

**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 #2 Speakeasy**

**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**

**Kavanagh Mysteries**

**Book #2**

**Speakeasy**

**By**

**Isaac Innes**

## Chapter One

“So, what are you two fighting about?” Kile asked. He leaned back in his chair, at the small table in their parent’s kitchen, and regarded his brother sympathetically.

Hugging his coffee cup in his big hands and sitting across from his big brother, Ajay was slumped in misery. He didn’t want to talk about his problems, especially with Kile. His brother knew the look of a man escaping unpleasantness at home, though. He wasn’t going to believe Ajay was there for a simple family visit.

“It’s probably about money,” his brother fished. He sipped at his own coffee and then planted an unlit cigarette at the corner of his mouth. He said around it, “You take in a fancy poodle from up-town, she’s going to want stuff you can’t afford.”

Ajay grumbled into his coffee cup, defensively, “That’s not what the argument was about.”

His brother’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “No? Well, then, it was probably about something stupid. My wife is mad about roses she didn’t get; yellow ones. What the hell is that all about, I ask you?”

“It’s your anniversary, today.”

Kile grunted, suddenly understanding, but then frowned again and asked, “Okay, I forgot, but what does that have to do with yellow roses?”

“The church was decorated in yellow roses when you were married.”

Kile looked dumbfounded. He demanded irritably, “I was supposed to know she wanted them this anniversary?”

“Yes, it would seem so.”

“That’s crazy!” Kile protested, fist hitting the table in anger.

Ajay took a firm grip on his coffee mug as the contents sloshed. “From the evidence of her actions, I think we can assume she wants you to be more romantic.”

“Says Ajay Kavanagh, who doesn’t even know what’s wrong with his own sweetheart, I’m

betting?" his brother retorted in angry embarrassment.

"I do know what's wrong," Ajay corrected his brother before he could think better of it.

"Ah," Kile said as he took his unlit cigarette and stabbed it in the air at Ajay, "Now we're getting to it. Let it out, brother. What's lit the fire under your girlfriend? It's confession time."

"She wants to pay for my new office," Ajay replied unwillingly, hating that it sounded so simple, when it was far from it.

Kile stared at him for a long moment, with an expression that questioned Ajay's sanity, and then asked, "And?"

"I wouldn't let her, of course," Ajay replied matter-of-factly.

"Because?"

Ajay's jaw worked and then he replied tightly, knowing his brother wouldn't understand, "Because it's my office. The business should pay for itself."

Kile snickered, "Bet you got the lecture about 'What's yours is mine and what's mine is yours, and if you don't think so, you don't really love me.' Am I right?"

"Yes," Ajay admitted reluctantly.

"Knew you'd screw this up," his brother replied with a sigh as he jammed his cigarette back between his lips, "I'm just surprised you managed two months before breaking up."

"We are not breaking up!" Ajay retorted, surprising himself, as well as his brother, by his strong reaction. It was hard to calm down. "It's not over. We just had an argument, that's all. We'll work it out."

Kile eyed him critically and then leaned forward, switching his unlit cigarette to the opposite side of his mouth. "One thing you gotta learn, brother," he said seriously, "is that you have to swallow a lot of crap to make them happy. Look at me. I have to go out and buy the biggest bunch of yellow roses I can find, to let my wife know that, yeah, I'm a stupid, insensitive lug, but I get, now, why she's mad. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm going home," Ajay replied as he stood up and grabbed his coat. "I can't let her pay for my office, but maybe I can explain better why not?"

His brother chuckled and leaned back in his chair again. "Good luck with that. Better toss a

gift through the door first.”

\*\*\*\*

As Ajay walked home, he considered that a gift might not be a bad idea. On a cold winter night, hot tea and coffee, with something sweet to go with it, might be a way to smooth the road before he explained to Julia why he was standing his ground.

Ajay pulled out his cell to call her, intending to ask her to dress warmly and meet him at the coffee shop. He wasn't prepared for a woman to run full tilt into his arm just as the call connected. She stumbled and the phone went flying, bouncing into the street as Ajay caught at the woman and tried to keep them both from falling onto the snow covered sidewalk.

As Julia's voice said, "Hello, Jay, is that you?" the tires of a passing delivery truck crushed the cell phone into the pavement.

Ajay was expecting an apology, or even a thank you, as he righted them. Instead, the woman pushed him away from her forcefully, look fearfully behind her, and tried to hurry past him as if he were nothing more than a momentary roadblock.

A petite blonde in high heels, the woman was wearing expensive clothes and looked barely in her twenties. She seemed overwhelmed by the city itself, the old buildings, the people rushing by, and the traffic almost bumper to bumper as the cars negotiated the salted roads and the slush of melting snow. She begged questions with every step, trailing an air of mystery like a lure. It was that mystery, more than Ajay's protective tendencies that sent him hurrying after her.

"Is something wrong?" Ajay asked as he caught up to the woman. "Is someone bothering you?"

The woman stopped and gave Ajay's size and strength a wide eyed look. Her expression quickly turned calculating, as she grabbed onto Ajay's black coat and pulled him close. "Maybe you can help me, Boy Scout," she told him. She searched through her purse, produced a fifty dollar bill, and slapped it into his hand. "I'll give you a hundred more if you play my bodyguard until I make it

to where I'm going."

"That's not necessary," Ajay said as he tried to hand the money back.

She gave him a disgusted roll of her eyes. "I broke your cell and I need you to protect me from the guys following me. That's worth a hundred and fifty dollars."

"More than that," Ajay complained, thinking about the cost of the lost cell phone alone, but then shook his head as he tried to hand the bill back to her again. "We should go where there's a phone and call the police."

She angrily snatched the bill out of Ajay's hand and jammed it back into her purse. "Look, I don't need you if you're going to make even more trouble for me, Boy Scout. Get lost."

She began walking quickly again, her heels clicking on the pavement. Ajay looked back the way she had come. He couldn't see anyone out of the ordinary. Still, she seemed convinced she was being followed. He hurried to catch up to her, again.

"All right, I'll take you where you need to go."

She smiled at him, not slowing her stride. "You really are a boy scout."

It wasn't a grateful smile, but a smile someone gave when they couldn't believe the scope of the stupidity of someone else. It put Ajay on edge as he wondered exactly what she was running from and what sort of trouble he might be getting himself into "How far?" he asked.

"Five blocks," she replied, in a way that dared him to take her that far.

"It might be safer to take a cab," he suggested, trying again for reason.

"You would think that," she sneered.

"Why wouldn't it be safe?" Ajay wondered.

"They'll still follow me," she replied, as if he were now worse than stupid. "They're in a dark blue car. We have to try and lose them."

Ajay made a motion, as if he were adjusting his coat, and shot a look behind them. Ajay saw it then, a dark blue car staying behind traffic and clearly not in any hurry. He counted three people inside before turning back to the woman and asking, "Do I get to know where we are going?"

She considered for a long moment and then replied, "Trimble."

It was a street filled with government and office buildings just outside of his community. Ajay

checked the time. "Nothing will be open this time of day."

"Nothing needs to be open, boy scout," she replied. "I just need to get there. After that, you get lost and forget you ever saw me. Got that?"

"Are you meeting someone?"

"None of your business," she snapped back angrily. "I'm not paying you to be nosy."

"You didn't pay me," Ajay reminded her.

She snorted and rolled her eyes, "Details."

"This way." Ajay directed her into an ally. She balked, wary. "This is where I live," he reassured her. "I know all the ins and outs."

"I suppose I don't have much choice," she decided, her tone exasperated. Ajay followed her as she slipped between two stinking dumpsters, her expression one of disgust.

"You didn't have anyone you could call for help?" Ajay wondered, every sense alert for trouble ahead and behind them.

"Not anyone who would put their necks out for me by coming down here," she replied sourly as she gingerly stepped over garbage. "I did good only to have to go as far as Trimble."

"I wish you would explain what that means," Ajay complained as he moved ahead of her to kick aside broken, wooden crates. "I'd like to know what sort of danger you think we might be facing."

"Me, they might want alive for a little while at least," she told him bluntly. "You, they'll probably kill out right."

She waited, probably expecting Ajay to protest and leave her. Instead, Ajay admitted, "I'm a detective. I used to be with the police force."

He saw her stiffen. She said suspiciously, "Used to be?"

"I have a private business now."

She didn't say anything until he opened a metal door and motioned her into the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant. The smell of cooking food rolled over them along with the heat from the kitchen. Five cooks, working furiously with large woks, hardly spared them more than a curious look.

"Where are we going?" she asked nervously as Ajay opened another door and took a narrow

set of stairs downward.

“These old buildings used to be secret gambling houses and speakeasies,” he explained as he motioned to a broken step to warn her to watch her footing, “They’re connected through their basements.”

Her heels clicked on rough concrete as she followed him into a store room with a low ceiling. Her well-manicured hands were raised as if she expected to fend off spiders, or cobwebs at the very least.

“How did you find out about them?” the woman wondered and her voice had an odd tone Ajay couldn’t decipher. Perhaps it was only an increase in her understandable wariness?

“I’ve been eating at Mr. Yao’s restaurant since I was very young. His son, Ming, is a good friend of mine,” Ajay explained, trying to reassure her of his good intentions as he stopped before a metal door. “Ming told me all about the secret passageway. He said it was haunted and that the bones of dead gangsters were cemented into the walls.”

Ajay pulled at the rusty door to get it open. It gave with a creak of hinges. Fumbling inside for the old light switch, Ajay flicked it on. A series of bare, hanging bulbs came on, revealing a long corridor of ancient brickwork. Dark gaps showed where some of the lights weren’t working. “Of course,” Ajay continued, as he grimaced at the stale, cold air, “I had to explore every inch of the place to find out if it was true.”

“Of course,” the woman replied dryly, but her eyes were wide with apprehension as she followed Ajay into the narrow passage way.

Either she was afraid of possible ghosts, Ajay thought sympathetically, or she was regretting her choice to follow a stranger into a place where he could easily do as he pleased to her.

“May I ask a favor?”

“I knew it! Forget it, Boy Scout!” the woman snarled, backing up and holding her hands out warningly towards him. “I don’t put out that easy and this sure as hell isn’t the place!”

Ajay quickly tried to reassure her, both their voices echoing down the hallway as he said loudly over her shriller voice, “I didn’t mean anything like that!”

She was panting with fear and anger. It took her a moment to calm herself enough to ask



roughly, "Then what do you want?"

"I was calling someone when you bumped into me," Ajay explained. "This may take some time. She's going to be worried."

"Oh." Embarrassed, the woman dug into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She handed it to Ajay with a tentative movement, as if she was afraid he might try to grab her.

The woman's phone smelled like powder and perfume. It made Ajay feel self-conscious as he waited for Julia to answer.

"Jay?!" Julia's voice shouted furiously over the sounds of street traffic, "This had better be you!"

"It's me," Ajay replied soothingly. "I'm sorry. My phone had an accident."

"Why didn't you come home? I was worried sick when your phone cut off!" Julia complained. "I've been out here, on the street, asking everyone if they've seen you."

A gruff voice that sounded like his friend Mike interjected, "You should be ashamed, Jay, making her get that upset. If I were Julia I'd—"

"Jay's brawn no brains, I always said," the distinctive voice of Mr. Harris, the hot dog vendor, interrupted.

"That's no way to treat your wife, Jay," Mike admonished.

"Not wife, idiot," Mr. Harris corrected irritably, "She's still his girlfriend."

"She's not even his fiancé?" Mike wondered. "What's Jay's hold-up? Why hasn't he bought you a ring yet Julia?"

"Julia!" Ajay broke in loudly, mortified and trying to regain the conversation.

"Someone else is going to step in and steal her if Jay doesn't get a ring on her," Mike said.

"You're right about that," Mr. Harris said. "He's lucky someone with her looks even bothers with him."

"Julia!" Ajay shouted desperately, "I need to talk to you."

"What's going on, Jay?" Julia asked, sounding flustered as she tried to talk over the two men still arguing about Jay's lack of sense "Where are you?"

"I'm helping a woman," Ajay replied, relieved to finally get his message out. "I'll probably be

another hour.”

“Helping a woman?” Julia repeated in concern. “What woman?”

“This don’t sound good,” Mike said worriedly.

“Out with another woman? I feel for you, Julia,” Mr. Harris sympathized. “Sometimes, that happens. You have a shouting match and the man takes comfort elsewhere.”

“Wait!” Ajay exclaimed in alarm. “That’s not what’s going on. Julia?”

“If Ajay’s with a woman, we should be calling his brother, the paramedic,” Mike warned jokingly. “You know how Ajay’s a disaster with the ladies.”

Ajay barely heard the last when the cell phone went silent. He stared at the dead battery light blinking at him and tried to convince himself that Julia would take him at his word and wait, calmly, for him to return. Julia would not jump to any wrong conclusions.

“Trouble in paradise?” the woman asked sarcastically. “I guess I don’t have anything to worry about. My boy scout has a girlfriend.”

Ajay handed the phone back to her and said impatiently, “We need to hurry and get you to safety.”

“I’m all for hurrying,” the woman replied angrily as she tossed her phone back into her handbag, “So let’s stop talking and start walking.”

After a few minutes of walking, though, and passing several concrete stairways that led upward, the woman began losing some of her assertiveness and asked nervously, “How much further?”

“This goes the length of the city block.”

“And comes out where?” she wondered.

“After going under the street, it takes a left and comes up under an apartment building,” Ajay replied as he pushed some broken rubble aside with his foot to clear the way for her. He didn’t tell her it was from the ceiling, but he could see her make the connection. “I haven’t been down here in years,” he explained. “It’s become unstable. It wasn’t my intention to put you in any danger.”

“Then get me out of here, fast,” she demanded anxiously. “Where in the apartment building does it come out?”

“In Mr. Casey’s apartment,” Ajay replied, “Inside his hall closet. It’s pretty clever, really. If the gambling houses were ever raided, they had their escape route.”

“This Mr. Casey, he won’t mind us popping out of his closet?”

“He will, but this is an emergency. He’ll understand.”

“This has taken a definite turn for the weird,” she complained, “but if it gets me to where I’m going, in one piece, I’ll be happy.”

“I would really like to know what this is all about. I don’t even know your name.”

“We’ll keep it that way. The less you know the better off I’ll be.”

“I don’t understand,” Ajay said in confusion as he batted aside cobwebs and found the stairs that led upward into Mr. Casey’s closet. He doubted anyone had been that way since he and Ming had played there as children.

She conceded, as she followed him up the stairs, “I can tell you I’m the good guy, if that will make it any easier?”

“I hope that’s true.” Ajay wasn’t going to believe that without any proof.

Ajay knocked hard on the steel door as he began opening it, to warn Mr. Casey of their intrusion.

“Thanks for the save, boy scout,” the woman said behind him, right before Ajay felt something connect hard with his head.

He went down onto his knees and concrete steps scraped them harshly. His head felt disconnected, his vision full of an odd light and his ears filled with a rushing sound. His hands went out to stop himself from going down face first, but he never felt them touch the steps. His head was dealt another blow that knocked him unconscious.

## Chapter Two

"Don't roll over!" Julia warned from the bathroom. "I don't want blood on our new comforter."

Face down on the bed, Ajay wisely kept quiet about his filthy clothes. He could hear Julia rattling things in the bathroom, in a near panic to gather medical supplies and get back to Ajay's side to treat his head wounds.

"I'm all right," Ajay felt the need to say soothingly.

"All right?" Julia retorted as she left the bathroom with hands full of gauze, antiseptic, and bandages. "You are not all right, Jay!"

Julia dumped the supplies onto the bed and sat next to them. She gently examined Ajay's head with her fingers. Her braid snaked down, a golden rope that thumped Ajay solidly between the shoulders as Julia bent very close. Ajay heard the tinkle of her golden earrings and necklaces as she shifted and reached for the antiseptic.

"This is going to sting," Julia warned and began dabbing cream into the wounds.

It did sting and Ajay winced.

"You should be at a hospital," Julia said for the tenth time since Ajay had shown up at their apartment door, bloody, filthy, and apologetic.

"It's a cut and a bump," Ajay replied. "I'm not dizzy, nauseated, or disoriented. I just have a mild headache and a case of acute embarrassment."

"A case of acute stupidity," Julia corrected. She rubbed antiseptic into the cut a little too hard as she angrily demanded, "What were you thinking?"

Ajay hissed in pain. Julia let up instantly on the pressure with a muttered, "Sorry."

"I was thinking that a woman needed help and my protection. I hope you're not saying I should have just walked away?"

"No," Julia replied in an offended tone, "But you should have called the police."

"I did suggest it. She wouldn't allow it."

"I wonder why?" Julia shot back sarcastically. "Could it be she was breaking the law? Maybe she was wanted for committing a crime? From what you've told me, she acted suspiciously from the very beginning. Knocking you out only confirms it."

"Not necessarily," Ajay protested. "You should never jump to conclusions."

"I wasn't." Julia placed gauze on the wound and tried to decide how best to make the bandage cover it. "I was basing my conclusion on the facts."

"Not all the facts. We don't know where she was going or who she was running from. Those are two very necessary facts."

The bandage wouldn't stick to Ajay's hair. Julia began unrolling more gauze. "Sit up. I'll need to wrap this around your head."

Ajay sat up slowly and tried not to show how much the movement hurt his head.

Julia's brisk movements made her many gold bracelets clash together as she wrapped the gauze around Ajay's head. Ajay looked at his lover through the glitter of gold reflecting the lamplight. He saw the stark concern in Julia's blue eyes. After Julia taped the gauze in place, Ajay took the supplies away from her and put them on the bed. He then held Julia's small hands in his much larger ones. They felt cold, trembling almost imperceptibly. Ajay rubbed them gently.

"I'm all right," Ajay insisted in a soothing voice.

Ajay suddenly found his arms full of Julia. Julia clutched at him desperately and said, "You almost gave me a heart attack!" Her voice was muffled against Ajay's shoulder, but Ajay could still hear her real fear.

"I'm sorry," was all that Ajay could think to say. He rubbed Julia's back to try and calm her. He wouldn't lie to Julia and tell her it wouldn't happen again. He was in a business that had the potential for danger. Julia knew that and had accepted it. That acceptance didn't carry with it immunity against emotions, though.

Holding Julia in his arms, warm, soft, and incredibly beautiful, Ajay had to thank God for the previous dangerous case that had brought them together. Without it, a small time detective would never have run into a high class model and fallen in love.

Julia pushed back suddenly, wiped at red eyes, and began gathering up the medical supplies.

“You’re filthy,” she said irritably, obviously wanting to reclaim some dignity and self- possession.  
“Go shower and then –”

Ajay reeled Julia back to him with his gentle hand on Julia’s golden braid and kissed her deeply. When he broke the kiss, he said, softly, “I love you.”

Julia wasn’t very convincing as she tried to hide a smile behind a stern look. “I hope so, after everything you’ve put me through.”

Ajay gave her a pleading expression and Julia relented.

“Love you, too,” Julia told him, “Now, please, get cleaned up.”

As Julia left the bed, taking the medical supplies back to the bathroom, she threw over her shoulder, “And don’t think any of this has made me forget about our argument.”

Ajay winced and stifled a groan as he stood up and began unbuttoning his filthy shirt. “I haven’t forgotten,” he replied sullenly.

“I make a great deal of money modeling,” Julia told him, the sounds of her putting things away coming to Ajay’s ears, “and I’m well off financially, even without that work. We’re a couple. That makes it our money.”

Ajay had already made the mistake of questioning that assumption. Julia had taken that argument to mean Ajay didn’t consider them a couple.

“Julia,” Ajay began carefully when she rejoined him in the bedroom. “I want to tell you something.”

Julia leaned against the doorjamb of the bathroom, arms crossed combatively over her breast.  
“Yes?”

“I love you. I consider us a couple, in every sense.”

“You do?” Julia was startled. She straightening, coming out of her defensive posture, but then she was asking crossly, “Did you tell Mike that before me? Is that why he thought we were married?”

“Yes,” Ajay affirmed, and then, “No. I meant...” as the second part of the question caught up with him. He frowned, refusing to be distracted, and said, “It’s not a question of yours and mine. It’s not a question of trust and sharing. It’s the basic fact that good money shouldn’t be thrown after bad. If my business can’t make it on its own, it doesn’t deserve to make it.”

“But it’s your life!” Julia argued as she came forward to stand face to face with him. “I can’t let you stop doing what you love.”

“I won’t say it won’t be painful for me, but I never ignore the facts, Julia. If I’m not good enough to support a business, then I have no right being in that business.”

“You’re so hard on yourself,” Julia sighed and reached out to caress Ajay’s cheek. “You’ve made me so happy, Jay. It kills me that things aren’t going as well for you.”

Ajay caught Julia’s fingers and pressed them against his face. “Maybe my chosen career isn’t doing so hot, but my personal life is everything I could hope for.”

Julia smiled, leaned in, and kissed him. She pushed away abruptly, then, after giving Ajay’s cheek a hard pat. She said, as she headed for the living room, “If you want your business to be a success, concentrate on it and stop following strange women around town. The police gave you another case and you haven’t even started interviews with witnesses.”

Ajay continued undressing as he replied, sourly, “I would if I had them. No one is talking.”

Ajay suspected it was the reason the case had been dumped into his lap in the first place. A man claimed someone was buying up properties by coercing the owners into the sales. Since neither the police, nor Ajay, had yet to find a witness to those coercions, or a former owner that would confess to that sort of pressure, the case had been stalled.

Motive was also impossible, as of yet, to define. Ajay’s research hadn’t uncovered any advantage to owning properties in that area. Like his well- established section of town, old buildings, and older businesses, had been in place for generations. Low income residents, and a clientele not open to change, wasn’t a good combination for any new business.

No motive, witnesses, or filed complaints of harassment had been documented. Only the determination of the man who had made the charge was keeping the file open at all. Ajay could imagine an overworked police force shoving the case off on him, not as a joke, but to simply get the file out of their way. Let Disaster Kavanagh have it, he could imagine them thinking, he’ll take anything.

At the moment, though, Ajay wasn’t ready to take just anything, especially a dead end case without, as yet, a real crime. While he could be altruistic about most things, the question of whether

or not he was going to get payment for services rendered was an important one now. The police force had alluded to paying Ajay, if he managed to break the case, yet they had seemed unwilling to contract him on paper. Randall Sheffield, the one who had made the charges, had been firm in his belief that it was a police matter. He had been unwilling to pay Ajay to investigate. Continuing the case had not seemed like a good idea, when Ajay was confronting the close of his business.

Ajay showered, keeping his bandage dry, and, while the hot water cascaded over him, he came to a decision. It seemed wrong to go backward after having established his credibility with the police force, but Ajay felt desperate. He would have to take the several small, local jobs that had been left pending and forget about the larger case for now. It didn't feel professional, or a good way to further his career, but there wasn't any choice if he was going to stay in business.

Ajay left the shower and went to the bedroom door as he toweled off, intending to tell Julia about his decision. He wasn't ready for two sets of eyes to stare at him in astonishment.

"My God, Julia!" Jerry exclaimed as his eyes raked appreciatively over Ajay's muscular body still dripping with water. "Now I see why you keep the gorilla around."

Scowling, and acutely embarrassed, Ajay quickly wrapped the towel around his lower half. "I didn't know we had a guest!"

"I hope not," Julia snorted in amusement. "I would hate to think you like showing off in front of my friends."

"I'm not complaining," Jerry chuckled.

They were both standing as if Jerry had just arrived. The thin Asian man was dressed in dark clothing tight enough to make him look even thinner. Ajay remembered his hard right-cross, though, when there had been a misunderstanding. Jerry wasn't as light weight as he appeared.

"Julia tells me I came at a bad time, so I'll make this short." Jerry took a small white card out of his breast pocket. He approached Ajay and handed it to him. Before he let go of the card, though, he looked Ajay over again and smirked.

Ajay snatched the card away, his embarrassment growing, and held his towel tighter around him with one hand. "What's this?"

Jerry shrugged and ran a hand over his slicked back, dark hair, as if he needed to check to



make certain that it was behaving. "They say if you know two people, then you know five, who know ten, who know twenty, and so on. Julia told me about the case you're working on. Well, I know someone who knows someone who might be able to give you some information."

Ajay wasn't certain how he felt about Julia talking about the case to Jerry. That meant she had also been talking about his business and, most likely, their argument. "What does this person know and who are they?" he asked, deciding to put personal feelings aside for the moment.

"I remembered that a friend of mine has a grandfather who owned a store in the area you are investigating. It was a little pharmacy," Jerry explained. "I remembered, because he told me how his grandfather suddenly closed the place without giving any good explanation. The family had been suitably shocked. The business had been in the family for many years. My friend's brother had even been promised ownership once he graduated college. I'm not sure if my friend's grandfather will tell you anything helpful, but Julia told me you were desperate for any information that could help your case."

Ajay couldn't decide if what he was feeling was anger or gratitude. He read the name on the card, Francis Furnier, R.Ph.,C.Ph., and remembered calling him on the phone. The man had been less than helpful. Perhaps, with this new, added information, he could approach the man again at a more personal level?

"Thank you," Ajay said at last.

"You have a great deal of pride," Jerry said with keen insight. "Don't let it keep you from getting what you need."

"I think this will be helpful," Ajay tried again, with more sincerity. "I appreciate your going to the trouble."

"For a friend, it's no trouble at all," Jerry said, waving a hand airily as he walked to the front door. "Julia cares a lot about you, big gorilla. Appreciate that."

"Jerry," Julia warned as she opened the door for the man, but then more softly, "Thanks."

Jerry gave Julia a quick squeeze on one arm and then was gone. Julia closed the door and then leaned against it to look at Ajay warily.

"Angry?"

Ajay put the card on a small table. Taking off the towel, he began drying himself once more. "Discussing a police case isn't wise," Ajay replied. "There is a question of confidentiality."

"Are you angry?" Julia asked again, more strongly.

Ajay approached her, snaked his damp towel around Julia's slim waist, and used it to pull Julia against him. He looked down into Julia's blue eyes. "I'm not used to everyone knowing my business. I'm—"

"Shy," Julia sighed. "You are angry."

"I love you, and I'm grateful that you were able to find information for the case, but please don't talk to your friends about things that are personal to you and me, all right?"

"All right," Julia looked down as if ashamed, but Ajay wasn't fooled for a minute.

"Enjoying the view?" Ajay asked, unable to help a blush.

"Just admiring what's mine," Julia snickered as she smoothed small hands over Ajay's hard abs. "I own a great deal, don't I?"

Ajay felt his body responding, despite his embarrassment. "I'd like to keep that between us as well."

Julia barked laughter and gave Ajay an unexpected push to slip out of his towel. "Stop modeling for my friends, then."

Julia went to make tea and Ajay could only be thankful for small mercies as he went to put on comfortable pants and a tank top. While his lower half was more than willing to pursue Julia further, his head was still pounding from the beating it had taken. It needed more time to recover.

It made him think about their first few days together as a couple. He had wondered how he was going to handle a relationship that didn't end after one night, especially when that one night usually ended in disaster.

Ajay remembered being in bed one evening, propped on pillows, worry gnawing at him that Julia would grow bored with him, would want more attention, sexual and otherwise, than he could give. The nightlight by the bedside had cast shadows and had made the bed seem a stage, waiting for the next act of a play; a play that Ajay hadn't had the script for.

Julia had been wearing a pink, silk pair of shorts and a white silk half top with lace trim. Back

turned to Ajay, she had shown her curves and that tantalizing spot just before the gentle flare of her rounded hips. Her slim fingers had pulled her braid loose and she had placed her earrings and jewelry into a bowl on the dresser, making small tinkling sounds.

Julia had been talking about something mundane, Ajay remembered. He should have been listening, but instead he had struggled with the sudden realization that he was a virgin when it came to a relationship. With the white hot passion of first time sex over, and the days ready to stretch out before them both as a couple, Ajay had been afraid that he wouldn't be enough. His dogged attention to his work, and his lack of tact and attention in earlier, disastrous, relationships, had made failure very likely.

Julia had pulled a fashion magazine from the dresser, though, and had come to bed with it. Climbing on top of the bed, she had draped her body over Ajay's lap, put on her reading glasses, and begun reading. Her golden hair had been spread over her back and her attitude had been comfortable.

The rise of Julia's hips in shorts that had slipped low had been too much of a temptation to ignore. Ajay had taken a big handful of Julia's ass cheek and squeezed. His erection under Julia's warm body must have been obvious to her. Julia had smiled a little, tucked strands of hair behind one ear, but had kept reading.

Emboldened, Ajay had smoothed his hands over Julia's body while Julia had talked about work. She didn't seem to mind when, later, Ajay snagged his notebook from the side table and used Julia's back as a place to open it up and read. While he read, though, his hands had still touched Julia. Sex hadn't been required. It had been enough to enjoy each other's presence. When they had finally grown tired enough to put things away and turn out the light, Ajay had spooned against Julia. Julia had snuggled back into Ajay's big arms and drifted off to sleep. Julia hadn't expected entertainment, or Ajay's undivided attention, Ajay realized. It had been enough to simply be together and to relax and talk about nothing.

They were still learning to be a couple, Ajay thought, smiling still at the pleasant memory. Though things between them could be rocky at times, he was confident enough in their love for one another to know that an argument or a misunderstanding wasn't going to end their relationship. He

wished he could put as much faith into believing his business would succeed.

## Chapter Three

"Your ma worries," Michael Kavanagh said through the window of his cab, pipe jammed between his teeth and brows furrowed. "Don't stop calling just because you aren't all alone anymore, hear me, son?"

Ajay had been walking to his office when he had spotted his father's cab pulled up to the curb. With his father's friend close at hand and people passing by in a steady stream on the sidewalk, Ajay wasn't about to discuss anything personal. "I'll call ma, later," Ajay promised. "Everything's been fine."

Michael Kavanagh raked his unruly, graying red hair with his fingers. He gave Ajay a look with keen eyes that often saw more than Ajay liked. "You're taking foolish risks, aren't you?" he asked worriedly. "Don't you bother trying to tell me you were hit on the head at the gym, like you told Mr. Harris? My sons and daughters rarely take the easy road when it comes to their careers, but a man feels the need to outlive his children."

Mr. Alusius the baker, leaning against the side of the cab while he drank a cup of coffee, nodded a balding head in agreement. He was a heavy set man of strong Greek descent and had a bulbous nose that had earned him the nickname, Potato, from his friends. "That's true," Mr. Alusius intoned, as if he were agreeing to a sermon. "A man likes to see his children have children and grow old themselves."

Ajay sighed inwardly, wishing he hadn't allowed Julia to talk him into wearing the bandage. He had been forced to explain to almost everyone that he met how it had happened. He hadn't wanted to talk about the case, so he had concocted the story about an accident at the gym. He should have known the story would get back to his father. "I am careful," he insisted. "You don't need to worry."

"Jay," his father said, in a tone that implied that his son was being dense. "It's not all about my worrying. You have a responsibility that maybe you're unaware of."

"Responsibility?" Ajay was mystified. He shook his head in the next moment, firming his resolve not to discuss his personal life in the street. "Not here, Da. I'll leave you and Mr. Alusius, so you can

talk. I'll call, later."

"Don't mind me. I didn't have anything important to say to your Da," Mr. Alusius chuckled. He brandished his coffee mug and a bag of baked goods at Ajay. "I was just having a coffee break with him."

"I was on the way to my office," Ajay explained impatiently, "I have a case."

"Don't be disrespectful," Ajay's father warned him. "Mr. Alusius is your namesake, after all."

"And I'm proud of that fact, Jay," Mr. Alusius assured him. "You've been like a son to me, especially since I never had any children of my own."

"Damn shame it is, too," Ajay's father said sympathetically. "You would have been a fine father, Potato. You deserve a family of your own."

"Well, besides, Jay, I do have relatives who've allowed me to play uncle," Alusius said and made a motion with his coffee cup as if he were toasting them. "Davey has been a good partner and friend these forty years as well. I couldn't ask for a better man to have at my side."

Ajay's father snagged the bag from Alusius. He dug out several Greek honey cookies and held the bag out to Ajay. "Enjoy and be careful, Jay," he said in a tone that made it a firm, fatherly order.

"Yes, Da," Ajay replied as he took the bag. "Goodbye, Da., Mr. Alusius."

Mr. Alusius put a hand on Ajay's shoulder and gave it a familial squeeze. "Tell your Julia that I'll have fresh lemon poppy buns bright and early tomorrow."

Ajay felt a blush of embarrassment as he nodded. Gripping the bag in one hand, he took Caraway Street towards his office. He could imagine his father and Mr. Potato Alusius continuing their conversation about him, careless about anyone else who overheard. He wasn't ashamed of Julia, or their relationship, but he couldn't easily shake his own desire to remain a private man. It had always been a part of his nature. That wasn't going to change because he was having a relationship with a woman whose body, nude and clothed, graced many public works of art.

Ajay knew he couldn't hope that Mr. Alusius's coffee break wouldn't last long. He and his father could talk for hours. Ajay wondered how his father and Mr. Alusius managed to run their businesses in such a fashion and that made Ajay think of Mr. Alusius's partner. He wondered what Davey thought of Mr. Alusius taking off, for hours at a time, and why the man had put up with it for so

many years.

It didn't occur to Ajay, until he was pushing the door to his building open, that there was a very good reason, besides the obvious bond of a business partner and friend, for two men to live together longer than Ajay had been alive, and for a man to put up with that kind of behavior in his partner.

Ajay froze in shock, half in and half out of the door as the sounds of street traffic and the near silence of the inner building struggled for dominance. A blush stung his face and he felt a moment of disorientation, his focus on his own life broadening to encompass this new theory.

"You going in, or what?" a woman's voice mocked him impatiently.

Ajay looked over his shoulder and then twisted to look down as he realized the speaker was much shorter than he was. Dr. Malevona ducked under his arm and preceded him into the building and up the stairs.

"I didn't know that walking and thinking were that hard for you, Kavanagh," she said loudly.

Ajay stared after her and then came back to himself. He let the door swing closed and started up the stairs himself. He wondered if his father knew about Mr. Alusius, but then reminded himself that a theory was not a fact. It was also none of his business.

"Here!" Ajay called to the retreating doctor. She turned just in time to catch the bag of cookies he tossed towards her. "You might as well take these now. I know you'll steal them, later."

She looked inside the bag and smiled. "Appropriated for charity purposes, Kavanagh," she corrected him. "At least that's what I say on my government forms."

She bit into a cookie, made appreciative noises, and went on her way.

Ajay unlocked his office door and went inside. Like everything else in his life, his office had changed. The plants in the windows weren't dead, the glass was clean, and the chairs had been replaced with ones that didn't need tape to hold them together. The walls were also no longer bare. Clippings from his last case, his police academy diploma, and his new letter of commendation were framed and on display. If they didn't look into the almost empty file cabinet, clients might think he was a respectable detective, Ajay thought sourly.

Katie popped into the office with a glass of water. "Deal's a deal," she grumbled as she watered the plants. "You donate, I keep the greenery alive."

"Thanks," Ajay said distractedly as he sat down.

"What's with you?" Katie demanded. "You're acting dumber than usual today. Maybe whatever is wrong with your head needs some checking out?"

"I'm fine," Ajay was quick to reply as he sat down behind his desk.

Katie scowled. "I am a doctor, remember? I'll take a quick look."

"You are a women's doctor," Ajay countered as he took his notepad from his coat pocket and began flipping through the pages.

"That does actually require the same diplomas as checking a bump on your head, Kavanagh," Katie retorted.

"I'm fine," Ajay repeated more firmly as he took out his cell phone. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a case."

Ajay made the call, expecting Katie to leave. As the call connected, he wasn't prepared for her to put down her glass and reach out to take off his bandage.

"Hello?" It was a woman's voice that answered as Ajay scowled and tried to duck away from the doctor. She scowled back and refused to stop.

"Hello?" the voice repeated.

"Hello, my name is Detective Ajay Kavanagh," Ajay replied as he reached around Katie to grab his notes and pencil. "May I speak with Francis Furnier?"

With his cell cradled between his shoulder and his ear, and his hands full, Ajay couldn't defend himself when Katie began examining his head wound.

"One moment, please," the woman on the phone told him. He heard her speaking to someone.

Katie re-wrapped the injury and whispered, "Just as I thought. Your head is made out of rocks. You're fine. Call me if you start having a lot of headaches, dizziness, or nausea."

"Not a chance," Ajay growled.

"Then I'll notify your next of kin when you die. Head injuries are not something you fool around with," Katie shot back as she waved over her shoulder and left his office.

"Detective Kavanagh?" an elderly man said.

Ajay brought his attention sharply back to the phone. "Mr. Furnier?"



"I thought I made it clear I didn't have anything to tell you about your case," the man reminded him irritably.

"I spoke with a mutual acquaintance, Mr. Furnier," Ajay replied. "Jerry Chin. He suspected there were unusual circumstances concerning the closing of your pharmacy."

"He doesn't have any right telling strangers my business!" the man fumed. "I sold my pharmacy, Detective Kavanagh. That's legal. There isn't a crime for you to investigate."

Ajay countered, "That is what I'm trying to discover. Your business wasn't the only one bought and closed down. In fact, all but one has been closed and gutted."

"Fishburn's delicatessen," Furnier supplied and his voice sounded tense. "He's a stubborn old man. He'll sell, just as we did, though. They'll give him a price he won't be able to refuse."

"Kraton Development was the company buying the stores?"

"That's the name that was on the check, yes," Furnier replied and sounded even more defensive.

"I did a search on that company and didn't find a record of it before these transactions."

"The check was good," Furnier snapped. "That's all that matters to me."

"More than your pharmacy? It was in your family a long time, Mr. Furnier."

"Times are hard, Detective Kavanagh," Furnier retorted.

"Your pharmacy survived the depression," Ajay pointed out. "I don't think times are as hard as that."

"I won't tell you anything more, Detective," Furnier replied angrily. "Talk to Fishburn, if you want answers. He doesn't have anything to lose."

"And you do?" Ajay countered. "If someone has been threatening you or your family, Mr. Furnier, I can help you."

"I watch enough detective shows," Furnier retorted. "No proof. No crime. No justice. Everything was legal."

"Paperwork doesn't necessarily make it legal," Ajay argued. "If you were coerced into signing—"

"Enough!" Furnier fumed, "I won't discuss this any further. My business is gone, Detective Kavanagh. It's been gutted completely. No matter what your investigation finds, that won't change."

The phone disconnected and Ajay sighed as he made notes. Ajay had already spoken to Mr.

Fishburn. The man hadn't made any accusations about anyone pressuring him to sell his business. In fact, he had sounded rather upbeat and eager for new customers. He had offered Ajay lunch at a discount, assuring Ajay he made the best hoagies in the city.

It was possible his business wasn't required, for whatever project Kraton Development was planning, even though it was the last business on that side of the street. To discover if that was true, though, Ajay needed more information. A trip to Kraton Development's offices definitely needed to be on his schedule, along with a trip to view city records. If Kraton was planning any rebuilding, there would be plans and permits filed already.

It was unfortunate that Sheffield, the man who had filed the complaint with the police department, hadn't been more than a concerned citizen, angry that his neighborhood was being drastically changed. Ajay could sympathize with that anger. Ajay couldn't imagine his own neighborhood without the small shops and old homes that had been fixtures there for generations. To have an entire city street gutted and left as blighted, empty shells, would have seemed like a nightmare.

Ajay almost rubbed at his forehead, but then remembered the bandage and didn't. He was doing it again, he thought, being impractical by letting his personal feelings control his decisions. Hadn't he decided to shelve the case and take ones that had a better chance of paying him? Speaking with Furnier hadn't uncovered any new clues, though it had convinced Ajay that a crime was being committed. That case was going to require long research to uncover enough clues to even continue it. The elusive question of who was going to pay him, even if the case was solved, made discontinuing the case the only sane course of action.

Furnier had proven a dead end. Time to turn his thoughts to other cases.

Ajay flipped through his notes and made a call. He hated how something inside of him cringed, and felt smaller, at the very idea of a Kavanagh admitting defeat.

When Mr. Karsten answered, Ajay clamped down on his emotions and was able to ask, in a professional manner, "Mr. Karsten, this is Detective Kavanagh. I'm ready to begin your case. If you could give me a description of your antique car, make and model, how long it's been missing, plate numbers, registration—"

"I didn't put plates on it. It never left the garage," Mr. Karsten snapped back. "Had it for twenty-five years. Restored it with my own two hands. Polished it every other weekend. It's an inside job, Detective. Check out that Williams boy. He was always asking questions about Sally."

"Sally?" Ajay asked as he scribbled notes.

"Sally Rose," Mr. Karsten told him impatiently. "That's what I named her. Sweetest 1930 Packard convertible I ever laid eyes on. Irish green with a cream colored top. The police took lots of notes and I never heard from them again. When I called, they said Sally was probably painted and sold off already. Without any paperwork, or registration, I couldn't even prove that she was mine if they did find her. I carved my name under her running board, though, Detective, and the date I finished restoring her. She's all mine and I want her back."

"Give me the full names and addresses of anyone who expressed an interest in your car, or that may have seen hanging around it, Mr. Karsten."

"Already made a list. Come out to my place and I'll give you all I have on them and Sally," Karsten told him eagerly. "I've heard from neighbors that Kavanagh's boy gets results. I hope they're right."

Those words, in light of Ajay's recent failure, stung like salt in an open wound.

"Detective? Still there?" Mr. Karsten wondered.

"Yes, Mr. Karsten. Just making notes," Ajay lied, "What time should I come to your place to collect your information and a retainer?"

"Tonight is good. After the news is over. Eight p.m."

"I'll be there."

Ajay ended the call, finished his notes, and made up a folder for the case. He slipped it into his still almost empty file drawer. A retainer would help pay the rent on his business. The landlord might settle for half now and half later, but Ajay would have to take another case if the search for Karsten's Packard dragged on too long.

Was he already preparing for another failure? He remembered his father's saying, Give up once and it will become a habit. He couldn't keep his focus if he worked on multiple cases and his confidence had to be unshakable. Start doubting himself and he would start questioning any

evidence he gathered.

Tucking pencil and notepad into his coat breast pocket, Ajay decided he wasn't going to get answers in an office that only reminded him of his lack of finances and looming difficulties. Besides, there was still only one person in his life who had the ability to find a green Packard in a city wide haystack.

\*\*\*\*

"Thought you'd forgotten all about me," Wezel grumbled as he left Ajay in his open doorway and walked back to his impressive stack of computers. "And what the hell happened to your head?"

"It's nothing."

"Nothing? Wezel repeated sarcastically as Ajay closed the door and followed him. "You're gone for a week and then show up with a hole in your head. I guess I'm not entitled to explanations?"

Ajay unbuttoned his coat and loosened his scarf. "It's been less than a week," he pointed out.

"Without a call, or anything," Wezel complained as he sat down in front of his computers. "I did risk my life for you, cousin. I think I'm owed more."

"You weren't in any danger," Ajay argued as he pulled out his notes and sat in another chair.

"He had a gun," Wezel countered as he took the notes and looked them over.

"We were on a city street," Ajay reminded him. "He wasn't a stupid man."

"Not from where I was standing," Wezel shot back as he began punching keys on his computer. "He looked stupid and crazy."

"I wouldn't have let anything happen to you."

Wezel looked up from the notes in surprise and asked, with a sudden switching of mental gears, "You're looking for a green Packard? What happened to the businesses that were being gutted?"

"Not enough leads, yet," Ajay replied uncomfortably. "This case is on more solid footing."

"Meaning this client is ready to pay?" Wezel guessed.

Ajay found it hard to answer.

Wezel raised a red eyebrow. "This isn't like you, Jay. It's too damned practical. What happened

to Detective Kavanagh, the biggest sucker for non-paying sob stories?"

Ajay's jaw worked as he tried to find words that didn't sound as pathetic as he felt.

Wezel finally showed him mercy and muttered as he brought up city street maps, "This is going to be on your tab, then, I'm guessing?"

"I always pay," Ajay felt the need to remind him, his pride on a cliff edge and needing something to hold onto.

"That's true," Wezel agreed, but then he was looking sideways at Ajay and saying critically, "You look pretty stressed for a man who's getting some on a regular basis, now. If you're having trouble taking care of rich girl—"

"She's a woman," Ajay countered instantly.

"Sounds like she's whipped you into shape already," Wezel snorted.

"And she doesn't need financial help from me," Ajay added angrily.

"Ah, I get it," Wezel replied as he went back to looking at street maps. "That must be hard, seeing her doing so well just by standing in front of someone's camera, or easel, and you struggling to make it doing good in this city."

Ajay glared. "I don't know why I'm the only one who understands my situation. I'm not jealous of Julia's success. "

"Hmmm," Wezel replied, as if he were only half listening. He pointed to a string of warehouses. "Everyone in that area has parking garages," he explained. "You can't hide a high ticket, classic Packard in places like that. Whoever took it needs a storage place where they can hide it until they can repaint it and sell it. Pinkerton's storage is closest to your client's address. If you can get me some names I can see if they own a unit there."

"I'm meeting the client tonight."

Wezel grinned as he changed all of his screens to images of naked women. "Then I'll get back to what I was doing before you interrupted."

Ajay stood and pocketed his notes. "Your grandfather doesn't mind?"

"He's at the senior's day care, uh, club, I mean," Wezel replied. "They get him out of my hair for a few hours and it gives him someone his age to complain to."

"I'll call you later with names." Ajay gave the images of women, in different provocative poses, a sour look. None of them were as beautiful or as alluring as Julia.

"Jay?" Wezel's concerned voice brought him out of his thoughts.

"Yes?"

"You have to know what a single minded, thick individual you can be, right?" Wezel wondered cautiously.

Ajay blinked at him in confusion. "Yes." He was prepared for a well-aimed insult, something that Wezel was an expert at.

"Consider this, okay?" Wezel urged. "Sometimes, a business needs time to get on its feet. There's nothing wrong with taking out a loan to get you to that point. You're chasing after a green Packard when you know you want to investigate people who might have been forced out of their businesses. You have this expression, like someone kicked you in the nuts. It's not going to go away until you give in and do what you do best, which is save the day for those people like some sort of inner city super hero."

"And if I lose Julia's money?" Ajay wondered, tightly. "If I lose everything, what will I say to her? What will I think of myself, then?"

Wezel sighed and rolled his eyes as he turned back to his screens. "You'll say to yourself, I gave it my best and I didn't give up because things looked too tough. As for Julia, I've seen the way she looks at you. She's not giving up on you over money."

Ajay checked his watch and the tight, sick feeling in his gut suddenly went away. "I still have time to go to the business district and check government documents."

"For a green Packard?" Wezel teased.

"For building permits and information on Kraton Development."

"Two cases at once," Wezel mused. "Can you handle that?"

"I don't think the Packard case will take very long," Ajay replied as he headed for the door. He paused on the threshold and said over his shoulder. "Thanks, Weasel."

"I keep telling you not to call me, Weasel!"

Ajay chuckled as he closed the door on Wezel's tirade. He did feel better, as if a weight had

settled more evenly. He could carry it better when he was doing what he thought was right, for himself and for the people who depended on him to think about them and not his bottom line.

## Chapter Four

"I bought pizza, for tonight, since I'll be late," Ajay said as he slid the pizza box onto their kitchen counter. "Don't wait."

"I won't." Julia stood on tiptoe to give Ajay a kiss and then snagged a slice of pizza from the box. With it between her teeth, she whirled away as she slid a black leather coat over her skin tight red shirt and her black leggings that were sheer on the side and embroidered with a white, stylized design that went from hip to ankle. With her bracelets and necklaces making tinkling noises as she moved, she headed for white, stiletto heel boots lying near the couch. After putting them on, she removed the pizza from her mouth and said around a bite, "I've accepted a gig on a night time shoot. Lin Park, the photographer, pays well. He promised to use me on ads for his new exhibit. My face will be on posters all over the city."

"You will be dressed for this?" Ajay wondered suspiciously, remembering Park's love of photographing nudes.

Julia laughed and assured him, "Yes, I'll be dressed, but he did ask me to buzz cut my hair. Is that all right?"

Julia opened the door and Ajay caught her by her gold braid. Julia turned and they ended up tangled together in an embrace. Julia laughed as she staggered. Ajay tried to keep their balance and Julia nearly dropped her pizza slice on Ajay's chest.

"The hair stays," Ajay insisted.

"Only because you like it." Julia looked as if she suddenly remembered something. She pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and slipped into Ajay's pocket. "I almost forgot that your insurance paid for a new phone. Now you don't have to ask me for money for a new one."

Ajay noticed the hint of bitterness in Julia's voice. He caught Julia's chin in his big hand as he steadied them against the door frame. "About that. It's been pointed out to me that I'm being thick headed. I want to—"

A small cough alerted them both. They turned their heads to see Mrs. Flaherty, with her small



terrier in her arms, giving them an outraged look. Tall and thin, her gray hair was pulled back tightly into a bun. She reminded Ajay of an old school teacher. He half expected her to hit his knuckles with a ruler as she said primly, "There is a time and place, Kavanagh! A time and place!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Ajay said quickly, "Sorry, ma'am."

As she humphed! and walked stiffly to her apartment, Ajay tried to untangle them without getting Julia's pizza down the front of his coat. As soon as they were both stable, though, Julia grabbed Ajay's tie and said, "Any time and any place is all right with me, Jay, whatever sourpuss says."

Ajay kissed her deeply and then was empty handed as Julia pulled away. "I'm going to be late for the shoot," Julia told him. "What did you want to say to me?"

Ajay took breath to speak and then realized it would take too long. He smiled and shook his head instead. "Later. I should be home around nine p.m."

"Unless Park gets temperamental, I should be home at the same time," Julia replied.

"Call if you're going to be later than that," they both said at the same time and then laughed.

"I will," Ajay told her.

"So will I," Julia assured him. She started down the hallway, but then turned and motioned to Ajay with her half eaten slice of pizza, "and no following any strange women this time." She took a bite and turned back around to enter the elevator.

Ajay locked their front door with a smile still on his face.

\*\*\*\*

"Missing?" Ajay repeated as the prim woman behind the counter frowned in obvious irritation and embarrassment.

"The records say where the information on those buildings is located, but nothing is there," the woman explained. "Because of their age, and a severe lack of budget, they were never copied to computer files."

“Don’t you keep records of who takes them?” Ajay asked.

“Yes,” she replied, almost snappishly, “but there isn’t a record of anyone taking them.” She calmed herself and then sighed. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but we do have a problem with keeping track of so many old papers. If you could see the state of some of the records rooms, you’d be suitably shocked.”

“All right,” Ajay replied as he made a few notes, “I’ll accept that they are gone, but there must be other maps, other plans for that area? Sewer maintenance or street repair maps, maybe? Survey maps would be especially helpful.”

“I can’t give you access to those without proper authorization,” the woman replied. “You could be a terrorist.”

That one word made many people in the crowded building and permitting office stare at Ajay. Ajay replied calmly, “I have authorization from the police department to pursue my case.”

“Well, that’s not going to be enough, I’m afraid,” she told him. “I need paperwork that states that you have authorization to look at city sewer plans and surveys.”

“I understand. Thank you for your help,” Ajay replied in disappointment. As he left the office, he considered alternatives. It could take weeks to get authorization and it wasn’t information he was certain he needed just yet. He already knew that Kraton Development was a company without a past. Aside from demolition permits filed by companies subcontracted by Kraton, there were no plans or permits filed for new construction. There were also no pending sales of the properties.

The lack of information led Ajay to think of more unlikely reasons for Kraton to want the properties. All of those reasons fell under the category of a long way to go to make a profit. In Ajay’s experience, men were always looking for easier ways to make their money. If they were willing to resort to strong arm tactics to get the owner’s to sell, that potential for profit had to be found, somewhere, on paper or on file in a computer.

Deep in thought, Ajay almost didn’t notice the petite, blonde woman walking quickly along the crowded sidewalk up ahead of him. She was in a business suit and holding a large, flat document case. She didn’t look like the frightened woman that had wanted to pay for his protection. She looked self-assured and in her element as the light changed and she crossed a very busy street.

Ajay hurried to catch up, but the thick crowds hampered him. When he reached the street, traffic was already flowing again and blocking his way. He tried to see where she had gone, but the immense government buildings of glass and concrete, and the thick traffic billowing smoke in the cold air, seemed to have swallowed her whole. There wasn't any sign of her.

Ajay's head throbbed, remembering acutely the blows that had caused his injuries. She could have easily killed him, whether she meant to or not. Why strike down a man willing to help her, though? The answer was pure theory, but it was possible that once she had escaped the people following her, Ajay had become an unwelcome liability, someone who knew where she had gone.

Ajay made notes about her appearance, time of day, and which buildings were in the direction she had gone to investigate later. It was possible she worked in that area, Ajay thought, and a stakeout might result in another meeting. It was something to attempt at a later date, though. He didn't have time for a personal case.

People jostled and swore at Ajay, annoyed that he was being a roadblock. He put away his notepad and walked back towards the bus station as a light snow began to fall. His trip had created more questions than answers.

Information about disappearing documents, pertaining to a questionable project, the names of subcontractors, and the fact that buildings were being left without any clear plans for new construction, had made it worth the trip. While he still didn't have any shop owners willing to step forward and accuse anyone of wrongdoing, Ajay felt that he could, perhaps, find other evidence to make his own case for illegal, or improper, business practices. That might also satisfy the client.

The bus ride downtown became a longer trip than Ajay expected. Snow had begun falling steadily and traffic had slowed to a crawl. When his cell phone rang it was a welcome break in his boredom.

"Detective Ajay Kavanagh, how may I help you?" Ajay answered.

"It's just your mother, Jay," his mother said. "I wanted to make sure you're all right."

There was the sound of utensils, steel on steel, and a rapid clicking that stopped after a moment. They were familiar sounds Ajay had grown up with; his mother cooking dinner and turning the big knobs on the old gas stove.

"I'm fine," Ajay replied as he took out his notes and flipped through them. "What are you having for dinner?"

His mother chuckled and replied, "A man always knows when food is cooking. Beef and barley soup, crusty butter bread, greens, and a cobbler. You know you're always welcome to come and eat with us."

Julia was an abysmal cook and Ajay barely knew his way around a microwave and a frozen dinner. The offer of his mother's home cooking made his mouth water. "Dinner's already made and waiting at my place, ma."

"Pizza, again?" she guessed in disapproval. "You should come and learn proper cooking from me. Your Julia doesn't have much time with her busy schedule, but..." she trailed off, perhaps realizing the criticism that was unspoken in her choice of words. "Jay, I never meant—"

"It's okay, ma," Jay soothed, though it had stung knowing that his mother was that aware of his situation. "I have work now. Two cases, actually. I don't have time for cooking lessons."

He could hear the relief in her voice. "That's wonderful Jay, but you and Julia shouldn't neglect your health. I don't mind feeding two more. You know I always make too much food."

"I love your cooking," Ajay replied with keen regret, "but we both have to learn to be domestic. We'll never do that if you keep feeding us."

She sighed. "I do like the company as well. Everyone's been so busy, especially now that Steven has been running about the city taking art photographs."

Ajay snorted. "He calls them art, I call them pictures of garbage cans, street grates—"

"He says it's all in the lighting and composition," his mother interrupted defensively and then apologized, "I'm sorry, Jay, but we are trying to encourage him, even if we don't understand. It's the first thing he's shown an interest in that could turn into a career."

Having been a recipient of his parent's endless patience and understanding, Ajay was quick to say apologetically, "I'll try to be less critical."

"Thank you, Jay." She paused and then asked worriedly, "These cases of yours? Are they dangerous?"

"Not at all," Ajay assured her automatically, though he knew he couldn't possibly guarantee that.

Reassuring his mother was reflex and Ajay suspected she knew that, but it always gave her an opening to say the words, "Please, be careful, Jay."

"I will, ma." He saw his stop coming up at last. "It's my stop, ma. I have to get back to business."

"This late?" The worry was in her voice again.

"I'm picking up information from a client."

As Ajay stood up and headed for the bus doors his mother said, "You must constantly worry Julia with your odd hours."

It made Ajay smile, remembering Julia's easy acceptance of what his work required him to do and the warm goodbye that was making Ajay eager to finish work and return home again. "She understands. Have to go, ma."

As he stepped down from the bus and navigated the snow covered sidewalk, his mother said, "Julia may understand, but please remember that you have her to think of now. Try not to be so reckless. Goodbye, son."

As Ajay pocketed his phone and huddled deeper into his black coat, he remembered his father saying something similar. Ajay knew that, in past relationships, he had been notorious for his single minded attention to his work. That had changed in his relationship with Julia. Though he couldn't control all aspects of a case, he didn't want Julia to worry. There seemed more to his parents comments than that, though, and Ajay found he didn't understand their deeper meaning.

Focus, Ajay told himself sternly, and put the thoughts out of his head. Trying to understand his parents at the best of times required more attention than he could give just then. He was about to have an interview with his client. It was important he get the answers to all of his questions if he hoped to end the case quickly and satisfactorily.

"I know that look!" Mike called as he passed Ajay and clapped him on the shoulder. A dark haired man with the big body of a fighter, he always had a smile for everyone. "Jay Jay's on a case. Stop by the gym before you go home and we'll do some sets."

"No time," Ajay replied. "Maybe, tomorrow."

"You'll get soft, Kavanagh!" Mike warned as he went on his way.

As Ajay made his way up Devoe Street, he considered the danger of going soft in a different way.

Taking small cases, while helpful to his community, blunted him for really big cases. Finding a green Packard, unless someone had the bad sense to chop it and sell the parts, wasn't going to be difficult. It wasn't going to require using the investigation techniques he enjoyed and that had made him want to be an investigator in the first place. It was yet another reason not to give up on the Kraton investigation.

Ajay found the apartment building. It was one of the newer buildings on the block. Meaning that it was still old, but not so old it didn't possess a working elevator and a car park underneath. Inside, the hallways were freezing cold. Ajay passed several tenants who were heavily bundled in warm clothing as he searched for his client's apartment door.

When Mr. Karsten opened his door with apparent nervousness, Ajay was surprised that the apartment was only a little warmer than the hallway. Mr. Karsten was bundled like his neighbors, a scarf around his neck and old gloves on his hands.

"Right on time, Detective Kavanagh," Mr. Karsten said and moved to let him in as he wondered, "What's with the head bandage? Have you been in a fight?"

"No, it was an accident," Ajay replied as he caught sight of a small woman with curly gray hair peeking out from the kitchen briefly before disappearing.

"My wife. She's shy," Mr. Karsten explained with an irritated, impatient gesture of one hand in her direction. "She's also not sympathetic. She thinks the Packard was too much for me to take care of and she's glad it's gone."

Mr. Karsten plopped down into a green leather recliner near a space heater and tapped at the control on the heater with his cane. He was over-weight, but looked frail despite that. His skin was pale and his eyes were red rimmed, as if he had been sick.

"Trouble with the heat in the building?" Ajay wondered as he followed and stood patiently.

"Damn landlord never fixes anything around here," Mr. Karsten growled. "This is the fourth time it's gone out this month. It's killing my old war wounds."

Ajay looked around the small living room as Mr. Karsten tried to get himself comfortable. There were more pictures of the green Packard than there were of the man's own family and green seemed to be the man's favorite color in furnishings.

"If I could get some details from you and the information you've gathered?" Ajay asked.

"Of course." Mr. Karsten leaned with a groan of aching joints to pull a large envelope from a side table. He handed it to Ajay. "I put in a picture I had of Danny Kiroplois and Eddie Penskie waxing my car for me. They're always working on the car for some pocket change. The car park manager, Ronnie Federbetter, always liked my car. Make sure you check up on all of them. I put all of that, and whatever else I had, in the envelope along with a check. You get the rest when you find my car, detective."

"Yes, sir." Ajay glanced inside the envelope and then tucked it under one arm. "There is the possibility that this is a random theft. I advise you not to accuse anyone until I've gathered the evidence, Mr. Karsten."

"Too late for that," Mr. Karsten grumbled. "I've already had it out with Danny and Eddie. They deny everything, of course, but I'm that sure they're both guilty. Young people don't have any morals, nowadays. They want, they take."

"I must insist you leave the investigation to me," Ajay persisted. "Please don't have any more contact with these people until I give you my findings."

The man waved dismissively at him, but then seemed to have trouble breathing. He snagged an oxygen mask from beside his recliner and made an adjustment on a small tank. He breathed in and out for a few moments before dropping the mask. He said faintly, "Damned emphysema!"

"It's dangerous to have an oxygen tank that close to a space heater," Ajay warned in alarm.

Mr. Karsten scowled and replied sarcastically, "You're full of advice, detective. I don't think I can make a choice between suffocating and freezing to death, can you?"

"Maybe I can take a look at the heating system?" Ajay suggested worriedly.

"A detective and a fix it man?" Mr. Karsten snorted. "Well, if you can fix the commercial boiler downstairs that's a good thing, but I only have enough to pay you to find my Packard."

"I wouldn't charge," Ajay assured him as he took out his notebook.

"Everyone told me what a good man you are," Mr. Karsten said, impressed. "Guess they were right."

"Thank you, Mr. Karsten. Now, please tell me everything you remember near the time of you

Packard's disappearance, no matter how insignificant. It's possible you may have seen, or heard something relevant to the case without realizing it."

"Oh, of course," Mr. Karsten replied excitedly.

Ajay took notes for nearly a half hour while the timid Mrs. Karsten peeked at them from the kitchen now and again. Mr. Karsten had to pause often to get oxygen. Ajay's anxiety about a possible explosion grew with each breath the man took. Finally, the man finished giving his information. Ajay was determined by that time to speak to the landlord about the boiler.

Ajay checked his watch after leaving Mr. Karsten's apartment. It was almost nine p.m. and Julia deserved a call. First, Ajay decided, he would see if anything actually could be accomplished with the boiler. He didn't want to call to say he was going to be late getting home if it turned out he was wrong.

A trip to the landlord's office, and his apartment, were fruitless. Going down to the boiler room, Ajay found him hunkered down with a box of tools and glaring at the machinery. He was African American and very tall. His hunched over figure, a collection of long arms and legs in greasy overalls, was almost comical.

"I'm working on it!" the man yelled without looking at Ajay.

"I'm not a tenant," Ajay informed him as he approached.

The man glared at him, noting his black coat and dress clothes, and then made a disgusted sound. "Are the tenants suing me now?"

"I'm not a lawyer, either."

"Then who the hell are you?" the man snarled. He motioned to Ajay's head injury. "Have you been in a fight, or something?"

"No, sir. My name is Detective Kavanagh," Ajay introduced himself and reached out to shake a large hand. The man shook reluctantly. "Mr. Karsten is my client."

"Green Packard." The man sighed with a roll of his eyes. "That man has accused everyone of taking it, short of Petula's nine month old baby."

"I'm here because Mr. Karsten is using an oxygen tank near a space heater," Ajay explained. "I've been around these large boilers before. I thought that I might help."



The man grunted and looked Ajay over again. "When have you ever worked on a boiler this big Mr. Suit And Tie?"

"I grew up on these old streets," Ajay replied with a smile. "You learn how these old buildings work, eventually."

"Well, I came here from a place that had central heating, not boilers," the landlord admitted. "I'm still learning."

"Do you mind if I take a look?" Ajay asked politely.

The landlord unfolded his great height as he stood up and nodded. "Go ahead. I don't suppose you could do worse."

An hour later Ajay was pulling grease covered arms out of the boiler with the astonished landlord looking on. "You need to replace that part, but its okay for now. Looks like mice have been crawling in there to keep warm and —"

"Pissed all over it?" the landlord guessed in disgust.

"Yes, so you'll need to put down traps as well."

The landlord stuck out his big hand and shook Ajay's hand firmly. "Name's Tyler Drewes. You're okay in my book, Detective." He dug some bills from his overalls and handed them to Ajay.

"That's not necessary," Ajay told him.

The Landlord waved his hands in the air rather than take them back. "I pay a man for good work."

"Thank you," Ajay replied reluctantly and put them into a pocket.

"No, thank you!" Mr. Drewes exclaimed. "Now those old farts will get off of my back."

"A question, if you don't mind?" Ajay said as he prepared to leave.

"Go ahead, detective," Mr. Drewes replied as he began putting his tools away with loud clatters.

"Do you have any idea who might have stolen Mr. Karsten's green Packard?"

"No, but it's for the best," Mr. Drewes replied. "That old man was spending way too much time worrying about the thing. He was out there constantly, making sure everything was perfect on that car. He treated it better than he treated his own kids. You've seen him? Damn man can hardly get around. He needs to take it easy."

"Have you seen Mr. Karsten's children?" Ajay asked.

"Yeah, they come around once in a while," Drewes replied and then looked worried. "Maybe that's none of your business, or mine?"

"I only need you to answer one more question," Ajay persisted. "Have any of them expressed an interest in the Packard?"

"Just to say how much they hate the thing," Drewes replied. "I heard them talking about it one day in the elevator. Pretty bitter couple of young men, seems like, wondering why their Daddy pays more attention to things than his own flesh and blood."

"Thank you," Ajay replied as he scribbled quick notes. "That's helpful information."

"I'm not accusing them of stealing, detective!" Drewes protested.

"I'm a professional," Ajay assured him. "I never accuse anyone until I gather all the facts."

"Okay, well, that's good, then. Thanks again, Detective Kavanagh," Drewes said as he carried his tools to a store room.

Ajay's cell rang as he walked towards the elevator. He sighed when he saw his own home number flash and answered it with, "I'm sorry."

"I still left you some pizza," Julia replied, "but only because I love you. What happened this time?"

As Ajay took the elevator to street level, he replied cautiously, "I interviewed my client, but there was another problem that I felt I should take care of." He looked down at his grease covered hands and his stained sleeves. "I'll need a shower."

"Information," Julia demanded.

"I fixed a boiler," Ajay admitted with a wince, expecting Julia to get upset and to ask a lot more questions.

"It was necessary, of course?" Julia wondered calmly.

"Yes."

"And you're all done?"

"Yes."

"Then hurry home. Tomorrow, I have a shoot where I have to sit on freezing motorcycles in the

snow. I would really like to have a few warm hours with you before bed. I'll be waiting."

Ajay sighed in relief as he pocketed his phone. He had to wonder, though, why Julia hadn't asked more questions. As he buttoned his coat up and left the building, snow beginning to fall in light flakes, he told himself that Julia was probably tired. He couldn't convince himself of that, though. Past experience told him Julia was never too tired to worry, or to berate him if it came to that. Mr. Drewes shouldn't have asked more questions than his lover, Ajay concluded, and that caused him to hurry through the weather and the crowds, wondering if Julia was all right.

By the time he reached their apartment, Ajay was already telling himself he was over reacting, that there were dozens of innocent explanations for Julia to have a shortage of conversation. Julia was going to laugh at him, Ajay thought, as he went through the door, stomped his feet free of snow, and then hung his snow covered coat on a peg by the door.

Julia could take care of herself. Ajay knew that from experience. He also knew Julia was going to be angry if Ajay voiced any concerns that seemed to question that fact. As he finally turned to find Julia, making up his mind to keep quiet, he found her sitting on the couch, stocking feet on the coffee table and a bandaged hand in her lap.

"What happened!" Ajay demanded as he rushed forward.

Julia made a sour expression and stared down at her hand, examining it. "Nothing I couldn't take care of. The motorcycle gloves will cover it up tomorrow."

"That wasn't an answer," Ajay growled as he sat next to Julia on the couch and carefully unwrapped her hand. "Your knuckles," he said with a wince. They were raw, the skin missing in places, "You punched someone?"

Julia sighed and then hedged, "Let's just say that my association as Park's model has ended."

"Then there was a reason he wanted you to model that had nothing to do with photography?" Ajay felt a righteous need to find the man and to pound him like a punching bag.

"No, that was legitimate business," Julia countered as she held her hand out for Ajay to re-wrap the bandage. "Afterward, he made it plain he wanted to make it more personal."

"And he didn't like when you said no?" Ajay guessed.

"He thought my answer was amusing, especially my insistence that I was in a monogamous

relationship with you. He said relationships like that were ridiculous. How were you going to know if I was getting some on the side? I ignored him, of course, but then he tried to stick his hands where they didn't belong."

"He's not going to sue, is he?" Ajay asked worriedly.

"No." Julia studied Ajay's expression and looking puzzled. "I didn't get paid and he has a sore jaw. We're even." After a long moment, she began to add, "I thought you would be..." but then stopped, as if unsure.

Ajay wondered anxiously, "Are you sure you didn't break anything when you hit him?"

"No, just skinned my knuckles," Julia assured him. It was obvious that she couldn't contain her question. She asked, perplexed, "Don't you care?"

Ajay blinked in confusion, "I did just ask if your hand was broken."

"No," Julia said impatiently, "I meant about Park. You don't seem angry or ready to go and take a few punches at him yourself."

Ajay shrugged dismissively, "You've already taken care of the situation. It's natural for me not to like that someone propositioned you, but you're a very beautiful woman. I have to accept that people will be attracted to you."

"Before I met you, I probably would have agreed to his offer," Julia revealed in a way that seemed a challenge. "I wasn't a virgin when we met, not by a long shot."

"Neither was I," Ajay replied with a wry smile. "Those relationships were disasters, though, every one of them."

Julia retorted in frustration, "I just told you I was with a lot of men! Doesn't anything get you excited or angry, Ajay? You're taking everything so calmly; I wonder just how much you really love me?"

Ajay was dumbfounded. Here it was again, his calm detached manner ruining a relationship. He could hear echoes from his past, women all saying the same thing: You don't seem to care. You forget about me. Your work is more important.

Ajay hadn't argued, then, because it had been a relief to end those relationships, to end the sham he had been perpetuating. This relationship was different. He was in love with Julia. Julia mattered

more to him than anything in the world. He wasn't going to let it end over a misunderstanding.

Ajay cupped Julia's cheek and leaned in to kiss her deeply. Julia fought it for a brief moment, not wanting to let go of her anger, but then relaxed and let Ajay deepen the kiss. When he finally broke it, Ajay was leaning close enough to be eye to eye with his lover as he said, "I trust you. Because of that trust, I know I don't need to get excited, or angry, or question your past. What we have is real and it's stronger than anything I have ever felt before." He gently touched Julia's bandaged hand and added, "and I'm long past questioning whether you can take care of yourself, or not."

Julia took a shuddering breath and smiled warmly. "Okay, a hundred points for a really good come back."

Ajay laughed, but then sobered and said, "I have more to say."

"More?" Julia looked nervous. "I don't think you can top that, Kavanagh."

"I think I can," Ajay replied, but found it suddenly harder to bring forth the words than declaring his love and trust had been. This was about his pride and his self-worth in his own eyes, he knew. He had been lectured by his brother, Jerry, and Wezel, that he couldn't continue to think in those terms if he wanted to succeed in his relationship and his business.

Julia's blue eyes were searching his in concern. "You look... constipated," she said nervously. "Maybe we should end on an 'I love you' and forget about whatever this is, for now?"

"No, it needs to be said," Ajay insisted. He took a steadying breath and then simply said it. "I think the business needs a loan until the cases I'm working on are completed. You were right that I shouldn't give up on my dream when I may be close to succeeding."

"Loan? I'm not loaning you any money, Jay."

Ajay felt a painful squeeze of emotion in the vicinity of his heart. "I thought..."

Julia made a disgusted sound as she nudged Ajay's arm until Ajay was tentatively putting it around her. "Idiot! I meant that my money is your money. It won't be a loan. You will not pay me back. If you can't accept that, then everything you have just said didn't have an ounce of truth."

Ajay considered Julia's words, his big arm holding the woman in the curve of his side. "All right," he finally agreed, "but I won't pretend it doesn't still bother me that my business isn't supporting itself."

"I don't expect you to," Julia said softly. "That's who you are."

They were quiet, simply relaxing together as they both thought about what had been said. Finally, Ajay moved his arm and stood up, wanting to get past the awkwardness of having swallowed his pride. "There is still pizza?"

"Yes," Julia replied as she looked up at Ajay and smiled, "Though there's less of it than there was. Fistfights make me hungry."

Ajay laughed as he reached down and pulled Julia to her feet. "Beautiful, strong, and sexy. I'm a lucky man."

"Park said that you were lucky, too," Julia mused as they moved towards the kitchen.

"Then I hate him less for realizing that," Ajay snorted.

## Chapter Five

None of them?"

"All information on the net is suspect, but, as far as I can see, none of those names you gave me have any interest in old cars," Wezel told Ajay. "A call to warehouses in the area also turned up nothing. That's not saying your car might not be there. It could be a warehouse rented, or owned by a friend, a relative, or an associate."

Wezel pointed to a website blog. "Your garage attendant likes to collect Barbie dolls. I don't think a green Packard is on his radar."

Ajay paced Wezel's living room thoughtfully as he looked over his notes. His hand felt his still healing head wounds. The scabs itched. He had left the bandage off, despite Julia's protest. He had grown tired of the constricting gauze.

Wezel's grandfather was making tea in the kitchen, the sound of dishes and the tapping of his walker background noises to young Wezel's sound of tapping keys on his computers. Finally, Wezel grunted, "I'm not finding much on your other two suspects."

Ajay replied absently, "It's likely the car was stolen randomly. I don't think an inside job would have waited so long. The car has been in that parking garage for years."

Wezel shrugged. "If someone needed money, and was given an opportunity to make some, then a green Packard would suddenly become a priority. Until then, it might have just been a worthless old car to everyone, but the old man."

"I'm aware of that," Ajay replied, "There are several other people who have motives for taking the car. Those motives haven't been firmly established, yet, though. I'll need to complete interviews before they become suspects as well."

"So why insist on a random thief theory?" Wezel wanted to know.

"Because, someone could be attempting to sell the Packard while I'm holding those interviews," Ajay explained.

"I'm not looking forward to spending days going through car catalogs, auto auctions, websites,

and newspaper ads," Wezel grumbled. "That takes legwork. You know how I hate walking."

The newsstand is downstairs and then one block over," Ajay pointed out irritably. "That hardly constitutes legwork." He handed Wezel a twenty dollar bill. "Here, partial payment for your legwork."

Wezel made the bill crinkle, as if testing its authenticity, and then smiled. "That's more like it. Hard cash is so much better than an I.O.U."

"You said it," Wezel's grandfather interjected as he suddenly snatched the bill from Wezel. He jammed the bill into his bathrobe pocket and then continued on his way to his bedroom, tea sloshing in its cup as he negotiated the walker.

Wezel stared after him irritably and then leveled a glare at Ajay. "I will be getting paid the rest, soon, I hope?"

"As soon as I get paid," Ajay assured him.

Wezel sighed and put chin on fist. "Eventually, you pay, but it's the eventually I get tired of waiting for."

"I'm glad you understand I'm good for it," Ajay told him as he flipped through his notebook, "because I need information on subcontractor's that have done business with Kraton Development. I also need any information on those buildings, especially plans, past and present. I've been informed that all hard copies have disappeared and that they were never copied to the city's computer system."

"That's weird, don't you think?" Wezel pointed out. "Something shady is going on and records are disappearing that might tell us what that is."

"That's supposition," Ajay warned. "We don't know for a fact that anything is going on that's illegal."

"Yet we're still pursuing the case, even though you are about to go out of business," Wezel pointed out.

"Not anymore," Ajay replied and felt an unpleasant flush of embarrassment.

Wezel raised a red eyebrow. "Not anymore?" he repeated.

Ajay stared down at his notes and found it very hard to admit, "I took your advice. I asked Julia



for a loan.”

Wezel grinned. “Well, well! I’m going to mark this day on my calendar. Hard headed Kavanagh finally takes my advice. So, how did she take it?”

Ajay sighed, closed his notebook, and blushed harder. “Very well.”

Wezel understood and looked uncomfortable, even as he said, “Well, well, swallowing your pride gets you some from the little woman.”

Ajay glared. “Don’t call her that.”

Wezel held up his hands, “Sorry!” he turned to his computers and brought up images of naked women. “I’ll get to work as soon as I erase the images of you having sex, even with Julia. I’ll call if I find something important.”

Ajay looked at the numerous images of naked women and had a sudden image of what Wezel might be doing with them. He replied, “I think I can understand the sentiment.”

Wezel threw a glare over his shoulder and then laughed. “Later, Kavanagh.”

Ajay was glad to leave. He glanced down the hallway as he waited for the elevator and saw the door of his old apartment. Someone had decorated it with a small Christmas wreath, the first sign that he had seen of the impending Christmas season.

The thought of someone else living in his old home felt strange, but not in a bad way, Ajay decided. That door led to his old life; a work consumed, lonely existence, full of the frustration of trying to make a career, while trying to understand himself. He didn’t have an ounce of longing for that old life, not when he remembered Julia’s warm, welcoming arms last night, and the heights of passion he had found sinking into her wonderful...

Ajay buttoned his coat as he went into the elevator, embarrassed by his body’s quick response. As the elevator went down and he regained some control, he had to smile. His personal life was right where he wanted it to be. It seemed almost wrong to want more than that, but he couldn’t help a little prayer of forgiveness anyway as he continued to hope for success in his business as well.

It was good not to have people stare while walking through the falling snow to catch a bus. Ajay was a big man and that made him imposing as he moved through the crowds, but that sort of interest was a lot easier to take than the kind his white bandage had attracted. He had grown tired of

addressing the topic with everyone who passed by him who wanted to know about the injury. It hadn't helped when most of them had laughed and said you're always getting into trouble. Ajay prided himself on being meticulous and thorough during his cases. Being accused of recklessness was the same, he thought, as being accused of not following the standards he had set for himself.

The name Fair Street made the sight of the gutted buildings that much more tragic. As Ajay stepped off of the bus, he couldn't help a tightness in his gut; a twisted mixture of depression, disgust, and a strong empathy for the people who lived in that neighborhood.

One side of the street was still intact. It was an old neighborhood with old businesses and interesting homes and apartment buildings. They created a comfortable feel of timelessness which made the sight of the long street of pane-less windows, stripped paint, and torn off facades more shocking.

Ajay walked down the sidewalk making notes. He was respectful of the keep out signs posted on every gutted building. He was also wary of the men who seemed to hang about with a purpose, their shirts identifying them as Kraton employees. They watched him as he passed them by. One of them pulled out a cell phone and made a call. Ajay couldn't assume the call was about him, but the way the man looked at him intently as he talked on his cell, gave the theory solid footing.

As Ajay ended at the untouched deli at the corner, he turned and looked down the street again. He was still being watched by men who didn't seem to have any other purpose except to guard the bones of what they had ordered demolished. Ajay had gleaned a reason for that nervousness, though. Someone had used spray paint to write on the keep out signs slogans that were definitely threatening to Kraton. Stop the blight, had been the tamest slogan. Put Kraton out of business! was more pointed.

The lack of real estate signs, permits for anything other than demolition, or other construction crews working in the area, confirmed what Ajay already knew from the records he had been able to access. Kraton didn't have any plans, yet, for their newly acquired properties.

"At least they stopped with the jackhammers," a man in an apron said to Ajay. He was almost bald, with prominent eyebrows that gave him a permanently concerned expression. He adjusted a placard announcing the hours of his deli and a few specials and then began to go back into the deli.

"Breaking up the flooring?" Ajay guessed as he followed the man inside, a bell on the door

ringing loudly.

“Breaking up the basements, I think,” the man replied as he went behind a glass counter full of deli items and began cleaning his hands in a sink. “They made the ground shake so much it gave everyone headaches for a week.”

The man finished cleaning his hands and put on plastic gloves. “What can I get for you? The provolone is to die for and I made some stuffed grape leaves this morning that are one step from heaven.”

Ajay found a smile even as he pretended to look over the food, “I’m not sure...”

“Take your time,” the man insisted as he began making sandwiches. “I have to get these ready for the lunch crowd. You might want one. I make the best hoagies in the city.”

“Has business been off because of the construction?” Ajay wondered as he tried a sample of meat from a tray on top of the counter.

“Was, but they stopped doing anything a week ago, like I said.”

“A pound of the pesto ravioli,” Ajay finally decided.

The man turned from his sandwiches to put them into a container. “Good choice. You might want some thin sliced pork roast and some good bruschetta, Detective Kavanagh, to round out your meal.”

Ajay tensed and then faced Mr. Fishburn squarely, “I apologize.”

Mr. Fishburn grunted as he packaged the suggested food, as if Ajay had already agreed to them. “You haven’t asked anything personal, so I can’t say you’re doing anything underhanded. I was told to watch out for you, though. They’ll want to know what you were doing here.”

“Is that dangerous for you?” Ajay wondered in concern.

Mr. Fishburn didn’t reply to that except to say, “I can handle myself. I made it through a war, after all.” He rang the sale up on the register. “That’ll be \$18.95.”

Ajay dug for money and put bills on the counter top. “I won’t ask anything personal,” he promised, “but if you could tell me more about what Kraton Development’s plans are for those buildings, it would help my investigation.”

Fishburn’s eyebrows went up a little further. “I wish I knew. They didn’t need my store for it and

that's all that I can tell you. People talk around here. We're a close community. No one's heard anything and that's strange, don't you think?"

"Yes, it is strange that so much could happen here, in such a short time, and that none of the workers on the project would say anything about it," Ajay agreed.

Fishburn nodded firmly as he gave Ajay his change and put his purchases in reach. "The demolition workers came into the area, worked night and day, and left without anyone else coming to do anything else. Those guys watching the place showed next. They come in, buy their food, and then go back and just... stand there. Even at night you can see their flashlights."

"Inside the building, or outside?" Ajay wondered.

"Inside," Fishburn replied nervously. "That's all I'm going to say, all right? My neighbors, the ones who sold, think I was in on everything because my business wasn't bothered with. Do you know what it's like; having people you've known your entire life suddenly avoid you? It's hard to live with, detective. I'm not going to make it any worse. If they won't tell you anything, there's a reason. I'm honoring their decision, all right?" He gestured to the food in Ajay's hands, "That's the best there is, and there's enough to share. Be a good boy and go on a date. Leave things like this alone. It could be dangerous for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Fishburn," Ajay replied, "but I think I'll look around the neighborhood a little longer."

Fishburn sighed and turned back to making his sandwiches, "It's done and over, detective. Look all you want, but it won't bring the neighborhood back."

But, maybe, he could make someone responsible for wounding it, Ajay thought, as he left the deli and walked back down the row of gutted buildings. He looked as deeply inside of each empty storefront as he could manage. Inner doors were gone, and some work lights had been strung from ceilings, but none of them were on. Shadows ruled and Ajay couldn't make out enough because of them to even guess at what he was looking at.

"This is private property," one of the men guarding the place warned.

Ajay blinked at him, as if he were confused by being confronted. "The sidewalk is public," he replied. "I don't have any intention of entering the buildings. I was just curious."

“Fishburn didn’t satisfy your curiosity, did he?” the man wondered, hard eyes looking down the street.

“The man at the deli?” Ajay hedged. “No, he couldn’t answer any of my questions.”

“Questions?” the man repeated.

“About what is going to be built here, to replace these buildings,” Ajay replied. “No one seems to know.”

“I’m security, not an architect,” the man growled.

“Do you have the name of the architect that Kraton Development might have hired for the construction?”

The man tapped his name badge and repeated, “Security. You want info, call Kraton.”

“I think I will, thank you,” Ajay replied and began to walk back to the bus stop.

One of the other security guards snickered and said, “Fat lot of good that will do him. You know Kraton doesn’t have any damned architects on this thing.”

“Shut up!” the first man snarled. “You’re not paid to talk.”

“Whatever.”

Ajay made notes and then read over them as he reached the bus stop and waited. He had to admit that a motive still wasn’t revealing itself. The reason for the project was key. He hadn’t considered that it would be the hardest thing to find out about the case. He had hoped to have more information to formulate pertinent questions when he made his appointment with Kraton, but he had to settle for what amounted to a fishing expedition instead.

Ajay slipped his food into an overlarge coat pocket, trusting the cold weather to keep it from spoiling. The packages were already getting frozen. Putting it in an outside pocket kept it from feeling like ice against his side as he boarded the bus and headed for the warehouse district.

Even as the bus headed back to more familiar parts of the city, Ajay couldn’t stop seeing those blighted buildings in his mind’s eye. Mr. Fishburn believed that nothing more could be done, so why worry about why it had been done? With that attitude, though, Ajay could see the blight crossing the street and destroying the rest of the community like a plague. If the reason for the first demolition wasn’t known, than how could anyone believe that Kraton was finished?

When Ajay stepped off of the bus, after checking for its return time, he was disheartened to realize he would be there for at least an hour. The block of warehouses, huddled in the shadow of an old brick factory, with their rusted tin roofs, and overlarge doors, didn't give Ajay the impression that it would take that much time to look through them.

A skinny, black cat slunk by, growling, as it slipped between buildings and disappeared into brown, over grown weeds. A train track led past the largest warehouse and men were setting up cargo to load. The other warehouses weren't so obviously occupied. Most of them were locked up buildings used for storage.

Ajay went to the men loading cargo. They looked him over warily and one said to a burly worker, jokingly, "Kirloff, looks like the cops finally found you."

That man glared and then said to Ajay gruffly, "What can we do for you? Lost?"

"I was hoping for some information," Ajay replied and held out a hand to shake. The man didn't take it. Ajay let his hand drop. "I'm Detective Kavanagh."

"I can spot them every time," the first man snickered. "A cop, no matter what he's wearing, always looks like one anyway."

Ajay let the comment go and stayed professional, still addressing Kirloff. "I'm looking for a green Packard. Have you seen any activity that might lead you to believe that someone is storing a car in one of these buildings?"

"A guy down four buildings rebuilds motorcycles," Kirloff replied. "Everyone else just stores their crap here." He shrugged and turned back to his work. "Who the hell would want a green Packard anyway?"

The other men snickered and made crude comments, suggesting that a man who wanted a green Packard probably had questionable sexual preferences as well. Ajay coolly thanked them and began to walk away.

One man called after him. "Watch it around here. Some of the unlocked warehouses get used by gangs and homeless people at night. They might not like you snooping around their digs."

"Digs?" one of the men repeated in disgust. "Who the hell says digs anymore?"

Ajay ignored the following insults and concentrated on the other warehouses. A few had locks

that had rusted in an open position. They were empty, except for some signs that people had been squatting there. The cracked, stained floors and high ceilings made them echo with nearby street noises. Ajay's shoes made loud sounds as he examined their floors for signs of new oil, paint, or refuse from someone taking apart a car.

Finding nothing, Ajay moved to the locked warehouses. Peering through dirty windows gave him a view of stacked equipment and boxes. The man who was rebuilding motorcycles had an alarm system on the door and windows and a guard dog that barked from inside when he heard Ajay.

A tumbled fall of concrete blocks and a rusted trailer hitch, allowed Ajay to get some height, so that he could see through a larger window without touching it and setting off the alarm. The snow, and a rising, brisk wind made footing uncertain. Ajay held out his hands for balance, his coat flapping against him, as he tried to see if there was anything other than motorcycles in the warehouse.

Ajay started hopefully when he saw the outline of a car under a tarp, but then he sighed, quickly dismissing the outline as belonging to a very small sports car. That's when the pipe hit him in the side.

"Fucking bums!" a harsh voice snarled as Ajay tumbled off of the blocks and hit the asphalt ground hard. "I'm calling the cops. Don't fucking move!"

Ajay hunched on the ground, one arm raised to fend off the rusted pipe that the big man was threatening to hit him with once more. The air had been knocked out of him by a bad landing. He gasped, trying to stop the man who had yanked out a cell phone and had started to call the police.

Ajay fumbled for his wallet and flipped to his business card. "D-Detective Ka-Kava-agh," he choked out.

The man froze, with his phone to his ear, as he studied the card in Ajay's shaking hand. He then closed the phone with a snap and asked, almost fearfully, "Did I hurt you?" and then in a panicked rush, "How the hell can I tell who you are! My place has been broken into twice! You can't blame me."

Ajay managed to sit up, one hand on his side. He felt the frozen deli food in his pocket and realized it had taken the brunt of the blow. It had saved him from broken ribs, if not from a bad

bruising.

"I-I'm okay," Ajay managed, took several deep breaths, and then said, more calmly. "I understand you're upset about the break-ins, but you can't become a vigilante. Please call the police next time."

"Uh, I will," the man replied, but didn't sound convincing. His anger seemed to turn to irritation as he asked, "What were you doing looking into my building anyway?"

"I'm investigating a car theft," Ajay replied as he slowly stood up. The man backed up, still holding the pipe in one hand and his cell phone in the other, as if he still didn't completely trust Ajay's credentials.

"Good luck," the man said sarcastically. "I had some classics stolen and I don't have a clue who took them."

Ajay nodded in sympathy, "I'm looking for a green Packard, but, if it was stolen to resell, even as parts, I doubt it's still green. I was hoping to find signs of a chop shop, or even an amateur attempt to change the car."

The man finally tossed the pipe aside with a loud rattle and pocketed his cell. "First thing I did, when I found my bikes stolen, was check out every warehouse in this place and rough up every bum and drug addict. My bikes aren't here and neither is your Packard."

"Mr...?"

"David Smalley," the man told him uncertainly. "Look, if you're going to press charges...?"

Ajay checked his side again. "I'm all right," he assured the man. "As long as this isn't behavior that will have a repeat, Mr. Smalley, I'll let it drop. I would like you to call me, though, if you do remember any activity out of the ordinary here, or see any new activity that might have a bearing on my case."

Smalley took Ajay's business card. "All right," he said. "Count on it. I have just as much stake as you in finding these thieving assholes. They killed my last dog. She wasn't even a guard dog, just a pet that I kept here. She didn't deserve that. Brute, now," he jerked a thumb to indicate the barking dog, "he's from an agency. He'll take care of anyone who decides to try for my bikes again and make them regret it."



"It may not be the same people," Ajay replied cautiously.

"I'll be hoping that they are," Smalley growled and turned to unlock his warehouse.

Ajay did two circuits of the warehouse district, after that, before it was time to catch the bus.

Nothing had seemed out of the ordinary, or even remotely helpful to his case. The few people that he found, who would speak to him, hadn't seen anything either. Considering how old and nearly abandoned the area was, anyone moving anything in or out wouldn't have gone unnoticed.

After boarding the bus, and studying his notes, Ajay had to conclude that he was going into the weekend without much more information than he had started with. He did have a firmer understanding of where, in both cases, he should concentrate his investigation, but neither of them seemed ready for any quick resolution.

When he arrived home and began hanging up his coat, Julia was already there, padding, barefoot, across the carpet in a loose pair of white cotton pants and a large white sweater. Her hair looked as if it had been sprayed and teased one too many times. It looked windblown, Ajay decided, and marveled that a woman who lived by her looks could be so casual and unconcerned about them when she wasn't working.

Julia had been coming from the kitchen. She stopped and asked nervously, "Chinese, chicken, or hamburgers?"

"I thought we decided to try eating in tonight?" Ajay reminded her.

Julia smiled apologetically. "Well, dinner wasn't exactly recognizable by the time I finished burning it. Jerry told me the recipe was easy, but it turned out to be easy for him, not me."

"Oh," Ajay could smell burned noodles and chicken and winced. "Nothing else burned?"

"The kitchen is safe," Julia replied quickly. "I might need the jaws of life to get the noodles out of the pan, though. Sorry."

Ajay reached to take the deli food out of his pocket. He moved to hand them to Julia. She took them gingerly and looked hurt.

"You knew I was going to ruin dinner?" Julia asked softly.

"I didn't," Ajay corrected her quickly. "I was questioning the owner of a deli. Buying the food was my cover."

Julia's eyes went wide and then warmly speculative. "You went undercover?"

"Briefly. He figured out who I was, though."

"Ah, still..." Julia moved forward to run a hand down the front of Ajay's shirt, "That's kind of sexy, imagining you undercover, pretending to be someone else to get information about an important police case."

Julia's blue eyes looked up at him with open invitation. Ajay leaned down to seize a kiss, more than eager to finish his day on a very positive note. When his stomach growled, though, Julia laughed and moved back a step.

"Maybe after dinner?" She wondered and held up the deli food packages. "Knowing you, this is probably your first meal of the day." Her eyes finally took notice of what she was holding and the deep dent in the ravioli package. "Jay...?" she began in consternation.

"A misunderstanding," Ajay replied offhandedly as he sat on the couch and began taking off his tie. "I wasn't hurt."

Julia was frowning, now. "Your misunderstanding ruined the ravioli."

"I'll be more careful not to use half frozen food as a shield in the future," Ajay promised jokingly.

Julia didn't laugh. She confronted Ajay more squarely and Ajay was forced to look up at her. "This could have easily been you," Julia told him, "Don't pretend this wasn't serious." She made an exasperated sound when Ajay looked as confused as he felt.

"I know that your job can be dangerous," Julia said more softly, "I won't pretend that's easy on me. I don't know what I would do without you. Even in this short time, you've become the center of my universe, Detective Kavanagh. It makes it harder, when you act as if you aren't being careful, as if getting hit hard enough to do this," she showed Ajay the sizable dent in the ravioli, "isn't a bad thing."

Ajay considered replies, trying to understand, and then replied simply, giving Julia honesty, instead of lengthy explanations. "I didn't want you to worry."

"It makes me worry more," Julia retorted and smacked Ajay hard on one arm with the ravioli.

"Julia!" Ajay protested as he left the couch and followed his lover into the kitchen. "That hurt!"

Julia glared at him as she took plates from a cupboard and put them on the kitchen counter.

“Good, it will make you remember this little talk.”

Julia crossed her arms over her chest, then, and they both stared at the plates. Finally, they looked at each other. Julia made a motion at the food on the counter. “You brought it home, you try and heat it up. I’ve killed enough food for one day.”

Ajay grunted sourly and began opening packages onto the plates. “It’s cooked. We just need to heat and eat.”

“You hope,” Julia muttered back.

They were quiet while Ajay decided what should go in the microwave first.

“Mad?” Julia suddenly wanted to know.

Ajay glanced sideways at her. “No,” he replied as he put a dish into the microwave and turned it on. He asked, as he watched the food on the turntable. “You?”

“No,” Julia replied.

Ajay thought about what Julia had said earlier. It reminded him of something that his parents had been trying to tell him. He had to ask, “So, if something were to happen to me. Something... permanent. You would find it hard to go back to your old life?”

“If you don’t understand that half of me would be gone, you don’t understand how much I love you, Jay,” Julia replied. She sighed and looked away. “I wouldn’t ever recover from that. You, though, I can see you going back to your old life if something happened to me. I think you would be sad, but you’re a lot stronger than I am.”

You have someone else to think about, now, his father had said, and his mother had echoed that sentiment. Ajay finally understood. He wasn’t just hurting himself by taking chances, Julia’s life was going to be ruined as well. She wouldn’t go back to parties, art openings, or fine dinners with friends. She would be half a person, by her own account, and devastated by it.

Ajay tried to imagine a life without Julia and understood completely. “You’re wrong!” Ajay exclaimed. He gathered Julia into his arms, taking her almost off of her feet. “I wouldn’t just go on with my life. I wouldn’t go back to how things were. Without you, life wouldn’t be worth living.”

Julia’s eyes were wide in surprise and then they were soft with emotion. “Forget the food!” she growled as she wrapped herself around Ajay and let Ajay pick her up completely.

Ajay's big hands cupped under Julia's ass, and meeting one deep kiss after another, Ajay took them both to the bedroom and onto the bed.

"Love you," Julia groaned as she reached down and undid Ajay's pants. Her slim hand hastily dove past belt, waistband, and underwear to what was eagerly waiting for her.

After she gave his erection a few rough strokes, Ajay frantically shoved his pants off and began pulling at Julia's clothes. "Love you," he groaned, as he used a sharp jerk of both hands to take Julia's pants down and off. He sank his head between her legs and his tongue and lips delved into the golden hair there, teasing her unmercifully.

Julia groaned and gasped, "You're so good at that!" She sank her fingers into Ajay's hair, mindless of her injured hand and his still healing scalp wounds. "Want you!" Julia urged. "Want you inside me!"

Ajay left off tormenting her and moved up Julia's body. He pulled up her sweater and suckled her full, pink nipples. "Love you," he kept repeating around his mouthful, enjoying her breasts as he cupped them in his hands and squeezed them while she moaned. When he couldn't wait any longer, he entered her, her smaller body making a tight sheathe around his erection.

Julia was far from submissive. She wrapped firm legs around Ajay, teased him with her hands and lips, and coaxed Ajay into every position she desired. When she climaxed she was on top. Ajay was lying flat beneath her with his hands kneading her ass. With both hands braced on Ajay's broad shoulders, Julia rode Ajay's hard erection, meeting every thrust of Ajay's with abandon.

Ajay came first, shouting hoarsely, and Julia wasn't far behind, crying out his name. She touched his come with one finger and brought it to her lips. She sucked her finger clean, with a lust filled expression on her face, and then leaned down to give Ajay a devouring kiss. He tasted himself on her tongue.

After a hot shower, and some lazy groping that almost turned into round two, they remembered dinner and went back into the kitchen wrapped in robes. Julia was drying her loose, golden hair with a towel as Ajay fished the now cold and unappetizing looking ravioli from the microwave.

"Looks ruined," Ajay sighed.

"Not as ruined as what I tried to cook," Julia laughed ruefully. "Plate it up and finish heating up

the rest.”

Ajay nodded. “Sit down. I’ll serve.”

Julia sat down gingerly at the dining room table. Ajay, his hands full of food containers, was immediately worried.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Ajay asked.

Julia frowned. “Ajay, we’ve already had this conversation several times. Trust me, I would say something if you were being too rough. I’m not a masochist.”

“Oh,” Ajay stared at his lover for a moment longer, unable to help his continued concern. Julia’s deepening frown was a warning, though, not to say anything else about it, so Ajay turned and concentrated on the food instead.

When they were sitting down and dubiously trying the ravioli, they were both pleasantly surprised to find it good. “It must like being pounded and over microwaved,” Julia joked. “We should ask for the recipe. It may be the only food that neither of us can ruin.”

“I hope you don’t mind when I say I’m looking forward to Sunday and dinner at my parent’s house?” Ajay told her as he bit into the crusty bread.

“Since I feel the same way, no, I don’t mind,” Julia said and laughed. “If you didn’t go to church, I think I might try to have breakfast and lunch there as well.”

There was a tense moment of quiet. Ajay considered whether or not to say what was on his mind, but then decided that his relationship was not going to succeed if he kept important things from Julia. He couldn’t solve a case with only half, or false information, and he was concluding that solid information was just as important in love.

“I know the church doesn’t approve of us living together,” Ajay began after taking a drink of water.

Julia looked unhappy talking about it.

“I haven’t said anything in confession and I haven’t been asked about our relationship,” Ajay told him. “I don’t consider us a sin. I won’t confess as if it was.”

Julia looked troubled.

“The church is important to me,” Ajay continued. “I don’t want you to think that I have a conflict,

though. I believe in my faith, strongly, but I've chosen to interpret certain things... differently."

"I hope they don't ask you to choose," Julia said softly.

"I don't either, because I won't force you to marry me before either of us is ready. I won't force you to go to mass either. Believe that," Ajay insisted firmly.

Julia gave him a pointed look, "So, why bring it up, now?"

Ajay sighed, poked at his plate of food, and then admitted, "Father Francis did ask my father how I was doing. He wanted to know if our relationship was becoming serious."

Julia coughed on some food, cleared her throat, and wondered, "What did your father tell him?"

"Da told him I seemed firm in my decision to be with you and, since you have made me happy, he wasn't going to interfere in my decisions, religious, or otherwise."

Julia blinked in surprise and then laughed. "I love your father."

"So do I," Ajay agreed.

"Thank you for telling me," Julia said more seriously.

"I wouldn't want you to wonder why if the Kavanaghs are all, suddenly, excommunicated," Ajay replied, but it was hard to make it sound joking.

Julia sensed his pain, reached out, and clasped Ajay's hand firmly. "I hope that it doesn't come to that."

"Me, too, but, like I said, no one, not even the church, is going to force us to do something before we're ready." Ajay tried to turn the conversation to something that wasn't so serious. "How was work?"

Julia was just as happy to change the subject. "I froze in the snow for three hours. Tight mini skirt, fashionable, short leather jackets, and everything open to my navel, is asking for frostbite. I should have asked for hazard pay. I didn't think the artist was ever going to be happy with his shots."

"Do we get copies?" Ajay wondered, imagining Julia sitting on a motorcycle in different poses in a mini skirt.

Julia tossed a piece of bread at him. It bounced off of Ajay's head and then bounced onto the table top. "Letch!" Julia chuckled at Ajay's surprised look. "If you want to pay a fortune for them, yes. He

wasn't offering anything for free for my portfolio."

Julia nodded at Ajay. "Your turn. Tell me about our crushed dinner."

"I was checking out warehouses, looking for the Packard," Ajay explained. "One of the owners thought I was breaking and entering."

Ajay went back to eating, but the silence on Julia's end of the table made him look up. "That's it?" Julia wondered when she had Ajay's attention.

"He apologized," Ajay added and then took another bite of food.

"Oh, as long as he apologized," Julia snorted sarcastically. "So, aside from being attacked, did you find anything helpful?"

"I'm not getting very far on either case," Ajay sighed. "I'm waiting for Weasel to get me more leads."

"Are you working tomorrow?" Julia asked.

"I think that I need to."

"Oh," Julia said and looked pensive.

"Plans?" Ajay wondered as he took his dirty plate to the sink. He looked back at Julia and saw his lover shrug.

"It can wait," Julia replied and smiled as she waved at her own plate.

Ajay took it and rinsed them both in the sink. As he dried his hands, he turned to Julia again, frowning. "Am I being... insensitive?" he wondered worriedly.

"You're being dedicated," Julia replied as she stood up and stretched her graceful body, arching and showing an expanse of her flat belly as her robe stretched open. She finished the stretch and pointed a finger at Ajay, "Even asking shows how much you care."

Ajay felt relieved.

"Besides," Julia added ruefully. "I've been putting off posing for a certain artist. I might as well sit for him tomorrow."

"Which artist?" Ajay wondered as Julia stood and helped him put away leftovers.

"Samuel Spinks," Julia replied. "He likes me to glow. The last time I sat for him, he nearly roasted me alive under dozens of lights. He had me wearing big angel wings, too. Embarrassing hardly

describes the experience.”

Ajay frowned. “You don’t have to take the job.”

Julia tossed the leftover packages into the freezer and then turned to Ajay with hands on hips. “I don’t give up on a job because it’s hard, Kavanagh, and neither do you.”

Ajay pulled Julia into an embrace and whispered into her hair. “Thank you for being understanding.”

“I knew what I was getting into,” Julia replied, bumping Ajay with her pelvis, so that Ajay gave her enough room to allow them to look at each other, “and I’ll never ask you to change.” She chuckled as she pushed away from Ajay to finish cleaning. “Besides, acceptance goes both ways. You’ll have to do your own accepting when you see an exhibit with me, on a twelve foot canvas, with only a handful of tangerines for cover.”

“When did you —” Ajay began, blushing in embarrassment at the mental image. Julia cut him off.

“I haven’t,” Julia assured him. “But I might. Everyone in the country might get to see it, too.”

Ajay felt a momentary stir of unease, but then firmly put it aside. “We both have challenging careers.”

“And we both love our careers,” Julia replied. “It’s who we are.”

And yet he would give it all up, Ajay thought, if Julia asked him to. He loved her that much. It would make him sad, maybe hollow inside, to make that decision, but he knew his priorities. He found he couldn’t tell Julia that, the emotion behind it too powerful for words, but he thought that Julia might know it anyway. Her soft smile, turned Ajay’s way, held its own truths, its own promise that what was between them was a priority for the both of them. So why didn’t they get married? Ajay felt ready, even though his head was telling him they hadn’t known each other long enough. He wasn’t sure she was ready for that commitment, though, and he had already promised not to pressure her.

Ajay’s cell rang. He fished it out of a pocket and answered, “Hello? This is Detective Kavanagh. How may I help you?”

Wezel’s voice was strange after the intimacy that Ajay and Julia had been sharing, but what Wezel had to say, was well worth the interruption. “I found something on your Kraton case.”



“Go ahead.”

“A bit of history that might help out,” Wezel continued. “You remember that old gambling den under the Chinese restaurant? It seems that this place has its own history of underground booze and gambling. There might be a basement under the basement of those places.”

Ajay frowned. “The gambling den under Yao’s was cleaned out years ago. I would imagine that the place under those businesses is in the same condition. I don’t see why anyone would pay so much money to buy out all of those businesses, when the cost would far outweigh any historical benefit.”

“Unless they think, like the historian that I found on the net, that a fortune is buried there somewhere,” Wezel pointed out with relish. “The urban myth goes, that the gangsters cemented all their money in the walls in case the authorities busted them.”

Ajay made an impatient sound. “Wezel, if there is a myth of a fortune, then it follows that people have searched for it.”

“But never found it,” Wezel pointed out.

“Wezel, please stick to facts, not myths,” Ajay urged irritably. “The cost of those businesses, and their demolition, was a small fortune in of itself. A business would have to be foolish to risk losing that money gambling that any found treasure, would be equal or greater than their outlay.”

“You take all the fun out of life, you know that, Ajay?” Wezel growled.

“Detectives deal in facts, Weasel,” Ajay insisted. “Please find me some.”

“They could sell the businesses afterward?” Wezel persisted.

“In that depressed, old neighborhood?” Ajay countered. “That’s another gamble, that they would even recoup the cost of the purchase prices, if they did manage to sell.”

“You know, Jay, some people aren’t as reasonable as you are,” Wezel told him sourly. “If you have a theory that’s better than mine, I’d like to hear it, because, unless they’re looking for gold, oil, or natural gas under the city, there’s not a hell of a lot of reasons to gut buildings and dig up their basements.”

“I wish I had the city plans for that block,” Ajay sighed. “They might have held some key information.”

“And don’t you find that strange?” Wezel demanded. “The very thing a treasure hunter would

need, a map of those buildings and that block, up and disappear.”

“I’m hanging up,” Ajay growled. “When you have real facts to give me, call.”

“Kraton holds all the answers and they don’t have much of an internet footprint,” Wezel replied quickly. “I’ll keep looking, though.”

The phone disconnected and Ajay pocketed it. He turned and found Julia standing behind him. “Maybe they’re storing something there? Drugs? Stolen merchandise, like your Packard?”

Ajay blinked at her, thoughtfully, and then made a note. “It’s possible.”

“I think you need to keep all theories open at this point,” Julia said as she pulled Ajay into the bedroom by the belt of his robe. “Even Weasel’s theory.”

“Clues lead to the development of a sound theory,” Ajay replied.

“And if you don’t find any clues?” Julia wondered as she handed a comb to Ajay and turned her back so that Ajay could run it through her hair.

Ajay gathered the long hair into one fist, mesmerized by the play of lamplight on the golden strands, and then began working at snarls with the comb below his fist. His tight grip kept the snarls from pulling on Julia’s scalp.

“There are always clues,” Ajay insisted.

He finished with the snarls and then released Julia’s hair to comb through the rest. When he was finished, he smoothed a hand down the length of it and then stopped at the bottom.

“What?” Julia wondered.

“Hm?” Ajay came out of his reverie, embarrassed. “Oh, I, uh, was just wondering what you would look like with short hair.”

“With a buzz cut, you mean?” Julia chuckled, “or a short bob?”

“Just short,” Ajay said uncertainly, wondering if he had made a mistake.

Julia turned and smiled at him, her blue eyes dancing in amusement. “If you only love me for the hair, then you’re not the man I thought you were, Ajay Kavanagh.”

Ajay sensed the tension behind the words, though, and assured his lover, “I love you, Julia, believe it. What you look like is... extra.”

Julia cocked her head and said, “I think that was a compliment.”

“It was,” Ajay assured her.

“Good, because I fully intend to get old with you, Jay,” Julia replied firmly. “You’ll have to get used to wrinkles and my hair going gray.”

Ajay pulled Julia into his arms tightly. “I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

## Chapter Six

“Mr. Kavanagh, I’m very busy. Have a nice day,” the heavy set man grumbled as he juggled two cell phones and tried to sort paperwork on his desk. He answered one cell, “Jacks. Yeah? Well, I told you how much cement you need to get that floor right. Don’t second guess me, or you’ll be out on your ass. Get it done.”

The man hung up and eyed Ajay. “You’re still here. I told you, have a nice day. That means, goodbye.”

The man answered the other cell, “Jacks. The big digger...old Bessie. You were supposed to have her down by the Laner’s site two hours ago. Traffic? More like coffee and donuts. Get there or have your pay docked for wasting my time.”

The man glanced up at Ajay again. “Still here?”

“It’s Detective Kavanagh,” Ajay insisted. “I need some information about demolition that you performed on Fair Street.”

“On a Saturday?” the man snorted. “I thought suits took weekends off?” he motioned to the paperwork and the phones with long, hairy arms. “Me? I work every weekend. Suits don’t like having workers during business hours.”

“I’m sorry if I’m disturbing your work,” Ajay apologized. “I’ve tried to make an appointment, but I was told that you don’t take appointments.”

The man’s dark, bushy eyebrows came down over small eyes. A crew cut made him seem like an army sergeant about to dress down an errant soldier. “That meant, Detective Kavanagh, that I don’t see people unless it’s business. I let my lawyers, accountants, and sales people take care of everything else.”

“I only have one question,” Ajay promised.

A cell phone rang and the man stared at him, darkly, as he answered, “Jacks. West 19th, moron! What are you doing on East 34th? Turn left, five blocks, turn right, seven blocks, and it’ll be smacking

you in the face.”

The man hung up and said, “Okay, one question. Make it quick.”

“Did Kraton Development give any reason for the demolition of those businesses on Fair Street? Was there a purpose in digging up their basements?” Ajay asked. He poised his pencil over his notepad.

“They pulled permits. We did the work. Nothing and nobody explained what the plan was,” Jacks replied tersely. “Have a good day, Detective Kavanagh.”

“Mr. Jacks,” Ajay began, but the man cut him off with a hard motion of one hand.

“One question,” Jacks said firmly and then went back to his work.

“Did you find anything, under the floors?” Ajay tried. “Just answer that and I’ll leave.”

“Start backing up, then,” Jacks told him angrily. “Towards the door.”

Ajay started stepping backwards.

“There were tunnels with red brick walls. We were told not to touch them,” Jacks replied. “Keep walking right out of here, Detective.” As Ajay reached the door he added, “Slam the door closed on your way out and don’t come back, ever.”

Ajay sighed and closed the door. The receptionist, waiting outside of the office, said accusingly, “You said that you were the police!”

“I said I was working on a case for the police department,” Ajay corrected her. “That’s true.”

“If I’d known you were going to ask him about that job, I wouldn’t have let you in,” she retorted angrily.

“Why?” Ajay wondered.

“Because they never paid!” the woman replied sharply and then thought better of giving out that information. “I think you’d better leave. I’m in enough trouble as it is.”

“I’m sorry if I’ve caused you any difficulty,” Ajay told her.

She held the door for him and Ajay heard it lock when she closed it behind him, as if she was determined not to have anyone bother her boss again.

Stepping down the steps, of the prefab office building, Ajay carefully made his way through heavy machinery and workers loading equipment and supplies in the large fenced in lot. Though he

hadn't been given any key information, he could, he thought, explain why Kraton wasn't building. They were in financial difficulties. It was possible that the buildings themselves might be a part of foreclosure proceedings.

Ajay wondered how to proceed if that turned out to be the case. His client had suspected coercion in the sales, a definite crime, but without anyone coming forward to support that claim, and the reason for such strong armed persuasion possibly moot, he couldn't see his way to making any sort of solid case against Kraton.

Foreclosure, or intent to file for bankruptcy, was easy enough to check. Ajay decided to check government records first thing Monday. Armed with good information, Ajay felt, that he might finally be able to present himself to Kraton Development and ask some intelligent questions.

Nearly through the large, chain link gate of the main exit, Ajay almost missed it. Glancing to his right, as several men tested a piece of equipment, Ajay blinked, startled, at the unexpected sight of a boat parked between metal buildings. A small sailing vessel, it looked new and carefully tended. The name plate on the stern was large and tin. It read, in stylized, gold, lettering Fortune's Lightning.

"I told him he'd get in trouble for taking that," a voice said at Ajay's elbow. He looked sideways and saw a skinny man, with a dark, shaggy hair cut, take a drag from a cigarette and then spit aside. He was wearing greasy overalls and had the company logo on one breast. "He tells us enough times, not to take from a job site, but there he goes and does it. He couldn't resist it, though. Yanked it out of the brickwork, repainted it, and put it on his boat. He's been trying to think of a name for that thing for months. If you ask me, he's due, though, since we didn't get paid for the stinkin' job."

"Fortune's Lightning. It was under the buildings on Fair Street? In the brick tunnels?"

The man nodded, looking concerned. "Look, the boss is a good guy. You're not going to haul him off to jail or 'nothing, right? It's just a bit of tin."

"That's not for me to decide," Ajay replied as he took out his cell and took a quick photo of the plate. "I'm on a case for the police department, not prosecuting a man for stolen property."

"That's good, right?" the man wondered anxiously. "I didn't say anything wrong, did I? I thought you knew about the name plate."

"I can't say whether it's pertinent to my case, but I am not going to seek prosecution for its

alleged theft," Ajay replied as he checked to make certain his photo was saved and then made notes.

"Huh?" the man said in confusion.

"Your boss is safe, as far as I'm concerned," Ajay said more simply. "Thank you for the information, Mr...?"

The man backed away making defensive motions. "You're not getting my name! We didn't even talk, okay?" The man turned and hurried away and Ajay made notes describing as many features as he could manage in case he needed to identify the man later. It was impossible to tell what information he might need in the future.

Fortune's Lightning. Ajay wondered at the significance of that name. He recalled that the gambling establishment under Yao's had been called Duke's, after the owner, but that had been part of the legend. Everything, except broken crates from long ago storage, and the brick walls themselves, had been stripped and carried off to parts unknown. Even an old, rust riddled tin name plate wouldn't have been left behind, especially by treasure hunters. That led Ajay to believe it was a recent addition. Why anyone would name those tunnels was a mystery, though.

The second demolition company was less helpful, if that were possible. Though not as openly hostile as Jacks, it was clear, by the time Ajay was escorted off of the property, they also had not been paid for taking down the inner plumbing and pipes.

If Kraton was also in default of their loans to buy the businesses, then, Ajay thought sourly, he would have to entertain Wezel's theory that these people might indeed be treasure hunters. It would remain a faint theory at best, but still on the list as a potential. It seemed unprofessional when he wrote it in his notes, something he wouldn't want to show anyone without proper facts. He was certain any hint of it to the police department would ruin any credibility he might have gained from his last successful case.

The sky was overcast and snow was coming down again, when Ajay returned to the Warren and Devoe crossroads. When he passed the point where he had run into his mystery woman, he stopped and stared at the pavement as if it could tell him something. He mentally recalled her, looking flustered and afraid, and then, later, looking professional and hurried. It wasn't a case, he told himself. He shouldn't let it distract him.

Ajay found himself retracing her steps, though, eyes on the businesses as he tried to divine why she had been in that place to begin with. She hadn't been familiar with the streets, yet someone dangerous to her had found her there and had followed her with unknown intent.

An apartment building, an old sagging brownstone sporting some Gothic finials, had several businesses under it. One was a print shop. Like an oversized closet, with a too grand ironwork door, it made the man at the tiny counter inside seem out of place. That man reminded Ajay sharply of Wezel. Modern techno geek, he thought, and was certain the door behind the man lead to computers and state of the art printing equipment.

Black hair pulled back in a tight pony tail and overlarge glasses perched down on a long nose, the man was wearing all black, a symbol on his shirt declaring him radioactive. He put aside a technology magazine and gave Ajay a bored once over. "Wedding, party, or business cards?"

The man put his hand on a stack of sample books.

"Information," Ajay replied.

The man slid a list of prices across the counter. "Here you go."

Ajay slid it back. "Not that kind of information."

The man sighed and gave Ajay a once over. "Are you the cops? I told that other guy all I knew."

"I'm a detective," Ajay corrected him. "The police were here, asking questions?"

"He said he was the police," the man replied with a shrug. "Who knows, though, right? He didn't show me any I.D." He gave Ajay a pointed look and Ajay took out his wallet and showed him his business card.

"Detective Ajay Kavanagh?" the young man snorted. "You're Steven's brother, aren't you? The one he keeps saying is a loser?"

Ajay felt a sharp pang of hurt. He was used to the harmless insults he and Steven often tossed back and forth. They each knew that the other didn't mean them. This man made them seem far more personal and judgmental. It was hard to recover and keep his professional demeanor, when he simply replied, "Steven Kavanagh is my brother, yes."

"Well, that won't get you any more information than I gave the other guy," the man told him. "A woman came in, had me recover some blueprints onto a memory stick, paid me, and then off she



went. I didn't look at the blueprints, so I can't tell you what they were for."

"You didn't look?" Ajay repeated, incredulous.

The man shrugged irritably, "So I'm an incurious guy, okay? Lots of lines on old paper don't interest me." He grinned, "That woman was hot, though. Her I remember."

"Small, blonde, high heels?" Ajay wondered as he made notes.

"With a great ass poured into a tight skirt. Yeah, that's her," the man replied appreciatively. "Seemed in a hurry. Didn't even wait for me to load it up and show her."

"She didn't have the blue prints when she left," Ajay remembered. "Did she leave them here?"

"Nope. Folded them up and put them in her purse," the man replied.

"She didn't say anything about what they were or why she needed the digital copy?" Ajay asked.

"Not a word," the man replied. "So, that's all I've got. You want to order something printed, I'm all ears, Kavanagh, otherwise you can take yourself out of my shop, okay? You're getting in the way of paying customers."

Ajay looked around the tiny, empty shop, but didn't see any unexpected customers waiting.

"Thank you," he told the man. "I appreciate your help. If you remember anything else, please call."

Ajay left him a business card. The man looked it over and then scowled, "I didn't print this. It's crap. You pay crap, you get crap! You want some class A cards, you come to me next time."

"I'll consider it," Ajay replied politely.

"Yeah, yeah," the man grunted and went back to his magazine.

Ajay left the shop, pocketing his notebook. He shivered in the sudden blast of cold and dug hands into his pockets as he made his way back down Devoe Street. He entertained, briefly, the notion of going to the gym. That kind of physical activity always helped him think and knocked out any remnants of a bad day. He remembered Julia's slight disappointment, though, when he had decided to work. The rest of the day, he decided, should be spent with the woman he loved, rather than pursuing work that had nothing to do with his two ongoing cases.

Mr. Harris was closing up shop, wiping down his hot dog stand. He saw Ajay walking by and shouted, "Jay? There's still dogs left over. Want some for dinner?"

"No, thanks, Mr. Harris."

"Wouldn't want you to starve," Mr. Harris said worriedly.

"I'm cooking tonight," Ajay replied, though he hadn't really considered what to have for dinner.

"Like I said," Mr. Harris snorted, "Wouldn't want you to starve."

"Thank you anyway," Ajay replied irritably. "I'll manage."

"At least take these onion rolls for your dinner and lemon poppy buns for desert," Mr. Alusius said as he and his partner, Davey, came from their just closed shop. He handed a large bag to Ajay.

"They have the honey glaze your lady likes."

"Thank you, but you didn't need to go to any trouble," Ajay replied, embarrassed and holding the bag gingerly.

"No trouble," Mr. Alusius beamed in delight. "They were just leftovers. I was taking them home for the dog."

"The dog?" Davey was a blue-eyed, big man with ham like arms and a friendly face. He towered over the shorter, rounder form of Mr. Alusius as he gave Ajay a shake of his head. "Funny how his dog likes two things that are your favorite, Jay."

"Well, never you mind that," Mr. Alusius grumbled at his partner. "Why throw them away when they can be enjoyed?"

"I mind when you stand by the window, like a vulture, waiting for Jay to walk by," Davey sighed.

"I wasn't!" Mr. Alusius retorted, but then sighed and smiled, "All right, I was," he admitted to Ajay, "but only because you're too proud. You're my namesake, after all. A Godson, really. Why can't I give you gifts?"

When he put it that way, Ajay found it impossible to refuse. "Thank you," he managed. "I want to pay you, though."

"It's a gift!" Mr. Alusius insisted and made a waving off gesture as he turned away. "Come on, Davey, our own dinner is waiting."

Davey gave Ajay a wink. "Coming, Potato."

Ajay watched them walk together down the street. Davey leaned and said something to Mr. Alusius in a way that seemed very intimate. He heard Mr. Alusius laugh good-naturedly.

Another bag joined the first one in Ajay's hands, smelling of hot dogs. "Shut up and take it," Mr. Harris said as he shoved at his cart to get it moving. "There's coleslaw and potato salad in there, too." He didn't wait for any protests, his broad back making the exchange final.

Ajay tucked the bags in one arm and pulled out his cell with the other. When his mother answered he accused, without preamble, "You told everyone I was starving, didn't you?"

There was a moment while his mother realized who was speaking and then her apologetic voice replied, "Jay? Well, not that I would say anything against you, or Julia, but you can't say that the two of you couldn't use a few solid meals. That's all I said, I swear."

"Ma, it's embarrassing," Ajay complained. "I don't feel like a man when you do these kinds of things."

"Oh, men!" his mother said in exasperation. "You all have far too much pride. There's nothing sinful in accepting a little help."

"When I need it!" Ajay retorted. "We are doing all right, Ma. Stop worrying."

"Then I shouldn't cook beef stew with dumplings tomorrow?" His mother wondered pointedly. "No blueberry pie, either, or that corn pudding that you love so much?"

Ajay's stomach growled. "You know I love your cooking," Ajay told her warmly. "I'll never say no to that."

"I hope not," his mother replied and he could imagine her proud smile. "I'll see you in church, son."

It was a firm ending to their conversation, one that wanted only one response.

"I'll be there," Ajay replied.

When he reached home and walked through the door into its welcoming warmth, Ajay was disappointed that Julia wasn't there to greet him. He checked the time as he deposited the bags onto the kitchen counter.

Late, but not late enough to warrant a phone call, Ajay thought. He knew that Julia didn't like interruptions while she was working, any more than Ajay did. It was hard to control the urge, though, as the clock went from a little late, to well past dinner time.

"She can take care of herself," Ajay told himself firmly.

He ate a hot dog to stop his hunger pains and then decided to distract himself by spreading his notes on top of the coffee table and attempting to organize them into a pattern. Kraton Development bought out businesses and gutted them. Then they refused to pay their bills. Not a good start for a new company. Street plans and business blueprints were missing. A plate, with the name, Fortune's Lightning, had been installed in the old underground gambling house, probably recently. Ajay grimaced and couldn't bring himself to add the note that read simply, treasure hunt.

Next to those case notes, Ajay placed the notes for the Packard case. They were few. Names of suspects, vague suspicions, and a list of interviews that Ajay had managed to set up for the coming week, went into one line.

Lastly, Ajay put down the notes pertaining to the mystery woman. Why, he wasn't sure, except that she had been close to the offices where he had failed to find blueprints, had wanted to reach that area on the fateful night when she had hit him, and had been in a printing shop having blueprints digitally copied.

Julia arrived, just then, wrapped tightly in a white jacket, an oversized scarf hiding most of her face, and gloved hands tucked into her armpits. She peeled out of them reluctantly, clearly shivering as she chattered, "S-Sorry! I didn't mean to be so-so late. I-I should have called."

"Is it snowing that badly, now?" Ajay asked worriedly as he stood up and left his work.

"Oh, artists!" Julia grumbled and sounded so like Ajay's mother saying, Oh, Men! that it made him blink. He was in motion again, then, wrapping Julia up tight in a throw and sitting her down on the couch.

"What happened?" Ajay wanted to know as he knelt and worked Julia's boots off. He checked to make certain her socks were dry. They were, so Ajay left them on.

"Angel wings galore," Julia complained, "with the perfection of snow falling on a half-dressed me. The artist said the cold made me look like a waif. I'm not sure what that had to do with being angelic."

While she was talking she was looking at Ajay's notes. When she saw the notes for the mystery woman she glared at Ajay. "Jay, you are obsessed."

Ajay briskly rubbed Julia's legs with his big hands to warm them up as he replied guardedly, "I

never could resist a mystery.”

Julia’s eyes went back over the notes. She frowned and observed, “She had blueprints printed, you saw her in the government district, and blue prints for your case are missing.” She seemed suddenly relieved. “Well, at least I can understand the obsession now. She must have something to do with your case.”

Ajay shook his head as he joined Julia on the couch. He pulled Julia into his arms to warm her up even more. “The odds of that being true are slim. Similar events don’t necessarily make them related to each other.”

“But you’re keeping notes, so you aren’t ruling out the possibility,” Julia pointed out.

“I do have information, that might have enough remote credibility to at least take under consideration,” Ajay explained.

“Chance in hell credibility, you mean?” Julia laughed.

“Something like that,” Ajay agreed. “Warm?” he wondered, changing the subject.

“Yes,” Julia replied. “I don’t feel ready to turn into an ice cube any longer.” She sniffed the air. “I smell hotdogs that aren’t burned. Tell me they are edible, Jay, and I’ll love you forever. I’m starved!”

“They are hot dogs,” Ajay admitted, “and, yes, you can eat them. I didn’t cook them, though. Mr. Harris gave them to me and wouldn’t take no for an answer. Sometimes, I feel like my mother is trying to get the entire city to look after me.”

“What does your mother have to do with Mr. Harris’s hotdogs?” Julia wondered as she stood up and went into the kitchen, still wrapped in the throw.

“She’s been telling everyone that we can’t take care of ourselves,” Ajay complained as he followed and watched Julia put several hotdogs onto a plate. “There are rolls and poppy buns as well. Mr. Alusius gave them to me.”

“With honey glaze?” Julia asked eagerly as she opened the bag and looked inside.

“Yes,” Ajay sighed and leaned back against the counter dejectedly.

Julia noticed his depression, then, and said, “Jay, if you don’t realize how special it is to have so many people care about you, I’m going to slap you.”

“You’d regret it,” Ajay replied in amusement.

“Afterward,” Julia snorted. She took a bite of hotdog appreciatively, chewed, swallowed and then motioned with the remainder at Ajay, “To them, we’re babies trying to make it on our own, Lover. Of course they’re worried. After a while, they’ll calm down.”

“After we learn how to cook?” Ajay wondered dejectedly.

“Probably,” Julia laughed and then elbowed Ajay in the gut, making him bend over in reflex, so that she could kiss him. Ajay tasted hotdog and chased after it, making the kiss deeper. Julia broke it and joked, “Get your own food, Kavanagh!”

When they were finished eating, they moved back to the couch with tea and coffee. Ajay went over his notes, again, chewing on a poppy seed bun, while Julia flipped through a fashion magazine.

“Do you think you’ll have any time free next week?” Julia suddenly asked without looking up from her magazine.

Ajay thought about it. “Wednesday, I think. Why?”

Julia shrugged. “Oh, just something I wanted to do with you.” She put out a stocking foot and it nudged Ajay in the ribs. “And not what you’re thinking, Cave Man.”

Ajay blinked and blushed, surprised at being read so easily. “What, then?”

“You’ll see,” Julia said cryptically.

The mystery was distracting, but then Ajay smiled and put it from his mind. If it was Julia’s secret, then it was something pleasant, he surmised. She wasn’t someone to hold back when anything serious needed to be discussed.

Not enough clues, yet, Ajay dejectedly concluded, after spending awhile staring at his notes. There were tantalizing theories, but all of them drawn from the realm of completely unsubstantiated. He stacked them in a better order, though, and had, at least, a direction to take come Monday morning.

“Done?” Julia asked wistfully and he was suddenly burdened by her weight as Julia sprawled over his back. Her golden braid tickled Ajay’s neck as it slid over his shoulder and thumped against his chest.

“For now,” Ajay replied, smiling.

“Then you can take us both to the bedroom,” Julia told him with a kiss along Ajay’s cheek.

“Who’s the cave person, now?” Ajay wondered jokingly.

“Can I help it if you give me ideas?” Julia chuckled as Ajay stood and easily carried her into the bedroom still draped on his back.

Depositing Julia onto the bed, Ajay began unbuttoning his shirt while Julia watched appreciatively. The word loser popped into Ajay’s head unexpectedly and he stopped with his hands still poised on his buttons. Staring down at Julia, and Julia beginning to look concerned, he struggled with several emotions, painful doubts, and a short bout of second guessing his decisions. It lasted the space of several heartbeats and then he was joining Julia on the bed.

Ajay was a man of hard facts and sound logic. An insult from a younger brother couldn’t outweigh what Ajay knew with certainty, that Julia was everything he had ever wanted in his life. Being with her, and having made the right choices to put him where he was right then, meant he wasn’t a loser.

“Love you,” Ajay said thickly as he pulled Julia into his arms.

“Love you, too,” Julia replied, in a tone that made Ajay think that Julia understood, somehow, what Ajay was feeling.

## Chapter Seven

Ajay slipped several gold bracelets onto Julia's wrists. Julia looked up, startled. Having just put them on their dresser, she hadn't been prepared for Ajay to walk up and pick them up again.

"Stop it," Ajay admonished her. "You don't have to dress differently for my family."

Julia, dressed in a conservative button down, blue shirt, gray slacks, and her hair pulled back and braided tightly, looked stubborn as she began taking the bracelets off again. "It's called keeping the peace," she told Ajay firmly. "They might accept our relationship, but they don't need me to dress 'in your face', especially when they've just been to church."

"It's not 'in your face'. You're being yourself," Ajay replied, picking the bracelets up again. He held them out this time. "When you change yourself for other people, you're admitting that you're wrong."

Julia stared into his eyes, searching, and then smiled warmly and took the bracelets. "Where did you hear that?" she wondered as she put the bracelets on and then moved to the closet to pick out less conservative clothing.

"It was something I thought about, last night," Ajay replied. "We're perfect together. I can't imagine being with anyone else."

"And you were thinking this, why?" Julia asked in concern as she pulled off her plain, blue shirt and replaced it with a silk, bright orange one. As she picked out yellow leggings she said, when Ajay didn't reply, "I thought something was bothering you last night."

"My brother, Steven," Ajay replied truthfully as he slipped on a dark blue sweater over jeans. His church clothes were carefully laid over the back of a chair. He smoothed a hand over them as if pressing out wrinkles. "He told someone I was a loser. This person repeated it unexpectedly while I was questioning him."

Julia frowned. She said, "Steven and I talk a great deal about photography." She shrugged. "People say things they don't mean, Jay. I'm sure that it was just one of his regular insults."

Except that it had been said to someone else, Ajay thought. He was left to guess whether the



insult had been a revelation of Steven's true feelings, or not. He supposed he would find out at dinner with the family.

Ajay reached and teased Julia's hair out of its tight braid. She huffed in annoyance and redid it loosely so that it looked more casual. "Perfect," Ajay declared when she was done. "Let's go."

Ajay's cell phone rang as he reached for his black coat. "This is Detective Kavanagh."

"Detective? This is Karsten." He sounded angry and anxious as he continued, "I have some information for you."

Ajay pulled his notepad out of his coat pocket. "I'm listening, Mr. Karsten."

"I overheard Tyler Drewes' son talking to a friend about my Packard. He said he was worried that someone would find it and that his dad would go to jail," Karsten told him. "You need to get down here with the police as soon as possible and arrest the both of them."

"Did he say where it was hidden?"

"No, but I heard him admit that Drewes took it and that should be good enough," Karsten replied.

"I'll need to talk to them both. I can't call the police with only hearsay testimony."

"My word isn't good enough?" Karsten snarled.

"Not in the eyes of the law, I'm afraid," Ajay replied. "They may admit to the theft if I confront them with your information, though."

"Then get down here and talk to them!" Karsten ordered.

"Mr. Karsten, today is Sunday. I reserve Sunday for being with my family," Ajay told him firmly. "I will talk to them, Monday."

"Today!" Karsten exclaimed. "I want my car back now, Detective Kavanagh! Who knows what they'll do with my Packard now that they realize I know they took it?"

He was right, but Ajay struggled with the decision. He felt Julia's hand on his arm suddenly and looked down at her face. Her expression was one of understanding.

"Go," Julia whispered. "I'll meet you at your parent's home, later."

Ajay began to shake his head, no, but Julia's grip tightened.

"We are who we are, right? I'll wear my jewelry and my fashion clothes and you'll solve your

cases," Julia urged. "It can't take long, can it?"

"Detective Kavanagh?" Karsten snapped, wanting an answer.

"All right," Ajay agreed, not liking it, but knowing that Mr. Karsten was right. Drewes and his son just might move the car if they knew that their theft had been discovered. "I'll be at your home in twenty minutes."

"Good." Karsten hung up the phone.

Ajay sighed as he pocketed his cell and said to Julia, "Thank you. Please try to explain to my parents. They won't be happy about this."

"No, but I'm sure they're used to it," Julia chuckled. "Be careful, Jay."

"Always," Ajay promised. He kissed Julia and then began throwing on a scarf and coat as he headed for the door. He paused and said, "About Steven. If he should say anything to you —"

Julia snorted. "He won't Jay, because he didn't mean it and he won't remember saying it."

Ajay knew Julia was right and he was feeling better about it as he left.

\*\*\*\*

"Mr. Drewes, I have a few questions for you, if you don't mind?" Ajay said as he stood in a bathroom doorway and watched Drewes, crouched over a toilet, trying to tighten a pipe at the back with a wrench.

Drewes straightened and his expression told Ajay he already knew what questions Ajay was going to ask.

"In private," Ajay insisted.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, Mrs. Stanley," Drewes told the curious woman waiting in the living room, and led the way out of her apartment.

"This is Sunday," Drewes complained. "Can't a man have a Sunday before he gets arrested? It's bad enough I had to fix a toilet."

He took Ajay into his small office and shut the door. He didn't sit at the work desk and didn't

offer Ajay a chair.

“Mr. Karsten was insistent,” Ajay replied. “I respect Sundays as well. I’m sorry.”

Drewes shrugged and sat on the edge of his desk as if defeated. “Why should you be sorry? It’s my fault for letting someone talk me into doing something stupid.”

Ajay took out his notepad. “So, your son was factual when he admitted you were the one who took Mr. Karsten’s Packard?”

Drewes nodded wearily. “He was, God love him. A man couldn’t have a better son. All my explaining didn’t change the fact I took something that wasn’t mine. He knew that.”

“You took Mr. Karsten’s Packard?” Ajay affirmed and Drewes nodded again. “For what reason?”

“A favor,” Drewes sighed. “A damned favor to a fine woman who just cared about that old fart, Karsten, enough to get rid of what was killing him.”

“Karsten’s wife?” Ajay surmised, remembering the shy woman peeking from Karsten’s kitchen. Guilt, replaced shyness, now, though, and Ajay could understand her actions.

Drewes turned his wrench over and over in his hands. “I’m hoping that someone’s wife can’t be jailed for taking a car that they both own, right?”

“You admit to taking it, though, for her,” Ajay pointed out. “I’m afraid, if Karsten presses charges, you might face jail time, Mr. Drewes.”

Drewes was upset, then. “She’ll tell him what happened!” he exclaimed, wanting to believe it himself.

“Sometimes, that doesn’t happen,” Ajay replied, knowing the man needed to face that possibility. “If you could produce anything she signed, proving she was your accomplice in the theft, that would help your case immensely.”

Drewes growled, “I don’t. Not a damned thing.”

“I will need to speak with her,” Ajay told him. “I’ll try to convince her that an innocent man shouldn’t go to jail.”

Drewes repeated again, as if trying to convince himself, “She’s a good woman. She’ll do what’s right by me.”

“I hope you are right,” Ajay replied.

“Damn it all to hell!” Drewes swore, shaking his head. “I’ve been working this place, and doing some construction work on the side, to try and get my son’s college fund going. He has some smarts and a chance for something better than what I have. Tell her that she’ll ruin more than one life not confessing to that husband of hers.”

“I will,” Ajay promised. “Tell me the location of the car. Mr. Karsten will most likely want it recovered immediately.”

“Down by the docks,” Drewes replied. “My cousin has one of those boat storage spaces. Cheap as hell, and rusted almost all through, but big enough to stash a car and an old fishing boat. Unit thirty-six. I still have the key.”

He went to get the key from a file cabinet. While Ajay waited, he decided not to mention that this helpful cousin might be implicated as an accomplice. The man had enough to worry about.

As Drewes gave Ajay the key, he said, “Thank you.”

Ajay replied in confusion, “For what?”

Drewes gave a dispirited shrug, “For making me an honest man? My son’s been troubled by all of this, even though I explained it was for Karsten’s own good. The boy knows the definition of stealing better than I do. No reason is a good enough reason. It would have all come out, maybe worse, sooner or later. I feel better, though, knowing that you’re speaking for me. I feel you’ll help me as best you can.”

“I will, Mr. Drewes,” Ajay promised. “My job is to solve the case, not actively pursue a conviction afterward. That’s Mr. Karsten’s decision. I’ll try to reason with him on your behalf.”

Drewes sat at his desk chair and stared at nothing, as Ajay left him to go to Mr. Karsten’s apartment. Ajay could imagine his thoughts at that moment. Possible jail time, for a good deed, was not something easy to contemplate.

Mr. Karsten was quick to open his door, as if he had been waiting there for Ajay since his phone call. “Well?” he demanded as soon as he opened the door. “What did Drewes have to say for himself?”

Ajay came into the apartment, and Karsten gave ground, hobbling on his cane. Ajay looked for Mrs. Karsten and saw her peeking nervously from the kitchen doorway. “Is it possible to speak to

Mrs. Karsten, alone, before I give you my information?" Ajay asked hopefully.

"I want to know where my car is!" Karsten exploded. "This isn't time for a tea social!"

"This is very important to the case," Ajay explained.

"Alone?" Karsten growled uncertainly. "Why, alone?"

"Because, I believe your wife might have some information she is unwilling to share," Ajay explained. "I think she might want to discuss it in a one on one situation with me."

"If you're trying to say she's in some sort of trouble, then, no, you can't speak to her alone," Karsten snapped. "She's shy and timid. I won't have you bullying her into saying something she doesn't mean." He slammed the end of his cane on the floor, angrily. "I hired you to find my car, Detective Kavanagh, not accuse my wife of something. If you know where it is, I want to know, now."

"I'm afraid your wife won't be left out of things, if the people involved are prosecuted, Mr. Karsten," Ajay informed him. "I would like to stop it from escalating to that point. I think that I can do that if I speak to your wife."

"Not alone," Karsten protested.

"I-I think alone is best," Mrs. Karsten's timid voice said from the kitchen. "Please, dear, let me have a word with Detective Kavanagh."

Karsten frowned at her in confusion. "I want to know what this is about!" he demanded. "You are my wife. If you are in some trouble --"

"I am your wife!" she suddenly exclaimed, "but do you see very many photos of us, or the children, in this house?"

Karsten and Ajay were startled by her outburst, but, having found her voice at last, she wasn't ready to stop.

"It's always about that car!" Mrs. Karsten went on. She was wringing her dress in her hands, obviously nervous, as she came into the living room. "You made room, by taking down our photos, so that you could put up photos of the Packard."

"It's a classic!" Karsten retorted, "I restored it with these two hands." He held up wrinkled hands and shook them at her. "Why shouldn't I be proud of that?"

“The thing is putting you into an early grave,” she shouted back. “Unlike you, I care about people, about you, not cars.”

“Tell him, Mrs. Karsten,” Ajay urged. “Maybe he’s ready to listen. Don’t let a good man go to jail over this.”

She blinked at him, her courage running out and trepidation beginning to take its place. “I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“Mr. Drewes said you were a good woman,” Ajay told her. “He was certain you would do the right thing.”

“He did?” Mrs. Karsten blushed, but still seemed uncertain.

Karsten hobbled closer to her. “If you had anything to do with my car disappearing...” He left off the threat, but she understood it.

“You’ll what?” she demanded, her anger coming back instantly. “Is that car more important than me?” She opened a drawer in a small desk and pulled out a picture of herself and two young men. She walked to the wall, pulled a framed photo of the Packard off of it, and then replaced it with the photo of what must have been their children.

“They belong here,” she told Karsten. “I belong here. If you don’t think so, then maybe you don’t belong here any longer.”

He was clearly shocked. “Is that really what you think?”

“What other choice have you given me?” she wondered sadly.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Karsten demanded.

“Because you’re not a man to listen,” she replied, “That’s why I gave the keys to Mr. Drewes. I told him to get rid of it.”

She put a hand over her mouth after that confession, clearly afraid of his reaction. He didn’t get angry, though. He hobbled to his chair and sat down heavily. “You would really leave me?” he wondered in a tired voice.

“You’re the one that’s been leaving,” she told him, going to his chair and putting a hand on his arm. He looked up at her and then at Ajay.

“Send me the bill, Detective,” Karsten told him. “The case is closed. You can’t tell me how to

make things right with my family, with my wife. I think we need privacy to talk.”

“Thank you, Mr. Karsten,” Ajay replied as he went to the door to let himself out. “I hope everything will be all right. Please talk to Mr. Drewes when you have a moment, so he can stop worrying about facing jail time.”

“I will,” Karsten replied with a hopeful smile at his wife. “If you know anyone who wants to buy a green Packard, give them my number.”

Mrs. Karsten fairly beamed down at him and Ajay was hopeful things would turn out well for them.

“I’ll do that,” Ajay replied.

Letting himself out, and walking back towards the home of his family, Ajay felt good. He had managed to bring a family back together, had saved a man from jail, and had successfully ended a case. It was everything he had wanted out of his career. He owed that success to Julia’s understanding nature, he realized, and marveled that he had found such a perfect match for himself.

When Ajay climbed the steps of his parent’s home, he could smell good food cooking and hear the laughter of his family. Walking down the old hallway, he deposited his scarf and coat on hooks full of other coats, and stamped his feet free of snow and mud on the bristle mat underneath them.

“Jay,” his brother Kile greeted him as he passed him by on his way to the front door to smoke. “You better rescue your little woman. Steven took her to his bedroom. There’s no telling what he has Julia doing in there.”

“Don’t call her little woman,” Ajay protested automatically, “and you aren’t going to fool me. The worst that Steven can do is to try to make Julia talk about photography all evening.”

Kile snorted, irritated that he hadn’t managed to get a rise out of his brother.

“I hear Jay!” their mother called from the kitchen.

Kile grimaced as he continued down the hallway. “Now that’s a problem for you, brother.”

Ajay sighed as he moved through the living room. The children were in every chair, busily playing video games. The adults had started a board game on a fold up table. Ajay recognized Mr. Williams as one of the players. They nodded at each other pleasantly as Ajay turned to go into the kitchen.

“Good that you could join us, Ajay Kavanagh,” his mother said angrily as she stirred a pot with a ladle. Her motions were hard and quick, letting Ajay know how upset she was.

“Didn’t Julia explain?” Ajay wondered as he took a seat at the small kitchen table.

“She tried to make an excuse for you, yes,” his mother snapped back. She turned, suddenly, and pointed the dripping ladle at him. “I put up with a lot from you, son, but Sunday is a day of rest, not work! It’s a day to worship and be with your family.”

“I know, but it was very important,” Ajay replied contritely.

“If you start down that road, Jay,” his mother said as she tossed the ladle back into the pot, “Then you’ll start thinking that everything is more important. Take Julia. She said that she understood, that it was important, but in her heart, I could tell she wished you were here with her.”

“Ma,” Ajay persisted, “I helped people, today. It wouldn’t have kept until Monday.”

She met his eyes, taken aback by his quiet firmness, and then smiled softly. She left her pot and touched Ajay’s hand, giving it a light pat. “I’m sorry, Jay,” she said. “I forget that you’re a man grown, and that you know what you’re about. We raised you properly and I should trust that you’ll do what’s right.” She gave him a sharp slap, then, on his hand, and added, as she turned back to her pot, “but don’t make working on Sunday a habit.”

“I won’t, ma,” Ajay promised.

“Go rescue your Julia, then,” his mother urged. “I was giving her cooking tips, earlier, but then Steven dragged her off to talk about photography.”

“Why does that worry everyone?” Ajay wondered as he stood, but then thought about it and realized just how obnoxious and difficult his brother could be. “I had better go and see what they’re doing.”

Going up the stairs to Steven’s room, he could hear Steven talking excitedly through the open door. “I signed up for photography classes, but that’s next semester. It’s great that you’re helping me get a head start. Just drop that towel a bit, so I can make this shot.”

Ajay was sweeping into the room, then, anxiously imagining the worst, but then stopped when he saw Julia arranging a towel on a string strung across the room. It directed the light from a table lamp, missing its shade, so that it was shining just on one half of Julia.



“What’s going on?” Ajay asked as he calmed himself down.

Steven glared at him as he lowered a camera. “You would have to show up now, moron.”

Julia smiled at Ajay and motioned to the room. The table lamp wasn’t the only thing that had been commandeered into creating a makeshift photo studio. Steven’s sheet, an umbrella, and two more lamps from other parts of the house were in use. “I’m teaching your brother some photography techniques. He has a very good eye.”

“Ma was looking for you,” Steven said with relish. “She’s probably going to cook you with the potatoes after she yells at you.”

“Already talked to her,” Ajay shot back, “and, as you can see, I’m not part of the menu.”

“She always did like you best,” Steven grumbled, “Probably feels sorry for you because you’re such a moron.”

“How many times can you say moron?” Ajay wondered acidly. “Maybe they should buy you a thesaurus instead of camera equipment?”

“Hey, hey!” Julia exclaimed, her hands up and making calming motions. “Let’s everyone not fight. This is supposed to be family day, right? No fighting, just eating and relaxing.”

Steven snorted, “Just like I said to Jimmy Fekudo, down at the print shop, my brother’s a complete idiot.”

“Actually you said loser. He told me,” Ajay retorted before he could stop himself.

They stared at one another, both of them surprised, but then Steven sneered and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I told him you were a loser, and that you were the worst half in your relationship. Julia is way better than you are dumb ass.”

“I don’t like you calling Jay a loser. It isn’t true and I know you didn’t mean it,” Julia said crossly.

Steven shrugged and looked embarrassed. “Sorry. Guys talk shit about each other, you know?”

“I’m not better than your own brother, either,” Julia added.

“You understand me,” Steven countered. “You think I have potential.”

“So do I,” Ajay interjected, feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable, putting aside his usual hectoring attitude towards his brother. “I’m sorry if I made it seem otherwise. You can be really difficult, that’s all. It’s hard to know where you’re taking your life. I worry.”

"I already have Ma and Dad," Steven retorted. "Let them worry about it."

"All right," Ajay sighed, "I'll hold the insults. Now, if you're through using up Julia's time, and keeping her in your room like a ten year old, can she join the rest of the family?"

"Yeah," Steven said and then, shyly to Julia, "Can we do this again?"

"Sure," Julia replied. "Next week, I can show you some techniques for taking photos outside."

"That would be great!" Steven exclaimed excitedly. "I've always wanted to know how they manage to keep the glare and shadows off of outside portraits."

As Steven put his room back in order, Ajay led Julia back to the family room. He looked down at her and felt a sudden rush of emotion. As if sensing it, Julia looked up.

"What's wrong?" Julia wondered.

"Just appreciating how lucky I am that we're together," Ajay replied as he slipped an arm around Julia's waist. "My life is so much better, clearer, and more honest. I used to be such a confused man. A moron, just like Steven said."

Julia laughed and leaned into him, giving him a bump. "You've never been a moron, Jay, just distracted by your love of your career. Speaking of which, are you going to tell me what happened today?"

"I solved the case," Ajay replied, "and everything turned out all right."

"Details," Julia urged.

"Later," Ajay begged. "This is family time, after all."

"Will you be joining us, now, Jay?" Ajay's father's voice said irritably from the living room.

"Coming, Da!" Ajay called back

"Family time," Julia repeated firmly and Ajay could tell that she was feeling the warmth of belonging.

\*\*\*\*

The address for Kraton Development turned out to be a disused garage tucked between two

abandoned brownstone warehouses. The door was open, a rusted affair of heavy metal, rivets, and solid slider bars for security. Inside, there wasn't anything to secure. The floor was bare, the few windows broken, and pigeons were roosting in the metal upper struts that held the roof up. An office door was also open, trash piled in a corner, and the furnishings long gone.

Ajay had thought to make a surprise visit that Monday morning. He'd hoped to get some of his questions answered by lower level staff and to simply see what the company looked like. Looking down at the paper he had gotten from Wezel, he had to believe the man had made a mistake in his research.

A phone rang, startling Ajay and making the pigeons flutter in agitation. It continued to ring as he looked around, searching for it. Finally, he went into the office and shifted the pile of trash there with his foot. He found the phone underneath, still connected to a working jack in the wall.

Ajay gingerly picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Finally!" a voice snarled. "This is Thomas Demolition! I want your accounting department, right now. I want to know why my company hasn't been paid!"

"This is Detective Kavanagh," Ajay announced uncertainly. "Is this Mr. Thomas? We spoke Saturday, briefly."

"Do you work for Kraton?" Thomas demanded. "Were you spying for them, trying to see if I was going to sue? Well, you can tell your boss, that the papers are getting filed with my lawyer, today, unless I see a check."

"I don't work for Kraton," Ajay corrected him. "I came here to pursue my case. There's nothing here, Mr. Thomas, except an empty building and this phone."

"Then I've been screwed!" Thomas snarled. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this!"

"Do you have a contact number for them other than this one?" Ajay wanted to know.

"Yeah, just a minute," Thomas replied. There was the sound of paperwork and then he told Ajay the number. "A guy named Brighten always answered, but I don't know his first name. He gave me the orders. Nobody picks up when I call that number now, though."

"Thank you, Mr. Thomas," Ajay said as he scribbled the number and name in his notes.

"I'm still calling the lawyers," Thomas promised hotly. "If Kraton has another name or address,

they'll find it. They can't operate without permits."

"If you could call me, if you find anything out, I would appreciate it."

"I don't have time to talk to a friggin' detective," Thomas retorted and hung up.

Ajay hung up the phone and put it back on the floor. Sifting through the trash, he noticed that it contained bills and advertisements. The mailman had delivered, even though there wasn't anyone to take the mail. Ajay gathered up anything that looked important and then slipped them into his coat pocket.

Ajay called Wezel on his cell as he left the building and then caught a train to take him to the government district.

"Not there?" Wezel replied after Ajay was done giving him his information. He could hear Wezel tapping keys rapidly. "The name on the sales is Kraton and that is the address," he replied, but then he made a small noise and said, "Wait, there's another address. It's out of state, though. Looks like they're sending all the paperwork there as the main office." There was more typing. "Huh, that address is for a lawyer. A Daniel Brighton. Slick. The principals don't have to let anyone know who they are if they go through a law firm."

"I was told the sub-contractors were given their orders by a man named Brighton," Ajay told him thoughtfully.

"Then you probably need to speak with him if you want to know what's going on with Kraton," Wezel replied.

"Is there a contact number?" Ajay asked.

Wezel gave it to him and Ajay jotted it down.

"I thought this case was going to be a snoozer," Wezel admitted, "but it's turning out pretty challenging."

"It is," Ajay agreed, "but I think we're running out of time to solve this mystery. I'm sure, now that the demolition is completed, their agenda for those businesses will be swiftly carried out and the buildings themselves abandoned. Keep searching for any underground street maps. I think that would give us the best clue as to what their plans are."

"So you keep saying," Wezel sighed. "I'm coming up zero in that area. It's too bad that they're

keeping you from checking out the basements yourself.”

“If I had even a slight excuse, I might convince the police to give me a search warrant. Vague suspicions aren’t enough,” Ajay replied.

“What are you going to do, now?”

“Check government records again,” Ajay replied, “Then check police records to see if anyone has priors.”

“And you think the police are going to let you just waltz in and look through their records?” Wezel said sarcastically.

“I have ways,” Ajay replied.

“Ways,” Wezel repeated. “Like?”

“It’s legal,” Ajay assured him.

“I know you, Kavanagh,” Wezel replied. “With you, it’s always legal.”

“I’m happy to have a reputation like that,” Ajay replied.

Wezel only snorted and hung up the phone.

\*\*\*\*

The contact number for Brighton wasn’t answered and Ajay could imagine an empty office, like the one in the empty warehouse, ringing and disturbing roosting pigeons. Only a trip out of the state would confirm that, though, and Ajay wasn’t ready to travel for the case yet.

Government records were, once again, missing, and only an apology was forthcoming from a harried government worker who wasn’t pleased by the whole affair. The man was able to produce permits for on-site dumpsters and several people had signed them. Ajay jotted down the names and contact information. Everything else he researched that day listed Brighton.

Ajay was about to call Wezel with his new information, eyes scanning the business section for a likely place to eat lunch that would fit his budget, when he spotted the woman. She was sitting at a cafe table with a brunette woman, eating a salad and laughing at something the other woman had said.

Ajay didn’t rush in. He stood while foot traffic flowed around him, street noise a constant, while

he decided if approaching the woman was a good idea. She took it out of his hands when she glanced around at a waiter brushing by her, and then saw Ajay standing beyond him.

“Gotta go, girlfriend!” she said as she surged up from her chair, grabbing her briefcase and her handbag in the process.

“Penelope?” the other woman exclaimed in confusion. “The bill?”

She tossed a twenty on the table and said, as she started hurrying away, “Leave the rest for the tip!”

As if drawn by her wake, Ajay went after her, determined not to let her get away this time. He supposed it looked bad to the other woman left behind. A large man was pursuing her friend. If Penelope called out for help, Ajay was certain he would have a difficult time explaining himself.

Penelope looked over her shoulder, eyes wide in trepidation, as she took a sharp right and headed for a particular building. When she breezed into the lobby through automatic doors and Ajay followed her, he came face to face with a round logo for an architectural firm on one wall that told him who owned the building.

“Please, wait!” Ajay called after the woman.

She gave him a harsh look as she turned and stepped forward on high heels to jab a finger into his chest. “All I have to do is call the guards. If you’re looking for payback —”

“I’m not,” Ajay replied quickly. “I don’t mean you any harm at all. I just want to ask you a few questions.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “I hit you over the head and didn’t pay you. If you expect me to believe you don’t want a piece of me, then you must think I’m one hell of a dumb blonde.”

People entered the building and Ajay and the woman shuffled sideways to get out of their way, still confronting each other. A guard behind a desk was beginning to frown.

“You’re a woman, half my size, and you didn’t trust me,” Ajay replied. “I can understand your motivation. Why you were there, at all, and why people were pursuing you, is not information I’m after, right now. I’m working a case and vital information is missing from public records. A print shop informed me they had a customer who matches your description, and that customer had blueprints transferred to digital media. I need a copy of those blueprints if they are, as I suspect, the

ones I need.”

“You’re doing a hell of a lot of assuming, Detective,” she retorted. “Yeah, that was me, but I was on personal business. Nothing that I’m doing has anything to do with you, or any case you’re working. End of story. Have a nice day, boy scout.”

She turned on her heel. Ajay said quickly, “You could have had them copied at the office. You didn’t need to take them.”

“When people pay, you shut your mouth, and don’t ask questions,” she said over her shoulder.

The guard began moving in. Ajay watched the woman punch a button for the elevator. When the doors opened, she stepped inside and faced him. She pushed the button for the floor she wanted looking triumphant. Ajay took out his cell and took her picture.

“What are you doing?” the guard demanded, but Ajay was already leaving, tucking his cell back into his pocket.

When he was outside, Ajay’s notepad came out next. He scribbled notes, as the flow of foot traffic moved around him, as if he were a boulder in a stream. When he was done, he looked around the building, taking note that the government offices were very close on the left and that a consulting firm and a bank were closest on the right. The significance of that information wasn’t known to Ajay at the moment, but anything might be vital later on.

“Are you the cops?”

Ajay looked sideways and saw the brunette woman standing close, purse clutched almost defensively in front of her.

“No,” Ajay replied, “I’m Detective Kavanagh.”

“Oh, that’s different than the cops?” She seemed anxious, almost sorry that she had approached him.

“Do you work with Penelope?” Ajay wondered.

She was a little relieved, then. “You know her, then? You’ve talked with her?”

“I did speak with her,” Ajay replied.

“She’s been so different, lately,” the woman went on. “After she talked to that guy from the bank, she acts like everyone’s against her. He wanted her to help out, getting information from government

records, for loans, he said. She needed the extra money, so she was keen to take the offer. I don't know what went wrong, though. It's like she's frightened of her own shadow, sometimes. That's why I was afraid that she went and mixed herself up in something illegal. I'm glad that's not it."

She seemed suddenly nervous, putting a manicured hand to her mouth. "I probably shouldn't have said all of that."

"You're a good friend to worry," Ajay replied. "Did she say what the name of the banker was?"

"Pennyworth," the woman replied and then laughed at Ajay's surprised expression. "Great name for a banker, isn't it?"

"It is," Ajay agreed with a smile.

The woman warmed. "I can see why Penelope likes you. You're nice looking when you aren't looking so serious."

Ajay felt a blush as he began to say, quickly, "I'm not personally involved with Penel- Ms. Penelope."

The woman was already talking over him though, beginning to walk into the building as she checked her watch. "Lunch time is over. See you!"

Ajay made more notes and then decided to comb through government records again. He had new names and new suspects to research. One of them had to lead him to the clue he needed to pull the case together. He wasn't going to have one successful case, and completely lose another.

Ajay almost ran into Julia, or so he thought. When his initial shock wore off and his eyes focused, he discovered that it wasn't Julia in the flesh, but a poster of Julia. Ajay's blush returned full force and with it a good dose of confused anger. Confused, because he wasn't sure how he felt about his lover's image, a nude photo of her being grasped below the waist by a gang of bikers, while she rose up, in angelic splendor, towards a heavenly sky, being posted in a heavily crowded area of the city.

It was one thing to talk about Julia's shoots and modeling, it was another to see the completed work and to know that Julia had been freezing in the snow that day, only angel wings and her outspread hair to cover her. The bikers looked rough and lustful and the waif look that the photographer had loved, was in full force on Julia's face. She looked as if she had been flirting with hyperthermia.



Ajay's cell phone was in his hand before he realized it, open and waiting for his fingers to make a call. His mind struggled with emotion, eyes staring at the number of the gallery where the photographer's art photos were going to be displayed. Gut emotion wanted him to call that photographer and tell him that Julia would not be working for him again. His mind told him that would be a bad thing. Julia might not forgive his meddling in her career.

"Julia?" Ajay had called Julia, his mind winning, barely.

"It must be serious if you're calling me on a shoot," Julia said worriedly. "I'm taking five, guys!" she called and then she was back with Ajay. "Tell me what's wrong?"

"I saw posters," Ajay replied, trying to keep his emotions under check. "I'm upset."

"You're in the business district?" Julia guessed nervously. She took a deep breath and then said, "I knew that this was coming. Sometimes, Jay, you aren't going to approve of the jobs I get. I'm sorry this one upset you."

"Do you know which posters I'm speaking of?" Ajay wanted to know. "The one where you're naked, with angel wings?"

"I didn't want to give details," Julia replied anxiously. "You're religious. Having everyone seeing me naked was bad enough, but that —"

"Julia!" Ajay broke in, and then paused to get himself under control again, "It's not about any of that, though I am disturbed that this looks like... a rape... or close to it."

"Then I don't understand," Julia said in a small voice.

"You're naked, in freezing weather," Ajay replied sharply. "How long did he have you standing in the snow? Did he even let you wear shoes?"

"I was wearing a G-string and my boots... for most of it," Julia admitted.

"Julia, I can't tell you what to do with your life, or with your career," Ajay told her, "but I'll always let you know when things bother me. Doing a photo shoot, in terrible conditions that might have seriously injured you, bothers me strongly. In fact, I had the urge to find the photographer and punch him."

"Don't do that," Julia replied softly. "I'm sorry if you're upset. Looking back, I should have insisted on a studio shoot. He was so convincing, though, when he talked about realism and the

beauty of nature that can't be reproduced under hot lights and fake snow."

"It shouldn't be art at your expense," Ajay said, feeling himself calming down, as he began to walk.

There was a long pause, while both of them thought, and then Julia asked, almost tentatively, "When do you think you'll be home? I should be home around four."

"Early," Ajay sighed, thinking about the lack of leads he was getting so far. "This case keeps handing me names with very little actual information. I think I need to go over my notes and hope that something will connect."

"I can't remember if it's my turn to cook, or yours," Julia chuckled, feeling out Ajay's mood.

"Whoever gets home first, cooks," Ajay suggested and decided that he was through being angry.

"I'll try to beat you home, then," Julia teased.

Ajay chuckled. "Considering that my last attempt almost had us calling a coroner, I hope you do make it there first."

"Love you," Julia said, softly.

"I do love you," Ajay replied strongly and felt some embarrassment when people in the crowd gave him curious looks. "That's why I worry."

"I know," Julia replied. "See you soon."

Ajay pocketed his phone, glad that he had managed not to do anything drastic where Julia's artistic photographer was concerned. He felt almost weary now, not used to breaking out of his natural calm, his ability to parse facts and make decisions based on those facts, not emotions. That kind of anger; protective and possessive, if he wanted to admit it, was definitely new. He supposed it was because he had never truly cared about anyone as much as he cared about Julia. Seeing someone he loved so much being abused unnecessarily, made him want to punch something... or someone.

Gorilla, Jerry liked to call him, and Ajay felt like one at that moment. What he was feeling, he was certain, had to spring from basic instinct, the need to protect one's mate. Ajay felt embarrassed, but almost proud as well. His emotions conflicted with each other as primeval instincts and modern thought processes collided.

A trip to the gym was in order, before he went home, Ajay decided. A good workout, and a few

rounds with a punching bag, he felt, would work it out of his system.

## Chapter Eight

“You must have stopped at the gym. Shower, now,” Julia complained as she poured noodles into a pot of boiling water. She was dressed in a long, natural fiber dress with a tribal motif in red swirling around the hem. The long sleeves were rolled up and she had tied a red scarf around her head to keep back her loose hair. She looked very domestic.

Ajay tried to hug her from behind, but Julia’s elbow in his ribs kept him off.

“All right,” Ajay sighed, but paused to look at the noodles dubiously. “Those don’t look –”

“I know!” Julia retorted, scowling. “I think the water wasn’t hot enough when I put the noodles in the first time.”

“Take them out, now, then,” Ajay suggested. “Boiling them, again, won’t help.”

“I guess...” Julia dumped the pot of noodles and water into a strainer in the sink. They both stared at the noodles, noticing how sticky and unappetizing they looked.

“There will be sauce, won’t there?” Ajay wondered hopefully.

“Something spicy,” Julia promised, “To cover the taste.” She wrinkled her nose and repeated, “Shower.”

Ajay gave the noodles a last, dubious look and then went to comply. He took his time, letting hot water take away the bone deep chill of the winter weather. When Julia joined him, completely naked and hair unbound, he asked, stupidly, “What about dinner?”

“I don’t think even spicy sauce is going to save that meal,” Julia sighed. “I thought, maybe, I could make you forget all about eating.”

With the hot water cascading over Julia’s lithe body, and her hair quickly turning into a wet, golden cloak, she sank to her knees on the tiles. She took hold of Ajay’s large erection and began to suck on it with abandon.

Ajay leaned against the tile, hands flat against the surface and legs spread to keep his weak knees from taking him down to join Julia. Looking down, watching Julia’s mouth work on him, almost made him shoot, then and there.

Julia was very good. As Ajay panted in pleasure, a small corner of his mind wondered where, and with whom, she had gained that experience. It was a tinge of jealousy, Ajay knew, and pushed it down ruthlessly. Neither of them were virgins going into their relationship, and he wasn't about to think of Julia as easy, because she was so obviously very experienced. They were together, now, and that was all that mattered. Julia was giving that experience to him, and, Ajay thought, he firmly believed that Julia was giving him pleasure with love and far more enthusiasm than she would have anyone else.

Watching Julia's small hand pump him, and her tight mouth slide up and down his shaft while the hot water drenched them both, was a sight that had Ajay spurting in no time. Julia sucked and swallowed it down, her face showing her pleasure.

Leaning against Ajay's legs, she said breathlessly, "I'm drowning."

"Starving and drowning," Ajay agreed and then, with passion, "Thank you, love."

Julia smiled warmly as she looked up at him through the spray of water. "It's a pleasure for me, too, you know?"

"I'm glad," Ajay replied as he pulled Julia to her feet and held her close. Raking Julia's wet hair out of her face, he kissed her long and deep, tasting himself on Julia's tongue.

The difference in their sizes was stark when they stood together like that. It made Ajay feel naturally protective, even though Julia's much smaller body wasn't weak by any means. It had almost become Ajay's mantra to think, Julia can take care of herself, because he knew that Julia craved his respect as much as she craved his love.

"You're thinking hard about something," Julia teased as they broke the kiss. "Only you could manage to think about anything after sex."

They stood, bodies pressed together and Ajay's beginning to take interest again. Julia gave his erection a teasing, tight fisted stroke that had Ajay gasping. "I-I was thinking about you," he admitted.

"I can feel that," Julia snickered.

"I want you to know," Ajay managed, "That I've never been with anyone like you."

Julia raised eyebrows. "I am one of a kind," she agreed.

Ajay smiled and cupped a hand under Julia's chin. "I don't want you to ever think that..." he struggled for the words. "I'm not..." That didn't work either. He stopped, not sure how to say what he was feeling.

Julia said for him, suddenly serious. "You don't want me to think that it's just sex?"

Ajay nodded.

Julia snorted. "Ajay Kavanagh, you don't need to keep reassuring me about that."

Ajay ducked his head, suddenly shy. "With other women I've had a problem with expressing myself, in not paying attention to --"

Julia sighed. "You didn't love them. Jay, I can tell that you love me. You tell me by everything that you say and do. Even this stupid conversation tells me how much you care." She leaned down suddenly and swallowed Ajay's erection. Ajay gripped at Julia's shoulders in shock as she sucked him hard several times and then released him. She straightened with a smile. "Stop thinking so much," she admonished.

"I-I have," Ajay confessed in a breathless voice.

Julia turned off the shower and stepped out to grab a towel. "Good, because I still need to be satisfied. Once you please me, my stomach needs attention. Maybe we can try the noodles, again, together?"

Ajay was eager to follow her, his body rising to the challenge.

\*\*\*\*

The sun through the window woke Ajay the next morning. His mind puzzled over that, making vain attempts to argue that it should be dark, that it was nearly eight p.m. After all, and dinner had to be made again. Logic, bolstered by a bleary look at the bedside clock, finally asserted itself, and Ajay had to come to terms with the fact that they had slept all night. His stomach let him know just how unhappy it was about that.

Julia was sprawled out on the bed, her hair a gold spray of loose curls on the pillow. She was breathing deep and even enough to tell Ajay that she wouldn't be waking up soon. Tucked up on the edge, and minus any covers, it was easy for Ajay to roll off the mattress without disturbing his lover. Leaving her in possession of the bed, Ajay decided that breakfast was going to be his main priority.

Dressing quickly, he was soon downstairs and out on the street, headed for the smell of coffee and fresh baked goods. Davey was behind the counter at Mr. Alusius's bakery, giving him a friendly nod over the heads of the other customers, who were using up every available space to stand and chat, while eating and drinking what they had just purchased.

"Jay!"

"Mornin', Jay."

"Awake early, Jay?"

"I'm fine, just wanted some breakfast," Ajay greeted everyone at once and called over their heads, "One hot tea, one black coffee..." but Davey was already waving away his order and getting it ready, knowing what Ajay and Julia liked.

"How's the little woman?" Ajay looked down and saw Mrs. Padrick, the owner of the butcher shop down the street. A short, round woman, her hair was dyed red and was put into a bun on the top of her head. She had strong arms from personally hauling slabs of beef about the shop, herself. Her expression was smug, showing Ajay that she was proud of her knowledge about his relationship. That smugness turned to confusion when someone piped up, "Not little woman."

"Jay doesn't like her called that," ancient Mr. Daughtry, a one-time friend of his father's father, and a retired veteran of the police force, shook his cane at Mrs. Padrick. "You wouldn't either, meat for brains."

"I didn't mean any disrespect," Mrs. Padrick shot back irritably. "That's what people called me when my husband was alive. The little woman."

"Nothing little about you," someone muttered in the crowd and she glared.

"She's not his wife, yet" Mr. Harris said as he sipped cautiously at hot coffee. "She's a... what do you call her, Jay?"

"Not little woman," Ajay replied firmly, even while he wondered himself. Partner? Lover?

Room-mate? Significant other? Girlfriend made it seem like they weren't serious, or they were still in high school.

"No offense," Mrs. Padrick apologized.

"None taken," Ajay replied. "She's doing fine," Ajay answered the first question. "Sleeping in."

"Ah, good to hear it," Mrs. Padrick replied and then she was back in conversation with the others about something else.

Soul mate? Ajay was still trying out names when his order was handed back to him by the crowd and he gave money to be handed back to Davey. When he heard the cash register ring, and Davy's cheery, "Have a great day!" he was saying goodbye to his neighbors and leaving the shop, already stuffing a fresh bagel into his mouth.

Ajay was halfway back to the apartment when his cell rang. He froze, hands full and not sure how to answer the call. Competent, old hands took things out of his hands, then. A wide brim on a hat rose, revealing the keen black eye of Mr. Yamato. He said impatiently, "Answer your cell. The drinks are hot."

Ajay took the bagel out of his mouth and then stuffed it into a pocket.

"Thank you," Ajay replied, recovering, and then fished his cell out of his coat pocket and answered it. "This is Detective Kavanagh, how may I help you?"

"This is Dr. Francis Furnier," a voice replied. "I think I am ready to speak with you, Detective. Can you be at Gravley Heights Park in a half an hour?"

"Yes, of course. That's close to your business, isn't it?" Ajay recalled.

"My former business, yes," the man replied tightly. "I've an interest in not allowing my family to hear what I have to say to you."

"I'll be there," Ajay promised.

The cell disconnected. Ajay checked his watch, thought of logistics, and knew that he had to hurry. "Mr. Yamato, could you please take these to my... to ..."

"Your life partner, Julia?" Mr. Yamato supplied with a glint of amusement in his eye.

Ajay froze, and then was nodding, liking the sound of the phrase, "Yes, my life partner. Do you mind?"



The old man shrugged little shoulders in his overlarge coat and scarf. "I am not a *go for*, young man."

"It's important," Ajay begged.

"Very well, then," Mr. Yamato sighed.

Ajay looked past him at the snow covered city garden, suddenly concerned for an old man out in the cold. "Why are you out here?"

"Wondering why there are not younger hands to do the work for me," Mr. Yamato replied irritably.

"Work?" Ajay surveyed the garden again, dormant under its blanket of snow.

"There is always work," Mr. Yamato told him. "Always back breaking, hard work."

A cheerful dog came ambling out of the bushes and nosed Ajay's shoes.

"And dogs have to be walked?" Ajay chuckled, relieved.

Mr. Yamato gave him a dire look from under his hat and then smiled. His face crinkled with even more lines. "All right, young Kavanagh, so I was not working. Still, in a few months..."

"I'll be here, helping," Ajay promised. He checked his watch. "Thank you again, Mr. Yamato. I have to go."

"Go, go!" Mr. Yamato retorted as he handed Ajay his cup of coffee and kept the rest. Ajay turned and hurriedly walked away to catch the bus as Yamato called after him crossly, "A bagel shall be my payment, young man!"

Ajay waved his acknowledgment without turning. It reminded him of his own bagel. He took it out of his pocket and finished eating it, hurriedly drinking his coffee before it could cool off as he made the bus just in time and found a seat.

The weather turned miserable in short order and Ajay found himself stepping off the bus just when sleet began pounding the pavement and snow turned to slush. He dumped his empty containers into the nearest garbage and then pulled up the collar of his coat as he made his way into the park.

Joggers were running for home and people were tugging pets hurriedly out of the park to escape the weather, leaving the park almost deserted.

Not seeing anyone on the walkways, Ajay decided that a central gazebo was probably where Dr. Furnier might have taken shelter. Shivering with wet and cold, he mounted the steps and almost ran into the man. He recovered with an apology, stepping back, and then held out a hand to shake. Mr. Furnier ignored it.

Ajay lowered his hand and put it into his pocket to warm. "Hello, Dr. Furnier. Thank you for seeing me."

"Detective Kavanagh," It wasn't a question. The slim, elderly man stood straight and seemed to look down his nose at Ajay, even though he was more than a head shorter. Bundled in a scarf, hat, and thick coat, his oriental features were tight with annoyance. Ajay wasn't certain whether that annoyance was directed at him or the foul weather.

"I'm not what you expected?" the man sniffed when Ajay took a moment to catch his breath and order his thoughts enough to ask his questions. "My great grandfather was adopted," the man explained. "Furnier was the name of his American parents."

"It wasn't my intention to offer any disrespect, sir," Ajay was quick to reply.

"I'm telling you this, Detective, so that you understand how important the pharmacy was to my family," Dr. Furnier told him. "Freshly immigrated to America, my great grandfather's parents succumbed to illness and died. He was left alone to fend for himself. In those days, migrants were not always welcomed into orphanages, were not always taken into protection when things went badly. Dr. Furnier, the elder, found my great grandfather on the street, felt sorry for him, and later, adopted him. He left the pharmacy to him in his will and it has remained in our family since. Selling it cut out my heart and the heart of my family. I haven't been able to live with that decision."

Ajay took out his notebook and pencil, tugging off one glove so that he could write. "If it was a legal sale," he replied, "There isn't any legal recourse for you, Dr. Furnier."

"Legal!" the man scoffed. "Is it legal to threaten an old man into selling?"

"You were threatened?" Ajay tamped down on his excitement and kept his tone even, "Do you have proof of that?"

Dr. Furnier scowled. "What is proof? If he says, I have friends in key positions that can make sure you are made penniless, I don't see how I can prove it. If a man tells me that he can take my business

from me, by making a turn lane on my street, or having inspectors force so many repairs that the cost will bankrupt me, how can I prove that? My only choice was not to lose everything, Detective Kavanagh."

Dr. Furnier was looking around them nervously, then, and his voice lowered as he hunched into his scarf. "Who told you all of this?" Ajay asked. "Is he still threatening you?"

"His name is Tavis Crowler," Dr. Furnier replied. "I feel I am being watched, yes, that, if I do make the wrong call, the wrong contact, that something might happen, something unpleasant. He seems dangerous. I do believe him when he says he has people who can ruin me. His dress and manner was slick, like a politician, or one of those men on television... high powered executive types."

"You might have been followed," Ajay warned. "This meeting might not have been a good idea."

Furnier gave Ajay a long, disdainful look. "I have been careful. I have made this a walking routine, including the stop at the Gazebo. Your part must be, a man seeking shelter from the weather. When I leave, you will remain, and then journey onward past this place to some destination. It will seem a chance meeting. Two men who don't like the cold."

"I understand," Ajay replied and put away his notepad, hoping that no one had seen it.

"I hope that you do when I tell you that the man who contacted me, and pressured me to sell, was not a Mr. Tavis Crowler," Dr. Furnier told him. "When he reached into his wallet, to hand me his contact card, I saw his license, briefly. It said Carmen Angelico. That is the man that you are after."

Ajay felt a throb in the center of his forehead. So many false leads and names that had led nowhere. It was a kick of adrenaline to finally have something concrete handed to him. Still, there was the matter of evidence. It was difficult to tell Dr. Furnier, "Without any direct evidence; cause and effect, recordings, or witnesses, your information can't bring Mr. Angelico to justice. It can't return your pharmacy to your family."

The man turned grim. "My business is gone, Detective. Gutted. I will never regain enough money to rebuild it. I want justice, revenge. Find this man, this Angelico, and gather enough proof to put him behind bars. It may not be the proof that he took my business from me, but knowing he is punished will be enough to take some of this weight of guilt and regret off my shoulders."

"I'll try, Dr. Furnier," Ajay promised. "I live in a neighborhood very much like yours. I know I would feel devastated if that business's ended up like yours. They are the heart of the community."

"I don't know why he wanted to gut every shop on that street," Dr. Furnier told him, "but that he ended that destruction at the deli is surely a powerful clue to his intentions. I will hope you find out what those intentions are and stop this man from destroying any more lives, any more neighborhoods."

"I will do my best, Dr. Furnier," Ajay promised.

"You do understand," Dr. Furnier said with a nod of respect. "I believe that you will do what is right."

Wrapping his scarf more tightly around him, he walked into the sleet and the wind and hurried away. Ajay didn't watch him go, but faced, instead, the opposite direction, like a man hoping that the weather would break soon enough for him to reach his own destination.

If anyone was watching, Ajay couldn't detect them. He hoped that Dr. Furnier wasn't putting himself into danger by meeting with him, and that his imagination had painted danger when there wasn't any. He recalled those men guarding the demolition site, and the implied threat that they had given him. He could understand Dr. Furnier's fear.

A man, with an overlarge dog, joined Ajay under the gazebo. While the dog tried to muddy his pants legs, tail whipping excitedly back and forth in pleasure at Ajay's presence, they talked about the weather, a baseball game Ajay wasn't familiar with, and a bit of politics, before the man was peering at the sudden lack of sleet and going on his way. Ajay felt truly relieved to finally leave himself.

The deli seemed a good cover. Ajay avoided the work site and went in. A petite woman was behind the counter instead of the owner. She looked happy to have a new customer and Ajay was happy to get a sandwich for lunch.

"This is good," Ajay said around a mouthful of food.

"Butter and salt in a pan," she said with a wink and a thick, European accent, "Fry the sausage until they burst. Throw in onions to fry near the end, toast the buns on top, and serve. Simple."

"It might be good without the bun," Ajay mused as he savored the flavor.

“Good with garlic bread on the side,” she agreed, “and a tossed salad. Are you thinking of cooking for your sweet heart?”

“Maybe,” Ajay replied carefully. “Cooking is not my strong suit.”

“Simple,” she repeated more strongly. “You’re not simple. You can do it.” She rang up the sausage, onions in olive oil, garlic bread, and an antipasto salad without asking. Ajay found himself paying for it without argument.

The woman tapped her nose. “Use your nose, not your eyes, when you cook. It will tell you what you need and when something is done.”

“Thank you,” Ajay replied and then, remembering more important matters, he asked, “How is Mr. Fishburn?”

“Taking the day off,” she replied as she cleaned her counter and then took out a package of meat to prepare.

“The last time I saw him, he was worried that construction would hurt his business,” Ajay fished. “Have things been all right?”

“Fine, fine!” she replied as she waved her sharp knife in the air and then plunged it into the meat. “They’ve stopped all the noise and the floor doesn’t shake any more. Mr. Fishburn doesn’t like those men coming in here, though. Not the workers, but those men in fancy suits. When they talk to him he’s upset for the entire day. I’ll be glad when it’s all over.” She eyed Ajay over the counter. “I’m hoping for some clothing shops to go in, or a few nice restaurants, but Mr. Fishburn says nothing’s going there. I don’t know why they would go to so much trouble, though, if they weren’t going to build something.”

“I don’t know either,” Ajay replied. “Please tell Mr. Fishburn that I was in. He juggled his packages of food and handed her a card.

She took it and tossed it onto the counter behind her. “I’ll let him know.” She tapped her nose with the tip of the sharp knife. “Remember, use your nose and everything will go well.”

Ajay was confused by the change of subject and then remembered. “Dinner will tell me when it’s done by the smell?”

“Right,” she agreed and went back to cutting.

“Thank you...?”

“Isabeau,” she supplied.

“Isabeau,” he echoed with a smile, but that smile turned to concern as he left the shop and caught the bus back to his office.

\*\*\*\*

“Is that lunch?” Dr. Malevona wondered as Ajay walked into her clinic carrying his packages.

“I forgot about these,” Ajay explained nervously as women, waiting their turn to see the doctor, looked up from a long line of chairs. “Can I put them in your refrigerator for an hour?”

“An hour?” She snorted as she tucked a clipboard under her arm. “That refrigerator is for medicines, specimens, and blood work, Kavanagh, not your deli lunch.”

“And your soda and stash of orange freezer pops,” an assistant said as she passed them by.

Katie glared. “I need those for energy and hydration,” she argued.

Ajay waggled his packages. “Please?”

“An hour,” she warned.

“Just an hour,” he agreed.

She took them, dubiously, and headed for her refrigerator.

Ajay was glad to leave the clinic. There was something about a room full of women, all waiting for examinations, he didn’t want to think about. It made him want to avoid the doctor’s clinic at all costs.

Back in the safe haven of his office, Ajay closed the door and began making notes. When those were done, he spread them out on his desk, put them in order, and then began pinning them to a wallboard.

Wezel had tried desperately to get Ajay to use his computer, showing him how to organize, save, and print. Staring at written notes seemed far better at triggering thoughts and conclusions, though.

Physically touching and organizing those notes made the facts more solid and the hunches more sensible. He could see a pattern that would never occur to him on a computer screen.

A company in name only. A lawyer buying the property and making contact calls for demolition. Non-payment of loans and services. Stolen documents. A woman afraid and pursued. A woman who worked in the very area where said documents had been stolen. A woman who had been seen having documents converted to digital media. A banker. Threatened shop owners. A sign that said Fortune's Lightning. A bevy of names that led nowhere and new ones that had potential.

Mr. Fishburn's new visitors were on his notes, now, as well. If he were to formulate a theory, based on the actions of Kraton Development so far, Ajay could only assume they hadn't accomplished with the first buildings what they had hoped for. Some development, now, made it imperative that they acquire Fishburn's deli. How they were going to do that, when their loans were now in arrears, was another question that needed an answer.

Information, first, Ajay thought. The documents detailing the street plans and the building of the shops were gone. Someone had needed them to confirm something. Ajay moved Penelope's notes into place. It was very possible that Penelope had used her position to acquire the documents for a man named Pennyworth. She had been frightened and had had felt the need to copy those documents in a safe area.

Purchases, second. Brighton and his team of lawyers had fronted the purchases of several old businesses. Coercion was suspected and confirmed by Dr. Furnier.

Action, third. Kraton Development had been created to front a demolition operation. Once finished, no permits for rebuilding, or plans to sell the properties had materialized. Ajay's best theory was that they were attempting to now purchase Fishburn's deli.

Motive? Ajay frowned, rubbing his forehead in frustration that this key element to solving the case still remained elusive. He stared at his wall, the note that read Fortune's Lightning hovering on the edge of his loosely fitted together pattern of events. Some instinct told him that name was important. It had been left there for a reason, when nothing else, he had been told, had remained to be salvaged. It remained to be seen if it pertained to the case at hand, though.

Ajay checked his watch and was surprised at how much time had passed. Collecting his notes

from the wall, he bundled them together in order and tucked them into his pocket.

He needed a visit to Wezel, he thought as he left his office. The man might be able to at least tell him who Pennyworth and Penelope were and where they might fit into the case.

Bracing himself, Ajay returned to Dr. Malevona's clinic. There were fewer women waiting and the doctor was in an examination room. Her assistant gave Ajay a flirting smile and didn't mind retrieving his food. She held it, though, both of their hands on the packages, and didn't let him have it immediately.

"I went to the store and bought peppers for you," she admitted. "When you're dealing with big, meaty sausages, spicy, hot, and moist is what every man wants."

Her innuendos were so blatant Ajay was too shocked to think of a response.

"He's got a girlfriend," one of the waiting women informed the assistant without looking up from the magazine she was reading.

The assistant glared at the woman. "A girl might still have a chance, if she's good enough."

The woman snorted. "I've seen his girlfriend. You don't have a chance."

Ajay was blushing hotly. He gave a hard pull on his packages and the assistant swayed as they were forced out of her hands. "Thank you," he managed. "For...keeping them."

"Anytime!" she called after him, making it an offer that had nothing to do with refrigerating food, as Ajay made a hasty retreat.

There was a time, Ajay remembered, when he would have taken her offer. His earlier efforts to date had left a trail of angry, broken-hearted women. It had always been a case of going through the motions. He had never felt anything, but a minimal sexual excitement by who ever happened to be beneath him in bed. He could have used a pillow or his hand with the same result. Crude, but apt, and Ajay still felt ashamed that he had been too dense, too caught up in his career and his goals, to realize that he had been hurting them.

Julia was always on his mind, and in his daydreams, and the only woman he thought of when physical desire needed release. He had found his life partner, and nothing less would do, or even come close to how he felt about her. Again marriage came to mind. It didn't seem foolish, or too soon any longer to contemplate the idea.



Ajay shifted his coat to hide his physical reaction to his train of thought. He still had hours of work until he could enjoy the warmth of Julia's embrace. He needed to concentrate on the case.

Ajay's phone rang. When he answered it and his mother said, "How are you, Jay?" It was like a bucket of cold water. Ajay felt a rush of embarrassment, as if his mother had just caught him in a compromising position. She had, he realized with a hotter blush, just not one she was aware of.

"I'm fine, ma," Ajay replied as he went back out into the cold weather and headed for his old apartment building. "I'm working."

"I wouldn't have called," she apologized, "but your Julia wasn't answering your home phone."

"You do have her cell number, ma," Ajay replied impatiently as he wove through pedestrians. "Don't be afraid to call it."

"Well, I thought this was... personal," Ajay's mother said uncertainly. "Maybe I'm old fashioned, but cell phone conversations can be heard by anyone close by. I don't want strangers giving ear to what's our family concerns."

"Family concerns?" Ajay echoed. "Is something wrong, ma?"

"Well," she replied firmly, "This would be one of those times where I wouldn't want to talk about it over your cell phone. When would Julia be home, again?"

"I'm not sure where she's gone," Ajay admitted.

"You don't know where she's gone?" His mother was mystified. "Why not?"

"I had to leave early on business," Ajay replied defensively. "She was still asleep. She might have gone out to do a modeling job."

"Gig," his mother corrected.

"Gig?" Ajay repeated, puzzled.

"Steven says that artists have gigs, not jobs," his mother informed him. "Still, returning to your lack of concern about Julia, I must point out that you've walked this road before, son. If you want to keep Julia, show more interest in her. You should know exactly what she is doing, where she is at --"

"Ma," Ajay said, cutting her off. "We don't have regular jobs. We are both called on a moment's notice. We both understand that."

"You assume that, Jay, but people don't always say how they really feel."

"We've talked about it," Ajay assured her. "It's all right, ma."

"If you think so," she replied and her tone told Ajay she didn't believe it. "Tell Julia I wanted to speak with her, when you see her again."

"All right, ma," Ajay said, mystified.

"Be careful, Jay," his mother told him and Ajay knew she was speaking about the case now.

"Always," Ajay replied.

"Was that your mother?" Mr. Alusius asked as he leaned on a broom, smiling at Ajay, just outside his bakery door.

"Yes," Ajay replied and couldn't help sounding a bit frustrated.

"They always see you as their babies, you know," Mr. Alusius chuckled. "They can't help it."

"I know," Ajay sighed as he pocketed his cell and arranged his packages of food to balance better in his hands.

Mr. Alusius frowned and then said, "What's that? I don't recognize the name on the packages."

"A deli uptown. I was asking questions for a case and then decided to take dinner home."

Mr. Alusius looked closely at the packages. "Looks good," he said, but then added, "but no dinner is complete without fresh bread. Wait here."

Alusius went into his shop. Ajay could see Davey inside asking questions as Mr. Alusius went behind the counter. Davey then looked up and waved, with a smile, at Ajay. He said something to Mr. Alusius that caused a small argument, but then Mr. Alusius was coming back out of the shop with a loaf of bread in a large bag.

"Put everything in here," Mr. Alusius told Ajay and helped him put his packages in the bag. Holding the bag out to Ajay, he said, "Good, crusty bread, with dipping olive oil. It will make your meal perfect, tonight."

"Thank you," Ajay replied, not pointing out that he already had garlic bread. Getting bread from somewhere else, almost felt like cheating on Mr. Alusius.

Ajay began to dig for his wallet.

"Pay me later," Mr. Alusius growled as he waved Ajay away and took up his broom again. What he meant, Ajay was certain, was not to pay him at all.

“Later, then,” Ajay said with firmness, letting Mr. Alusius know that he fully intended to pay for it.

When he reached Wezel’s apartment, Ajay wasn’t surprised when the man reached for the bag and asked eagerly, “That for me?”

“No,” Ajay replied as he passed Wezel and went to sit by the man’s computers.

Wezel frowned, “You know, this isn’t a real office, Jay-Jay. It’s my home. You could try for some politeness, manners, even knocking before you came in. I could have been in the middle of something.”

Ajay looked over at old Weasel asleep in a comfortable recliner. He was snoring softly. “Like?”

Wezel scowled as he sat in front of his keyboards. “All right, whatever. Don’t rub it in. Got anything for me, like, money?”

Ajay propped a few twenties on Wezel’s keyboard. Wezel grabbed them and tested them between his fingers, grinning.

“That’s my man!” Wezel exclaimed and then stacked them neatly beside his keyboard. “Info?”

Ajay pulled out his notes. “I need information on a Mr. Pennyworth. He works at the Northside Bank, uptown.”

“What’s he up to?” Wezel wanted to know as he began typing. “I hope it’s something important, because, so far, I’ve got nothing for you. These guys are good at hiding behind the paperwork.”

“I’m not sure if he fits into my case,” Ajay replied as he watched Wezel work. “Documents are missing. He requested documents. I also need you to find anything you can about a woman, first name Penelope, who works at Foundation Architecture. She was retrieving the documents for Pennyworth. She felt the need to copy them onto digital media.”

“For herself?” Wezel wondered.

“I don’t know,” Ajay replied. “Before she hit me on the head, she seemed afraid that men were after her. It’s possible those men could have been agents of Pennyworth, or agents from the government building where she might have taken documents illegally.”

“Hit you- She’s THAT woman?” Wezel asked in amazement. “You talked to her?”

“Briefly,” Ajay replied. “She was very defensive.”

"I can imagine," Wezel grunted and then pointed to his computer screen. "Titus Pennyworth, a commercial loan officer in Northside bank. How much do you want to bet that he okayed the loans for your Kraton Development?"

"That's a theory," Ajay warned. "Find me the facts." As Wezel grumbled and typed, Ajay flipped through his notes and then told him, "I also need information on a Carmen Angelico."

"And he is?"

"The man who threatened Dr. Furnier and convinced him to sell his business," Ajay replied.

Wezel sat up in his chair, excited. "Theory?"

"Accusation, by Dr. Furnier himself," Ajay corrected.

Wezel looked relieved. "Nice to know, for a fact, that I'm doing all of this for a good reason."

"Not fact," Ajay reminded him.

"Accusation," Wezel repeated. "Yeah, yeah, but still better than what we were going on before."

"Agreed."

As Ajay read over his notes and old Weasel kept sleeping, young Wezel did his research. At last he said, "Mr. Pennyworth didn't get his job by having any financial black eyes. He doesn't owe anyone money and he makes his payments on time, according to his credit report. He has been playing the stock market, though, and investing in some start-up companies. Nothing very profitable, but it does show that he's willing to take some risks."

Ajay made notes as Wezel checked on Penelope. He grunted and pointed out a long line of money troubles.

"Your head basher likes to shop. Penelope Ashford. She owes and owes big time," Wezel told him. "She definitely has a motive, if you suspect she's doing something illegal. Her social networks tell me that she's popular, she hates her mother, and her last boyfriend was a dick. Nice picture."

Ajay looked up and saw a posted pic of Penelope smiling. She looked different without the tense, fearful expression that he was used to.

"Foundation Architecture?" Ajay wondered.

Wezel tapped keys. "They're tight with their info. No news reports, lawsuits, or government take overs."

Ajay blinked at him.

"It was a joke. Lighten up, Kavanagh," Wezel grumbled. "I can't believe Julia likes that dead serious personality of yours."

Ajay didn't reply that Julia was allowed to see a side of him that only seemed to come alive when he was with her.

"Carmen Angelico," Wezel said, interrupting a pleasant memory of Ajay and Julia together. Wezel tapped at his screen. "No photo. Just some bits and pieces. Small time crime record. Doesn't seem to own anything or stick his nose in the news. I think you're looking at what's called *muscle* by the mafia."

"If that's the same Angelico that I'm looking for," Ajay replied.

"Everything's an if on the web," Wezel reminded him. "I don't see another one, though."

"Any contact information?" Ajay wanted to know.

"Not that I can access," Wezel sighed. "This is a crime watch website. They gave Angelico three bloody knives out of ten. Not a good neighbor, but not someone to move away from in a panic for your life."

"No record of who he might work for?" Ajay asked as he made notes.

Wezel grunted, "You're just going to say, Weasel, you're jumping to conclusions without proof, but I do think organized crime is mixed up in this."

"I'm not supposed to call you Weasel," Ajay reminded him. He could feel Wezel's glare as he continued making notes and refused to crack a smile. "It seems that an organized group, very aware of legal maneuverings, is behind this," Ajay allowed, "but it's mostly heresy, so far."

"You were supposed to check out police records?" Wezel reminded him. "Found the nerve, yet?"

Ajay tucked away his notebook and stood up. "Not nerve, facts," Ajay replied. "I have enough names and facts that will make a trip to the police department worthwhile."

"Who's going to be your stoolie?" Wezel wanted to know.

"Stoolie?" Ajay was mystified and then he corrected, "Informant. This isn't about breaking any laws. It's about getting information that's available to someone working a case legitimately for the police department. Krowl gave —"

“Krowl?” Wezel’s red eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “You think Krowl is going to tell you anything? Didn’t we decide that he gave you this case to get it out of his hands?”

“He knows me,” Ajay replied as he gathered up his bag of food. “I’m thorough.”

“Methodical. Persistent. A pain in the ass,” Wezel finished. “Even more reasons for him to give you the finger.”

“I’m going to rely on his professionalism,” Ajay told him as Wezel tipped open his bag and looked at the contents.

“That’s like relying on a man without any hands to hold a rope and keep you from falling off of a cliff,” Wezel muttered and then added, as he let go of the bag and headed for the kitchen, “Tomato sauce. You need tomato sauce in with the sausage and the peppers.”

Wezel came back with a can and put it into the bag. “Not a lot, just enough to get everything cooking together.”

“I’m not certain why everyone is confident that I can cook any of this food,” Ajay replied with a sigh. “It may become a complete, burned, mess.”

“Sausage is simple,” Wezel retorted. “Just pay attention to it as much as you pay attention to Julia’s ass.”

Ajay gave him a sour look, but then admitted, “We ruined pasta.”

“Pasta?” Wezel repeated and then shrugged, “Pasta dishes can be —”

“Just boiling the pasta,” Ajay added.

“Oh,” Wezel replied, but then tapped his nose and said, “When the smell of cooking peppers, onions, sausage, and tomato sauce fills your apartment, you’re done. Got it? And keep stirring and turning.”

“I’ll try,” Ajay replied uncertainly.

“When are you calling Krowl?” Wezel wondered.

“Now,” Ajay replied.

“Now?” Wezel echoed and then looked nervous as Ajay took out his cell and dialed the officer’s number.

“Officer Krowl?” Ajay said when the man picked up the phone. “This is Detective Kavanagh.”

"You're bothering me," Krowl grumbled and Ajay heard paperwork turning.

"I need to meet with you to discuss my case," Ajay told him firmly. "When is a good time?"

"To hear you admit defeat? Wednesday, at ten, sharp, should be good," Krowl replied. "That way I can tell everyone at lunch and have a good laugh."

"Wednesday at ten is fine," Ajay replied. "I'll meet you, then."

Ajay disconnected the call and pocketed his cell. Wezel looked at him suspiciously. "That was too easy. I didn't exactly hear you tell him why you wanted a meeting."

"I did," Ajay corrected as he headed for the door. "I told him that I wanted to discuss the case."

"That's not really the same as a request for police records," Wezel pointed out, but he looked pleased at Ajay's cleverness.

"We'll discuss it when I get there," Ajay said, "Call me if you find anything pertinent."

"I'm telling you that you need to talk to that historian, the one who thinks a treasure is buried down there, somewhere," Wezel told him. "He knew a hell of a lot about your city block and what went on there. Isn't that what you need to know? History?"

"Concrete history," Ajay replied with his hand on the doorknob. He frowned and then relented. Taking out his notebook, he asked, "Tell me his name and number."

"Professor Thomas Conrad," Wezel told him. He gave Ajay a phone number and the address of the University uptown. "He's been down there, Jay, before the demolition. That's one of his areas of research. He even wrote a book, *City Underground*."

"You made him sound like a fortune hunter," Ajay accused.

"Well, that's all I knew until I did some more research," Wezel explained. "His name kept popping up, though, every time I researched city planning and records for underground construction."

"Why would his name come up?" Ajay wondered.

"For the same reason that you get weird results when you do any kind of internet search," Wezel replied with a shrug. "I can search *big ass* and get big ass salads every time. Keywords."

"And you've talked to him?" Ajay asked.

"Yes," Wezel replied. "He'll tell you everything you want to know and then some. You could tell

that he lectures. I think I earned an entire credit in underground architecture by the time he was done talking."

"What you're saying is, if there was a buried fortune, he would have found it," Ajay concluded.

Wezel shrugged, "He says he wasn't done looking when the buildings were purchased. He kept talking about Fortune's Lightning and enough hidden gold coins to buy a few small countries."

Ajay frowned. "Did he say if he put the sign Fortune's Lightning there? It was relatively new."

"Nothing about that," Wezel replied, "but—"

Old Wezel jerked in his sleep, stiffened, and let out a few loud choking snorts. His head lolled on his chest and then he stopped moving.

Ajay's eyes were wide with alarm. "Is he all right?"

Wezel snorted and made a dismissive gesture at the old man. "He's like an old dog, running in his dreams. He's okay. Probably dreaming of winning at Black Jack in Vegas, again."

Ajay felt dubious but the old man was still breathing.

"Don't worry," Wezel said as he turned back to his computers to start his research, "The old man's f'n annoying, but I take care of him."

Ajay nodded in amusement as he pocketed his notes and left Wezel's apartment..

Wezel and his grandfather had a closer relationship than they let on. The old man had remained a widower for almost fifteen years and Wezel never seemed to pursue his interest in women beyond a computer screen. Ajay often wondered if that was because he felt obligated to take care of the old man. Would he change if the old man suddenly passed on? Somehow, Ajay doubted it. He could see, in his mind's eye, Wezel aging to look like his grandfather and still sitting with his computers, finding whatever information Ajay needed.

It was a relationship, of sorts. He supposed it was like Julia's relationship with Jerry; old, comfortable, and totally platonic. He never felt jealous when Julia wanted to meet Jerry for lunch, or visit the man's apartment after work for coffee. Jerry seemed so far out of Julia's interest, that Ajay couldn't imagine them doing anything. Julia was lucky in that respect, she didn't have to worry about any old girlfriends trying to steal Ajay away from her.

Or did she anyway? Ajay remembered Julia's hot response to Penelope. Small and blonde, just



his type, Julia had probably thought, maybe not understanding that it wasn't Julia's looks that was at the heart of Ajay's attraction to her. He supposed that his insistence on finding the woman, and knowing more about her, would seem threatening.

Ajay was calling Julia on his cell phone not a beat after that thought.

"Hello... Jay?" Julia's voice said after only one ring. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," Ajay replied as he stepped out into the street and headed for home. "I'm sorry I left so early. Did you enjoy breakfast?"

"Yes," Julia replied warmly. "I hope you don't mind, but Mr. Yamato ate your half. He spent some time talking about your abuse of house plants and how, as a boy, you helped him in his garden. You were very serious, he said. I thought you sounded adorable."

Ajay sighed. "When do we show up to help him clear snow and debris?"

"This weekend," Julia chuckled. "He said it's all too much for an old man."

"Were you working, today?" Ajay wondered. "Ma tried calling you earlier, but said you didn't answer. She still won't call you on your cell."

"I went to check out a job earlier," Julia told him.

"Gig," Ajay interjected.

"Gig?" Julia snorted in amusement. "Aren't we sounding professional?"

"Steven says they're called gigs," Ajay explained as he wove through foot traffic.

"I've never used that term," Julia explained. "It always makes me feel like I should be playing a saxophone in a night club, somewhere."

"Job, then," Ajay chuckled. "Did you get the job?"

"No, but I did run into an associate of Samuel Spinks," Julia's voice was odd. She sounded strained, Ajay decided, as if she was holding back a strong emotion.

"What did he say?" Ajay asked, trying to keep his voice level and his mind from jumping to conclusions that were only going to make him angry on Julia's behalf.

"He said that my services were never going to be required by Mr. Spinks again," Julia replied. "He said that if I couldn't keep my lover from calling and threatening a great artist like Spinks, then I didn't understand great art, or the sacrifices that a model must make for its creation."

“Julia, I didn’t call him,” Ajay was quick to say. “I don’t know who he’s talking about. I was very angry, because he endangered your health, but I made myself call you, instead, trusting that you would understand why I was upset. Do you think it was Jerry? You know how passionate he is when he thinks he sees injustice.”

“It would be like him,” Julia agreed and then, quieter, “I’m sorry, Jay.”

“Sorry for what?” Ajay asked in confusion.

“For doubting that you trust me to take care of things, even after we talked about it,” Julia replied. “I’ll call Jerry and tell him, thank you, but that he doesn’t have the right to call the people that I choose to work for without talking to me first.”

“Good,” Ajay replied, but couldn’t help the voice, deep down, that was glad that Jerry had managed to tell Spinks off.

There was a series of beeps and then Julia said. “Call waiting. It’s probably your mother. Coming home?”

If Julia hadn’t been home, Ajay might have veered off course to the gym. Now his mind filled with thoughts of a good dinner and other kinds of exercise afterward. “Yes,” Ajay replied. “I’ll see you in a few minutes. I have dinner.”

“Good, because I don’t feel like cooking,” Julia replied and then was gone to answer her other call.

Ajay looked down at the heavy bag in his hands with a sour expression. It was going to be up to him, he realized, and he wasn’t certain he was ready for the challenge, despite everyone’s advice.

When Ajay entered the apartment, the bag hit the floor as he rushed to where Julia was curled up on the couch. She had her arms wrapped around her knees and her face was hidden, hair a golden curtain over her features.

“What’s wrong?” Ajay demanded as he leaned down and took hold of Julia’s shoulders.

Julia wiped at her eyes and looked up at him, a smile breaking across her face, even though her eyes were red from crying. “I love your father,” she said in a choked voice.

Ajay tried to process that as he recalled that Julia had, probably, been talking to his mother on the phone. “Has something happened to Da?” Ajay asked anxiously, as he reached for the cordless

phone beside Julia on the couch. "Should I call them?"

"Everything's all right." Julia sniffed and wiped at her nose. She pulled Ajay down beside her and took the phone away from him. She put it aside on the coffee table and then curled up into Ajay's strong arms.

"What's going on?" Ajay demanded, obliging Julia by holding her tightly.

"Everything's all right," Julia replied. "Your father..." She swallowed hard and tried again. "Your father was uptown, taking care of paperwork for his cab business. He saw..."

Ajay went tense. "He saw the posters of you, naked, as an angel, being..."

"It wasn't about that," Julia was quick to reassure him. "Your mother swears he didn't even mention the poster itself, except to express his strong opinion about someone who would make me stand out in the snow in nothing but my skin. He sounded remarkably like you, Jay, only he didn't call me to discuss it. He went right away to talk to Spinks."

Ajay found a smile then. "My ma always said that red hair is a warning of the temper underneath it."

"I feel..." Julia searched for words. "If you or Jerry had done that, I would have felt that you didn't believe in me, that you didn't think I could take care of my own problems. Your father makes me feel like his daughter, his family. Once my father found out about my desire to be a model, once he decided I was replaceable by someone else in the family he did approve of, I didn't have a family any longer. That makes a very big hole in your life, Jay. That hole isn't there, now. Your father just filled it."

"I wouldn't mention any of that to him," Ajay warned. "He's not much for emotional displays."

"Old School?"

"Yes," Ajay replied.

"It will be hard not to say anything to him." Julia sighed.

"Just treat him like Da," Ajay explained. "That's what he wants; his wife, children, friends, and his pipe, in that order."

Julia took a deep breath, wiped at her eyes, and then tried to recover her composure, "So," she asked brightly. "What's in the bag on the floor? It doesn't look like Chinese food."

“I have to cook it. It might turn out inedible.”

“Or un-recognizable as whatever it is right now?” Julia wondered, amused.

“Exactly,” Ajay admitted. “I might be able to call it something else, though, if it’s not completely ruined. I’ll leave open some options.”

“A surprise.” Julia laughed. “I’ll stand by with a fire extinguisher.”

Ajay kissed her deeply and then said with some trepidation, “That might be wise, actually.”

Ajay rose and went to pick up the bag. Looking inside to make sure he hadn’t damaged anything, he remembered to tell her, “I have a meeting at the police station, tomorrow, at ten, to do some research.”

There was silence. He turned, bag in hand, and saw Julia’s brief look of disappointment turn into resignation. “Later in the day, hopefully, we can spend some time out together?”

“I think so,” Ajay replied. “Did you have something special planned?”

“Something special, but not time sensitive,” Julia admitted as she rose and followed Ajay into the kitchen. She was wearing white shorts that were made out of a narrow strip of cloth that was skin tight and a white t-shirt that seemed far too large for her. Her shorts said something in French, the lettering following the small globes of her ass. It was revealed only when she twisted the fabric of the shirt and made it ride up like a tantalizing peek-a-boo show.

“That’s my shirt,” Ajay accused as he pulled the food out of the bag and lined each item up methodically on the kitchen counter.

“Do you mind? All my shirts are in the dirty laundry,” Julia wondered as she puzzled over the food.

Ajay looked down at Julia’s slight form and felt the beginnings of arousal. There was something about Julia in his clothing that made him feel a warm, possessiveness that was pleasurable. “No, I don’t mind, but it looks too big.”

Ajay pulled out a deep frying pan as Julia replied, “You wear clothes until they fall off. It makes them comfortable.”

Ajay put the pan on the burner and studied the food.

“At a loss how to start?” Julia wondered with a smirk.

“No,” Ajay admitted and frowned.

“What?” Julia pressed.

“A lot of people we know contributed to this meal,” he told Julia, “even Weasel. I know it bothered me before, the way they fuss and try to take care of me, of us, but you’re right. They’re family and they’re just showing it. It feels good.”

Julia smiled warmly. “Let’s try not to ruin the food, then.”

Ajay nodded and turned on the burner.

\*\*\*\*

Later, stomachs full, Ajay wasn’t ready to call it a success, but they had been able to eat the meal once the overcooked parts had been cut away.

“Five minutes less on the cooking time,” Ajay decided as he sat on the bed and began undressing.

Julia burped, laughed, and then threw herself backward onto the mattress, so that she was sprawled mostly across it. The shirt hiked up and the little shorts didn’t hide much.

“Wear my shirts anytime you want,” Ajay told her as he reached out and ran Julia’s braid through his fingers. It was almost unraveled, loose, golden strands everywhere.

“From cooking time to shirts in less than a second.” Julia laughed as she reached up and snatched her braid back. “I’m full of food, Jay-Jay. The body is always willing, but my stomach is in full protest. It doesn’t want to do anything except digest.”

Ajay pulled off his shirt. Wearing only his underwear, he stretched out beside Julia in the opposite direction. His big hands kneaded Julia’s small feet.

“God, you’re good at that!” Julia groaned. She patted Ajay’s obvious arousal and said to it, “Sorry, big guy, no fun for you right now.” and then down at Ajay, “It’s your fault. That was enough food for all the Kavanagh’s.”

Ajay felt like insisting. He was full as well, but Julia’s body was calling to his strongly. It was hard to deny it, to tell it that Julia called the shots, and that he wasn’t going to insist, wasn’t going to

press Julia to do something, physically, that she wasn't willing to do.

"How did today go?" Julia asked.

That was a good as a cold shower to Ajay. As Julia turned and rolled to drape herself over Ajay, head nestled on Ajay's broad chest, Ajay told her about the day's developments.

"Confirmation, at last, that you really do have a case," Julia said when Ajay had finished. "Will that be enough to get Krowl to let you see records tomorrow?"

"We'll see," Ajay replied and didn't feel as certain as he sounded. "He may not like me, but he's just as dedicated to helping people as I am."

"He once told me," Julia said thoughtfully, "that it was his duty to warn all women to steer clear of you. He told me to run while I still had legs that weren't broken."

"Disaster Kavanagh," Ajay sighed. "I don't know why I couldn't get anything right back then."

"It wasn't what you wanted," Julia replied. "You weren't happy there. You straightened out, once you realized that."

"I didn't realize it exactly," Ajay admitted, "They fired me."

Julia put her chin on Ajay's chest and looked at him. "I think they've revised their opinion."

"Somewhat," Ajay tempered.

"Ajay Kavanagh," Julia growled, pinching Ajay's nipple hard. "You will not put yourself down. You will not listen to anyone who doesn't say that you are a fantastic man and a five star detective."

"No?" Ajay said as he rubbed his pinched nipple ruefully.

"No," Julia insisted.

Golden jewelry, golden hair, and large blue eyes looking at Ajay with love, strangely put Ajay in mind of harem's, concubines, and Julia's little shorts.

Julia's eyes narrowed as she felt the rise under her belly. "What are you thinking, now?"

"You don't want to know," Ajay muttered as he put Julia aside and rolled onto his stomach.

Julia straddled his back, small hands on Ajay's broad shoulders. She bent close, lips to Ajay's ear and braid coiling up near Ajay's neck, tickling him. "Whatever you were thinking. It must have been good."

"It was," Ajay admitted in a strained voice. "It was about you."

He felt Julia's hand reach underneath him to touch his hard erection.

Ajay looked back at his lover. "What happened to not being interested?"

"Maybe you're so sexy, that even a full stomach can't keep me from wanting you?" Julia said in a sultry tone of voice.

"If you're sure?" Ajay was careful to ask.

Julia's hand stroked him. "Oh, I'm sure."

Ajay was up, then, and pulling Julia to him. Clothing went flying and his big hands on Julia's small waist and hips, made Ajay as hard as a rock as he pulled his own shirt off of her.

"Want you, now," Julia moaned.

Ajay didn't give Julia what she wanted yet. Instead, he teased Julia with the swollen head of his cock, making her moan and throw up her long legs, begging with her body for him to push into her.

Julia's hands reached up finally and grabbed Ajay by his black hair. She pulled Ajay's face close to her own. Her blue eyes were as commanding as her voice as she ordered, "I want it now, fast, and hard. Stop teasing."

"You're beautiful," Ajay breathed, pulling back enough to look at the woman below him. Knees up and legs wide, body bowed to offer herself to Ajay, her face was flushed pink with desire.

"Jay!" Julia begged and her small hands pulled at his hips.

Ajay worked himself in with a groan and then covered Julia with his body as he sheathed himself into tight heat. He never used his entire strength, never let himself forget, in his desire, that his lover's demands couldn't be entirely fulfilled. Julia liked gentleness, and slow lovemaking, but these times when she wanted Ajay to show her all of his strength, to be possessed utterly, to be conquered physically, were never going to lead to pain as a consequence.

Ajay pumped strongly and let Julia feel possessed, but his thrusts were controlled and his hands careful of their grip while holding firmly. Still, it was hot and fast, and he felt the thrill of the act, himself, the primal triggers that made him think mine! as he released into his lover in a strong orgasm that had him shouting an uncharacteristic, "Fuck!"

Julia laughed. Embarrassed, Ajay pulled back enough to see that Julia was sweating, breathing hard, and that she had experienced her own orgasm.

“I love when I make you lose control,” Julia told him. “Ajay Kavanagh said a swear word. Must have been good.”

Ajay sat back, looking down at where he was still pushed deeply inside of his lover. He pulled Julia’s legs up so that they moved even more tightly together.

Julia’s breath caught a little in pleasure. “Want some more?” she wondered.

“Always,” Ajay breathed, “Forever. I’ll never get enough of you.”

Julia’s smile was warm. “That’s exactly how I feel about you, love. I want us together, forever.”

Ajay felt a wave of intense emotion and could only nod. They were a long time getting to sleep.



## Chapter Nine

“Why not?” Krowl glared at Ajay from over the laptop and paperwork on his desk. The birthmark on his face seemed even more pronounced as his anger ratcheted up a notch and his skin darkened. “One, you almost killed people while you were employed here. Two, you started a two bit detective agency. Three, you dropped women and picked up with a juvie, Four – -”

“She’s my age!” Ajay protested. “She’s just small.”

Krowl shrugged, “Whatever. Let’s get back to business. Maybe you were lucky with that last case, but I don’t expect to see a repeat. I’m not letting you get into police files, so you can mess up people’s lives with your usual Disaster Kavanagh style.”

Ajay wasn’t going to be intimidated. The precinct was busy, men and women going about their business and noise at high decibels. Ajay ignored the noise and the bustle around them and leaned over Krowl’s desk, hands flat on Krowl’s paperwork.

“You gave me this case,” Ajay reminded him unnecessarily. “You can’t deny me the information I need to solve it.”

“Yes, I can,” Krowl bit back sarcastically and sat back in his chair to be out from under Ajay’s shadow. “You really shouldn’t have taken that case seriously. It was more of a joke than anything else.”

Ajay straightened, frowning. “You consider the lives of those people, who had their businesses taken away from them, a joke?”

“One guy said there was something illegal going on,” Krowl reminded him, holding up a pudgy finger. “Nobody else, not even one of the owners.”

“Not any longer,” Ajay replied, seeing his moment. “Dr. Furnier admitted to me that he had been coerced into selling. He gave me a name and I have several others who I need to investigate.”

Krowl studied Ajay’s determination and then shook his head in disgust. “You don’t even know if anyone’s going to pay you for this.”

“When I’m doing something that’s right, then it becomes more than about a paycheck.”

“Some people think that’s fanaticism,” Krowl pointed out as he began writing something on a slip of paper. “Obsessive behavior. Trying to make a case, when their isn’t one. If that’s what this is, Kavanagh, I’ll enjoy the judge slapping the entire case down for the count. Don’t mention my name, in any way, when that happens.” He shoved the paper at Ajay.

“Just today?” Ajay said incredulously when he saw that Krowl had given him permission to see records. “What if more information needs research later on?”

“Then I’ll enjoy you coming in here and begging me again,” Krowl snapped, “But, right now, I’ve got work to do. Real work, Kavanagh, and real crimes that a real, certified, police detective needs to solve.”

Krowl suddenly turning and ignoring him to dig into a file cabinet, was a dismissal. Ajay didn’t feel that a thank you was in order. Krowl was throwing him a bone, but it was a very small one, one that was going to be taken away quicker than he liked.

Ajay fumbled for his cell as he walked to records, nodding at some people that he knew, and resigned, that some people would rather pretend that they didn’t know him at all.

“Jay?” Julia’s voice said.

“I’m sorry, love,” Ajay began, “but this is going to be a long day. Krowl is being a —” Ajay swallowed a nasty term as some eyes looked his way, “difficult,” he amended.

“We can try again, tomorrow,” Julia said, but Ajay could hear her disappointment. “Since you won’t be here, there’s no reason for me to stay home. I’ll make some phone calls and try to get a job scheduled today. If that doesn’t happen, I’ll have lunch with Jerry.”

Ajay sighed after two men passed him and then snickered behind his back. He heard one of the men say, Disaster Kavanagh.

“We do just talk, you know?” Julia insisted, misreading Ajay’s sigh.

“He’s not your type,” Ajay confirmed.

“Aside from being gay, not even a little bit,” Julia assured him and Ajay could hear her smile. “All you have to do is look in the mirror to know who I’m interested in, Jay.”

“Tell Jerry, hello,” Ajay said as he faced the open door of the records dept. “Don’t let him insult me too much.”

“One day he’s going to understand our love of our careers and each other,” Julia chuckled. “Just know that I do understand, all right?”

“All right,” Ajay replied. “I have to go, now. See you tonight.”

“Tonight,” Julia agreed.

Ajay pocketed his cell and put his mind firmly back on the case. He had to work quickly and thoroughly.

“Who authorized you?” an old voice said before Ajay was even all the way through the door.

Randell Potts had been in records since anyone could remember. He had refused to retire, saying that they could drag him out with a toe tag before he would let anyone touch his carefully filed and sorted records. Ajay had lost a file, once, and the man had never forgiven him for it. Ajay had spent a week doing the research necessary to rebuild that file, but the man had never relented in his dislike for Ajay.

Bald, and wearing thick glasses that were probably from his teens, Potts was stooped over in his police uniform and holding onto a cane as if he fully intended to use it on Ajay. He even advanced a few steps as he thumped the rubber tip on the floor threateningly.

“I do have authorization,” Ajay handed him the slip and Potts stared at it as if he suspected a forgery. “Don’t worry; I’m not taking any information with me. I’m only authorized to complete my research in your department.”

“Good!” Potts snarled as he took the slip and put it in an in box to be filed later. Ajay wondered how many slips like his had been carefully cataloged. Were there scrawled requisition notes from when the man had been a rookie in the department? Ajay suspected that there were.

Potts turned to him again. “No drinking, no eating, and no making notations on the records,” he told Ajay firmly. “If you’re doing a computer search, there will not be any printing out of that information. The computer allows an officer to make a case file with appropriate links to research. Since you are not an officer that function is off limits.”

“All right,” Ajay agreed. “I’ll be using the computer. The information that I’m looking for is recent.”

Potts lifted a lip in disgust, “Did you learn how to use a computer since you were here last?”

Ajay felt the burn of embarrassment, but he replied calmly, "I can do a search."

"Good," Potts replied with a sniff, "Because I can't spare the manpower to babysit you."

Ajay looked around and didn't see anyone else in the department. He supposed Potts meant that he couldn't be spared to help. "I will manage," Ajay assured him.

"That computer, over there," Potts said and pointed to a cubicle with a computer system.

Ajay sat down and took out his pencil and notebook. He heard Potts sniff in disgust, again, and knew that was the man's comment on his lack of technology. The man lost interest after the first hour, though, and disappeared into his aisles of records.

Ajay worked as intensely as possible, breezing by lunch and ignoring any protest from his stomach. When Potts finally stood at his elbow and cleared his throat, Ajay felt exhausted and seedy, as if the dust from all of the old records had settled into every pore.

"Dedicated, at least," Potts gave him with a scowl. "Your time is up, though."

Ajay checked his watch. "I could have used a few more hours."

"All of us want more time," Potts replied testily, not speaking only of records "We seldom get it."

Ajay tucked his notepad and pencil into his pocket and forced sore muscles to move. Standing up, he walked stiffly out of the building and made his way to the small pub butted up against the precinct. A favorite after work stop of his father's, Ajay could see the man's cab parked outside.

Inside the pub, the décor and atmosphere made Ajay feel as if he had been transported to an Irish pub of the nineteen thirties. Low lighting, tobacco smoke, and the strong smell of beer, made even the middle of the day feel as if it were evening after stepping over the threshold. It was a good place to unwind and connect with friends, especially for the off duty police officers, firemen, and paramedics, that were the predominant patrons. Kavanaghs had sat among them for generations, some gene drawing them to those professions like moths to a flame.

Though Michael Kavanagh had chosen to drive a cab, bucking the trend, he was still welcome among them, especially since some of his children had been drawn to the flame. He had his favorite stool at the end of the bar and he held court there, puffing on his pipe and smiling as his friends talked.

"Ice tea," Ajay ordered.

“With?” the burly bartender asked with a lifted eyebrow.

“Just ice tea,” Ajay replied.

The man grunted and opened a bottle. It made a heavy sound as he put it on the bar with the cap next to it. Ajay paid him and then carried it over to his father, drinking to quench a thirst that seemed bottomless.

“Drinking like a fish?” Michael Kavanagh said around the stem of his pipe as he watched Ajay finish the bottle.

“Ice tea,” Ajay replied as he showed his father the label on the bottle. It was something the child Ajay might have done, answering as if he had been caught doing something wrong. He wasn’t a drinker, a beer, or two, once in a while, his usual choice. Unlike the bartender, Michael Kavanagh wasn’t going to find fault with his choice.

“Running down felons?” his dad asked him.

“Sitting for hours in the records room,” Ajay replied as he signaled the bartender for another bottle.

“Dry work,” one of his father’s friends sympathized.

Ajay’s father puffed on his pipe and then asked, “They let you in there?”

The question wasn’t as obvious, or as simple, as it sounded. The man was asking a lot more. “The case I’m working on is sanctioned by the police department,” Ajay explained. “Krowl—”

“Krowl?” his father’s face went dark and Ajay could see him biting on his pipe stem in temper for a moment. He finally said tightly, “You need to stay away from that bit of misery. He’s not good for you.”

“I try, but he’s where I need to be right now,” Ajay replied as he took another bottle of ice tea from the bartender and drank.

“Did you find enough information for your case?” his dad asked, changing the subject.

“I’m not sure,” Ajay replied.

His father’s friends had given them space, but Ajay recognized a few who were given him disgusted looks. He could imagine that some of them certainly didn’t approve of his failure to stay in the police force. They probably felt sorry for his father.

“How’s that...” one of the men, Carvelli, Ajay remembered with difficulty, motioned absently with his mug of beer and then finished, “girl of yours... wazzername...”

“Carvi, you’re drunk,” Ajay’s father told the man firmly. “Appreciate the effort, but not right now.”

“After what the others said about what she does for a living... thought I’d...” the man struggled, “balance it out.”

“Thanks,” Ajay’s father grunted and gave the man a small push away from them. The man hiccupped and went into the crowd.

“I should go,” Ajay said as he put his half-finished bottle of tea back on the bar.

“Kavanagh’s don’t run,” Michael Kavanagh said, emphasizing each word. “Julia is a part of our family now. I won’t hear anyone say a foul word against her.”

“Not me?” Ajay found himself saying uncomfortably.

His father looked embarrassed and then shrugged. “They’ve known you since you wore short pants, son. They protect and accept their own, as it should be. Julia’s a strange, shiny bird, though. They think she’s bad news. Not likely to stay. One of those uptown rich girls out to have fun at someone’s expense. Yours, this time.”

“Did they see the posters?” Ajay guessed.

His father’s expression grew tight. “Yes,” he replied simply and puffed on his pipe for a long while before he added, “Not saying it’s wrong, son. I’m an old man and the world moves on, changes, and grows different morals. People had things to say, though, and bar stools are worse than confessionals, sometimes.”

“I’m sorry,” Ajay said and hunched into his coat.

“I’m sorry we’re having this conversation here, son,” his father replied with some embarrassment. His old eyes flicked around them; at the crowd trying to pretend that they weren’t listening. “Won’t see you walk away, though, when you have to stand your ground.”

Ajay tried to imagine his father facing down a temperamental artist and telling him that abusing his son’s lover was not going to happen under his watch. It was easier to imagine him facing down his cronies. That was Michael Kavanagh’s element, their old part of town, and the close ties that they

all shared there. It was where the man drew his strength. The uptown world of glass buildings, suits, and the unfamiliar, must have been daunting.

Kavanaghs didn't run away, Ajay repeated to himself. They didn't give up, either. His hand went to his notes and the new leads that were ready for him to explore. "I'm not running away," he told his father. "I have things to do, for my case. Give ma my love."

Ajay felt a sudden need to hug his father, to tell him how much his acceptance and his protection of Julia meant to him. His father was old school, though, and Ajay hadn't been one to express emotions like that, either. He saw the expression in his father's eyes, though; a clear, steady stare that managed to convey his pride and love for his son. Ajay tried to return that look with one just as strong. His father gave a short nod and then he was turning on his stool to draw his friends back into conversation.

"Drinking away your sorrows?" Kile asked as he walked into the pub with his brother Kenny. Both red heads were enough alike to be twins, but they had different expressions. Kenny looked concerned while Kile looked as if all of his theories about life were being proven true.

"You don't drink in bars," Kenny said pointedly as he jabbed a thick finger into Ajay's chest. "Don't tell me you made trouble with the little missus, Screw Up?"

"He didn't have to," Kile snorted, "He just has to be himself, hooking up with a rich girl model."

Ajay couldn't help his temper, then. He went toe to toe with his brothers. He didn't think they had ever realized he wasn't their little bother any longer until that moment. He was taller and he outweighed them with muscle. He could see their startled realization as he ground out, "Julia is not the little missus, there is nothing wrong with what she does for a living, or us being together."

"She is little," Kile dared, though his chin was tucked up as if he expected a punch.

"Not the way you mean it," Ajay retorted. "If you can't accept her, if you can't understand how much we mean to each other, then at least keep your damned insults to yourselves."

Kenny rolled his eyes. "We're your brothers. We're required to insult you and make little of you for the rest of your life. We're also required to care about you. The two sometimes go together, unfortunately for you. We care. We want to know why you're here. If it's nothing, say it's nothing, and we'll go have our drinks."

Ajay took a moment to digest that speech and then he let the anger go as he replied, "It's nothing. I was just getting a drink."

"Okay, then," Kenny snickered. "Tell Julia we said hi."

His brothers pushed past him, socking each of his shoulders as they passed. Ajay rubbed at his shoulders with a grimace as he exited the pub and blinked at the sunlight.

Ajay didn't think he had over reacted. He had made his point with his brothers and they had accepted it in the only way they could, with the same hectoring big brother attitudes they would never shed completely.

It would have been so easy, Ajay thought, as he walked through the snow towards his office, for them to totally reject him. Adopted off of the street, without anyone knowing anything about him, they had never treated him as anything other than blood kin. His father might insist that he act as all Kavanagh's had acted before him, but the genes weren't really his. That he rarely considered that, though, when his father reminded him he was a Kavanagh and expected to act like one, was a testament to how much they did care about him.

"Working late?" Katie asked as she passed him on the stairs that led up to his office. She had an armload of paperwork to take home, her job not ending when office hours were over.

"New leads," Ajay replied.

"The super sleuth is hard on the case," Katie snickered. "Did you eat dinner?"

"Later," Ajay replied. "I'm only making some calls before I go home."

"If you pass out from lack of food," Katie said as she began digging in a pocket while she juggled paperwork, "your plants won't try to save you. You've abused the poor things too much. Here." She tossed him a large bag of chocolate covered peanuts.

Ajay caught them and noticed that they were warm and the bag rather flat. "Thank you?"

"Okay, so they're melted a bit, but beggars can't be choosers," she chuckled.

"I'm not depriving you of dinner, am I?" Ajay wondered.

"No, Detective Kavanagh," Katie shot back. "Eat with a clear conscience."

She was down the stairs, then, and out the door at the bottom with far more energy than someone, after a long day, should have had. Ajay wished for some of that energy as he pushed into



his office and took out his cell. He was exhausted and needing to keep a clear head.

Spreading out his notes, Ajay organized his thoughts before he made his first phone call.

"Mr. Angelico? My name is detective Ajay Kavanagh. I'm investigating a case that you may be a part of. Have you had any dealings with Kraton Development and a project on Fair Street?"

"How did you get my name?" was the man's first question. His accent was heavy and Italian. It was hard to keep Wezel's theory, that organized crime was behind the purchases, from coming to mind.

"Police and government records," Ajay replied. "You've had dealings with a Mr. Brighton, the principal behind the purchases."

"I did work for him, but that doesn't mean I had anything to do with this business," the man shot back. "If you're picking me out of a crowd, Detective, because I have a record, I can bring charges against you."

"I'm not attempting to charge you with anything," Ajay assured him, "or imply that you've done anything illegal. I am at a few dead ends and I need information I think you may be able to provide."

"Like?" the man asked and Ajay heard the irritated sigh.

"I don't have any information as to why the purchases were made," Ajay told him.

"And you think I know?" the irritation in the man's voice was clearer now. "Look, Detective, they just hired me to go in, make the offers, and do the deals. They said something about investments and acquiring valuable property, but I wasn't invited into any board meetings."

"You're not overseeing the demolition?" Ajay wondered.

"No," Angelico replied. "My job stopped when I acquired the sales."

"Do you have the name and number of someone that was in charge of the demolition?"

"Like I said," the man insisted, "My job is over. Whatever happened afterward had nothing to do with me. Talk to Kraton or Brighton."

"Kraton is a company that was formed by Brighton and his lawyer group," Ajay informed him.

"Lawyer confidentiality," Angelico snickered.

"Did you have any dealings with a Mr. Pennyworth from Northside bank?"

There was a moment of silence and then Angelico emphasized clearly the word, "No."

He had hit a nerve, Ajay decided, and pushed forward, "I have information that he handled the loans and the closings for the sales."

"I don't think I want to keep repeating myself, Detective," Angelico growled. "They only hired me to present their offers and convince the owners to sell. I didn't do the banking, the lawyering, or make the decisions."

"Convince them? How?" Ajay asked, jumping on that at once.

Another silence and then Angelico said, "I think we're done talking, Detective, because I sure as hell hear somebody accusing somebody else, namely me, of doing something wrong. You can ask my lawyers the questions."

"Brighton?" Ajay shot back. He wasn't surprised when the phone clicked and he was listening to dead air.

Ajay made notes and then called Northside Bank. Getting Mr. Pennyworth took a long wait. When he finally made his way past the secretary, and Pennyworth answered the phone, the man sounded smooth and in control. "My secretary told me you had questions about the Fair Street sales, hmmm, Detective Kavanagh?"

"That's correct, Mr. Pennyworth," Ajay replied. "Thank you for speaking to me."

"Don't thank me, yet," Mr. Pennyworth protested. "There are regulations that bar me from discussing some aspects of our customer's business dealings, and I'm really far too busy to have any sort of long conversation with you at this time."

"Would it be better if I saw you personally?" Ajay asked. "If so, I'd like to make an appointment with you. Tomorrow?"

Silence and then the sounds of someone moving about.

"Mr. Pennyworth?"

"Checking my schedule, Detective Kavanagh," Pennyworth replied. "Tomorrow, at six p.m., would be acceptable."

"After hours?" Ajay said in surprise.

"I'm a busy man," Pennyworth told him. "I don't have any other opening in my schedule. The bank will not be taking customers, but the offices are still open. I make a habit of working late, you

see? It's not an inconvenience to see you then." he added, "Though I'm not sure what I will be allowed to discuss, Detective Kavanagh. It may be a wasted trip for you."

"Any information will be all right."

"I have a conference, Detective," Pennyworth told him. "I'm sorry, but I must go. I will see you at six p.m., tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir," Ajay replied, but Pennyworth had already disconnected the call.

Ajay had been underlining the name, Brighton, while he had been speaking to Pennyworth. He had a definite contact number now and information that the firm was being investigated for improper business practices pertaining to other land and business purchases. The principal in all of the investigations, an Anton Rhubel, no longer worked for Brighton, though. While Ajay had his number and address, it was highly unlikely the man would incriminate himself or speak to Ajay without a lawyer present. It was a name that went into the needed further information category. He didn't dare approach the man until he had an allegation that involved him.

That left Professor Thomas Conrad. Ajay fingered his notes for a long while before he made the call. When the man answered, Ajay introduced himself. He didn't get anything else out, though, as the man launched into an excited babble that drowned Ajay out.

"Detective Kavanagh? I'm so happy to speak with you. Young Wezel has been in contact with me about your investigation. I find such work so akin to my own brand of archeology, that it's absolutely a joy to lend any assistance I can offer. That area is rich with history, with treasures that most people overlook. Even now, such sites are being destroyed, every day, because the city, or private interests, fail to see the significance of historical underground works. I hope, by working closely with you, I can be a part of something that will bring to light how important Fair Street's connecting underground system is. It shouldn't be destroyed by using them to route our new technology, electrical, and sewage concerns through them."

The man caught his breath and Ajay interjected quickly, "There are city plans to this effect?"

"Been on the books for several years, actually, with a great deal of money spent, by many concerns, on either side of the issue," Conrad explained. "Fair Street had its protectors, including those with monetary interest in maintaining the above ground infrastructure, but those funds have

run dry. Interested parties are making bids to tear through the underground once again. Whoever wins those bids could make millions, easily."

Conrad sighed sadly, "I've fought the good fight, Detective Kavanagh, but when that sort of money is on the verge of being handed out, my lone voice is easily drowned out."

"I haven't seen any of this in records or reports," Ajay pointed out. "Where are you coming by your information, Professor Conrad?"

"Oh, it's not listed under, Demolish Fair Street Underground, Detective," Conrad replied. "It's all under the hat of Zone Forty-Two Renewal Project. I wouldn't have known about it either, but I have a cousin in zoning and development and she saw the project plans go through her office. She knew that I was excavating Fair Street and that I should have the chance to defend it."

Ajay was writing quickly, adrenaline rushing, as he realized that this odd contact was handing him the key to the entire case.

"Those underground rooms," Conrad continued, "were used as gambling dens, speakeasies, and even a way for the old bank at the corner to move money to its main branch on Haven Street three blocks away. There's even a story that gangsters hid a fortune down there, collected from their drug deals. Excavations are everywhere. I'm surprised they didn't bring the whole thing down looking for the fortune in the brick walls."

Ajay cut in. "One of the demolition firms took a rather recently made sign that said Fortune's Lightning. Is that significant in any way?"

"Interesting," Conrad replied thoughtfully. "Was it made out of metal?"

"Yes," Ajay replied.

"It is rather dry down there," Conrad said thoughtfully. "It's possible that the sign isn't as recent as you believe. Some of my own excavations turned up hundreds of empty bottles from the speakeasies, broken boards, and makeshift utilities. We were hardly a fourth of the way into our excavation when we were evicted."

"I was told that there was nothing down there except for that sign," Ajay informed him.

"Nothing is relative, Detective. Some of history's most important finds were considered nothing at one time," Conrad pointed out. "That opinion might change to include my discarded bottles and

other things that were left, if you pursue the definition of nothing a bit further.”

“Any theories as to what the sign might be referring to?” Ajay wondered.

“There was mention of a Fortune’s Lightning in several city records,” Conrad replied, “but I haven’t discovered which illegal concern used that name.”

“So, Fortune’s Lightning could be referring to a speakeasy or a gambling hall?” Ajay theorized.

Conrad chuckled. “Wouldn’t that be a good name for a gambling hall? Fortune can hit you like lightning.”

“Have you had any dealings with a man named Brighton, Angelico, or Kraton Development?” Ajay wondered.

“I had dealings with a man named Tavis Crowler,” Conrad said with a tone to his voice that said it hadn’t been a pleasant meeting. “He claimed to be representing Kraton Development. He told me the buildings were purchased and that my archeological dig was being evicted. He had some muscle with him that made me think of old gangster movies.”

Tavis Crowler, Angelico’s alias, Ajay thought with interest, and then asked, “Do you believe that Kraton Development is making a bid to lay the new utilities?”

“Who knows, but it would make sense,” Conrad replied. “Why else would you buy those marginal businesses in a low income area? Being in possession of a key underground avenue, between two junctions of granite rock head, might make the difference in the selection process. The city wouldn’t like to contemplate using dynamite in a densely populated area, after all.”

“Why take the plans, then?” Ajay mused to himself as he made notes.

“They took the underground plans?” Conrad asked.

Ajay winced, and then replied, “A theory. They have gone missing. It’s possible they were taken.”

“That wouldn’t be a wise move if Kraton was trying to prove the significance of their land purchase,” Conrad told him. “A rival concern might have taken them.”

“That’s possible.” Unless, Ajay thought, those plans showed something that undermined Kraton’s position. There was also the problem of Kraton’s loans being in arrears. Why risk having their property taken away from them, if they were using that property to acquire a lucrative contract?

“I have class, Detective,” Mr. Conrad said apologetically. “I would love to work with you further. Please call if you need more information or a top notch historian on site.”

“I will, thank you,” Ajay replied. “And thank you for the information that you’ve given me, already. It has been very helpful to my case.”

Ajay munched on chocolate as he arranged his notes, staring at them and trying to make sense out of them. Wanting to get the bid on a lucrative works project seemed firmly logical, Ajay decided. Fortune’s Lightning signs, and a supposed treasure hunt, simply didn’t make sense in light of all of his new information. Kraton, or whoever Kraton Development really was, needed something to clinch their deal with the city, something that they hadn’t found yet. Or maybe they had found it? Maybe, whatever it was, resided under Fishburn’s deli?

It was late before Ajay called it a day. With his stomach grumbling about his choice of dinner, he gathered his notes and left his office for home.

Ajay found the apartment quiet and dimly lit. Hanging up his coat and kicking off his shoes, he peeked into the bedroom and saw Julia asleep, propped up on pillows and magazines lax in her lap. Ajay couldn’t help smiling at the scene and decided not to wake her.

Going into the kitchen, Ajay saw that Julia had ordered Chinese take-out. Empty boxes, fortune cookies, and half-filled containers littered the counter. Ajay opened the garbage and put empty containers into it with a sweep of his arm. Grabbing a fork, he carried the rest into the living room. Sitting down, he finally gave in to his appetite.

By the time he was done, he had decided to visit Fishburn’s deli the next morning. If he could get the man to give him some information about Angelico, or even Pennyworth and his bank, Ajay reasoned, his meeting with Pennyworth might be more productive.

Ajay yawned and stretched, feeling his back crack. It wasn’t that late, but the day had been a long one. He decided to join Julia in bed.

He undressed first and then, smiling, helped Julia get more comfortable. She said something sleepily, but didn’t really wake up. It made Ajay wonder how her day had gone to exhaust her that much. He took out Julia’s earrings, placed them in a bowl on the nightstand, and then put her magazines next to it.

After turning out the light, Ajay spooned up behind Julia and held her in his strong arms. She fit perfectly in the curve of his body, hips nestled right where they needed to be to...

"N't t'nght," Julia slurred and hitched her body into a curl away from Ajay's obvious interest. She reached back, gave his bulge a pat, and then said, "T'm'rrow."

"It's all right, love," Ajay assured her. "Go back to sleep."

"S'prise for you t'm'rrow," was Julia's last words before she drifted asleep again.

A surprise? Ajay blushed, thinking that it must have to do with sex. It was difficult not to try and imagine what sort of surprise that might be. It made sleep a long time in coming.

## Chapter Ten

There was a note on his bagel and coffee when it was passed over the heads of those assembled, for their morning get together, at Alusius's bakery. Ajay stared at the bag, puzzled, and then looked up to see Alusius and Davey waving and smiling. He returned the wave, even though he wasn't sure what was meant by the scrawled word Congratulations.

Julia had still been asleep when he had left the apartment. Ajay's suggestion of breakfast had been rejected by a sleepy grumble from under their blankets.

The day didn't get any more understandable when Pokestas came striding by, long coat and scarf flapping, and turned to give Ajay a puzzled look. "Not at home?" he wondered cryptically.

"Not in jail?" Ajay shot back at the small time thief.

Pokestas glared and said irritably, "They only keep you so long, No Badge Kavanagh. Didn't you stay on the force long enough to learn that?"

"I was there long enough to know that guys like you don't stay out of jail long," Ajay retorted.

"I'm just a petty thief," Pokestas replied with a twitch of shoulders and a wide, rapid blinking of eyes. "No harm done. Better than being a cold fish like you."

"What do you mean by that?" Ajay wanted to know, but then shook his head and started walking again, "I don't know why I'm bothering."

Pokestas put a finger under his eye and pulled down, "Always watchin', Kavanagh. That's what makes me a good thief. I see things."

Ajay stopped, but didn't turn around, letting foot traffic flow around him. "What things?" he asked, sure that he would regret it.

"Things that make me wonder what you're doing out here, on the street, and not home," Pokestas replied.

"I have a job to do," Ajay shot back and started walking again.

"So do I!" Pokestas called after him and laughed.

It was hard to ignore the part of him that was a trained police officer, but Ajay gritted his teeth and kept walking. Pokestas was always up to something. It was possible to spend a career chasing him. Ajay wasn't inclined to do that.



“Congratulations,” Mrs. Anthony said as she passed him by, bundled up and on her way to the corner grocery.

Ajay half turned, puzzled, but she was already being swallowed up by the early morning crowds. His cell rang and Ajay didn’t recognize the number. As he stepped onto the bus and sat down, he answered and was surprised to find Drewes on the other end of the call.

“It’s not too early, is it?” Drewes asked.

“No, I’m already out and working a case, this morning,” Ajay told him.

“I was on the way to work, myself, and just had to call you and thank you again for straightening out things between Karsten and myself,” Drewes told him. “That old man is all right. I told him I was having trouble making ends meet, so he hooked me up with an old friend of his. The man gave me a job on the docks. It’s warehouse work, but it pays really well.”

“I’m glad you’re doing well,” Ajay replied, pleased that a case had benefited both parties concerned.

“I am,” Drewes agreed, “so, I’d like to return the favor. I told my new boss that you were a great detective and that he could use you to take care of some problems that he’s been having. It’s not serious, or dangerous, just something that’s bugging the workers.”

“I am working a difficult case, right now,” Ajay informed him. “It might be several weeks before I could start.”

“Really?” Drewes sounded disappointed. “That’s too bad. It would be quick money for you, Detective. I mean, right now, everyone thinks it’s ghosts that are breaking locks and leaving doors open. Nothing gets taken, mind you, but people are a superstitious bunch. My new boss is having trouble keeping everyone calm and it’s slowing work down. Workers are afraid to go into certain areas of the warehouse, especially where we store the big equipment. If you could just tell them what’s really going on, the boss would be grateful with his wallet, if you know what I mean?”

Ajay watched the snow begin to fall as he said, thoughtfully, “It’s probably just carelessness. Setting up a surveillance camera would be my advice.”

“He thought of that, but that place is pretty much open to the wind, the sea, and the rain,” Drewes explained. “It’s also full of big cranes and lifts. It has lots of places where a camera can’t cover.”

A day for observation, Ajay thought, and a night, or two, to observe any activity. "I don't think I have time for your case," Ajay admitted, "but I can come by, check the area, and give your boss some ideas that might help him."

"Fair enough," Drewes replied in relief. "I don't want to sound like I called to be self-serving, but thanking you, and making sure that my boss does well, so that I can stay employed by him, sort of kills two birds with one stone. If he has employees quitting, or refusing to operate certain machinery, because they think they're haunted, that definitely impacts his bottom line and my paycheck."

Ajay considered his schedule and suggested, "Lunch time, today, would be a good time for me to meet with your boss. That way, employees won't be working and disturbing me while I investigate the site."

"That sounds good," Drewes replied. "I'll tell him. I work on crane number four, dock seven. The business is called Tempkin's Cargo."

Ajay juggled coffee and bagel and made notes in his notebook. "I have it. See you, then."

"Thanks again, Detective," Drewes told him.

Ajay pocketed his phone and ate his breakfast while the bus made its way through snow and traffic. When he stepped off at Fair Street, he could see the change right away. The deli at the corner had a large, red closed sign on the window. When Ajay crossed the street and approached it, he saw through the window that it had already been emptied. Even the deli cases had been taken out, leaving a floor scarred by generations of use.

Occupational licenses, menus, and several old newspaper ads that gave the deli five stars, were still glued to the walls. The first dollar the deli had made was still tacked up in its frame. It had probably seemed an unimportant thing after the closing of the business.

Ajay stepped back and looked down the long line of gutted buildings. It was painful and depressing, knowing their age, that families had owned them and had served the families in that community for generations. Everything was going to change, now. The bank would repossess them, bulldoze the buildings, lay new foundations, and build a string of modern, cookie cutter store fronts.

All of that would happen after they laid cable and utilities under the streets, Ajay corrected himself. That would mean for that shell shocked community, months of equipment and men overwhelming narrow, old streets.

The overcast sky and the falling snow gave everything a nightmarish quality as Ajay began walking down the sidewalk past each empty building. The cold made his breath steam and he kept his hands jammed into his deep pockets as he gazed through every store front and saw the remnants of lives spent working there. When he reached the end, it was obvious one important thing was missing; Angelico's guards.

Ajay surveyed the streets slowly. There were people walking about, but not many. They might see him and assume he was looting. He had his ID and he felt he might be able to adequately explain that he was working a case. It wouldn't convince an actual police officer, though, who would know he was definitely trespassing. The chance he might be booked on trespassing charges, and damage his credibility, made Ajay spend some time weighing the benefit.

"Are you that detective Fishburn was talking about?"

Ajay started and turned to find a slim, dark haired man at his elbow.

"I'm Detective Kavanagh," Ajay affirmed.

The man's blue eyes were wary and he darted looks at the street as he continued, with bitterness, "This was my shop. Parkinson's coffee shop. It's been here for eighty years, Detective. My dad handed it to me, when it was time, and told me to do him proud." The man's lips trembled and then his teeth clenched and he glared at Ajay. "I didn't want to sell, I didn't want to lose it all, and I didn't want to end up a damned coward! I have kids, though, and I had to think of them. I couldn't lose the money, couldn't take the chance that those guys were just blowing smoke."

"They threatened you?" Ajay tried to confirm.

The man glanced nervously at the street again and took a ring full of keys out of his pocket. He took off one and handed it to Ajay. "I'm not saying anything," he told Ajay, "but I want to feel like I did something, damn it!"

The man walked away quickly, crossing the street. Ajay watched him for a moment and then fingered the key in his hand. The windows were all broken out. He could have easily climbed through them and entered the building. A key gave him some legitimacy, though. It was much easier to argue that he hadn't known the key was from a previous owner, than to get out of a breaking and entering charge.

Mind made up, Ajay unlocked the door and went inside. It still smelled like coffee and it made

Ajay think of Alusius's bakery. He could imagine the regulars gathering there every morning and catching up on the news and gossip. He could see, in his mind's eye, the young owner taking care of everyone the way his father had, and his father before him.

Ajay's steps echoed with the emptiness. Small bits of broken things crunched under his heels as he made his way through doorways without any doors and passed down a narrow, short hallway. That hallway ended at another, dark, opening and a stairway.

It was obvious that machinery had been forced down the narrow stairway. Parts had been cut out, or broken entirely, and the doorway itself looked as if it had been part of a project to make it larger. The treads of the stairway were damaged. Ajay flicked a light and wasn't surprised when he found the electricity turned off.

Digging for his apartment keys, Ajay used the small flashlight on the ring to show him the way as he carefully made his way downward. When he reached concrete floor, he could see where power equipment had ripped down deep, testing rock and soil.

Conrad's theory, was finding some validation, Ajay realized. Men interested in the bedrock, head rock, and soil was likely to have plans to dig through it.

Or use existing tunnels, Ajay corrected himself as he crossed the floor carefully and then peered into another entry. He flashed his light inside and saw that a tunnel did indeed stretch off into the distance.

Ajay oriented himself while he tested the walls. Brick, he discovered, and none of it deteriorated enough to give him any concerns about collapse. He could even see where Kraton, or the owner of the shop, had reinforced the ceiling. There were hanging wires where lights had been and Ajay could see that they were old enough, and frayed enough, to have given anyone using them concern that the place might go up in flames from a short.

The tunnel definitely ran down the length of Fair Street, Ajay decided, right underneath all the gutted shops. As he walked, Ajay's small light picked out holed foundations and his shoes kicked at rubble on the floor. Openings led to large rooms with rock walls. More hanging wires, bolts in floors and ceilings, and even carved out sconces that might have held gas lights and candles were still in evidence.

Fortune's Lightning, Ajay thought, as he traced a worn spot over a door where the sign had

probably been pried off of bolts. He could see now why Conrad had been so upset by the demolition. One man's nothing, was, indeed, another man's fortune. There was as much history here as there was in the buildings above.

The tunnel continued to the right, taking a gentle curve, but that curve was ruined by a hole knocked into the brickwork. Stepping through it, Ajay could see that another section of tunnel stretched out into the distance under Fishburn's Deli and beyond. This one looked more like a drainage tunnel for the street above and, suddenly, Ajay was very certain the previous tunnel ended in an unsatisfying fashion somewhere up ahead.

Stepping back through the hole, Ajay made his way down the previous tunnel. It took time, but it did indeed end. Someone had shored it up with brickwork and Ajay suspected the gambling vault had once stood there, solid and defensible. It must have taken Kraton awhile to reach the solid bedrock beyond and to discover that their tunnel didn't continue on that way.

Fishburn's Deli had been needed after all.

Ajay walked back and stepped into the tunnel leading under the deli. It was obvious that water often flowed through it. It was danker and the brickwork was covered with dirt and debris. The gambling den, or speakeasy, whichever had come first, had blocked off their tunnel to keep that runoff from above from ruining their business.

Ajay followed the tunnel until he was certain he had passed the deli. There wasn't any telling how far it did go and there might be instability in the brickwork. It was a chance he was willing to take. Without a plan, only a physical investigation was going to reveal any new facts.

It was a long walk and it became treacherous, every now and again, when he stumbled on debris. His light saw him through safely, though, and when he finally reached the end of the tunnel, he realized he didn't need it any longer. The pipe ended at the docks, the grated opening showing him an expanse of water and dock posts.

Five miles, Ajay guessed, and the perfect conduit for anyone wanting to lay new utilities. Kraton definitely had a good reason to want those shops.

Ajay wasn't looking forward to the long walk back, but a few tugs on the grate let him know it was set solid and locked on the other side with a slider bar. Turning reluctantly to begin walking, he almost missed the narrow side tunnel.

Set back behind a masking bit of brickwork, it was a slightly darker patch of black, but enough to catch Ajay's eye. The wall hid a stone stairway that led sharply upward. At the top, Ajay found rusted, corrugated sheet metal covering the exit.

Unwilling to admit defeat, Ajay felt along the cold metal and tried to find any hidden latch. He shined his light over the face of it and then spotted the small metal plaque over the top. It read Fortune's Lightning strikes twice.

Seeing that here didn't make sense, Ajay thought. If the old gambling house or speakeasy had blocked off their part of the tunnel, then why would they put a sign in a place that they couldn't reach? Unless, Ajay realized, it was from a time before they blocked off the tunnel.

Ajay reached up and felt around the sign. It moved an inch away from the wall, and, feeling underneath, Ajay felt a metal bolt that was not attached to the sign. Pulling on it, he managed to move it out two inches. A click sounded and the metal door popped open slightly.

Ajay cautiously shined his light on the metal door. He could see a bolt through the top, then, that must have been connected to the mechanism under the sign.

Ajay blinked against light as he pushed the door open all the way and found himself in a very large, old warehouse. The smell of sea water was heavy in the air, along with grease and diesel fuel. Cranes and forklifts were bunched tightly together and the large wheel of one almost blocked Ajay's path. He squeezed past it and came face to face with a man preparing to climb into the cab of one of the forklifts.

"Shit!" the man exclaimed, clearly frightened. He stared, wide eyed, at Ajay, until he determined that Ajay was flesh and blood and not a ghost. Then he growled, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I'm Detective Kavanagh," Ajay introduced himself. "I—"

"The guy Drewes was talking about?" The man seemed even more relieved now. "He said you'd get rid of the ghosts."

"I don't think you're dealing with a haunting," Ajay replied. "Do you mind if I look around?"

"I know the boss man wanted you on the job site, so I guess it's okay," the man said, but then added impatiently, "I've got work to do. Watch yourself in here and on the dock. We're loading cargo and some of these idiots I work with don't always watch where they're going."

“Thanks, I will,” Ajay replied and backed up between two other machines so that the man could take the forklift out of the warehouse.

It made sense that the ghosts were probably Kraton’s people checking out the tunnels. They had exited just as Ajay had and been careless enough to leave evidence behind as they passed through the warehouse.

Walking back and closing the metal door, Ajay saw how it perfectly matched up to the rest of the corrugated, rusted wall of the warehouse. Since the wall had been laid out in panels, not even the faint lines of separation were remarkable enough to have attracted anyone’s notice.

Ajay’s cell rang and he answered it with one hand while he took pencil and notepad out of his pocket with the other. He wasn’t ready for Julia’s frantic voice.

“Jay? Why did you have your cell turned off? I’ve been trying to reach you for hours!”

“I didn’t. I was in a place that probably interrupted the service,” Ajay surmised. “What’s wrong? I’m sorry if you’re upset. I did leave a note saying I would be out on the case most of the day.”

“That’s not it,” Julia replied with noticeable anxiety in her voice. “I need to know what happened to the things that were on the counter last night.”

Ajay frowned, “The garbage? I know we’re not great at housekeeping, Julia, but garbage does go in the garbage can.”

“Jay!” Julia exclaimed and then took a moment to calm down. “I know THAT. I need to know if you took the garbage to the incinerator this morning.”

“Yes, on my way out,” Ajay replied. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll call you later. Love you,” Julia said quickly and the cell went dead.

Ajay stared at it, confused, and then put it into his pocket and decided to concentrate on the case. Julia, he was sure, would tell him later what was going on.

Ajay blinked against a strong sun as he stepped out of the warehouse. Wary of the machines buzzing up and down the docks with cargo and curious men passing him by, he tried to orient himself. He wasn’t surprised when an older man with a military crew cut, steel toed shoes, and a t-shirt already covered in dirt from the day, approached him with the man Ajay had seen in the warehouse.

“He was blathering about a ghost hunter,” the man said and stuck out a beefy hand that shook

Ajay's strongly. "Arnold Tempkins. I run this dock. You're that detective friend of Drewes?"

"I'm Detective Ajay Kavanagh," Ajay confirmed. "I was pursuing another case and found myself here after going through some underground drainage tunnels. There's an access into your warehouse through a hidden panel. I suspect that access had once been used by smugglers, drug dealers, or the owners of some very old gambling houses and speakeasies. I also suspect that your ghosts were workers in those tunnels."

"Workers? What were they doing down there?" Tempkins grumbled. "I don't like the thought of people popping up into my expensive machinery. Maybe they didn't take anything, but that doesn't guarantee they won't in the future."

"I would hate for someone to find themselves trapped down there," Ajay replied, "But a lock or a bar on that panel would keep out any unauthorized entry."

"Sounds good," Tempkins said and jerked his chin at the man beside him. "Show him where it is, while I cut you a check."

"That's not necessary," Ajay protested. "It was an accident, not part of any real investigation."

"Accident, or on purpose, you did me a service," Tempkins told him. "It's worth something not having my men shiver like scared schoolgirls whenever I tell them to get a machine from the warehouse."

Tempkins stomped off through the heavy traffic of machinery as if he was invulnerable to being run over.

"He's a good guy," the man still with Ajay said as Ajay led him back into the warehouse. "He can see you aren't flush with cash."

Ajay gave the man a puzzled look as they made their way through the tight lanes between large machines. "What do you mean?"

The man looked embarrassed for him and scratched at his head briefly, before saying, "Well. That coat looks really old. There's a hole at your elbow."

Ajay pulled the fabric around and saw it. Now he felt embarrassed. He wasn't sure there was a good response, so he said nothing until they reached the false panel. "That's it. There's a stairway that leads into a drainage tunnel."

"And city workers were using it?" the man wondered as he fingered it and decided how best to



lock it up.

“Or private workers,” Ajay replied. “It’s a theory, though. I don’t have any real proof, yet.”

“I think you popping your head up where it didn’t belong is proof enough, sir,” the man chuckled.

“I’d take his best theory over anyone’s proof any day,” Drewes said as he appeared between machinery and shook Ajay’s hand. Smiling he said, “Word spreads quick on the docks. They were saying the ghost hunter was here. Guess I did get to return the favor?”

“You did. Thank you,” Ajay replied. “I found an excellent clue for an ongoing case as well.”

“That’s great!” Drewes said, but then glanced at the man beginning to work on the panel, and drew Ajay away a little for some privacy. He whispered, “Tempkins has been good to me, so I wanted to help him out as well. This guy, Tavis Crowler, has been meeting with him lately. They go into his office and, when he comes out, Tempkins looks upset... mad... ready to eat forklifts, if you know what I mean? I think he’s having some money problems. Because of that, I figured, he didn’t need to be losing any, right now, by having men slowing down the loading process.”

“Tavis Crowler?” Ajay felt a shock at that name.

“That’s what Tish, Tempkins’ secretary, calls him,” Drewes replied. “You know him?”

“I might,” Ajay hedged. “I think I need to speak with Tempkins again.”

“Well, I’ll be getting back to work, then,” Drewes said and shook Ajay’s hand again. “Thank you, Detective.”

“You’re welcome. I think I owe you a thank you as well,” Ajay said.

“If everybody helps out everybody else, it makes it a better place to live, right?” Drewes chuckled. He slapped Ajay on the arm, good-naturedly, and then strode away.

Ajay followed him back outside of the warehouse and Drewes pointed out the tin shack on the edge of the wharf, where Tempkins’ office sat.

Trish was a tall, older brunette with an overlarge sweater and a pair of glasses that made her look formidable. As Ajay opened the office door and stepped in out of the cold, her words were pleasant enough, though skeptical sounding, as she said, “The ghost hunter, I presume?”

“Just a detective,” Ajay protested with a wince.

She relaxed, perhaps his character redeemed, somewhat. “Mr. Tempkins, the detective is here,”

she called through an open doorway.

“Let him in, Trish,” Tempkins called back and Trish motioned with her eyes for Ajay to go inside.

Tempkins was at a desk with a laptop open and running. Paperwork was piled and looked ready to slide off his desk at any moment. He had a large checkbook portfolio open on top of the pile and was just finishing pulling a check off. He handed it to Ajay and Ajay pocketed it without looking at the amount. He still wasn't certain he was owed anything.

“Thank you, Mr. Tempkins,” Ajay told him. “I'm glad I could be of assistance.” He pulled out one of his business cards and handed it to Tempkins. “If you have any need for a detective, or you know anyone who does, please contact me.”

Tempkins sighed and put the card in his much abused rolodex. “Will do, Detective, but, right now, I'm probably in need of a good lawyer. Know any?”

“I'm afraid I don't, sorry,” Ajay replied.

Tempkins looked both angry and stressed. “It's these damned city codes. There are millions of them and I don't know where I stand with any of it, right now.”

“The city is citing you for violations?” Ajay wondered.

Tempkins threw up his hands. “I don't know and that's the problem. This guy came by and told me to think of selling, because he had a tip that the county was going to lay cable through here. He told me, they could pay me pennies and put me out of business. He gave me a card for a Brighton law firm and told me to call them if I wanted to get a fair selling price. Seemed shady to me. I asked, why buy, if they know the city is going to grab the place up? He told me the city could rip it up all they wanted to, but, after, he just needed the dock, not the warehouses.”

Tempkins rubbed at his forehead as if he were developing a headache. “The guy told me he might be back to make a firmer offer, later. If you ask me, it sounded like a damned threat. If you told me he was mafia, I'd believe it. He talked like someone out of one of those gangster movies.”

“His name?” Ajay asked.

“Tavis Crowler,” Tempkins replied and then eyed Ajay, “So, any suggestions?”

Ajay tapped the rolodex with one finger. “If he does attempt to pressure you to sell, please call me. It might have a bearing on another case I'm working on. As for whether the city is actually planning on laying cable, and whether they might attempt to buy you out, I'm afraid I don't have any

information about that right now.”

Tempkins sighed, “I suppose you wouldn’t, but it was worth a shot. This dock has been in my family for generations. I’m not letting it go without a fight.”

“I can understand that,” Ajay told him, “and I’m sure all of your workers are grateful for your dedication to your business.”

“I take care of my own, even when they’re just hunting for ghosts in my warehouses,” Tempkins chuckled, attempting to lighten his mood.

Ajay smiled. “Thank you again, Mr. Tempkins.”

“Sure thing, Detective Kavanagh,” Tempkins replied and then waved at his desk full of work. “If you’ll excuse me, now, I have a lot of things to sort out.”

“Of course,” Ajay replied and saw his way out. He stepped carefully through the speeding machinery, and striding workers, and soon found himself on a well-worn road that snaked along the docks.

Ajay’s cell rang and he saw that it was Julia.

“Everything all right?” Ajay wanted to know.

“Yes, now it is,” Julia said with a tone of exasperation. “I called to ask when you’ll expect to be home.”

“Are you going to explain what was wrong earlier?” Ajay pressed.

“I will, when I see you,” Julia assured him. “Answer the question.”

“You sound angry,” Ajay pointed out as he began wondering whether to call a cab or walk what seemed like a long way to find a train or bus stop.

“Not angry,” Julia was quick to assure him. “I just had a bad morning. I want to make it better when I see you.”

Ajay considered his schedule. “I have a meeting uptown, in the business district, at six p.m. I’m not sure how long that will be. I might reach home around eight?”

There was a long silence and then Julia said, “That’s too long. Can I meet you there? We could have dinner out.”

Ajay thought about it and then realized they had never done anything that special. “All right. I think that’s a good idea. I’ll call you later to let you know how things are going and to set up a

meeting place.”

“Great!” Julia replied warmly. “Love you.”

Ajay felt a moment of embarrassment, knowing that there were workers in ear shot all around him, but then he ducked his head and said, “Love you, too.”

Ajay decided on the walk. He took the old road to a dilapidated bus stop while dodging the machinery and trucks that zipped up and down it heedless of pedestrians.

The wait for the next bus to arrive was long and cold. Looking out to where the warehouses squatted, rusted roofs and siding a motley of rust colors, and the boats bobbing on dark cold waters under a gray sky, Ajay longed for Spring. When he thought of a bright sun and flowers blooming everywhere, the image of Julia in the painting that hung in their home, interjected itself. Bright sunshine warming Julia while she sat in a field of sunflowers, was the perfect image of Spring time. The desire to see Julia in a setting like that for real, made Ajay’s longing even sharper.

“Work,” Ajay muttered to himself as he pushed that longing down with difficulty. He pulled out his pencil and notepad, wanting to use his wait time more constructively by writing down as much information as he could.

The bus finally arrived and Ajay boarded. The bus was empty and Ajay found a seat near the driver, a young man with a shock of blonde hair and a spray of freckles. The man grunted at him, eyed him up and down, and then said, “Lunch time. We’re going to sit for a good hour, okay?”

“I thought...” Ajay trailed off, thinking about bus schedules, regulations, and shifts, but the man looked used to not obeying any of those things, so Ajay let his protest go unvoiced. Instead, he settled and kept making notes.

The man grunted as if agreeing with Ajay’s wisdom in not fighting it. He opened up a lunchbox and began eating, a radio tuned to play music from a station that specialized in swing.

“This is better,” the man said around a bite of an overfilled hoagie sandwich. “I can see the water from here, the boats, the seagulls, and breathe some fresh air. Not like back at the main terminal. That’s all gas fumes, crowded tables, and hurry, hurry, if you know what I mean? Nobody wants the bus out here, this time of day, anyway. Everyone’s working. What happened to you? Get fired?”

“I don’t work around here,” Ajay replied. “I was... contracted for a special job.”

“The ghost hunter?” the man said excitedly. “They said one might be coming out. Did you see it?”

The ghost, I mean?"

Ajay sighed as he finished a note, not looking up. "There wasn't any ghost. It was workers using the warehouse to exit an underground drainage tunnel."

"Oh, that tunnel," the man said knowledgeably. "I grew up around here. My family worked on the docks, too, all of them except me. They said those tunnels led to a fortune some old time gamblers left behind. The stash of Fortune's Lightning gambling house. We all went digging and hacking at walls when we were kids. Never found 'nothing. Didn't know there was an exit through Tempkins' warehouse. We always went through the grate. There's a catch that opens it up on the sea side."

Ajay frowned. He didn't think the stairway had been that well-hidden, certainly not hidden enough to fool treasure hunters. That could mean it had been hidden better in the past. Someone must have uncovered it, whether by plan or accident, and then began using it.

Ajay's stomach grumbled. The driver raised eyebrows. "Split a sandwich? I have an extra coke, too."

"If you have enough?" Ajay replied as he put pencil and notes away.

"More than enough," the driver snorted. "My wife always makes too much." He held out a hand. "Fred Karlin."

Ajay shook it, "Detective Ajay Kavanagh," he returned and then found half of the man's sandwich in his hand. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Fred chuckled and then handed him his extra can of coke.

They ate quietly, the music playing and the sound of seagulls a counterpoint. When they were done and everything put away, the driver donned his cap and put the bus in gear.

Ajay transferred several times until he was in the business district. Checking his watch, he saw that he still had some time before his meeting with Pennyworth. He decided to do more research.

Public Works turned out to have better information than his last visit, now that he was in possession of the right questions. They confirmed a project proposal for laying new cable and pipes in an area that encompassed not only Fair Street, but the wharf area as well. The bidding process was still open, but there was a problem getting any underground plans for that area. Again, Ajay was told that those plans were still missing and that a proposal to create new, up to date ones, had already been approved.

“Can I have the name of the firm making those plans?” Ajay asked the clerk behind the counter.

The woman frowned at him for a long moment, as if checking regulations off in her head, and then nodded as she tapped keys on a keyboard. She had overlarge glasses perched on a thin nose. With her hair up in a bun, and hairpins stuck through it, she looked almost bird like as she finally looked over her glasses at him and replied, “Foundation Architecture. It’s just down the street.”

Penelope’s theft of city plans suddenly didn’t seem so innocent. Ajay thanked the woman and left the building. He tried not to look at the posters of Julia, still prominent everywhere, or the few people that were staring at them appreciatively, as he made his way to Foundation Architecture. Going inside, he found the guard confronting him at once. The man recognized him from his last visit.

“Sir? May I ask your business?” the guard asked with a fake politeness that was given some threat as his hand settled on the holstered gun at his side.

“I’m here to see Penelope Ashford,” Ajay replied.

The guard scowled. “I remember that she didn’t want to see you.”

“That was a misunderstanding,” Ajay told him. “Please tell her that Detective Ajay Kavanagh is here to see her, and that I want to discuss the Zone Forty-Two Renewal Project.”

The man gave him a long look and then brought his cell phone to his ear. “Peggy?” he said. “Which extension belongs to Penelope Ashford? Thank you.”

Ajay watched the man punch in the extension and then wait. The next conversation was predictable.

“Ms. Ashford? This is Tom, the guard at the main entrance. I have a Detective Kavanagh who wants to speak with you about the Zone Forty-Two Renewal Project.” The guard paused to listen to the reply and then looked satisfied as he pocketed his cell. “She says she doesn’t wish to speak with you, sir. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“All right,” Ajay replied. “Thank you.”

The guard saw him out, his gaze steady enough that Ajay was certain he was memorizing every detail of Ajay’s person. He didn’t blame the man. He would have done the same in his position. It would have been hard to explain to the man that he was actually the one who had been attacked by the small woman.

Once outside, Ajay found a place free of pedestrians and took out his phone. He dialed

Foundation Architecture and then Penelope's extension.

"Penelope Ashford," she answered, sounding stressed. "How may I help you?"

"That's two," a familiar female voice laughed. "You never get calls. If it's that detective again, get his phone number. If you don't want him, I'll take him."

"Shut it, Nancy!" Penelope growled in a low whisper.

"This is Detective Kavanagh," Ajay told her.

"How did you get this number?" Penelope hissed. "I should have you arrested! You're stalking me!"

"You know why I called," Ajay replied quickly. "This has to do with my case. I think you know what's really going on and the principals involved. You made copies of those plans because you didn't feel safe, or sure of your commitment to what's happening."

"Oh, yeah?" Penelope scoffed. "I don't think you know anything except a name."

"I know many names," Ajay replied, "And they're all connecting to a bid on The Zone Forty-Two Renewal Project."

"What do you want me to say?" she demanded, her voice lowered now and harsh with emotion. "I'm sure they know I'm talking to a detective now. These guys aren't playing softball, Boy Scout. It's hardball and they play to win. You've made a lot of trouble for me."

"I'm sorry, but people's livelihoods, and their community, have been destroyed," Ajay replied firmly. "I'm not going to back down from this case, not when other communities might face the same fate."

"You're acting as if those buildings wouldn't have been bulldozed anyway," Penelope retorted. "When they lay utilities, they don't exactly go through the front door."

"I can't speak for that," Ajay replied, "Except to say that there is a very big difference between improvements that have been planned through the right channels, and open meetings, and the ones that are done behind closed doors, where people are strong armed into selling their properties."

"This is big time, boy scout," she whispered, "The people involved call the shots around here. You file complaints, they're going to get buried."

"I won't be filing complaints," Ajay told her. "I intend to bring charges against those involved."

"They said they would leave Fishburn alone," Penelope said, suddenly angry. "They told me

they didn't need his place. Nothing's turning out like they said."

"Do you know Fishburn?" Ajay wondered, surprised.

"He was in the service, with my dad," Penelope replied. "They still get together. I wasn't going to help them if they messed with his place. Now he's closed. He told my dad he didn't know what to do now."

"Make it right," Ajay urged her. "Make a statement and I'll make sure they know you were coerced —"

"I wasn't, though," Penelope told him. "I did it for the money. The stinking money!"

"Taking government documents for copying is not a large offense," Ajay tried, desperate for her help.

"What kind of person am I?" Penelope said in anguish. "I did all this just so I could keep buying dresses and having my nails done. My dad's going to be so disappointed in me."

"We need to meet and talk further," Ajay told her.

"Yeah..." Penelope seemed distracted, almost in tears. "I think I do need to make this right..."

"Can you meet me near the bus terminal at 6:30 p.m.?" Ajay asked. "I have a meeting, but I should be done by then."

"Yeah... I think so... Yes, I'll be there," Penelope replied.

"Until then," Ajay said and didn't remember his date with Julia until he was halfway to the bank.

"You're calling to let me know when to meet you, right, Jay?" Julia said when Ajay called her on his cell. "If this is a not tonight, honey, speech, I'm not listening."

Ajay chewed on his bottom lip, weighing possibilities. A short meeting with Pennyworth was possible, but he wasn't certain how his meeting with Penelope was going to go. If she decided to make a statement, a trip to the nearest police station was going to be in order.

"Jay?" Julia sighed and then said, "Look, I can wait, even if I have to wait a long while. I know we joked about me helping you on your cases, but I could tag along, take notes for you, snap crime scene photos with my cell, or just stand and look like a beautiful assistant. All right?"

Ajay smiled. "All right, but standing around looking beautiful might be distracting for me."

"I'm not dressing down," Julia warned.

"Of course not," Ajay chuckled. "Meet me at the bus terminal here, at 7:00 p.m.?"



"I'll be there," Julia replied in a happier mood. "In a cab, though," she added. "You know I won't take a bus anywhere."

"I know," Ajay replied with a long suffering sigh that wasn't genuine. He knew that it was ridiculous, but he always felt better when Julia took a cab or her motorcycle. It seemed safer. It was his protective nature, of course, but Ajay didn't expect that part of him to ever change.

\*\*\*\*

Ajay was early. He sat on a public bench, close to the bank, checked his watch, and then settled in to go over notes until it was time for his meeting. There were a lot of people on the sidewalks and Ajay wasn't alerted to any danger when a shadow fell over him.

"Slow, easy, and quiet," a voice said very distinctly.

Ajay looked up at the skinny, sallow skinned man glaring down at him. The man's hand was under his coat, a few flakes of snow beginning to fall on his shoulders and dark, stringy hair. His small eyes looked very nervous, almost afraid, as if he hadn't expected Ajay to be so large or intimidating as Ajay slowly stood up.

"What's going on?" Ajay wanted to know. He was now looking down at the man. That made the man even more nervous.

"You're going to follow me, like I'm your best friend," the man ordered. "Make a move and I'll—"

"Shoot?" Ajay wondered and looked around at the crowd. "Here?"

The man looked angry, now. "I've got a silencer, stupid. By the time these idiots stop wondering what that little noise was, and figure out you're not having a heart attack, I'll be lost in the crowd."

"If you think so," Ajay replied skeptically.

"I know so!" the man retorted.

"Why do you need me to follow you?" Ajay wondered, trying to keep calm while his mind raced to figure out an escape.

"Stop asking questions!" the man snarled and then lowered his voice as his eyes darted around. "I just follow orders. The boss said, bring you, or leave you a piece of meat. Your choice."

“You do realize there are street cameras everywhere?”

The man’s eyes narrowed as he flicked Ajay’s coat open on both sides with a gloved hand. He sneered at the lack of a gun. “You think they work? Most of them are dummies,” he informed Ajay.

“You know so?”

“Yes, I know so!” the man snarled. “Now, move where I tell you to move, or I will hole you.”

“Where are you taking me?” Ajay wanted to know.

“Kraton Development,” the man snickered.

Ajay went ahead of the man away from the bank. The man stayed at his elbow, so close that someone said, “Fags,” in disgust.

“I’m not a stinking fag!” the man snarled back.

“That was rude,” Ajay said quietly as they began walking past the terminal, hands in his pockets. He turned in a swirl of coat and snow. He left his cell on a small ledge, along one terminal wall, as he confronted the smaller man and said, “And offensive.”

“Take offense all you want,” the man retorted. “Keep walking.”

Ajay glared and then complied, walking to where the man had a car parked. He made Ajay slide into the back seat and then handcuffed his wrists to the head rest of the seat in front of him.

Sloppy, Ajay thought. Anyone could see them together, see what was going on, and report it. That carried with it knowledge that it took a certain type of citizen to notice something odd going on and to take the time to call someone about it. He couldn’t hope for that kind of intervention.

“If this is about the bid for the utilities,” Ajay began, but the man cut him off with a snarled, “Shut up!”

Ajay tried to relax the pressure on his wrists and get the attention of someone either driving past them or walking on the sidewalk. When they stopped at a light and Ajay tried to show his cuffs to the driver next to him, the man grinned and said through his open window, “Kinky!” and drove on.

Ajay sighed, but then tensed as a gun and silencer reached back and pressed against his forehead. “Do that again and I’ll shoot you in the brain basket.”

The man sounded like a bad movie, a not so tough individual trying to sound like a gangster. His hand on the gun wasn’t shaking, though, and his eyes were level, even if they were showing how nervous he was. Ajay was certain he was used to violence. Ajay had to assume he was capable of it

and that Angelico might want more than just a talk.

Ajay checked his watch. Julia was probably arriving at the bus terminal. She wouldn't see Ajay and she would use, Ajay hoped, her fancy GPS cell locator, the one she had been patiently trying to show Ajay how to use not a few days ago. It would tell her Ajay was at the bus terminal. How long it would take for his lover to find the cell was anyone's guess, though. She might find Ajay's text message before then. The one that simply said *Kraton ware*; all that he could type and send before having to leave the cell behind. Typing blind, he could only hope he had managed to spell something decipherable.

Julia was capable, intelligent, and fast thinking, Ajay told himself. She would figure it out. She would call Wezel and ask the man where Kraton's warehouse was located. Then she would rush headlong to save him, Ajay thought with a sudden chill. He hadn't considered that. Julia didn't care that she was half the weight of most men and a head shorter. She wouldn't care that she was weaponless and only had a beginner's knowledge of karate. She was as fierce as a pit bull when she thought she needed to be, and she would think that this was a time that needed it.

"Angelico just wants to talk?" Ajay decided to verify.

"That's up to you, isn't it?" the man snickered. "You listen real carefully and maybe that's all that's expected. Maybe."

"How did you know I was in the business district?" Ajay asked as he studied the cuffs and wondered if he could actually get loose, somehow.

"You don't exactly hide anything you've been up to," the man sneered. "The boss has been watching what you're doing. He knows who you've been talking to."

"Pennyworth?" Ajay asked, suddenly afraid for Penelope's safety.

The man frowned. "Just shut up, until the boss tells you what's what."

The man was afraid he had said too much, already, Ajay guessed, which allowed him to make an assumption that Angelico knew about his meeting with Pennyworth. That revealed a connection. If Angelico knew Pennyworth's itinerary, then they were either working closely together or he knew someone who was working closely with Pennyworth.

Now Ajay had to wonder if Pennyworth knew about his abduction.

Traffic was heavy. They sat behind traffic jams several times. The man cursed and became

severely agitated each time. He watched Ajay closely, though, making certain Ajay wasn't attempting to alert nearby cars to his plight. Ajay, for his part, wanted to arrive and get it over with. He also wanted to access his notebook. His mind was racing to memorize everything that was happening and he couldn't help a bit of anxiety, fearful he might forget key elements.

When they finally pulled up to the abandoned warehouse, the man unlocked Ajay from the seat. He then made Ajay get out of the car and walk into the warehouse in front of him. Angelico wasn't there.

Pigeons fluttered about, one setting up a mournful cooing sound. Sunlight was turning orange and diffused through the high, dirty windows as the sun began setting.

"In the office," the man directed and Ajay went into the dirty little room with its forlorn phone on its pile of garbage.

The man handcuffed Ajay's wrists and then shoved him up against the wall. He took a few steps back and grinned.

Ajay met the man's gaze steadily, even though he wasn't feeling steady at all. He feared the worst and could only think, as the man checked his gun and silencer that, though he hadn't spent long with Julia, it had been the best part of his life. He might regret they hadn't had longer together, but he didn't regret anything else. He was a Kavanagh. Kavanagh's served, even if it meant giving up their lives. Perhaps he didn't own the blood, but Ajay did own their spirit. He wasn't going to beg. He was certain it wouldn't do any good, anyway.

"I was told to talk to you," the man said as he pointed his gun at Ajay's head. "I'm not real good at talking. I'm more of a show you kind of guy. So, I'm going to show you that you wanna drop your snooping and go find something else to do. If you don't get it, then I'm going to have to show you, permanent like, got it?"

"I really don't think you need to resort to violence," Ajay began softly, but then winced as the man shot the wall next to his face. The drywall exploded and bits of wood and gypsum splattered his cheek hard. He closed his eyes and held very still, feeling dust settle over his skin. Something wet trickled in the dust and Ajay knew that his face had been cut.

"I only want to hear one thing from you," the man told him. "I want to hear, I'm dropping it and not bothering you people anymore, all right?"

“If Angelico only wanted you to talk to me, then —” Ajay tried again, but another bullet ripped the wall on the other side of his face. Again he felt drywall and wood splatter his cheek. More blood flowed. Something sharp was sticking into his shoulder. He had started badly, unable to help that reaction, and his voice shook a little when he asked, “If you kill me, won’t he be upset?”

Ajay opened his eyes to find the man smiling at him. He made a lazy gesture with his gun. “Accidents happen...” and then he was pointing it at Ajay’s head again. “Say the words and mean them,” he ordered. “Maybe the boss wants to keep things on the legal side, but you can’t teach a rat to sing like a canary.”

“What?” popped out of Ajay’s mouth before he could stop it, too anxious and confused to edit his speech.

The man scowled. “I’m the rat.... can’t teach me to sing and be fancy mannered... like a canary,” he explained with emphasis. “Fuck, you’re stupid! I don’t know why the boss even bothers. Not like you’ll figure anything out.”

The man braced his stance and took a bead along the sight of his gun. “I bet I can hit that little mole, just next to your eyebrow,” he said.

“I’m dropping it and not bothering you people anymore,” Ajay parroted quickly.

The man frowned. “I don’t think that sounded genuine. In fact, I can tell, just by looking at you, that you don’t mean it at all.” He lowered his gun and sighed. “You’re one of those fucks who has rocks for brains and doesn’t scare off. The boss may want things done legal, but you’re going to keep hanging around and getting in the way of us making lots of money. You can get why I don’t want that to happen? Some of the cut is mine. It’ll set me up nice for a while. I’m not missing out on that.”

“At least tell me what this is all about?” Ajay asked, feeling adrenaline start to pump and his body tense.

“No, not a chance,” the man growled and stepped forward as he produced another set of handcuffs from his coat pocket. “See, I’m giving you a sporting chance. You get loose, maybe you’ll have learned something. If you don’t, you’re not a problem anymore.”

He attached one handcuff to Ajay’s ankle. It was tight and Ajay winced in pain. When the man closed the other cuff on a pipe snaking along the floorboard, Ajay wasn’t sure if the man had simply chosen to give Ajay a slower death. That pipe was bolted down and thick. If Ajay couldn’t break it,

his fate was going to be slow starvation or death by exposure from the cold.

The man ripped the phone jack out of the wall. He let the cord and the broken pieces of the jack trickle down on top of the phone. He grinned at Ajay, pleased by his own cruel cleverness. "In case you do get loose," he warned as he turned toward the door, wiggling his gloved fingers, "I wear gloves so I don't leave prints. It's your word against mine that I left you here."

He turned at the doorway and looked over his shoulder. "In case you weren't listening to that, let me make sure you hear this: Get loose and mess in our business again, or try and take it to the cops, and I'll make sure that you, and whoever you're lovey-dovey with, don't see another sunrise. Got it?" he shrugged, "I added lovey-dovey because, maybe, you're one of those guys who doesn't care about himself? Gotta care about someone else, though, right? Because, isn't that who you're doing all of this for? Other people?"

Ajay watched him walk across the expanse of empty warehouse floor and give Ajay a lazy salute goodbye as he went out of the main door. Ajay waited until he heard the car pull away, and he was left with only the sound of doves, before he sat down on the floor, managed to reach the phone line, and began splicing it back together using his fingers and teeth.

It took time, but Ajay finally had the wires together. When he picked up the phone, though, the line was dead. Brighton had given up on their office after the demolition had been completed it seemed. With that hope gone, Ajay turned his attention to the pipe. Soon, there wouldn't be enough light to see by and he didn't want to simply tug at the pipe until it broke or he froze to death in the unheated warehouse overnight.

The pain in his shoulder stung sharper as Ajay hunched over the pipe and studied it. Reaching up, he found an old nail sticking through his coat. A tug pulled it out and Ajay measured the blood as if he were checking oil on a dipstick. An inch at least. He could feel a bloom of blood start soaking his shirt. Not dangerous, but adding to his misery all the same. He tossed the nail and studied the pipe again.

It was soldered at several points, but those points were protected by metal hangers that were bolted into wall studs. Looking around, Ajay couldn't see anything in the debris to help him pry at the metal. It was going to be brute strength, then, he decided, and began kicking at the wall to take out the drywall on both sides of a stud.

Gypsum powdered the room before Ajay broke through and found that the studs were metal. He stared at the steel bolts and the steel stud and knew that brute strength wasn't going to save him as far as prying the metal pipe loose. Breaking the solder point was his only chance now.

A dove fluttered into the office, looked at Ajay in surprise, and then fluttered out again as Ajay began to kick at a metal band. The impact hurt his foot and ankle, and the angle didn't give him the most power, but he was able to put a good amount of force into the kick all the same.

Shadows began to deepen, the sun almost falling below the line of windows. The warehouse itself was disappearing into darkness and the cold was becoming bone numbing. Ajay's repeated kicks were hurting him up to his kneecap now and his foot felt tight in his shoe, as if it were swelling. He didn't slow down his kicks, though, gritting his teeth and glad he had used exercise machines at the gym that strengthened leg muscles.

The light went entirely and Ajay was plunged into darkness. He paused, panting, feeling desperation claw at his gut. He remembered his father telling him that he had someone else to worry about, now, and how he hadn't realized the full importance of that warning. It suddenly made sense with a crystal clarity that made Ajay's heart clench.

It was possible, as much as he didn't want to consider defeat, he might never manage to get loose. He might very well die. If he did, Julia was going to be left alone and heartbroken. Being the cause of Julia mourning him, and being responsible for losing the chance to spend a life together, was almost more than Ajay could bear. It made him kick at the pipe in the darkness with all the furious force that his emotions could gather.

"Jay?!" Julia's voice made Ajay jump, but it was as welcome as the voice of an Angel.

"Julia! I'm here!" Ajay saw the beam of flashlights playing over the warehouse as three figures entered the warehouse.

"Careful!" Wezel's voice warned as running footsteps came toward the office and Ajay.

"Julia!" Jerry's voice piped in, sounding very nervous. "You don't know what else is here. There could be guard dogs, service pits...."

"Jay?" A light from a flashlight played crazily over the office until the beam found Ajay, panting where he sat on the floor.

Ajay wiped a dirty hand across his sweating brow, sweat that was quickly turning his skin cold

and clammy, and smiled shakily. "Love."

Julia's hands were on him, then, as she crouched down and looked into Ajay's face. "Are you all right? What the hell happened?"

Ajay tried to reply, but Julia was clutching at him and kissing him with fierce relief.

The two men joined them, looking worried.

"Nervous breakdown later, Julia," Jerry said anxiously. "We need to get the gorilla out of here."

"Can you walk?" Wezel asked as he crouched by Ajay.

Julia had stopped kissing him, but she wasn't letting her grip on Ajay loosen. Ajay was smoothing a hand along Julia's back awkwardly, handcuffed wrists rattling. "I think I hurt my ankle, but I'm sure I can walk. Getting loose is a problem, though. I'm handcuffed to a pipe."

Julia located the pipe with her flashlight. She followed it along the wall and then tried to take hold of it with the flashlight tucked under her chin.

"Julia, you won't be able to budge that," Ajay warned with a sigh.

"I can try!" Julia snapped back. "I want you out of here."

Jerry took the flashlight from Julia and crouched to hold the light on the pipe. "He's right, Julia," Jerry agreed. "I don't think all of us together can get that loose. We'll have to call someone for help."

"That will take too much time!" Julia snapped, her voice sounding shaky. "He's freezing."

"As much as I hate a cuddle session with guys," Wezel said uncomfortably, "Body warmth will do the trick until we can get someone out here to cut the handcuffs."

"That won't be necessary," Angelico said from the doorway of the office.

"Shit!" Wezel exclaimed and fell backward in fright, flashlight clattering to the floor and making crazy shadows everywhere.

Jerry was up in a fighting stance instantly, long braid slapping Ajay in the face as he moved. He stepped in front of everyone, ready to fight the much larger man. "Who are you?" Jerry demanded. "I warn you, we're armed!"

Julia was up as well, face set angrily. "If you're the man who did this, you'd better contact an ambulance. No one hurts my man."

"Everyone calm down!" Ajay shouted. "Don't jump to conclusions."

Angelico was wearing a long black coat. His expression was one of irritation, but his eyebrow



was also raised in sour amusement. He didn't look intimidated and Ajay was certain it was because he was armed and very dangerous. He looked like a stereotypical Italian gangster. A wrestler's build, black hair, and a scar over his nose. His black eyes were flat and level. They were the eyes of someone who could and would kill if it was necessary.

"You are Mr. Angelico?" Ajay confirmed.

"Yes, I am," the man replied. He said with deadly seriousness to Jerry, "Don't make threats that you can't back up, boy. It leads to unnecessary violence and dead bodies. You aren't armed, or you would have pulled a gun at once, am I right?"

Jerry glared, looking very slight next to Angelico's bulk, but more than willing to defend his friends. "You know a lot about violence, it seems." It was an insult that was lost on Angelico.

"I know about a lot of things," Angelico replied. "I especially know how to keep my men in line. This wasn't the plan." He tossed keys through the shadows and they hit Ajay in the chest. "I told him, everything legal, or else. Now Mucy is finding out about the what else. He was only supposed to tell you how things were going to be."

"And how were things going to be?" Wezel growled as he crawled over to Ajay and used his flashlight to help Ajay unlock the cuffs. "Cement shoes? Dirt nap? Trunk Bunk?"

Angelico frowned and asked Ajay in confusion, "What the hell is he blabbering about?"

Ajay finished taking off the cuffs as he asked, "Mucy is the man who kidnapped me?"

"I don't mind telling you that, because there's nothing you can do about it," Angelico replied with a shrug. "Proof is hard to come by. Besides, he won't be talkin' to nobody again. He's taking a, what's a good way to put it? Extended vacation?"

"You killed him?" Julia said sharply and moved closer to Ajay.

"Now, I wouldn't say something like that," Angelico snorted in amusement, but then went deadly serious again, "But this is the conversation Mucy was supposed to have with you, Detective Kavanagh. Put your own meaning to that, as long as it gets you out of our business."

Wezel suddenly said, "I don't think you have a gun, either. Maybe we could all jump you, together and—" His flashlight centered on Angelico as the man drew a black gun from under his coat. The man showed it to them.

"She's a beauty and she's never failed me. Something for you to think about," Angelico warned.

Wezel swallowed noisily and Jerry took a step back from Angelico. He didn't drop his stance, though, or stop from defending his friends. Julia was in front of Ajay as well, body blocking him protectively.

Angelico grunted at their united front. "Remember what I'm saying," he warned. "We're playing for keeps, here. Two bit detectives, dames, and skinny gay boys should stay in the sandbox."

"I'm not gay!" Wezel protested automatically, but then shut up and swallowed hard again when the gun pointed at him.

"You've ruined a lot of lives," Ajay said as he managed to stand and face Angelico. He limped to put himself in front of his lover and friends, "and a lot of businesses, to get what you wanted. Doesn't that bother you at all?"

Angelico frowned, disgusted with Kavanagh's naiveté. "It's a dog eat dog world. I'm top dog. I get the best steak and everyone else gets the scraps, or nothing at all, if they don't do as I tell them."

He turned and left them there, footsteps sounding loud as he crossed the cement floor. After he left the building, there were a few moments and then the sound of a car.

"Sometimes, the poodle has a bigger bite than the pit bull, though," a female voice said from the darkness and a frightened Penelope stepped into the light. "Guys, it's time I did the right thing and stop thinking about myself. I helped hurt a lot of people, just like Boy Scout said. First it was for money, but then they scared me into shutting up when the money stopped being enough. I kept copies, though, of everything I could get, just in case I needed to threaten them to keep myself safe. They followed me when I copied the city plans, though. If you hadn't been there, Boy Scout, I might have ended up like Mucy, taking a permanent vacation. I think I have enough to bury Pennyworth, and the Brighton law firm, or at least give them a black eye that will cost them the contract with the city."

"Not Angelico?" Julia wondered as she put Ajay's arm over her shoulder and helped him stay off of his injured ankle. There was a tone to her voice that told Ajay that Julia wanted revenge.

"No, I'm sorry," Penelope said.

"I don't think we need to worry about that," Wezel told them with a smug smile. "I have plans for that guy."

"Plans?" Ajay wondered wearily as he began limping for the doorway.

"Leave it to me," Wezel replied cryptically. "I am the computer genius of this group."

"Should we go to the hospital?" Julia wondered worriedly as they left the warehouse and Ajay shivered in the cold night air.

"No," Ajay assured her, "My ankle hurts from kicking the pipe. I'll be fine after I get warm and relax."

They helped him into the back seat of a sleek, black sports car, and Julia slid in beside him. As Penelope slid in on his other side, Ajay asked, "So, you found my cell phone?"

"A homeless man found your cell phone," Julia said in exasperation. "I saw him playing with it after I arrived at the bus terminal. He asked me for a dollar, but then upped it to twenty when I asked for the cell phone."

"My text message?" Ajay wondered.

"You sent it to me, not Julia," Jerry complained as he slid into the driver's seat. "I had no idea what Kjatn why meant. Why you even have my number, is curious."

"I put your cell number in my contact listing," Ajay replied. "When you helped me with information, you became part of my case."

"He used technology," Wezel said, as if he could hardly believe it, as he climbed into the front passenger side seat and turned up the heat. "You're finally learning."

"Well, anyway," Jerry said, giving Wezel an irritated look for interrupting, "I called Julia to see if it was her text," Jerry continued, "She said, no, and so did everyone else I called. So, I deleted it."

"Deleted it?" Ajay was startled. "How did you find me, then?"

"I checked your messages," Julia told him. "It showed that the last text message was sent to Jerry. I called Weasel right away, to see if he knew what it meant."

"That's Wezel, God damn it!" Wezel snarled.

As Jerry pulled away from the curb, he gave Wezel a startled look. "You are too loud," he complained.

"And your damned hair is too long, but I'm not yapping my complaints, am I?" Wezel shot back.

"Since I'm not trying to get a date with a straight man, I hardly see how your opinion matters," Jerry shot back.

"Like you don't want some of this," Wezel sneered as he motioned to his chest proudly. "I got

what everyone wants, regardless of orientation or sex.”

“That would be...?” Jerry wondered acidly.

“You need two rulers, baby,” Wezel replied with a self-satisfied smile.

Jerry’s eyes widened and then looked disgusted. “To make up for what you don’t have?”

“Keep thinking that... and missing out,” Wezel retorted.

“Are you all gay?” Penelope asked in confusion.

“Not me, baby,” Wezel snorted back.

“You figured out that I was talking about Kraton?” Ajay wondered, loudly, trying to get them back on the story.

“Eventually,” Wezel complained. “You didn’t make it easy. I told Julia and she was hot to go there. I knew you’d kill me, if I let her do that alone, so I decided to go along.”

“He wouldn’t take a cab,” Julia complained.

“It costs too much money!” Wezel complained.

“They called me, because I have a car,” Jerry interjected. “Of course I wouldn’t let Julia go alone, either.”

“I can take care of myself,” Julia complained irritably, “but I didn’t know what the situation was, so I decided it would be smart to have backup.”

Ajay frowned as he bent and rubbed at his throbbing ankle. He was warming up, but shivering with reaction to the cold still. “I suppose calling the police was out of the question?”

There was a moment of silence and then Wezel snorted. “What were we going to tell them? Kavanagh wasn’t where he was supposed to be? They might have sent an officer sometime next week.”

“Where are we going now?” Penelope asked anxiously. “I put all of my copies in a locker at my gym. It should still be open.”

“At your gym?” Julia blinked at her. “Why the gym?”

She looked at her as if she were stupid. “That blonde must be natural,” she replied acidly. “Of course I wouldn’t take them home. They’d rob me, or something, and get them.”

“What sort of information did you copy?” Ajay asked.

Penelope smiled, “Oh, you’d be surprised what people leave lying around, when they think they

have things tied up nicely, and how often people walk away from their computers without logging out.”

“And you did all of this, because you were afraid of being threatened?” Ajay asked.

Penelope hesitated the barest moment and then replied, “Of course.”

Wezel laughed. “I have your number already, sister,” he scoffed. “You were going to blackmail them.”

She frowned uncertainly and twisted her hands together in her lap. “Yeah, well, didn’t they deserve it? Especially after going after Fishburn?”

“You got scared,” Wezel guessed. “You realized that these guys are for real and that things aren’t like the movies, right? Kavanagh called you just when you were thinking of either taking a hike out of your job, or to keep playing nice, nice with the gangsters.”

“Nice, nice?” Jerry repeated sarcastically. “You’re the one watching too many movies.”

“We’ll get the proof, first, and then take Penelope to the police station,” Ajay said firmly. “She can give her statement and they can make sure she’s kept safe until arrests have been made.”

“I’ll need to make a phone call while we’re there as well,” Wezel said. “If I’m right, we may have some proof on Angelico as well.”

“What proof?” Ajay wondered.

Wezel replied, “There’s a lot of if’s, as in, if they’ve been paying their security bill, if there was enough light, and if the security camera was aimed in the right direction we’ll have proof.”

Ajay frowned skeptically. “If there was security, I think that someone would have helped me sooner. An alarm would have gone off and someone would have been called about a break in.”

“Who would they call?” Wezel wondered with a grin.

“Brighton,” Ajay surmised.

“Who reside in another state,” Wezel added. “Angelico may have known about this place, but, I’m betting an empty, trashed warehouse wouldn’t get any of his attention, even if he was a contact when alarms went off. In fact, I’m betting the alarm company has a sticky note on their account that says, don’t bother calling. A naked frat party probably wouldn’t get a response.”

“That’s a great deal of supposition,” Julia pointed out. “What are you basing any of that on?”

“A security sticker on the outside of the warehouse,” Wezel replied and didn’t seem daunted in

the least by the slim lead.

“And this man works for you, gorilla?” Jerry asked in disbelief.

“He’s very capable,” Ajay replied as he sat back in his seat and tried to compose how he was going to present his evidence to the police. Julia’s hand was warm as she took hold of Ajay’s hand and squeezed.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Julia asked worriedly.

Ajay nodded and reassured her. “This is where everything comes together,” Ajay said, sure of his facts enough to make that statement. “It won’t be difficult to convince the shop owners to make statements about the coercion used against them, now that there is reasonable proof that illegal activity has been going on.”

“If this woman’s proof is sufficient to make the case,” Julia pointed out.

“It is,” Penelope snapped back. “And you better be right about that protection, Kavanagh. I know, now, that the guy waving his gun around, wouldn’t hesitate to plant me five feet under. This isn’t about stupid underhanded architects, lawyers, and bankers. This is gangster stuff.” She looked upset. “Even my friend... She was in on it. As soon as I got off the phone with you, she was out of her chair and going into the boss’s office. I went out the door looking for you right after that, but you were already gone.”

“I thought that she was acting strangely,” Ajay mused, “She was so open and informative with a complete stranger about your business. She must have been attempting to see if you had already talked to me about what you knew.”

Penelope looked upset. “You can see why I’m here, right? Maybe I’m feeling bad for Fishburn, and the others, but I’m in trouble, big time. That guy, who was waving that gun around, is going to be aiming for me.”

She gave them directions to her gym. When Jerry pulled up to the building, she asked, nervously. “All of you coming?”

“Jay needs to rest,” Julia replied. “Wezel, you and Jerry go with her.”

Penelope rolled her eyes as she opened the door, and said, “Great! I get skinny and geeky. I feel so safe.”

“I am solid muscle!” Jerry shot back as he and Wezel joined her. “Weight is irrelevant when one

is trained as well as I am in the martial arts.”

As Penelope began walking toward the gym, she came face to face with Julia’s angel poster. She looked back at the car with an exasperated expression and then went around the poster to reach the door of the gym. Wezel and Jerry were close behind her.

“What was that look?” Ajay wondered.

“Either the, she’s trash because she does that for a living, or the, what’s she doing with him, look,” Julia replied as she leaned into Ajay to lend some of her warmth and comfort.

“I often wonder about the last question,” Ajay sighed and then looked down at Julia, noticing at last how well-dressed his lover was. Wearing gold jewelry, her hair was woven into micro braids and pulled back into a ponytail of bright gold. She was wearing a white coat with a faux fur spotted, snow leopard collar, a shimmering gold skirt, and white boots with stiletto heels. It was obvious that Julia had dressed to go somewhere very special with Ajay.

Ajay rubbed at a dirt spot on Julia’s shoulder and then noticed more. “I’m sorry,” he told her softly. “I know you wanted a night out.”

Julia made an impatient face and then slipped an arm around Ajay. “First, I’m with you because you’re a damned handsome man and I love you. Second, what’s happening now is far more important than a dinner out. Do not apologize for that.”

Ajay saw something in her eyes, though, a shadow of deeper emotions that she was trying hard to cover up. Frustration, Ajay guessed, though it didn’t make any sense. Why not anger and disappointment? “What is it?” Ajay wanted to know. “You’ve been keeping something from me. Tell me what’s going on.”

Julia motioned to the car and the gym. “Not a good time, Jay. Later.”

“No,” Ajay told her. “Now. We have a few minutes.”

“A few minutes in which you could be reviewing what you’re going to say to the police,” Julia countered. “Again, more important than what I want.”

Ajay wanted to pursue it, but he knew that Julia was right. He turned on an overhead light in the car and pulled out his notes. He began writing new ones. When Penelope returned with her guards, he took a leather case from her and pulled out its contents. Memory sticks, hard copied documents, including copies of loan applications, were only a few of the things in Ajay’s hands.

"Emails, spreadsheets, cost analysis reports, geological survey, architectural notes and plans, to name a few," Penelope said proudly.

"I'm in love," Wezel said in appreciation. "When you blackmail, you're thorough."

"They were all pretty cocky," Penelope explained. "They never considered little me, running their errands, was any kind of threat to them. Well, not until I needed to get those city plans copied. I was just supposed to steal them, not run halfway across town. I should have realized that errand was important enough for them to watch me. My excuse that I was visiting an old relative before returning with the plans wasn't really good enough to convince them. I'm lucky Luigi, back there, didn't come after me, right then and there."

"Angelico," Ajay corrected absently. "He said he wanted everything legal, but he did seem willing to forgo that if a person was too troublesome."

"We don't know that he killed this Mucy fellow," Jerry pointed out. "He might have actually meant permanent vacation."

"And the gun was just for show?" Wezel scoffed.

"You're the one creating this image of him as a gangster," Jerry retorted. "He might have wanted to frighten us, but he could just as easily have shot us and disposed of us."

"I don't think that would be easy," Julia said, sounding sick.

"He didn't want gorilla dead, that's for certain," Jerry reminded him.

"Why do you keep calling him that?" Wezel complained.

"It fits," Jerry chuckled.

"So does boy scout," Penelope interjected.

"Enough!" Julia snapped. "Get us to the police station, Jerry, and let's get this over with."

"All right! All right!" Jerry replied and pulled away from the curb.

"This isn't going to be easy, either," Ajay told Julia. "It may take hours. You don't have to wait around. Take a cab home and—"

"Like hell!" Julia growled and Ajay could feel her body tense angrily. "Maybe you're used to all of this, but I find it hard to just get over my lover being kidnapped, chained in a freezing warehouse, and in danger of losing his life. I think I'll enjoy the feeling of having you safe again, a bit longer, all right?"



"Tough little gal, isn't he?" Wezel snorted in amusement.

"Don't call her little!" Ajay reflexively snapped back.

"Well, sorry," Wezel replied uncomfortably.

"You should be," Jerry chimed in with a snicker.

"I'm not listening to any of this," Penelope said in disgust. "Just get me to the police."

Julia tightened her arm around Ajay and held him closer. "Almost over," she said and Ajay wasn't sure if she was saying it to comfort him or herself.

## Chapter Eleven

"I'm going to kill Perkins," Krowl growled angrily as he glared at Ajay over his desk filled with paperwork.

"Why?" Ajay asked in surprise as he pulled out a chair for Penelope to sit in.

"Because, if I hadn't switched shifts with him, I would have missed your three ring circus," Krowl shot back. He leaned back in his chair and looked them over, arms crossed over his big chest. "It's late, Kavanagh. If this is about a lady's poodle, or about a stolen purse, or –"

"It's about the case you gave me," Ajay interrupted.

Krowl grunted and said, "One man makes an unsubstantiated claim of coercion and you take... how long to put it to rest? "

"The case was broader than anticipated," Ajay explained. "It had many elements that took long investigation."

"Just show him the stuff!" Penelope exclaimed as she pulled the briefcase out of Ajay's hands and slammed it down on top of Krowl's paperwork. "There's your case closed, officer. All the proof that you need to put some men in jail for coercion, rigging a city bidding process, and for all kinds of other things, I'm sure." She moved around the desk and pushed a manicured finger into Krowl's chest. "Now, I need protection. Those guys are going to be after me when they find out I gave you all of this."

Krowl blinked at her in surprise and then glared at Ajay. "What the hell is going on, Kavanagh?"

"Kraton Development was a shell company," Ajay explained, "created by the Brighton lawyer firm for Titus Pennyworth, a commercial loan officer with Northside bank."

"He handled the city loans and knew there was going to be a bid on a huge underground infrastructure project," Penelope interjected. "He knew if he had the plans, owned the buildings where the construction could most easily take place, and had certain knowledge of old forgotten underground tunnels, he could win the bid easily. Without the cost of building tunnels, no one would be able to underbid him."

Krowl stared at them both and then asked, "One: How did he know about the tunnels? Two: Why would a banker be interested in bidding on a construction job?"

Penelope smiled and patted the briefcase. "Pennyworth denied a loan to an archeologist, who couldn't get funding to investigate those tunnels. The archeologist told him how far those old tunnels ran and how incredible it was that they managed to find a natural rift between two slabs of granite to make them. You'll see in here that Pennyworth owed some money for a very large gambling debt to a Mr. Carmen Angelico. You'll see by their emails to each other that getting the bid for the job was for Angelico and his associates, not Mr. Pennyworth himself. "

"Angelico is a gangster," Ajay mused.

"A sharp businessman, at least," Krowl grumbled. "Where does the illegality come in, Kavanagh?"

"Pennyworth used proprietary knowledge to attempt to win the bid," Penelope told him. "Wouldn't you say that there was a conflict of interest when the banker handling the city's loans for a project, then uses that knowledge to bid for the project through a shell company?"

"And this Angelico?"

Penelope looked at a loss and turned to Ajay.

"He threatened us with a gun," Ajay told Krowl, but, when Krowl's eyebrows went up, he added, "but I don't have any proof of that. He warned me to leave the case and threatened my life."

"I've threatened your life, Kavanagh," Krowl growled, but he seemed concerned as he shoved papers at them. "Start filling them out. You know the drill, Kavanagh."

"I need more forms," Ajay told him. "There were three other people with us when Angelico threatened us with a gun."

Krowl looked around the office as he opened a drawer and pulled out more forms. "These aren't imaginary friends, are they?"

"God, you're stupid!" Penelope exclaimed. "Boy Scout said he used to work with you. Looks like he made the good move getting out of that partnership."

"Boy scout?" Krowl repeated.

"Yeah and twice... no, ten times, the detective you'll ever be!" Penelope shot back.

Krowl sighed in disgust. "I'm getting lip from a blackmailer."

"Hey!" Penelope protested.

"All this info belongs to you, right?" Krowl asked.

“Yeah, what about it?” Penelope replied angrily.

“You’re just short of having pictures of them with male prostitutes dressed as nuns,” Krowl said. “Looks like you were aiming for some blackmail. What happen? Find out they like guns a whole hell of a lot?”

“I don’t need to take this!” Penelope retorted.

“Krowl,” Ajay protested. “Please treat my witnesses in a professional manner.”

“Yeah, what he said!” Penelope interjected.

“Fill out the forms,” Krowl insisted, “and get those other people in here.”

When Ajay brought Wezel, Jerry, and Julia into the office, Krowl looked exasperated. He pointed at Julia, “I’ve seen your posters.” His finger moved to Jerry, “You have several assaults on file.” His finger moved on to Wezel. “And you have a hacking charge.” He glared at Ajay. “I shouldn’t know all of your witnesses, Kavanagh. That’s bad. That means you’re about to embarrass me in front of a court of law, yet again.”

“I was defending myself from protestors and bullies,” Jerry snapped indignantly. “I won’t back down when people try and discrimination against me.”

“I don’t see how being a model makes me an unreliable person,” Julia angrily said on the heels of Jerry’s speech.

Krowl curled his lip. “When you talk, everyone, even the judge, is going to remember a naked angel being molested on a poster in the business district.”

Julia went pale and Ajay didn’t like her suddenly withdrawn look. He began to step in, but Wezel was already speaking. “I don’t think you can complain about my skills in getting information.”

“I can when they aren’t legal,” Krowl shot back.

“Oh, this is legal,” Wezel assured him and put a hand written note and phone number on Krowl’s desk. “This is the number of the security company in charge of monitoring the warehouse where we were threatened. They have Angelico on camera waving his gun at us and a man named Mucy handcuffing Ajay to an office wall. You’ll need to call the company to get the playback. They only keep the tape for twenty-four hours. You wouldn’t want them to erase it.”

“Fill out the forms,” Krowl growled, but he was taking the number and picking up his phone to make the call at the same time.

“Thank you,” Ajay said to Wezel in relief.

Wezel grinned. “You’re welcome, cousin.” But then he was glaring and his tone changed to anger, “Just remember in the future,” he added, “that I do computer work, not getting shot at work, okay? I’m staying home, from now on.”

“Understood,” Ajay chuckled.

\*\*\*\*

“Congrats!” Mike called as he passed by Ajay and Julia.

Ajay looked after him for a moment, frowning, and then followed Julia into their apartment building. “Why do they keep saying that?”

Julia looked embarrassed, head down and eyes on the carpet, as they entered the elevator and took it up to their floor. “Maybe they heard about the case?” she suggested.

“Not likely,” Ajay mused. “A few people congratulated me this morning, as well. It’s as if they know something that I don’t.”

“I can’t think what that would be,” Julia replied as she unlocked their apartment door and they went inside.

Ajay tossed off his coat and shoes and stretched out on the couch while Julia did the same and then went into the kitchen to make coffee. “Case closed,” Ajay said with satisfaction.

“Yes, but it’s sad that those people won’t get their businesses back,” Julia said as she put coffee grounds into the coffee maker.

“They might if they buy them back in foreclosure from the bank,” Ajay replied.

“You didn’t get paid,” Julia persisted.

“Because I didn’t solve the case I was given,” Ajay reminded him. “I was supposed to prove that those business owners had been coerced into selling. I didn’t do that.”

“You would think they would talk, now that those people are going to court,” Julia said as she leaned on the counter and watched the coffee perk.

“There isn’t proof,” Ajay replied. “Nothing in writing or recorded. There weren’t even any witnesses. Angelico was very thorough.”

Julia smiled faintly, "Not thorough enough."

"Many times it's the small details that trip them up," Ajay replied. "That's why I'm very careful when I'm gathering clues and evidence."

Julia filled two cups with coffee and brought them to the couch. Ajay sat up with a groan and took his cup. As he sipped at the coffee, his eyes took in Julia's weary and dirtied appearance. The woman was staring into her cup as if there was something very depressing there.

"What is it?" Ajay asked.

Blue eyes flicked up to Ajay's and then Julia opened her mouth to pass it off.

"No, the truth," Ajay insisted as he took both their coffee cups and put them aside on the coffee table. He turned to face Julia more squarely. "It bothered you when Krowl said that your profession would be a problem in court."

"I'm controversial," Julia agreed. "I didn't like thinking I was that kind of problem for you, that I couldn't help you when you needed me."

"You're seeing the world through Krowl's eyes," Ajay replied as he cupped Julia's cheek. "He has a very narrow view."

Julia smiled then. "Just when I've accepted that you're a big lug of a workaholic man, who has trouble being romantic, you say just the right, completely romantic, thing."

"You're everything I've always wanted," Ajay told her softly. "Don't ever doubt that."

"I don't doubt that," Julia said and then chewed on her bottom lip as if she were struggling with a dilemma.

"What now?" Ajay asked worriedly.

"I don't know if this is the right moment to tell you," Julia admitted and held out a closed hand to him. "I'm afraid that someone is going to ruin my secret, though. I didn't realize people would see me and that they would tell everyone else, including your mother."

Ajay felt his heart clench, his mind jumping to a hundred different conclusions. He remembered Julia telling him that she used to be casual about her relationships. Ajay stammered, before he could stop it, "If you've been with someone else, I—"

Julia slapped him across the face before he could react. It stung. Julia was off of the couch, then, and grabbing her coat, face livid. "How DARE you!" she shouted at Ajay. "How could you think I

would do something like that?"

Julia was rushing for the door, but Ajay was off of the couch in an instant and grabbing her around the waist from behind. Julia struggled furiously, but Ajay held on, face buried in Julia's hair.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Ajay repeated, over and over.

Still struggling, Julia flung what she was holding in her hand against a wall. Two things rebounded and tumbled under the couch. When the back of her head connected with Ajay's nose, Ajay saw stars, but he still kept his grip. "I should have left them in the garbage where you put them," Julia spat out. "In the incinerator."

"I..." Ajay felt blood on his face as he struggled to put into words what he was feeling. "I'm sorry. I... I just can't understand why... why you're with me. I keep thinking... you'll leave me like all the others... That you'll realize that I am a stupid, workaholic, who can't give you all the love and attention that you deserve. There... There are millions of men better than I am. Millions..."

Julia stopped struggling, panting hard. "Let go," she commanded.

Ajay found it hard to convince his arms to loosen. Julia stalked across the living room, went on all fours, and searched under the couch.

"Of all the ridiculous, stupid, boneheaded..." Julia ranted. "That hurt, you moron. Don't ever say things like that again. I will never leave you for someone else. Get that through your thick, muscle bound skull. There isn't anyone better. You are one in a million, Detective Ajay Kavanagh."

Julia found what she was looking for and turned back to Ajay as she stood up. Her anger softened as she said apologetically, "Oh, God, I am so sorry! Is your nose broken?"

Ajay gingerly touched his bleeding nose as he grabbed a tissue from a box nearby. He tried to stop the bleeding with it as he admitted, "I don't know."

Julia came to stand close to him, looking up and showing him what she was holding. In the palm of her hand were two gold rings. "I wanted to show you how much you mean to me," she told Ajay. "I know you've been waiting for me to make the decision. I have. Will you marry me, Ajay Kavanagh?"

Ajay took his larger ring and put it on. It fit perfectly. Julia put on the smaller ring and held it next to Ajay's. They sparkled, something engraved on both of them. Ajay looked closely and read the other half of my heart.

“You can have it melted off, if you don’t like it, or pawn it if you don’t want to get married. They’re not refundable,” Julia told him nervously, “I have to warn you, though, that I’ll be angry again. I had a lot of trouble measuring your big, fat ring finger while you were sleeping and they cost me a lot of money.”

Ajay seized Julia up into his arms and kissed her deeply on the lips, not caring about his throbbing nose, the blood, or the fact that he didn’t care for rings. It was from Julia and proof that she loved him and wanted him long term.

Ajay carried Julia into the bedroom. When he broke the kiss as he put Julia on the bed, Julia smiled warmly and said, “That felt like a yes.”

“It was. It is,” Ajay replied as he discarded the bloody tissue and started pulling off his clothes. He paused and asked, “I want to show you how much this means to me. I want you to know how much I love you. I want...?”

Julia’s smile turned sultry as she began unbuttoning her own clothes. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Ajay crawled onto the bed to lie beside Julia. He worshiped the beautiful woman with his hands, running his big calloused fingers over sensitive skin and making Julia sigh in pleasure. Every inch of his lover was perfect. He supposed that was why he hated when people called Julia little, Ajay thought. It meant more than just size when they said it. They didn’t know how possessive and strong she could be, couldn’t know how she could hold Ajay’s orgasm at her command, or make him do things he would never have considered before, with just the force of her love and personality.

“I’m going to make you crazy,” Julia breathed into Ajay’s ear and her hand stroked his erection.

Ajay was hard and wanting. His mind, already in his groin, was sure she was making him crazy with desire already.

Julia’s golden ring winked in the light as she pumped Ajay and made him rock hard. When her mouth covered him and sucked, his hips snapped up in reaction and he gasped in pleasure.

She played him like a fine instrument, taking him to the peak of desire, leaving him hanging there, and then letting him fall back, time and again, until he was begging her. Her laugh, her smile, and her teasing became his world. When he used his lips and tongue to make her cry out in orgasm, he was finally granted his release. She rolled onto her back and opened her legs invitingly. He took



her, then, and his orgasm hit him like a tidal wave.

## Epilogue

“I hope you feel as if you’ve had some justice, Mr. Furnier,” Ajay said as they stood in the gazebo near Fair Street. The man had called him to set up the meeting, obviously still worried about retribution, even though the men who had threatened him were waiting for trial dates.

Mr. Furnier was frowning, staring at the falling snow with his hands in his pockets. “Things won’t ever be the same, Detective Kavanagh, but, yes, I do feel as if those men have paid for ruining our community. They took away the life blood of my family, a part of our history. It wasn’t the foundation, though. That’s still very strong. We’ll build on it again.”

“Mr. Fishburn was able to buy back his deli from the bank and re-open,” Ajay told him. “Perhaps you could do the same?”

“That’s up to my children,” Furnier replied with a shrug. “If they have the passion for the business, they can pursue it. It won’t ever be the same business for me, though. They erased my history, my place there, when they tore down everything to the bare walls.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t have done more,” Ajay said sadly.

“It would be arrogant of you to think that you could have done more,” Furnier chuckled, but it was bitter. He dug into his pocket and handed Ajay an envelope. “Not much, but someone should pay you for your efforts. It distressed me when you told me the police had not considered your case a success. Your efforts should not go unrewarded.”

“Thank you,” Ajay replied as he pocketed the envelope without looking inside of it. Whatever it was, it would be more than zero, and that was above criticism.

“Thank you,” Furnier replied firmly and gave Ajay a small nod as he stepped off of the gazebo and walked away into the swirling snow.

A hand dipped into his pocket and Ajay looked down to see Julia looking through the envelope. Wrapped in a red coat, and hooded, Ajay couldn’t see her expression. “Four hundred dollars,” Julia said, pleased. She pocketed the envelope.

“I don’t get to keep it?” Ajay chuckled.

"You do owe me, Detective Kavanagh," Julia pointed out.

"I thought what was mine was yours, and what was yours was mine?" Ajay reminded her as they stepped into the snow.

"Convenient that you agree, now," Julia joked, "but you're right. I'll buy you lunch."

"I know a good deli," Ajay replied as he hooked an arm through Julia's and they headed for Fishburn's Deli.