by protecting his little community with all the unrealistic and unofficial determination of a superhero. If he had managed that with any amount of success, he might have agreed with his father. Unfortunately, Ajay was still more likely to end up without a conviction in most of his cases. That was a failure rate that he was finding impossible to be proud of or to accept.

His bank account was also finding it hard to accept. Ajay didn't get paid for failures. On the long walk back to his office, hunched into his long coat against a light snowfall, Ajay considered his lack of finances. He wasn't going to be able to pay the rent on his office or his apartment. It was a safe bet that neither of his landlords would accept milk and cookies as payment.

His father wouldn't continue to be proud of him if he lost his agency, Ajay thought with mounting depression. Nor would he stay proud of him if Ajay moved back home and couldn't

manage his life. Whatever noble aspirations the man attributed to Ajay's choice in careers would surely be lost under the glare of harsh reality and failure. Still, when Ajay pushed aside those worries about what his father might think of him, he could still find that strong desire to succeed; to really make a difference. Imagining another line of work—another direction in his life—just wasn't a choice that Ajay wanted to make. Stay on course, he told himself. Man up and make it work somehow.

As Ajay joined a group of people waiting for a street light to change at a busy intersection and considered the humiliating prospect of begging his landlords for more time, his thoughts were interrupted by an unusual tinkling noise. It cut through the noise of traffic and pedestrians by the very nature of its oddness and the fact that it seemed to be coming from the very spot where he was standing.

Ajay looked down and discovered that a woman was standing very close to him in the press of pedestrians. Shorter than most, the top of the young woman's head barely reached Ajay's collarbone. She was wrapped in a thick white coat and an overlarge cream colored scarf, but Ajay guessed that she didn't weigh more than a hundred pounds.

The woman had a long blonde braid, small gold earrings, snug cream colored pants, and ankle boots. She had arching gold eyebrows, intelligent blue eyes, and a heart shaped face. Her stance was confident, almost challenging. Ajay suspected she was well aware of him and was pointedly ignoring his scrutiny. Her frigid expression spoke of someone used to unwelcome advances and was expecting one at any moment.

The signal changed and they began crossing the street. The woman walked quickly ahead of Ajay as if she were eager to put distance between them. Ajay's eyes followed her, reflexively noting details as if he might be called to testify about her later. It was a reflex that made him a good investigator, but tended to make people nervous.

The woman was well off, Ajay thought, if the leather and costly jewelry she was wearing was any indication, and definitely not from that part of the city. As Ajay kept making mental notes, he passed over the exact spot where he had been born without the slightest tingle of recognition. His entire attention was on the beautiful woman in front of him.

Warrenburg and Devoe Streets were the veritable *x marks the spot* at the center of Ajay Kavanagh's life. He had been born at that crossroads in a cab stuck in rush hour traffic to a free-spirited mother and an unknown father. Her midwife had been the cab driver; a ham-handed,

overworked father of eleven children. The mother had left him with the newborn as soon as she had caught her breath enough to pay for the cab ride and to—incredibly—walk away, never to be heard from again.

Adding a newborn to his clan had been as perfunctory as taking in a stray puppy. Handing the newborn into his harried wife's arms, the cab driver had only announced, "Another one," and sat down to a beer, his pipe, and the evening news. A more official adoption and twenty-five years later, Ajay was still treated no differently than any of his foster brothers and sisters by his foster parents or the people in their tight knit community.

Ajay was known as Michael Kavanagh's son. His face and family were well known to all. Ajay had learned to make that familiarity work for him. He knew the people. He knew every sag, stain, and warped roofline of the long line of Victorian era apartment buildings, single family homes, old businesses, and decrepit office buildings in his small part of the city. When he realized the woman walking ahead of him was obviously lost and looking for an address, it was easy to use his knowledge to consider which address she might be searching for. Turning down Caraway Street, the choices became fewer. She didn't look in need of a used book, a bail bondsman, or a watch repair. The only other buildings were small time businesses that had magnetic signs inside dirty windows as the only advertisement of their existence.

The woman stared hard at a note in her hand, studied several signs, and looked frustrated as she passed by them. She stopped at the next building, looked even more frustrated, and turned around. Returning to the previous sign, she studied it and her note in obvious confusion.

"Uh, that's actually a six," Ajay said quietly from behind her. He reached over the woman's shoulder to turn the errant magnetic number around. "It's Eighteen twenty-six, not nine."

Startled, she quickly turned to face Ajay. She looked Ajay up and down warily with wide blue eyes. She regained her composure almost instantly and stood straighter as she gave Ajay a curt, "Thank you."

Ajay didn't blame her. She was in a rundown area of town. A big man much had, to all appearances, followed her. It wasn't a good time to look like an easy mark. Ajay had to struggle not to smile in amusement. She reminded him of Mrs. Anthony's poodle: tiny, done up in ribbons and bows, but still as fierce as any Doberman.

"I have an office here," Ajay said, trying to reassure her.

She didn't look reassured. "Oh, I see. Well, thank you."

The tinkling sound came from a small golden ball hanging among the many golden necklaces on her neck. Something inside the ball chimed like tiny bells with every motion she made as she cautiously edged out of Ajay's shadow.

Opening the front door, she entered the building. She paused in the narrow lobby to check door numbers. Not finding the number she was looking for, she began climbing up the stairs to the second floor. Ajay knew he wasn't putting her fears to rest when he followed her upstairs to a long hallway leading to more offices.

There was a women's clinic, a divorce lawyer, and Ajay's own office. The lawyer had an actual plaque on his door and the women's services had a sign written by hand. Ajay's office door was unmarked. Ajay almost always met his clients at their home or place of business. A door sign was something he didn't need aside from being an expense he hadn't been able to afford.

Ajay's office door was strangely open at the moment. He could hear someone inside complaining. The woman asked the occupant, "Is this the Ajay Kavanagh detective agency?"

There was a familiar snort of laughter. A feminine voice replied, "This is it, honey. He's not in right now. I'm the doctor for the women's clinic. Need a pelvic exam?"

"Katie!" Ajay exclaimed in annoyance.

"Shit! Well, looks like Ajay is here after all. You can't blame me for trying to get a new patient."

The woman looked from the office interior to Ajay. Her disappointed expression and her tone told Ajay she considered her time wasted. "I'm sorry. I seem to have been misled. I was told this was a professional agency."

Katie snickered as she came out of the office with a box of paperclips. She was a short woman with black hair cut in a severe buzz cut. In her red plaid shirt and old jeans, she didn't look like a medical doctor with eight years of experience under her belt. Her dark eyes were as sharp as her tongue as she raked Ajay with them and said, "You could find someone more professional at a day labor office."

"Ha, ha," Ajay growled irritably. He was used to her sharp tongue, but the last thing Ajay needed was her humorous put-downs in front of a prospective new client.

"Are you going to pay for those paperclips, Dr. Malevona?" Ajay asked acidly.

Katie sniffed as she waved the box at him and began walking to her office. "It's charity, Kavanagh. You just gave to the cause. Accept it graciously."

She donated her medical services to the poor and supported herself in ways that Ajay had never been able to discover. She did often run low on supplies. Small filches from his office were common; more so after the lock on the door had been broken.

The woman began to leave. Ajay stepped sideways into her path and tried not to look threatening as he quickly said, “I hope you understand that she’s joking? I assure you, I am a competent investigator. I have one year on the police force and several solved cases to my credit. If you need references, I can provide them.” Ajay hoped she wouldn’t ask for them. They had all been very small cases.

The woman looked uncertain, the address clutched tightly in her well-manicured hands. Ajay couldn’t help holding his breath and offering up a silent prayer. It was answered when she suddenly made up her mind and held out her hand, as she shook Ajay’s hand, her golden bracelets chimed together as she introduced herself. “My name is Julia Temple.”

“Detective Ajay Kavanagh,” Ajay said with relief. He returned her handshake, being careful not to squeeze too hard, and led her into his office.

Ajay released her only after he closed the door. Motioning her to take a seat in a wooden chair positioned in front of his desk, Ajay moved to sit in a well-worn office chair behind it. As he sat, he swept his dust-covered laptop off of the desk and into a drawer. He wished he could do the same for the dead plants on the windowsill.

Ajay took a notepad and short pencil from his breast pocket. “May I ask who recommended me?”

“Samantha Engles,” she told him as she looked around the room with the air of someone ready to leave again at the slightest provocation. “She told me you were an excellent investigator—the best, actually—and she was certain you could help us.”

“Us?” Ajay wrote the woman’s name down. He had never heard her name before, and he didn’t know anyone who would use *the best* and his name in the same sentence.

“Ms. Engles and I share a common need to know where a certain man has gone,” she explained. “He disappeared a week ago and no one has heard a word from him since. While it isn’t unusual behavior for him, I’m afraid that he left at a very bad time. He’s on the verge of becoming a famous artist, you see. His debut is in several weeks. Many important people are to appear. If he doesn’t attend, I’m not sure he will get another chance. He’s rather eccentric and his art is controversial.”

“So a crime hasn’t been committed?” Ajay affirmed. “He’s just missing?”

“That’s right.”

“How likely is it that he’s still in the city?” Ajay wondered as he made notes quickly.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. She fiddled nervously with her golden braid. “He has a habit of disappearing for days, but he never tells me where he’s been when he returns.”

“What is your concern in this?” Ajay wondered.

She frowned. “Does that matter?”

“It does if this person doesn’t want you to find him. It could make my job more difficult,” Ajay explained as he made a note that Julia had appeared confused rather than defensive about the question.

She looked uncomfortable and then she said tentatively, as if she expected a negative response from Ajay, “I’m his model. He paints me.”

“Interesting line of work,” Ajay said, keeping his voice neutral even though his interest was piqued. “Does it pay well?”

Her lips thinned, perhaps disapproving of being questioned about personal things. She replied with a small shrug, “Sometimes.”

“I assume that not having works of art—with you as the subject—make an appearance at an important art show might hurt your career and your finances?” Ajay asked.

“It’s not about money, Mr. Kavanagh, and I’m not worried about my career as a model,” she retorted with sudden temper. “David Ridder is important to me.”

“Is that the artist’s name?”

“Yes.”

Ajay made more notes. “What about Ms. Engles? What’s her concern in all of this?”

“She’s David’s agent,” she replied. “She manages his appearances.”

“You mean his *one* upcoming appearance?”

“Well, yes. This is the only one so far,” she replied impatiently. “It’s his debut.” She placed a flyer on Ajay’s desk showing a photo of a brooding young man with dark curling hair. Beneath his photo was information about the art show.

“She’s worried about her commission?” Ajay wondered as he took the flyer and studied it.

“I suppose,” she replied. “Though I’m sure she’s worried about David as well. She’s worked hard to get him ready for this show.”

“This Ridder doesn’t seem very appreciative,” Ajay pointed out, looking up from the flyer to watch her expression. “Why would he jeopardize his chance for success?”

“He’s...” She frowned as she searching for the right words. Finally, she said, “He’s a man of the moment. I don’t think material things concern him at all. He only cares about his painting. It is possible he wanted a place to paint without interruption and left without thought for the consequences.”

“Sounds like a hard man to deal with,” Ajay commented as he put down the flyer, finished his notes, and then flipped his notebook closed. “It makes it easier for me.”

“How is that?” she wondered.

“He won’t have covered his tracks if he simply hopped a plane or a bus and took off for parts unknown.”

“You’re right,” she agreed, looking hopeful. “I can’t imagine him caring about subterfuge.”

“I’ll need access to his home,” Ajay said as he stood up. He looked at Julia hopefully. “That is, if you’re hiring me?”

She looked Ajay up and down thoughtfully. “You do sound professional.” Her eyes swept the un-kept office with its poor décor with distaste and asked, “If you are successful, though, I fail to see why you’re working in these conditions. To be honest, it doesn’t inspire confidence.”

“I only take certain cases,” Ajay told her truthfully, “and that limits my financial portfolio unfortunately.”

“Which cases?”

“You would be surprised at how many people want an investigator to get the dirt on someone for a court case, revenge, or simply misplaced curiosity. I like to take cases for good reasons. It’s a sign of the times, I suppose, that many of those kinds of cases don’t come my way often enough.”

“You’re altruistic,” she said with a pleased smile. “That is very rare.”

She stood as well and shook Ajay’s hand. “You’re hired, Detective Kavanagh. But I warn you; if you don’t have any results for me in a very limited time, I will terminate our association and hire someone else.”

“Understood. When can I see Ridder’s home?”

“Tomorrow morning.” She plucked Ajay’s worn pencil out of his hand and wrote the address on the reverse side of his crumpled address note. She handed the pencil and the note to Ajay and said, “Eight sharp.”

“Eight sharp, it is.”

Ajay traded the address for one of his business cards.

Ajay watched the beautiful woman go. Julia left behind a slight scent of expensive perfume. Ajay found himself unconsciously breathing it in deeply.

Katie stuck her head into his office soon after and found Ajay still standing there lost in thought. “Well?” she asked gruffly. “Who the hell was she?”

Ajay came back to himself with a start and sat down in his office chair. “She’s a new client.”

She grinned. “Good, that means you can afford to *donate* some copy paper.”

“I don’t have a copier,” Ajay pointed out.

“Then get one and donate,” Katie retorted. “Look, if I can’t rely on you to . . . Jeez! Kavanagh!”

Ajay blinked at her dumbly, his thoughts having wandered back to his new client again. “What?”

“I thought you were gay all this time and now I find out you’re not.”

Ajay scowled in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Katie snickered. “You’re so clueless. What a moron!”

Julia was a beautiful woman, Ajay told himself, but his interest in her was limited to how she might fit into the mystery of Ridder’s disappearance. Katie was crazy to read anything else into it. He desperately needed to concentrate on making his business a success. He wasn’t looking for a relationship. He needed to keep clear of entanglements until he had a solid client base and a stack of successfully solved cases.

“If you aren’t interested in someone who looks like her, then you are gay,” Katie said.

“I think I would know if I were gay,” Kavanagh retorted irritably.

“Maybe you’re asexual?” Katie snickered derisively as she left.

Ajay decided to ignore her. He had a big case to solve now. He needed to focus; not get distracted by ridiculous supposition about his sexual orientation.

Two cases required paperwork. Ajay scribbled names on the tabs of two folders. Tossing his old notes into the one marked Mrs. Anthony, he put it and Julia Temple’s empty folder into a

drawer that held only three other files. There weren't enough to warrant a filing cabinet yet, but Ajay was holding out hope for that *one day soon*.

Closing the file drawer, Ajay opened the one where he had stashed the laptop. He brought it out and wiped the dust off of it with a sleeve. He recalled his father giving it to him as a gift on the day he had started his detective agency. He hadn't admitted to his father that he almost never used a computer. His notebook and pencil were far more effective when he needed to quickly jot down his sudden streams of thought or his observations.

Julia was making him re-think using the computer, though. Perhaps, it was time to take his professionalism up a notch with this case; a case that might make or break his career. Ajay tucked the laptop under one arm and decided to call it a day.

Ajay's home was on the top floor of a building once owned by a wealthy family. Its many bedrooms had been converted into one room apartments. Other than that renovation, Ajay doubted that it had seen much more than a coat of paint since the turn of the century. The plumbing was ancient; the pipes had been painted over a thousand times and snaked along the outside of walls. Heating was from an ancient radiator and a window air conditioner was the only relief in the hot summer months. The rent was cheap, though, and Ajay couldn't complain about the neighbors. Most of them were elderly and quiet.

Ajay had furnished his place with donations from his family and a trip to the local Salvation Army. The couch was a flowery affair with tired springs and the kitchen table was a folding card table with an edge torn off and some mismatched chairs. The bed folded out of the couch and had a dip on one side where many guests had spent uncomfortable nights at his parent's home. A straight-backed chair, the only sound piece of furniture that he owned, was for his infrequent guests.

Ajay tossed his coat over the chair back along with his tie before he made his way into the kitchenette. That consisted of an old enamel sink, a small refrigerator that rattled and hummed, and a stove he never used. His limited kitchen didn't bother Ajay though. His minimal cooking skills usually barred him from anything more complicated than putting frozen food into a battered microwave.

Making coffee became Ajay's first priority. He put his laptop aside on the tile counter while coffee began filling the chipped decanter. Leaning on the counter and playing with his big coffee mug, Ajay's thoughts were on the case. He wanted to be prepared when he met Julia again. He didn't want her to doubt he was a professional or to think she'd made a mistake by choosing him.

The manner of that choice puzzled Ajay. Why a perfect stranger, Samantha Engles, had recommended him was definitely a line of questioning he intended to pursue when he interviewed her in his investigation. Ajay's business was strictly local. Knowing his clients well since childhood, he could positively say that none of them had contacts with agents in the art world. That left cases from his days on the force. The name Engles didn't ring any bells.

The coffee finished. Ajay poured himself a cup, tucked his laptop under one arm, and then left his apartment for the one next door. He didn't bother knocking as he swept in, announcing loudly, "I've got a case, Weasel!"

A skinny young man thrashed in surprise, headphones flying as he spun around in a swivel office chair. He glared at Ajay from under a mop of unruly red hair. Freckles stood out sharply on his face as he shouted furiously, "Knock, god damn it! Is that too much to ask?"

Behind the man, a bank of sophisticated looking computers was arranged on a long table. Their screens were showing different websites, one of them pornographic. Ajay reached past him and put his laptop on top of the keyboards. "I need some research, Weasel."

"God damn it!" the man shouted angrily. "I told you to stop using that nickname. I'm not twelve anymore. I'm freakin' twenty-two and my name is Sean Wezel." He put the laptop aside. "I'm not using that piece of crap from the stone-age. You want something, I use my gear. I want to get paid too. No more IOUs."

"You know I'm good for it," Ajay said in a dismissive tone.

"Yeah, yeah," the young man agreed with a sneer. "You always pay eventually, but that's not the point! I don't like waiting for months."

"It won't be months this time," Ajay promised. "I have a paying client."

Wezel looked skeptical, but he turned to his computers with a resigned sigh. "If you weren't my cousin..."

Ajay snagged a chair and pulled it close to the computers. As he sat down in it, he dug into a breast pocket and pulled out his notebook and well-used pencil. Wezel rolled his eyes in exasperation as he took the slip of paper Ajay handed him.

“He uses paper,” Wezel lamented as he searched for the name on the slip. “Doesn’t own an iPhone or a Blackberry...he just uses paper. Why did you even bother bringing the laptop?”

“It looks professional,” Ajay replied absently as he watched information and photos appear on the computer monitors. “You can show me how to use it later.”

“And I’ll charge for the lessons too.” Wezel warned. He grunted and then asked, “Who’s gorgeous? A model? Why does a model need your help?”

An online portfolio had sprung up on a monitor. Julia was shown in fashion poses with a short bio and contact information at the bottom of the screen. There was a list of previous jobs. There were a few references for photography modeling, but most were modeling jobs for paintings.

“Likes artists, I guess,” Wezel muttered as he pulled up a second page. Julia was prominent there in several pieces of art.

Ajay found his eyes lingering far more on the portrait of her standing with her hair loose and a white, linen sheet wrapped around her seductively than any of the others. She might look good walking a beach in a bikini, or straddling a motorcycle in bits of studded black leather; but simply wrapped in a sheet, she seemed to be revealing much more of an honest, open expression—a glimpse of who Julia Temple might really be. Daring and seductive, yet soft too; the small quirk at the corner of her mouth seemed to say she wasn’t a person who took things too seriously.

Wezel repeated irritably, “I asked why she needs your help?”

Ajay pulled his eyes away from the screen and blinked at his cousin. It seemed hard to bring his mind to order enough to answer the question. “She needs me to solve a missing person case.”

“That’s pretty big stuff for *small time* Kavanagh,” Wezel pointed out. “Who recommended you?”

“This person,” Ajay replied as he handed over the note with Engles’ name.

As Wezel went to work on a new search, Ajay had to wonder at his odd feeling of disappointment as Julia’s picture left the screen to be replaced by search results for Samantha Engles. What was wrong with him? He’d never had a problem shutting down his personal life for business before. Was it her beauty, or was it just gratitude for being given the chance to work a big case? Whatever it was, Ajay decided he had to put it out of his mind. A case like this needed his complete focus. He couldn’t allow any clue to go unnoticed because of distracting elements.

“She needs a new web designer,” Wezel commented critically. “Her website is full of fuzzy photographs and bad hype. It’s definitely bush league stuff.”

Ajay frowned in confusion. “My client described her as an important person with contacts.”

Wezel shrugged. “Sometimes people don’t get how important the web is.” He pulled up more search results and whistled appreciatively. “Now we’re talking *important*, Kavanagh! Here are some news articles. She’s schmoozing in this picture with Paul Bale, Mayor of our fair city. That’s Bashing Virgins in this picture. They’re a very popular rock band, in case you didn’t know...and you probably didn’t.”

“Never heard of them,” Ajay said impatiently. “Are they her clients?”

“No, she’s just hanging with them at this benefit,” Wezel told him. “Hang with the mayor and you hang with a lot of other important people.”

“I need her client list, not her meetings with *who’s who*,” Ajay replied impatiently. “Go back to her web page.”

Wezel complied. After a brief search, he admitted, “Only a few artists are listed. I’ve never heard of them. She rocks with rock stars, schmoozes with mayors, and has artist dweebs as clients.”

“Find me David Ridder,” Ajay asked as he scribbled notes.

“He’s not on her client list...at least not here,” Wezel told him. Then, after more searches and a few false leads, he shrugged and admitted, “Nothing. Do you know how hard it is *not* to be on the web?”

“So, he’s not known,” Ajay concluded. “He isn’t in any online news articles, hasn’t made any appearances, and no one has talked about him in any context.”

“He also doesn’t have his own blog and isn’t listed anywhere under his name,” Wezel added. “That doesn’t mean he isn’t there. It just means he’s not using David Ridder.”

“How hard is that?” Ajay wanted to know.

Wezel snickered as he googled *Ajay*. A dozen things popped up. “Even if someone talks about you, you’re on the web...even if *you’re* not. Understand?”

Ajay’s service as a policeman popped up along with a few comments on Wezel’s blog, a few insults from an ex-girlfriend on her blog, and several old newspaper articles.

“Oh, look!” Wezel chuckled. “When you were seven, you saved a kitten from a drain pipe.”

“I get your point,” Ajay said, making more notes. “My missing person is an extreme hermit.”

“To be that much of a clean slate, he must not know anyone or have done anything noteworthy in his life,” Wezel said.

“Or, as you’ve already suggested, he isn’t using his real name online. It’s also possible David Ridder isn’t his real name,” Ajay suggested as he finished his notes and tucked them into his shirt pocket.

Wezel looked skeptical. “Why would your client give you a false name?”

“It’s possible he isn’t aware of it,” Ajay replied as he stood up and took his laptop back from Wezel.

“Our missing person is using an alias?” Wezel popped his chin back on the screens. “That’s going to make him hard to find.”

“It is going to make this case more difficult,” Ajay agreed as he headed for the door. “If he is using an assumed name, there may be definite reasons other than the one that I was given why he would suddenly want to leave the area.”

“Bet you didn’t ask for enough money.”

“Sometimes, it’s about more than money,” Ajay said defensively. “Sometimes, it’s about the challenge and the—”

“Nope, didn’t ask for enough money,” Wezel accused in disgust. “So much for getting paid.”

That stung, but Ajay couldn’t reassure him. The case was turning out to be more complicated than he had been led to believe.

As Ajay made his way back to his apartment—stepping over Mrs. Murphy’s black and white cat, Suzie, in the hallway—he reminded himself that Wezel wasn’t hurting for money. The man lived with his grandfather. Though his grandfather refused to live in style, he was rather well off financially. While it still wasn’t right to stiff his information source, Ajay wasn’t going to allow guilt to keep him from doing his job.

Conscience settled and back in his apartment, Ajay sat at his kitchen table and spread his notes out to study them. Sipping at his coffee while he read, he considered what he now knew. Nothing concrete, of course. His suspicions were just that until he had them validated by his client or by the facts he uncovered during his investigation. The trick was to not let those suspicions color his thinking. He had to stay open and fluid, ready to accept new suspicions and any new theories he uncovered.

Ajay's cell phone rang. He absently pulled it out of his pocket and read the number. "Hi, Ma."

"Safe and sound?" she asked worriedly.

"Yes," Ajay replied. He lined up his notes on the table and continued to stare at them. "Not a scratch."

"Ask him why the hell he was chasing Pokestas!" his father's voice shouted from a distance.

"Your father told me you were running through traffic," his mother said in exasperation.

"You've got to be more careful, Jay."

"I was being careful," Ajay said irritably. She could always manage to make him feel five years old again.

"Why haven't you asked him *why* yet?" his father wanted to know.

"'cuz he's a moron?" Ajay heard his brother, Steven, suggest helpfully.

"Tell him, he's the moron," Ajay retorted.

"Ajay!" his mother admonished in a long suffering tone.

"I didn't start it," Ajay complained.

"Why aren't you answering my question?" Ajay's father exploded.

"It wasn't anything dangerous," Ajay told his mother to forestall her heated reply. "You know Poky, always doing small time crimes. It was dog-napping this time. I managed to get back Mrs. Anthony's poodle."

"Woman?" Ajay's father exclaimed.

"Pokey was stealing again!" she shouted back. She sighed and calmed herself before she said to Ajay, "I don't know where that man went wrong. He wasn't a bad person when we were children."

"People make their own choices, good or bad, Ma," Ajay said sympathetically.

"Poor Mrs. Anthony though," his mother went on, growing angry now. "How could he? That dog is like her child. She must have been terrified for him."

"She gave me cookies and milk. We talked. She seemed all right," Ajay reassured her.

Ajay began making notes for the questions he intended to ask Julia as his mother, unable to ignore his father any longer, had to relay Ajay's words to him. Ajay wasn't surprised when his father took the phone and said, somehow understanding full well what Ajay hadn't said, "Son,

pay is money. It is not cookies and milk, even from Patsy Anthony. How are you going to eat and pay the rent?"

"She's on a fixed income, Da," Ajay reminded him. "You wouldn't take a cab fare from her, would you?"

A pause followed by a sigh. "No," his father admitted. Then gruffly, knowing that his next words would embarrass them both, he added, "You know you're welcome to come home if things get too tight for you?"

"You tell him he can come home whenever he needs to!" his mother shouted, "Our son is not going to starve or live on the streets!"

"I just did tell him that, you daft woman!" his father shouted back.

"What a loser!" his younger brother snickered.

"Steven!" his mother admonished. "That's no way to talk about your brother!"

"Big talk from Mr. No Job," his father grumbled under his breath. Then he said louder, "Don't mind him, Jay. I know you're doing good work. The pay will come with the experience. That's how it is."

Ajay was feeling the flush of humiliation though, his brother's words hitting home. Loser. He didn't want that insult to have any truth to it. "I'm about to get some more experience, Da," he told his father. "I have a missing person case. It's not dangerous," he quickly assured the man, "but it may take me out of town for a few days."

"Officer Murphy, down at the pub, says that a man always has a partner, or a backup," his father said with worry plain in his voice. "Since you don't have either, you have to let us know where you'll be. All right? We'll be your backup."

Ajay smiled even as he winced at the thought of his mother and father helping him with his case. "Will do, Da."

"So," his father fished, exchanging worry for excitement now. "Who's the client? Is she a beautiful, mysterious person? A blonde in high heels?"

"You watch too many detective movies," Ajay said and chuckled.

"Since all of the movies are yours, son, that's like calling the kettle black," his father said with a snicker. "So?"

"Blonde," Ajay replied. He couldn't help adding, "And beautiful, very beautiful."

“Ah,” his father replied in a tone that said he was reading between the lines. “You like this client. Married?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Ajay replied but then felt uncomfortable at the thought of trying to explain to his parents when he wasn’t certain of that fact himself. It was a gut feeling.

“He likes his client?!” his mother’s voice exclaimed. She was suddenly on the phone and his father was complaining in the background as she asked, “Is she a nice person?”

Ajay considered the question and then replied honestly, “Seems to be.”

“Nice *and* beautiful?” Ajay’s mother warmed to the subject and Ajay could almost feel her smile of pleasure. “You like this client?” she asked.

Ajay felt himself blush. He held his pencil very tightly, almost breaking the lead.

“Jay?” his mother prompted.

“I...” Ajay floundered, at a loss for words and not certain why he was suddenly feeling embarrassed. He was developing a knot of anxiety in his gut.

“Bring her to dinner so we can meet her,” his mother suggested.

“She’s a client, Ma, not a date,” Ajay told her quickly. “Sorry to disappoint you. She’s an artists’ model. One of her clients has gone missing and it’s keeping some of her paintings from being in an important art show. She’s hired me to find the artist.”

He sounded as if he were babbling, he realized, and put a stop to it. There was an uncomfortable silence, but at least he had put the brakes on his mother’s endless need to see him in a relationship.

His mother finally said in a very low, strangely emotional voice, “No matter who you love, Ajay Kavanagh, we will still love you. You know that, don’t you?”

“Ma!” he protested, suddenly understanding fully what she was implying. “I’m not gay, I’m just too busy with my business to get involved with anyone, especially a client!” he blurted loudly, completely embarrassed now.

“You can talk to us about anything,” his mother insisted.

“What are you on about, you daft woman?” his father wanted to know. “Stop your nattering nonsense and give me back the phone.” The phone made noises as his father took it back.

“Da, I do have work to do,” Ajay protested weakly.

“I know, I know,” his father said. “Don’t let your Ma get you twisted into a knot. You know how women are, always hoping for a big wedding.”

“I know.” Ajay sighed when he realized he had made a crude doodle of Julia’s face on his notepad. “It’s okay, Da.”

“Make sure you eat food for dinner and don’t just drink damned coffee,” his father admonished him. “Let us know when you leave town.”

“I will,” Ajay said. His mind was in too much turmoil to say anything else.

His father hung up and Ajay let the phone drop to the table with a clatter along with the pencil. He rubbed his face hard, dark blue eyes troubled. He had been accused of being gay twice that day; once by his mother—if he had understood her correctly. Why they thought something like that escaped him. Nothing in his life could lead anyone to that conclusion and he wasn’t going to let his mother pressure him into a relationship to prove his sexual orientation.

“She’s my client,” Ajay affirmed as he picked up his pencil again and drew a firm line through his bad drawing of Julia. “And that’s the way it’s going to stay.”

Chapter Two

The door was open to David Ridder's studio. It was an old warehouse made of concrete and steel. Stripped down, its original use was a mystery. Ridder had filled it with his art and his supplies. Rows of small windows let in light, illuminating paintings of all sizes. Some were complete while others were in the process of creation; skeletons of sketch marks and swathes of paint. The smell of that paint and thinners was heavy in the air.

One very large painting depicted a naked Julia Temple caught in a storm and being lifted up by strong winds. Swirls of blues, golds, blacks, and reds joined with rolling thunderclouds to cover embarrassing parts of her lithe form. Her eyes were seductive and powerful, their ice blue color rarified into bright aquamarine from light breaking through at the top of the storm. That light caught in her wind-tossed golden hair as well, making it appear like spun gold mixed with bright white threads. With her back turned to Ajay, the flesh and blood Julia stood admiring it.

"Excuse me," Ajay said, trying not to startle her.

Julia turned with a smile. "You are prompt, Detective Kavanagh."

Dressed in a gray, oversized turtleneck sweater, a black pencil skirt, and gray, stiletto heel boots, she seemed lost in wool. Her hair was pulled back in its braid, but wisps had escaped and were catching the light from the windows like hot gold threads. Her jewelry chimed together and her heels made clicking noises on the concrete, as she walked toward Ajay. Her hands were tucked into her sleeves to keep warm in that unheated space.

Ajay felt overwhelmed by the image of Julia portrayed as a sort of mythic goddess figure in the painting and the more human one—who hardly seemed any less goddess-like—standing in a pool of light before him.

Julia took Ajay's silence for something else. She quirked her full, red lips, gestured at the painting, and said, "It must seem a little conceited to you to find me admiring myself, but David is a great artist. It's hard not to appreciate the power of his talent, even when I'm the subject."

A laugh as bright and as beautiful as the rest of Julia had Ajay smiling in return. He covered his embarrassment by looking around them and replying, "If someone had painted me, I don't think I could help looking either."

Ajay realized his comment gave an opening for derision from a woman who *was* beautiful enough to paint, but a quick glance only found her looking at him appraisingly.

Ajay covered the awkward moment by pulling out his notebook and beginning to search for clues among the tables of paint, painting supplies, and an overwhelming number of used and unused canvases.

David Ridder was a prolific painter, but also an uncaring one. Stacked paintings were not treated as the works of art they were. When Ajay lifted a few, he found their paint had adhered to other paintings. David hadn't cared enough to allow them to dry. The focus of those paintings was for the most part figures, faces, and the human condition. Ajay found more that was ugly than beautiful. Elderly people seemed to be Ridder's favorite subjects.

"Did he change his style when he met you?" Ajay asked.

Julia smiled, perhaps taking it as a compliment. She shrugged and said, "Engles thought his paintings were too dark. She wanted to inspire him to create something different, so she introduced him to me."

"Are you lovers?" Ajay asked point blank.

She frowned angrily, but then her expression smoothed out and she replied coolly, "I know this is important information and not idle interest, so I'll give you an honest answer. No, we aren't lovers. I've never seen David with anyone actually. He is a very self-contained person. Even though we spend many hours together while he paints me, I sometimes feel as if he doesn't really consider me to be alive. I'm only his subject...a model."

"Then, he's cold and distant?" Ajay wondered, trying to imagine someone not taking any notice of a naked Julia posing for him.

Ajay turned when Julia didn't reply. He found her pulling a very small painting away from a free space on one wall. She brought it to Ajay. As Ajay leaned to look, he smelled the scent of Julia's perfume mingling with the smell of oil paint.

"I keep rescuing this one," Julia explained. "It's my favorite. It wasn't up to Engles standard, though, and David doesn't care about his art once it's completed. David may not express himself well, but his art does that for him."

It was a painting of Julia in sunshine. Seated in a field of yellow sunflowers, and wearing a white sundress, she seemed ethereal; a part of the sunlight that was making the field glow. Smiling, blue eyes sparkling, and hair blowing in a breeze, she was leaning a little forward as if she was sharing a laugh with whoever was seeing the painting.

“He plucked that from nothing,” Julia told Ajay. “I simply sat and posed and he imagined everything else.”

“He is talented,” Ajay admitted. He wanted to say something about the subject, about how Julia made the painting the piece of art that it was; but Julia was already moving away to put the painting back. It gave Ajay time to realize how inappropriate the remark would have been and to wonder why he had felt the urge to make the observation.

“Why don’t you keep it?” Ajay wondered as he covered his confusion by making notes. “I don’t think Ridder would notice.”

Julia chuckled. “I don’t think he would either; but that is stealing, Detective.”

Ajay felt the sting of a blush. He kept his head lowered to hide it as he moved to where a narrow cot was shoved behind several paint-covered tables. A blanket was rumpled on top along with a shirt covered in paint.

“He keeps his personal things under the cot,” Julia told him.

“Is it all right to look through those?” Ajay asked as he bent and spotted several plastic boxes under the cot.

“I feel like I’m invading his privacy,” Julia admitted uncertainly. “I’m only his model, not a family member.”

“Can we contact anyone for permission?” Ajay asked. “I’d like to keep this search as legal as possible. If we don’t actually have permission to be here, there might be consequences later.”

“I’ve never heard David speak of any family,” Julia said, at a loss. “David gave me a key because we work so often together. That’s all the *legal* that I can offer you, I’m afraid.”

Ajay considered it and then decided it would have to be enough. “That key might be enough to get us out of a breaking and entering charge,” he said as he pulled the boxes out from under the cot.

Where paintings had been stacked haphazardly, the boxes—in stark contrast—contained neatly filed color and black and white photographs. There were hundreds of them.

“He takes his camera everywhere and shoots photos of everything that catches his interest,” Julia explained as she gingerly sat on the cot. “He uses them for references for his paintings.”

Kneeling on the floor, Ajay began going through them. He found photos of people, animals, landscapes, architecture, signs, and even the textures of bark, leaves, and stones all carefully

organized with labeled tabs. One label read *party* and seemed the newest. Ajay took out a sheaf of photos showing a glittering party at someone's very expensive home.

"That's Ms. Engles home," Julia told him with a frown. "I didn't know that David had gone there." She pointed a slim finger at some of the people in the photos. "That's the Chief of Police with Mayor Bale. The two men on the right are David's patrons, Cassini and Philmore. I don't recognize the women."

"They look serious," Ajay mused. "It must have been a boring party."

Julia shrugged ruefully. "They usually are. People use them to make connections, seal business deals, and show off their bling."

"Bling?" Ajay pointed to the women in glittering dresses and jewels. "They're bling?"

Julia laughed her beautiful laugh and motioned to her jewelry. "This is bling. Those women are *escorts*."

"Why would Ridder want photos of a boring party?" Ajay wondered as he looked through the rest.

Julia shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe he liked the glitter, the shadows, or Bale's craggy face?"

Ajay finished looking through the photos and then stood up to continue his thorough search of the studio. "Does Ridder develop his own photos?"

"Yes, in that bathroom over there," Julia motioned to a sign that read *keep out* over a battered doorway. "There are four sinks and long counters. It used to be an employee bathroom, I imagine, when this place was a factory. David doesn't like digital photography. He always uses an old Nikon camera."

Ajay opened the door and looked inside as he asked, "Do you go to those types of parties? Have you been to any lately with Ridder?"

Julia leaned in the doorway, arms tucked into her sleeves again. She looked almost embarrassed as she replied, "I've never been to a party with David, but I do go to them. I need to make contacts in the art community. That's how I get work, besides referrals."

As Ajay looked through a hanging string of photos, he said absently with his mind on his work, "I'm sure people enjoy having you as their escort."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Julia's tone was sharp and offended.

Ajay froze with his hand poised on a photo of an old woman feeding birds and saw that Julia was frowning angrily, delicate nostrils flaring. He replayed his words in his head and then understood. "I thought an escort was a date. I'm wrong, aren't I?"

Julia looked confused and then her expression showed her amusement. "You are an odd man, Kavanagh. You remind me of David. You're very innocent."

"You mean *ignorant*?" Ajay wondered sharply, trying not to be offended in turn. He left the photos and examined the chemicals and empty developing trays on the long counter.

"Knowing the meaning of catty insults is not a sign of intelligence," Julia said. "Not knowing them is rather charming actually. In answer to your question though, yes, I did go to parties as someone's date at first. But when I began posing for more *known* artists, I was invited as part of the art crowd as a matter of course. That's how I met Samantha Engles."

Ajay felt angry with himself. He was supposed to be a professional, yet he had almost had a fight with his client. He was there to gather clues. He needed to focus. "I don't see Ridder's camera," he noticed. "He must have taken it with him."

"His clothes are gone as well," Julia told him, looking pensive. "Not that he had that many to take. He spends almost all of his money on his paints and canvases. I doubt he has two good pairs of jeans to wear."

"Wherever he went," Ajay theorized as he made notes, "it can't have been far or done in style if he's short of cash."

"David did tell me that Engles had given him an advance on the art show," Julia informed him. "I suppose she wanted him to buy a decent suit to wear. David also has patrons who support him. He might have called one of them to help him."

"Have you checked with them?" Ajay asked as he returned to the main studio.

"I only know one of his patrons," Julia replied as she followed behind Ajay in his careful examination of the room. "I did search for phone numbers to call, but I never found a Rolodex of any sort. David must keep them all on his cell phone."

Ajay began looking through newer paintings, but his thoughts returned to the photographs. He tried to match references with actual paintings. As he picked through numerous paintings of Julia, a fact struck him suddenly.

"There weren't any reference photos of you. Why is that, when you are his latest model?" Ajay wondered.

“It could be because I actually pose for him in the flesh.” Julia replied, arching an eyebrow at Ajay for missing the obvious.

“You can’t have posed the entire time,” Ajay said defensively. “Taking photographs to use while you aren’t available seems logical.”

Julia appeared slightly embarrassed. “I don’t really think David found me an interesting subject. He was only painting me because Engles asked him to. When I wasn’t available, he was usually working on other paintings.”

Ajay’s eyes flicked to the large painting of Julia at the center of the room. It didn’t look like the work of an uninterested man. It was too vibrant; too full of emotion and attention to detail. Ajay found himself saying without thought, “Perhaps Ridder considered the actual woman more inspiring than a photograph.”

Julia chuckled and said, “That sounded like a compliment, so I’ll thank you.”

Feeling flustered and confused as to why he had said such a thing, Ajay tried to regain his professionalism. He cleared his throat and managed to say, “Ridder is a prolific painter, yet all of these canvases are completely dry. If David was becoming interested in parties as a subject, as his reference photos seem to indicate, it’s reasonable to conclude he must have started painting already.”

“It’s possible.” Julia looked around them. “In fact, it’s very possible. I don’t see anything started though.”

Ajay stopped at an area that seemed strangely free of clutter. Looking down, he saw splatters of paint on the already paint covered concrete floor. The pattern of paint followed a definite straight line. If a man were painting the bottom edge of a canvas, paint might splatter in that very same manner. Crouching, Ajay touched the paint gingerly. It was only beginning to dry, the thicker clumps still wet at their centers.

Straightening, Ajay asked, “Has Ms. Engles begun taking paintings for the art show?”

“I don’t know. Mine are all still here. Why wouldn’t she take them as well?”

“I’ll have to ask her that,” Ajay replied thoughtfully.

“I suppose I should have realized you would want to speak to her.” Julia looked as if she might have been doing something wrong and was about to get caught at it.

“You object?” Ajay asked, perplexed. He searched Ridder’s personal area again.

There was a long moment of silence. When Ajay looked at his client, he could see she was struggling as if she wasn't sure whether to reveal something or not.

"It's in Engles best interest, and the interest of those backing the art show, to find David as quickly as possible," Julia finally said. "Yet...Engles gave me the name of a back street investigator instead of urging me to call police investigators."

"I am a professional," Ajay argued stiffly.

"You don't even have a sign on your office door," Julia pointed out.

"Why did you hire me, then, if you have doubts about my ability to carry out this investigation?" Ajay angrily wanted to know.

Julia fished out the photos of the mayor and the chief of police and flashed them at Ajay before stuffing them back into their slot in the box. "I'm not a dumb blonde, Detective Kavanagh. Do I know why Samantha Engles wouldn't want to find her rising star of the art world? No. Do I know why she would risk losing that much money by giving me your name? No. I do know though that if she doesn't want David Ridder found, her friends—the Chief of Police and the Mayor of our fair city—will make sure that he isn't."

Ajay digested that and weighed Julia's suspicions with the facts. "She could have picked up my name from anywhere," he admitted. "I leave my cards all over the city." The more embarrassing theory was that the Chief of Police had suggested him knowing his record with the force and expecting him to fail.

"I know it sounds like a bad novel," Julia said self-deprecatingly. She sank her hands into her woolen sleeves and paced the cold room as she continued. "I want to believe that he just went away; that he couldn't take the stress of the show or Engles hounding him to change himself or his subjects to become more marketable in the art world. It makes perfect sense, if you know David. What doesn't make sense is how Engles is reacting to all of this. She's not acting like a frantic agent afraid of losing thousands of dollars and becoming the laughing stock of the art world. When I saw your office, it made my suspicions that much stronger."

Ajay was finishing his notes. He let up on the pressure of his pencil when he realized that he was angrily digging into the paper. He tucked his writing pad and pencil into his coat pocket before he trusted his temper enough to reply, "I can see how my office might create some doubt as to my ability," he acknowledged.

Julia winced and tried to offer an apology.

Ajay held up a hand to forestall her and said, "I'm not going to dismiss your suspicions because I'm beginning to have some of my own," he admitted.

Julia looked both alarmed and relieved.

"I won't jump to any conclusions though," Ajay added quickly. "I will speak to other people, including Ms. Engles, before I make any guesses as to what might have happened to Ridder. Until then, it is simply a case involving a man who doesn't want to be found."

Julia followed Ajay to the door, fishing the door key out of one pocket in preparation to lock up. She seemed embarrassed. "My suspicions sound foolish now that I've said them out loud."

Ajay frowned and thrust his hands deep into his jacket pockets. "I won't discount any suspicions until I have all of the facts. I do have to ask you why you're bothering to pursue this case. Is it simply because you're afraid that your paintings won't be shown? I need to know how committed you are. I don't want you to decide against further investigation when I'm in the middle of solving the case."

Julia said almost angrily, "I've told you before, it's not just about the paintings. I'm not that shallow. It's about David. Maybe he doesn't consider me anything more than his model, but I've really grown to care about him. He's special. The world would be a sorrier place without him and his wonderful art. He needs to show it. He needs to be recognized for his talent. If he's in trouble, then he needs help. I won't suddenly change my mind about getting him that help."

Ajay felt reassured, but he also felt a tinge of jealousy. He wondered at its source as he firmly warned Julia, "Our suspicions might be groundless. Ms. Engles, despite her connections, might simply be reacting with inexperience or is too distraught over the possible loss of her career to choose a detective with any competence. Please, don't make any accusations before I gather enough facts to support them."

"I understand," Julia agreed, though Ajay could sense her frustration. "When will you contact me again?"

"As soon as I have some leads to investigate," Ajay replied. "I'll keep you informed of my progress."

Julia gave him Ms. Engles' phone number and then smiled as she admitted, "I didn't think much of you when we first met, Mr. Kavanagh, but you are inspiring confidence now."

That pleased Ajay. Long after he left Ridder's studio and Julia had taken a cab, he was still smiling warmly.

Chapter Three

“Where am I supposed to put your food, Jay?” The waitress had a tray balanced on one hand and her other hand rested on her hip as she glared at Ajay. “You do still have an office, right?”

Ajay arranged his notes off to one side and tapped the table. “I can’t think there.”

The elderly redhead put down his cup of coffee and a plate with his ham sandwich as she tried to make sense of his bad handwriting. “And you *can* think in a crowded, noisy diner under the tracks of the West Street train?”

“White noise,” Ajay told her as he rearranged a note thoughtfully and took a sip of his coffee. “When you grow up in a large family, Mrs. Monnety, it’s never quiet. You find that you can’t think without some noise.”

“Oh, I see. That makes perfect sense,” she said with good-natured sarcasm. Her mood soured abruptly though when she saw the small sketch of Julia among Ajay’s notes. “Who’s she?”

Ajay had forgotten about it. Shortly after making the mark across Julia’s face with his pencil, Ajay had felt strangely compelled to carefully erase that mark and keep the sketch with his notes. It seemed a foolish impulse now as he replied, “She’s my new client.”

“Not that you’re a great artist or anything,” Mrs. Monnety said with an edge in her voice, “but I can see she’s beautiful.”

Ajay said firmly, “Her looks don’t matter. Like I said, she’s just a client.”

Mrs. Monnety arched a red eyebrow at Ajay’s strong response, but then said critically, “You’re alone too much, Jay. Your mother says you’re all business. A man needs a life outside of his job. You and my daughter Jessica are so much alike, both of you worrying about success rather than starting a family. She’s free tonight, for once. Why don’t you take her out? You can both forget about work and have a good time together.”

Ajay floundered for a reply.

The diner was very crowded and patrons were calling for Mrs. Monnety impatiently. “All right, all right!” she shouted at them. “I’m coming!” Leaning down close to Ajay, she quickly said, “Think about it, Ajay. You’re not getting any younger.”

Ajay had gone to school with Mrs. Monnety’s skinny, redheaded daughter. Mrs. Monnety was a regular at his parent’s home. Starting anything with Jessica, even if he had been inclined, would have felt as if he were dating one of his sisters.

Maybe that was his problem? Ajay looked up from his notes to see the bustling intersection of Warrenburg and Devoe Streets outside the large window of the diner. The old part of the city, filled with people who were so well known, couldn't present a choice that didn't feel as if it carried a hint of the incestuous. When finally presented with someone new, beautiful, and as decidedly different as Julia, it was understandable he would react strongly. That's all it was, Ajay told himself with relief. He wasn't falling for his client.

Ajay looked down at his notes. They seemed to swirl before his eyes, nothing making sense. He needed to stop getting distracted. He needed more information for his case. He needed to talk to the one person who might have been the driving force behind Ridder's disappearance, Samantha Engles. He took out her phone number and pulled out his cell phone.

Ms. Engles had a secretary who wasn't about to let just anyone speak with her boss.

"I'd like to make an appointment to see Ms. Engles as soon as possible," Ajay persisted.

"Ms. Engles is fully booked, sir," she said in a tone which suggested she told everyone she didn't recognize the same thing.

"This is about her client, David Ridder," Ajay informed her quickly, sensing he was about to be disconnected.

"Ridder?" The secretary changed her attitude instantly. "I'll put you through at once."

Ajay fiddled with his notes as he waited on hold, pencil poised to make more. Mrs. Monnety slid a plate of apple pie by his elbow and smiled at him in a way that told him it was a bribe to date her daughter. Ajay was oblivious to that fact until he gave her a distracted nod of thanks. Mrs. Monnety joyfully hugged him and exclaimed excitedly, "Be at our home at eight sharp. Jessica will be ready. Take her some place nice, Jay."

Her words registered a second too late. She was gone into the crowd of diners by then and Engles was on the line before Ajay could call her back and tell her she was making a mistake.

"Hello? This is Detective who?"

"Aja-Ajay Kavanagh," he stammered, rattled and trying to bring his thoughts back to the case.

"My secretary tells me you have information about David Ridder?" Her tone warned him he had better not be wasting her time.

“I’m sorry, but the purpose of my call is to gather information about Mr. Ridder, Ms. Engles,” Ajay told her. “Ms. Julia Temple hired my services, at your suggestion. I’ll need to ask you some questions to help my investigation into his disappearance.”

“If I knew anything, I would have found him myself!” Engles snapped.

“It is possible that you know something without realizing it,” Ajay replied. “You might unknowingly have a clue that will help me locate his whereabouts. I’d also like to question Ridder’s family, friends, or close patrons. If you have their phone numbers or addresses, I would appreciate having that information.”

“What I realize, Mr. Kavanagh,” she said angrily, “is that I’m about to lose thousands of dollars, and the respect of the art community, when I’m forced to cancel my art show. To prevent that, I’ve already hired the best that the city police department can offer to find David.”

Ajay frowned as he neatly stacked his notes and settled a blank notepaper on top. “I don’t think I understand, Ms. Engles. Why did you suggest my service to Ms. Temple, if you’ve already gone to the police?”

“To keep Julia busy and out of my hair.” She laughed derisively and then said, “That little, idiot wouldn’t stop calling me. I simply handed over your card—the one you so conveniently placed in the windshield wiper of my Mercedes—and told her that you were the best. I can’t blame her for being afraid that her paintings won’t show, but I can’t have her going into hysterics or getting in the way of a real investigation either.”

It was hard to control his hot flush of anger and embarrassment, but Ajay forced his voice to remain cool and professional as he said, “Whatever the circumstance, I was hired by Julia Temple. I do need to speak with you privately and ask questions that will help with my investigation.”

“And I’ve told you I already have professionals on the case, Mr. Kavanagh,” she retorted. “Professionals who don’t need to pepper every car and note board in the city with their advertisement. Good day, Mr. Kavanagh. I’m a busy person.”

The cell phone went dead. Ajay slowly placed it back into his pocket. He made several notes and then pocketed them as well. He was used to insults from people who didn’t believe he was a good detective. It was going to be difficult to explain to Julia, though, that Ajay had only been recommended to her as a means to keep her occupied. There wasn’t any question that he would

tell Julia. Going forward with the case would be his client's decision, but having hostile sources of information might make the investigation impossible.

Ajay finished his food, gulped the rest of his coffee, and then went to pay his bill. On his way out of the diner, Mrs. Monnety smiled brightly and reminded him, "Eight sharp, Jay! Flowers would be a nice touch too."

In the face of her glowing enthusiasm, Ajay didn't have the heart to tell her she was mistaken. His case had taken a bad turn and he had somehow offered to go on a date with Jessica Monnety. It was not turning out to be a good day and it was barely twelve o' clock. The last thing he wanted to do was to continue his bad day into the afternoon by calling his client not only empty handed, but bearing bad news.

Between two old brownstone buildings was a very small community garden. Though it was nothing more than a few potted flowers, staked tomato bushes, and several anemic looking trees during the growing season, it still boasted a few hardy rose bushes that refused to cease blooming even in the snow and a comfortable bench in front of a dry stone fountain. With its stone cupid shooting a stone fish, the fountain was the focal point. When Ajay felt troubled, he was always drawn to that garden. Traffic passed by and the noise of the city was as loud as ever, but it seemed like another world entirely.

"If you're going to use it, you need to work in it," an old voice complained.

Ajay looked over, unsurprised to see an old man in a thick winter coat hunched over the snow covered roses. He held a pruner in one hand. His head tilted so that his large straw hat hid everything except for one bright eye and a small part of his face.

"Hello, Mr. Yamato. I promise, next Sunday I'll shovel snow, okay?"

"You always say that," the old man grouched as he made a rather brutal cut on one of the rose canes. "You never deliver, Ajay."

"Sorry." Ajay turned his attention back to the fountain.

Mr. Yamato had been a fixture of the community garden since Ajay had been a child playing among the flowers. Perhaps he was cranky and not always willing to talk, but he seemed to have a gift for grounding Ajay when he needed it the most by just being a constant presence taking care of the garden.

"What is it this time?" Mr. Yamato wondered testily. "If you're going to wear the paint off of my bench, you might as well entertain me with tales of your woes."

“Work...life...take your pick. Both of them are going to hell.” Ajay leaned his head back to let the small bit of sun that managed to get between the buildings warm him. Eyes closed, he added, “I just need one break and I’m not getting it.”

Mr. Yamato snorted in derision as he tucked the garden refuse and a few of the frozen roses into his basket. “Breaks are for people who aren’t good enough, Ajay.”

“That’s not true,” Ajay argued bitterly. “Sometimes the odds are just too great.”

“And *never trying* makes those odds even greater. You do the very best you can. You do what’s right for you. You explore every possibility.”

Ajay sighed heavily. “And if that’s not enough?”

Mr. Yamato shrugged. “Then maybe it wasn’t what you were meant for? Who wants a ham-handed surgeon, or a police officer that can’t shoot straight, or—”

“A detective that can’t solve cases properly?” Ajay cut in as he sat up with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Sometimes, the truth hurts.” Mr. Yamato dug in his basket and pulled out a glass jar filled with tomatoes. He moved to give it to Ajay. “Sometimes, we make our own truths by giving up.”

Ajay frowned as he turned the glass jar in his big hands to examine it. “You know that I never give up, Mr. Yamato.”

“But you bend too often to the harsh winds,” the old man pointed out. When Ajay looked at him blankly, he translated testily. “You complain too much, boy. Less complaining about bad luck and more action will get you results.”

Ajay nodded in agreement. He gestured at Yamato with the glass jar and asked, “What am I going to do with this?”

The old man shrugged and shuffled back to his plants. “One jar of tomato preserves may seem useless, but it can flavor many dishes. Give it to your mother.”

“Is that some sort of cryptic, oriental metaphor for something that I should know already?” Ajay asked in confusion.

Mr. Yamato snorted. “It’s just tomato preserves, Ajay Kavanagh. Your mother works in the garden. She’s owed a share of the tomato harvest. I was taking that to Mrs. Lancaster, but I can get her another jar.”

“One jar?” Ajay chuckled.

“If you had helped more, the harvest would have been larger,” Mr. Yamato retorted.

“I’ll be here Sunday to help clean up the garden,” Ajay promised.

“No, you won’t,” Mr. Yamato grumbled as he shuffled back to his flowers. “But that’s how young people are. It pleases me to make you feel guilty about it though. An old man has so very little to amuse him.”

Ajay laughed but then said seriously, “Thank you.”

“What for?” Mr. Yamato wondered. He eyed Ajay from under the brim of his hat as if Ajay might have lost his mind.

Ajay struggled for a reason and then simply shrugged and replied, “I always feel better after I come here.”

The old man turned his sharp eye on the garden and nodded once. “Nature does clear the mind.” That eye swiveled back to Ajay and the hat tilted up just enough for Ajay to see a half smile as he added, “And it’s about time you fell in love, Kavanagh.”

Ajay scowled. “I’m not...” he began to protest, but the old man was already shuffling towards the trees and a larger pruner.

Mystified, Ajay left the garden and began walking toward his office as he wondered how the old man had come to a conclusion like that one. He chalked it up to some form of senility. The old man must be nearing eighty, after all.

That brought to mind the tomato preserves. Ajay looked down at the jar, admiring the man’s tenacity in trying to grow anything in such a hostile environment. One jar could flavor many dishes. One jar had many uses.

Ajay pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and called Julia Temple.

She answered, sounding out of breath.

“This is Detective Kavanagh. Did I catch you at a bad time?” Ajay wondered.

“I was just showering,” Julia replied. “It’s all right though.” There were sounds of movement, as if Julia was toweling off, and then Julia asked, “Is there news?”

Ajay momentarily imaged Julia in the shower with water cascading down her lithe body; a body he could visualize perfectly from recalling her painted likeness.

“Watch where you’re going, Kavanagh!” a hotdog vendor snarled as Ajay ran into his cart.

“Sorry, Mr. Harris,” Ajay apologized as he recovered his balance.

“You young kids!” the man complained. “You’re always talking on your damn cell phones! Next you’ll be walking into traffic.”

“What’s going on?” Julia asked in confusion, having heard some of the conversation.

“I wasn’t watching where I was going,” Ajay replied in embarrassment. He found a place to stand against a wall of a drugstore that was out of the steady stream of pedestrians.

“Are you all right?” Julia sounded concerned.

“Perfectly all right,” Ajay assured him.

“Afternoon, Ajay!” an elderly woman called as she passed.

“Afternoon, Mrs. Grungen,” Ajay replied automatically. He moved his cell to his other ear and straightened his coat.

Julia gave an amused chuckle and asked, “Where are you?”

“Devoe Street,” Ajay replied.

“Hey, Jay!” a young, dark haired man called with a cocky salute as he passed Ajay by.

“Afternoon, Mike,” Ajay replied. He half-turned toward the drugstore wall and put a finger in one ear to block out the traffic noise. “I spoke with Ms. Engles,” Ajay told Julia.

Julia’s amusement went away instantly. “You don’t sound as if that turned out well.”

“It didn’t. She wouldn’t speak to me about Ridder. In fact, she made it clear she’s relying on the police department to find him. I’m afraid she only gave you my card to keep you from interfering. She seemed certain I’m neither competent nor professional enough to work a case properly.”

There was a moment of quiet, and then Julia asked, “How likely is it that you can continue your investigation without her help?”

“It will be difficult,” Ajay told him truthfully.

“Jay?” A very elderly woman, with her arms full of grocery bags, peered up at him nearsightedly over the rim of her glasses. When she confirmed his identity, she asked him, “Be a dear and help me get my bags home, will you?”

“Of course, Mrs. Yuma,” Ajay agreed without a second thought. He put his jar of preserves in one of his large pockets, cradled his cell between his ear and his shoulder, and took her bags from her. Following the bent, old woman, they made slow progress up the street.

“If you can assist me,” Ajay continued his conversation with Julia, “I might be able to get information from other sources. Remember those men in the photos that Ridder took at the party? You said you knew them. Can you give me their phone numbers?”

Julia was quiet, thinking. She finally said cautiously, “They are both important men and not likely to speak with just anyone, Detective Kavanagh. I know Mr. Cassini well. I should speak with him first and explain to him about Ridder. If he knows how important this is, he might be more helpful when you call. Unfortunately, I don’t personally know Mr. Philmore. I don’t have his phone number.”

Ajay almost dropped the cell and Mrs. Yuma’s bags when children rushed past him laughing and bumping into him. When he had settled both grocery bags and his cell phone again, he said to Julia, “Any help you can give is appreciated.”

“Anything to find David.”

“Thank you for allowing me to continue with the investigation,” Ajay said gratefully as he followed Mrs. Yuma up her apartment steps.

“I really don’t know why I should. You don’t have a proper office,” Julia pointed out. “You call clients from the street. You aren’t affiliated with a proper police department.”

“Watch that you don’t let Boo Boo out,” Mrs. Yuma warned. She opened her apartment door. Her little Yorkshire terrier barked at them.

“Yes, Mrs. Yuma.” Ajay was feeling the sting of Julia’s criticism. “Then why allow me to continue the case?” he asked Julia in confusion.

As Ajay put Mrs. Yuma’s bags down on her kitchen table and avoided her little dog nipping at his heels, he heard Julia reply, “Because dropping it would be letting Ms. Engles win, wouldn’t it? I’m really not ready to allow that.”

“You are such a good boy, Jay! Thank you!” Mrs. Yuma said warmly. “Here’s a cookie for your trouble.” She gave Ajay a sugar cookie, patted him on a muscular arm, and saw him to the door.

“Anytime, Mrs. Yuma.” Ajay took a bite of his cookie as he made his way out of the apartment building.

Julia laughed and said, “There’s another reason. I don’t think I can bring myself to fire a man who helps little old ladies with their bags.”

“I am a professional,” Ajay felt the need to say defensively. “Perhaps my methods are unorthodox, but I do get results.”

“I can believe that,” Julia replied seriously. “At least you haven’t given me any reason to doubt you...yet.”

That *yet* hung heavy in the air. It was a warning.

“With proper information, I can solve this case, Ms. Temple,” Ajay assured her.

“And that information gathering is up to me for the time being,” Julia said as if she were contemplating an unpleasant task.

“I’m sorry, but yes,” Ajay told her, not liking it any more than Julia.

“I’ll do my best,” Julia assured him.

“Thank you, Ms. Temple,” Ajay said in relief.

“You can call me Julia,” Julia told him in an amused tone. “May I call you Ajay, or Jay? Isn’t that what I heard everyone calling you?”

“Ajay is fine,” Ajay told her and felt the sting of a blush.

“Ajay then,” Julia said. She added, “I might have something for you tomorrow. When is a good time to call?”

“I’m up early,” Ajay assured her.

“And you’re always on duty?” Julia wondered.

“Yes, mostly.” Ajay felt uncomfortable, as if he were admitting that he didn’t have a personal life.

“Until tomorrow, then,” Julia told him. “Goodbye, Ajay.”

“Goodbye, Ms.—Julia.” Ajay slapped himself on the forehead in embarrassment as Julia laughed and ended the call. “I sounded like an idiot,” Ajay complained to himself.

“So what’s new about that?” his brother wondered.

Ajay realized that his steps had taken him all the way to the home of his parents. His older brother was on the front steps having a smoke.

The Kavanaghs were a clan of redheads and his brother Kile was no exception. It was buzzed close to his skull and the color was startling compared to his pale skin. Big and muscular, he had a temper as fiery as his hair. Working as a fireman, he was often jokingly accused of starting more fires than he put out.

“Did your wife toss you out of your house again?” Ajay wondered in way of retaliation.

Kile scowled, stubbed out his cigarette on the railing, and muttered, “Yeah. She said something about nail polish and eggs. I haven’t figured it out yet.”

Kile’s wife had an even worse temper than Kile. A grade-A firecracker, it often made their parents’ home ground zero for fireworks.

“Staying the night?” Ajay wondered.

Kile waved a cell phone at him. “If she calls, I go back home. If she doesn’t, I’m off to the fire station. I’m not staying here to suffer through another one of Ma’s long lectures about sensitivity.”

“If you’d listen—” Ajay began, but Kile sneered and cut him off.

“Wait until you’re married, dumb ass.” Kile lit another cigarette. “Then you’ll realize that more than half of women’s arguments don’t make any damned sense at all.”

Ajay snorted as he walked up the steps to the front door. “Well, I don’t plan on that any time soon.”

“So what’s the interest in Jessica Monnety then?” Kile wondered. “It’s not like she’s going to put out or anything.”

Ajay turned and stared at him in surprise. “How did you know about that?”

Kile grinned and took a puff of his cigarette. He replied, “Who do you think Mrs. Monnety would call first thing? Ma, of course. I’m sure everyone in the city knows about your date by now.” Kile looked up at Ajay and asked seriously, “So what gives? Why the sudden interest in Jessica?”

Ajay rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment and admitted. “It was an accident. I didn’t really agree to a date. It just...”

“Mrs. Monnety just made it happen?” Kile guessed. He snickered and then said, “You *are* a dumbass.” He grunted and added, “Well, at least you’ll be the one who’ll get the lecture about sensitivity when you dump the girl.”

“It’s just dinner,” Ajay protested in alarm.

Kile laughed and said, “That’s what you think. Jessica is probably already planning the wedding. That’s the way women are.”

“I’ll have to explain right away.”

“Good luck with that.” Kile retorted derisively and then asked jokingly, “So, who’ll you pick as best man? Thought of any good names for the first born?”

Kile’s laughter followed Ajay into the house and he angrily slammed the door shut behind him.

Ajay’s reaction wasn’t just fueled by anger. He was afraid that his brother was right. What if Jessica did believe Ajay was contemplating the start of a serious relationship?

“Ajay Kavanagh!”

Ajay flinched as he almost walked into his mother. She was blocking the hallway, arms crossed over her breast and expression as serious as her tone. She was a small woman in a plain dress and sensible shoes, with her hair caught back in a graying bun, but her angry blue eyes made Ajay’s stomach clench in trepidation.

“What’s wrong?” Ajay asked cautiously.

“I expected this from Kile, or even Steven—that lay-about—but not you,” she said as she poked a finger hard into his broad chest.

“I’m not sure what—,” Ajay began, but she cut him off.

“Why are you dating Jessica Monnety?” his mother demanded point blank. “I couldn’t believe it when her mother called and told me. I said, ‘*But Jay’s never said word one about seeing Jessica.*’ She said that the date was set for tonight, though, and she was as pleased as a cat with a fat tuna, I can tell you.”

Ajay raked his fingers through his hair roughly in exasperation. He couldn’t find the words to explain what he didn’t understand himself. His mother eyed him keenly and guessed the cause of his turmoil.

“She made the date for you, didn’t she?” When Ajay nodded miserably, her anger found a new direction. “That damned woman! Can’t she see how hurt her daughter will be when you tell her that you aren’t interested?”

Ajay felt suddenly defensive. “Who says I’m not interested? Maybe I need to date more? I’ve been so wrapped up in work, Ma, that I haven’t given myself time for a social life. This could be a good thing.”

Her eyes widened skeptically. “You and Jessica? A good thing? You’re about as compatible as oil and water, Jay. You haven’t liked her since she dumped play sand down your pants in preschool.”

“If you hadn’t noticed, Ma,” Ajay protested, “I’m not four years old anymore.”

“And you’re not old enough to be desperate yet,” his mother retorted. “You’re also too nice to go about breaking hearts. Don’t break Jessica’s. Call her up and explain.”

“What’s to explain?” Ajay demanded and wasn’t able to keep his irritation out of his voice. “You think you know what I want, but even I haven’t figured that out yet, Ma. Maybe it’s Jessica.”

His mother took a deep breath, and Ajay expected a lecture about respecting his parents. She surprised him by letting it out again and taking a firm hold on his arm. Her voice was low, keeping her next words between them. "I know it's hard for you, but we love you. Don't make choices because you want our approval. Make choices that will make you happy."

"This might make me happy," Ajay insisted.

She let him go and made an exasperated sound. She didn't believe it any more than he did, but he felt challenged. When challenged, Ajay never backed down. If one date would stop his mother and everyone else from speculating about his sexuality, it would be an evening well spent.

"A hard-headed Kavanagh to the bone," his mother grumbled. "Just like your father."

Not by blood, Ajay thought as he followed his mother down the hallway, but by example. His father had never backed down from anything and neither had his mother. He had learned from the best.

Even though most of his brothers and sisters were grown, some with families of their own, his parent's plum colored, Victorian era, three-story home still remained at the center of all their lives. They came often to relax and reconnect with the solid foundation of their family. Steven was the only one who still lived there.

"Dumb-ass!" Steven said as he passed them on the way to his bedroom in the basement.

"Grease bat," Ajay retorted.

Steven used styling gel to spike his red hair and he had a tattoo of a bat on his neck. He was proud of both of those features. He sneered and retorted, "That's better than a boring dweeb who can't get a date."

"I have a date," Ajay informed him coolly. He felt a guilty pleasure when his brother's eyes went wide in surprise.

"Boys!" their mother complained. "Can it."

"Yes, ma'am," they both said at the same time.

"This way, Ajay." His mother steered him into his parent's bedroom.

It had always been off limits to the Kavanagh children. Even though he was an adult now and was going in with his mother's permission, it still made Ajay nervous.

There was a neat blue quilt on the bed, an old dresser decorated with white Irish doilies, and a Victorian era lamp on the side table by the bed. That side table also held a romance novel opened up and face down. On the cover, a knight in medieval armor was rescuing a damsel in distress.

Ajay looked away, unable to explain his sudden wave of uncomfortable embarrassment. It seemed wrong and too personal to see where his parents relaxed and were together intimately.

“You need something nice to wear,” his mother explained.

Ajay was quick to protest. “I’m not sixteen, Ma. I don’t need you to dress me for my date.”

“A good coat at least?” his mom suggested as she opened a closet door and started fingering coats his father hadn’t worn in years.

“I’m just taking her to the diner,” Ajay said.

Ajay’s mother turned with a frown of disapproval. “That’s not much of a date. Why don’t you take her to Adaggio’s? I’ll call Phillip Adaggio and let him know that you’re coming. He’ll treat you and Jessica very special.”

“The diner will take less time,” Ajay said without thinking and then wished that he hadn’t.

His mother looked concerned now. “Is this a race?”

“I have a case.” Ajay fiddled with his shirt sleeves uncomfortably.

His mother sighed. She asked, “What is this all about, Jay?”

He didn’t know. He felt confused. He had liked telling his brother about the date and he had liked being able to say he was doing something normal for once. That feeling wasn’t lasting though. It was being replaced by certain knowledge that he was playing a false role in a play of his own making. He not only didn’t want to go on a date with Jessica Monnety, he didn’t want that kind of involvement with any woman just then.

His mother closed the closet door firmly. “Ajay, please be careful. You’re going to hurt Jessica.”

Ajay took a shaky breath and nodded. “I’ll tell her, Ma. I won’t let her think I’m interested.”

“You’re a good boy, Ajay,” his mother said with a smile and patted his muscular arm. “The truth hurts too; but the longer the lie goes on, the more that hurt grows.”

“Does Da know about the date?” Ajay asked in sudden trepidation.

His mother sighed. “Of course and he’s that proud too.”

Ajay felt his stomach go into a knot.

“He’s proud of you no matter what, Jay,” his mother quickly added. “He just wants you to be happy. It’s not only about Jessica Monnety and a date. He thinks you’re lonely. I do too.” She patted his arm again. “I’ll tell him. Just make sure you’re well away before he gets home. I don’t think you need his enthusiasm right now.”

He wanted to thank her, but he didn't know if he could say it without sounding pathetic. Ajay didn't like not being able to face his father. The man had always been someone he could be truthful with. This seemed too much like subterfuge; a lie...at least until his mother explained things.

"You really should buy some better clothes, Ajay," his mother complained as she took him from her bedroom into more comfortable hallways. "Your client, Julia Temple, wasn't it? Well, I don't think she would appreciate that shirt with a button missing and that frumpy, black, long coat of yours any more than Jessica."

Ajay fingered his shirt and the missing button with dismay. He had been wearing the same shirt at their meeting. What had Julia thought of that? "Maybe I could borrow a few of Da's good shirts, just until I can buy a few of my own?"

There was quiet from his mother. Her back, as she led him into the kitchen, seemed to shake.

"What's wrong, Ma?" Ajay asked in worry.

His mother looked over her shoulder with bright eyes, and Ajay realized that she was laughing. "Of course you can borrow anything you like, Jay. It seems that your client is someone you want to impress."

Ajay was desperate to change the subject. He dug into his pocket for the jar of tomato preserves and handed it to his mother.

His mother read the handmade label on the jar with Yamato's name and the date of the harvest written on it.

Ajay said the phrase guaranteed to get his mother off the subject of Julia and his non-existent love life, "I'm starved."

"Can't wait for your dinner date?" his mother asked in surprise, but she put away the preserves and began making a sandwich for him.

"I don't think I'll be having dinner once I tell Jessica we're not on a real date."

His mother nodded ruefully as she spread mayonnaise on a slice of white bread. "You're probably right about that, son."

Chapter Four

She's actually very pretty, Ajay thought as Jessica opened the door of her home and positioned her purse on one shoulder firmly. In a red sheathe dress and red high heels, her makeup and upswept, brown hair made her look ready for any five star event.

"Have fun, you two!" her mother called as she followed them onto the front walk and pointed a camera at them.

"Pose, idiot," Jessica growled under her breath as she hooked her arm in Ajay's and smiled for the photo.

Her mother took the photo with a happy giggle and then waved goodbye as Jessica steered Ajay towards the busy street.

Jessica hailed a cab and all but pushed Ajay into it. When they were both in the back seat, she told the driver, "Talbot's Tea Room."

The cab driver whistled appreciatively and pulled away from the curb. Jessica's mother followed for a few paces, still waving.

"Let's get this straight," Jessica said with her eyes forward and expression clearly irritated. "I didn't want this date, but you know my mother. You might as well try and argue with a pile of bricks. It gets you nowhere. I'm going to tell you right now that this date is going nowhere. If you actually had any plans for some sort of romance or even the cruder idea of going back to your place later, you can toss them in the nearest dumpster. Not happening, Kavanagh. You are going to pay for my lost evening by taking me to a nice restaurant and buying me whatever I want. By nice, I mean a restaurant uptown that never heard of hamburgers or a half-priced spaghetti dinner."

It took Ajay a few miles to get over his shock and then he was quickly reviewing his finances. He would be eating ramen noodles for a month, he decided glumly, yet it never occurred to him to say no to Jessica's demands. Guilt wouldn't allow it. Because of his confusion and inability to say no to Mrs. Monnety, his predicament was his fault. He could only count himself lucky that Jessica wasn't going to be a broken hearted, rejected woman.

Ajay recovered enough to look over at his *date*. He cleared his throat and then said nervously, "You look nice, Jessica."

“Yes, I know,” she replied without looking at him. “But it’s not for your benefit. If I manage to find a better date, I fully intend to leave you in my dust.”

Ajay sighed and slumped in his seat. “I’m sorry, Jessica.”

“You should be,” she retorted, glared at him briefly, and then looked straight ahead again. “I know how pushy my mother can be, but this is stupid even for you. We don’t even like each other. I made that clear when I dumped sand down your pants in preschool.”

Ajay chuckled. He couldn’t help it. She glared again and then unsuccessfully fought a smile as she said, “Serves you right, then and now.”

“It does. I’m such an idiot.”

“A big lug of an idiot,” she agreed, her smile slipping away and her expression becoming serious. “Some women like that. I don’t.”

The familiar buildings melted into the unfamiliar. Ajay watched through the car window as they crossed onto streets that sported mini-mansions and manicured lawns. They fell away after a time to be replaced by towering, glass skyscrapers, glittering shops, and restaurants that had names that were unpronounceable.

“Straighten your coat and hide that damned missing button,” Jessica told him as she smoothed a hand along her hair to check that it was still perfect. “And don’t you dare embarrass me.”

They stopped in front of a stone building with a metallic sign that read in golden letters and flowing script, Talbot’s Tea Room. A valet lifted an eyebrow at their cab and a doorman, dressed in a stiffly starched black uniform, leaned to say something to him with an obvious look of concern. Ajay sensed trouble.

Jessica was nervously checking her makeup in a small, hand mirror while Ajay climbed out of the cab and paid the driver. Coming around the cab, Ajay then opened Jessica’s door and held out a hand to help her out.

The mirror had been put away, along with all signs of Jessica’s displeasure, as she took his hand. She exited the cab with a smooth grace that reminded Ajay of movie stars attending award ceremonies. As they moved toward the door of the restaurant, Ajay could almost feel sorry that Jessica wasn’t someone he was interested in.

The doorman blocked their path. He gave them a slow, rude appraisal and came to a conclusion that was clear in his expression of distaste. “You have reservations, sir?” he inquired coolly.

Ajay was at a loss, but Jessica smoothly replied, “Of course we do. The name is Monnety.”

The man didn’t have to voice his insult as he smiled condescendingly at her dress and informed her, “We do have standards of attire, Miss Monnety.”

She blushed hotly, and Ajay could see her self-confidence evaporate in an instant. He had always had strong protective tendencies, even for women he didn’t particularly like.

“Are you insulting Ms. Monnety?” Ajay demanded angrily. “I would like to speak to a manager.”

The doorman drew breath to argue, but a familiar voice behind Ajay exclaimed, “Brian! This is a friend of mine, Ajay Kavanagh!”

Ajay turned to see a large man, who looked as if he had been stuffed into an expensive, pinstripe suit, a tall, older man dressed all in black, and Julia Temple.

Julia was dressed in white and gold. The collar of her white leather jacket was trimmed with white fox fur and her ears and her neck were hung with a great deal of gold jewelry. Her hair was loose, a long, golden waterfall decorated with a few micro-braids. Her shimmering gold dress hugged her curves and her gold high heels made her look tall and elegant. She outshone her two older and more conservatively dressed companions. Those companions were both frowning at Ajay.

Julia touched the arm of the big man and said with concern, “This ridiculous doorman is giving my friend trouble. Isn’t that rude? Perhaps we should go elsewhere?”

“N-nothing of the kind, sirs!” the doorman stammered and came to attention as if he were a soldier suddenly confronted by a general. He opened the door and said stiffly, “I was merely confirming this gentleman’s reservation. Please, everyone enjoy your meal and your evening.”

Julia smiled at Ajay like a cat that had just caught a mouse. Her eyes went to Jessica. Her expression turned to displeasure when she realized they were together. Her tone was suddenly formal and cool. “It’s good to see you again, Mr. Kavanagh. I hope that you and your *companion* enjoy your dinner.”

Ajay wasn't sure what he replied. He was too busy being mesmerized by Julia's beautiful appearance. It was as if the world had gone away and there was nothing except the feeling of drowning in Julia Temple's ice blue eyes and the racing of his heart.

The big man was the one who broke the moment. He raised his hand, covered in glittering rings, and put an unlit cigar into his mouth. He bit down on the cigar and growled around it, "I'm starved! Cut the chitchat and let's go to our table." He then placed his hand possessively on Julia's shoulder.

"Of course, Brian," Julia soothed. She allowed the big man to escort her into the restaurant ahead of Ajay and Jessica.

The tall older man in black paused long enough to look down at Jessica and Ajay. He sniffed with contempt and then followed the other two into the restaurant.

"This might not have been a good idea," Jessica said in a small voice.

Without Julia to distract him, Ajay remembered his date. He looked down to find Jessica emotionally and physically deflated. Her hands were twisting together nervously.

Ajay took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. Whatever he felt for Jessica, he wasn't going to end her evening this way. It would be a bitter memory for the rest of the woman's life.

"It is a good idea," Ajay said firmly. He ignored the doorman and took Jessica into the restaurant.

Jessica was looking nervously around them as they were seated. The other women in the restaurant were all wearing expensive designer clothing and a fortune in jewelry. It was clear Jessica was feeling under dressed.

Ajay was feeling nervous for a different reason. Their table was in a position where he could easily see Julia and her companions at their table nearby. Julia was a bright presence as she smiled and laughed between the two more serious men. She didn't look as if she belonged with them, Ajay thought, and hated the way the big man took every opportunity to touch her.

"Do you know her?" Jessica asked when she realized that Ajay was watching them.

Ajay dragged his eyes away with an effort and picked up a menu. He said shortly, "She's a client."

“I didn’t think you had any.” She placed her napkin in her lap and picked up her own menu. “My mother thinks you’re just playing at being a detective and that you’ll find a real job once you settle down.”

Ajay didn’t register the insult. He was too busy trying to suppress an exclamation of surprise as he read the prices on the entrees. They were all outrageously expensive. When the waiter appeared to take their drink orders, Ajay asked for water. He couldn’t control a wince when Jessica ordered wine.

“A moment ago I felt guilty for bringing you here,” Jessica admitted. “But with clients like that, I think you can afford it.”

Ajay could have argued that he hadn’t actually been paid yet. He didn’t want to reveal that his business was on shaky ground, though, or that their meal was going to hurt his bank account severely. It was better to keep some of his dignity intact.

Brian was leaning into Julia, his pudgy arm draped over Julia’s slim shoulders as he said something in low tones. His unlit cigar was in his hand, almost poking the older man in black as he gestured with it. That man was eyeing the two with barely concealed disgust as he leaned sideways to get out of range.

“She’s beautiful,” Jessica said as she followed Ajay’s gaze and looked over her shoulder at Julia. She added cattily, “She must like rich guys, because she certainly isn’t with those two for their looks.”

Ajay brought his eyes back to Jessica with an effort. “Is she?” he asked.

“Is she what?” Jessica asked blankly.

“Beautiful,” Ajay clarified.

Jessica gave him a searching look and then replied slowly, “Yes, she is. Don’t you think so?”

Ajay’s eyes went back to Julia. “Yes,” he agreed.

“Then why ask?” Jessica wanted to know, mystified.

Because he needed someone else to think so, Ajay thought. Someone to confirm that Julia was someone worth staring at and that it was normal to find it hard to look at anyone else.

“You think I look nice and you think she’s beautiful,” Jessica complained as the waiter came to take their order.

“I want the lobster wrapped in Chilean sea bass,” she ordered. “That is the most expensive item on the menu, correct?”

“Yes, it is,” the waiter confirmed in a pleased tone.

Jessica glared at Ajay—who was staring at Julia again—and said angrily, “Good.”

“And for the gentleman?” the waiter prompted.

Ajay pulled his attention away from Julia and glanced down at his menu in confusion. “The house salad,” he finally ordered.

The waiter waited expectantly for the rest of his order.

“That’s all,” Ajay told him firmly.

Ajay tried to ignore the waiter’s disgusted expression and Jessica’s speculative one as he pretended to find his glass of water suddenly interesting.

Their meals came and went with Jessica appreciating her meal immensely and Ajay hardly noticing his salad. He tried to ignore Julia and concentrate on Jessica when the wine relaxed her enough to talk about her satisfaction with her job as a travel agent.

“Do you get a lot of interest in international travel in our part of the city?” Ajay wondered as he pushed his plate aside. “I don’t think most of our neighbors have ever traveled past the laundry on Martin Avenue.”

It was an old joke. The laundry was the last building before the road leading to the uptown expressway.

Jessica replied, “I am in the yellow pages, so I get clients from outside our area.”

“I have an early appointment,” Ajay heard Julia say in an irritated tone of voice. “I should go.”

Ajay’s attempt to concentrate solely on Jessica failed at that moment. She continued to talk, but Ajay wasn’t listening. He looked past her as the older man in black stood up to allow Julia the room to leave the table. Julia was looking angry.

Brian’s pudgy fingers locked onto Julia’s arm in an attempt to keep her seated. He begged, “Let’s not let the evening end like this. I’ll take you back to my place and we can share a fine wine from my personal cellar. Paige is being such a bore. If that’s what’s bothering you, I’ll call him a cab and he can go home.”

It was clear that Julia was forcing a smile and a more pleasant tone of voice when she smoothly disengaged herself. She said, "I'm sorry, but I really do have to go. Paige isn't bothering me. I did invite him to dinner."

"Without mentioning that Brian would be coming along as well, as I recall," Paige complained acidly. He made an elegant dismissive gesture with one hand and sounded resigned when he said, "I really don't mind going home. Brian left his sense of modesty somewhere between Fourth and Main Street and I don't care to watch him embarrass himself any further."

Brian glared at Paige, but then decided to ignore him. He crooked his finger at Julia. When Julia leaned in close, Ajay saw Brian's lips move in what he theorized was a more personal argument for Julia to join him at his home.

"Why don't you just go over there?" Jessica asked angrily.

"Sorry—what?" Ajay said in confusion. He dragged his eyes unwillingly back to Jessica.

Jessica made a frustrated sound as she pushed the check toward him and placed her napkin on her empty plate. "I told you I would dump you if I had a chance to be with someone else. I should extend the same courtesy to you. It's obvious that you want to step-in over there. Why don't you? You are interested in her, right?"

"She's just a client," Ajay repeated.

Jessica gathered up her purse as she rolled her eyes. "Whatever," she said dismissively. "I can take a cab home. Don't worry about me."

Ajay was torn between his concern for Jessica's feelings and his concern that Julia might be in trouble. Julia looked so small and defenseless. Ajay doubted Julia could stop those men from forcing her to stay. Not that the man called Paige seemed likely to resort to that, but Ajay wasn't so sure about Brian. The man seemed used to getting what he wanted. Just then, what he wanted was Julia's company.

"Go already, before you hurt something," Jessica urged in exasperation. She stood up, smoothed down her dress, and put her purse strap on one shoulder in preparation to leave.

Julia laughed and straightened. Many of the diners paused to look at her and her companions as she backed away from Brian and the table and said, "You have a very good sense of humor, Brian. Thank you for the offer, but no. Paige, I'll be the one leaving. You can stay and enjoy Brian's company."

Julia threaded her way through the tables toward the exit. Brian glared after her as he jammed his unlit cigar into his mouth and chewed on it. After a moment, he said something to Paige. The man frowned, nodded, and then went after Julia.

“Well?” Jessica wondered. She made a frustrated motion at the retreating Julia and Paige as if it were obvious what Ajay should do now.

“Someone needs to take you home,” Ajay insisted, even though he was afraid Julia might be in danger. That fear was irrational, he told himself. They were in a public place. Nothing was going to happen to Julia where there were valets and doormen to witness it. His rising panic was making his heart race and adrenaline pump through his system, though, in a physical call to action.

Jessica waved a cell phone at him. “I’m a big girl, Kavanagh. I know how to call a cab. Save your white knight routine for someone else. I don’t need it.”

“I’m sorry,” Ajay told her quickly. His tension was like a released spring as he tossed all his cash on the table and hurried towards the exit.

“And that’s why I don’t date,” he heard Jessica retort behind him as she began calling on her phone for a cab.

Ajay hit the street running, but slowed to get his bearings as he looked frantically for Julia. The nightlife of the entertainment district was in full swing. Lights, traffic, and people melded into a confusing jumble of images. Julia’s white jacket was like a beacon, though, as Ajay spotted her a surprisingly long way down the block. Paige was walking quickly towards Julia.

Ajay had been taught to make certain he could handle a possibly dangerous situation before approaching, especially since he was working alone and unarmed. Panic wasn’t allowing him to listen to reason, though, as he dodged pedestrians and ran to catch up to Paige and Julia.

In Ajay’s concerned panic, Paige’s aristocratic poise seemed to take on a more sinister persona altogether. His dark clothes brought to mind the grim reaper, now, and his hand, sinking into his coat pocket, wasn’t innocent, but a threat that made Ajay’s blood turn to ice as he heard Paige call out Julia’s name.

Julia had been searching the street for a cab. When she noticed Paige, she didn’t attempt to avoid the man. Ajay heard her ask coolly, “Paige. Did I forget something?”

Ajay reached Paige and grabbed his arm just as Paige began to withdraw his hand from his coat pocket.

“Get your hands off of me!” Paige protested angrily as he tried in vain to jerk free of Ajay’s iron grip. “How dare you!”

“Ajay, what are you doing?” Julia exclaimed anxiously. “Let go of Paige!”

“I suggest that you listen to Ms. Temple,” Paige snarled. “I don’t know who you think you are, but I assure you I am willing to prosecute you with the full force of the law if you don’t take your hands off of me this instant!”

“Ajay, what is going on?” Julia demanded angrily.

“I wanted to make sure you were all right,” Ajay replied without taking his eyes off of Paige. “Your other dinner date didn’t look very happy when he sent this guy after you.”

“Are you suggesting that I was going to harm Ms. Temple?” Paige exclaimed in outrage. “What do you take me for—some sort of hired thug?”

“I’ll let you know when I see what you were going to take out of your coat pocket.” Ajay gave Paige’s arm a twist upwards. The man swore and winced as Ajay pulled his hand out of his coat. He was surprised to see that Paige was holding his wallet.

“Mr. Cassini asked me to catch up to Julia and pay her cab fare,” Paige explained as he jerked his arm out of Ajay’s suddenly lax hold. He faced Julia and took several hundred dollar bills out of his wallet as he added, “And to offer Mr. Cassini’s apologies for any misunderstandings.”

“Accepted,” Julia said stiffly as she took the money. “Thank Mr. Cassini for a pleasant evening.”

Paige nodded with a relieved expression. He glared at Ajay before he straightened his coat and began walking back towards the restaurant. Ajay heard him mutter, “Cretin.”

“I can take care of myself, Mr. Kavanagh,” Julia told Ajay frostily as she pocketed the money and again began looking for a cab. “You didn’t need to leave your date to rush to my aid.”

“She’s not my date,” Ajay said reflexively as he tried to overcome a wave of acute embarrassment.

“Interesting,” Julia snorted skeptically. “Then what *do* you call a woman you take to a five star restaurant?”

“An obligation.” Ajay sighed and jammed his hands into his coat pockets against the night chill.

Julia frowned and left off her search to look at Ajay curiously. “That’s an expensive obligation for a *down on his heels* detective. You’re an honorable man, Mr. Kavanagh.”

“If I was honorable, I wouldn’t have let her mother talk me into taking her out,” Ajay admitted shamefacedly.

Julia’s eyes widened and then she burst out laughing. It made Ajay feel even more embarrassed. “You’re honorable and a nice man. You took out a woman for the sake of her mother and ran to rescue me when you thought I was in trouble.”

“Your Mr. Cassini *did* look angry and he did tell Paige to go after you. What was I supposed to think?” Ajay retorted defensively.

“That not all men are violent criminals,” Julia replied, all laughter gone now, “and that I wouldn’t be in the company of such men. Mr. Cassini is a very wealthy philanthropist. He’s given to enumerable charities and good causes. He’s well respected.”

“Why was he afraid that you had a bad opinion of him, if he’s such a great guy?” Ajay wanted to know.

Julia raised a pale eyebrow and looked uncomfortable. “Sometimes men forget themselves when they want something badly enough.”

“You, you mean?” Ajay wondered boldly.

Julia went cool again. “I hardly think that’s any of your business.”

It wasn’t, but Ajay could imagine what Mr. Cassini must have said to Julia and he couldn’t help his desire to have his suspicion confirmed.

Julia frowned as she waved for a passing cab. As it pulled up to the curb, she said, “Look, Mr. Kavanagh—”

Ajay cut him off. “You are my client. It’s only right that I should worry about your welfare.”

Julia was opening the door of the cab, but she paused at Ajay’s words and gave Ajay a long look. “That’s all it was? You didn’t want to lose your client to misfortune?”

The street lights shone brightly on Julia’s beautiful face, her glittering gold jewelry, and her pale hair as she waited for Ajay’s reply.

“That’s all it was,” Ajay lied.

Julia searched his face, frowned, and then took a card from her pocket. It had a name and a phone number written on it. She handed it to Ajay. “For you, Mr. Kavanagh. I only went to dinner with Mr. Cassini, so that I could ask him to speak with you about David. He agreed to see you. That’s Mr. Cassini’s phone number and place of business.”

Ajay took the card, but he hadn’t stopped looking at Julia—at her subtle expression of disappointment. Ajay wanted to erase that expression because he knew his lie had put it there. His confusion kept him tongue tied though. He didn’t understand his strong attraction to Julia and he certainly wasn’t ready to admit that it had caused his lack of professionalism.

Julia was clearly irritated by Ajay’s silence. She climbed into the cab, gave the driver her address, and said to Ajay acidly, “I hope you are more competent making use of that information than you’ve shown yourself to be just now.”

The door slammed closed, punctuating Julia’s rebuke, and the cab pulled away from the curb.

Ajay wiped his hands over his face roughly and called himself every kind of idiot. As snow began to fall, he walked back to the restaurant.

Jessica was long gone. Ajay knew he would hear about his bad behavior from either Jessica’s mother or his own when Mrs. Monnety told her how he had made Jessica find her own way home. As painful as that prospect was, it paled in comparison to the fact that he had made a complete fool out of himself in front of Julia Temple.

“Sir?”

Ajay turned and saw an employee from the restaurant approaching him wearing a very serious expression. The man’s name badge identified him as the manager. “Yes?”

“Sir, you haven’t settled the complete bill,” the manager informed him and handed him the bill on a small silver tray.

Ajay took the slip of paper and stared dumbfounded at the amount of the bill. As he pulled out his bank card, he realized that once he paid it, ramen noodles were going to be a luxury he couldn’t afford.

The next day, when Ajay called Mr. Cassini’s office from his apartment, he found the secretary not only informed about who he was, but also very accommodating when he set up an

appointment to see the man. Ajay considered that Mr. Cassini might fear that Julia Temple could tell others of his bad behavior the night before. Ajay wondered what Mr. Cassini might have said to try and entice a reluctant woman to join him for the evening.

Ajay felt disgusted as he put on one of his father's borrowed shirts. He hated abuse of power in any form. It was easy to imagine Mr. Cassini threatening a young woman's career, or enticing her with promises of contacts with employers, if Julia allowed him privileges. The thought of Cassini's pudgy ringed fingers touching an unwilling Julia caused Ajay's blood to boil. His own hands trembled with anger as he finished buttoning his shirt.

Ajay calmed himself with an effort. He had to be professional, cool, and collected to get the answers he needed from Cassini to solve the case. He had to stop acting on his emotions or those actions might have disastrous results.

The knock on his apartment door had Ajay checking his watch irritably. He still had an hour until his meeting, but he wanted to use that time to prepare his line of questioning. He didn't often have visitors. Getting one now seemed worse than bad luck.

Ajay opened his door, intending to send whoever it was on their way, but speech failed him when he saw that his visitor was Dr. Katie Malevona. Balancing two bags of groceries in her arms, her exhausted, but determined expression, forestalled anything he had been about to say.

"Well, are you going to let me in, Kavanagh?" Katie wondered angrily.

Ajay stepped aside in confusion. Katie moved past him and dumped the groceries onto a table. The bags looked old and reused, Ajay noted. Some of the canned goods spilling out of a rip in a bag were dented. Some didn't have labels.

"What's this for?" Ajay asked. He hadn't known that Katie knew where he lived.

"I keep my eyes open more than you think," she told him as she worked sore muscles in her arms. "I noticed that you came to your office this morning to get the granola bar in your desk drawer. That's damned desperate considering it's so old even the roaches won't touch it."

"Did you notice that while you were stealing my pens?" Ajay wondered sarcastically.

"You were donating them, remember?" she shot back as she headed for the door again. "Anyway, it was a clear act of desperation and I couldn't ignore it. I did take an oath; and besides, I don't want my favorite benefactor to starve to death. Those groceries are from the homeless

pantry down on Carmen Avenue. I had them all crying when I told them how much of a pathetic loser you are. They were more than happy to feed you.”

Katie looked around at the poor furnishings of his apartment in distaste. “You really need to find yourself another line of work, Kavanagh. Stray dogs live better than this.”

“Follow your own advice much?” Ajay wondered pointedly. He knew Katie barely made it from week to week.

“Well, I starve to help people,” Katie argued as she reached over and fingered a dead plant on a windowsill. “You seem to do it so you can buy more plants to murder.”

“I help people too,” Ajay corrected her irritably. “It’s about justice.”

“Yeah?” Katie snickered. “Try and get justice to pay you next time, Kavanagh. I’m not going to make it a habit to feed you like a stray cat.”

“Thank you,” Ajay told her even though he was finding it hard to feel grateful when she was insulting him.

She eyed him speculatively. “Well, at least you didn’t try to bullshit me that you didn’t need the help. I hate that macho crap.” She turned and was halfway out the door when she said, “And I know what it feels like to have to ask your parents to help you out. Nobody should have to go through that kind of torture, not even you. Even eating cans of wax beans and cream of mystery soup is better than that.”

“Yes, it is,” Ajay admitted as he closed the door behind her. He had been dreading the prospect for most of the morning, putting off that call to his mother for as long as possible. She wouldn’t think twice about helping him, or judge him for it, but word would get to his father and probably his brothers.

Ajay pulled some of the cans from the bags and couldn’t help trying to identify them even as he struggled to bring his thoughts back to his case. He needed to solve this case. He needed to get paid. He needed to be a success. It went beyond proving himself to the police department that had ejected him from its ranks, or having his father see him succeed. He felt that being a detective was his calling in life. He had been given enough cause lately to doubt that. Yet here he was; still at work and still waiting for confirmation of any kind that he was right about the direction his life should take.

Do what you love. Ajay's father had taught him that. He also said that you get one shot at life, so don't live it being miserable. His father loved being a cab driver. Each of his children had found their own niches in life as well by following that good advice. Even Steven, the youngest Kavanagh, was doing what he loved, even if that was being a lay-about. Ajay was the only one still struggling to make his life conform to his dream job.

"I don't want to do anything else," Ajay said to the empty room as he put down the mystery cans of food and pocketed his notepad and pencil.

"I will make this work," he insisted as he checked his borrowed shirt to make sure that nothing was missing or stained.

"I will get the answers that I need out of Mr. Cassini," Ajay told a mirror as he fingered combed his dark hair and made sure he had shaved properly.

"I will find David Ridder," Ajay said as he put on his coat.

"I am a detective and I don't intend to stop being one," Ajay said with determination as he locked up his apartment and headed for the bus line with a renewed confidence.

Without money for a cab, he had to rely on pocket change and the bus to get him to his meeting. Not very professional, he thought, but he would do what he had to.

The bus was full. Ajay found himself sandwiched tightly between a woman with shopping bags and a child with a cup of juice sitting on the lap of another woman. Ajay stared down at his close proximity to disaster and told the child sternly, "Don't you dare."

The child's eyes went wide and the mother wisely changed seats. She was replaced by a very large man with an iPod who couldn't refrain from moving to the beat of whatever music he was listening to. Ajay spent the long trip being bumped from one side and trying his best not to transfer that bump to the woman next to him. When he finally reached his stop, he was grateful to get off.

The high rises of the business district, with their gleaming glass facades and modern architecture, was an abrupt change from Ajay's small community of old homes and businesses. Throngs of men and women were hurrying in every direction on foot while traffic inched by bumper-to-bumper on the roads. Snow powdered everything like confectioners' sugar, but in the road it was a dirty slush being turned under car wheels.

Ajay pressed himself against a wall to prevent being trampled while he checked his address. A steady stream of humanity went past him, many of them drinking coffee in paper cups, talking or texting on cell phones, and walking with total disregard for their surroundings.

The money for Mr. Cassini's philanthropic endeavors came from a solid source. The towering building with its black glass facade proudly displayed the name of his well-known insurance company in large letters.

Ajay was impressed, but he refused to be intimidated. It didn't matter how powerful and rich Mr. Cassini was, Ajay intended to ask him probing questions about the case. If Julia was right, it was possible Mr. Cassini could have information that might tell Ajay where David had gone. At the very least, he might be able to point Ajay in the direction of someone else that might have that information. Without his assistance, Ajay feared the case was going to remain unsolved.

"I'm here to see Mr. Cassini," Ajay told the guard at the front desk. "My name is Ajay Kavanagh."

The guard gave him a suspicious up and down look and then checked his computer for Ajay's appointment. He must have found it. He finally asked, "ID, sir?"

Ajay flipped open his wallet and showed the man his license. The guard examined it carefully and then nodded. He pointed through a metal detector to an elevator on their left. "Top floor. Take a right. It's the large door at the end of the hallway."

"Thank you."

Ajay turned and began to walk through the metal detector. The alarm sounded.

"Please empty your pockets, sir," the guard beside the detector instructed him. He pointed to a small plastic bin.

Ajay placed his house keys, coins, and his wallet into the bin. Ajay tried to step through the detector again. The alarm went off.

The guard behind the desk stood up and put a hand on his side arm. The guard by the metal detector was looking irritated. He asked, "Was that everything, sir?"

"Yes," Ajay replied. At a loss, he patted his person, searching for something on his clothing that might set off the detector.

The guard reached out and fingered the top buttons of his coat. They were larger than the bottom ones. "Put your hands over these and step sideways through the detector," he instructed.

Feeling as if he was playing a children's game, Ajay placed his hands over the buttons and moved through the detector with crab-like steps. The alarm didn't go off. The guard nodded in satisfaction as he held out the bin and gave Ajay his personal items back.

The elevator ride was very quiet and lacked the usual canned music. That silence permeated the top floor as well. Ajay found it deserted. The doors along the hallway were without identifying numbers or names. One door was open, showing a meeting room with a large, polished, oval table surrounded by leather chairs.

The door at the end of the hall was dark oak. The lack of a name plate made Ajay feel cautious. He knocked lightly.

Mr. Cassini opened the door. He motioned Ajay to enter as he turned and walked toward a mini bar. "Come in, Mr. Kavanagh," he said pleasantly. "Would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you," Ajay replied as he examined the room.

The office floor was covered in a Persian rug. One wall had an immense book case filled with leather bound volumes. A few titles were classics, but most were reference, business, and legal books. Fine leather chairs were arranged around a low, round, white marble table. The walls were covered in wood paneling. The obvious attempt to emulate an English study was spoiled by a large video screen on one wall and a sophisticated looking computer system near it.

Mr. Cassini snorted in amusement as he poured himself scotch. He said, "You look as if you're examining a crime scene, Mr. Kavanagh. Please, relax and have a seat." He motioned with his hand, filled with glittering, golden rings, to one of the leather chairs. He had emphasized *Mr.*, making certain Ajay understood he was omitting the title of Detective on purpose.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice." Ajay sat down and pulled out his notepad and pencil.

"Julia can be very persuasive," Mr. Cassini said and chuckled. His eyes were watching Ajay keenly over the brim of his glass as he took a sip of his drink. Sitting down, across the table from Ajay, he added, "I believe you've fallen under her magic as well. She is a beautiful woman, don't you agree?"

Ajay became flustered. He hadn't expected that sort of question. With an effort, he kept his voice neutral as he replied, "I suppose that's why people like to paint her likeness."

Mr. Cassini narrowed his eyes. He said irritably, “Especially David Ridder. Julia is in a flutter over him and wouldn’t speak of anything else during our dinner date. Of course, I realized Ridder’s talent. I did what I could to help him after Ms. Engles brought him to my attention, but the young man really was impossible.” He tapped his forehead with a pudgy finger. “He’s a bit dark in the penthouse, if you understand my meaning. I wasn’t surprised to hear that he had disappeared.”

“I was told Ridder contacted you when he needed money,” Ajay said as he made notes.

Mr. Cassini leaned forward, interested in what Ajay was writing. “That isn’t accurate. Before Ms. Engles discovered him, he was living in an abandoned building without electricity. I doubt his lack of funds concerned him. Ms. Engles moved him to his present location, paid his bills, and asked for funds to support him and his art.”

“She asked you for the funds?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure how that’s helpful to your case, Mr. Kavanagh. My finances and my philanthropic endeavors are not part of your investigation.”

“I’m pursuing a theory that Ridder might have taken a plane or rented a car in order to leave the city and his stressful situation. It would be helpful if I knew he had the funds to do so.”

“Stressful?” Mr. Cassini snorted. “The man was handed an artist’s dream—his own gallery opening where the rock stars of the art world will be in attendance. Running away from it, and ruining the reputation of the woman who made it possible, proves my belief that David Ridder is less than balanced.”

“Some people are unable to handle sudden fame,” Ajay said as he made more notes. “They feel compelled to leave it.”

Mr. Cassini laughed. “I’ve found very few examples of that sort of person, Mr. Kavanagh. Besides, what’s an artist if no one sees his art?”

Mr. Cassini didn’t wait for an answer as he levered his bulk out of his chair. He fiddled with the controls on a wall panel. “In answer to your question, Mr. Kavanagh; no, I haven’t given Mr. Ridder any funds lately. Mr. Ridder was making himself unmarketable at a rather swift pace. He failed to ingratiate himself with the art community and several other investors. Ms. Engles was very lucky to drum up enough support to hold his gallery opening. I don’t put my money on bad investments, Mr. Kavanagh, even when I’m trying to help a young man succeed.”

“If I could have the names and numbers of other people who were sponsoring Ridder, it would help my investigation,” Ajay said as he stood as well, sensing that his interview was about to end.

“My secretary will give them to you,” Mr. Cassini assured him. He smiled at Ajay in a way that made Ajay think of sharks and helpless prey. “I’ve made amends to Ms. Temple in an abundance of my important time, Mr. Kavanagh; so I really must end this interview now.”

“You’ve been very helpful, Mr. Cassini. Thank you for seeing me.”

Mr. Cassini pressed a button. The video screen showed Ajay walking sideways awkwardly through the metal detector. He said, “Ms. Engles informed me she is funding her own investigation using professional detectives. I doubt you will get very far with your investigation before they solve the case of David’s disappearance.”

Ajay flushed hotly with embarrassment, but asked as calmly as he could manage, “Have they spoken with you yet?”

Mr. Cassini turned off the video with a frown and admitted, “No, not yet.”

“I wonder why?” Ajay said. “It’s unprofessional to ignore any source.”

“I’m certain Ms. Engles has already provided them with all the information they need.”

“True, but you are still one of Ridder’s patrons,” Ajay countered. “Ms. Engles might not be aware of the important information you’ve just given me.

Mr. Cassini seemed amused now. “What information?”

“That Mr. Ridder was acting in an unbalanced manner that wasn’t beneficial to his health or his success. His art seemed all important to him, yet he didn’t appear to want fame,” Ajay replied. He finished his notes and pocketed his pencil and notepad. As he moved towards the door, he continued, “You’ve told me Ms. Temple is very interested in finding Ridder. That may indicate a relationship she hasn’t revealed to me.”

Mr. Cassini cocked his head a little and asked, “She isn’t allowed to be altruistic in her motives?”

“How likely is that?”

Mr. Cassini snorted. “I should hate to think we both were rejected by Julia for a poor, addled artist.”

Ajay frowned. “I am not interested in having a relationship with Ms. Temple.”

“You ran to her rescue at the restaurant rather quickly for an uninterested man, Mr. Kavanagh.” Mr. Cassini opened the door for him with a sly smile. “It’s all right to keep your aura of professionalism, I suppose. It’s impossible to resist a beauty like Julia’s, though, so don’t bother dissembling. She would tempt even a gay man.”

Ajay hardly knew how to respond to that, but Mr. Cassini wasn’t expecting any. He admitted to Ajay instead, “I thought you were a man playing at being a detective, Mr. Kavanagh, and a fool besides. You’ve proven just now that I shouldn’t underestimate you.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank Julia,” Mr. Cassini suggested as Ajay stepped out of the office. “I wouldn’t have seen you without her request.”

Ajay suspected that Julia’s request wouldn’t have worked either without the threat of revealing Cassini’s bad behavior at the restaurant to give it weight. Ajay still felt angry about that event.

“Good hunting, Mr. Kavanagh,” Mr. Cassini told him. “I hope you do find Ridder and that he’s not in any trouble. He really is an excellent artist, despite his eccentricities.”

The door closed. Ajay had the uncomfortable feeling he had just exited a lion’s den and its inhabitant had forborne to eat him.

Ajay took the elevator down to the first floor and sought out Mr. Cassini’s secretary.

“Yes, sir?” she asked.

“I’m Detective Kavanagh. Mr. Cassini said you had information for me?”

The young, blonde woman pulled a slip of paper from a stack of papers on her desk. “Yes, sir, here it is, sir.”

Ajay took the paper and was pleased to see several phone numbers and addresses printed on it. It brought more questions to mind though. Why had David Ridder needed so many benefactors when he had supposedly lived so simply? Ajay surmised that donations from Mr. Cassini alone could easily have supplied the man with room, board, and materials.

As Ajay thanked the secretary and turned to leave, she said, “Have a good day, sir. I hope you don’t have far to go, it’s really coming down out there.”

When Ajay reached the large glass exit doors of the building, he understood what she meant. Outside, it was white out conditions.

There were several bus transfers on his way home. Ajay didn't relish waiting for those transfers in a snow storm. Julia didn't live far from Mr. Cassini's business. Ajay decided to visit her and apprise her of his progress thus far. By the time he finished, he hoped the weather improved enough to make his return home not so miserable.

The buildings afforded some protection, but Ajay couldn't avoid the snow altogether. His coat was soaked through and he was freezing by the time he reached a block of high rise apartments snugged in tightly between two office buildings.

Ajay's estimation of Julia's income went up considerably. Any real estate in that section of the city was expensive. Security was tight as well. Ajay had to wait in the lobby for Julia to clear his presence with the doorman before he was allowed access to the elevator.

His knock on Julia's door didn't have an immediate response. In fact, Ajay was turning to go when a blurry-eyed Julia finally opened the door. Her blonde hair was in a messy braid and she was dressed in a low-slung pair of plaid sleep pants and a very thin half shirt. When she recognized Ajay, she turned away with a mutter that sounded like, "Come in."

Ajay followed Julia into the apartment and stood uncertainly while she fumbled to turn on a lamp. Ajay couldn't keep his eyes from appreciating Julia's slim expanse of pale, bare skin illuminated in the soft glow. It wasn't only Julia's face that was beautiful, Ajay decided. When Ajay's eyes began to follow that perfect curve of Julia's back to where it met flawlessly with the curve of her hips, he had to force them to stop. Ridder's painting hadn't done her justice.

Julia didn't notice Ajay's blush when she turned from the lamp and mumbled, "Tea?" She yawned and didn't wait for an answer as she went into the kitchen and began making it.

"Coffee," Ajay belatedly said as he struggled out of his wet coat and hung it on a hook by the door.

"I only have tea," Julia informed him.

"Tea is fine," Ajay said. He stared down at his shoes. They were filthy and wet.

"Take off your shoes and leave them there," Julia suggested as she took down two mugs from an upper cabinet.

Ajay took off his wet shoes and placed them by the door. He stepped onto the white carpet in his socks while he waited for Julia to invite him to sit down.

The apartment was furnished with white leather chairs and a cream colored leather couch with thick cushions and soft throw blankets. Books and magazines were piled on a brushed stainless steel coffee table. The open design of the apartment allowed Ajay to see that the kitchen had stainless steel appliances and brushed stainless steel counter tops. The cabinets and the sink were black. Through a door, Ajay could see the bedroom. The white bedding was tossed aside and partly on the floor. It looked as if Julia had just woken up in order to answer the door.

“I’m sorry if I woke you,” Ajay felt the need to say.

Julia was leaning on the kitchen counter, blinking sleepily, as the tea kettle began to boil. She said, “It’s all right. I was being lazy. I didn’t have anything scheduled today and decided to catch up on my rest.”

When Ajay continued to stand uncertainly, it took a moment for Julia to notice.

“Sit,” Julia finally ordered and gave a vague motion to a chair by the couch.

Ajay checked his clothing for anything that might wet or dirty the pale fabric of the chair and then sat down gingerly to watch Julia make their tea.

Without any jewelry and her hair a soft, golden mess, Julia seemed more attractive, not less, Ajay thought. She also seemed more approachable. Gone was Julia’s aloof poise. Ajay watched her fill two mugs and dunk tea bags into them. She asked, as she scratched along one hip unconsciously, “Sugar, honey, or milk?”

“None.”

“Shortbread?” Julia looked inside a cabinet as if trying to find them.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a cookie. They’re good with tea.”

“No, thank you.”

Julia found the box containing the cookies and took one out. She held it between her teeth as she carried both mugs into the living room. After she placed the mugs on the coffee table, she sat on the couch with a small bounce and took her cookie out of her mouth. She gestured with it at Ajay and warned, “Don’t spill or you’re a dead man, Kavanagh.”

Ajay nervously kept his mug hovering over the tabletop. “Don’t worry. I’m being careful.”

Julia leaned forward and dunked her cookie into her tea. She took a bite with relish. Looking far more awake now, she asked, “So, to what do I owe this visit?”

“I spoke with Mr. Cassini earlier,” Ajay told him. “I thought I should tell you about the information he gave me.”

“You couldn’t call?” Julia asked around a yawn.

Ajay was quiet for too long. Julia’s blue eyes flicked up from her tea and then at the driving snow against the windows.

“I was in the neighborhood,” Ajay managed at last, not about to explain his inability to pay for a cab.

Julia’s eyes were speculative when she turned her attention back to Ajay. “Probably best not to be out in that storm anyway.”

Ajay nodded, but kept his eyes on the stack of magazines and books as he briefly told Julia about his meeting with Mr. Cassini. The magazines, he noticed, were all about fashion, but the paperback books were thrillers.

Julia finished her tea, leaned back into the couch, and planted her small, bare feet on the edge of the coffee table. “So,” she asked, “what have you concluded from talking to Mr. Cassini?”

“I have theories,” Ajay admitted. “I don’t know enough yet to make any conclusions.”

Julia smiled. “Your *theories* then?”

“David might have run away from a stressful situation.” Ajay pulled out his notes and flipped through them. “He seems to be a very self-contained man, living for his art. I don’t think he was either comfortable with sudden fame or the idea of being forced to attend functions in order to ingratiate himself to the art community.”

“David didn’t like parties, you mean?” Julia clarified. “You’re absolutely right. He may have been planning to create a painting of a party to express that. He’s done it before, created paintings with strange or violent themes when he was troubled. He did a painting of his landlord engulfed in flames when the man complained about not receiving his rent payment. Ms. Engles isn’t always prompt with money.”

“No?” Ajay made a note of that. “I was under the impression she had enough sponsors to pay Ridder’s bills.”

Julia shrugged. “Perhaps she is a good agent, but not very good with her finances?”

“That could be,” Ajay said thoughtfully. He finished his notes and tucked his notebook and pencil away.

“Do you have any more theories?”

“Only extreme ones. I’ll keep those close to my chest for now.”

“Why is that?”

“They’re highly unlikely,” Ajay replied between sips of tea. “I’d rather explore a more likely scenario than start believing in theories that belong in the movies.”

“I see.” Julia chuckled.

The snow storm was beginning to let up. Sunlight began coming through the windows. Even subdued as it was, it shone in Julia’s hair and made it look like strands of gold.

Ajay found himself staring, again mesmerized by Julia. It was hard to look away; to force himself to put his mug down and stand up when every part of him was trying to rebel.

Ajay didn’t relish going after he had just warmed up, but he had a strong sense that, now that work was done, they could only turn to more personal conversation. It was hard to admit he wasn’t sure he could stay professional if that happened. That feeling grew alarmingly stronger as Julia stood up as well. Her sleep pants were hanging low. Ajay was able to see perfect hip bones and the waistband seemed just above her—she hitched them up suddenly as if noticing his intense regard.

“The snow’s stopping,” Ajay managed to say hoarsely as he looked away. His pulse thundered in his ears and he grew inexplicably hot from head to toe. “I’ll be going now.”

Julia closed the space between them. She looked up at Ajay with a small smile. Her light blue eyes seemed to drink in Ajay, making him powerless to move or look away.

“Thank you for keeping me up to speed on the investigation,” Julia said softly.

Ajay’s mouth opened, but nothing came out. It was difficult to think about anything other than how he could feel Julia’s warm body so close to his and whether that light, enticing scent was Julia’s own, or perfume.

Julia’s small smile and a twinkle in her blue eyes seemed to say she knew exactly how Ajay was feeling and she was enjoying Ajay’s confusion.

That realization was like being doused in cold water. Ajay swallowed hard. He said, trying to recover his composure, “I-If you have any questions later, please call me.”

“I will,” Julia promised.

Julia's eyes suddenly lowered and they were hidden by golden lashes. It was hard to read her expression, but she was still smiling softly as she moved away from Ajay.

Ajay felt a wave of relief, as if he had managed to escape great danger. He went to retrieve his still wet coat and shoes. He couldn't deny the part of him that welcomed that danger and wasn't pleased at to escape from it.

"I forgot to give you your advance when I was in your office," Julia suddenly said.

Ajay turned, with his coat half on, and saw her go to a small table. She took out a checkbook.

Julia said, "You should have reminded me. I am asking you to travel and use resources on my behalf."

Ajay wanted to exercise some pride and say it wasn't necessary, but he knew he couldn't afford that sort of foolishness. Used to working with people who couldn't afford anything but payment after services rendered—and sometimes not even then—he hadn't even considered asking for an advance.

Julia held out the check. Ajay moved to take it, noticing the amount as he thanked Julia with some embarrassment. It was a large payment.

"I'll call you after I interview my other sources," Ajay told Julia. "That should take a few days."

"I have a modeling job," Julia said with a smile, "That means I'll be busy for a few days posing and looking glorious for one of my clients." She struck a pose like a Greek statue, graceful and showing her curves to great effect. She laughed a moment later as she dropped the pose and said with self-deprecation, "You must think I'm vain."

Ajay's eyes had gone wide with appreciation. He said without thinking, mind totally captivated by the woman in front of him, "Not vain...just...well, you're beautiful and—" He stopped talking, embarrassed that he had actually said something like that out loud. He tried to recover by adding lamely, "Nothing wrong with knowing it."

Julia looked startled. Then she was laughing as she opened the door for Ajay. "You should leave now, Detective Kavanagh. Perhaps I'm not vain, but my ego certainly doesn't need any encouragement."

Ajay's embarrassment went up a notch. He barely remembered to say goodbye and he didn't recall Julia's last words as he struggled to find his composure. Outside in the hallway, with the door firmly closed behind him, he rubbed at his face and cursed himself for an idiot.

"What was *that* all about?" he wondered irritably to himself. "You are getting yourself into trouble, Kavanagh."

Chapter Five

Ajay worked out at the local gym using a punching bag mercilessly until his hands were sore. He then lifted weights until all he could think about was the burn in his muscles. Eventually, the tension in his body melted away. The confusion in his mind was another matter. He needed to distance himself from the source of that confusion; Julia Temple. Ajay didn't have time to investigate the reason for his feelings towards Julia just then. He couldn't allow them to distract him. After he solved Julia's case, he promised himself he would explore those feelings further. To help him keep that resolve, he decided he would contact his client only by phone from then on.

"Stay professional," Ajay told himself firmly as he showered in the gym locker room.

A man showering close by gave Ajay an odd look and put more space between them. That movement suddenly brought to Ajay's attention that he was, in fact, surrounded by men showering and that he had been surrounded in the gym earlier by men working out. That he hadn't noticed that fact earlier relieved him. So much for being gay, he thought. In the next instant he felt angry that his mother had reduced him to thinking in those terms.

As he left the shower, found his locker, and began toweling off and dressing, Ajay realized he was breaking his promise already. He muttered irritably, "Stay professional. Stay focused."

His famous focus had been one of the few things the police force had complimented him on during his time there. His nickname had been *Bulldog* Kavanagh, when his fellow officers weren't calling him fouler names for making legal disasters out of his cases. During his time on the force, he had worked long hours and ignored his personal life entirely without regret. He wondered why he was finding it so hard to have that same kind of focus now.

After the gym, Ajay made a trip to his bank. Depositing Julia's check into his account guaranteed he would have funds for himself and his investigation, but he didn't feel that he had earned it yet. The contact information he had in his pocket could make or break his case. Ajay felt he should have found more to go on than that by now.

It was early evening when Ajay headed for home. The sun flickered between old buildings, turning the snow and slush covered streets orange, red, and yellow as it began dipping down behind the skyline. Street lights began to turn on wherever darkness had already claimed its territory.

The smell of frying onions coming from the diner reminded Ajay he hadn't eaten in a while. He had money in his pocket and a strong reluctance to go home and attempt to make a meal from his mystery cans of food. He decided to get dinner to go. As he entered the diner, Ajay realized that his hunger had made him forget about his disastrous date with Jessica Monnety and the fact that her mother would certainly have something to say about it.

Mrs. Monnety glared at Ajay from behind the counter of the diner, yanked a pencil from her tightly styled red hair, and poised it over her pad. She asked, with a chill that rivaled an arctic winter, "Your order, Sir?"

Ajay swallowed hard. He wondered what Jessica had said to her. "I'll have a hamburger, fries, and a salad with Italian dressing."

She wrote the order down angrily with a hard scrawl that left grooves on the paper.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Monnety," Ajay blurted out.

Her head came up and she shouted at with, her eyes flashing, "You should be! My daughter had to take a cab home alone! What kind of inconsiderate moron does that to his date?"

Everyone in the diner was staring. Some looked annoyed, but those who knew them stared in amusement. They were happy for some entertainment and new gossip.

"She insisted," Ajay explained, but then winced. It sounded like he was blaming her. He sighed and leaned on the counter heavily. He said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Monnety, but Jessica and I decided early on in the date that we were not interested in each other. I bought her dinner anyway. She decided that she didn't need me to take her home."

Mrs. Monnety's anger turned to sadness. She pocketed her order pad in her apron and said dejectedly, "I was so hoping that it would work out, Jay. You are such a nice young man. You proved that by buying Jessica such an expensive dinner when you didn't have to. I'm sorry I pushed you into the date."

"I understand, Mrs. Monnety."

She turned to place his order and then faced him again as she said, "Jessica is always so wrapped up in her work. It's not good for a young girl."

Ajay could only apologize again and then they waited in awkward silence for his food to cook. When it was done, Mrs. Monnety bagged his order. She slipped in a piece of apple pie.

“You and Jessica are so much alike, Jay,” she said worriedly. She looked on the verge of tears. “You both need to realize there’s more to life than your careers.”

“It’s who I am,” Ajay replied and felt how true that was. “It’s what I want to do in my life.”

Mrs. Monnety looked unconvinced. “You don’t want to be alone when you’re older,” she warned. “I keep telling Jessica that careers don’t keep you warm at night.”

Ajay blushed. Even the tips of his ears felt hot as he took his take out bag from her and stammered another yet another apology.

Mrs. Monnety looked both sad and defeated as Ajay left the diner. As he headed for home, he could only think how much harder his life would be without the support of his parents. Reaching his goal might have been impossible if his father had disapproved as strongly as Jessica’s mother seemed to disapprove of her daughter’s choices.

As Ajay crossed Caraway Street, he reflexively checked for traffic. He was surprised to see an expensive black car parked illegally at the curb in front of his office building. Two men in dark suits and sunglasses stood beside it. They were gesturing to each other in a way that told Ajay they were angry.

Ajay kept walking until he stepped up on the opposite curb of the street and was hidden by the building on the corner. His time in the police force had given Ajay an instinct for trouble. That instinct was now telling him that those men were not there to visit the good Doctor Malevona or the old lawyer. If they were there to employ the services of a detective, he might be making a costly mistake, but something in their body language made Ajay certain his caution was justified.

Ajay took a full minute before slowly looking around the corner. He started back when he came face to face with one of the men. The man smiled at his shock. His dark sunglasses hid his eyes, making it impossible to tell whether his smile was amused or malicious. A thick scar ran from his forehead into his hairline and his dark hair was oddly white there.

“Detective Kavanagh?” the man asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” Ajay replied nervously.

The man was tall, but slim. If it came to a fight, Ajay was sure of his superiority. The bulge under the man’s coat warned him that the man had a gun, though, and something in his stance told Ajay he was prepared to use it. Ajay tensed, and his heart began racing wildly, when he reached

into his coat towards the gun, but the man only pulled out a white business card from an inner pocket. Smile still in place, he held it out to Ajay. Something was taped to the back of it.

As Ajay took the business card, the man said, "My employer has become aware of your investigation into the disappearance of David Ridder. He would like your efforts to cease."

Ajay saw that the business card was for Gregory's Dry Cleaners. Turning the card over, Ajay discovered neatly folded one hundred dollar bills taped to it.

"Compensation for your trouble so far," the man explained.

"Why is a dry cleaner taking an interest in David Ridder's case?" Ajay asked, knowing full well that it wasn't. The card was just a cover in case other people were watching. The man didn't want anyone witnessing money changing hands. That told Ajay a great deal about whom he might be dealing with. It was someone important enough to worry about appearances and consequences.

The man's smile was clearly amused now. Too many people in Ajay's life had judged him as brawn without brains. This time, that perception was working in his favor. "It doesn't concern you," the man said, "just as this case shouldn't concern you. It's being handled by more experienced professionals."

Ajay handed the card back. When the man didn't take it, he gingerly pulled open the man's coat and tucked the card back into the inner hidden pocket. That allowed him to see the man's gun in its worn shoulder holster.

"I'm under contract," Ajay explained. "I've been given an advance. Only my client can ask me to stop the investigation."

The man's smile stayed firmly in place, but now it was thin and tense. He said with barely concealed contempt and disgust, "We're talking about a little piece of ass. If this gallery opening doesn't happen, she might lose her career. She might not get invited to anymore parties. Considering the expensive gifts these rich morons give her for her *services* rendered, you can't blame her for getting personally involved in the case."

It was difficult for Ajay to keep his temper after that crude slur and cruder innuendo, but he managed to say with professional calm, "My case involves the search for David Ridder. I believe the motives of my client are completely ethical."

“Are they?” The man arched an eyebrow higher than the top of his sunglasses. “Do you really think a model makes enough money to afford the bling she wears on a daily basis? Has she shown you her apartment? How do you think a model affords that address?”

The man pulled out the card again and held it out to Ajay. “You can still take this, Detective Kavanagh and go back to rescuing pets for old ladies.”

Ajay cocked his head and gave the man his best smile. Maybe the man had created some doubt about Julia’s motives, but he had opened up a line of questioning about his own. “You’ve done your homework concerning me,” Ajay said, “so you must know I take on cases others might not bother with.”

The man agreed derisively, “Small cases for a small time detective. Let this big case go, Kavanagh, if you know what’s good for you.”

Ajay held up his bag of food and said apologetically, “I’m sorry, but I really can’t do that.”

The man looked at the bag suspiciously and asked, “Why not?”

“I’ve already cashed the check and I’m about to eat some of the profit,” Ajay replied. “It would be unethical of me to back out of the case now.”

The man lost his smile entirely. He ripped the money off of the back of the card and flipped the card to the pavement. “You’ve bought yourself some trouble, Kavanagh. I’m going to tell my employer that you took his money. If you decide to continue this case, his reaction won’t be good for your career or your health.”

The man turned and walked back to his car. He exchanged a few angry words with the other man as he got into the back of the car. The other man gave Ajay a long look from behind dark sunglasses and then got in the driver’s seat. Ajay watched them drive away before he picked up the business card. Luckily, it had missed several slush puddles and was only a little damp. Ajay put it in his pocket.

“You think the dry cleaner is doing something criminal?” Wezel asked in disbelief as he entered the business name into his computer. The place was a landmark in the community and

the owner had a reserved pew in the front row of the church. Ajay was finding it just as hard to believe the owner was doing anything illegal.

“Find some other place to play Frogger, you lazy ass!” Wezel’s grandfather exclaimed. He hobbled through the living room with his cane, glaring at Ajay suspiciously. “Who the hell is he? Mafia? Are you doing deals with Mafia now, you no good—”

Wezel grimaced. He said as his fingers flew over the keyboard, “Nobody plays Frogger anymore, Gramps, and you’ve known Ajay since he was pooping his diapers. He’s your Cousin Mike Kavanagh’s son, remember?”

The old man adjusted his thick glasses and squinted hard at Ajay. He grunted sourly. Continuing to the kitchen, he said, “Didn’t know Kavanagh’s boy was mixed up in the Mafia. He must be disappointed.”

“He’s not Mafia, Gramps!” Wezel retorted in exasperation. He said aside to Ajay, “Watch out. Next time he sees your dad, he’ll want to talk to him about your being in the Mafia.”

Ajay sighed as he turned the business card over and over in his hands. He noticed that something appeared to have been scribbled on it and then erased. As Wezel continued to search, Ajay picked up a pencil and lightly colored over the spot.

“Gregory’s Dry Cleaners,” Wezel said and shrugged. “It’s been in business for 150 years. There’s been nothing newsworthy about it besides a fire in 1937. The owner, Timothy Buckler, adopted several handicapped children, helps out at the animal rescue, and raises money for local soup kitchens. He has a blog about Siamese cats. No priors. No liens against his business. No reason for any involvement with anything except your dry cleaning needs.”

“How about someone named Yokima?” Ajay wondered as he squinted at what his pencil had revealed on the card. “Cell number...893-349...8... I think.”

Wezel typed in the name and the number. “Hm... *Yokima* has a lot of hits. Your guess is as good as mine. Phone number...zip. Why don’t you try calling it?”

Ajay shook his head. “I don’t think I want them knowing I found this.”

“And that would be because?” Wezel wanted to know anxiously.

“I was threatened,” Ajay explained.

“Threatened...as in physical harm?” Wezel looked suddenly nervous.

Ajay nodded. “Someone didn’t like my investigation into Ridder’s whereabouts.”

Wezel leaned toward Ajay anxiously and demanded, “Swear to me nobody’s going to come knocking on my door! It’s your job to investigate and put yourself in danger. I’m just the geek sidekick. I don’t want to be involved in things that are bad for my health. You’re on your own, Kavanagh.”

“You’re safe, as far as I know,” Ajay said dismissively as he read down the list of people named Yokima on Wezel’s screen. He commented, “Two of these people are artists. One is a banker. Three are stock investors.”

“Twenty are accountants,” Wezel pointed out as he scrolled down the screen. “People named Yokima seem to enjoy numbers.”

Ajay thought for a moment and then asked, “Narrow it down to our city.”

“I did that already, moron,” Wezel retorted.

Ajay considered the list again. He flipped through his notes. He asked, “See if there was a person named Yokima at any of the recent events in the city.”

Wezel nodded and hit keys. He grunted a moment later and pointed to a news article. “*Lawrence Yokima gives large donation to the Mayor’s Beautiful City project.*” He said with obvious sarcasm, “They take a low income neighborhood and fill it with trees and shrubs. Everyone pats themselves on the back for doing a good deed, but nobody funds the upkeep. The plants die and they’re never replaced. In the end, a lot of people make money and nothing is really done for the blighted community.”

Ajay ignored Wezel’s diatribe. He asked impatiently, “Who is this Lawrence Yokima?”

“Let’s see...” Wezel pulled up a picture. The man looked oriental; his expensive suit an advertisement of his wealth. The people surrounding him in the photo—all city officials—were leaning towards him in excitement as the Mayor shook the man’s hand. “He’s the owner of several shipping ventures,” Wezel discovered. “He has three luxury cruise ships, two floating gambling casinos, and one yacht business. There’s your Mafia, Gramps,” he muttered. “I can see why he would rub elbows with the city elite. He needs to dock his ships and those people give him the permission.”

Ajay leaned forward, trying to read the script. “How do you know he’s Mafia?”

Wezel gave Ajay a roll of his eyes in disgust. “Gambling... Hello? What else?”

Ajay sat back, annoyed. “That’s not a fact. You know I only deal in facts, Weasel.”

“I told you, don’t call me that!” Wezel exclaimed.

Ignoring him, Ajay pointed out. “I doubt these people would want to be seen with him if he was Mafia.”

“Shows you just how naive you are, Kavanagh,” Wezel said in derision.

“Get me an address,” Ajay said irritably. He slipped Wezel the paper with the names and numbers of the people who had sponsored Ridder. “I need information on these people as well.”

Wezel scanned the paper as he held out a hand and rubbed fingers together. “You’re asking a lot out of me today. Pay up.”

His surprise when Ajay actually handed him some bills, told Ajay he hadn’t actually thought he was going to get paid. Wezel counted the money suspiciously and then whistled appreciatively.

“That’s everything you owe me and then some,” Wezel said. He looked for watermarks on the bills to verify their authenticity. “I guess your pretty girl pays her bills.”

“Time for you to pay up too,” his grandfather grumbled and snatched half the bills from Wezel’s hands as he hobbled past him.

“Hey!” Wezel protested angrily and then threw up his hands in defeat. “I can’t win.”

Wezel went back to work on his computers. He discovered that Ridder’s other benefactors were all wealthy businessmen. Aside from their connection to Ridder and appearances at events in the city, they didn’t have any connection to each other, Yokima, or Mr. Cassini for that matter. They also didn’t have other philanthropic endeavors in the artist community.

“Gerald Philmore is in shipping. His hobby is fishing,” Wezel said. “Terence Calahan runs a national employment agency. His hobby is golf. Harry Montoya is in agriculture and also clothing manufacturing. He loves fashion shows. Ivan Ivansson owns several large construction firms. He shows pug dogs. These people don’t seem to be art lovers.”

“Somehow Ms. Engles convinced them to support Ridder,” Ajay said thoughtfully

“Maybe she convinced their wives to support Ridder?” Wezel suggested.

Ajay frowned in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

Wezel changed his screen saver to show multiple images of a tumbling nude woman. “Women have all the power, Jay. They’ll make you do whatever they want, including funding an artist.”

“I don’t think that’s a valid theory,” Ajay said doubtfully.

“What if it was Julia asking you to fund an artist? Could you say no to her?” Wezel changed his tumbling woman into Julia tumbling in a white sheet. “Love will make you do anything, Jay.” He laughed at Ajay’s expressions of shock, interest, and then irritation. He explained, “If their significant others tell them to support an artist, that’s what these men will do.”

Ajay still felt skeptical, but asked, “Find me the names of their wives and any connection they have to the art community.”

Seeming to come out of thin air, Wezel’s grandfather whacked the monitor, displaying tumbling half-naked images of Julia, with the end of his cane. He exclaimed, “My god! I don’t want porn in my house!”

“It’s art, not porn, Gramps!” Wezel protested hotly as he jumped up to protect his computers from further assault. He grinned slyly in the next moment and added, “She’s a friend of Ajay’s.”

The old man shook his head sadly and said as he hobbled back into his bedroom, “A prostitute, for sure. Mike Kavanagh must be so disappointed.”

“Thanks, Weasel!” Ajay growled. “He’ll tell my Da and my Da will want an explanation.”

“About the Mafia part, at least,” Wezel said under his breath as he settled back into his chair and began searching again. “He’d be happy you were with someone, even if it was a prostitute.”

“I’m not deaf, you know,” Ajay retorted.

Wezel ignored him as he made the images of Julia disappear and he took a few minutes to do research. He said at last, “Mrs. Philmore doesn’t seem to have any art interest. Callahan’s wife does like buying expensive art. Montoya doesn’t have a wife. Ivansson doesn’t have one either; but he and his partner, Keven Anderson, seem very close...if you know what I mean? He does support the arts.”

Ajay made copious notes. Wezel watched him for a time and then asked, “Why all the research, Jay?”

Ajay looked up, puzzled. “It’s an investigation.”

“What are you looking for though?” Wezel pressed. “Are you looking for someone who bought Ridder a plane ticket? Just check the flights for David Ridder.”

“I’m not a cop anymore,” Ajay said. “I don’t have those kinds of resources.” He chewed on his thumbnail pensively, finding it hard to explain. Finally, he admitted, “I feel like something else is going on. Call it intuition or whatever, but things seem odd. I need to be careful and make

sure I don't miss a piece of the puzzle." He shrugged. "Finding how he traveled and his destination are only a small part of the case. Once he arrived at that destination, he could have gone anywhere. I need to find personal connections; friends or relatives who might give me a clue as to his present whereabouts."

"I never thought of that," Wezel admitted and then grinned. "Guess that's why you're the detective and I'm the side kick."

"A Mafia detective!"

Ajay started and turned to find Wezel's grandfather at his elbow. The old man glared hard at Ajay through his thick glasses and thumped his cane on the floor. He told Ajay angrily, "Something needs to be done about you. I *will* speak to your father."

As he hobbled toward the kitchen, Ajay asked Wezel in consternation, "How does he do that?"

"Appear out of nowhere like a freakin', scary as shit, ghost? No idea. Maybe he secretly trained as an octogenarian ninja," Wezel joked sourly. He became serious in the next instant and added, "Your meter is running, Kavanagh. What else do you want to know?"

Ajay hesitated, but then reminded himself to stay professional and not let his feelings about Julia get in the way of his investigation. Until he had all the facts, even Julia's motives and innocence was suspect. He asked, "I want to know more about Julia Temple."

Wezel raised an eyebrow, but he didn't hesitate to begin his search.

Late that night, while sitting with his legs up on the couch with coffee in one hand and notes spread out along his lap and lower legs, Ajay tried to make a picture out of the puzzle pieces. It was foolish, he knew, since he didn't have enough pieces yet, but he was only arranging the pieces that had to do with his client.

Julia Temple was the daughter of Harold Temple, a third generation oil tycoon. It was possible Julia didn't need to convince wealthy men to buy her jewelry and an apartment. She might be able to afford them herself. She also didn't need Ridder's paintings to find fame. The news seemed to find the antics of an oil tycoon's daughter rich fodder.

Wezel had found an article about Julia dropping out of a prestigious college, presumably to join her father's business. A few scandal rags linked Julia to several affairs, a nightclub fight, and a motorcycle accident. Three years ago, though, Julia had stepped out of the limelight. Her cousin, Carmen Kingsman, had taken her place at Harold Temple's side in the oil business. That was near the time when Julia's advertisements as a model had appeared.

It was possible that Julia had chosen to become a model instead of an oil tycoon. It was also possible that this decision had caused a falling out with her father. Ajay couldn't assume that Julia was wealthy simply because her father was wealthy. The evidence easily supported the theory that Julia's antics in the press, or her desire to be a model, might have alienated her from both her father and her father's fortune. Therefore, Ajay couldn't eliminate the possibility that Julia might be instigating the hunt for Ridder purely for financial reasons rather than friendly concern for his well-being.

The next question was; did that matter? Ajay stacked his notes neatly as he considered the question. Ms. Engles refusal to help his investigation and the clear threat to his person made him want to look deeper under the skin of the case into areas he hadn't been hired to investigate. If Julia Temple's motivation was purely financial, then she might close down the investigation when it became more than a matter of finding a wayward artist. Ajay wasn't certain he could stop investigating if he saw evidence of a crime being committed.

"Son?"

Ajay gasped and started up from his couch, spilling coffee and scattering notes everywhere.

Michael Kavanagh was looking down at him worriedly.

"Da! Knock next time!"

His heart pounding, Ajay tried to save his notes from puddles of coffee on the couch and the floor. His father tried to help him, taking the partially soggy notes that Ajay handed him. When he had them all, Ajay left him to get a kitchen towel to wipe up the mess.

"Sorry, son," his father apologized, "I was upset and not thinking about your privacy."

"Upset?" Ajay wiped his clothes with the kitchen towel as he returned to the living room.

"What are you upset about?"

Ajay's father looked confused as to what to do with the notes, his eyes searching for a clean place to put them down as he replied, "Old Weasel called me. I couldn't understand the half of his bluster, but I did hear the word Mafia damn clear. I came here for an explanation."

At least it wasn't prostitute loving Mafia, Ajay thought sourly to himself. When he was done wiping the couch, he took his notes from his father and said. "Sit down, Da."

His father was a tall, slim man with a shock of graying, red hair. His blue eyes usually sparkled with humor and he almost always had a smile on his face. The worried expression he wore now seemed unnatural. He was also looking uncertain. That told Ajay he wasn't half believing what Old Weasel had said.

As his father sat down and Ajay laid out his notes on the coffee table to dry, he said, "Mr. Weasel hears what he wants to, Da. I'm not mixed up with the Mafia."

"Your case—," his father began, but Ajay didn't let him finish.

"Is a simple missing person case," Ajay explained. "The Mafia is not involved."

His father looked relieved. "A parent worries," he explained apologetically.

Ajay snorted. "Ma, you mean?"

His father shook his head in embarrassment. "Not this time. *You wouldn't*, and that's all she had to say on it. I'm more realistic. I know situations come up. Take McCullum's second son. He was hell bent for the seminary and as holy as the Pope, or so his da told me. You know how he ended up? He was jailed along with two hookers after a prostitution sting. Never say never; even when it's your own."

Ajay could only nod, having run into enough similar cases himself.

The elder Kavanagh ran a hand through his wild hair and relaxed in his chair, signaling that his worry was indeed over. "So, how *is* the latest case going?" he asked.

"Slow." Ajay sighed as he picked at the coffee stains on his shirt ruefully. "Everyone should be falling over themselves to give me information; instead, they're tight lipped. I have to hunt down people to interview."

"That's odd," his father agreed. He was fiddling with his fingernails and saying carefully, "Well, son, it might just be that they don't know you from Adam."

Ajay frowned. "Was that a nice way of saying I don't have credentials?"

“If it’s not insulting, it is.” His father chuckled and leaned forward to grip Ajay’s arm. He gave it a little shake and said more seriously, “You’ve got to work for your reputation and pay your dues. You’ll get there.”

“I know.” Ajay sighed but then laughed and said, “It just seems like *there* is in the Congo sometimes and I have to walk there, Da.”

His father nodded in approval as he stood up. “Always laugh at your troubles, Jay.”

Ajay’s father moved to pick up a bag he had left by the door. He put it on the small kitchen table. Looking uncomfortable and speaking to the bag rather than Ajay, he said, “From your Ma. You know how she gets. She’ll always worry about her babes eating enough.”

“Thank her for me.” Ajay stood and saw his father to the door. As he passed the bag, he could see that it was full of his father’s favorites. There were peanuts, a bundle of hotdogs from the deli, bread, cheese, and a slice of cherry pie from the bakery. Ajay doubted that his mother had anything to do with choosing the groceries. It made their goodbye awkward.

“Don’t forget where your home is,” the elder Kavanagh growled and gave Ajay a small cuff on the back of the neck. “Visit your poor Ma.”

“I will,” Ajay promised.

His father paused in the open doorway and looked even more uncomfortable. He said, as if fighting to get the words out, “And bring that *client* of yours around to dinner. She should meet the family.”

The man left quickly, then, as if he wanted to avoid a reply. Ajay wasn’t sure he could have given him one anyway. His father had stressed the word *client*, meaning he didn’t want to make Ajay angry by calling Julia something more intimate.

“Dammit!” Ajay growled as he closed the door. He was tired of people making assumptions about his life. It felt as if they were pushing him to make choices, as if they had the inside information he was lacking. Even his father was accepting and supporting a choice Ajay hadn’t made yet.

Snow began falling steadily outside the window as Ajay put away his new groceries. He thought about Julia, imagining her smile, light blue eyes...and the few glimpses Ajay had had of the more intimate places on her body. The resulting heat those thoughts generating in Ajay’s body

troubled him. Julia Temple was impossible for him to ignore even when the woman wasn't present.

Ajay pressed the cold package of hot dogs against his forehead, feeling a stress headache coming on. "It doesn't matter," he told the empty apartment. Only the missing person case mattered. When the case was closed, Julia Temple would go back to her life as a model and Ajay would continue trying to make his reputation as a detective. He would forget about being attracted to anyone and leave relationships once more to that elusive someday. That was the reality of the situation, he felt. There was never going to be anything between him and a woman who could have anyone she wanted. Not that he wanted there to be anything between them, Ajay insisted to himself as he finished putting away the groceries.

With his mind firmly focused again, Ajay picked up his dried notes and went to bed. He spread them out on the comforter and sorted through them, trying to create a pattern, until he fell asleep.

Chapter Six

“I need that information, Bonny,” Ajay begged as he scanned the crowded terminal.

“You’re not a cop anymore, Kavanagh,” Bonny Tillman pointed out as she tapped keys on her check-in terminal. “You don’t have paperwork or authority. I need something to save my ass if anyone wonders why I’m telling random men flight manifests.”

Bonny was a big blonde with a professional attitude. She was also a distant cousin of Ajay’s. The family relationship had been tenuous enough for Ajay’s mother to suggest a blind date. After that complete disaster, they had still managed to stay friends. That friendship wasn’t helping Ajay now. Bonny loved her job at the airport and she wasn’t going to jeopardize it without a good reason.

“Have the police, or private detectives, contacted you?” Ajay wanted to know.

She checked in an elderly couple before replying. Smiling vaguely at nothing, as if Ajay didn’t exist, she said, “No.”

“Have they talked to anyone else here?” Ajay wondered.

“Not that I know of,” Bonny replied as she tapped keys and frowned at her screen. Bonny was the type of person who made it her business to know everything that was going on at the airport. If the police, or private detectives, had contacted someone else for their information, it was likely she would have heard about it.

“Their investigation doesn’t make any sense,” Ajay murmured in confusion as he stepped out of a man’s way to allow him to check in.

When Ajay had made his interview appointment with Philmore, he had once again been told that Philmore hadn’t been contacted by anyone from the police department or a private investigation firm. Unless he could believe that the case had been handed to a rookie without the slightest knowledge of procedure, the lack of investigation was puzzling.

After checking the man in, Bonny gave Ajay a cool look. “You’re not getting your information from me, so you might as well not hang around my counter.”

Ajay didn’t want to give up that easily. He said, “I’m not asking you to do anything wrong. I’m checking on a friend to make sure his flight arrived safely...a week ago.”

“Your late concern is heartwarming, Kavanagh,” she growled. Then suddenly snapped, “At least look like you’re waiting for someone! If you just hang around, they may decide you’re a terrorist.” She nodded toward the airport cameras.

Ajay stepped in front of her counter. “See? I’ve decided to ask someone about the flight. That someone is you. It’s all perfectly normal looking.”

She glared. “You owe me.”

Ajay felt a wave of relief. “Name it.”

She tapped on her keyboard rapidly as she said, “Date...with your brother, Kenny.”

Ajay’s surprise was hard to cover. “Kenny? When did you become interested in him?”

“On our only date,” Bonny told him. “What’s the name of the person you’re looking for?”

“David Ridder.” Ajay replied distractedly. Then he said in consternation, “Kenny had his head in the refrigerator when we were at my parent’s house. He burped when I asked him to say hello to you.”

She smiled as if Kenny had been adorable and said, “After you accidentally knocked me down the front steps and broke my ankle, he called 911, remember?”

“He’s a paramedic,” Ajay told her sourly. “He could have helped you himself.”

“Date or no information,” Bonny told him firmly.

Ajay made an exasperated sound and said, “All right. I’ll ask him to date you. No promises on whether he’ll say yes though.”

Bonny looked excited about the prospect as her manicured finger followed lines of text on her computer screen. “Here’s your info, Kavanagh. There was no David Ridder leaving this airport for any destination. Don’t ask about assumed names either. Everyone has to show ID”

Ajay sighed in disappointment. “Thank you, Bonny. I’ll have to check the train lines next.”

“That’s a tall order,” she said in sympathy. “It’s too bad you don’t know his destination.”

“I’m in the process of trying to find that out, but according to my client, time is short.”

Bonny looked entirely mercenary as she asked, “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you, but the date with Kenny is still on, right?”

“The *request* for a date,” Ajay corrected her. “You know I keep my word.”

“I know,” Bonny told him almost sadly. “That’s what I like about you. It’s too bad the rest of you is such a disaster.”

Ajay began to turn away. Bonny said quickly as if she was afraid she might have hurt his feelings “Check out travel agents too. A lot of people use them.”

Ajay frowned in doubt, but he thanked her. As he made his way through the crowds in the airport, he discarded the idea. Ridder didn’t strike him as a man who would use a service like that. The man everyone had described to him seemed more likely to pack a few things in a duffle and hop on the nearest train.

“Kavanagh!” a familiar voice called.

Ajay looked over the heads of the crowd and saw a man he knew all too well coming towards him. It was Benjamin Krowl, his ex-partner. The man’s face, with its heavy jowls, crew cut, and cherry-colored burn over one prominent eyebrow, was in most of Ajay’s photos from his days on the police force. Ajay had suppressed the urge to cut the man out of them. They had a history together he couldn’t deny even though he had been thrown off of the force because this man’s reports had put Ajay’s failed cases in the worst possible light.

“Leaving town at last?” Krowl asked as he shouldered the crowd aside to stand in front of Ajay. He didn’t try to shake Ajay’s hand. In fact, he looked tense; his smile patently false.

“No, you?” Ajay retorted with his own false smile.

“Meeting someone,” Krowl admitted and stared at Ajay intently.

“Is something wrong?” Ajay couldn’t help asking.

“It’s not like we want to talk to each other, Kavanagh,” Krowl pointed out.

It was a comment that made Ajay wonder why Krowl had made his presence known. “You’re harassing me?” Ajay wanted to know.

“That would be illegal, wouldn’t it?” Krowl said. He leaned forward and added in a lower tone of voice, “I don’t know why you’re here, Kavanagh, but I don’t need one of your screw-ups to happen here. If you’re done with your business...”

“Last I heard, it’s a free country,” Ajay said.

Krowl definitely wanted to know why he was at the airport, Ajay thought, but he was more interested in not having Ajay see whomever he was meeting. In fact, from the way Krowl was looking at him, it was obvious he was wondering if Ajay was there for that very reason. It was a ridiculous theory of course and endemic of why he and Krowl had never worked well together. The man had been a terrible detective, always making the wrong assumptions.

Krowl flipped open his wallet and tapped his badge. "I am a police detective, Kavanagh. I am on police business."

"And I'm working a case." Ajay nodded to the listing of flights. "If that's the flight you were waiting for, it's arrived. You don't want to miss the man you were waiting for."

"Who says it's a man?" Krowl retorted, but he was looking toward the terminal and already scanning the crowd. Aside to Ajay, he warned, "If you know what's good for you, you'll go back to tracking down lost wallet lint and leave the big cases alone. The higher ups have their sights on you, Kavanagh. Let's just say I'm giving you a warning for old times' sake. Drop the Ridder case."

"Our history makes you sympathetic toward me?" Ajay scoffed.

Krowl spared him a glare, but then grinned. It wasn't a pleasant expression as he acknowledged, "You're right, it doesn't, but I can feel sorry even for bugs that get squished."

"Now that sounds like a threat," Ajay pointed out.

"We were talking about bugs," Krowl said with a nasty chuckle.

Passengers were flowing out of the terminal and it was becoming noisy.

"Leaving, Kavanagh?" Krowl asked. "I would if I were you. You've been hanging around without any real reason to be here, I bet. It wouldn't be hard to convince airport security to cavity search you."

"Now, that's being nasty," Ajay said. "I was done with my business anyway. Hope I don't see you around, Krowl."

"Likewise, Kavanagh." Krowl strode off into the crowd.

After two threats and a confirmation that Krowl was working the Ridder case as well, Ajay's instincts were telling him emphatically that something bigger was going on than a simple missing person case. He was now determined to see Krowl's mysterious passenger. He wasn't going to let a threat of retaliation deter him.

Over the heads of the crowd, Ajay saw Krowl attempt to take a woman's carryon luggage. She was tall and curvy in a black skirt and loose white shirt. Her dark hair was pulled back in a severe bun and her expression was frigid. She exchanged greetings with Krowl, but kept her luggage case, Ajay noticed. She held onto it tightly, as if it held something important.

Ajay noted her flight and wrote it in his notes—Nebraska. He had seen Krowl greet her. He hadn't caught the sound of her name, but he had seen Krowl's lips form a name he thought might be *Martinez*.

It was hard not to think that Krowl's meeting this woman and his anxiety about Kavanagh being there wasn't suspicious behavior where it concerned David Ridder's case. Instinct and circumstantial events weren't evidence, though, and Ajay had to resist the temptation to draw conclusions from them. It was just as likely that it was his reputation and their past that was generating Krowl's enmity towards him. His expulsion from the police department hadn't been a quiet, little affair; and he imagined there were still some who didn't want that embarrassment to the department to happen again.

Ajay checked his watch. He had to forget about his suspicions for now. He needed to get across town quickly to make his meeting with Gerald Philmore. He seemed the least likely to generate any information about the case, but Ajay wasn't about to stop being a professional because of a lack of time. He needed to investigate every lead.

Ajay's cell rang as he tried to hail a cab at the entrance to the airport. When he answered, he was surprised to hear Julia's voice. It was difficult to hear her above the sounds of traffic and milling crowds.

"Julia? I can hardly hear you," Ajay told him. "Can you say that again?"

"I didn't know who to call." Julia's voice sounded shaky, almost afraid.

"What's wrong, Julia!" Ajay demanded in alarm.

Julia took a deep breath as if to calm herself. She let it out slowly and then replied, "I was mugged. I don't think I can walk. My leg..."

"Where are you?"

Julia hesitated before answering, perhaps getting her bearings. "Second Street and Thomas...by the Kingsman complex. I'm in an alley."

"Call the police!" Ajay ordered sharply as he stepped off the curb and frantically signaled a cab.

Julia made an attempt to laugh. It sounded full of pain. She said, "I don't think the men who mugged me are hanging around to be arrested, Jay." She seemed to pull herself together and said

a bit more strongly, "I'm not hurt too badly, but I think I twisted my leg when they knocked me down. I need help walking. I know I shouldn't ask, but..."

"I'm on my way. Stay on the cell," Ajay told her as a cab pulled up to the curb.

"All right, I will," Julia replied softly. She sounded faint and exhausted and that worried Ajay.

Ajay gave directions to the cab driver as he climbed into the cab. When they were on their way, Ajay said to Julia, "I don't like the way you're sounding. Do you have any head injuries? Is there anyone you can call who might be closer to you?"

"I'd rather no one saw me like this," Julia replied. "I don't want any drama and I don't want the authorities notified."

To Ajay, that didn't sound as if Julia was thinking competently. "Are you thinking clearly?" he asked. "Do you feel dizzy or disoriented?"

"They slapped me in the face and kicked my legs out from under me. I hit my head when I fell. It hurts, but it's not bleeding."

The cab became stuck in traffic and Ajay cursed. "Can you get around this?" he snapped at the cab driver.

"Not unless we can fly," the man grumbled.

"Hold on," Ajay urged Julia.

Julia sounded almost amused as she said, "Not going anywhere, promise."

Ajay felt adrenaline pumping through him, making him feel ready to rip the door off of the cab and run to Julia on foot. He had almost decided to do just that when the cab driver announced, "Here we go!" He slipped his cab through an impossible hole in traffic and they zipped down a side road. He promised, "This'll get us there in a hurry."

Ajay turned his attention back to Julia. "Do you know why you were attacked?" he asked. "Were you robbed?"

"Yes, they robbed me," Julia replied. She paused and then said faintly, "This alley stinks like piss."

"Let me call 911," Ajay begged.

"No," Julia told him firmly. "It'll get into the news. The headline will be *estranged daughter of oil millionaire is mugged after a nude modeling session.*"

“Is that where you were, a modeling session?” Ajay wondered.

“You’re a good detective,” Julia chuckled. “You ignore the scandal and stick to the facts. Yes, I was going to Michael Harrison’s studio. It’s a nice, uptown place. It’s not where you would expect someone to drag you into an alley and beat you up.”

Ajay pounded a fist on the back of the driver’s seat and shouted to the cab driver, “Can’t you go faster?”

“Hey! I’m doing the best I can, bud,” the driver replied irritably.

“Calm down, Jay,” Julia urged. “I’m fine. Don’t have an accident getting here.” Her tone turned to disgust, “I never imagined that an upscale area like this would have such filthy alleys.”

“If someone attacked you, that’s a crime, Julia. You should report it. Those men could attack someone else. They might even come back to hurt you again. Please, let me call the police. They can get to you faster.”

“No!” Julia said, sounding upset now. “Please don’t do that, Jay! I’m begging you!”

Ajay took a steadying breath, trying to keep his temper in check. He said tightly, “You’re being foolish.”

“I know, but I’m just bruised and scraped,” Julia said.

“Did they say anything to you?” Ajay asked as the car rounded a turn and he saw they were finally on the right street. “Never mind, I’m almost there.”

“Good,” Julia sounded relieved. “It’s starting to snow again.”

Ajay saw the Kingsman complex of apartments and looked for alleyways. He spotted one tucked between two high rises. It was near a small canopy meant for bus riders. Ajay could imagine Julia crossing the street to use the canopy, intending to seek shelter there while she waited to hail a cab.

“Stop!” Ajay called to cab driver. He was out of the car before it came to a full stop, stumbling and staggering as his long coat tangled in the door. Regaining his balance, he ran into the alley as the snow started coming down in earnest.

In the gloom, Julia was easy to see. In white designer dress with low cleavage, white ankle boots, and a pale cream coat, she was a stark contrast to the filthy concrete and refuse. With her face sunk in a thick, white wool scarf to keep warm and her phone still cradled against one ear, it

was a moment before she realized Ajay was there. She started and looked up fearfully when Ajay's shoes crunched in the snow.

Ajay crouched down, his big hands held out hesitantly. He wasn't sure which part of Julia was safe to touch or move. Julia's hair was falling out of its braid in dirty strands. She looked embarrassed. One of her blue eyes was swollen and bruised. Her lower lip was cut and bleeding. One of her hands was gripping her right leg as if it pained her.

"They surprised me," Julia said, her lip making it hard for her to speak. "I didn't have time to fight back before they had me down and were punching me." She shook her head and made a noise of disgust at herself. Gold earrings swayed and tinkled together. Her necklaces were gone; red marks around her neck telling Ajay they had been ripped off of her. Ajay felt a chill, glad they hadn't decided to rip out her earrings as well.

"There was nothing you could do," Ajay soothed as he carefully helped Julia to her feet.

Julia glared, but it lacked heat. She didn't have the strength for real anger. She said, "I could have done a lot. I'm not helpless. They took me by surprise."

Ajay didn't argue. He asked instead, "Is your leg broken or sprained?"

Julia tried to put weight on her leg and winced. "I twisted the knee when they knocked me down. The joint hurts."

"I should take you to a doctor."

"I want you to help me get to my apartment," Julia said stubbornly. "If you don't like that idea, call me another cab and I'll get there by myself."

Ajay didn't even consider it. With her filthy wet clothes, strands of her wet golden hair stuck to the blood on her face, and balanced shakily against Ajay, Julia appeared completely helpless. Ajay's protective nature—coupled with his growing attraction to Julia—demanded that he make certain that Julia received all the help she needed.

Ajay helped Julia limp out of the alley. The cab driver took one look at them and drove away.

Ajay cursed him. Julia surprised Ajay by laughing weakly and saying, "Guess he didn't want blood on his seats."

"Come on." Angry and frustrated, Ajay helped Julia hobble to the bus shelter and sit down.

Julia slumped on the bench and wiped her hair out of her face with one trembling hand. "I'm sorry."

“Sorry for what?” Ajay handed Julia a handkerchief from his pocket and began searching the street for a cab.

Julia tried to clean her face with it while she apologized. “I’m sorry I called you, but I don’t think any of my friends would have handled this as well as you have.”

Ajay looked at her in concern. “Maybe you have the wrong friends?”

Julia snorted and said, “Everyone can’t be like you, Jay; big, strong, and ready to take on everything and everyone.” She winced as she touched her busted lip with the handkerchief. She looked thoughtful as she added, “This is going to sound stupid, but you’re the first person I thought to call. I didn’t consider anyone else. Jerry would have called every paramedic and police officer in the city to help me and held a rally against violence the next day. The rest of my friends would have made a latte, sat and agonized over my misfortune, and then called fifty of their friends to gossip about it before calling a cab to come and help me. It doesn’t mean they’re bad people, just not the *knight in shining armor* type.”

“Jerry?” Ajay wasn’t sure why his mind clamped down on that name rather than anything else Julia had said. “Is he your–” He couldn’t say the word *boyfriend*. It surprised him how strongly he felt about the thought of Julia having a lover. Jealousy was a new feeling for Ajay and he wasn’t certain why he was feeling that way. Of course someone like Julia would be with some lucky person. It was ridiculous for him to mind. Julia was just his client. He didn’t want a relationship–

“Jerry’s a friend,” Julia replied.

Ajay couldn’t help feeling relieved.

The image of him as a white knight coming to Julia’s rescue was hard for Ajay to imagine, but the image of Julia as the maiden in distress wasn’t. He didn’t think of himself as a hero, let alone a knight.

Ajay must have frowned. Julia regarded him with thoughtful, blue eyes and came to the wrong conclusion. “You’re angry. I’m sorry. Once we arrive at my apartment, I’ll be fine by myself. I promise I won’t call you for something like this again.”

“I don’t mind,” Ajay said quickly, feeling how true those words were.

Julia smiled and twisted the bloodied handkerchief in her lap. “Now you’re just being polite,” she accused. “Thank you, Mr. Kavanagh.”

Ajay found he didn't like Julia saying his name so formally. She had called him Jay as if they were close friends. The return to formality made it seem as if Julia, like Ajay, was trying to reaffirm their professional relationship.

"Jay is all right." Ajay finally saw a cab and hailed it. As it pulled up to the curb, he added, "Mr. Kavanagh sounds like you're talking about my father."

Julia smiled and winced as it caused her mouth pain. "I feel strange when someone calls me Ms. Temple as well. According to my father, it's a name you have to earn."

The cab driver lowered a window and looked them over nervously.

"She slipped and fell in the snow," Ajay explained as he took money out of his wallet and showed the driver that he had cash to pay for the ride.

The cab driver was satisfied. He jerked a thumb towards the back of the cab. "Get in. Where to?"

As Ajay helped Julia into the cab, he gave directions. The driver was reassured by the address.

The cab was warm. As the cab moved away from the curb, Julia gave a sigh of relief, leaned her head back against the seat, and closed her eyes.

"Are you sure you don't need a doctor?" Ajay asked worriedly.

"I'm sure," Julia replied firmly. "It hurts, but I only have scrapes, bruises, and a twisted kneecap."

Ajay studied Julia's face, trying to believe her.

Julia felt his look and opened her eyes to regard him. Her smile was tight. "Not so pretty now, am I?" Julia wondered but didn't expect a reply. "I'll be out of work until my face heals."

"I wasn't thinking about that," Ajay said irritably. "I was wondering whether I should believe you or not—whether I should make a police report on my own since you don't seem willing to make one. If those men attack someone else—"

"They won't attack anyone else!" Julia snapped and winced and as she closed her eyes again.

Ajay asked carefully, "What makes you come to that conclusion?"

Julia was quiet for a long moment before she replied, "Because it wasn't just a mugging. Their attack was personal. They wanted me to stop trying to find David. They said I would get hurt far worse if I didn't." Julia frowned, mystified as she added, "I don't know who they were or

why they don't want me to look for David, Jay. They may go after you as well. We should stop the investigation. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I'm glad you told me, but I've already been threatened and I've already decided not to let it stop my investigation."

Julia sat up with a hiss of pain, her eyes opening wide in shock. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Ajay shrugged. "Detective work can be dangerous. It comes with the territory. I accepted that fact a long while ago, Julia. You have been threatened as well, though, and that's different. You should inform everyone that your interest in this investigation is over. Whoever wants this case to remain unsolved will cease to worry about your involvement."

Julia plucked at Ajay's wet coat and opened it a little to look inside.

"What are you doing?" Ajay wondered, perplexed.

Julia smiled and replied, "Looking for your armor, my white knight."

Ajay blushed hotly and brushed Julia's hand away, but not rudely. "I'm only doing my job," he assured Julia.

"I'm not afraid," Julia told him more seriously. "This has only made me more determined to find David."

"It's not about being afraid," Ajay assured him. "You're not necessary for my investigation any longer. There isn't any reason for you to place yourself in danger. I'll continue to investigate on my own."

"Is that something you would normally do?" Julia wondered.

Ajay chewed on that for a moment and admitted, "Yes, it is. I'm very committed to my work and I don't give up cases easily."

The cab stopped. Ajay helped Julia out. While Julia leaned against the side of the cab, Ajay paid the cab driver and ignored Julia's protestations that she could get to her apartment on her own.

The falling snow was turning into white out conditions. Ajay helped Julia into her apartment building as quickly as he could. When the doorman greeted them in the lobby, Julia kept her face covered by her scarf to hide her injuries as she identified herself.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" the doorman asked anxiously.

"Yes, thank you," Julia lied smoothly. "I slipped on some ice."

“Terrible weather,” the doorman agreed.

Ajay helped Julia to the elevator. Julia pushed away from Ajay then and insisted, “I’ll be fine from here on, Jay. Thank you for helping me. Please add a fee to the final bill for your inconvenience.”

The doors to the elevator opened. Ajay firmly took hold of Julia’s arm and helped her limp inside. “Don’t be stupid,” he said in exasperation. He pressed the button for Julia’s floor. “I’m not going anywhere until you’re in your apartment and I’ve had a chance to make sure you’re really all right.”

Julia looked up at Ajay with wide eyes. “How do you intend to make sure of that? Strip me?”

Ajay felt himself blush hotly. “I’m going to check your head and your leg. Are there other injuries you haven’t told me about?”

“Oh,” Julia said. She looked as embarrassed as Ajay felt.

“There wasn’t anything else, was there?” Ajay asked again, suddenly concerned.

“No.”

“Good.”

Ajay cleared his throat uncomfortably and adjusted his tie, unable to banish the thought of strip searching Julia for injuries.

The elevator doors opened and they came face to face with a tall, skinny man in a black sweater and black jeans holding a leather portfolio. He looked Asian. His straight, black hair was slicked back and tied in a three foot braid and his almond-shaped black eyes went wide in shock. Those eyes took in Julia’s bloody and bruised appearance and they turned furious in a heartbeat.

“You bastard!”

A bony fist hit Ajay squarely in the jaw. His head jerked sideways with the force as he staggered and let go of Julia.

“Jerry!” Julia shouted. “Stop! You don’t understand!”

Jerry wasn’t listening. He shoved at Ajay’s wide chest and demanded, “How dare you hurt Julia! Get out of here right now! I warn you, I’m a black belt.” He struck a fighting pose as he used one arm to push Julia behind him for safety. “Call the police, Julia,” he ordered. “I’ll hold him off.”

“Ajay wasn’t the one who hurt me, Jerry!” Julia protested.

“Denial is part of it, Julia,” Jerry said tightly. “Therapy will help you realize that you don’t deserve to be hurt by anyone.”

Ajay rubbed at his jaw and straightened. Jerry stepped back, his wide eyes afraid now as he realized just how much larger Ajay was than himself. He kept Julia behind him though, determined to protect her.

“So, this is Jerry?” Ajay said with pained amusement. “This is the man that you didn’t consider calling?”

“And now you can see why. He would have mobilized the entire city,” Julia replied ruefully. “I’m sorry, Ajay.”

“Call me about what?” Jerry asked in confusion. He didn’t drop his fighting stance and turned in a crab like fashion to keep Ajay in front of him as Ajay straightened his coat and moved past him to Julia. When Julia reached out to allow Ajay to help her walk to his apartment door, Jerry demanded, “What’s going on, Julia?”

“I was mugged,” Julia explained as she fumbled for her keys. “They hurt my leg. I couldn’t walk on my own. I called Ajay to help me.”

Jerry finally dropped his fighting stance. He followed them with an expression of mingled worry and suspicion. “Who is this guy?”

“This is Detective Ajay Kavanagh.” Julia opened her door and Ajay helped her inside. “He’s helping me find David.”

“Oh.” Jerry followed them inside with his leather portfolio clutched protectively in front of him. “I’m sorry, Detective. Did I hurt you?”

Ajay rubbed at his jaw and replied, “A little, but I’ll be okay.”

Jerry looked embarrassed now. “It really looked like—”

“I’m smarter than that,” Julia told him irritably as she pulled off her mud-covered coat and let it land on the tile foyer. “Shoes off,” she ordered everyone. “Nobody is getting mud on my carpet.”

“You and your carpet,” Jerry grumbled as he and Ajay complied awkwardly. “It’s not about being smart, Julia,” Jerry continued when they finished and moved into the living room. “Some people allow violence because—”

Julia cut her friend off, explaining to Ajay, “Jerry loves going to seminars and self-improvement workshops.”

“They *have* improved my life,” Jerry argued. He glared at Ajay pointedly and took Julia’s arm. “I’ll help Julia clean up in the bathroom, Detective. You stay out here and make tea.”

Jerry’s tone was almost hostile, but Julia seemed to think it was a good idea and went along with Jerry into the bathroom. Ajay could hear them talking clearly while he moved around the kitchen and tried to figure out how to make the tea.

“He’s like a gorilla!” Jerry was saying. “Where did you find him—*Thugs Are Us*?”

“He’s a good man, Jerry,” Julia said, sounding weary. “If I didn’t trust him, I wouldn’t have called him to help me.”

“About that... What the hell happened?” Jerry demanded. “You’re bruised all over.”

Ajay froze in the act of filling a kettle full of water. His concern for Julia went up a notch.

“I really don’t know,” Julia hedged. “They stole my jewelry—even that silver ball that jingled.”

“You’re lucky they didn’t rip your earrings out, Julia,” Jerry pointed out. “Jewelry can be replaced.”

“I liked that one.” Julia sounded like a child suddenly.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t be at the hospital?” Jerry asked in concern.

“I’m tired, sore, and pissed off; but I’ll be all right,” Julia assured him.

“Pissed off?”

“Wouldn’t you be if someone beat you up?” Julia sighed.

Ajay heard the shower go on and it was harder to hear them. He left the kitchen and moved closer to the bathroom door.

Julia said impatiently. “Get out, Jerry, this isn’t a peep show.”

“I like big Norwegian men, remember?” Jerry said irritably. “You don’t even come close to my ideal lover. I’m not leaving this bathroom. What if you pass out?”

“Should I charge admission to see me naked, then?”

“To that detective?” Jerry wondered cattily. “Do you think he’d pay?”

“Very funny,” Julia replied irritably and then added, “You realize he can probably hear you?”

Jerry sounded embarrassed. “Do you think so?”

“I know so,” Julia replied.

They both became quiet as Julia presumably showered.

Ashamed of himself for listening to their private conversation, Ajay went back into the kitchen and finished the tea. As he poured it into three cups, he suddenly remembered his appointment with Gerald Philmore.

“Dammit!” Ajay exclaimed as he fumbled for his cell phone and went into the living room.

The water went off and Julia asked, “Was that Ajay?”

“I’ll check,” Jerry replied.

Ajay was already grabbing his coat and thrusting his feet into his shoes as Philmore’s secretary answered the phone.

Jerry opened the bathroom door and peered out. He frowned and informed Julia, “He’s leaving.”

“Leaving? Why?” Julia wondered in surprise.

“My name is Ajay Kavanagh,” Ajay was saying into his cell as he checked his watch and silently swore again. “I’ll be a little late. Is that all right?”

“Mr. Philmore was expecting you nearly an hour ago, sir,” the secretary replied in a tone of voice that told Ajay such an occurrence rarely happened to such an important man.

“Is there any way he can still see me today?”

“I believe your detective is late for a date...with another man,” Jerry told Julia.

“Don’t be stupid,” Julia retorted. “Get me my robe from the bedroom.”

“He did have a three o’clock cancel,” the secretary said uncertainly.

“I promise I will be there on time,” Ajay told her as he watched Jerry go into Julia’s bedroom. He came out with a white silk robe. He was wearing a disgusted expression and he glared at Ajay as he took the robe to the bathroom.

“Please see that you are, Mr. Kavanagh,” the secretary warned.

Ajay pocketed his cell just as Jerry stood aside and Julia hobbled out of the bathroom hastily putting on her robe. Ajay saw brief glimpses of Julia’s nude body, sparkling with water from the shower, before she pulled her robe into place and belted it at her waist.

“Jay, what’s going on?” Julia asked anxiously. “Are you leaving? Where are you going?”

Ajay suddenly felt as if he was running a fever and his tongue seemed unable to form words. His expression must have been doing something interesting because Jerry was looking at Ajay as if he had suddenly lost his mind. Ajay rallied his scattered wits with an effort and replied, “I-I forgot that I had an appointment with Gerald Philmore, one of Ridder’s patrons.”

“And I made you miss it?” Julia looked stricken as she hobbled closer. The bruises on her face were darkening alarmingly.

“Will you be all right?” Ajay asked worriedly. He felt conflicted; torn between his case and the woman standing before him looking so vulnerable.

Jerry waved irritably. “Hello! Someone else *is* in the room, gorilla man. I can take care of Julia.”

Ajay only gave Jerry a brief glance before locking eyes with Julia, waiting for her answer.

“I’ll be fine with Jerry,” Julia told him firmly. “Go work your case.”

“I’ll call later,” Ajay promised.

“Your confidence in me is overwhelming,” Jerry said sarcastically as he went into the kitchen to get their tea.

Ajay frowned and buttoned his coat as he hurried out the door. He heard Jerry say behind him, before the door closed, “He may be a gorilla, but he makes good tea.”

“He was on the list,” Philmore told Ajay impatiently as he shoveled papers into a pile on his large desk. Mounted prize winning fish decorated the walls of his office along with an old fly-fishing rod.

“List?” Ajay held his pencil poised over his pad. He hadn’t been invited to sit down.

Philmore was an elderly man. Dressed casually in a soft sweater and informal tan slacks, he seemed like anyone’s grandfather; not the owner of a shipping empire.

“I’m given a list every year,” Philmore explained. “I call it the *sucker list*.” His expression seemed kind and his light gray eyes amused, but that impression was at odds with the harsh tone of his voice. “If you ever come into a great deal of money, Detective Kavanagh, you’ll learn that you’re expected to *give back* by people you have to do business with. They don’t care that you

have six children and twelve grandchildren to support...as well as every employee in your business. They think you should give your hard earned money to complete strangers. So every year, I ask my wife to give me a *sucker list*, and I donate. If you want to know why I gave money to this David Ridder, you'll have to ask her."

White eyebrows came down over light gray eyes as Philmore said, as if were telling his small grandchildren a story, "I suggest you don't ask her, by the way. I would consider that harassment. I have a whole gaggle of lawyers I'm itching to put to work to justify all the money I pay them. My wife is not becoming part of your case."

"I understand," Ajay said smoothly. "But if I could just find out who suggested David Ridder for her list; that's all the information I require for my case."

Philmore regarded him steadily. "Didn't you just hear me? You wasted my time by missing your appointment and then you have the balls to still show your face. Nobody wastes my time, Detective Kavanagh, and then makes demands."

"I'm sorry I missed my appointment, sir," Ajay said. "A client of mine was robbed and needed my assistance. I'm sorry if that inconvenienced you. It wasn't my intention."

Philmore's eyebrows rose briefly and then came down hard. "Are you being sarcastic?"

"No, sir," Ajay assured him. "I'm just offering an explanation."

Philmore looked suspicious. "It seems an unlikely one."

"It is true."

"What is your client's name?" Philmore asked.

"It would be unprofessional to talk about my client," Ajay countered apologetically.

"Convenient," Philmore grunted. "From the evidence on your bruised face, I think it's more likely you were at a bar drinking and fighting."

"Mr. Philmore," Ajay persisted, touching his face self-consciously, "my client is concerned that David Ridder may be in trouble. He disappeared without telling anyone where he was going. Any small clue—even the name of who suggested Ridder for your charity list—may help in finding him."

"I didn't get where I am by being stupid, Detective," Philmore snarled. "I can see where this is leading. You're making connections; suspecting foul play in this Ridder's disappearance. Well,

you are not connecting me or my wife to this. I'm going to ask you nicely to leave. If you don't, then I will have some of my security escort you out. Understood?"

"Yes, sir, understood," Ajay replied. "Thank you for your time." He put a business card on the man's desk. "If you should change your mind, this is where I can be reached."

The man tossed the card toward a wastebasket with perfect accuracy. He said, "I won't. If the police want to question my wife, they can serve her papers."

"I'm not affiliated with the police," Ajay admitted.

"What a surprise, *Mr. Kavanagh*," Philmore said sarcastically. "I assure you your *professional* manner never gave that away."

Ajay tried not to let anger color his next words, but it was difficult. He said, "I assure you I am a professional."

Philmore ignored that and insisted firmly, "Our meeting is over."

Philmore stood and strode to the door. Before Ajay turned to follow, his eyes automatically scanned the papers on the man's desk. Shipping orders, a stack of messages, and bills were not in any tidy order. It was easy to read a few and commit them to memory. The man had a calendar blotter as well, marked here and there with scribbles and notes.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Philmore.

Ajay went through the door that Philmore had opened for him and hardly noticed when the door was closed hard behind him. He was already quickly making notes. The secretary outside said something as he passed her, but he only nodded absently without really hearing her and kept walking to the elevator as he scribbled.

One outside the building, Ajay read over his notes as he stood on the busy sidewalk. He then pulled out his cell phone and made a call.

"Hello?" Julia answered, sounding tired.

"Hang up on whoever that is." It sounded like Jerry. "You're supposed to be resting."

"It's Ajay. Are you all right?"

Julia's voice sounded pleased as she replied, "Yes, I'm fine. Jerry's been taking good care of me, Jay."

"Is that the *gorilla*?" Jerry asked irritably.

"Yes," Julia replied impatiently and said to Ajay, "How did your meeting go?"

“Not very well,” Ajay admitted as he hailed a cab.

A cab pulled up to the curb. Ajay climbed in and gave his home address as he struggled to hold onto his cell phone and notes.

When he was settled, Ajay continued his conversation with Julia. “Mr. Philmore thinks that I’m trying to implicate his wife in a crime. He threatened legal action if I contact her.”

“Why did you need to speak with her?”

“She’s the one who suggested that her husband give money to Ridder.”

Julia seemed sympathetic, but also puzzled as she asked, “How likely is it that she knows where David has gone?”

“Right now, we have very few clues. While I investigate the different ways he might have left the city, it’s important to speak with everyone involved in Ridder’s life.”

Julia sighed. “I’m sorry I don’t know any of his family...or even if he has any close friends. I have the feeling that, besides Ms. Engles, and the people at those parties she forced him to attend; I am the only person he ever saw.”

“That’s why speaking to Mrs. Philmore is necessary.”

Ajay didn’t like admitting defeat, but he wasn’t sure how to proceed without Philmore’s threat of a lawsuit becoming a reality.

“You’re going home now?” Julia asked.

“Yes,” replied Ajay as he slumped in his seat and tried to make sense out of his notes. He felt tired and hungry. His misery made it hard to think. “I’ll try to see Terence Calahan tomorrow and check out the trains.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday,” Julia pointed out. “Aren’t you going to take a day off? I’m sure Calahan won’t be at his office.”

“If you want to see the gorilla, just say so, Julia,” Jerry suggested. “I don’t think he understands innuendos.”

“Time is short,” Ajay said as he rubbed at his eyes and tried to stay focused. “Calahan may not be available, but there are other resources that I can research.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose you’re right.” Julia sounded disappointed. “I shouldn’t complain when you want to work overtime. I just thought we might spend some time together.”

“Did he just turn you down?” Jerry demanded in outrage. “Who does he think he is? Not that you aren’t better off without someone like that in your life—”

“Jerry!” Julia growled. “Do you mind?”

“Do you want me to go over to the kitchen and pretend that I can’t hear you?” Jerry asked sarcastically.

“I don’t understand,” Ajay said in confusion. “Did you want to see me to talk about the case, Julia, or is something wrong? Are you really all right?”

“I’m fine,” Julia replied, “and no, I didn’t want to see you to talk about the case.” She sounded slightly exasperated. “Don’t worry about me. Go and get some rest, Jay. Call me when you find any information.”

“I will,” Ajay promised, “though it might be a day or two before I do call you.”

“All right,” Julia said, sounding disappointed. “Thank you again, Jay, for coming to the rescue today. I’ll never forget your kindness.”

“You’re welcome.” Julia’s voice made Ajay feel as if he had been wrapped in a warm blanket. Emotions he could hardly name had him wishing he had agreed to meet with Julia, even though he didn’t have any new information to give her.

Ajay discovered that he was smiling foolishly. He wiped a hand over his mouth and cleared his throat, trying to regain his professional manner as he warned, “Be careful from now on. Make sure everyone knows that you’ve cancelled the search for Ridder.”

“I will,” Julia replied worriedly. “But you need to be careful as well. If there’s danger, you’ll be the target now.”

“I can take care of myself,” Ajay told him with firm assurance.

“I believe that,” Julia chuckled. “Goodbye, Ajay.”

“Goodbye, Julia.” Ajay held his cell in his hand after saying his goodbye and simply stared at it; still not ready to label what he was feeling, but knowing he felt good just having heard Julia’s voice.

“Your stop,” the cab driver announced.

Ajay pocketed the cell along with his notes and paid the man. When he was on the street again and going up the steps of his apartment building, he wasn’t sure why he felt so reluctant to be there. The empty hallways, the quiet neighbors, and the bare essentials in his apartment

conspired to create a feeling of loneliness he hadn't experienced since moving out of his family's home. Compared to Julia's apartment, decorated with the sparkling personality of the woman who lived there, Ajay's home seemed unfinished, cold, and transient. Some of his things were still in boxes as if he intended to leave at any moment. He had never paid attention to how it looked, focusing only on functionality. It showed him how much of his life had been wrapped up in his goal to be a detective.

Even now, after a shower and a change of clothes, Ajay was still focused on his case. He put aside all thoughts of the day's drama and his disturbing new feelings towards his client. He took only enough time to heat up ramen noodles and make coffee, before he was sitting at his small dinner table with his notes spread out over the top. He ate and drank mechanically as his mind tried to find a clue that would help him solve his case.

Ms. Engles name had been written on the calendar blotter of Mr. Philmore's desk along with a small notation: party at six. The date was shortly before Ridder's disappearance. Philmore's assurance that his wife had picked David Ridder for his *sucker list* seemed disingenuous when the man was partying with Ridder's agent.

There had been several written phone numbers as well and small notations that had looked like time schedules. Those had been crossed out as if whatever they had pertained to had been completed. Ajay studied them for a long while, noting the long hours the notations seemed to cover. Too long for a bus or local train schedule; but a plane trip or long train trip might have times like that if there were connecting flights or trains to transfer to.

The papers on Philmore's desk had been even more cryptic. Ajay had expected trucking manifests and billing. Instead, he had seen a name, Osakana, and what looked to be overseas cargo manifests. Though he had taken notice of them, his real focus had been the note partly revealed under the papers. It was a confirmation that an orchestra had been hired to entertain a garden party tomorrow. If he had any luck at all, and Ajay was beginning to doubt it, he would not only find out where that party was being held, but that Mrs. Philmore would be in attendance. A slim hope at best, but perhaps his only chance of speaking with the woman.

Ajay's cell rang. He checked the number and then sighed. He answered it reluctantly. "Hi, Ma."

"Hi, Jay. Your father said he visited you." Her tone sounded apprehensive.

“It was a good visit,” Ajay assured her as he neatly stacked his notes and filed them in a shoebox with colored tabs. The tabs were all neatly labeled. It occurred to Ajay that his filing system was similar to David Ridder’s. Unlike David’s files, though, Ajay’s all fit into one shoebox. Some of the tabs were dated from his days at the police force. It was a testament to how new his career still was. “You and Da worry too much. You know I can take care of myself.”

“I know,” his mother replied fondly, “but we’re parents. We’ll always look out for you even when you don’t need us to.” She didn’t follow that up with *when you have children, you’ll understand*. It suddenly occurred to Ajay that she often said that phrase to his brothers and sisters, but not to him. Though Ajay couldn’t picture himself with a wife and children, it still depressed him to think his mother had so little confidence in his finding the right person and having a family of his own someday.

“What are you eating for dinner tonight, Jay?”

Ajay frowned at his ramen noodles. “Steak and a salad,” he lied as he pushed around the noodles in his bowl.

“Will you be selling me a house in a swamp next?” his mother asked archly.

Ajay chuckled. “Sorry,” he apologized, “but I knew you wouldn’t approve of noodles and coffee. I’ll have something later, I promise.”

“It’s like you’re four years old again,” his mother said in exasperation, “only now, I have to remind you that you can’t investigate if you don’t keep up your health, instead of keeping it up to play. I do wish you had learned to cook properly. Does your new client know how to cook? Maybe she can make you something healthier to eat.”

Ajay frowned in confusion. “Why would my client cook for me, Ma?”

“These city cases aren’t like close to home cases, are they?” his mother replied. She sounded nervous, as if she thought she might have said something wrong. She was almost babbling as she continued, “Remember when Silas hired you to find out who was taking his mail? When you found five-year-old Jaime taking it to play post office, Silas was so happy he made dinner for you two nights running. That’s all I meant, Jay.”

“Silas is an old friend of the family, Ma, regular clients don’t cook dinner for an investigator.... usually.” Ajay sensed that his mother was insinuating things he wasn’t ready to

discuss yet. He remembered his promise to Bonny Tillman and asked, to divert her attention, “Is Kenny there?”

“Kenny?” his mother changed mental tracks with difficulty. “Yes, of course. Where else would he be but here eating us out of house and home? Why do you want to talk to him, Jay?”

“I know a girl who’s interested in having a date with him,” Ajay revealed. He smiled at his mother’s excited response.

“A girl? Interested in Kenny?” She asked softly, as if she didn’t want anyone else to hear, “Is she crazy, or something?”

Ajay chuckled as he put the top on his box of notes. He replied, “I don’t think so.”

“What’s she like?” his mother wanted to know.

Ajay replied with some embarrassment, “Do you remember that girl I briefly dated, Bonny Tillman? She works at the airport.”

“Bonnie?” His mother sounded upset. “That poor girl! She still speaks to you after what happened? That proves she has a good heart.”

“I suppose it does,” Ajay agreed.

“I’ll get your brother,” his mother told him. “Make sure he says yes. His offers are few and far between.” She added firmly, “And you. Make sure you eat more than noodles tonight, Ajay Kavanagh. Understand?”

“I will, Ma,” Ajay assured her.

Getting past his brother’s memory of Bonny Tillman as a clumsy blonde giraffe was harder than mollifying his mother. Ajay spent far longer than he wanted assuring Kenny she was worth a date, even if she couldn’t negotiate a flight of stairs and had the bad taste to try and date Ajay. Kenny agreed to the date in the end with a threat to retaliate with all the unpleasant medical equipment at his disposal if things turned into a disaster.

Calling Wezel came next. Ajay prayed that old man Wezel wouldn’t answer the phone and was rewarded.

“Bring it!” Wezel answered.

“That sounds like a threat,” Ajay said irritably.

“I have caller I.D. stone age man, so I knew it was you. I do live next door. Why are you calling instead of coming over?”

“I had to explain to my father about the Mafia.”

“Are you saying you’re afraid of the old Geezer now?”

“No, I’m tired. I don’t feel like explaining myself to him.”

“You are scared of him.”

Ajay ignored the taunt. “I called because I need you to work on something for me for tomorrow.”

“As long as there is pay involved, I’m your man,” Wezel reminded him.

“I need you to find out about a garden party being held tomorrow—possibly by Gerald Philmore’s wife. I need a location, a time, and who’s invited.”

“And if it’s private?” Wezel wondered. “Would you like me to make you invited? If it’s on the web, I can maybe *tweak* you in.”

“Nothing illegal,” Ajay warned. “If it is private, I’ll try to get in through normal channels.”

“With what: your sparkling personality?” Wezel suggested sarcastically.

“With names,” Ajay replied. “I need the names of Philmore’s wife and a few of her associates.”

“That should be easy,” Wezel grunted. “I’ll have them in the morning for you. Don’t come over too early, though, okay?”

“All right,” Ajay agreed. “I still have to check the rails tomorrow and try to make an appointment with Calahan.”

“Wait! Tomorrow is Saturday, Kavanagh,” Wezel pointed out. “It’s a good day for garden parties, not for business meetings.”

“There’s always a chance someone is working in the offices, even on a Saturday. I can’t pass up a chance to get more information. I’ll call you tomorrow, Weasel. Thanks.”

“All right, Alusius Java Armani Yanci Michael Kavanagh,” Wezel taunted. “Talk to you then.”

Wezel hung up without allowing Ajay a hot retort. He didn’t like being reminded of what his name actually stood for. His mother had given him life and his name before leaving him. One was a gift. The other was a definite burden. His father had explained how she had gleefully picked every sign around them without thought and then added the name of the man who had helped deliver her baby. His foster parents had shortened it to Ajay and few remembered that it stood for

Alusius, after Alusius's bakery, Java, after the Java coffee shop, Armani, after the Armani clothing billboard, and Yanci, after Yanci's tailor shop and shoe repair.

Ajay supposed he should have been bitter about his abandonment, but nothing during his childhood had made him regret being the foster son of the Kavanaghs. Even if the woman suddenly appeared in his life again, Ajay wouldn't call her mother. He already had one who had earned the title a thousand times over.

Ajay went to bed that night with a jumble of different thoughts in his head when all he really wanted to think about was the case. The next morning, he blamed his distraction when he woke from an erotic dream of holding a naked Julia in his arms and shaking from a powerful orgasm.

Chapter Seven

Leaning on the kitchen counter in his robe and boxers, Ajay sipped at his coffee and stared at the package of bacon that his father had included in his *care package*. Ajay didn't own a frying pan. Cooking anything that didn't require the coffee pot, the microwave, or a sauce pot wasn't something he wanted to attempt. He wondered if he could trade the bacon to Wezel for something more manageable.

Ajay sipped more coffee and rubbed at his tired eyes. Even a cold shower and a short workout in the living room hadn't dispelled the erotic dream of Julia he had experienced. It had felt so real, so passionate and hot. He felt exhausted and confused now when he needed to be focused and on his game.

If he was going to speak with Mrs. Philmore and convince the rail to give him information on David Ridder, he had to look as if he had every right to do so. He needed to be Police Detective Kavanagh and hope that no one asked for proof. While he had told Wezel the night before not to break any laws, Ajay didn't see anything wrong with allowing people to wrongly assume who he was.

Ajay took his coffee to a window and leaned on the sill to gauge what sort of day it was going to be. The snow had stopped. The rising sun was filtering through tall buildings and turning the old part of town into glowing golds and reds. Traffic was already on the move, but people were few and far between on the sidewalks. Some of them were going into the bakery down the street. That sight set Ajay into motion and it wasn't long before he was dressed and out the door.

Showing up at Wezel's early was smoothed over by flashing a bag of just baked iced crullers and two containers of very good hot coffee under Wezel's nose when the man answered his door.

"Bribes work," Wezel growled as he grabbed a coffee and the bag and led the way back into his home. He was dressed in a red plaid robe, t-shirt, and sleep pants. He put down his coffee and scratched himself as he sat down at his computers. With a donut shoved between his teeth, he brought up Ajay's information. Ajay looked over Wezel's shoulder as his cousin tapped at the screen and began eating his donut.

Mrs. Philmore was hosting the garden party. *Garden* was a misnomer. Placed in the lobby of the five-star Poppel Hotel, the flower arrangements and miniature topiary displays were all potted.

Even a koi pond was temporary. The web page proudly spoke of bringing beauty to the citizens of their city while also citing the exclusivity of the guest list.

“Actual citizens need not show up,” Wezel said around a donut. “Looks like Detective Kavanagh need not show up either.”

“Let me worry about that,” Ajay told him as he made notes on his notepad. The party was at twelve o’clock. That meant he had time to check the rail beforehand. “Who is showing up for this party?”

Wezel grinned, looking bizarre with his sleep-mussed, red hair and mouth full of donut. He clicked a button and a guest list appeared.

“This looks private,” Ajay noticed and glared at Wezel. “Didn’t I tell you not to break any laws?”

“I didn’t,” Wezel protested, scowling now as he chewed and scrolled on the list. He swallowed and then explained, “What’s on the net is public domain. I just found the page that someone thought no one would see except who they wanted to see it.”

“You think that makes sense?” Ajay wondered sourly as he wrote down names.

“Legally, yes...I think,” Wezel replied and shook his head. “Sometimes, it’s best not to ask, Jay. You’ll be a happier man.”

“Until someone arrests me,” Ajay grumbled. He paused in his writing. “It says that the mayor is going to be there.”

“Another reason you’ll have a snowball’s chance in hell of getting in,” Wezel pointed out. “Security will be tight.”

“Police security,” Ajay agreed. Feeling a renewed sense of optimism, he smiled.

“I’m not used to seeing you smile,” Wezel said suspiciously. “I don’t think I like it.”

Ajay dropped the smile and pointed out, “I don’t recognize anyone except the mayor on this list. Do you know any of them?”

Wezel shook his head and looked exasperated. He put up another list on the screen. He printed it out and handed it to Ajay. “That’s why I researched the list for you,” Wezel told him. “I’m thorough. As you can see, besides the mayor, there are mostly women going. One guest is a poet, Kari Barnard. She’s published books, all of them having to do with nature. She’s doing a reading. It sounds like a real snoozer of a party, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t.” Ajay looked over the list thoughtfully.

Wezel bristled and warned, “Donuts and coffee only get you so far this early in the morning, Kavanagh.”

Ajay rolled up the bag with the other donuts and sipped at his coffee as he headed for the front door.

“Hey! You’re taking them?” Wezel protested. He swiveled around in his chair to watch Ajay go. “I thought that was part of my pay.”

“I didn’t sleep very well,” Ajay told him as he reached for the doorknob. “I need them for energy.”

“Didn’t sleep well?” Wezel said, puzzled. “Why not?”

Ajay froze with his hand on the doorknob, feeling a flush of embarrassment as he thought of his erotic dream starring Julia. Then he was shrugging as he opened the door. He said vaguely, “Bad dream. I don’t remember what it was about.”

Ajay didn’t wait for Wezel’s reply. As he closed the door behind him and headed for the stairs, he thought about how he had just lied to Wezel. It hadn’t been a bad dream. It had been extremely pleasant, pleasant enough to keep him awake for the rest of the night thinking about it. Julia had felt so real in his arms. Her body had been soft, warm, and supple. Ajay could even remember her soft cries of pleasure and the feeling of her breasts in his hands—Ajay tried to shut those thoughts down as he left the apartment building and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He didn’t need to remind himself that dreams often didn’t have any basis in reality, but Ajay couldn’t deny that his desire for Julia still lingered. What he intended to do about that desire, he couldn’t say yet, but he knew now wasn’t the time to attempt to figure it out.

Street lights were going off and the morning sun was beginning to paint the tall buildings with light as Ajay walked toward the rail entrance. The weather called for clear skies, though, and unseasonably warm temperatures. It would have been a good day to rest, to help Mr. Yamato clear his garden of snow and debris, to work out at the gym for more than thirty stolen minutes, or to simply relax at home. Ajay couldn’t take the time, though. There were no days off when he was on a case. It was a personal rule he hadn’t broken yet.

Ajay finished off the donuts and washed them down with the coffee. Throwing the trash into a receptacle, he took the stairs that went down to the city rail system.

“Morning, Ajay!” Mr. Williams called as he took the stairs upward. The man worked as a night guard. He and his five children were considered extended family by the Kavanaghs. They had spent many summers at the lake outside of the city, camping and forgetting whose kids were whose over long, lazy days. The years had turned the man’s hair from black to peppered white, but he still had the strong physical presence in his uniform that Ajay remembered from his childhood.

“How was work, Mr. Williams?” Ajay wondered.

“Boring,” the man replied with a grin as he stopped to face Ajay. “But that’s a good thing. A guard doesn’t want excitement ever. Where are you heading?”

“Nowhere. I need information.” Ajay replied.

“For a case?” Mr. Williams wondered. When Ajay nodded, Williams indicated down the stairs. “Now that you aren’t official, I’m not sure they’ll tell you anything. I’d better go along.”

“That’s not necessary,” Ajay said, but Mr. Williams was already making his way back down the stairs and asking, “What did you need to know?”

Ajay felt ten years old again as he trailed behind the older man. Mr. Williams didn’t lessen that feeling when he said as an aside, “Wipe your chin; you have something on it.”

Ajay wiped at his chin and found sugar from his donuts as he said, “I need to find out if a man named David Ridder took a train.”

“Out of town, of course?” Mr. Williams assumed.

“Yes,” Ajay replied and gave him a time frame. He wasn’t sure what a night guard for a shoe warehouse could accomplish, but Mr. Williams’ self-confidence kept Ajay from asking.

The station was as old as the part of the city it served. Gothic, Ajay thought. He looked through stone archways at old rail tracks and platforms and walked along walls covered in cracked tiles and graffiti over graffiti. The station office was an odd iron cage over stone, and the windows were retrofitted with modern Plexiglas. The attendants looked bored, each sitting in what looked like stalls filled with modern computer equipment.

“Tommy! I’m back again!” Mr. Williams greeted a portly man in a uniform sitting behind his Plexiglas barrier.

“Something happen?” Tommy wondered. He lifted his head from where he had been resting it on his large fist to look at Williams in concern.

“No, no,” Williams replied with a grin. “I just remembered a friend of mine was supposed to come back through here in ten days, but I can’t for the life of me remember when he left.

Tommy snorted. “Are you getting old, Ken?”

“As old as you, Tommy.” Williams chortled.

Tommy entered something on a computer and said, “No can do. It’s against the law for me to give out that information. You’ll have to jog your feeble memory for...what’s his name and about when did he leave?”

“David Ridder,” Williams replied with a sigh and gave the man the dates. “Sorry, Tommy. You know I’d never ask you to break the law for me. David will just have to call me when he shows up. I’d just hate to have him think I’m a heel though after promising to pick him up.”

“Well,” Tommy said with a shrug as he tapped on keys, “it could be that he didn’t even take the rail on those dates. Maybe you’re really not remembering right?”

Williams glanced at Ajay and Ajay nodded to indicate that the information was correct. Looking embarrassed, Williams said to Tommy, “Could be. Now I just feel stupid.”

Tommy frowned at his computer, entered something else, and then said, “You should really go and try to jog that memory of yours again, old friend, to be absolutely sure he took the rail on any date.” He gave Ajay a pointed look and said in a lowered voice to Williams, “I’d steer clear of Kavanagh’s boy if I were you, Ken. He might just get you into trouble next time with his crazy investigating.”

Williams cocked his head to one side and grinned, “Oh, I’m not worried about that, Tommy. Ajay will make something of himself, you’ll see. The boy has heart and drive, I’ve always said.”

Tommy leaned close and snickered, “They call him *the cuckoo*, you know? Kavanagh’s cuckoo. For all the trouble he’s caused that man, maybe he should have handed him over to the orphanage first thing instead of raising him with his brood?”

Williams looked angry suddenly. Then he took a calming breath before replying, “Kavanaghs like to help people, Tommy. Ajay’s no different. He’s just going about it in a different way.”

“Different? You should have seen him chasing Pokestas down the street not too long ago as if he had a badge and a right,” Tommy told him, thumping his finger against his Plexiglas barrier in emphasis. “I’m telling you, he’s a danger. And you should not be trying to help him in his madness.”

Williams spread his hands as he began to walk away and said apologetically, “He’s like a son to me, Tommy. I can’t help myself from helping him. See you later.”

Ajay followed Williams to the stairs and up to the street before Williams turned and said with a sigh, “Tommy really is a good guy, Ajay. A lot of people just can’t see beyond their own nose.”

Ajay scrubbed a hand through his dark hair and then shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. He said, “Sometimes it’s hard having everyone know me.”

Williams clapped him on the shoulder and then squeezed it in comfort. “It is hard when they remember you getting your head stuck in a railing when you were five or running down the sidewalk naked because you thought it was too hot for clothes when you were three.”

Ajay ducked his head but laughed with Williams. “I see your point.”

“Your father tells me to wait until you build your reputation,” Williams told him as they stepped aside to let people use the stairs. “He knows, and you do too, that you’ve chosen the hard road being a private investigator. Without law enforcement backing, you need that reputation like a man needs air.”

“This case may give it to me,” Ajay told him, his dark blue eyes full of his belief. “It’s the first big case I’ve had. I can’t botch it.”

“I hope you solve it, Jay, if that’s how it is. Unfortunately, if we can believe Tommy—and I think we can—your David Ridder didn’t take the rail.”

Ajay said in frustration, “He didn’t take a plane either.”

“You’ll have a hard time if he took a car somewhere,” Williams told him, “and I can’t help you there. I don’t know anyone in the highway patrol.”

“I’m not sure Ridder owned a car or if he could drive.”

“Many of us can’t,” Williams said. “There just isn’t a need for it in the city when you have so many other ways of getting around. Besides, owning a car is damned expensive.”

“Ridder didn’t have issues with money,” Ajay said, considering the possibility. “But that was only lately when he managed to acquire some sponsors to help him with his finances. He didn’t seem the type to suddenly purchase a car, so it’s likely he rented one. I’ll need to research the possibility and ask my client about it.”

“Like a bulldog, aren’t you?” Williams said with admiration. “I can see why Michael is so proud of you.”

Ajay smiled ruefully. He said, "I'd like him to be proud of me for my accomplishments."

"They'll come," Williams assured him. "You're young yet."

Williams sighed and looked tired, rubbing at his eyes.

"Sorry!" Ajay told him apologetically. "I forgot that you've been working all night."

"I do need to get home," Williams said with a limp smile. "I get so little time with the kids before their Nanna takes over and I go to bed."

He's been a widower all of Ajay's life, never replacing Mrs. Williams with another bride. Ajay knew her only from photos and Williams' fond memories of her when he could be coaxed to talk about her. It spoke of a deep relationship. Ajay had always wanted that kind of relationship for himself. It struck him just then that he might have been using a yardstick that most people couldn't measure up to. Relationships like that had to be rare. Ajay couldn't imagine settling for less though. Better to live like Mr. Williams—alone—than to have someone in his life who he didn't feel that strongly for, he thought.

"Thank you for helping me, Mr. Williams," Ajay told the man.

Williams gave him a quick, hard hug. "Can't call me Uncle Ken, Jay?" he chided.

Ajay's brothers and sisters had always called Williams *Uncle Ken*. The man had been a guard for as long as Ajay could remember though. Something about him in his uniform had always prompted respect from Ajay. *Mr. Williams* had been, for him, as fond a term as Uncle Ken. He was sure the man knew it too and was only poking fun at Ajay's usual business-like formality.

"Sorry, Uncle Ken," Ajay tried, but it sounded wrong and Williams laughed at his attempt.

"That's okay, Jay," Williams told him, giving him a clap on the shoulder. "Say hello to your parents for me. And good luck on your big case."

"I will, and thank you again."

As the man walked down the street mixing with the growing crowds, Ajay's sense of being a child diminished. He felt irritated at himself now, not liking how he had allowed Mr. Williams—however helpful—to take over. Ajay was the trained professional. It was his case; a case that was proving to have some dangerous elements. He couldn't allow even well-meaning people to become involved and take the lead.

Ajay checked his watch. He had several hours until the garden party and some time until he could call Calahan with any confidence that he might reach the man.

Ajay decided to take a cab uptown and see Mr. Calahan's place of business. He hoped it would give him some insight into how to best approach the man for information. He already had a strong feeling that Calahan's wife, a definite art lover, had been the one to urge her husband to sponsor Ridder. Ajay could only hope Calahan wasn't going to be as difficult as Philmore about allowing Ajay to question her.

Ms. Engles was still the most important person of interest, Ajay thought irritably as he hailed a cab and climbed in. Even if her assurances that she was allowing the police to search for Ridder, and that she didn't know where he might have gone, could be taken at face value, there was still the chance that she might have information she was unaware of. It was frustrating to Ajay that he couldn't convince her to speak with him.

He considered the possibility of interviewing her via a second party, but that would mean finding a person who knew her and was sympathetic to the case. Aside from Julia, who she had already made clear she didn't want to deal with, there were only Ridder's patrons.

"Not much open down here," the cab driver said as he pulled up in front of Calahan's employment building. "You might have a hard time getting another cab. Want me to wait?"

"No, I'll call the company if I need one sent," Ajay replied as he climbed out of the cab.

"That'll cost you," the man warned, but Ajay shook his head and grunted, "Don't wait."

"Suit yourself." The cab driver shrugged and drove away.

The clean lines of the office buildings, the empty streets and sidewalks, and the blue sky overhead gave everything a dream-like quality. When a flock of pale-colored pigeons flew from around one of the buildings, swirled around him, and then disappeared around the corner of another building, Ajay felt as if he were dreaming.

Calahan's employment agency was definitely closed for business. Ajay could see through the windows that the lobby lights were off and the front desk was empty of security guards or secretaries. When he stepped toward the front doors to read the sign that said when they would be open next, he was surprised when they automatically opened.

The sound of a vacuum told Ajay cleaners were in the building. One of them had probably left the doors open. Ajay turned to go, but stopped when he saw a man going into an office. Hoping to ask a few questions, he followed.

The man had close-cropped, salt and pepper hair, dark brown eyes, and squared-off chin. Although he was dressed casually in gray slacks and a pale blue polo shirt, he had an air of authority that told Ajay he wasn't a simple office clerk.

The man was looking over a sheaf of papers in a folder and not looking up at Ajay who was standing in the doorway. "Are you through cleaning?" the man asked irritably, mistaking Ajay for one of the cleaners. When Ajay didn't reply, he looked up and said sharply, "Well?"

"Doesn't seem so," Ajay replied uncertainly.

"Well, hurry it up! The noise is bothering me!"

The man walked past Ajay out of the office. It was then that Ajay noticed the line of portraits on the wall. The man who had just left the office resembled the latest edition to the gallery. The label told him it was a portrait of Callahan.

Ajay could hardly believe his luck. He left the office quickly and looked for the man. He found him in another office down a hallway.

"Mr. Calahan?"

"What is it?" the man snapped back as he searched through folders in a filing cabinet. "Three million dollars in new computer systems and these idiots are still filing reports on paper!"

"I wonder if I may have a few moments of your time," Ajay said tentatively as he took out his notebook and pencil.

The man turned abruptly and scowled, suddenly realizing that Ajay was not one of his cleaners. He asked warily, "Who are you?"

"I'm sorry to trespass, but the doors were open. I wasn't aware that you were closed today."

"Why wouldn't you be aware of that?" Calahan snapped. "We're the main office of a national business. Of course we're closed on Saturday. Sunday too, in case you haven't figured that out either!"

Calahan picked up a phone. After a moment, he said into it, "Where are you? Taking a piss or eating donuts somewhere? You're supposed to be guarding my building. Well, I have an intruder right in front of me. Would you mind coming to escort him out before I fire you?"

Calahan hung up the phone and stared at Ajay, still wary. "Are you a reporter? If this is about those workers suing my company in Wyoming for overtime violations..."

“No, sir,” Ajay assured him quickly. “My name is Detective Kavanagh. I’m investigating a missing person case. I was hoping I could ask you a few questions about David Ridder.”

“He’s missing?” Calahan’s voice was flat, devoid of any uplift in tone that would have indicated surprise. His eyes had narrowed as well. Ajay had a feeling the man was stalling for time until the guard arrived. “How does Ridder concern me?”

“You are one of his patrons,” Ajay replied, keeping his stance and voice matter of fact and nonthreatening. “I was hoping he might have given you a clue as to where he might have gone.”

“Do you consider me a suspect, Detective...?”

“Kavanagh, sir.”

“Detective Kavanagh.” Calahan kept an office desk between them. The file was still in his hands and held almost defensively. “Well?”

“Foul play isn’t suspected,” Ajay assured him. “Ridder seems to have left of his own free will, but he didn’t leave any clue as to where he might have gone.”

“And your client is understandably worried?” Calahan guessed.

“This has become a personal investigation,” Ajay informed him. “My client has declined to pursue the matter any further.”

“Ah, and you didn’t want to give up the case? How dedicated.” Calahan looked over Ajay’s shoulder and said angrily, “Escort Detective Kavanagh out and lock the damn door this time!”

Ajay turned as a hard hand fell on his shoulder. He found himself looking up at a large, angry guard. The man ordered, “Come with me, sir.” The ‘or else’ was implied.

Ajay resisted, keeping his voice and demeanor calm as he said to Calahan, “I simply want to know if your relationship with Ridder was such that you might have spoken personally with him.”

“I met him at a party where he made a lasting impression on everyone,” Calahan replied angrily as he motioned for the guard to make another attempt to remove Ajay. “Ms. Engles, his agent, was very persuasive about sponsoring his art endeavors. Everyone regretted their participation after his behavior that night. He was both rude and belligerent.”

“You withdrew your patronage after that?” Kavanagh wanted to know as he resisted the guard by planting his feet.

Calahan frowned. “That’s really none of your business, Detective.”

“It might be part of the reason for his disappearance,” Ajay argued.

“Do you think he left because he was embarrassment over his actions that night?” Calahan held up a hand, making the guard abort an attempt to put Ajay into a headlock. “Let me make clear what sort of man you are trying to find, Detective. He didn’t show an ounce of remorse for his behavior. He seemed determined to insult us. If Mr. Cassini hadn’t argued to continue his funding, I think he would have had a hard time getting a nickel begging on a street corner after that performance. If he’s missing, I can only assume he’s done so to spite his benefactors. I suggest you’re better off using your energies to solve real missing person cases.”

Ajay blinked, caught off guard. “Mr. Cassini spoke in support of Ridder?”

Calahan’s stare turned icy as he said to the guard, “Remove him now.”

“One more question,” Ajay begged as he bent his body almost double to brace himself against the guard’s sudden rough handling. “Did Ridder say anything to you about a place he might like to go? Or mention family or friends?”

“We didn’t speak personally,” Calahan replied. “Not even to thank me for my sponsorship. He was completely unsociable.”

“Thank you for your time!” Ajay called after Calahan as he finally allowed the guard to push him out of the front doors of the building.

After the glass doors had closed, the guard locked them pointedly and glared at Ajay as he snarled, “Thanks a lot, buddy!”

“Sorry!” Ajay apologized, but the man was already turning his back.

Ajay straightened his clothing, smoothed out his crumpled notepad, and began writing as he walked. It embarrassed Ajay that he had not been able to execute a professional interview with Calahan. Ajay could only hope Calahan wouldn’t see fit to spread the news that Detective Ajay Kavanagh had to be tossed out of his business.

So far, Ajay knew Cassini, Calahan, and Philmore had been at the gathering. Cassini had urged everyone not to pull their support of Ridder. Ridder had acted rude; dissatisfied in some way with the gathering. Ajay seriously began to consider that this gathering might have been the tipping point that had caused Ridder to disappear.

People were lying. Which ones and why, Ajay wasn’t certain yet. A motive wasn’t hard to find. They were important men. It was possible they were leery of revealing a deeper association with Ridder for fear of becoming involved in a legal case. Ajay was unwilling to consider other

motives or conspiracies without more information. He needed more interviews. He especially didn't need Calahan to make getting those interviews more difficult or impossible.

Stuffing his notebook into his pocket, Ajay walked until he began to pass open shops and restaurants. Finding a cab was easier then and he took one to the Poppel hotel.

Getting into the gothic-style hotel wasn't the hard part, Ajay thought as he straightened his coat, smoothed back his unruly black hair, and made his entrance. Getting past security at the doors to the main lobby was.

Hotel guests were being filtered through other hallways to their rooms and only allowed a glimpse of the proceedings. The high glass ceiling of the lobby sparkled with sunlight. A large collection of hot house flowers and plants filled the space, safe from the cold outside. The promised koi pond had its own waterfall and was surrounded by greenery. The tables and chairs for guests were arranged around it. A raised podium awaited speakers and the promised poet.

Ajay kept a low profile, following the other guests until he found a wide column and an ornate archway. It gave him enough cover to observe his goal and the obstacles in his way.

Richly-dressed women filtered into the lobby. Some came with their husbands but for the most part were escorted by drivers and hotel attendants. Ajay noted each guest and tried to discover which one was Mrs. Philmore.

"Are you attending the party, or admiring the columns of the hotel?"

Mr. Yamato was standing slightly behind Ajay, bag of tools hung from one shoulder and hat firmly in place. That brim tilted up so that he could level a keen eye at Ajay.

Ajay turned, startled. "Mr. Yamato! What are you doing here?"

"You don't think I just putter around a city garden, do you?" he asked with a smirk. "I do own a floral business."

"I thought you were retired," Ajay pointed out. "Isn't the business run by your son now?"

Mr. Yamato made a dismissive gesture. "He's a boy and inexperienced."

Mr. Yamato's son was close to forty-five years old, Ajay remembered, and had been running the business for nearly ten years.

Yamato saw his puzzled look and explained irritably, "This job requires an expert hand to keep the plants from wilting. These idiots want a *garden party*, but they want it without any actual interference from nature. No one wants a leaf to drop on their pretty tile floor and the koi pond

must not smell like fish they tell me. Wait until they get my bill. I'm charging for every inconvenience they make me suffer."

Yamato eyed Ajay again. "Why are you here? Hot date in one of the rooms?"

Ajay frowned, "No, sir. I'm still on a case. I need to interview Mrs. Philmore."

"Why?" Yamato asked. "The lady has air between her ears. If you're looking for a criminal mastermind, she isn't it."

"It's nothing like that. She may have asked for sponsorship of my missing person. I would like to know why and if she spoke with him recently."

"She's already inside having *vapors* about the arrangements," Yamato told him.

"Vapors?"

"Panic attacks," Yamato translated. "I don't think she will be in a mood to talk to poorly dressed detectives."

Ajay straightened his coat self-consciously. "I put on my best shirt."

"The collar is tight," Yamato teased. "It must be your father's best shirt."

Ajay blushed, but refused to lose his focus. "Maybe I don't fit in with this wealthy crowd, but maybe I can pass as security or as one of your gardeners?"

Yamato snorted and replied, "I'm not like Williams, Jay. I don't stick my neck out when my business reputation is at stake."

"How did you know about Mr. Williams helping me?" Ajay wondered in surprise.

Yamato tapped his ear. "I listen." He poked Ajay in the chest and said, "I know you. You're likely to get excited. There will be running about, things ruined, and people getting angry. It's been that way with you since you were small. I can't be a part of that."

Ajay sighed, "I do understand. It's all right. I still need to get in there though."

"Keep your eyes open," Yamato told him. "Opportunity is knocking."

"That's good advice. Thanks," Ajay said politely.

Yamato made an exasperated sound. "No," he said irritably and turned Ajay to face the lobby. "I mean *now*! Opportunity is knocking now!"

A woman in a loose, tan skirt, a blowsy pink shirt under a thick tan coat, and pink snow boots was having an argument with security. A book was tucked under her arm. She pulled it out to show it to the men barring her way.

“I was invited! How was I supposed to know this wasn’t a *real* garden party? The invitation didn’t say *it will be inside in an expensive hotel lobby with potted plants, so dress like a million bucks.* ”

Ajay hurried forward, ready with a name and silently thanking Wezel for his thorough research. “Are you giving Ms. Barnard trouble?” he asked the men angrily. “Ms. Barnard is the guest of honor and a published poet. Would you like to explain to Mrs. Philmore why you turned her away at the door?”

Ajay didn’t wait for them to gather an argument. He put a broad hand to the small of the woman’s back, ignored her wide puzzled eyes, and gave her a push past the men into the lobby. Security decided not to pursue them, but Ajay was sure he had been marked as someone to watch.

“You can stop pushing,” the woman complained.

She was a petite brunette; her serious, freckled face overwhelmed by overlarge glasses. She slid those glasses higher on her nose as she stared curiously at Ajay.

“Party crasher?” she wanted to know bluntly.

“I’m actually a detective without an invitation,” Ajay assured her. “I’m here to speak to Mrs. Philmore.”

“Will it be a polite conversation that she’ll be happy to engage in?” Ms. Barnard wondered.

Ajay started to reply, paused, and then said honestly, “That’s my intent, but it’s not a guarantee that it will end up that way.”

“I owe you for getting me in here,” she told him, but added, “but we part company here. A poet doesn’t get many paying gigs. I don’t want you to mess this up for me. Thanks...”

“Detective Kavanagh,” he supplied.

“Detective Kavanagh,” she repeated firmly and wished him, “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Ajay watched her walk away purposefully and then went in search of Mrs. Philmore.

Yamato was busy directing his staff. His finger-pointed and his hands gesticulated, but his hat kept his face undercover. Servers were finishing up decorating tables with flower centerpieces and elaborate-looking finger-foods and pastries. Early guests were admiring everything and making small talk. A full orchestra was setting up. Their brass instruments caught the light

through the glass ceiling and the sound of the musicians tuning their instruments warned Ajay that the party was about to begin.

An elderly woman was having a low-key argument with a server. She was dressed all in green. A miniature hat perched on her carefully-coiffed gray hair reminded Ajay of the hats ladies wore to hunt foxes on horseback.

"I've told you," she was telling the server, making every effort to keep the argument from being overheard, "I wanted pink roses wrapped inside the napkins. I have yet to see a single rose."

"Mr. Yamato has them," the server said. "He won't put them on the tables until just before your guests arrive."

"They are arriving early," she pointed out nervously.

"It can't be helped, Mrs. Philmore," the server apologized. "Mr. Yamato is afraid of them wilting if he puts them out too early."

"The man is a genius with plants," she sighed, "but just as temperamental as any artist."

"Like David Ridder?" Ajay asked as he stepped forward.

Mrs. Philmore blinked at him as if she couldn't see well, but she was automatically pleasant and smiling as she asked, "I'm sorry, but my poor memory can't place your name, Mr....?"

"Detective Kavanagh," he supplied.

She looked puzzled now as she asked, "Are you a guest of someone?"

"No, ma'am," he replied and hurried to add before she could react to that, "I only need to ask you a few questions for a missing person case I'm investigating. I was told about your party and thought it would be an easy way to reach you."

She was frowning now, clearly irritated. "Well, it's not. And you can tell that to your chief of police or whatever officer is your superior."

"I'll inform him of your displeasure," Ajay said smoothly. "May I ask my questions?"

She nodded stiffly and said, "I will of course assist in any way I can with law enforcement."

"Thank you." Ajay inwardly sighed with relief as he took out his pencil and notepad. "The name of the missing person is David Ridder."

"I have heard of him," she said, but looked as if she had tasted something unpleasant. "I was hoping to have a real artist for one of my parties and contacted an art agent, a Ms. Engles, to acquire one. My husband became interested in the choice and spoke with her as well. He decided

to sponsor the young man, but he was never allowed to attend one of my parties. Gerald told me Ridder was an unreasonable, temperamental artist, and that he might embarrass me. I never heard of the matter again.” She smiled and added, “It turned out for the best. I much prefer a poet. They lend a rich ambience to any gathering.”

“So, you never spoke with Ridder?” Ajay asked in disappointment.

“No,” she replied. She looked impatient and said, “If the questioning is over now, Detective, may I continue with my party?”

“Of course,” he replied as he pocketed his notes. “I’m sorry to disturb you. Good day, Mrs. Philmore.”

She inclined her head in reply. As Ajay turned to go, he heard her say aside to the server still waiting at her elbow, “Tell security that I want them to make sure that man leaves without incident.”

Ajay made certain to make a straight line for the door to the lobby. He passed Mr. Yamato on the way. The man tilted up his hat to show him a twinkling dark eye and said, with amusement, “Maybe you’re getting more mature? No noise, no destruction, and no angry people in your wake.”

“This time,” Ajay said. He hadn’t been so lucky with Mr. Callahan.

Security did make sure Ajay left the party and one security guard stood at the door of the hotel to make sure Ajay left the place altogether.

Chapter Eight

The lawyer's office in Ajay's place of business was locked and dark, but Katie's clinic was still taking patients even on a Saturday. Ajay passed a few of them on the way to his office. He knew a few by name.

Once his door was closed, Ajay took out his notepad and copied his clues onto post it notes. Taking a box of pins from a drawer, he then took his post it notes one by one and pinned them to the wall. He spent the next hour arranging and rearranging them as he tried to make a pattern emerge.

At the top of the pinned notes was Ms. Engles name and a question mark. She knew the most about David and about his situation and associations. She, Ajay felt, was the key in all of this. She might be able to add the clue that would make Ajay's puzzle crystallize into a coherent picture. She might even be able to tell him who was lying and who wasn't.

"I need to talk to her," Ajay muttered as he sat in his office chair, leaned back, and studied his wall of clues. "There has to be a way."

Ajay had started his day far earlier than was his usual. He fell asleep with clues swirling in his mind. The faint sounds from Katie's clinic, and the outside street traffic, made a lulling white noise.

Ajay wasn't certain how long he slept, but he came awake panting and disoriented from a vivid dream. He had been pulling silk sheets from a seductively pliant Julia as if un-wrapping a long anticipated gift. Ajay felt aroused and embarrassed. It took him a heart pounding moment to realize it had been his cell phone ringing that had startled him from sleep.

"Detective Kavanagh," he answered as his mind tried to sort out what was a dream and what was reality.

The caller didn't help matters. "This is Julia. I'm sorry to call you, but I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"All right?" Ajay sat up straight and rubbed a hand over his face briskly to wake himself up completely. "Why wouldn't I be?"

“I was attacked over this case,” Julia replied, sounding almost irritated. “It follows that you might be attacked as well.”

Ajay nodded at the logic of that and then remembered Julia couldn’t see it and said, “I’m fine. Thank you for your concern.”

There was an awkward silence. Julia tried to fill it. “How is the case going?”

Ajay’s eyes went to the wall and his random post it notes. He conceded, “I’m getting more mysteries than useful information.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Do you suspect that something else happened to David—other than his running away?”

Ajay wanted to say yes, but the information to support that theory just wasn’t there yet. It was still just a gut feeling. “No, not yet,” he dutifully replied. “Right now, I’m just concerned that some of Ridder’s patrons haven’t been truthful during our meetings.”

Julia sighed and said, “Actually, it’s all very understandable to me why they wouldn’t be eager to get mixed up in this. Reputation is very important to these people. They wouldn’t want any scandal touching them.”

She sounded bitter, as though speaking from experience. Knowing Julia’s history with her father, to some small extent, Ajay could understand why.

“You really should speak to Ms. Engles,” Julia told him as if reading his mind. “I wish she would change her mind and allow a meeting.”

“She’s taking a course of action that makes sense,” Ajay said. He didn’t want to defend her, but he was unable to criticize her choices either. “She has decided to rely on professionals who have tools for finding David that I don’t have access to.”

Julia sounded angry then. “I really don’t think she is investigating this, Jay. I don’t know why—and I don’t have proof—but no one has come to question me. Being David’s model and spending a great deal of time with him, I would think they would. That doesn’t sound like professional behavior to me.”

“I agree,” Ajay said, “but I won’t make the assumption that an investigation isn’t being performed. I need more proof of that.”

“I understand,” Julia said, letting it go with reluctance.

“Are *you* doing all right?” Ajay wanted to know.

“You do like to worry, don’t you?” Julia chuckled. “I’m fine. I had to call and cancel a modeling session though, much to the photographer’s annoyance. Even makeup couldn’t hide this swollen lip.”

“Photographer?” Ajay felt an odd emotion. He couldn’t define it, but it was unpleasant.

“An Art photographer, actually,” Julia clarified. “In this particular shoot, I’m supposed to be a nude angel at a luau with Hell’s Angels bikers. Don’t ask me what kind of sense that makes because I really don’t know. They decide if that’s art.”

Ajay’s unpleasant emotion increased as he imagined Julia posing nude for some unknown man. When he analyzed that feeling, he suddenly realized what it was. He was feeling jealous. Ajay quashed that feeling immediately. He was not only judging Julia’s profession, he realized, he was acting as if he had a right to feel offended by Julia’s interaction with the photographer himself. Even if they were in a relationship, he still wouldn’t have that right.

“So, what’s your next move?” Julia wanted to know.

It took Ajay a moment to understand that Julia had changed subjects. He recovered from his emotional upheaval with difficulty and switched mental gears. He replied, “I need to speak to Montoya and Ivansson.”

“On a Sunday? I admire your work ethic, Jay, but I don’t think—”

“I intend to try to speak to them Monday.”

“Oh, of course.”

Ajay felt the need to explain, “On Sundays, I go to church and have dinner with my family.”

Julia sounded flustered and disappointed. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t even consider that you had a family. I must be keeping you away from your wife and children with—”

Ajay was quick to correct her. “I meant with my mother, father, brothers and sisters. I don’t have a wife or children.”

“Oh.” There was relief in Julia’s voice. “I’m being stupid. Of course you wouldn’t have a family. You were on a date with that woman at the restaurant.”

“That was only a date by technicality,” Ajay pointed out sourly.

Julia laughed and asked, “How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“I’m not sure. My mother always says, *enough to start our own country and then some.*”

“She sounds nice,” Julia told him and sounded a little wistful. “It must be something to see...when you’re all together.”

“It is. Ma likes to cook, so she insists that we all come for dinner every Sunday,” Ajay said. He added jokingly, “She even wanted me to invite you.”

“I accept,” Julia said abruptly.

Ajay floundered in confusion for a moment before he managed to ask, “You want to come for dinner?”

“Why not?” Julia then sounded embarrassed and apologetic as she hurried to say, “That is, unless you were joking? I suppose it’s a bad idea to mix business and pleasure? I’m just a client. I shouldn’t presume.”

Ajay knew Julia was right. He believed strongly that he should keep their relationship professional and anything else could hamper his focus and his objectivity in the case. His tongue seemed to be on autopilot though. A part of his mind was unconvinced and unwilling to disappoint Julia as he said, “You are welcome to come, Julia.” He struggled to add, in a last attempt to keep it professional, “My parents have been curious about the case and my new client.”

“Fantastic!” Julia seemed to be truly looking forward to it. Knowing how loud and chaotic those dinners could get, Ajay hoped her enthusiasm wouldn’t turn into disappointment.

“Should I give you the address or pick you up?” Ajay winced. *Pick you up* made it sound like a date.

“Pick me up,” Julia replied without any reservation. “What time?”

“Around six,” Ajay told her, beginning to regret it already.

“I’ll be waiting. See you tomorrow evening, Jay.”

“All right.”

Ajay sighed heavily when the phone disconnected.

How did he keep getting himself into these situations, he wondered? At least this time he wasn’t dreading the prospect. It forced him to consider the reason why. Unlike Jessica, Ajay realized he actually enjoyed being with Julia.

“She’s a client,” Ajay muttered angrily to himself. “This is not a date. It is not going to turn into one. She is a client meeting my family over dinner, nothing else.”

His words lacked conviction. Ajay couldn't back those statements up with any real emotion behind them; especially when he was unable to deny the fact that he wasn't regretting being talked into the situation.

It would give him a chance to question Julia further about Ridder, Ajay told himself. He would also be able to discuss at length his conversations with Ridder's patrons. In reality though, Ajay wasn't sure how he was going to accomplish either of those things in the chaotic atmosphere of his family's dinners. He clung to his reasoning like a drowning man clings to a life raft. It was better than admitting to more personal reasons in his decision making.

Ajay rearranged the post it notes on the wall yet again. The papers on the wall might as well have been blank. Ajay was finding it impossible now to concentrate on them. Instead, he was already thinking about calling his parents, warning them about his guest, and begging them to keep his brothers and sisters under control.

He punched a fist into the center of the post it notes, making them flutter as he growled, "And this is why we keep our personal and business life separate."

Ajay leaned into the papers until his forehead was resting against them. He let his forehead bang lightly several times as he tried to get focused.

"I would say first comes madness, but you've been mad for as long as I've known you," Katie said from the doorway.

Ajay turned his head to look at her, gave out a long sigh that fluttered the papers, and asked, "May I ask you for some advice?"

"There is a low cost psychiatrist two buildings down from here," Katie suggested, hooking her thumb vaguely in its supposed direction.

Ajay stared at her until she relented.

Leaning against the doorjamb with her arms crossed tightly across her chest, Katie said, "Okay, ask; but don't get used to it."

"How do you keep your personal life from interfering with your business life?" Ajay asked, feeling a flush of embarrassment.

Katie frowned. "You have a personal life now?"

"It would seem so."

Katie scratched at her short hair and shrugged, “Well, I guess you just compartmentalize your life. You trust that whatever is happening with either of them, it will still be there to deal with when you stop dealing with one or the other.”

“I didn’t understand any of that,” Ajay confessed.

Katie rolled her eyes and thought for a moment. She tried again in exasperation. “When you work, you work. Whatever’s at home will keep. When you’re at home, whatever’s at work will keep. You trust in that. You never mix them. Think of flipping an on/off switch. Home: no work. Work: no home.”

Ajay tried to understand, wondering if he could do that. “You’ve been successful at this?” he wondered.

Katie snorted and looked a little pained. “No,” she replied. “That’s why I’m single. The clinic is my life twenty-four seven, just like this detective agency is yours.” She cocked her head to one side and added, “It could be that I haven’t found the person I love enough yet to take time away from work. Have you, do you think?”

Ajay straightened, feeling annoyed now. “Of course not! Who said anything about love? She is a distraction, though.”

“Men are such emotionally stunted creatures,” Katie growled, throwing up her hands and walking past Ajay to steal several pencils from a cup on his desk.

Waving the pencils at Ajay and turning to leave, she said, “Thank you for your donation to the clinic. This session with Dr. Malevona is now over.”

Ajay closed the door behind her and stared at his notes again. Don’t bring *home* to work, and don’t take *work* home. Trust that things with Julia will keep until he can leave work and deal with them. It wouldn’t be easy, but he supposed it would be far easier than the opposite—forgetting about work when he was home Sunday having dinner with his family and Julia.

Ajay was still only formulating a picture of Ridder’s personality. He was a reclusive and intense artist who didn’t like the attention that Ms. Engles had forced on him. He was rude, odd, and liked to paint dark subjects. He hadn’t ingratiated himself to his patrons, and Ajay doubted that he had seen the need for the money they had given him. He liked to live simply with all of his focus on his art and not his comfort. Deciding where a man like that might go still required more clues.

It struck Ajay suddenly that Ridder was as dedicated to his art as Ajay was dedicated to being a detective. Ridder wouldn't go where he couldn't paint. While that didn't tell Ajay where he might have gone, it did narrow down the search. Ridder wasn't likely to remain homeless. Ajay imagined his goal would be to begin painting again as soon as possible.

That theory had holes where logic was concerned. Would a man so dedicated to painting leave without any of his brushes, paints, or canvases? Even a man running impulsively might take something. It caused Ajay to wonder if he had missed that clue while searching Ridder's apartment. He needed to return, he decided, and examine the apartment again; especially with the new perspective he had gained from his interviews. He hoped the police hadn't locked it up and taken away evidence for their investigation.

Ajay made notes, tucked them into his pocket, and decided there wasn't much else he could do. He could almost hear a clock ticking away the time he had left for the investigation. Ajay didn't like the thought of wasting even a few hours. He briefly contemplated working Sunday.

Ajay's cell rang. He answered it absently as he stared at his clues.

"Jay?" his mother said.

Ajay started and turned away from his post it notes, feeling as if he had just been caught stealing cookies. "Ma?"

"I wanted to make sure you were going to be with us tomorrow." Her tone let Ajay know she was seriously doubting it and not happy about it. "I know your case is important, but so is church and family. One recharges the soul and the other recharges the heart."

"I know." Ajay rubbed his forehead. His growing frustration was making it ache. He felt torn as his sense of duty to his profession battled with his sense of duty to his family. "I don't have endless amounts of time to solve this case, Ma. Taking even one day off—"

"Will help clear your head to help you think about your case," she said, interrupting. "Haven't you heard that stepping away from a problem sometimes helps you see the solution more clearly?"

"If I had enough information, there might be something in this case to become clear," Ajay complained irritably. "Right now, I have very few clues. I need to get more information."

"And this can happen on a Sunday?" his mother wondered skeptically.

"It might." Ajay sat on the edge of his desk and stared at his wall of clues again.

“Well, I’m *just* your mother; and they’re *just* your brothers, sisters, and dear father,” she said. “I’m sure everyone will understand when there’s an empty place at church and an empty chair at dinner. I’ll tell Father Francis that your work was more important. I’m sure he’ll understand, while he reads your name at the sermon and embarrasses your father and—”

Ajay said, interrupting her lecture, “I almost thought you were supporting my decision.”

“Silly you,” retorted his mother. “I’ll see you at church and at dinner, Jay.”

“Yes, Ma,” Ajay said. He found a smile as a weight seemed to lift off his shoulders. Trust his mother to know what he really wanted and to hamstring his attempt to self-sacrifice for his work.

Ajay remembered his invited guest then. “I asked my client to join us for dinner,” he said uncertainly. “Is that all right?”

His mother’s voice warmed as she replied, “Of course it is. You know you’re always welcome to bring someone special, Jay.”

“Ma! She’s a client!” Ajay protested.

“Of course she is,” his mother soothed.

“She wants to meet the family,” Ajay told her worriedly. “Could you find a way to lock Steven in the basement? I’d rather not have Julia decide to drop me from the case because Steven decided to be his usual obnoxious self.”

“Steven is your brother,” his mother admonished him. “If your Julia judges you because of someone else in your family, then maybe she isn’t right for you?”

“She may judge me when Steven says something rude and I have to punch him,” Ajay pointed out.

“I would judge you, too,” his mother warned him. “And send you to your room without dinner.”

Ajay smiled, imagining his mother ordering him upstairs as if he were still a child. “Just talk to him, okay?” he begged her.

“I will,” his mother agreed with a long-suffering tone that said she didn’t have much hope her talk would do any good.

“See you tomorrow at church,” Ajay promised.

“We’ll be waiting,” she said with a firmness that locked him into that promise. He hoped he wouldn’t regret it.

“How was church?” Julia wanted to know.

Ajay glanced over at her nervously and then continued watching the street pass by as the cab took them to his parent’s home. “Good.”

It was an attempt at conversation. There had been little enough of it after Julia had entered the cab in a pair of jeans, low brown boots, a cream-colored leather jacket, and a pale yellow sweater. Her hair was braided tightly and small gold studs in her ears were her only jewelry. The bruises on her face spoiled her attempt at understated casual though. They were beginning to turn green and yellow as they healed. She looked like she had been in a brawl.

“Are you certain you want me to come?” Julia asked bluntly.

Ajay sighed. He stopped his game of evasion and met Julia’s blue eyes squarely. “I’m not sure how I feel; that’s the problem.” That was as honest as he could manage.

Julia looked down at her manicured nails. They were a pale pink. She clasped her hands together in her lap. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I shouldn’t have invited myself. I just...” She paused to consider her next words carefully before she finished, “I just wanted to know you better. I’m not sure how much time we have before you solve this case. I might not see you again afterward.”

Barely an admission on both sides, but neither of them was ready to go further than that. Ajay felt acutely nervous now that Julia was acknowledging she was feeling the same attraction between them.

“It’s all right,” Ajay told her firmly. It was, especially when Julia gave him a bright smile of relief. That might change once she met his family and they were supremely themselves—testing even the patience of a saint. For now, though, Ajay felt excited to show Julia to the people he cared most about even if he didn’t yet fully understanding why.

“So,” Julia said, trying for conversation again. “You’re Catholic?”

Ajay snorted and replied, “How did you guess?”

Julia smiled and shrugged.

“We’re once-a-week Catholics,” Ajay admitted, remembering his mother saying that with exasperation. “We sin all week and then confess and do penance on the weekend.”

Julia laughed. “I’m sure your priest isn’t happy about that.”

“We do take up a lot of time in the confessional,” Ajay admitted with a grin, but then frowned as he sorted out his feelings about it. “I suppose I want to be closer to God, my family, and my community, but I don’t think I’m a true Catholic.”

“It just feels good to be part of it?” Julia guessed.

Ajay nodded, surprised at Julia’s perception. “You?” he wondered.

Julia frowned and shrugged. “I don’t go. They don’t approve of my work. It’s hard to worship when you’re made to feel like a sinner.”

“Because of your nudes?” Ajay wondered.

“I pose for some very controversial art pieces and photo shoots, Jay. Sometimes, those more outrageous works of art are plastered all over the city for advertisement purposes.” Julia’s smile was brittle. “I don’t want to pretend I’m someone I’m not. I enjoy posing for art. My father didn’t approve either.”

Ajay considered how his church might treat Julia. He couldn’t imagine the good Father rejecting anyone as long as they confessed and showed a true desire to worship, but he supposed he was being naive. Not having seen anyone turned away didn’t mean it hadn’t happened. It gave him a chill imagining Father Francis judging him for being with a model that showed her body to the world, asking him to admit to sin in the confessional, and then ejecting him from the church afterward as an unrepentant sinner. Unrepentant because Ajay realized he didn’t consider Julia a sinner. Her career might make him uncomfortable, but he had seen beauty in the art created with her as the subject.

“Jay?” Julia asked worriedly, seeing Ajay’s stricken expression. “What’s wrong?”

“A crossroads,” Ajay muttered to himself. He shook his head sharply. “Nothing,” he replied stronger, trying to recover from his unpleasant epiphany.

Julia surprised Ajay by understanding enough not to pursue it further. She simply asked, turning the subject of the conversation to something else, “So, how many brothers and sisters do you have?”

Ajay felt as if he was girding his loins for a fight when he replied, “Eleven.”

Julia mouthed *eleven* in shock and then laughed. She said, “That’s not a family, that’s a nation.”

“So my Da always says.” Ajay chuckled, his mood improved as he described his family to Julia.

“Kenny is the eldest,” Ajay told him. “He’s a paramedic. Not married, no kids, and an impossible slob and wise-ass. Patricia, or Patty Pain-in-the-Ass as I call her, is the second eldest. She’s an OB-GYN doctor. She likes to *inform* people. Simply nod a lot and don’t argue, and she’ll go on to *inform* the next person soon enough. Erin is the third eldest. She’s having her second baby; but when she’s not pregnant and complaining about it, she’s a fireman—wait...no, don’t say *man*. Make sure you say *firefighter*, or you’ll get an earful. Kile is a firefighter as well, and he’s married to a firecracker. If he brings her, expect a light show.”

“Breathe, Ajay,” Julia chuckled.

Ajay smiled, gave himself a moment, and went on. “Sean is the fifth eldest. He’s in the military and stationed in South Korea. Michael Junior, number six, is a psychologist. Do not, I repeat, *do not* let him psychoanalyze you, or he’ll have you crying about a loose tooth when you were four-and-a-half and how it warped the rest of your life. Marta is number seven. She’s a social worker and married to Father John, a Methodist. Let’s not even get into what my parents thought of that! Mark is number eight. He’s an architect who designs low cost buildings for low income people. James, number nine, is an accountant. He works with my sister—his twin, Joanne. They run a small clothing shop on Devoe when it isn’t tax time. Lastly, there’s Steven. He’s younger than me. He likes weird clothes, weirder hairstyles, and being a burden to my parents.”

“And your father and mother?” Julia asked.

“My father is a cab driver,” Ajay replied. “My mother rules the Kavanagh nation at home.”

Julia laughed. Ajay found that he loved that laugh; it was pleasant and genuine.

“You?” Ajay prompted.

Julia sighed and pushed a loose strand of her gold hair behind one ear. “I suppose it’s only fair, but it’s not easy to talk about.”

“You don’t have to,” Ajay quickly assured her. “It’s none of my business.”

Julia thought about it for a long moment and then confessed, “You’re not likely to meet my family, especially my father. I tried to follow in his footsteps. I tried to convince him—and maybe

myself—that I was the daughter he wanted. That didn't work of course, and he's disowned me. I have cousins, but no brothers or sisters. My mother passed away when I was young."

"I'm sorry," Ajay said, trying to imagine that sort of life and failing.

The cab pulled up to his family's plum colored Victorian house and Ajay began to pay for the cab fare. It was like bringing home a date and it made him feel uncomfortable. When Julia tapped his hand aside and said, as she paid the fare instead, "This was my idea," that uncomfortable feeling turned to relieved gratitude.

Kile was, as usual, sitting on the front porch steps and smoking. Ajay said aside to Julia, "He's not allowed to smoke in the house."

"And he's not deaf," Kile growled and stubbed his cigarette out on the railing. He wiped his hand on his jeans and held it out to Julia. "You're Julia?"

"Yes," Julia replied as she lightly took his hand. "You're Kile?"

"How did you know?" Ajay asked, startled.

"Firemen tend to have big shoulders," Julia replied with a small blush.

Kile released her hand, flexed his shoulders, and laughed.

"Is Catherine here today?" Ajay wondered.

Kile rolled his eyes and gave a long-suffering sigh. "I was told I was a complete asshole this morning...and something about not caring about her feelings. Somehow she pulled that out of me not picking my underwear off of the floor. She might come over later if she finds enough sanity."

Kile followed them into the house. It was already full of family and the smell of cooking. Conversation was at a dull roar. As they entered the living room, family members rose to greet the new arrivals with boisterous goodwill. Julia seemed small, fragile, and in danger of being overwhelmed. Ajay found himself reaching out almost protectively to put a hand along Julia's back as he tried to introduce everyone. When his nephews and nieces joined them as well, it turned into chaos.

"Enough!" Ajay's mother finally roared and pushed through to Julia and Ajay. "Give the girl room to breathe!" She took Julia's hand and led her into the kitchen.

The kitchen was her domain. No one entered without invitation. The cabinets and appliances were as old fashioned and well-worn as the pots and pans hanging from a rack over the stove. A

small table and two chairs were butted up against a wall. It was there that she motioned Julia and Ajay to sit before she went to stir a large pot of boiling corn.

Her voice softened as she looked over her shoulder at Julia and asked, “So you’re Ajay’s friend, Julia?”

“Client,” Ajay corrected.

She gave him a sharp look of exasperation before returning to her welcoming warmth. “Ajay’s told us good things about you. I’m glad to finally meet you.”

Julia appeared almost dazed by her introduction to the Kavanagh household, but she rallied and managed a charming smile. “I’m glad to meet you as well. Thank you for allowing me to dine with you.”

“So polite!” she chuckled with pleasure. “I like this one, Jay.”

“I’m glad,” Ajay said sourly.

Ajay’s father leaned over the threshold of the kitchen as if respecting a strict boundary, unlit pipe between his teeth and hands in his pockets. He gave Julia a nod.

“My father,” Ajay introduced.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Julia said and seemed more nervous than when she had faced the entire Kavanagh clan.

Michael Kavanagh swung his pipe to one side of his mouth before replying, “No *sirs* here, Julia. You can call me Mike, or even Da, like the rest.”

That startled Ajay as much as Julia. It seemed as much as his obviously embarrassed father could impart. He nodded to Julia again, his skin color trying to match the red still left in his wild hair as he went back to join the others.

Ajay’s mother added, “And you can call me Martha, or Ma, like the rest too.”

“Thank you, Martha,” Julia said with only a little hesitation.

Ajay recalled that it had been *Mr. and Mrs. Kavanagh* to Bonny and the last two dates he had managed to bring home. Why they were acting so differently to Julia was a mystery.

“What’s for dinner?” Ajay asked.

“Pot roast, potatoes, corn, fresh rolls, and some Michaelmas pie,” his mother replied. She winked at Julia. “That’s pie with apples and blueberries. It’s Jay’s favorite.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Julia said.

“It is,” Ajay promised. “She’s the best cook anywhere.”

“Why, thank you, Jay!” his mother said, pleased. Then she admonished with a shake of her wooden spoon, “Just remember to save some for other people this time.”

Julia laughed at Ajay’s blush, but Ajay defended himself by retorting, “I was seven at the time, Ma. I haven’t eaten it all since.”

“Never hurts to remind you,” she said. She smiled warmly again and told Julia, “Da’s probably finished telling the others to tone it down. Why don’t you go and try to meet them again?”

“Up to it?” Ajay asked Julia as he stood up.

Julia stood up as well and nodded. “I think so.”

They entered the living room again and the Kavanagh’s stayed in their places this time, helped by glares from their father. The children were conspicuously absent, but Ajay could hear them shouting and calling to each other outside.

They were all trying to be polite, but the volume rose as Julia seemed to relax and become a part of the clan. She sat at their center and fielded as many questions as she asked; always charming, smiling, and a perfect guest. Even Steven, grudging at first, warmed to her and asked about her modeling jobs and the cameras they used.

Ajay could see a hunger in his brother; a spark of interest he had never seen before. Was he interested in photography? He caught his father’s eye and saw the man nod, taking notice as well. Ajay suspected a new camera was going to appear in the house that would probably end up being far more complicated than the point-and-click one his mother used. Michael Kavanagh always encouraged his children, whatever their dreams.

As Ajay watched Julia at dinner—watched her become part of the family as if she had always been there—he felt a growing emotion became clearer as the evening came to a close. It was more than a reaction to Julia’s beautiful face, her golden hair catching the lamplight, or her slim hands gesturing as she talked with Ajay’s father. It was Julia herself. She was more than a client, Ajay admitted at last. It was time he stopped avoiding the facts. He was falling for Julia Temple.

Saying it, even mentally, didn’t stop the turmoil of uncertainty though. It only made it worse. Especially when he realized—now that he had dropped his blinders—that his family was making every effort to show their acceptance of him and Julia.

Ajay found himself sitting on the back porch without knowing how he had gotten there. He stared blindly at the yard as it darkened into night, trying not to make an emotional fool out of himself.

His parents knew when to give Ajay space to think, but Kenny wasn't so thoughtful. The man appeared next to Ajay, leaned against the railing, and sighed as he looked up at the dark sky.

"I guess I have to thank you," Kenny said grudgingly.

Ajay blinked, caught off guard. "For what?"

"For hooking me up with Bonny," Kenny explained. "She's pretty great."

Ajay found a smile. "I'm glad."

There was a long moment of silence. Then Kenny said, with some embarrassment, "Ma explained what's going on with you and that gal, but I didn't believe it. Well, not until I saw you making cow eyes at her at dinner." He made a derisive sound. "You dated women, but it was a disaster every time. I was thinking you were gay. I was waiting for you to bring home a guy."

Ajay glared and then sighed and stared at the ground between his feet. "I've always dreamed of becoming a good detective. I was completely focused on that goal. I didn't want to date anyone, but Ma and Da were worried about me. I did it to make them happy. That's why those dates failed."

Kenny snickered. "I remember that one—Tanya? She said you left her sometime during the middle of the date after saying something about a breakthrough in a case. I had a lot of fun consoling her."

Ajay frowned disapprovingly. Kenny laughed at him.

It took a minute for Kenny to get serious again. He admitted, "Not all of us understand or like where you're heading, you realize? She doesn't seem like your kind of woman."

Ajay nodded, wondering who in his family was giving lip-service to their support because their parents demanded it.

Kenny leaned a little forward, his expression concerned. Ajay wasn't used to Kenny being the serious one. He tensed, waiting for his brother to crack a joke. He was shocked instead when Kenny said, "We worry about you, that maybe you're rushing things. Some are even wondering how the little gal got those bruises on her face."

“I didn’t do that!” Ajay snarled, hot fury scalding him from head to toe. His hands curled into fists as he explained. “Julia was injured in a robbery!”

Kenny raked a hand through his red hair and looked immensely relieved.

“How could you think that I would do something like that?” Ajay demanded.

Kenny reached out and squeezed Ajay’s shoulder. He said sadly, apologetically, “You’ve always been the workaholic; the detective; the clueless wonder about women; the dry, too serious, dumbass of the family. Now you’re suddenly bringing home this girl nobody knows, little brother. Makes me wonder what else is going on with you I don’t know about.”

“Not that!” Ajay exclaimed, “I would never hurt her, or anyone, like that.”

Kenny bowed his head and let his hand drop. He said darkly, “You can’t blame me for wondering.”

“Yes, I can!” Ajay stifled an urge to punch him.

Kenny must have sensed it. He gave Ajay a few minutes to calm down and then said, “That wasn’t the only worry we had—that I had. Let’s look at the facts, Jay. This girl is way out of your league. She’s a model; a pretty, pampered pooch from uptown. I don’t see how it’s going to work between you two. Maybe this is another disaster in the making?”

Ajay scrubbed at his face roughly and said, “Look, you’re assuming a hell of a lot, Kenny. I’m not getting into anything with anyone right now. I’m still figuring it out, all right? Let’s not talk about it.”

Kenny nodded, respecting that request. Then he said, “I’m not very good with the ladies, either; but I do know that you don’t run out on them without an explanation. She’s worried that she screwed up somehow. You better get back in there.”

Ajay stood up in a rush, worry plain on his face.

Kenny sighed and said, “You got it bad, brother...real bad.”

Ajay glared. Then he considered how difficult it must have been for Kenny to talk to him about such an uncomfortable subject. “Thanks,” he managed.

Ajay went inside to find Julia.

Julia was sitting on the couch. She gave Ajay a worried look as he entered the living room. Some of the children were playing a board game on the floor while others played their handheld

games. Several of the adults were talking to Julia. Ajay's father was seated in his favorite recliner, still chewing on the pipe that Ajay's mother wouldn't let him smoke.

Ajay's mother was standing by the door into the living room. She gave Ajay's elbow a slight squeeze, her worried expression matching Julia's.

"It's okay," Ajay whispered to his mother and then moved to Julia's side. "Everyone behaving themselves?" he asked Julia.

Julia smiled. "Yes, they are. You have wonderful family, Ajay."

"I do," Ajay agreed, much to their surprise.

Later that evening, as they were preparing to leave, Ajay's father told Julia, "You'll be coming back again soon," as if it were an order. Julia seemed happy to agree.

After calling a cab, Ajay and Julia stood outside on the front walk to wait for it. The night air was freezing. Julia didn't look dressed warm enough for it. She sank her hands into her sweater pockets and found the tips of her shoes interesting.

"Thank you for inviting me," Julia said softly.

"I'm glad that you came," Ajay looked down at the top of her head and wondered what to say next. He fell back on the topic of work as if it was a lifeline. "If it's possible, I would like to visit Ridder's studio again tomorrow morning. I think, with the new information I have, I might find clues I missed before."

"All right," Julia agreed and looked up with a smile. "That is, if they haven't changed the locks yet."

"Is that likely?" Ajay wondered in concern.

"Ms. Engles owns the lease, not David," Julia explained. "Anything is possible."

Ajay had the urge to visit the studio immediately then, not wanting his chance of finding more clues compromised. He recalled Kenny's words. He had run out on a woman for that very reason and without a second thought. Ajay found he didn't want to disappoint Julia that way. The effort not to ask made him frown though. It was almost painful to hold himself in check.

Julia's smile grew warm. She laughed and said, as if reading Ajay's mind, "Why don't we go to the studio now?"

Ajay blinked in surprise. "You don't mind?" he asked carefully.

Julia replied firmly, “You’re working to find David. I need to help you in any way I can.” She added, almost under her breath, as their cab arrived, “And I’ll get to spend more time with you as an incentive.”

Ridder’s studio wasn’t in a good neighborhood. Nighttime lent the block of old warehouses, bathed in the harsh light of streetlamps, an eerie feeling. The cab driver agreed to wait, but he locked his doors as soon as they exited the cab.

A stray dog skirted the shadows. Trash blew along the pavement in a light, freezing wind. There was a club of some sort blasting music much farther down the street. Ajay could just make out a group of people hanging out there illuminated by the colored, flashing lights of the bar.

Julia fumbled for the right key as they stood in front of the large industrial door of Ridder’s studio. As Julia unlocked it, Ajay found himself nervously scanning the neighborhood and instinctively keeping himself between Julia and any possible danger. Ajay knew he looked imposing in his dark coat and with his formidable size, but Julia would look like an easy victim.

Once inside, Ajay locked the door behind them as Julia turned on the lights. The too bright industrial lighting gave everything a garish glow and made the changes to the room that much more obvious.

Ridder’s bed had been overturned and pulled apart. His box of reference photos had been upended onto the floor, a colorful mosaic on the paint-covered concrete. His photography darkroom light had been left on. Ajay could see overturned bottles of solution. There were empty spaces among the hanging photos.

“Do you think the police did this?” Julia wondered in a small voice.

“It’s possible,” Ajay replied as he carefully looked around, “though this level of disruption definitely isn’t procedure. I don’t see any evidence of a break in.” He looked down at the scattered photos. “It’s likely whoever did this had a key.”

“Do you think it was Engles? Why would she do this now and not earlier?”

“Paintings were missing before,” Ajay reminded her. “It’s possible she came back for something else.”

Ajay squatted and sifted through the photos. There were photos of every kind, but they were predominantly of faces, mostly old or odd looking ones.

Ajay said thoughtfully. "I wonder if any of these photos are of his family." He flipped a few over and saw a number written at the corner of each one. "What could the numbers mean?"

Julia crouched next to him. Her perfume tickled Ajay's nose. Her braid slid down from one shoulder, swinging like a golden rope, as she sifted through the photos as well. "I've seen some of these people before."

Julia pulled out a few photos of the people she recognized and handed them to Ajay. She stood then and walked over to canvases stacked in a dusty corner. She began going through them as if searching for particular ones. She said as she searched, "Once, David made me wait while he developed some photos. I was bored and started looking through his older works. I remember that some of them resembled David."

Ajay looked through more photos, puzzling over the numbers. "There must be a sequence," he guessed. "If we can reorganize them, we might discover if any are missing."

Without thought for how long that might take, Ajay righted the bed and gathering up all the photos. He began sorting them by number using the bed's flat surface.

Julia glanced over at him and sighed when she saw what Ajay was doing. "I don't think the cab driver is going to wait, Jay. Perhaps we should take them with us?"

"That's taking evidence," Ajay replied distractedly, mind on his work.

"There are numbers on the backs of all of the canvases as well," Julia told him. "Maybe they match the reference photos?"

"Are there any names on the paintings?" Ajay wondered as he found a set of photos with sequential numbers.

Julia frowned as she tried to read the old labels in the industrial lighting. Finally, self-consciously, she took a pair of reading glasses from her sweater pocket and put them on. Reading the labels, she finally replied, "All numbers." She hastily put the glasses into her pocket again.

Julia reached under a table and worked out an old, heavy, wooden shipping crate full of canvases. A spider crawled away as its web between the table and crate was broken. Julia positioned the box in the light and read the large lettering on the shipping label.

Julia shouted, "Jay!"

Alarmed, Ajay rushed to Julia's side.

"Are you all right?" Ajay demanded worriedly. "Did you find something?"

Julia tapped the label. "It's addressed to Davyd Ryder. Either someone can't spell, or David is an assumed name."

Ajay read the shipping date. "It looks years old. When did he move here?"

"Recently," Julia replied.

Ajay rubbed lightly at the label, trying to remove some dust and dirt. "I can't read the return address."

"Why would David change his name?"

"We can't rule out that the label was filled out incorrectly," Ajay said as he began pulling out the canvases.

Julia grimaced as she helped lay out the dusty canvases on the floor. "Does being a pessimist make you a better detective?" she asked sourly.

"Jumping to conclusions definitely makes you a bad one," Ajay retorted. "It's very easy to let yourself be led in the wrong direction by misreading clues."

"David didn't pack these," Julia said as she put down the last one. "Looking around, you can see he never cared what happened to a painting once he finished it. He only cared about satisfying his compulsion to paint. Someone packed all of these very carefully."

"The moving company may have packed them," Ajay suggested as he looked over the paintings meticulously.

Julia squatted by a painting of an older man and looked down at it thoughtfully as she said, "When my father disowned me, he called a moving company to deliver all of my things to my new apartment. When he called, he simply asked if it had been delivered. He hung up when I said, yes. I haven't heard from him since."

"His loss," Ajay said angrily, not understanding how a father could do such a thing to his daughter—to someone like Julia.

Julia smiled gratefully and said, "I didn't tell you that to get sympathy. I was wondering if this might be the same situation. David is a difficult man. His complete absorption in his art might have been too much for someone to handle. This crate might be from his family—Ryders, not Ridders."

Ajay wasn't ready to believe that theory without more proof, but he wouldn't dismiss it out of hand either. "It might, but..."

"You need more proof?" Julia finished, sighing in exasperation when Ajay nodded.

Looking inside the crate to be certain he hadn't missed anything, Ajay caught sight of a brown, file folder at the very bottom that was almost hidden by decaying packing paper. He pulled it out carefully and looked inside.

"Photos," Ajay announced as he carefully took them out.

"There are several photos of David," Julia said. She pointed to the photos of the tall, slim man with wild, dark hair and brooding eyes. David seemed caught off guard in all the photos and annoyed, as if he hadn't wanted his photo taken.

"The numbers on the backs are just like the others," Ajay noticed, "but not on the ones taken of him."

Julia picked up the canvas of the older man who bore a striking resemblance to David. "896," Julia read on the back.

Ajay sorted through the photos and picked out 896. "Here's the man's picture." He studied the photo. The man seemed to be working in a study, head down and light from a window giving everything an ethereal glow. It didn't match the dark portrait, with its odd ghostly figures and storm clouds surrounding the man.

"David painted his emotions," Julia told him. "I will lay bets this is his father, even though I don't have any proof of that."

"Those are doctors, I think," Ajay guessed as he squinted closely at the forms and made out physician's clothing, stethoscopes, and charts that showed downward, red graphs. "They look angry and menacing."

"A man might change his name," Julia theorized, "if he feared someone might come looking for him—someone who might mean him harm."

"If someone sent him this crate," Ajay argued, "then they already know where he lives."

"We can't read the shipping address," Julia countered. "Maybe it wasn't sent here? David told me he moved around a lot before he was taken in by Ms. Engles."

Ajay straightened and tilted the photo of Ridder's supposed father to the light, trying to read framed documents that hovered behind the man's left shoulder.

Julia looked hesitant and then reached into her pocket. She took out her reading glasses and held them out to Ajay. “I only need them to read very small things,” she said in embarrassment.

Ajay took them in confusion, not sure why Julia was embarrassed by them. He held the lenses over the painting, adjusting them until it magnified the writing. “There’s nothing wrong with wearing glasses,” he said absently.

Julia moved in close to Ajay to peer down at the painting as well. “I don’t like how I look in them,” Julia explained. She sighed and said, “You probably think I’m vain.”

Ajay’s mind was on the picture now. He replied distractedly, “I don’t.” He was finally able to focus on a name. He read aloud, “Dr. Marcus Ryder, University of Nebraska.”

Julia didn’t bother pointing out that she had been right. She was too busy rescuing the photos and her glasses as Ajay nearly dropped them all in his haste to get out his notepad.

As he scribbled notes, Julia pocketed her glasses and looked through the photos, trying to match them with paintings.

Julia said, “I don’t think anyone bothered looking through these crates.”

“I didn’t consider them important until I had completed some investigation and understood Ridder-Ryder better,” Ajay pointed out. “Whoever was here, might not be that far along in their investigation.”

“Here’s an older woman,” Julia said, matching a picture with a gray haired woman who had been painted with a stern, elongated face full of deep lines. Her skin was green and she was wearing a great deal of jewelry. She looked almost buried in diamonds and gold. “The subject of this painting isn’t hard to guess—green envy, maybe, or excess.”

Ajay finished his notes, put away his pencil and notepad, and went back to the bed full of photos. He began arranging them again as he wondered, “Are there any paintings of younger people that might be Davyd’s brothers or sisters?”

“One,” Julia lifted up a scene of death, reminiscent of a classical painting of a drowning Ophelia from Hamlet. The girl was young, perhaps in her later teens, and the setting was an ocean tidal pool full of seaweed and colorful shells. The title of the painting could have been Beauty and Tragedy. She was floating in the pool in a flowing wedding dress, eyes closed and face peaceful. “I wish we had names to go with the photos and the paintings.”

Julia matched the photo of a young, smiling girl on horseback with the painting. “Do you think she’s dead?” she wondered softly. She added, “There are faint patterns on the rocks in the painting. They look like galloping horses.”

“Did Davyd have a good memory?” Ajay suddenly asked.

Julia put down the painting and went to look at Ajay’s work. “He could remember numbers very well,” she replied. “If that’s what you’re wondering? I only had to tell him my phone number once. I never saw him write it down.”

“These numbers might have a key somewhere,” Ajay surmised. “But if Ryder had an unusually good memory for numbers, then there might not be one.”

“He didn’t care about the paintings,” Julia mused, “but he seemed meticulous about the reference photos. I wonder why?”

“One might have been an emotional outlet,” Ajay replied, “and the other may have been a compulsion.”

“A compulsion?” Julia echoed. “Like people who wash their hands constantly?”

“Yes. He might have felt compelled to take photos and keep them in order by numbering and filing them, aside from using them for reference material to express himself in his paintings.”

Julia looked around the room. “Then there should be more than one box.”

Ajay agreed. “The order of these photos is not in sequence. There are gaps.”

They both searched the warehouse, but it was difficult. Ryder had filled the space to capacity with his sprawling collection of paintings and art materials.

“Jay, here’s something,” Julia called out.

Ajay joined her and saw a four-by-eight area on the floor behind several tall paintings that had been painted with a faded strip of alternating yellow and black. It was a warning sign to stay clear. Looking around, Ajay spotted the rusting control on the nearest wall. “Stand back,” he warned and pushed a large button.

Gears ground loudly and that section of the floor dropped out of sight. They both moved cautiously to look into the opening.

“A basement,” Ajay said. “Stay here.” He sat on the lip of concrete and dropped down to the floor below.

“Jay!” Julia called after him angrily. “There isn’t any light. You might get hurt.”

“That’s why you’re up there,” Ajay told her as he squinted and tried to make out details.

A metal cage kept unwary workers from getting crushed by the lift. Fumbling, Ajay found the button for the lights along the side of the cage door.

It didn’t look safe. To either side were rusted-metal storage bays that had been stripped of everything useful including a few support beams. Ajay doubted that anything other than a collection of used, metal shelving was keeping some of the bays from collapsing. A wide hall led upward at a gentle slope to a wide, heavy-duty door that had been chained shut. Ajay surmised that this is where the defunct business had received deliveries.

Julia suddenly dropped down from above and ducked through the safety cage to join Ajay. “If you’re not going to say anything, I need to look for myself,” she complained.

Ajay pulled a box off of the metal shelving and looked inside. It was full of carefully filed photographs. The shelving was stacked with similar boxes, each giving a clear indication of which series of numbers was within.

Julia was wide eyed in amazement as she looked around them. “There must be a hundred boxes at least.”

Ajay spotted post-it notes on some of the boxes. Each was written with random numbers, but numbers that were within the series indicated on the box. “Reference photos, maybe.”

“I think so,” Julia agreed. “Now we can see what’s missing. I’ll go back up and get the other photos.”

“Good,” Ajay said. “I’ll look for a key to the numbers.”

Julia gave a skeptical look at the shelves full of boxes as she walked back to the lift and said with certainty, “Somehow, I don’t think you’ll find one.”

It took time; but once they had gone through all of the boxes with post it notes, it was obvious that someone had taken the most recent ones. “The party photos,” Julia remembered. “They aren’t here.”

Again, Ajay had the strong feeling that something besides a missing person case was going on. Recent paintings and photos were missing from the studio. If the paintings were of the party that Davyd had attended—the party where he had shown rude behavior and taken photographs—then it led him to believe that someone didn’t want them seen. That someone might have objected so much they might have done something to the artist.

Ajay grimaced and Julia, putting the reference photos back, noticed. "What's wrong?"

Ajay took the photos from her and led the way to the lift. "I must be tired. My mind is coming up with dime-store novel theories."

"Does it help that I'm thinking of them too?" Julia wondered as they took the lift to the upper floor. "It looks very suspicious."

"Desperate," Ajay said.

"Desperate?" Julia stepped away from the lift and faced him. "Desperate, how?"

"Someone has removed more photos. When I first came here, I suspected that some were missing," Ajay explained, "I surmised that someone in those photos didn't want anyone to see them."

"I can understand that sentiment," Julia said. "Davyd did seem interested in taking unflattering photos of people. If they were embarrassing photos they could damage someone's reputation."

"My theory is that a careful professional was here the first time to remove some paintings and select photos," Ajay said as he slid the box of photos under Ryder's cot. "Later, someone must have realized that there might be more and returned. The mess they left behind shows their lack of professionalism and desperation to make certain they found everything they wanted. That level of emotion makes me fear for Davyd's safety."

"So you're saying they were pissed off about the paintings and the photos and that it's possible they might have been pissed off enough to harm Davyd?" Julia surmised worriedly.

"It's a theory," Ajay replied.

Ajay walked over to the painting of Ryder's supposed father. The painting fitted perfectly into his forming theory. He debated with himself whether to tell Julia about it, but reminded himself that Julia was his client and deserved to know any information or theory, however tenuous.

"While I was checking at the airport to see whether Ryder had taken a plane," Ajay revealed, "I ran into my old partner from my police days. I'll just say that there wasn't any love lost between us and he was anxious for me to leave. I stayed long enough to see him meet a woman named Martinez, who I believe had just flown in from Nebraska."

"If Engles has the police investigating Davyd's disappearance," Julia surmised, "then they might already be aware of where Davyd's father lives and that Davyd's name is an assumed one."

Ajay crouched to look more closely at the painting. “If Ryder has mental problems, his father might have been trying to commit him to an institution. I think this painting depicts Ryder’s anxiety about that very issue. You told me that Ryder didn’t care about his well-being. You can have someone institutionalized if they are a danger to themselves. If his father had been informed about his son’s location by people who wanted Davyd out of the way, then it’s possible that Ryder is in an institution somewhere right now.”

Ajay saw that Julia was looking skeptical.

“I’m going to remember your advice,” Julia said firmly, “about not jumping to conclusions. A few missing photos and paintings might mean that someone is covering up their involvement in something, but that doesn’t then mean they would go to such extreme measures to keep Davyd quiet. They didn’t find the old painting of Davyd’s father. The next question—and one that can’t be answered—is how did they know his real name, and his father’s name and location, if they didn’t use the same evidence that we did?”

“The police do have fingerprint and facial recognition software,” Ajay told her, still unable to help exploring at the theory. “Or it’s possible that Ryder might have accidentally given himself away somehow.”

“If Engles is a part of this,” Julia said thoughtfully, “it would explain why she isn’t getting as upset as she should over Davyd’s disappearance. It’s possible that whoever was worried about the paintings and photos might have had enough money to pay off her losses in order to keep her quiet and to get information from her.”

“Why wouldn’t they worry about her keeping quiet?”

Julia replied, “It’s easier to keep someone like Engles quiet, than a mentally challenged artist.”

“But where do the police fit into this?” Ajay straightened, frowning as he pursued the theory to its conclusion. “I don’t believe they were acting illegally, so I must assume they were duped into contacting Ryder’s father and assisting in having Davyd institutionalized.”

Ajay ran a hand through his tangled, dark hair and sighed as he began to pace. “If we could find out who Ms. Martinez is, we might have more evidence to support this theory. If they took Ryder to Nebraska to put him in the custody of his father, then she might have been a part of that.”

Julia sat on the cot and sighed. “It seems impossible to believe. It would be easy to forget about this being a simple case of Davyd running away because of too much pressure. I’m glad that

you're so insistent on facts, Jay, or we would be going to Nebraska right now to search for Davyd in institutions."

Ajay knew that Julia was suggesting that very thing. He was quiet as he paced the studio, making sure that he hadn't missed anything this time. When he finally ended up in front of Julia again, he had to admit, "We were both threatened, and you were harmed, because someone was desperate enough to keep us from investigating Ryder's disappearance. That sort of violence didn't make any sense in a simple missing person case until you consider that it may not be one."

"If we believe that," Julia said anxiously, "then we have to believe that Davyd not only took photos that someone didn't like—perhaps incriminating photos—but that he began to paint something this person also didn't like."

Julia stood and walked to the glaringly empty space where a large painting might have once stood. She faced Ajay and asked, "What should we do now?"

"This case may have taken a very dangerous turn," Ajay replied. "It's understandable if you feel that you aren't close enough to Ryder to pursue it further."

"Would you stop investigating if I did end the case?"

Ajay didn't hesitate in his reply. "No, but it would be hard for me to pursue the case to Nebraska without your funds." It was difficult to admit how thin his financials had been before meeting Julia.

Julia moved to stand toe to toe with Ajay. She reached out and straightened the lapels of Ajay's coat, but didn't let go immediately when she was done. She looked up at Ajay with a serious expression and said, "You're rubbing off on me. I'm worried about Davyd and about you getting hurt, but I'm actually enjoying myself. I can see why you love being a detective. I can also see why you don't want to give up on this case. I don't think I've ever been this excited about anything...or about anyone."

Julia's blue eyes locked with Ajay's. Her expression was asking for a response. Ajay was frozen in place, understanding the admission, feeling the same way, but terrified to admit it.

Ajay said with quiet desperation, "I don't know what to do."

They stood for a long moment that seemed like an eternity to Ajay, then Julia was smiling and patting Ajay's lapels as she said, "You aren't ready then."

Julia stepped away, leaving Ajay confused. She turned her back as she said to the room at large, “It’s late. We should be going. If you’re through, that is?”

Ajay was watching Julia, wanting to bring back that moment and maybe handle it better; but it was already too late. He said, “I’ll use my cell phone and call the cab. I have enough information for now.”

“I hope so,” Julia said. “If we have to return, there’s no telling what else might be missing.”

Ajay tried to return to a professional demeanor. He said, “I need to check the train and airport records for Davyd Ryder now. I also need to find Dr. Marcus Ryder in Nebraska. I’ll try to do that while I’m waiting to interview the last of Ryder’s patrons.”

“That’s still necessary?” Julia wondered. She had sunk her hands into her sweater pockets. She looked cold. It was freezing in that place and she wasn’t dressed for it. Ajay berated himself for not having noticed earlier. He needed to get Julia out of there.

Ajay pulled out his cell and searched for the taxi service number as he replied, “If we want to believe that Davyd was taken away—or worse, eliminated—for something he photographed, then a motive would clench the theory. Without that motive or any hard evidence, I have to keep myself open to the previous theory. I can’t let potential information remain undiscovered.”

Julia smiled sheepishly. “I want to run to Nebraska to Davyd’s rescue, but I know you’re right.”

Ajay finished his call and pocketed his cell. He pointed out, “There may be a problem with helping Davyd if he’s been legally institutionalized.”

“I want to try,” Julia insisted. “Not just because he’s a great artist, but because it simply isn’t right if he’s been locked away without a good reason.”

Ajay agreed with that sentiment. Doing what was right and helping people were the reasons he had become a detective. It warmed him to discover that Julia felt the same way.

After locking up the studio, they were forced to stand out in the cold to wait for the cab. Ajay kept close behind Julia, keeping a watch on the people down the street who were still hanging out in front of a club as the music blared out into the street.

“You’re warm,” Julia commented with a shiver. She moved a step backward to press against Ajay and take advantage of it.

Ajay shivered from more than the cold before he forced himself to stillness, becoming a wall of tense muscles under the pressure of Julia's body.

Julia was staring off into the night, watching for the cab and completely relaxed as if they stood this way all of the time. She asked, "You'll call me tomorrow and tell me what's happening?"

Ajay had trouble finding his voice, but he managed, "Of course." He felt as if every fiber of his being was centered on that pressure against his body, but he didn't have a clue what to do about it. It would have been easy to wrap arms around Julia and pull her even tighter against him, but confusion kept him motionless. '*You aren't ready then,*' Julia had told him and she was right.

Julia moved away from Ajay as soon as the cab's lights appeared and she was silent the entire trip to his apartment building. Before she exited the cab though, she placed her hand over Ajay's and said, "Be careful, Jay."

"I will, don't worry," Ajay promised.

Julia smiled warmly at her and then she was exiting the cab and walking quickly to the front of her building.

Ajay made the cab driver wait until Julia was safely inside before giving him his home address. It was three blocks before he realized he was smiling like an idiot.

Chapter Nine

Ajay awoke the next morning blinking against the glare of the sun through a dirty window and dead plants. His aching body told him falling asleep on the couch without bothering to open it up into a bed had been a bad idea.

Ajay sat up slowly and fumbled to turn off a lamp that was adding to the eye-aching glare and tried to catch his open notebook as it tumbled off of his chest. He stared at it blearily and tucked it into his coat pocket as he stood up and staggered toward the kitchen.

He was in his boxers, he realized, as he was forced to step over his discarded clothes on the floor. Somewhere between the front door and the couch last night, keeping his coat on in the cold apartment had seemed like a good idea to his exhausted mind.

Ajay started the coffee maker and leaned on the counter, his coffee cup dangling in one hand as it perked. Nothing much entered his mind until the coffee was finished and he sat down to drink half a cup. The events of yesterday came pouring back to him, then. He was left floundering as he tried to make sense of it all.

"I think I'm in love," Ajay told his half-full coffee cup, trying out that notion. "I know I want Julia like I've never wanted anyone else in my life. That makes me in love, right?"

His coffee didn't have an answer for him.

Ajay took out his notebook and pencil and opened it up on the table. He wrote the words harshly as if it needed to be marked as a special point in the case: *Detective Ajay Kavanagh is in love.*

"There," Ajay told his coffee, "it's official. Now I can concentrate on the damned case again."

Ajay drank some more coffee and tried to do just that, going over all the information he had gathered so far.

"I really do need a motive for all of this," Ajay sighed in frustration after a long time of sorting through theories that refused to make any logical sense. Unless he called Marcus Ryder and the man admitted to institutionalizing Davyd, he was still left trying to piece together a reason to suspect that such a thing had happened.

Ajay showered and shaved. He then picked through a pile of clothes, trying to determine what was clean enough to wear again. He really needed to wash them—and take care of things around the apartment, he thought as he bypassed a sink full of dishes to put his coffee mug on the counter. The case had him in its teeth, though, and it wasn't going to let him go until he solved it or admitted defeat.

Walking over to Wezel's apartment, Ajay stepped over a friendly black cat. He didn't knock as he entered and almost ran into Wezel. The man, still in his pajamas and holding a cup of milk and a plate of cooked bacon, was on his way to his computers.

"I hate you," Wezel commented flatly as he sat down and put the plate of bacon beside his main keyboard. "You are totally clueless when it comes to knowing what a decent time of the morning is."

Ajay pulled up a chair beside him and stole a strip of bacon as he said, "Dr. Marcus Ryder, Nebraska." He spelled the name and then took a bite of the bacon. Wezel grunted in surprise as he yanked the bacon strip out of Ajay's mouth.

"My food," Wezel declared irritably and put it back on the plate. As he typed the name into his computer, he asked, "How did you figure the name wasn't right?"

He chewed his piece of bacon and swallowed before replying, "Shipping label."

"Ah." Wezel tapped his computer screen. "Is this the guy?"

Ajay shook his head, no, and Wezel kept looking.

"This?" Wezel brought up a doctor's website. "He's into plastic surgery."

Ajay nodded as he stared at the face of Davyd's supposed father on the web page. "I need a phone number."

Wezel brought it up and asked, "So, what's going on with the lovely ladies' case? Who is this guy?"

Ajay sighed and rubbed at his eyes.

"What?" Wezel prodded as he wrote down a phone number and address and pressed it into Ajay's hand.

"It's hard to explain," Ajay replied. "I have clues that lead me to believe something, but I'm not sure if I'm thinking clearly."

“You? Not thinking clearly?” Wezel snorted in disbelief before he took Ajay seriously. “She’s got you tied into knots that bad?” Ajay didn’t bother denying it. Wezel grunted and shook his head as he reminded Ajay, “Isn’t it the unwritten rule to never get involved with clients?”

“I don’t seem to be able to control the situation,” Ajay replied despondently as he tucked the slip of paper into his notebook.

Wezel ate half of a piece of bacon. He waved the rest at Ajay for emphases, as he said around a mouthful, “Ruining a case because you can’t think straight because of this woman isn’t going to get you any respect from the world of detectives. Why don’t you tell me what your crazy theory is and I’ll vet it for you, okay?”

“You’re not a professional,” Ajay pointed out.

“I work with one, so give me the benefit of some brains,” Wezel retorted.

Ajay was quiet for a long moment, considering just how much he could trust Wezel’s opinion. He decided he really did need someone else—even if he was a layman—to judge his theory’s validity.

“I suspect someone didn’t want Ryder to reveal something that may have been compromising to this person,” Ajay explained. “I believe this person, or persons, contacted Ryder’s father, a man who might have wanted Ryder to enter a mental health facility. I believe that Ryder may be in that facility at this moment.”

“Anything a crazy man says is crazy,” Wezel snorted. “That’s actually a good plan. Now I’m going to try to poke holes in your theory, all right?”

Ajay nodded, opening up his notebook.

“What makes you think that Ryder’s father wanted him committed?” Wezel asked.

“A painting of Ryder’s depicted his father surrounded by doctors. The painting was very menacing,” Ajay replied. “Also, there are facts that Ryder changed his name, never spoke of relatives, and exhibited—according to those who knew him—mental deficits.”

Wezel frowned. “Ajay Kavanagh... Going on feelings? That’s not like you at all. Let’s try motive. Why would someone want to cover up an *association* that Ryder might have seen, and why would you even come up with that theory to begin with?”

“It’s possible they didn’t suspect that Ryder understood the association at the time and considered his penchant for photography harmless,” Ajay replied, looking over his notes. “I have

an account of Ryder becoming very upset at a certain party though. This could have marked his moment of understanding; a moment when others might have realized his threat to them. Certain photographs of a party are missing from Ryder's studio. I also suspect that a missing painting was of that party and reflective of his anger at whatever transpired there. That theory is supported by evidence that he often painted subjects reflecting his darker emotional states."

"Who do you think is involved in this?" Wezel wondered.

"Engles and the patrons that I've interviewed so far," Ajay replied. "I've caught them in several conflicting statements and exhibiting evasive behavior where their involvement with Ryder is concerned."

Wezel raised eyebrows. "See, that's the part that I would question. You're assuming some sort of large conspiracy. They would have had to pick Ryder, not because he's talented, but because he was easy to manipulate and use in some larger scheme."

"That's why I have doubts," Ajay said.

"I'd say your doubts are valid," Wezel agreed. "I'd get a lot more clues before chasing after that theory."

Ajay nodded at the picture of Ryder's supposed father. "I'm reluctant to call him before I've questioned Ryder's other patrons and rechecked the trains and the airport for his real name; but I feel that I might get answers from him that will sink that theory."

"Call him," Wezel told Ajay firmly. "You're probably worried about tipping him off if he's part of this supposed conspiracy. But if he sounds like his answers are legit, then you can get back to the real business of finding a missing person."

Wezel changed web sites and stood up with his leftover bacon and milk. "If you're asking me, you should cut your lovely lady out of your investigation altogether and don't hook up with her again until the case is solved. That will get rid of your distraction and doubts about how you're proceeding."

"I already know that, but she has access and insight that's been invaluable," Ajay said irritably.

"Okay, okay," Wezel retorted. "I'm just saying, because I care."

"I know," Ajay replied as he stood and headed for the door. He knew Wezel was right, but he was in too deep with Julia to let her go now.

“Well, whatever you do, stay safe, cousin!” Wezel called after him.

Ajay left with his mind in turmoil. He wasn’t used to thinking with his heart as well as his brain. It took a short trip to the gym, and a few rounds with a punching bag, to clear his mind well enough to go to his office and call Marcus Ryder with any level of professionalism.

As he waited patiently for the man to answer the phone, Ajay had time to contemplate his sore knuckles, his punishment for overdoing it with the punching bag, and what questions to ask Dr. Ryder.

“Hello, this is Dr. Ryder. How may I help you?”

“Dr. Ryder, this is Detective Ajay Kavanagh.” Ajay stood with his cell in hand and moved closer to the papers on the wall. “I’ve been employed by an associate of Davyd Ryder to investigate his sudden disappearance. Certain papers in Davyd Ryder’s possession have led me to believe that you may be his father and that you might have information as to his whereabouts. My client is not interested in contacting Davyd if he wishes privacy. She only wishes to be reassured that Davyd is well.”

There was a long silence. The man finally said, sounding angry but controlled, “You may tell your client that Davyd is where he belongs. Tell her not to try and contact us further if she cares anything at all about Davyd’s well-being. I have others to thank for finding him and bringing him back to me to receive treatment he so desperately needs. I don’t intend to allow anyone to interfere in that treatment, no matter how well intentioned. Goodbye, sir.”

“Wait!” Ajay exclaimed. “At least tell me who informed you of Davyd’s whereabouts, so my client can thank them personally.”

“It was Ms. Engles, Davyd’s agent,” the man snapped before hanging up the phone.

Ajay stood for a long moment with his cell still held loosely in one hand. He said to the arrangement of clues, “Case closed.”

Was another one opening though? Marcus Ryder had just answered the main question: where was Davyd Ryder? But he had opened up more questions. Why would Engles call Marcus to take Davyd away just before a lucrative showing of the man’s art? Why not tell Julia? Why the ruse that she was allowing the police to investigate when she could have simply informed him that Ryder was not missing? Why the threats? In the case of the police, Ajay at least understood that it

had been a private matter and they hadn't wanted him to interfere; but what about the attack on Julia and the men who had threatened him outside his office?

As a police officer, he might be concerned that a crime was being committed and continue the investigation. As a private detective, he had to consider whether it was his concern to do more than submit his findings to the proper authorities. It was possible they were already holding an investigation. His information might help them.

There was still the matter of confirming Davyd Ryder's location. While it didn't seem likely that Marcus Ryder was lying, Ajay didn't feel the case could come to a satisfactory close without some confirmation.

Ajay took out more sheets of paper and added notes including whatever facts he knew about the two men that he hadn't interviewed yet. When he taped those to the wall, he found himself arranging them; still trying to find a solution to the rest of the puzzle.

Engles discovered Davyd. She acquired patrons for him. They attended a party where Davyd behaved erratically. Those in attendance denied their attendance and involvement with Davyd. Engles, concerned for her reputation, contacted the police, who must have discovered the name of Davyd's father. Marcus committed Davyd, thereby allowing Engles to cancel the art show rather than proceed with one and take the chance that Davyd would behave erratically. It made sense that she wouldn't want anyone to know of her involvement.

Ajay couldn't convince his instincts with a logical explanation though. Those instincts were pointing out the extremes of behavior and the threats. It didn't explain the missing photos and painting. Simple fear of embarrassment didn't lead to cover ups of that level.

Ajay tried to remember the photos he had seen during his first visit to Davyd's studio, but it was hard to put names to the faces that neither he, nor Julia, had been able to recognize at the time.

Philmore's business was shipping. Calahan ran a national employment company. Montoya owned farms all across the country. Ivansson's business was construction. Cassini ran a large insurance company. How did these men's lives intersect with Ms. Engles, a man named Yokima, and Davyd Ryder? Had they all been at the party, comfortable in Davyd's ignorance, and let slip something that Davyd hadn't liked?

The only man who could answer that was probably Davyd, a man whose words were now suspect due to his supposed mental illness.

Ajay decided to visit Julia personally. He had bad and good news and he didn't feel comfortable discussing it over the phone. He wrote up a bill for the remainder of his fee and stamped the name of his agency at the bottom. He supposed he had been pessimistic in not printing any bills with his name on them, but he had wanted to wait until his business was a success. Now, he didn't see that success coming anytime soon.

"You are inhuman," Julia yawned as she let Ajay into her apartment. "How did you manage to work so late and still get up so early?"

Julia was wearing a loose pair of white sleep pants, a blue, silk shirt, and an open and trailing white silk robe. She yawned again and sleepily motioned Ajay to the couch. Sitting down next to him, she looked at Ajay expectantly.

Ajay found himself staring at Julia's body. He cleared his throat and dragged his eyes up to meet the woman's blue eyes as he said, "I've solved the case."

Julia blinked, confused. "This morning?"

Ajay nodded.

Julia said warily, "You look like an undertaker. Is it bad news?"

"Marcus Ryder *is* Davyd's father," Ajay explained. "He told me that Ms. Engles had contacted him regarding Davyd and that he had taken action to bring Davyd to Nebraska for treatment. He's advised that you not pursue the matter further."

Julia digested the news, golden lashes lowered. Then her eyes came up again with determination. "Something is going on, Jay, because no one's actions make any sense."

"That's my feeling as well." Ajay was surprised how much he hated taking his bill from his coat pocket and giving it to Julia. "I'm afraid that investigating further goes beyond the case you retained me to solve. You hired me to find Davyd Ryder. That case is now complete."

Julia looked down at the bill. Ajay saw her lips firm. She said after a moment, "Are you saying you're not interested in investigating Ms. Engles?"

"I'm not a police officer," Ajay replied. "I can't search her offices or her home. I can't subpoena business or personal papers. I can only question her and her associates if they're willing, or set up a surveillance of her movements."

Julia searched his face and nodded in resignation. "All right, I understand."

Julia stood and went to a small desk. She took out her checkbook and began writing payment for the bill. She said with her back turned to Ajay, "So, this is it? Will I see you again?"

It was a question pregnant with meaning. Ajay found that he couldn't answer immediately. Julia took that as his answer. She turned with a tense smile on her face as she moved to hand Ajay the check.

"I guess there isn't any reason to see each other, is there?" Julia's voice sounded as brittle as glass. "You performed very professionally, Detective Kavanagh. Thank you for your services. I'll be certain to recommend you to anyone in need of a detective."

Ajay took the check, still unable to formulate a response. He stood and followed Julia to the door. When Julia opened the door, he turned and stood staring down at the check. He struggled with his confused emotions.

"Is there something else, Detective Kavanagh?" Julia asked icily.

Ajay's emotions crystallized all at once when he contemplated never seeing Julia again. He looked up, handed the check back, and said firmly, "I don't think a missing person case is truly closed without some contact with that missing person."

Julia grinned, her entire face lighting up as she tossed the check behind her and left the doorway. She went into his bedroom. Ajay heard a closet door opening and closing. Within moments, she reappeared with two motorcycle helmets. She handed one to Ajay and said, in a tone not allowing for an argument, "I'm driving."

It wasn't that simple. They both had to pack clothing into bags small enough for a motorcycle. Julia had to inform artists that she was still unable to sit for them and let friends know that she would be gone. Ajay had to call his parents.

"Blue jeans look good on you," Julia said in her helmet radio as she took them onto the interstate headed for Nebraska on her Ducati red, black, and chrome motorcycle.

Ajay doubted that he looked as good as his companion. Julia's gold braid was bright against her black, leather jacket and her blue jeans looked molded to her body. She had also acquired more gold jewelry. Her earrings rattled, now and again, against the helmet radio.

“You seem tense,” Julia noticed.

“I do?” Ajay was holding onto Julia’s waist self-consciously, uncertain of his balance and how much contact was actually acceptable in their situation.

“Have you ever been on a motorcycle?” Julia wondered.

“No.”

“You can hold on as tight as you need to. Just don’t cut me in two, all right?” Julia chuckled, and Ajay relaxed his hold—though marginally.

“A motorcycle is much cheaper than a car and easier to store,” Julia told him. “I don’t take it out of the city too often though. Well, not in years actually. Not since I stopped visiting my father.”

Ajay was quiet for a long moment and then felt the need to reveal, “I’ve never been outside the city.”

There were several heartbeats between his confession and Julia responding with an incredulous, “Never?”

Ajay felt a hot blush of embarrassment. “Never. I’ve never driven a car, either, aside from when my father let me use his cab to teach me how to drive.”

“You *were* a police officer, right?” Julia asked.

“I had a partner who liked to drive,” Ajay admitted. “I’m only telling you this so you know what sort of liability I might be if we find ourselves in a bad situation.”

“How likely is that?” Julia wondered worriedly. “We are just going to see Davyd.”

“I don’t anticipate trouble, but it is a long drive to Nebraska. We should be prepared for any eventuality.”

Julia sped up the motorcycle to pass slower vehicles. Ajay gritted his teeth and tightened his grip.

Julia reached up to her helmet and turned on an MP3 player. Easy listening music came through the radio to Ajay.

“Maybe this will help you relax?” Julia said in a strained voice, “because, I really need my lungs to breathe, Jay.”

Ajay loosened his grip again. “Sorry.”

The music did help, but Ajay couldn't stop being nervous. It was more than just about his first ride on a motorcycle though. He'd been known in the police force as a loose cannon; someone more likely to tackle a case for the *right* of the situation rather than the law and the evidence. He thought he had managed to become more mature and to make sure to build his case properly. Yet here he was on the back of a motorcycle, swept away on a spur-of-the-moment decision, and egged on by a woman he was emotionally involved with.

"Julia?" Ajay said uncertainly.

"Yes, Jay?" Julia replied. She added anxiously, "Please don't let your next words be, *I'm going to throw up*, okay?"

"No, nothing like that," Ajay assured her. "I just feel that I should be straight with you."

"What's wrong, Jay?"

"I didn't agree to this trip simply to confirm that Davyd is indeed well and in an institution," Ajay admitted cautiously.

"I knew that. I'm just as eager as you are to ask him about Ms. Engles and what he might have heard or seen at that party."

"It might be putting you into danger though," Ajay pointed out, "especially if it's discovered that we were asking Davyd questions. It might be best, once we reach Nebraska, for you to stay behind at a hotel room while I investigate."

"I took karate classes," Julia told him.

"That may not be enough," Ajay said uncertainly.

"I may be small, but I'm not fragile or likely to fall apart in a situation," Julia told him irritably. "I make my own choices. This time, I'm choosing to go with you."

Ajay thought of Katie and Jessica. He couldn't imagine them being fragile or falling apart in a situation. "It's not about treating you like a helpless woman," he said defensively. "It's because I don't want you to get hurt."

"And that's because you care about me?" Julia wondered.

"Yes," Ajay replied before he could think. He felt a hot blush as his mind caught up with what he had just said. "I mean... I don't think... That isn't what..."

Julia took pity on Ajay. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair, was it?” she said with a sigh and patted Ajay’s gloved hands clutching at her waist. “Let’s forget you said that, all right? Please understand that I’m not in this with my eyes closed. I know the danger.”

Ajay was still floundering emotionally. He managed a shaky, “All right.”

Julia accepted that and fell silent as she concentrated on her driving.

The easy listening music became the backdrop for Ajay’s tumultuous thoughts. Their destination was Lincoln, Nebraska, and it was days away yet. Once they were there, it might be days more before they could find where Davyd had been institutionalized. All that time spent in Julia’s company might clench, once and for all, how he really felt about her. He supposed it was already telling that he was hoping it was more than just a physical attraction.

“Having fun?” Julia asked as she pulled off her helmet and looked back at Ajay.

In the midst of miles and miles of farmland, they had stopped for gas at an old, two-pump station. A small roadside diner with dusty farm trucks parked in front of it promised a bite to eat.

“My ass is sore,” Ajay complained as he swung a leg over the motorcycle and tried to stand up. “And my head hurts from the helmet.” He pulled it off and sighed in relief.

Julia stood up as well and stretched, golden braid swinging and jewelry sparkling in the sun. “That didn’t answer my question,” she complained as she propped her helmet on the bike.

Ajay thought about it and smiled as he said, “Yes, I’m having fun.”

“Good,” Julia chuckled as she took Ajay’s helmet and put it next to hers. “I’ll gas up while you grab us a table at the diner.”

Ajay looked around them, feeling wary; but there was only an elderly woman attendant who was sitting in a plastic chair and reading a magazine. Ajay doubted she was ready to give Julia any trouble.

As if reading his thoughts, Julia leaned close and whispered, “Don’t worry. She looks scrappy, but I think I can take her two falls out of three.”

Ajay felt embarrassed as he headed for the diner, Julia’s laughter following him. He could smell something strong as he approached the dirty trucks. One truck had a bumper sticker that

claimed the owner *Got Milk*, so Ajay assumed it must be cow manure that he was seeing and smelling on the tires of the truck.

The diner had wooden floors and plain, Formica-topped tables. A few patrons were seated in a corner having lunch and a waitress was sweeping the floor. She looked up as Ajay entered and sat at a table. The men glanced at him briefly before going back to their food and talk. They looked like farmers, all of them wearing dirty jeans, worn shirts, and sun-faded caps.

Julia came in, took off her leather jacket, and pulled off her gloves as she sat across from Ajay. He had positioned himself so that Ajay was between her and the seated men. The men turned at her entrance as well, but Julia had sat quickly and she was hidden behind Ajay's larger body. They frowned, curiosity unsatisfied, and went back to their meal.

"We could eat later," Ajay suggested, sensing Julia's nervousness.

Julia shook her head as she picked up a menu. "This place has good food. I'm starved."

"If you think there might be trouble—" Ajay began to insist, but Julia cut him off.

"You're doing it again," Julia complained sourly. "It's a diner. We're here to eat, so let's eat."

The elderly waitress raised an eyebrow at Julia when she came to take their order. "Haven't seen you in a while, city girl," she said and glanced at the men in their corner. "I hope this is worth one of Joe's cheeseburgers."

"You remember me?" Julia asked in surprise.

She was scowling now and leaned down to whisper, "I remember that your nickname was Trouble. I'm sure Hank and the boys remember it too."

"Then it'll be like old times," Julia said with a shrug. She ordered a soda and a cheeseburger. Ajay ordered a tuna sandwich and a coffee, his eyes never leaving Julia.

When the waitress had gone to place their order, Ajay repeated, "Trouble?"

Julia shrugged and hunkered down as if to make certain she was hidden behind Ajay completely. "It was one of my father's attempts to straighten me out. He sent me to a farm for a summer; to get away from bad influences and to learn the value of hard work." Julia looked angry and blushed as she remembered. "I can work hard, by the way; and I wasn't a complete city brat. I decided after a while, though, that raising cows wasn't a skill I needed to learn. I perpetrated a little rebellion so I would get sent home."

"Rebellion?" Ajay was finding it impossible to imagine Julia living the farm life.

“I *accidentally* let the stock bulls in with the cows and then *accidentally* left the gates open,” Julia admitted. “It was a very costly rebellion. My father had to pay for the stud fees, the calves, and compensate the farmers for the time and effort spent chasing the animals down.” Julia was smiling, but she added, “I really was a little snot back then. I could have just gone home and saved them a lot of trouble.”

Ajay considered the facts for a moment and shook his head, “I don’t think you gave them any trouble at all.”

Julia looked confused, but amused as well. “And you know this because of Ajay Kavanagh’s vast knowledge of farming?”

Ajay pulled out his pad and pencil and scribbled numbers for a moment. He nodded finally, confirmed in his theory. “In any given calving season, they might sell most of their calves and might collect money for some stud fees. I’m sure, unless your father had a good knowledge of cattle prices and stud fees, he most likely paid top dollar for everything. It’s my theory the farmer’s made out extremely well for their trouble.”

Julia stifled a laugh. She said warmly, “I like your theory. If we make it through our meal without a fist fight, it will prove it.”

“Is the food good enough to risk proving my theory?” Ajay wondered critically.

Julia sighed and gathered up her jacket and gloves. “We can take it to go and find a rest stop further down the road.” She added apologetically, “I really didn’t think those men, of all people, would be here at this time of day. Sorry.”

Ajay signaled for the waitress and told her they needed the food to go. She seemed relieved. When she had gone again, Ajay found himself contemplating Julia. She raised eyebrows at him. “What?” Julia asked.

It took Ajay a moment to formulate his thoughts into words and then he admitted, “I expected trouble because you’re beautiful and we’re strangers. I didn’t expect trouble because you were a rebellious cowgirl.”

Julia snickered, blue eyes sparkling. “I wasn’t technically a cowgirl, but I did a lot of farm work.”

Ajay still couldn't bring forth a mental image of Julia working on a farm in jeans and covered in who knew what. He could only see, in his mind's eye, a beautiful uptown model standing gracefully in high heels and looking annoyed.

The waitress brought their food in several bags and Ajay paid the bill. Sliding out of his chair carefully, he kept his bulk between Julia and the men as they made their way from the diner. Ajay couldn't help a sigh of relief as they reached the motorcycle without incident and Julia handed him his helmet.

Julia was frowning, obviously thinking about something troubling as she put on her helmet. "Ajay?"

"Yes?" Ajay sat on the back of the motorcycle and tried to arrange their lunch in his lap so he wouldn't lose it.

"They *will* say something eventually," Julia told him quietly.

"About the cows?" Ajay asked as he put on his helmet and fumbled with the straps.

"No, I don't mean those cowboys. I'm outrageous. I have a career in avant-garde modeling. It might bother you to see me on posters all over town in the nude, in odd scenes, or on ten foot paintings in popular galleries. You might not be ready for the insults you'll get being with me."

Ajay smiled wryly. He said over the mic as Julia started the engine, "You forget how many brothers and sisters I have. I'm used to insults." He said more seriously, "I'm a reasonable man. I was a police officer. I don't start fights, especially over insults."

"Good," Julia said.

Ajay didn't mention that he wasn't so sure he could have remained calm if those men at the diner had decided to take some revenge on Julia, or at the very least, decided to hurl insults. For himself, he could maintain control. Julia triggered every protective instinct he owned.

They found a rest-stop a mile down the road. It wasn't much more than an expanse of gravel and a sign that promised a scenic overlook. Without even a park bench, they were forced to sit on the motorcycle. They ate, watching traffic go by on the highway.

"I'm sorry," Julia said between appreciative bites of her cheeseburger. "If it wasn't for me, we would have a proper place to take a rest."

"This sandwich is good," Ajay said. He was startled when Julia turned around so that she was facing Ajay and sitting very close.

“You’re always such a gentleman,” Julia told him, sounding concerned. “It’s all right to get mad at me.”

Ajay took a bite of his tuna sandwich, chewed thoughtfully, and swallowed before replying, “I can’t get angry at something that happened when you were younger.”

“Very logical,” Julia agreed, “but sometimes anger isn’t about logic. If you keep bottling it up inside, you’ll explode, Detective Kavanagh.”

Ajay considered her words and then admitted. “I suppose I am...annoyed.”

Julia smiled and leaned in a little closer. “Just annoyed?”

“I wanted to get off of this damned motorcycle for a little while. My ass hurts,” Ajay continued with some real temper, even while he felt the uncomfortable heat of a blush at Julia’s proximity. A few inches nearer and they would be touching. A part of Ajay was strongly anticipating that event.

“Then let me apologize,” Julia insisted. She swung her leg over the bike again and got off. “Come on, Jay!” she urged. “We can at least walk and eat. Let’s see the scenic overlook the sign is talking about.”

It took a moment for Ajay to switch gears and follow. His jeans felt tight. He was glad his jacket hung low as he negotiated the slippery gravel to join Julia at a guardrail at the back of the rest stop.

The land did dip down into a pleasant looking valley powdered with snow. They could see a half frozen brook cutting through trees and heavy bushes and sparkling in the sun. Very nice, Ajay thought; but when he looked over at Julia, he found a view much more to his liking. Under a blue sky and a bright sun, Julia was even more beautiful.

Julia burped loudly, looked at Ajay in embarrassment, and then laughed. Ajay laughed as well before he turned his attention back to the scenery rather than have Julia suspect he had been staring. They finished their lunch in companionable silence, found a wastebasket, and then started on their journey again.

“Feel better?” Julia asked over the mic.

“Yes,” Ajay replied.

“See?” Julia asked in amusement. “Letting me know how you felt was good for you and me. Don’t keep it in.”

“Okay,” Ajay agreed, but he had a feeling that Julia was talking about more than being irritated over lunch.

The ride was long, and freezing rain interrupted it more than once. As they huddled beneath overpasses and old bridges until the storms passed, Ajay found himself using the time to talk to Julia rather than thinking about the case. That was so unusual for him he froze mid-sentence and reflected on such a monumental change in himself.

“What?” Julia asked worriedly. She had her hands in her jacket pockets to keep warm, and droplets of rain were sparkling in her hair. They were standing way back from the road to keep from being splashed by the passing cars, but some of it still reached them.

“I’m not thinking about the case,” Ajay admitted with a sting of guilt. “I haven’t been thinking about it since we left the diner.”

Julia cocked her head slightly and asked, “Are you having second thoughts about pursuing it?”

“No,” Ajay replied with firm conviction. “I still feel that I need to find out what’s going on, and I need to confirm Davyd’s whereabouts.”

“Then what’s wrong?” Julia pressed. “You can’t think about it all the time.”

“I used to,” Ajay told him.

Julia nodded. “Your father told me he hoped I was a patient woman. He recalled a few of your disastrous dates with women when you were so consumed by a case that you forgot about them. For some reason, he said he didn’t think that would happen with me.” Julia looked almost sad as she added, “You’re a lucky man to have such supportive parents.”

Ajay almost denied that until he realized it was true. While he was still trying to understand his feelings, his family was already accepting Julia and himself as an established couple.

“I told your father we weren’t seeing each other that way,” Julia explained, wary of Ajay’s uncertain expression, “but he just chewed on his pipe for a moment, smiled, and said, ‘You know it when you see it.’”

Ajay didn’t know what to say to that, but Julia was already moving past him to the motorcycle. The freezing rain had stopped finally. The sunlight coming through the dark clouds was definitely angling toward evening. It was time to find a hotel to spend the night in. That brought with it a new anxiety, but Ajay refrained from considering it by occupying himself with his lack of concentration on the case.

As they eased the motorcycle out from under the bridge on the motorcycle and back onto the highway, Ajay understood the truth as surely as his father had. No one had interested Ajay more than his cases. He had dated out of reflex without caring about his dates. Julia was different. Julia was the first person to come into Ajay's life who had become more important than his career.

When the sun began to dip behind the trees ahead, Julia was the one to decide to stop for the night. She wasn't comfortable driving hilly roads with low visibility, she told Ajay; and the rain had turned to light snow flurries. Still, she passed up two roadside hotels before she settled on one, despite the growing darkness.

"There is nothing worse than staying at a bad hotel," Julia explained after they had checked in and entered a spacious room with two beds. She tossed her gear onto one before adding, "There isn't much point in staying awake all night in dirty sheets and bed bugs when you paid to sleep."

Julia looked into the bathroom, looked at Ajay with a tired grin, and said, "First call for the shower!" before disappearing inside and closing the door.

Ajay grunted sourly as he dropped his jacket onto a chair to dry and lowered his baggage to the floor. Julia, it seemed, could be a bit of a *prima donna*, he thought. Cold, wet, and sitting gingerly in a chair before pulling off his wet socks and shoes, he could truly dislike that.

Ajay remembered Julia's words about not expressing his emotions. He called out, before Julia could drown out any words by turning on the shower, "We should have flipped a coin for it!"

Julia opened the door and peeked out. Ajay could see glimpses of bare flesh. He was suddenly not cold any longer as heat flooded his body. "Sorry," Julia told him contritely. "Do you want to do that now?"

Ajay swallowed hard. "What?" he asked. Any coherent thought was now impossible.

"Flip for the shower?" Julia asked uncertainly.

"Next time," Ajay managed, his voice almost a croak.

"Next time," Julia agreed with a soft smile, ducked back into the bathroom, and closed the door.

Julia turned on the shower. Ajay struggled not to imagine Julia nude under the spray of water. It was a losing battle, though, and Ajay finally admitted defeat by putting his shoes back on and throwing on his jacket.

Ajay grabbed the ice bucket and shouted, “I’m going for ice!” in what he hoped was a loud enough voice before he went out into the cold night air.

In the end, Ajay didn’t just go for ice. He wandered near the hotel until his body stopped wanting what he was firmly denying it. Now wasn’t the time, he told himself. Julia was still his client. If he broke that self-imposed barrier now, Ajay didn’t think he would be able to trust his judgment or his conclusions. It was difficult enough already to determine whether he was making judgments based on facts or his emotional response to Julia.

When Ajay was certain that he had himself at least mentally under control and that Julia would be done with her shower, he bought a coffee and a hot tea from the nearby convenience store and returned to their room. He wasn’t prepared to find the door wide open.

Ajay glanced to make certain the motorcycle was still in its parking place even as he was hurrying inside the room. He found the door to the bathroom open as well, steam coming out as it hit the cold air coming from the open front door.

“Julia?” Ajay called anxiously as he put the drinks aside onto the hotel dresser and went into the bathroom. “Are you all—god damn it!” His words ended up strangled as he rushed forward to help Julia.

She was hanging from the shower head by one of her shirts that had been ripped and knotted into a makeshift rope and tied around her wrists. She was half dressed in plaid sleep pants, her bare upper body wet from the dripping shower head. A bull’s-eye had been painted in the center of her chest. It was running like blood down Julia’s damp body and Ajay spent a panicked few moments making sure it was indeed spray paint and not blood.

“Julia?!”

Ajay jerked at the bindings until they tore rather than loosened. Julia slumped into his arms and Ajay half-fell into the shower, uncaring about the hard tile hitting his knees or one arm going numb as his elbow connected with the side of the tub. His only concern was to keep Julia’s head from hitting the tile and to see if she was breathing.

“Julia!” Ajay called again, voice harsh with concern

Julia took a shuddering breath and her blue eyes opened with an effort. They slowly focused on Ajay and then she began to struggle in panic.

Ajay put arms around Julia to hold her down. "It's all right! You're with me!" Ajay told her.

Julia stopped fighting. She raised a shaking hand to the back of her head. "Is it bleeding?" she asked in a weak voice.

Ajay checked and found a lump there, but no cut. "No. Tell me what happened."

"Two men with ski masks grabbed me when I came out of the bathroom. I was half in my shirt, putting it on. I didn't see them until it was too late. When they shoved me into the shower, I hit my head." Julia sounded ashamed now. "If I had been ready, I could have done more."

She might be dead now if she had, Ajay thought with terror. He found himself wrapping Julia tightly in his arms, heedless of the paint and the water. "We should take you to the emergency room."

"My head hurts, but I'm all right," Julia began, but then she gasped in fear. Julia touched her chest and then looked in horror at her red fingers. "What is this? Is this blood?"

"Paint," Ajay replied reassuringly and struggled to explain. "They painted a bull's-eye on your chest—a warning message."

Julia was furious in an instant. "To stop our investigation?" she wondered. Ajay didn't reply. It was obvious. She begged Ajay, "I want to clean up and get dressed. We should get out of here and talk about this later."

"We're calling the police," Ajay said firmly. "I'm not taking *no* for an answer this time, Julia. This is important. Don't clean up before they see the evidence."

Julia put her head against Ajay's chest as if in defeat. She said worriedly, "You're shaking. I can hear your heart beating a mile a minute. I'm all right, Jay. It's okay, calm down."

Ajay took a shuddering breath and admitted. "I went out because I didn't want to deal with my feelings for you. I'm sorry. You were hurt because of me."

"Not because of you!" Julia insisted as she slid arms around Ajay and held him. "This isn't your fault."

"I should have been here!" Ajay insisted in anguish.

Julia grabbed Ajay's face with painted hands and made Ajay look at her. Her blue eyes were hard as she insisted, "This isn't your fault! You didn't hurt me. I'm going to be all right. Do not let

this make you hate yourself, Jay.” One of her hands caressed Ajay’s cheek roughly as Julia attempted a weak smile. “Just to make you feel better, I’ll admit I was worrying about my own self-control. I might have gone out for ice too. If you had showered first, you might have been the one painted and hung up to dry, not me.”

Secure in his own strength, Ajay doubted that, but he didn’t say so. Instead, as he pulled Julia to her feet along with him as he stood, he asked anxiously, “Are you in pain? Are you dizzy? Do you feel disorientation or nauseated?”

“Just what you would expect from getting beat up and hung in a shower,” Julia replied irritably as Ajay helped her drape a towel around her bare breasts. “Call the police and let’s get this over with.”

Ajay nodded. He helped Julia into the main room and sat her in a chair. He used his cell to call the police. As he paced, he turned to face the bathroom door. It was then he saw that something had been spray painted on the outside. He swung the door closed. He felt a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. In dripping red letters the message read, *Next time, it won’t be paint. Drop the case.*

“They must have been watching us,” Julia surmised.

“Or one of the artists you called said something to Ms. Engles about your being unavailable to model,” Ajay suggested.

Julia looked distraught. “I shouldn’t have done that. I knew this might be dangerous. I’m sorry. This isn’t your fault, it’s mine.”

Ajay went to the front door and looked out at the darkness and the falling snow, wishing the police would hurry. He said, “At least we know that they aren’t violent.”

Julia sounded incredulous as she retorted, “And how do we know that?”

Ajay replied logically, “After several attempts to stop our investigation, neither of us is dead or seriously injured.”

“You’re right, but this warning on the door might mean they’re capable of murder,” Julia pointed out.

A police siren in the distance startled them. They fell silent while a dusty, old police car pulled up to their hotel. A weary looking police officer got out and approached cautiously with one hand on his gun.

When the officer was able to see them both clearly, he swore, “You both look like shit! Is that blood? Should I call EMS?”

“This is red paint, not blood,” Ajay assured the man.

The officer asked, “What the hell went on here?”

“My client was attacked,” Ajay began, but the officer interrupted him.

“Client? What do you mean, client?” the officer narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“I’m Detective Kavanagh,” Ajay began again. “This is my client, Julia Temple. I am investigating a missing person case under her employ. We are in route to confirm the missing person’s whereabouts. I suspect there are people associated with the missing person who want us to cease our search. I believe they are the ones who attacked Ms. Temple and that—”

“Spell your last name, Detective,” the officer interrupted again and pulled out a pad and pencil. When he had their names and addresses, and had taken their IDs, he went back to his cruiser. He used an onboard laptop as battered as his car to research them. He didn’t look pleased by what he was finding.

When the officer returned, he handed them back their IDs and said angrily to Julia, “You have priors, Ms. Temple. You, *Mr.* Kavanagh,” he emphasized Mr. as he turned to Ajay, “are an ex-police officer with a record of making trouble as well. Both of you have brought trouble to my little county. I don’t like that, not one bit. I’m going to take your report dutifully, do my investigation, and try to find who did this. That’s my job. My jurisdiction is fifteen miles wide though, so that tells you how successful my investigation will be. I suggest—off the record—that you continue on your way and have those people attack you in a larger, well-funded, give-a-damn, big city.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Julia exploded angrily.

The police officer gave her a disgusted look as he said, “That’s pretty good coming from a woman who...” he read from his notes, “...threw up in a public fountain, crashed a motorcycle into a restaurant, stripped nude and danced on the buffet table at a senator’s fund raiser, let loose a herd of expensive cattle, threatened a man’s life— Should I go on?”

“He wouldn’t keep his hands off me,” Julia protested. “I only said he was going to get what he deserved if he didn’t stop,” Julia protested.

“You said he deserved to end up in the East River. Sounds like a death threat to me,” the police officer snapped.

“It *is* pretty polluted,” Julia agreed.

The officer glared and told them, “I’ll take photos; gather fingerprints, hair, and paint samples—all proper. If you can find a police lab to do something about it, since we don’t have one, contact me and I’ll send them.”

The man was as thorough as he promised, but it didn’t lessen the feeling it was wasted effort. When he was gone, and the door was shut, neither of them was sure what to do next.

“Flip for the shower?” Julia suggested weakly. She hadn’t liked stripping for the officer and showing him the bullseye on her breasts. Her blue eyes were looking at Ajay sadly, as if she expected Ajay to follow the officer and leave her.

“You first,” Ajay replied.

“Thank you.” Julia rose with an effort and made her way to the bathroom. She paused at the door, gripping the towel around her upper body, and said without turning, “My father wanted a great deal from me. I tried to deliver. It didn’t work out. In the end, I did stupid things because he made me hate myself and him. I wanted to embarrass him. It took me awhile to understand that it was his problem, not mine. There’s nothing wrong with me wanting to live my own life.”

“No, there isn’t,” Ajay agreed.

The door closed and Ajay was left to wander the room looking for his own clues. When he reached the dresser with its mirror, he discovered red hand prints all over his face and shoulders. He looked like a lunatic. It explained the police officer’s attitude. It had helped confirm his belief that they were criminal elements as well.

Julia finished her shower and came out wrapped in a towel. “I’m getting dressed while you shower,” she said. “I don’t want to stay here, especially since the front door lock is broken.”

Ajay was too worried and disturbed by events to register Julia’s half naked state as he shoved a chair under the front door knob and warned, “Don’t open it for anyone. I’m going to just wash my face. I’ll take a shower at our next stop.”

“No, shower now,” Julia argued. “There might not be another hotel for miles.”

Ajay insisted. “I’ll just be a moment. I don’t want you—”

“I’ll be all right for a few minutes!” Julia exploded and turned to face Ajay, her gold braid whipping around with the motion like a whip. “Take your damned shower!”

“No!” Ajay replied just as angrily. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Julia demanded. “Do you think you have to protect me every second now?”

“Yes!” Ajay exclaimed in anguish.

Julia’s shoulders slumped dispiritedly. “Then we have a problem.”

Ajay took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and admitted, “I can’t right now. I just...can’t. I was... You scared me, Julia.”

Julia moved to Ajay swiftly and wrapped arms tightly around him. She said softly, “I was scared too. I wondered what they might do to you when you came back.”

“You should go back home,” Ajay insisted yet again. “This has become too dangerous.”

Julia’s head came up nostrils flaring with temper. “I’m not leaving you. You must know why by now?”

Ajay nodded in defeat. “Because you care about me?” he guessed.

Julia nodded unsteadily.

Ajay ran fingers through his hair in frustration and let them drop as he said, “I’m washing my face and we are going. I am winning this argument.”

“If that’s the only one, then I’ll let you,” Julia said.

When they reached Lincoln a few days later, they were exhausted. Sleep had been elusive. Miles away from the scene of the assault, they had still jumped at every noise. Finally, they had agreed to keep traveling for as long as possible, despite dangerous roads and sporadic snow, and to avoid any long stay at a hotel.

“We should try to lose them,” Julia suggested as they waited at a stoplight. “Maybe if we disguise ourselves and store the bike, we could slip in to see Davyd without their realizing it?”

Ajay lifted his visor and rubbed at his weary eyes. His fingers were cramped from holding on. He had been afraid for the last twenty miles that he would fall asleep and fall off of the bike. He replied, after a jaw-cracking yawn, “This isn’t a movie, Julia. They will most likely either stake out

the institution waiting for us or inform Davyd's father. He might then inform the institute not to allow us to see Davyd, or he might file a restraining order against us."

"Then why attack me?" Julia wondered.

Ajay forced his hands to hold onto Julia again as they were given a green light. He felt every ache in his body as Julia turned into the parking garage of a hotel. He replied, "They might be afraid that we have information we could give to Davyd's father or Davyd himself."

"I wish we did know something about what the hell is going on," Julia said in frustration as they left the bike and they entered the hotel.

"If we can get in to see Davyd, he may tell us," Ajay said. "First though, we need to sleep."

"I'll feel safe enough to sleep in this larger hotel than in one of those tiny, roadside places," Julia agreed. "But shouldn't we try to find Davyd right away? Maybe that will surprise them and they won't be prepared to stop us so soon?"

"I can't think clearly without sleep," Ajay argued as they checked in.

Ajay signed for one room. He hefted his bag to one shoulder and led the way, pass key in hand, into an elevator.

"I could get a separate room?" Julia suggested quietly.

"Do you want that?" Ajay wondered, weary mind pointing out to him that he shouldn't have just assumed they would be rooming together. Though to be fair, he told himself, Julia had chosen single rooms at their last two stops. His mind tried to make sense of why Julia would suddenly want to change that arrangement now and if he might have done something wrong. "Do I snore?" was all Ajay could think to ask.

Julia laughed. "No, you don't snore," she assured Ajay. "At least, you haven't in the very brief moments that I actually saw you sleep. I just realized I've been forcing us together in one room and you might not like that."

"I could have said no," Ajay pointed out.

Julia smiled. "You could have, but you're too polite sometimes, Jay. I felt I should give you the option this time."

"I'm really too tired to think about it," Ajay admitted with another yawn. "Talk about it later," he slurred and dragged himself out of the elevator and to their room as if he were sleepwalking.

When Julia opened the door of their room, Ajay pushed past her, dropped his bag by the door, and collapsed onto the first bed he reached face down. “Lock the door,” he mumbled into the blanket.

Julia locked it before removing Ajay’s dirty, wet shoes. “You didn’t sleep at all, did you?” she accused.

“Nope,” Ajay admitted.

“Not even a minute?” Julia persisted as she struggled to relieve Ajay of his coat.

“Nope,” Ajay replied again.

“Why not?” Julia wondered as she worked part of the blanket over Ajay.

“Had to protect you,” Ajay slurred. Sleep claimed him then as if the world had suddenly ceased to exist.

When consciousness returned, Ajay felt something warm and firm against him. He slowly, with some reluctance, opened his eyes. He blinked at sunlight coming through half open drapes.

Memory returned with an effort, reminding Ajay that he was in a hotel room and that he wasn’t alone. When he turned his head, he discovered the firmness against him was that other person. Julia was curled up on her side, facing away from Ajay. She was still deeply asleep.

Ajay started up, biting back an exclamation. Heat rushed to his face in embarrassment and confusion. “Julia!” was the only coherent thing he could think to exclaim.

Julia pulled a blanket higher up on one shoulder and mumbled, “What? What’s wrong?”

“Y-You!” Ajay stammered. “M-me! We’re in the same bed!”

“There is only one bed,” Julia explained irritably. “Don’t worry, I kept my pajamas on. You still have your clothes on. We’re not even sharing the same blanket. Get me some tea when you go get coffee, okay? I won’t be able to wake up without it.”

Ajay scrubbed a hand over his face and sat up further. He was still wearing his clothes, he affirmed, and felt as if every wrinkle in the material had transferred to his skin. His head warned him of an impending headache from caffeine withdraw. His socks were slightly damp, still, and his shirt had twisted around him, choking him a little at the neck. Those discomforts registered only

faintly over the heart-pounding anxiety he was feeling at being body to body with the woman he desired.

“Eggs and toast,” Julia added around a yawn. “Get eggs and toast too.”

Ajay heard himself answer amidst his confusion, “What time is it—morning?”

“Don’t know,” Julia replied muzzily. “Don’t care. Just want eggs and toast.”

Ajay untangled himself from his blanket, untwisted his shirt, and rolled out of bed. Running fingers through his hair, he staggered to the hotel dresser and looked at the clock there. It was just after noon.

Looking back at Julia still wrapped in a blanket, he felt an intense desire. “I’ll call room service,” he told Julia. “You answer the door when they come. I need a shower.” A cold one, he added mentally.

Julia mumbled something that sounded like agreement.

The shower did wake Ajay up completely. It also helped him stop seriously considering giving in to both emotional and physical needs when he confronted Julia afterward.

Julia was sitting up, dressed in a large cream colored sweater and jeans, and sipping at her tea. She was holding the cup in both of her hands. Her eggs and toast were on a plate balanced on one of her knees.

Dressed in a white t-shirt and blue jeans, Ajay ran a comb through his unruly hair as he tried to formulate a plan. “There might be several intuitions in the area. We should rate them in order of the likelihood that Davyd’s father would choose them.”

“They might have specialties,” Julia agreed around a yawn.

“Levels of security,” Ajay added with a nod as he tossed his comb into his bag. He picked up the cup of coffee and donut waiting for him on the dresser next to a pile of Julia’s discarded jewelry. “You’ll need to look more conservative,” he suggested.

“No, I don’t,” Julia said sourly. “Davyd is an artist. I do look like the friend of an artist. You’re the one who will look odd. You look like a bar bouncer—a handsome one,” she amended with a tired smile.

Ajay considered that. “You’re right,” he said at last, and Julia looked pleased. “We won’t get in acting like professionals. We’ll have a better chance being exactly who we are.”

“Sometimes, the truth works better than a lie,” Julia agreed. “So, how do we find out which institute is more likely?”

“Call a doctor and ask for recommendations,” Ajay replied. “I’ll get a phone book from the front desk.”

Julia smiled as she picked up her breakfast and rose. She put the plate and her tea on a side table and reached for one of her bags. She unzipped it and pulled out a tablet. Sitting on the bed again, she put on her reading glasses and began to surf the net on her device.

“I believe that Dr. Ryder was very interested in his son’s care,” Ajay said, resisting the urge to sit with Julia. Instead, he sat in a chair and sipped his coffee. “I would try five-star institutions first.”

“Davyd clearly didn’t want to be institutionalized though,” Julia pointed out. “I can’t see his father taking a chance that he would run away again. I would make security my top search.”

“It would help if we knew what his mental problems are,” Ajay sighed, rubbed at his eyes, and then guessed, “Antisocial behavior, dangerous lack of self-care, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and anger issues?”

Julia typed them into a search and came up with several names. “If they don’t specialize in these areas, they may be able to refer us to doctors who do.”

Ajay nodded and pulled out his cell.

“What will we do,” Julia asked worriedly, “if they’re waiting for us?”

Ajay thought a moment and replied honestly, “I don’t know. We can only hope they haven’t filed restraining orders and they aren’t willing to confront us in public. There’s a third possibility. They may think we will contact Davyd’s father first with our suspicions.”

“Meaning that they won’t suspect that we’ll try to talk to Davyd,” Julia guessed.

“Yes,” Ajay agreed. “Locked away as he is, any information he might give someone will be suspect.”

“Who told you there was a secret plot? Why, a madman of course,” Julia quipped despondently.

Ajay nodded. “If he does give us information, I will have to prove its validity.”

“Which means another investigation,” Julia said jokingly. “My bill is growing.”

“I won’t ask you to pay for this one,” Ajay said, taking her more seriously. “I may not be a police officer any longer, but I do still have a desire for justice. It’s what made me decide to be a detective.”

Julia smiled warmly. “You sound like a superhero. Why did the police let you go when you’re so dedicated?”

Ajay stared down at his cell phone uncomfortably and replied, “I wasn’t good at following procedures when people needed my help. My conviction rate was almost nonexistent.”

“Yet we need solid proof now,” Julia pointed out in concern.

Ajay looked up then, gaze firm with determination. “I want convictions if a crime has been committed, but Davyd’s welfare is more important to me. I won’t lie to you about that. If he has been unjustly institutionalized or is in danger, I will forget the larger case in order to help him.”

“Lucky for us, it’s one and the same this time,” Julia said. “Davyd won’t be kept safe if we can’t prove that certain people want him to keep their secret permanently.”

Ajay agreed. But as he asked for the first number to call, his mind was already far ahead and wondering just how dangerous things might get if Davyd did reveal a deeper criminal plot. The shock of seeing Julia strung up and the painted warning still gripped him. It could just as easily have been a bullet instead of paint.

Ajay’s hands were shaking. He took a deep, shuddering breath, when he realized that Julia was standing over him. She had one hand on Ajay’s shoulder and she was calling Ajay’s name fearfully.

“I’m all right,” Ajay assured her as he tried to regain control. “It just—just hit me—the paint,” he tried to explain and failed.

Julia leaned in close, forehead almost touching Ajay’s, as she assured him softly, “I’m all right, Jay. We’ll be more careful. Nothing’s going to happen to me; so don’t even consider leaving me behind now.”

“We can’t know that,” Ajay argued.

“No, we can’t, but as I’ve told you before, it’s my decision to make, not yours. I choose to take the risk,” Julia told him firmly. “I warn you, if you try and leave me behind, I’ll find a way to follow.”

Julia's hand caressed the side of Ajay's face briefly to take the sting out of her words, but then she was walking away and sitting on the bed again with her tablet. "Here's the first phone number," she said, all business now. "It's the Tri-county Mental Health facility; area code..."

In the end, they were given three possibilities. Ajay would have liked to find Davyd's doctor; but he doubted the man would reveal anything about his patient.

"Do we visit these places by order of importance?" Julia wondered as she put on low black boots and checked for her wallet.

Ajay shrugged into his coat one-handed as he considered his notes. He tapped one address that he had written down. "This is a large facility. The doctor I spoke with had a lot of good things to say about the treatment capabilities and security. However, *this* one," he pointed to another address, "is generally used by the city when someone is found to be a danger to either themselves or the community. Unless Marcus Ryder was able to get the court to rule that Davyd is incompetent, and gain legal and physical custody of Davyd, they might have sent Davyd here.

"Isn't it more likely that Marcus Ryder has legal custody if our police force had Davyd transferred all the way here?" Julia wondered as she put on her jacket.

Ajay nodded. "I agree."

After flipping her gold braid over one shoulder, Julia zipped her jacket. "Otherwise, we would have to believe that our police force is corrupt and working for Ms. Engles."

Ajay frowned. "I have my issues with the police department, but I don't believe they are doing anything illegal."

"So," Julia said as she leaned to look at Ajay's notes. "We have one facility with all the bells and whistles, another one the court would most likely use, and the last?"

"Excellent care, but low security," Ajay replied. "That one is only a possibility because Davyd's father might be more concerned with the quality of the physicians rather than keeping his son securely locked up."

Julia nodded as she put her tablet back in her bag and pocketed her glasses in her jacket. She lamented, "I wish you carried a gun. I don't like the idea that dangerous people might be waiting for us at these facilities."

“Sometimes weapons invite trouble,” Ajay said. “I’m a detective. I’m supposed to discover the crime, gather evidence that will hold up in a court of law, and let law enforcement arrest people. They need the guns.”

“I’d still feel safer,” Julia argued.

“I trust that if we keep ourselves in public at all times,” Ajay explained as he led the way from their room, “they won’t attack us.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Julia said. “Unless what they are trying to cover up is that important to them.”

Ajay didn’t voice his doubts about her theory. He had been a police officer long enough to have seen just how desperate some people could be—and how violent. He wanted to reassure Julia, even if he hadn’t really reassured himself.

“If there is trouble,” Ajay couldn’t help saying, “you’ll let me handle it, right?”

Julia rolled eyes at him as they entered the elevator. “Listen, macho man, I’ve told you I can handle myself in a fight. I know my track record has been awful, but when I’m not taken by surprise, I can fight.”

Ajay looked down at Julia, so small against his much larger bulk, and didn’t feel confident about that statement at all. “You’re my client,” he said firmly. “I’m supposed to protect you.”

Julia sighed. “You could have said *I want to protect you because I care about you*. I’m still just a client to you...”

Ajay frowned, embarrassed. “You know you’re not.”

“Then say so,” Julia urged seriously. “I think we’re past this *professional* attitude.”

Ajay nodded, finding his shoes interesting. He stubbornly insisted, “I should still be the one to handle any trouble.”

Julia pushed past him as the elevator doors opened and said in exasperation, “Maybe I’ll get to show you what I’m capable of sometime, but I have to hope that it isn’t any time soon.”

Chapter Ten

They found Davyd at their second choice. They also found a new receptionist who wasn't sure of all the policies she should be following where visitors were concerned.

"Only a few questions?" the woman behind the heavy Plexiglas asked as she frowned at her computer.

"Yes," Ajay assured her. "If it wasn't so important to the case I'm working, I wouldn't consider disturbing Mr. Ryder's care. The information he might have could be critical."

The woman typed for a moment and then flushed excitedly as she asked Ajay, "Is it a murder case? Weapons dealers? Cocaine bust? Something like that? Will it be on TV after it's completed?"

"Something like that, yes," Ajay replied evasively.

"My name is Trisha Simpson," she told Ajay eagerly. "Will I be in the story?"

"Could be," Ajay replied, mystified by the woman's reaction, but not willing to discourage her belief if it would get him in to see Davyd.

"I love shows like that!" the woman went on. "They're always so exciting." She tapped her keyboard again for a moment and then told Ajay, "Davyd Ryder doesn't have any orders against visitors. We will need to ask him if he wishes to see you though."

"Tell him my name and that Julia Temple, his professional model, is here to see him as well," Ajay said as he motioned to where Julia had been standing quietly.

The woman blushed, now smiling at Julia. "You're a model? I've heard that Mr. Ryder is an artist. I've never seen a professional painter's model before."

Julia flashed her best smile, eyes sparkling as she said, "It's a living. You should consider being one yourself. You're really very beautiful."

She blushed even more and gushed excitedly, "Thank you, Ms. Temple. That's very kind of you to say so. I would die of embarrassment posing in the nude though."

Julia's smile faltered, but she recovered smoothly, "I don't always pose in the nude, Trisha," she chuckled.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she laughed. “Of course you don’t.” She acted thoroughly embarrassed. “I’ll have them ask Mr. Ryder if he wants to speak with you.”

As she spoke on the phone, Ajay said angrily under his breath to Julia, “What was that all about?”

“If we keep her off balance, she won’t think of all the reasons we shouldn’t be allowed to see Davyd,” she explained. “Visiting strangers aren’t exactly sanctioned in places like this, you realize?”

“I do,” Ajay replied, “but how do *you* know that?”

“Later,” Julia said. She gave the receptionist another bright smile as she lowered the phone looking pleased.

“Mr. Ryder has agreed to speak with you, Detective Kavanagh,” she told him. “I’ll have Craig take you back.”

The receptionist pushed an automatic switch and there was a loud buzz. A door opened and a stocky man, dressed in a white uniform and looking annoyed, motioned them to follow him.

“This isn’t procedure,” he said aside to Trisha.

“He’s a detective!” Trisha retorted.

The man said warningly to Ajay, “Keep it short. If I think you’re bothering Mr. Ryder in any way, I’ll call the police, understood?”

“I am working a professional case,” Ajay assured him. “You don’t need to worry.”

“Mr. Ryder has real problems need treatment,” the man said as he led them down white corridors. “I’m only allowing you to see him because he has been telling his therapist about some sort of criminal activity he knows about. The therapist thinks he’s delusional. So does Mr. Ryder’s father. I don’t care if you’re a real detective. I think it will help Davyd if he tells someone he thinks is a police detective about his delusion.”

“You’re not worried about getting into trouble?” Julia wondered.

The man glared. “I got into this line of work because I care about patients,” he told Julia angrily. “If this helps Davyd, it’s worth some risk.”

He took them to an open area with small, white, plastic tables and chairs. Davyd was seated at one, waiting for them. He was looking every inch the brooding artist. His hair was a tangled mess of black, curly locks. His eyes were deep-set and looking almost fevered in their intensity. Dressed

in jeans and an overlarge t-shirt, it was obvious they were still allowing him to paint. He was covered in splotches of different colors. Even his hands were stained with paint.

The male nurse didn't leave them, obviously intending to monitor them closely.

"Julia!" Davyd greeted her with pleasure, but his eager gaze was on Ajay. "I never expected this. How did you find me?"

"I hired Detective Kavanagh to find you," Julia replied as they sat down. "I was worried when you disappeared. I wanted to make certain you were all right."

Davyd seemed to process that information in a distracted manner. Then he said, "My father has me where he's always wanted me. I can't embarrass him here. He thinks the doctors can *cure* me of my desire to paint."

"Why would he want to cure you of that?" Ajay asked as he took out his notebook and pencil.

"My sister drowned," Davyd explained bitterly. "It happened while I was taking reference photos. My mother never forgave me. My father blamed it on my compulsive need to paint. They wouldn't listen when I explained that the surf and wind probably kept me from hearing her call for help."

Davyd made a cutting gesture with one hand and leaned toward Ajay. "My problems, real or imagined, aren't the concern right now, Detective. The trafficking of human beings is."

Ajay studied Davyd, trying to gauge his mental stability. "That's a serious charge."

"I have proof," Davyd told him. "Ms. Engles thugs had me taken to a mental facility before I could give it to the police. Ms. Engles told the police I was dangerous to myself and others and that I was paranoid and delusional. The police discovered that my father had filed a missing person's report. They called my father and he sent them proof I had been judged incompetent and that he was my legal guardian. He had the police bring me to this facility."

"Your studio was searched," Ajay told him. "It didn't look like the work of professionals. Is it possible Ms. Engles was looking for your proof?"

"I took photos," Davyd replied. "I tried to tell the police where they were hidden, but they just considered it part of my delusion."

"Photos of what?" Julia asked. "Did it have to do with the party that Ms. Engles wanted you to attend?"

Davyd nodded, looking surprised that Julia knew that much. “At the party, I was bored. Everyone was ignoring me and talking together. No one cared about the art pieces I had brought; and they were mostly talking about farming, shipping, and employment troubles. When a Mr. Yokima arrived, Mr. Cassini was upset. He took the man aside and told him they weren’t supposed to meet in public. Mr. Yokima was angry and told Cassini he wasn’t going to deal with invisible entities. He wanted to meet the men he would be doing business with.”

“They held a party in honor of the artist they were sponsoring,” Ajay tried to understand, “but they weren’t interested in the artist—only business?”

Davyd nodded angrily. His hands were spread out on the plastic table as if he needed to brace himself as he continued. “Mr. Cassini told Mr. Yokima the other men were willing to transport and hire the illegal workers he smuggled into the country; but if they knew the circumstances under which they were forced to immigrate, they might not have the stomach for it.”

“Mr. Yokima owns an international shipping business,” Ajay said thoughtfully. “Philmore ships cross country. He could easily ship illegal workers. Calahan runs a national employment company. He could find positions for illegal workers with his contacts. Montoya runs large farms that need cheap labor. Ivansson, with his construction companies, can also use cheap labor. Working together, they could make a great deal of money.”

“And how does Cassini fit into all of this?” Julia wanted to know.

Davyd had been nodding often while Ajay spoke. He replied, “He’s the one who devised the entire scheme. He convinced the other men to participate.”

Julia looked ill. “I’ve had a lot of contact with Brian. I knew he liked his money, but I never suspected he would do something this illegal.”

“How did your art fit into all of this?” Ajay wanted to know.

“They used my art to launder the money,” Davyd explained. “Ms. Engles was doing all my accounting. She billed me excessively for her services each time my patrons made a deposit into my account. My patrons, in turn, bought my paintings. They then sold them to Mr. Yokima, and his other entities, for ten times the price. That’s how they were getting paid for transporting the illegal workers. My prolific style fit their needs perfectly in that respect, but I know they intended to bring more artists into their operation eventually.”

Ajay frowned as he finished writing a notation, doubt suddenly surfacing. “How did you become aware of that aspect of the scheme?”

Julia blinked and looked concerned, seeing the flaw there as well. She said nervously, “If you tell us your tinfoil hat told you, I will be disappointed in you, Davyd.”

Davyd said impatiently, “Engles told me when they discovered that I overheard Cassini and Yokima. She tried to get me to join. They promised me a great deal of money. I told them flat out *no* and left the party. I knew someone would remember I had snapped a lot of reference photos during the party and they would probably come after me to get them. I developed the film as soon as I returned to the studio, numbered them, and put them—”

“Wait,” Julia interrupted. “Go back. You didn’t finish the part about Brian and Yokima. You overheard them talking about illegal workers being forced to come here. Yokima ships them. But who pays him? And how do you get that many workers into the country without papers?”

“Falsified papers,” Davyd explained, “and men like Ivansson and Montoya. Not only are they willing to pay for very cheap labor, but they also get some money back by being the middle-man with other farms and manufacturers.”

“How did you overhear them?” Ajay persisted.

“I was loading film into my camera on the balcony,” Davyd explained, “when Cassini and Yokima came near the doors and had their conversation. They discovered me when they decided to take their conversation out onto the balcony for more privacy. I took several pictures of them and the others at the party before Engles came to stop me.”

“They told me you were angry, erratic, and not making any sense,” Ajay informed him.

Davyd frowned, “I was justified in being angry. I was being used to exploit human beings. I know you have doubts, Detective, but I do have proof—at least enough for you to take to the police. If they investigate Engles’ books, the bank accounts of Cassini and the others, and search Yokima’s ships, there will be more proof. I’m sure of it.”

Ajay looked at the male nurse, but the man was staring off at another part of the room as if what they were saying wasn’t interesting and he had heard it all before. Seeing that, Ajay had to ask, “These people helped put you here, but your father is the one who convinced a judge that you should be institutionalized. Even if they are convicted of a crime, it may not help get you released.”

Davyd smiled sadly and leaned back in his chair. He gave a small, helpless shrug. "My father might be right about some of his concerns. I might have some issues they can help me with here." His smile brightened a little as he added, "And they let me paint. That's all that really matters to me."

"Time's up," the male nurse announced, moving forward. "You have therapy, Davyd."

"Where's the proof?" Ajay asked quickly. "I'll make sure the police get it and they start an investigation."

"Inside the door at the studio," Davyd said as he stood up. "It's the rusted one with chipped paint."

"I'll get them," Ajay promised as he and Julia stood as well.

Davyd nodded gratefully, turned to go, but turned back and told Julia, "You were a boring model, but I liked to hear you talk. I remember you told me once you liked a painting of mine. You can have it. Make sure you get it before my father decides to throw everything away. He never did appreciate my art."

"Thank you," Julia said. She sighed as Davyd walked away without acknowledging them any further. Julia turned to Ajay and said doubtfully, "I don't know what to think. He's never been that clear; that focused about anything before."

Ajay closed his notebook and put it in his pocket. He said, "We have our own experiences and the facts I gathered to support some of what Davyd told us. Someone wants those photos Davyd took. Someone wants us to stop the investigation. I've been lied to about that party by those who attended it."

"We need to get back home then," Julia suggested as they headed for the door. "We need to get those photos before someone else finds them."

Ajay considered that to be the least of his worries. Convincing the police to investigate because of a few photos, a police report in a rural town, and the words of a man in a mental institution was going to be extremely difficult. He was, after all, a man who had been discredited and washed out of that very same police department.

"Did you get the information you needed?" the receptionist asked hopefully.

"Perfectly, thank you," Julia replied. "Thank you so much for your help."

"When will this be televised?" the woman asked eagerly.

“Soon, Trisha, soon,” Julia replied. She waved goodbye as they exited. Aside to Ajay, she said, “She really should be one of the patients.”

Ajay only grunted, still thinking about the case, and almost walked into a man. The gun the man showed him just under the flap of his coat made Ajay reach out to Julia protectively.

“Get in the car quietly,” the man warned. Tall and with a crew cut, there was a dead look to his brown eyes. A hardness to the set of his mouth told Ajay he was used to pulling the trigger.

“No,” Ajay said. When the man glared and Julia looked at Ajay fearfully, Ajay explained, “This is public area. I doubt you’ll shoot.” He stepped in front of Julia. “Go back into the building, Julia.”

“No,” Julia said firmly. “I’m not going to leave you in danger.”

“I have a false license plate on the car,” the man explained as his gun nosed towards Julia. “I have a face that isn’t very memorable. I’m willing to chance killing you and getting away with it. It’s that important.”

Ajay stood his ground. “I don’t believe you,” he stated. “Besides, our odds of dying are greater if we go with you. Here at least, we have a chance.”

“I have your information,” the male nurse said breathlessly as he came up to the gunman. “Ryder told them the pictures are in a hole in his studio door. I risked my damned job for that. Pay me the money you promised me.”

“Shut up!” the man growled, and his eyes shifted to glare at the nurse.

Julia’s foot caught the gunman in the side of the head hard in a well-executed karate move. The man went down with a startled exclamation. Julia followed that move by stomping her foot into the gunman’s diaphragm. While the man choked for air, Julia grabbed the gun from the man’s lax fingers and handed it off to a shocked Ajay.

They both heard a car door open. Parked at the curb, another man was getting out of the vehicle as he began to take a gun out of his jacket.

“Shit!” the terrified male nurse shouted and ran back into the building. He locked the door, blocking any escape that way.

Ajay grabbed Julia by the arm and was all but carrying her as they sprinted for the motorcycle. Julia was fumbling for her keys as Ajay grabbed their helmets off the seat of the bike. He pulled

Julia on with him as he sat, and she slung her leg around with difficulty as she jammed the key into the ignition.

Shots were fired and the pavement splattered near the tire as the man incredibly tried to shoot them. Ajay felt something pierce his ankle. He bit back a cry as he shouted at Julia, "Go! Go!"

"I'm trying!" Julia shouted back as the engine roared to life and she popped a wheelie taking off. She slapped on her helmet radio as soon as she was clear of the parking lot and into traffic. "He shot at us!" she exclaimed shakily. "He wasn't supposed to do that! We were in public!"

"He was trying to hit the tires, not kill us," Ajay explained as he tried to look at his injured leg. The pain was excruciating. "It does show how desperate he was to stop us. We should go back to the hotel, get our things, and call the police."

"No, I'll have them send our things to us," Julia protested. "We have a full tank of gas and a head start. We should get the hell out of the city right now."

"He'll finish the job, then," Ajay protested. "We can't outrun him. I'm sure he's already contacting someone to get the pictures from Davyd's studio. We should think about our safety now."

Julia was quiet for a long moment. She took a sudden sharp turn and took the ramp onto an expressway. She said, "I'm going to store the bike. We'll take a plane home. He won't try anything with airport security around."

Ajay agreed that it was a good plan. He longed to be back in familiar territory. There was a problem, though.

Ajay checked his leg again and finally had to admit, "I'm bleeding."

Julia was so surprised by the revelation she almost sideswiped a car. Her voice came over the radio anxiously, "How bad?"

"I wasn't hit by a bullet," Ajay reassured her. "My pants leg is turning red, but very slowly. I don't think it's serious enough to warrant medical attention. I don't want to stop."

"Me either," Julia said. "Rip my shirt and try and make a bandage."

"Airport security is going to question us," Ajay knew for certain.

"We'll say it was a bike accident," Julia suggested. She braced herself against Ajay tearing at her shirt hem. "Do you think the receptionist will remember our names?"

“Yes, but I hope it will take the police time to file a report linking us to the man shooting the gun.”

“Then we have to outrun the report,” Julia said as she steered the motorcycle dangerously fast between two cars to change lanes.

Ajay managed to bind a three inch gash in his ankle without losing his head in traffic, but his heart was in his throat more than once as Julia threaded a dangerous path in and out of traffic to reach the airport.

Putting the bike in long-term parking was normal, but when they entered the terminal carrying only their helmets and no baggage, and buying one way tickets, it rang enough alarm bells to alert security.

They were soon seated in an office with airport security at the door. An airport official, sitting behind a wide desk, was smiling at them with false pleasantries and holding their ID. He looked like an ex-army sergeant with his gray, crew cut hairstyle and his spit and polish demeanor. The name plate on his desk read, Director Agostino. He asked, “Where are you and your companion flying to, Mr...?” he looked at Ajay’s ID, “Kavanagh?”

Ajay replied, “I’m a detective investigating a missing person case. It’s vital that we return home immediately. We didn’t have the time to retrieve our luggage.”

The man frowned. “Detective?” he echoed, then became pleasant again. “I should apologize, then. Is this your partner?”

The man was now looking at Ajay’s business card.

“My client,” Ajay replied. He nudged Julia’s foot to warn her against any protest.

“There was a shooting a short time ago,” Agostino told them, “at a mental institution. Both your names are on the report as possible people of interest. You are also featured prominently on surveillance cameras. I would think that a legitimate detective would have reported an event like that one. Why didn’t you?”

“He was shooting at us!” Julia exploded. “I’m sure the cameras show that too!”

“I intended to file my report to the police as soon as I—” Ajay began, but the official cut him off.

“You failed to report a shooting,” Agostino insisted angrily, dropping his pleasant demeanor. “That is usually the action of a person with something to hide. I don’t have any choice but to turn you over to the police for questioning. Your trip will have to be delayed, Detective Kavanagh.”

Julia began to retort again; but Ajay squeezed her upper arm and said as calmly as possible, “Of course. I understand, sir. I’m afraid my eagerness to return home and pursue evidence in my case led me to make an error in judgment.”

“I hope that’s all it was,” Agostino said as he picked up his phone to make his call.

Julia leaned in close to Ajay, furious. “We can’t lose time on this!”

“Calm down,” Ajay said. “Getting excited now will only mean more delay. We’ll answer all of their questions and hopefully convince them we were the victims.” He frowned, troubled, and admitted, “And the man *is* right. We should have stayed and made a report. It can only help our case if we document the attacks against us and report crimes appropriately. Not building my cases properly and acting on impulse are the very things that ended my career with the police department. We won’t convince the police to investigate Davyd’s claims if we screw up now.”

“But the photos,” Julia argued. “They will be long gone by the time we get back home and the people we’re trying to investigate will have covered up any crime.”

“We have to chance that,” Ajay said. “We don’t have a choice now.”

It didn’t make it easier for them when the police searched them and found the gun Ajay had jammed into a coat pocket and forgotten about.

“You’re looking at jail time,” a police officer named Canon told them as he looked through his computer file. He was a short, balding, portly man, and he was inspecting their ID. They were once again being questioned, but this time it was at a police station. “Trying to take a weapon onto an aircraft is a federal offense.”

“We were attacked,” Ajay explained. “We kept the weapon to keep our attacker from using it. I forgot about it after we left for the airport.”

“Detective Kavanagh was injured in that altercation,” Julia argued hotly. “We were being shot at. All we could think about was getting to safety. You can forgive us if we forgot about the gun afterward.”

“You both have records,” the police officer continued, but he was looking at Julia as he said, “Yours is pretty extensive, but it consists of minor violations. You also spent a short time in a mental institution. That makes anything you say suspect.” Ajay felt shock at that, but Julia didn’t look at him. The officer went on to say, “Taking all of that into consideration, along with your ejection from the police force for violations, Mr. Kavanagh, doesn’t make either of you look good.”

Another officer entered the room and told Officer Cannon, “The surveillance video checks out their story. So does the receptionist. They were definitely approached and shot at first. They were there for an investigation.”

“I do have a license to carry a concealed weapon,” Ajay told Cannon, “Even though I don’t have one at the moment. I also can’t be charged for taking it onto an aircraft when I hadn’t yet bought a plane ticket.”

Cannon parried, “I could prove intent to board the plane with the weapon. If you want to convince me of your innocence, Mr. Kavanagh, you’ll have to tell me all about this case of yours—a case that someone feels the need to shoot you over.”

“I can’t believe he laughed at us,” Julia fumed as they took a cab back to the airport.

“It’s an unbelievable story,” Ajay said sourly, “and we only have the word of a man in a mental institution to vouch for its authenticity. The police aren’t going to cross state lines to investigate something that flimsy.”

“We were shot at over this,” Julia reminded him. “They had a doctor bandage your wound.”

“And those men will be arrested if they’re found,” Ajay said. “But there wasn’t proof of a connection between that incident and the crime being perpetrated now. As far as the police here are concerned, it was an assault with a deadly weapon. The victims are two people who they would rather see on a plane and headed east out of their jurisdiction.”

Julia sighed and sank in the seat dejectedly. “I don’t think we’re going to get any better reception from our own police force without those photos.”

“Probably not,” Ajay agreed. “But we have to try to convince them.”

Julia fiddled with her braid nervously for a few moments before saying, “I shouldn’t go with you. I’m a liability. Maybe you were let go from the police force, but I do have a record. I was put in a mental institution.”

“By your father?” Ajay wanted to know. When Julia nodded, Ajay understood and said, “I have wondered why you were so determined to help Davyd.”

“We’re both different and misunderstood,” Julia said with a sad smile. “Because of some of my actions, my father thought I might have some mental problems. He had the best therapists try to help me. He didn’t believe them when they said there was nothing wrong with me.”

Ajay didn’t want to agree. “You’re the least of my liabilities. I embarrassed the police department several times with my lack of evidence. They haven’t forgotten that.”

“But I *will* be a liability,” Julia insisted, looking pained. “You were right not to want me to come along in the first place.”

Ajay found his hand reaching out to touch Julia’s hand where it rested on the seat. He expected to feel nervous and unsure when they touched; instead, he felt only a surge of protectiveness; an urge to make Julia not feel guilty. “I wasn’t the one who took out that gunman. That was a very impressive move.”

“I told you I could take care of myself,” Julia said with a satisfied smile. “A year of karate classes comes in handy when you’re my size.”

“I never thought...” Ajay began and then wondered if his next words were wise ones.

“What?” Julia prompted, turning her hand to curl around Ajay’s.

Ajay frowned as he chose his next words carefully. “It was easy to think you were just a model; a beautiful woman without...” He fought a blush and couldn’t go on.

Julia sighed. “You thought I was a pampered poodle, some vain, shallow, rich-man’s daughter without a care in the world.”

Ajay didn’t reply for a long moment and then he said nervously, “This is usually when my dates run out on me. I’m told my blunt observations are rude and thoughtless.”

Julia said sadly, “I took some wrong turns in my life. It wasn’t my entire fault, but some of it was. You should be the one running out on me, Jay.”

“No, that’s not how I feel,” Ajay argued, forgetting they were in a cab and that the driver could hear them. Ajay’s only concern was reassuring Julia. To do that, he needed to confess feelings that were still a knotted up ball inside of him. It was time he put a name to them.

“Knowing these things about you has only made me understand why I’m so attracted to you,” Ajay said.

Julia looked startled, then her mouth quirked in amusement. “So,” she said, “you like bad girls?”

Ajay couldn’t help but chuckle as he corrected, “Interesting women.”

Julia’s expression turned serious and her grip tightened. “Promise me that when this is all over, we won’t be over too?”

Ajay couldn’t imagine not seeing Julia again. “Whatever happens,” he promised, “I would still like to see you.”

Julia was pleased. She let go of Ajay’s hand as they reached the airport terminal, but she leaned in close before opening the door and said softly, “I hope that means you want to see me as more than a friend?”

Julia laughed at Ajay’s blush and didn’t wait for an answer as she slid out of the cab.

It seemed an act of futility, but Ajay took the key to Ryder’s studio and went there as soon as the wheels of their plane touched down. He went alone, even though he had promised Julia to call the police first and ask for backup. Ajay doubted he could have convinced the police without anything to support his story, anyway. His main concern had been to keep Julia out of danger. It was worth a lie.

He found the studio still intact when he arrived. Davyd’s father had not begun to remove Davyd’s things. It was obvious, though, that yet another search had been conducted by someone who hadn’t cared about the artwork. Canvases were strewn everywhere. Boxes were turned over, their contents spilled out on the floor, and Davyd’s bed had been torn apart.

Ajay checked the front door without much hope, crouching down to examine it closely. A hole had been torn in it. He checked the other doors and found the same. The last door seemed torn with desperation, perhaps anger. It was almost broken in two. Had they found the photos?

The possibility that Davyd had been fantasizing the crime loomed large in Ajay's mind just then. He wasn't ready to make that judgment just yet. Instead, he entertained the idea that he might have misunderstood Davyd's instructions.

"Inside the door at the studio. It's the rusted one with chipped paint." Ajay considered that it might have been a play on words, but then discarded that idea. Davyd had been very clear about his wording. He had described the place in a matter-of-fact tone. He had expected Ajay to know exactly what he was talking about.

All of the doors in the studio were steel, industrial doors though—without chipped paint or rusted holes. Whoever had already been there had overturned larger paintings, searching for any hidden doors. Even the lift in the floor was open. Ajay suspected they had searched the delivery room door as well. Still, he went down and double checked, wanting his search to be thorough.

When Ajay returned to the main studio, he looked over the tumbled paintings and the overturned tables of paints, brushes, and rags. He finally began to give more credence to the theory that Davyd might be delusional...at least about some parts of his story. While Ajay was convinced that something was going on and that someone seriously wanted a certain party to be forgotten, Davyd's role in that incident might be different than he remembered.

Frustrated, Ajay was reluctant to go; especially when he knew that Davyd's father would take everything and make further investigation of the studio impossible. There was definitely nothing he could do without some concrete connection between the people involved in the supposed crime.

Ajay walked the studio slowly and methodically one last time, following a mental search grid. When he found the portrait of Julia and the sunflowers strewn on the floor with other canvases, Ajay bent to gently uncover it and lift it up to the light.

Julia laughed at him from her field of yellow flowers. Ajay admired it for a long moment, remembering how Davyd had known that out of all of his paintings which one Julia had preferred. It showed a keen attention to his art that probably far outstripped his attention to the living world around him.

“Of course!” Ajay exclaimed. He put Julia’s painting aside on a table and began looking through the other paintings.

He didn’t find it right away. When he did, Ajay felt a keen sense of relief. Whoever had searched the studio had tossed the painting aside along with some others and then overturned a table on top of them. The frame of the canvas was broken and the canvas was folded in half, but Ajay still caught sight of the depiction of a rusted doorway. In Davyd’s favored dark style, drunken and almost skeletal adults dressed in their finest clothing sat and sipped at champagne in fluted glasses. The rusted doorway and derelict room where they held their party made its meaning clear.

Foolish Indulgence—Ajay titled it in his mind as he flipped it over. On the backside, Davyd had taped an envelope. Opening it up, Ajay took out a sheaf of photos. Yokima was talking to Cassini in one photo from the infamous party. Another showed Yokima and Cassini speaking with Calahan, Philmore, Montoya, and Ivansson. Both were numbered which would make it easy to match it up in the photographic timeline down below in the receiving room.

Ajay’s cell rang. He answered it while he stared at the photos. “Detective Kavanagh.”

“Jay!” Julia’s voice said urgently.

“Julia?” Ajay put the photos in his coat pocket and headed for the door. He snagged Julia’s painting without thinking about it and tucked it under one arm as he demanded, “What’s wrong?”

It wasn’t Julia’s voice that replied. Cassini said, “Detective Kavanagh. It seems our little Julia has decided to trespass and steal some very important papers that belong to me. My office video surveillance shows her putting those papers in an express mailer and handing them to an office courier. I’m willing to bet she sent those papers to you. I’m ready to let this matter drop—as long as I get those papers back still sealed in that envelope. If you choose to ignore my offer, I have an associate who is prepared to make certain Julia has a new career on a container ship outbound for China. Would you care to entertain the position she might find herself in once they enter international waters?”

“How do I know you’ll give me Julia once I give you the envelope?” Ajay asked as he hurried to the cab still waiting for him outside and climbed in with the painting tucked under his arm.

“You don’t,” Cassini replied with a grunt. “I have all the good cards, Detective. You get only what I choose to give you. Call me when you receive the package. I’ll give you instructions for redelivery.”

The phone disconnected and Ajay stared at it for a long moment, his fear for Julia overwhelming him.

“Where to?” the cab driver wanted to know.

“Home...for now,” Ajay replied and gave the man his address.

Chapter Eleven

“It’s been awhile,” Mr. Yamato said without turning around from pruning the dead branches of a bush.

The sun was making everything take on a glow of red and yellow, darkness already claiming the corners of the garden. Small solar lights were beginning to pop on along the small garden path. The stone cherub fountain was empty of water. Ajay stared at it unseeing, coat tucked in around him and hands buried in his pockets against the chill.

“I just wanted to think,” Ajay said, wishing the man was gone. The place always seemed to center him; to give him a much needed moment away from all pressing business, fears, and doubts. He truly needed that moment just then.

The man tilted his broad hat at Ajay, shooting him a keen look. Then he made a sighing noise and continued to prune dead branches. “You won’t find answers in that fountain, Jay. You know that.”

Ajay said nothing, only frowning as he gathered himself to leave and find solitude to think elsewhere.

“You won’t find answers by hiding, either,” Yamato told him.

Ajay continued to stare at the fountain hard as he said, “I have decisions to make. I need fresh air to clear my head, to...”

“If the decision was in you to make, you would have decided already,” Yamato pointed out.

“Asian wisdom?” Ajay scoffed angrily.

“Old man common sense,” Yamato replied. He chuckled as he continued to snip.

“A man’s life may depend on my decision,” Ajay retorted. “It isn’t a laughing matter!”

“I see. Forgive me, then,” Yamato turned and tilted his hat to look at Ajay. “A little more old man wisdom, if you’ll allow me,” he said. “A struggle usually means there’s right decision, or a wrong one. You struggle between sound knowledge and impulse. Meaning: you already know the right decision.”

Ajay’s struggle was with his emotions, with his need to keep Julia safe. “If I decide on what I know is right,” he explained, voice choking a little, “Julia may die. If I do as they say...”

“You need to watch more movies,” Yamato told him. “What happens when the bad guys tell the good guy to put down his gun, or they’ll kill the lady in distress?”

Ajay chewed on his lip and then replied tersely, “They shoot anyway.”

“Ah! So you *do* know,” Yamato said.

“This isn’t a movie,” Ajay retorted, standing up to leave.

“No, it isn’t,” Yamato agreed. “So please refrain from trying to be the hero as if you were in one. There are ways of doing things for a reason. They were not created out of empty air without foundation.”

“They’ll be watching me,” Ajay argued. “If I go to the police now, they’ll hurt Julia.”

Yamato sighed and said, “There are ways to get information to people without the need for telltale travel, Jay. You really should get out of the stone age.”

Ajay stood quietly, mind battling with emotion. Then his shoulders slumped. “You’re right. I know what I should do. If I do this alone, they might kill us both. There’s no guarantee that they won’t commit violence after they have what they want.”

“Good,” Yamato said, pleased. “You are thinking now.”

Ajay turned to go, paused, and looked back at Yamato with a smile. “Thanks, Mr. Yamato.”

“What for? I only pointed out that stone cherubs can’t answer the troubled questions of young men.”

“For always being here to listen to my problems,” Ajay replied.

Yamato made a dismissive gesture with his free hand and said, “If you want to thank me, you can come help me shovel snow out of the garden. That’s the sort of thanks my old bones can appreciate.”

“I’ll be here,” Ajay promised.

Yamato shook his head and sighed. “No, you won’t.”

“I will,” Ajay insisted.

Yamato shrugged and began to walk away into his small garden.

“I will,” Ajay insisted again.

Yamato was gone, though, and the calming effect of the garden seemed to go with him. Ajay felt his fear for Julia return, but his mind was clear on his next course of action. Procedures were there for a reason. He wasn’t going to ignore them this time.

“Your boyfriend is here!” Wezel’s grandfather shouted.

“I am not gay!” Wezel retorted as he swiveled in his chair away from his computers.

The old man hobbled away from the front door grumbling, “This is the only person who comes here. What am I supposed to think?”

Ajay came into the apartment, eyes searching. “Did you get the mail yet?”

“Gone for days and not even a, *Hi, Weasel?*” Wezel grunted as he pulled down a stack of mail from on top of his computer and began leafing through it.

Ajay reached into the stack and pulled out a mailer. Wezel grabbed the other end. “Wait! I did you the favor of getting your mail while you were away. I at least get to know what’s in the package as payment.”

“Not this time,” Ajay said. He gave it a hard tug. “This is serious.”

Wezel refused to let go. “I never considered this a game, Jay,” he said angrily. “Tell me what’s going on!”

“They have Julia!” Ajay burst out, unable to stifle the fear eating him alive. “She secretly sent this to me—incriminating evidence—but they caught her. They won’t let her go until they have this back.”

“And you buy that load?” Wezel demanded.

“No!” Ajay replied angrily.

“Good.” Wezel went on, “Now, what’s your plan?”

“Take it to the police, get them to believe me, and have them help me get Julia back,” Ajay replied.

Wezel pulled the envelope out of Ajay’s hands. He opened the package carefully and pulled out a memory stick and some papers. “Let’s copy all of this. I want to do a little research before we email it. I know you don’t like hacking, but I think it’s time to use my full potential, Kavanagh. We need as much proof as possible to give to the police.”

Ajay’s fear had risen after the package was opened. He was committed now. Julia’s life now depended on him, and the help the police and Wezel could give him.

Wezel worked feverishly, fingers flying over his keyboards. His computer screens went from one website to another faster than Ajay thought possible to read.

“Here,” Wezel finally said, pointing to a screen and the papers in his hands. “Proof that Yokima’s ships were in port every time a large sum of money was transferred into Cassini’s bank accounts.”

“When he Davyd’s paintings were bought and sold,” Ajay surmised.

Wezel blinked at him, not understanding. “Does this help?” he asked.

“It does prove a definite connection besides the party photos,” Ajay replied.

Wezel agreed. “In his papers, you can see where Cassini bought the paintings from Engles for a decent, but not outrageous sum of money. He then sold them to Yokima at a seventy percent markup. That doesn’t say much for Yokima’s intelligence...if the sale is legit.”

“Donations went to Ryder’s account, an account overseen by Engles. The donations were for Ryder, but it seems he spent very little of the money.” Ajay said as he made notes. “His chief sponsor also bought and sold Davyd’s paintings.”

“Are we talking about money laundering?” Wezel guessed with raised eyebrows. “Do you know what the money was being used for?”

“Trafficking in illegal immigrants,” Ajay told him grimly. “Yokima ships them. Cassini manages their disbursement across the country, paying off and taking payments from the other people involved.”

“You mean Callahan, Montoya, Philmore, and Ivansson?” Wezel guessed as he attached the information to an email.

“Yes, they are all involved,” Ajay replied as he put everything back into the envelope and stared with some despair at the opened seal.

“Don’t meet them alone,” Wezel suggested, looking at Ajay in concern, “and don’t meet them on their home ground. Make it your advantage.” His fingers hovered over the keyboard. “Who do I send this too?”

Ajay’s cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket in trepidation, checked the number, and then answered it. “Detective Kavanagh,” he said tightly.

“You should have the envelope by now,” Cassini’s voice said angrily. “Confirm it.”

Ajay looked at the open seal. “Confirmed.”

“Mail it again at once to my office. We’ll be watching you,” Cassini ordered. “Once I have it, Julia goes free.”

“No,” Ajay said, firming his voice. “I don’t trust you. We’ll do an exchange at the crossroads of Warren and Devoe.”

“May I remind you, Kavanagh, that I have the power here?” Cassini warned.

“Do you?” Ajay retorted. “Whatever is in this envelope must be highly incriminating if you’re ready to stoop to kidnapping to get it back.”

“Detective Kavanagh,” Cassini snapped, “I have an associate who will stoop to much more to keep his business a secret. Do you understand me? Everything isn’t under my control in this situation.”

“Was he the one who tried to have us shot in Nebraska?” Ajay demanded.

“He was growing tired of my attempts to dissuade you, so I imagine so,” Cassini said. “If I were you, I wouldn’t attempt any bargain.”

“I won’t change my mind,” Ajay told him, tamping down on the terror rising up inside of him with difficulty. “Be at Warren and Devoe at one o’clock sharp. If Julia isn’t with you...”

“I wouldn’t make a bet on your chances of leaving alive if you fail to hand over that envelope unopened, Kavanagh,” Cassini growled, “or on Julia leaving alive—especially if we see any police waiting for us. Keep that firmly in mind.”

The call disconnected. Ajay looked up at Wezel. Wezel was looking stunned and impressed.

“I didn’t know you had it in you,” Wezel said. “That took brass balls, Jay.”

Ajay swallowed hard and then began making a call on his cell.

“Now what?” Wezel asked.

“I’m calling the police,” Ajay replied. “Send the email to this address.” Ajay gave Wezel the email for his old partner.

Wezel looked at the name and frowned. “That guy? He hates you.”

“Benjamin Krowl was working Ryder’s case,” Ajay explained. “He’ll at least know what I’m talking about. It’s a start.”

“He was working on having Ryder committed as I recall,” Wezel reminded him as he sent the email. “It’s a good thing we have some proof other than the words of a known crazy man.”

Ajay checked his watch. He didn't have much time. When Krowl answered his phone, Ajay's voice was filled with anxiety as he said, "Don't hang up on me, Krowl!"

"Kavanagh?" Krowl growled. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Because a woman's life depends on you," Ajay told him quickly.

"Did you manage to get one of your *clients* into trouble?" Krowl wondered acidly, but Ajay could hear the change in his voice. It wasn't about his hated ex-partner anymore. Ajay had his attention.

"I discovered that Davyd Ryder, aka David Ridder, overheard certain persons talking about illegal activities," Ajay told him. "Ms. Engles, his agent, is involved in a scheme to transport illegal workers. She was using the sale of Ryder's paintings to launder money."

"Your track record of not providing court-worthy proof is legendary, Kavanagh," Krowl pointed out. "You almost ruined my career along with your own when I stuck my neck out for you. Why should I put myself on the chopping block again?"

"I have proof," Ajay assured him. "It's enough to ask a judge for search warrants and enough to guarantee that you will find something to create a case. I'm emailing it all to you right now."

"Hm...", was the only response Krowl made for several long minutes as he checked his email and went over the information.

Ajay could hear the man breathing letting him know they were still connected. During that time, Wezel went into the kitchen and returned with an iron. He plugged it in and let it heat up on a living room table while he put everything back into the envelope.

Krowl finally said, "All right, I'm listening. Let's start with whose life is in danger and why?"

"My client, Julia Temple," Ajay replied as he watched Wezel reactivate the glue on the envelope with the heat of the iron and reseal it. "She took and mailed the information—that I just sent to you—from Cassini's office before they discovered her. They're threatening to harm her if I don't return the envelope unopened. We're supposed to make a trade at the crossroads of Warren and Devoe Streets at one o'clock."

"That's thirty minutes from now," Krowl complained angrily. Ajay could hear him moving as if he had suddenly gotten out of his chair. "How am I supposed to get men into position, or even develop a plan, by then? I have to convince them this isn't another screw up of yours, Kavanagh!"

"I don't know," Ajay said, feeling despair. "I didn't have any choice."

“You know they won’t go through with this?” Krowl barked orders at someone and then continued with Ajay. “They’ll dangle Temple where you can see her. They’ll threaten you, make you go with them, and then probably kill you both.”

“I know,” Ajay said. “That’s why you need to be there.”

“God damn you, Kavanagh!” Krowl snarled, yelled at someone else, and then said to Ajay, “Why didn’t you stick to finding lost dogs? If this isn’t legit, my career is going to go down the drain.”

“Julia is in danger,” Ajay insisted.

“And that’s why I’m mobilizing right now; *only* because of that, Kavanagh. Proving one of your cases is dead last on my give-a-shit list right now. Got that?”

“Yes,” Ajay replied weakly. He said more firmly as he stood up, “I have to go. I’ll try and stall them as much as possible.”

“Because I said so, damn it!” Krowl shouted at someone. “I’ll have clearance from the chief in a god damn minute!” And then he said to Ajay, “I can’t tell you how long this is going to take. You’re on your own. Do you have a gun?”

“Yes,” Ajay replied nervously.

“Well, don’t use it,” Krowl snarled back, “or I’ll arrest you, too! The place is going to be crawling with civilians.”

“It’s locked up anyway,” Ajay weakly chuckled. “I never use it. I don’t even know where the key is any more.”

“Use your brain, Kavanagh!” Krowl told him. “Stall.”

“Hurry,” was all Ajay could find to say after that and pocketed his cell as he headed for the door. He took the envelope from Wezel on his way and inspected it. It looked good, but he couldn’t be sure it would pass a more thorough inspection.

“It’s the best I can do,” Wezel told him.

It was then that Ajay noticed Wezel had his coat. “No,” Ajay ordered. “This is dangerous.”

“We’re cousins,” Wezel said. “That counts for something. Nobody is going to get away with hurting you or your S.O. while you’ve got family around.”

“S.O.?” Ajay wondered, confused.

“Significant Other,” Wezel explained.

“Why not just say girlfriend?” Ajay complained as he led the way out of the apartment.

“If you’re okay with that?” Wezel asked as he pulled on his coat.

“I am now.”

“All the evidence is in then?” Wezel chuckled.

“And case closed in that respect; yes,” Ajay agreed.

“So, how are we going to stall?” Wezel wanted to know.

Ajay shrugged, but then smiled tightly as they left the building and stepped onto the sidewalk. Four people called a greeting to them. “Let the neighborhood do what it does best,” Ajay replied. “Let it be itself.”

It was hard to wait even though Ajay knew every minute that passed was a minute closer to when the police might arrive.

The man who finally stepped out in front of him to stop his pacing was easily recognizable. He was the gunman from the mental institution. Dressed in dark clothing and a black long-coat, the bruise from Julia’s kick was still livid and purple. His brown eyes, looking over the top of his dark sunglasses, were full of anger.

“That’s the envelope?” the man asked in a tone of voice that told Ajay he wanted to shoot him where he stood.

Ajay held it up but pulled it away when the man reached for it. The man cocked his head to one side and warned, “Don’t start any games, Kavanagh.”

“Where’s Julia?” Ajay demanded.

The man nodded down the street. A block away, Ajay could see two men, as identical to the one before him as brothers, holding Julia securely between them.

“Why so far away?” Wezel demanded from a position of safety behind Ajay’s bulk.

The man glared at him. “The moment we see cops,” the man warned, “they’ll knife your little friend and put her in a dumpster. They’ll be gone quick as that, and I’ll be here without anything tying me to the crime except your say so.”

“But you won’t have this,” Ajay said as held up the envelope again.

“Maybe not,” the man warned, “but Mr. Yokima will have his revenge.” He leaned in, hand reaching for the envelope. “Now, you have to ask yourself if you can live without justice, or without that little bitch down the street.”

“Ajay! How’s it hangin’?” a tall, skinny young man with dark hair called. He was trying to carry too many groceries while following old Mrs. Yuma to her apartment.

“Morry!” Ajay called back, ignoring the glare of the gunman.

“You’ve been scarce,” Morry accused. “Come down and shoot a few hoops this evening at the rec center with me and a couple of the guys. We’ll do pizza and beer after.”

“Come along!” Mrs. Yuma grumbled. “My ice cream is melting.”

“Not in this weather, ma’am,” Morry assured her and then to Ajay, “Be there?”

“I’ll be there!” Wezel called and waved.

“Hangin’ out with Weasel in broad daylight?” Morry made a *tisking* sound. “You gotta get out more, Jay. Tonight. Be there!”

The gunman glared after the two and then held out his hand again. “Give me the envelope, Kavanagh, or make funeral arrangements.”

“Kavanagh!” A stiff finger jammed into Ajay’s chest as Katie confronted him, eyes blazing. “Where have you been?”

“Doctor Malevona,” Ajay choked in surprise as he saw the man reach inside his coat for his gun. He half-turned her away, much to her indignation, and said, “I’ve been out of town.”

“Well, maybe you should have paid your office rent before you left?” she pointed out. “How will I collect my donations if you lose your office space? The landlord was getting ready to change the lock, but I convinced him to layoff for a few days more.”

“Get lost!” the gunman snarled. “He’s got business!”

Katie whirled on him. She was small, but she looked fierce as she demanded, “Is this one of your clients, Kavanagh? I don’t like his attitude.”

“My attitude is going to get a hell of a lot uglier if you don’t go away,” the man snarled.

She raised her chin, glared, and jabbed an elbow backward into Ajay’s ribs. “Well, stupid, say something to him!”

“He’s right. I’m sorry, Doctor,” Ajay apologized as he put himself between her and danger. “Thank you for helping me with the office. I will contact the landlord as soon as possible.”

Ajay handed her off to a white-faced Wezel, who pulled her a few more feet back and whispered something urgently to her.

The gunman held out his hand once again. “No more stalling,” he warned. “This is your last chance, or the bitch goes into the dumpster.”

“Jay!” Ajay’s father called from his cab as he pulled up to the curb. “Why didn’t you call to say you were back? You know how your ma worries!”

“Sorry, Da, but I’m in the middle of business!” Ajay shouted back. “I’ll call afterward, all right?”

“Mr. Harris!” Ajay’s father motioned to the hotdog vendor nearby. “Get my son and young Weasel a couple of dogs on me. The boys need to eat; not just work.” He waved and drove off.

Mr. Harris grunted as he started making up the hotdogs. “What’ll you kids have on your dogs?”

“Later, Mr. Harris,” Ajay told him.

“Your father didn’t say later,” he argued.

“Later.” Wezel repeated for Ajay as he joined Ajay again after having seen Katie on her way.

Mr. Harris shrugged and growled, “Whatever.”

The gunmen put his cell phone to his ear as he exclaimed, “I’m done with this shit!”

“Why haven’t you taken the envelope yet?” Cassini demanded as he stepped out of the shadow of the deli. “What are all of these damned interruptions?”

The gunman glared and retorted, “Sir, I advised you not to show yourself; just as I advised you that this handoff was a bad idea.”

“You are armed,” Cassini snarled back. “We have a hostage. What the hell is the problem? Give us the envelope, Kavanagh.”

“Speaking of the devil, there he is.” Kile chuckled as he approached with one arm thrown over Julia’s shoulders. Ajay’s brother waved with his free hand and said, “I was just going to get some dogs for the guys at the fire station when I saw your Julia, Jay! She must have gotten lost, so I thought I’d show her the way to the house.”

Julia looked pale and disheveled, her jacket was ripped. She smiled fearlessly at Ajay, though, and then at the gunman and Cassini. “Some of your friends are lost too, Brian,” she said. “Maybe you should go help them.”

The gunman was taking a step back, obviously ready to leave. Cassini gripped his arm hard. “You have a damned gun. They don’t. Use it. I want that envelope!”

Ajay stepped in front of Wezel, his brother, and Julia. He held out his arms protectively and his expression was determined as he said, “You’re not shooting anyone.”

“I’m not,” the gunman agreed as he pulled away from Cassini. “We won’t get away with it, Cassini. Not here. Not like this.”

Cassini was jerking the gun away from the man in the next instant as he snarled, “I won’t lose everything I’ve worked so hard for. I’m getting that envelope if I have to shoot everyone here!”

A police revolver pressed against Cassini’s temple. “I think enough people heard that to give you some trouble in court, mister,” Krowl said as he reached and took the gun away from a terrified and frozen Cassini.

Other police officers moved in and began cuffing the two men as Krowl demanded of Ajay, “Where’s your woman in danger?”

Julia slipped an arm around Ajay’s waist and waved at Krowl. “Here.”

Kile shook skinned knuckles and told Ajay, “Do I get to know what’s going on? Two guys were roughing up your girlfriend here. They needed a lot of persuasion to let her go.”

“Are you all right?” Ajay was asking Julia, not caring about anything else just then.

Julia smiled up at him and assured him, “They roughed me up a little, but they didn’t break anything. I was just about to get away when your brother showed up.”

Ajay took a breath to voice his doubt, but Kile said in admiration, “She was putting up a good fight for such a little lady.”

“Glad nobody needed my help,” Wezel said weakly. “If I’m not needed anymore, I’ll go back home, change my pants, and have a nervous breakdown. I’m never going out on a case with you again, Jay.”

Kile exclaimed, “Wait’ll the guys back at the station hear what happened!”

“Nobody goes anywhere!” Krowl shouted. Even his men paused in taking Cassini and the gunman away to stare at him. Krowl pointed a rigid finger at Ajay. “I want everyone down at the station for questioning. I want all the evidence. This case will not turn into a Kavanagh screw up. It’s getting done by the numbers. Got that?”

“Julia needs a doctor,” Ajay argued, putting an arm around Julia as if Julia needed the support.

“I’ll go along and treat her,” Katie said from behind Wezel, patting her medical bag. “I always have my kit with me.” When they looked at her in surprise, she snorted, “You didn’t really think I’d just leave because Weasel gave me a lame excuse about Ajay having knocked up some guy’s sister?”

Ajay glared at Wezel. Wezel shrugged unrepentantly and said, “I had to think on the fly, sorry.”

“I’m not hurt that badly,” Julia complained, pushing away from Ajay to prove it and trying to straighten her ripped coat.

“She’s tough,” Kile chuckled. “I wasn’t too sure before, but I think she’s just right for you, brother.”

“Please come along,” Ajay begged Katie. “Julia really does need you to treat her.”

“Everyone is coming,” Krowl thundered again, red in the face with anger and pink birthmark livid on his forehead, “even if I have to take a triage team along with me! Get in the squad cars, now!”

Kile complained, “Can we get hotdogs, first? I haven’t had lunch.”

“No!” Krowl snarled. “In the squad car before I have you arrested as well.”

Kile grumbled an obscenity, but dutifully went along with Wezel to the cars.

Ajay reached out for Julia again, adrenaline running out and the dangerous situation that Julia had been in finally hitting home. “I was terrified,” Ajay admitted in a stressed whisper. “I don’t know what I would have done if they had...”

Julia looked up at Ajay, standing close and not caring who saw them. She assured Ajay, “I really am all right. They’re going to jail. I’m safe. It’s over. Case closed.”

“Not until the trial,” Krowl snapped, looking uncomfortable and impatient. “Save whatever this is for later, Kavanagh. We need to go.”

Ajay cupped Julia’s face with both hands and kissed her deeply, unable to help himself. Julia met his lips fiercely for a heartbeat, but then pulled away and said, “Not now, Jay. He’s right. We have to go and get this done first.”

Ajay nodded shakily and let Julia lead him toward the cars. A bemused Katie followed behind them, already pulling out tape, gauze, and antiseptic from her bag.

“So?” Ajay’s mother asked as she stirred her pot of soup.

The small kitchen was filled with a beefy aroma that mingled with the smell of baking bread. Their Sunday evening dinner was at least an hour from completion. It gave Ajay too much time to stare at the empty chair at the small table and remember Julia filling it with her brightness.

“She’s not here,” Ajay told her.

“She could be late,” his mother argued as she tasted and added more salt to the soup.

“Really?” Ajay said sarcastically, but then despondently, “Haven’t we had this conversation enough times to know how it ends? My dates are disasters. They promise to come or to call and they don’t. They didn’t want to deal with dumping me.”

His mother stirred and asked, “Exactly what happened the last time you saw Julia?”

Ajay frowned. He scrubbed at his face for a moment and then replied, trying to recall everything that had happened, “I went to tell Julia that the case was out of our hands now; that it was definitely going to trial. I took her painting to her—the one by Ryder that she liked so much. I thanked her for being my client and for giving me the chance to become more respected as a detective. I told her I was already being offered more cases because of it.”

“And then?” his mother prompted with a sigh.

Ajay blinked at her, confused. “I said I hoped she could drop by the house for dinner. I told her how everyone really enjoys her company. She said she would try to come.”

“That’s it?” she wondered, finally looking at him in exasperation and ceasing to stir the soup. “And you think that dry speech—bereft of any signs of emotion or words of caring—was enough to keep anyone interested in my son, Ajay Kavanagh?”

“It was enough for me,” Julia chuckled as she opened the back door with a little knock and looked at Ajay’s mother sheepishly. “You see, I know Ajay enough to understand *Ajay-speak*.”

Ajay’s mother’s exasperation was an act now as she gave Julia a warm, dimpled smile and said, “Then maybe you could explain it to me?”

“Ajay told me, *I’m here telling you all of this because I care about you, appreciate what you’ve done for me, and want you to know everything that I know,*” Julia explained as she slowly crossed the kitchen to stand in front of Ajay. Staring down into Ajay’s shocked eyes with soft amusement, she continued, “*I care so much about you I even remembered the painting you loved,*

despite everything else that was going on at the time, and made sure I got it for you. My family means the world to me, and I want you to be a part of that by inviting you to come and share our special time together.”

“Then why are you late?” Ajay wanted to know dazedly, his one hand going out and taking Julia’s smaller one.

“You didn’t tell me the time, stupid,” Julia laughed.

Ajay’s mother snorted, “Alusius Java Armani Yanci Michael Kavanagh, when will you learn?”

Julia’s mouth hung open, and then she laughed brightly. “Is that what your name is short for?”

Ajay blushed. “I keep trying to forget it.”

“I like it,” Julia admitted. She asked Ajay’s mother, “What made you give him a name like that?”

Ajay felt uncomfortable as he admitted. “My birth mother gave it to me. I’m adopted.”

“Not enough Kavanaghs,” his mother laughed. “We had to borrow another.” She smiled at Julia. “It seems we need another one too...if you want to join the family?”

Julia smiled, looking emotionally shaky, and replied, “I’d like that. Thank you.”

“Then get in there with the rest of them,” she admonished with a shooing motion, “and let me cook.”

Ajay rose and pulled Julia along with him as he led the way to the living room. He paused in the shadows of the stairs though, and said low enough for only Julia to hear, “I want you to be a part of the family too, but it’s not another sister I’m looking for.”

Julia grinned, blue eyes sparkling. “Is that *Ajay-speak* for I love you?”

“Yes, it is,” Ajay admitted with sudden emotion, hand tightening on Julia’s.

“Then we’re speaking the same language,” Julia said. She grabbed the lapels of Ajay’s coat and pulled him down for a passionate kiss.

End

