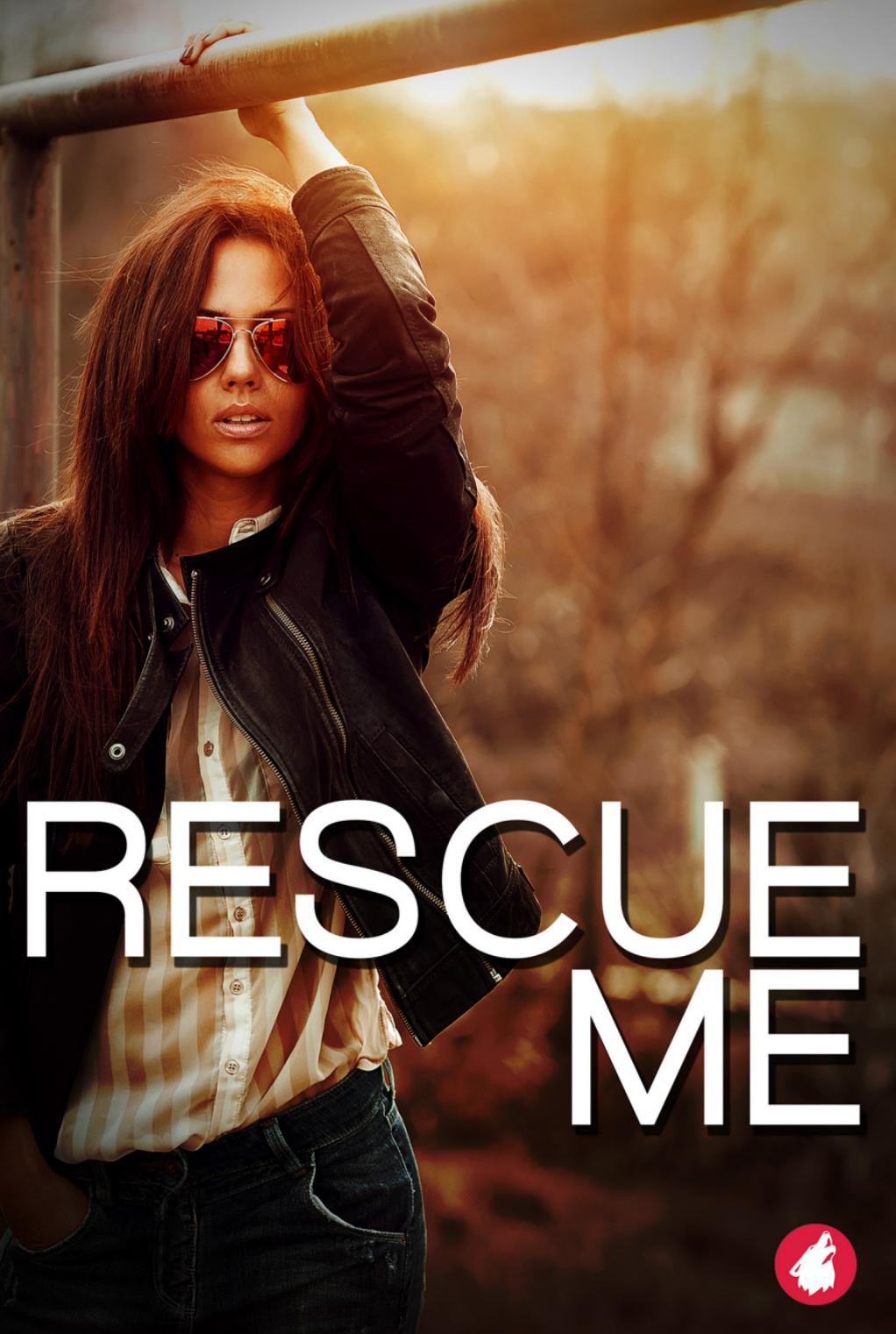


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# RESCUE ME



# CHAPTER 1

“ASHLEIGH?” HER MOTHER STOOD AT the stove, wearing the Wonder Woman apron she’d received as a stocking stuffer last Christmas from Ashleigh’s father. Her light brown hair, so close to Ashleigh’s in colour, was pulled up and out of the way, but she’d let it down for supper in a few minutes, just like she always did. The room smelled like the salmon baking in the convection oven, but it had a nice spice to it and was actually pleasant. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Ashleigh groaned. *Not this again.* “Mom—”

“Now, before you protest, he’s a doctor.”

*So what?* “That’s great, but that doesn’t make me any less of a lesbian.”

Her mother stomped her kitten-heeled foot. “I wish you wouldn’t use that word.”

*This again.*

It was time to move out. She’d been back home for two years, and it felt like if she didn’t leave now, she would never get out again. She loved her parents, but twenty-five and employed full-time meant she was too old to be living at home with her mom who refused to accept that she was gay. Ashleigh had finished undergrad three years ago, taken a job with Global Vision International, and moved to Kenya with her university boyfriend, only to realize two things—she hated working abroad and she was a lesbian.

Having the talk with her parents when she returned had been the most difficult conversation she’d ever had, and she wasn’t thrilled to keep having it over and over with her mom.

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Her father walked into the kitchen, his dark hair covered with a Blue Jays baseball cap. The crack of a bat and cheers entered the kitchen from the TV in the family room. Ashleigh hoped the discussion might improve now that her father was here. Even though he had fought her on it initially, he had been marginally better about accepting the news of her sexual orientation the first time. Of course, he'd also told her that she had just gone "bush-queer" in the jungle and assured her that he'd had a similar experience as a teenager when he'd gone on a forty-five-day canoe trip with a group of boys through Algonquin Park. It was just a phase, something she'd grow out of as he had.

"Dad, tell Mom to stay out of my dating life."

Her father froze, his arm halfway in the fridge as he reached for a beer. After a brief pause, he grabbed the beer, closed the fridge, and popped the top on the can of lager. "What's going on?" he asked in his most neutral voice.

"Nothing," her mother said, her back to Ashleigh as she stirred the potatoes.

"Mom's trying to set me up with another guy," Ashleigh said quickly. She felt like a child, tattling on her mother, but living at home sometimes made her feel thirteen all over again.

Without warning, her mother began to cry. Her father took his wife's hand, gave it a squeeze, and said, "Oh, honey, come on. She's our daughter."

Her mother wiped her eyes on the backs of her hands and sniffed. "Well, maybe if our daughter had become a doctor, I wouldn't be trying to set her up with one."

Ashleigh's face burned. Somehow, her mother had managed to pull the two biggest bones of contention between them into one conversation. "I help people," she said through her teeth.

"She helps people," her father repeated, patting her mother's back in an effort to soothe her.

"Oh, yes, chasing ambulances."

"That's a lawyer. I drive the ambulance."

"With what you make, you might as well be driving a cab."

"Sure, Mom. Give me the keys to the Cadillac, and I'll quit my job and become an Uber driver. Would that make you happy?"

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Her mother turned around to look at her. Her brown eyes were glassy and red. “I was proud of you when you went to Africa. I thought when you came back you were going to go to med school and join Doctors Without Borders.”

As if the high risk of malaria, constant fear of Somalian pirates, and black market human kidney harvesting weren’t bad enough, the poisonous snakes and venomous spiders she often found in her residence and shoes were sufficient to send her running back home. Still, she wanted to help people. The medical training that she had learned with GVI and the time leading up to that had been enlightening, fascinating, and had given her a sense of immense satisfaction. Her attraction to Laura, on the other hand, made her question everything she thought she knew about herself and left her with an overwhelming emptiness, a yearning to be fulfilled by...something. She didn’t know what, exactly, but she somehow understood that it was missing. Whatever it was, when her arm had brushed against Laura’s, it felt like fire on her skin.

“Africa wasn’t for me. Neither is MSF, and neither are men.” Medecins Sans Frontieres, or Doctors Without Borders as her mother referred to it, had seemed like a great idea in theory, as had both Africa and men, none of which had worked out for her.

“What about Colin? You were with him for years. You loved him.”

Colin’s touch, unlike Laura’s, hadn’t felt like much of anything. Still, they both wanted the same things, valued the same things—a house, kids, kindness, and a family. Because they agreed on the important stuff, Ashleigh supposed she just forgot about their relationship somewhere along the way.

When Ashleigh had first told Colin that she didn’t think she wanted to continue their relationship, it had been the hardest conversation she’d ever had until, of course, the one when she told her parents that she was moving back home because she’d broken up with Colin and thought that she was gay. In hindsight, she should have come to them with some proof. The fact that she’d never mentioned anything of the sort before, didn’t have any experience with women, and had been with a boyfriend for the previous five years had brought her parents to the comforting conclusion that it was just a phase.

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“Yes, I loved Colin, but I was never in love with him, not the way I should have been, not the way you’re supposed to be when you marry someone.”

“Ha!” Her mother laughed mirthlessly. “Like you would know. You’re a child.”

“I’m not a child!”

“All right.” Her father put his hands up in a defensive stance, then gestured them toward Ashleigh first and then her mother. “This reminds me of that summer I thought I was bush-queer—” her father started.

“James, honestly, enough with that! You’re only encouraging her. You’re not queer.”

“I’m just trying to say, well, I guess you can take the queer out of the bush, but our daughter is still a lesbian.” The comment was so absurd that the three of them couldn’t help but laugh, and it was the break in tension they needed.

Her mother pulled a paper towel from the roll and wiped her eyes. The tears stopped, and she looked to Ashleigh. “I just want you to be happy, and you’re not.”

That much was true. After she quit GVI, returned from Kenya, and moved back in with her parents, she’d spent the last two years going through the process of becoming a paramedic and establishing herself as a lesbian. The first part was easy. She had similar medic training from her time abroad, and she’d always had a knack for tests. Proving to herself and everyone else that she was a lesbian had been a little messier. If she’d been less naïve, she would have approached things with Denise differently.

She thought back to the night she met Denise at Tango, the only women’s bar she knew of in Toronto’s gay village. She hadn’t known where else to go to shake the lesbian tree and hope some forbidden fruit would drop in her lap. Unwittingly, she’d been looking for love in the wrong place, but she’d fallen for Denise regardless of the numerous red flags.

While Ashleigh was looking to find a partner, Denise had been looking for nothing more than a challenge, but her bad girl demeanour had sucked Ashleigh in. Her entire life, she’d been careful, done what was expected of her, played on the safe side. She’d gotten together with

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Colin in first year because he was her best friend. She'd followed Colin to Kenya for similar reasons. He felt safe, comfortable, like an old robe she simply slipped on because she knew it would fit.

"You're right," Ashleigh said. "I'm not happy, but I plan to be."

"That's all we want for you," her father said, giving her mother a stern look. After a moment's hesitation, her mother conceded with a nod.

"I know, and I'm working on it."

Her mother untied her apron. "Dinner's ready."

Her parents might not bug her on the issue any more that evening, but she couldn't stop her mind from revisiting it. When would she meet someone who made her heart race and her head spin? Someone nothing like Denise. Someone warm and caring, who took relationships and commitment seriously. Somebody she could make a home with.

\* \* \*

Parade was lackluster as usual. Sure, it helped for Kristen to learn about the cases, the beats, and the local gangs in the mandatory morning meeting and debrief, but learning all that and more was part of her prep work for the undercover position inside the Toronto Police Service. She'd had the names, colours, designs, and insignias of every local gang memorized before she'd stepped foot into 52 Division for the first time. Her rather carefree attitude was not just part of her Constable Kristen Bailey persona, it was simply who she was. One thing she did take seriously, though, was her job, and she excelled at it. Her RCMP rank, medals, and decorations attested to that, and the Mounties did not hand them out lightly.

As 52 Division's Staff Sergeant King droned on, Kristen let her gaze wander. The only cop who was giving his undivided attention was his son, Charles King. With only two years under his belt, he was still looking to earn his dad's favour. Her gaze continued around the room until it rested on her training officer, Henry Hackett. Cop extraordinaire. He was half-asleep, slumped over in a chair that looked a size too small for him. *Jackass.*

Hackett was a typical I'm-just-here-collecting-paycheques-till-I-retire kind of cop, and that didn't sit well with Kristen. If he carried a

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badge, then he better respect it. Lives depended on it. Veteran police constables like Hackett, who still worked patrol, were often made training officers for rookies. There were several TOs in 52, and Kristen was quite certain she'd been saddled with the worst one.

Sure, it was common in Toronto to have a TO ride with a new cop for six months, even a year if a rookie's superiors didn't think the constable was ready sooner; however, part of Kristen's cover was that she was a veteran transfer from Montreal, so why was she stuck with this oaf after three months? Training officers like Henry Hackett might have been a contributing factor in the death of rookie constable Ricky Oslowe, whose murder was the reason she was in Toronto in the first place. Hackett hadn't been Oslowe's TO, but curiously, he'd been the training officer of another rookie who'd gone missing six months prior to Oslowe's death. That officer had never been found.

Hackett was lazy. That one was obvious. What she'd not-so-subtly learned during their first fifteen minutes together was that he was also somewhat of a misogynist and a racist. Any cop who wasn't strictly a white male had to work twice as hard to earn his respect. As a lesbian with a black sister-in-law, Henry's prejudice concerned Kristen, but she wasn't there to teach tolerance. Her mission was clear: find Oslowe's killer, bring the perp to justice, collect another accolade, and with any luck, the keys to the Banff branch of the RCMP, along with a sizeable salary bump.

Positions in the Banff office didn't come up often. They were highly coveted. The fact that her staff sergeant major had even dangled one in front of her still stunned Kristen. Banff was a retirement post, the location where most RCMP dreamed of finishing their careers. Being offered a position in that office at only thirty-two years old told Kristen just how highly her superiors thought of her.

"These two gangs have been at it for years. We need to make sure we know who's in their territory before they do." Staff Sergeant King finished off with a quick recap of what happened on the overnight shift when the Italian Mafia infringed on the Chinese *Lǎohǔ* gang's territory in the west end. It ended in a sloppy storefront shooting in Little Italy. No one was killed, but gunshots were never good. "The more we know, the fewer people get caught up in things they don't understand. Neither

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of these organizations has much patience for the other, and the summer heat isn't going to help with that. We need to stay vigilant." He looked down from the podium at the sheet he held there and flipped to the last page. "Oh yeah, we're coming up on the August long weekend. That means illegal fireworks sales in Chinatown. If you're in the area, stop, get out of the car, and just walk the beat. Police presence should be enough to scare off most civilians looking for kicks."

King put his papers down and wiped the sweat off his head with the back of his hand. His stiff, starched, white collar and his epaulettes set him apart from the rest of the officers in the room, and Kristen wondered with amusement if it bothered Henry Hackett that his commanding officer was black. It would probably blow his mind to know that Kristen was a staff sergeant in the RCMP and outranked him by miles. She would have her own white shirt if the RCMP handed them out to staff sergeants the same way they did to local police, but she was still a few promotions shy of inspector, and not everyone reached that desiderated rank.

Kristen looked over just as Henry's head drooped down. The motion woke him abruptly, and he looked around, clearly startled, and almost fell out of his chair. Kristen suppressed a snicker as King pinned her TO with a warning look.

"There's one last thing before we head out there today." Staff Sergeant King continued as if he'd never been interrupted. "We're coming up on one year since Constable Richard Oslowe was found dead at the scene of a routine drug bust. For those of you who didn't know Ricky, he was a class act. All cop, all the way. When we lose one of our own, it's personal, so let's get out there and catch this guy already." There was a cheer, and Staff Sergeant King motioned to them for quiet. "His young widow suffered the most, and this year we will be having a fundraiser in her honour. FiteNite. If you want to participate, I'm leaving a sign-up sheet outside this room. I know you guys, and I know we won't lack for volunteers. Just remember that it's for fun and for a good cause. Please come if you can, and open your wallets as big as the hearts buried somewhere inside you." This garnered a few laughs. "That's it for today. Serve, protect, and don't screw up."

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Hackett met Kristen in the hall outside the parade room. “Ready, rook?”

“You know I’m not a rookie, right?” Kristen did her best to appear amused. “Anything special you wanted us to get started on today?”

“Yeah.” He straightened his belt. “Tim Hortons is having a sale on doughnuts for some charity. Let’s grab a box.”

“Yes, sir.” She held the door open for him as he passed through.

“You’re driving,” he said and tossed her the keys. “I don’t like getting powdered sugar on my uniform.”

“Could have fooled me,” Kristen mumbled under her breath.

It was the beginning of rush hour, not the best time to be driving down Spadina Avenue in Chinatown. As she slowed the car to a stop behind a long line of traffic, Hackett looked out the window, an expression of ennui on his face.

“So, it’s been almost a year since Ricky Oslowe was gunned down,” she said, almost out of boredom at this point.

“He wasn’t gunned down. He was strangled.”

“Right.” She feigned ignorance. “I can’t believe they haven’t arrested any paramedics yet. I mean, there’s that video evidence, right?”

“No one to arrest.” He cleared his throat and looked back out the window. When he opened it for air, Kristen wrinkled her nose. She’d never quite gotten used to the stench of seafood and sewer that seemed to permeate the Spadina and Dundas area, especially under the hot summer sun. “Why do you say that?” she asked, trying to sound casual instead of like she was gagging.

“It wasn’t a paramedic.”

That surprised her. The first time she’d questioned him three months before, Hackett had said somebody would pay for Oslowe’s death. When she’d asked who, he told her it was none of her business. She thought that good ol’ boy Hackett would have jumped on the easiest solution, like the rest of the force, and blamed the paramedics for murdering Oslowe at the response call. The video of unidentified EMS workers approaching an injured Oslowe just before his death that had been leaked around the department certainly made it look that way. “You don’t think the paramedics killed him?” she asked. Did he know more than she’d thought? Had she misread him?

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He tightened his jaw. “Where he was killed?” he said rhetorically. “Mafia territory. Probably some wop did it.”

No. She hadn’t misread him.

“You think some mobsters just happened to walk by on the street and kill him?”

Hackett shrugged. “The wop thought he saw something. Made sure no one would ever know what that was.”

Well, at least it was a theory, which she admitted was more than she had at this point and more than what SIU had when they’d called her in after failing to catch the killer for nine months, which had created a stain on the special investigations unit’s reputation.

“Wasn’t he killed in *Lăohū* territory? And why kill a cop and make a mess? Seems kind of pointless. Also, how did they get the ambulance there so quickly for the cover-up? I saw the video,” Kristen said.

“Good for you. Hell if I know why anyone does anything. A gang’s a gang; don’t matter much which one. They’re all impossible to pin down with any one crime. Why are you always going on about this case anyway? You were still in Quebec when he was killed.”

“It just doesn’t sit well,” she said.

“Yeah? Well, get used to it. A lot of what you see ain’t gonna sit well, rook.”

“I’m not a rookie,” she said for the fiftieth time that summer.

“And those doughnuts ain’t gonna materialize out of thin air. For God’s sake, take a side street. You drive like a boob.”

Kristen bit her cheek and took the next turn up Cecil Street. “I don’t buy that it was a random gang hit. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“New cops always have lots of theories. All full of ideas and rainbows in your eyes. You can’t see the world in front of you because you spend too much time trying to fix what you can’t. Hotshots, hotheads, glory chasers.” He shook his head. “That’s how you end up dead.”

Did Oslowe being a rookie—albeit near the end of his first full year with the force—have anything to do with his own death? Would a veteran cop have fared better? The video didn’t show the altercation, so it was hard to tell.

“And what would you have done?” She put the car in park outside of Tim Hortons.

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“What I always do: seen through the bullshit, kept my head down and my nose clean, and stayed alive.” He opened his door, and it took two tries to heave himself out of the opening and onto the street. “I’m getting a box. You want anything, *Bailey*?” He looked back at her through his still-open window.

She smiled. “Medium coffee. Black.”

“It’ll put hair on your chest, rook.” He smirked to himself, and Kristen’s smile fell.

Inside Tim Hortons, Henry showed his badge and moved the queue aside as he walked straight to the front of the line to order his box of doughnuts. From the privacy of the car, Kristen almost laughed at how official he made it seem. Almost, but she couldn’t quite muster up the energy. It was going to be another long, uneventful day, much like the last three months. The prospect of ever solving this murder was beginning to fade into the distance, along with her promotion.

# CHAPTER 2

IT WAS A TWO-ALARM BLAZE, and as usual, the EMTs were second to arrive after fire. Ashleigh unbuckled her seatbelt and readjusted the collar of her shirt. The smoke from the building was dark grey, which meant the fire was almost out. With large hoses connected to a nearby hydrant, firemen doused the last of the flames.

“Ready, Paige?” Rodrigo asked Ashleigh from the seat beside her. Since she’d become a paramedic a month ago, Ashleigh hadn’t heard her first name used once at work. She felt kind of silly about it, as if they were pretending to be a hockey team. She called her partner by his first name, regardless of precedent.

“Lead the way, Rodrigo.”

Rodrigo gave her a crooked smile as he stepped out of the ambulance. Ashleigh jumped down after him. They took a moment to find the fire captain, and when Rodrigo recognized him, they made their way over.

“Hey.” Rodrigo stepped up to him. “What’s the rundown?”

The captain’s forehead was smooth, and his body was relaxed, sure signs things were going well inside the building. His face was clean shaven, and there were no soot marks on him. Ashleigh didn’t recognize him, and by the looks of it, he hadn’t even gone into the low-rise apartment building; the fire was under control. The structure was old brown brick, not unusual for Chinatown, and black smoke poured out of the top corner unit on the fourth floor, but the rest of the building looked okay. These were the kinds of calls she hoped for.

“Nothing much yet,” the fire captain answered. “There are a few people inside, but none of them appear to be injured. Stick around,

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though; we might have a few mild cases of smoke inhalation to bring to you once it's all cleared."

"Sure thing." Rodrigo turned to Ashleigh. "Let's go back to the truck."

Ashleigh nodded. Rodrigo liked to be more involved in the action, but she was happy to be on standby.

Just as they were about to get back into their vehicle, a sole police car finally arrived on scene. Ashleigh shook her head. Good thing they didn't actually need police assistance on this call.

"You guys get lost?" Rodrigo asked. His voice had a hard edge to it.

Two cops, a male and a female, lackadaisically made their way out of the cruiser. The driver was pushing fifty and had salt-and-pepper, crew-cut hair; tanned, leathery skin; and what Ashleigh's mother would call a pot belly, visible even through the bulletproof vest that covered the rest of his torso.

"Har-har," the female officer said, a wicked smirk pulling up the corner of her dark red lips. "It turns out all-you-can-eat doughnuts eventually has its limits."

She was tall for a woman, as tall as Rodrigo, and she leaned against the cruiser with a sexy confidence that made Ashleigh smile. Her nametag read *Bailey*. Now that was a last name she could get behind. She liked it. A lot. Bailey wore classic aviators that were big enough to cover not only her eyes but part of her striking cheekbones as well. Her dark hair was down and disheveled in that sexy just-got-out-of-bed look. It was a look Ashleigh had never been able to pull off with her own long, light brown twists. Bailey's hair rested just above her pronounced clavicle, nicely complementing her golden skin. The two top buttons of her uniform shirt were unfastened and showed off her tan, which was almost as dark as Rodrigo's, before the Kevlar hugged the rest of her torso. She was thin and fit, with wiry muscles on her arms.

The residual heat from the fire combined with a blistering hot summer day made Ashleigh sweat, but the sight of Constable Bailey in her uniform made her hot in a completely different way.

"Toronto PD at their finest," Rodrigo said loud enough for the cops to hear.

The older man spat, and Constable Bailey's grin grew even wider.

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“Fine and dandy.” She pushed herself off the cruiser and took a step toward the fire before turning her head back to them. “Any criminals hiding up in there, or is this another social call, Cruz?” she asked, her tone matching Rodrigo’s.

In her month on the job, Ashleigh hadn’t seen either of these cops, but with her short tenure, there were always new faces.

“Not sure,” Rodrigo said curtly. “Why don’t you do your job and find out?”

“Whapsssh!” The woman mimed a whip. “You’re feisty today,” she said to Rodrigo.

“It’s just a kitchen fire,” Ashleigh said.

Rodrigo glared at her, and Bailey turned around and glanced at Ashleigh’s name tag.

“Well, hello there, Paige. Haven’t seen you before,” she said with that easy smile still painted on her lips. Bailey moved toward her and leaned in conspiratorially. “You should be careful. If you’re too nice to us, your buddies will start calling you a doughnut-chaser.”

“Okay, enough.” Rodrigo moved between the two of them, placing himself protectively in front of Ashleigh. “There’s no crime here. Why don’t you two run along and let the professionals handle things?”

“Ooh.” Bailey cooed and looked to her partner, but he was busy picking something out of his ear. The woman sighed and focused her attention back on Rodrigo. “We need to stay and make sure there wasn’t any mischief here, sir.” She gave him a mock salute. “I think I’d feel more comfortable standing in that fire than out here with you, so I’m going to head up, but do me a favour? If one of us gets hurt in there, call someone qualified to help us out, would you? I’d hate to succumb to injuries without a competent medic around.”

Ashleigh’s mouth opened in surprise as the woman walked away brashly. Cops, EMTs, and firefighters were supposed to be on the same team, and although the woman had said everything with a lilt of humour in her voice, Rodrigo vibrated with anger.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“Fucking cops.” He kicked the ground and sulked back to their truck. He sat on the ledge of the open back door, next to their gear. It was ready and accessible, just in case they were needed. The truck’s red

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and white lights were still flashing, but not much else was happening on the scene as the firefighters put out the last of the small blaze.

“I don’t understand.” Ashleigh joined Rodrigo on the truck’s ledge. “I thought we were all on the same side.”

He scooted over and made room for her to sit beside him.

“Used to be,” he said under his breath. “Until a year ago.”

“What happened a year ago?”

Rodrigo looked down at his feet and kicked the pavement again before letting out a long breath. He glanced over at the older cop still standing next to the cruiser. “I’ll tell you later.”

Ashleigh opened her mouth to ask him to explain now, but Bailey strolled back to her partner.

“Okay, guys, it’s all clear,” Bailey said. “No need to thank us. Keeping Toronto safe is just what we do.”

The muscle in Rodrigo’s jaw flexed and released. Clearly he wanted to comment but bit back the remark.

Bailey started to slide into the passenger seat but stopped. With half her body in the car and the other half hanging out, she turned back to them. “Welcome to the fold, Paige, and good luck. You’re going to need it.” With that, she slid the rest of the way in, her partner’s foot already heavy on the gas as the door swung shut.

“She doesn’t seem so bad,” Ashleigh said. The attractive curve of her smile and the easy way she carried herself more than made up for the sass she gave Rodrigo.

“Are you kidding me? Bailey’s one of the worst. I’ve never seen anybody so cocksure in my entire life. Everything’s a fucking joke to her, a game. I’m sure if she ever needed it, she’d refuse treatment from an EMT, just like the rest of them.”

“You mean, like, refuse medical treatment?”

“Yep. Almost every last one of them refuses now. Won’t let anyone touch them until they get to the hospital. That makes us just glorified sirens, and they already have their own on their vehicles.”

In hindsight, every time she’d offered cops treatment, they’d always refused, saying it was just a bump or a scratch. Ashleigh hadn’t thought anything of it. Cops were proud and liked to think they were invincible,

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so she'd let it go. Rodrigo had certainly never pushed PD to accept medical attention.

"That's just... That's totally fucked up." She looked off to where the cop car had sped away. "I don't understand. Someone could die like that, refusing help on scene."

"The way they see it, someone already died accepting help."

\* \* \*

The condo was hot and dark when Kristen got home, if home was even the right thing to call this place. She'd been living here for the last three months, and still, the unit felt stark and unfriendly. She wasn't happy about how long this case was dragging on.

Her phone rang, and she groaned at the name on the call display. Couldn't her staff sergeant major give her one day without needing a briefing?

She picked up. "Bailey."

"It's Ouellette."

"I know." They only did this every time he called.

"So, what's the status?"

"Nothing new since yesterday." She hung her keys up in the foyer and moved to the small adjoining kitchen. There was little in her fridge, but a Mad Tom IPA was all she wanted. She popped the cap and waited for Ouellette's reprimand. He did not disappoint.

"Come on, Staff Sergeant." Clearly, he was in a mood, because he knew she hated being addressed by her rank. "I put you in there to make me look good, not bad."

Kristen moved the phone away from her mouth and let out a long breath. "My TO only lets us respond when dispatch already knows we're in the area of the call, so I don't get to see all that much outside of our daily drive. We answered a call with some EMTs today, but it was Rodrigo Cruz, whom we've already pumped dry for information, and his partner is new, so no leads to be had there."

"I didn't think getting around an aging training officer would be so difficult for you," he said without humour. "Who's Cruz's new partner? What did you learn about him?"

"He was a she, and nothing more than her last name. Paige."

“I’ll run the name.”

Kristen nodded. “Sounds good, sir.”

“Have you been able to get close to anyone since Maria Cruz?”

“Not in that way, no.” Kristen swallowed the neck of her beer. Tracking down Maria Cruz and sleeping with her had been a disaster.

Rodrigo Cruz had been one name in a roster of hundreds who had travelled the 650-kilometre radius of Toronto Paramedic Services’ jurisdiction that day. Breaking it down only to those who had worked shifts the afternoon Ricky Oslowe died had narrowed the field some, but dozens still remained as suspects. The trouble was that background checks on all the paramedics had been performed before she’d arrived, and none of them showed much more than some debts in collections or unpaid parking tickets. Rodrigo Cruz stood out when his dispatch log showed him in the area where Ricky Oslowe had been found within the one-hour window of Oslowe’s call to dispatch and the subsequent official finding of the officer’s body.

Unfortunately, Kristen’s investigation into Cruz found him guilty only of making an unsanctioned stop to visit his sister, Maria, whose daughter was celebrating her fifth birthday that day. Maria had even provided the video of Rodrigo singing “Happy Birthday” and presenting his gift to his niece at the same time that Ricky Oslowe’s murder video was timestamped. Of course, Maria hadn’t known at the time that she was handing over evidence on her brother to the RCMP. Kristen had merely asked Maria to get her a glass of water from the motel washroom after they’d slept together, then taken the opportunity to put a chip in Maria’s cell phone and copy the memory to her own device while she was in the washroom running the tap.

The earlier investigative work by SIU into pulling all the traffic feeds, local business surveillance footage, and red light cameras in the area confirmed the validity of the video Kristen copied from Maria. Kristen had turned the evidence she found on Rodrigo over to her cover team two months ago, which had resulted in Rodrigo Cruz and his then-partner receiving unpaid suspensions, as well as the severing of their partnership. If Cruz hadn’t been running his mouth about how much he hated cops over the past year, Kristen might have felt bad about splitting him and his partner up or even about what she’d done

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with his sister, but to Kristen, both acts had been nothing more than a part of the job.

“What about at fifty-two? Made any new friends in the division?” Ouellette asked.

“Not recently, no.”

“Damnit, Bailey. You’re not giving me anything to work with here. I don’t know what else I can do for you. You need to start delivering on this case, or I’m going to have no choice but to yank you. That won’t look good. We’ve spent a lot of time and pulled a lot of strings to get you in there.”

With the help of Staff Sergeant Major Ouellette and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police’s resources, they’d manufactured a story for her and all the right paperwork to get her transfer pushed through to Toronto Police Service’s 52 Division, supposedly as a transfer from a Montreal precinct that had too many officers for its payroll. The problem was she hadn’t arrived soon enough. Rookie constable Richard “Ricky” Oslowe was killed months before she reached the precinct, reportedly by an EMT, and by the time she put on the Toronto uniform, the animosity between the cops and paramedics was so thick that a lot of the EMTs had shut down and wouldn’t talk to her, regardless of the fact that she hadn’t been part of the force when Oslowe died and the bad blood began.

“What about Detective Ortiz? Tell me you’ve got him talking to you by now.”

Kristen winced. That she hadn’t been able to get the lead detective to talk to her about Ricky Oslowe remained a huge disappointment to both her and Ouellette. Usually, her charm worked easily, but Ortiz had been closed off from the start. She’d chalked it up to the responsibility that must be weighing on the man who was charged with catching a cop killer and who kept coming up empty month after month, but still, it irked her that after three months, he’d said little more to her than an occasional gruff hello.

“No, sir. He’s still not talking.”

“I don’t have to tell you that it should have been the first relationship you cultivated when you arrived.”

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Her eyes narrowed as she remembered all the times Hackett had been derisive and dismissive of her around the precinct. She was supposed to be a seasoned transfer, but he regarded her as a bumbling rookie, so how were the rest of the cops supposed to respect her?

"There are still avenues that I haven't investigated, sir," she said, trying to steer him away from her failure with Detective Ortiz. "I think pulling me now would only make us lose the headway I've made."

"What headway is that?"

"We know this isn't the first time something suspicious has transpired at Fifty-Two Division. Take Constable Jenna Bradley, for instance. She's been missing eighteen months, and no one at the precinct talks about her."

"Talking about her would just be bad form, Bailey. Cops die; it's an occupational hazard, but gossiping about it like schoolchildren is not the way police officers are expected to behave."

Kristen let out a deep breath. Maybe Ouellette's opinion of her wasn't far from Hackett's at this point. "I don't believe in coincidences. Constable Bradley went missing after going in to break up a drug bust on her own. Ricky Oslove died the same way. They were both rookies at fifty-two. They were both out on their own when there were more than enough officers for them to have been with partners. I've done a nationwide search; this division is the one that keeps pinging the most with results in suspicious police activity and strange protocol of this nature. If nothing else, something strange is going on at this precinct."

"You are not there to find Constable Bradley or expose some citywide conspiracy into police activity. Henry Hackett was Bradley's TO; if you haven't found anything suspicious about the guy after riding around with him every day for three months, then I think it's time to drop your theories on the cases being connected. You've rattled enough cages already, don't you think? You're there to catch Richard Oslove's killers, nothing more."

"Give me more time and I will."

"With what? Admit it; you've got nothing solid on this case, Bailey. Little more than the information we gave you when you first went in. I'm starting to think you like it a little too much there."

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*Yeah, right.* This wasn't the longest she'd ever immersed herself in a job, but still, the ennui of it was starting to wear on her. It was trying, the obscurity of being undercover. She could make friends while she was UC, but they weren't real friends. Everyone was a suspect or a potential lead, and no one knew who she really was, not even 52 Division's Staff Sergeant King, who had signed her transfer paperwork.

The RCMP set her up with a one-bedroom condo and a Toronto Police Service badge, and she'd ceased to be RCMP Staff Sergeant Kristen Bailey. Her looks helped. A lot. Mounties used whatever assets they had available. In her case, her astute mind and slammin' body weren't interchangeable, but she used both for leverage on different cases. Neither seemed to be working too well on *this* case, though, and she wanted out of Toronto as soon as the job was done.

"Give me another month. If I don't have something solid, I'll pack my bags." Kristen scratched at the imprint of the beer logo on the bottle as she waited for his response. He wouldn't pull her yet. For now, he was making a threat, but she needed to come up with something soon, or his threats wouldn't be so idle.

"Next month will make a year since Richard Oslowe was murdered. If you don't have a solid lead by his anniversary, I'm putting you on a plane back to Ottawa, and you can kiss Banff goodbye."

She swallowed. As much as she wanted to leave Toronto, she didn't want to go back to Ottawa. A position in Banff was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and she desperately didn't want to miss hers. "Understood, sir."

She'd done her tenure with headquarters in the nation's capital, put forward an unmatched solve rate, and shown that her methods were both solid and honest, which was why Ouellette had requested her for the Toronto job in the first place. One more job well done, Ouellette had told her, and she would be made staff sergeant major herself in the Alberta branch.

Unfortunately, this Toronto case was taking much longer than either of them had hoped, and after three months of playing beat cop, Kristen had yet to come up with a single solid suspect. Her hunches so far had been mostly glorified guesses, all of which had led nowhere.

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Ouellette let out a long breath on his end of the line. “This isn’t a punishment, Bailey. I just don’t know how much longer I can postpone things. I have people to answer to as well, and they’re getting impatient. This isn’t good for first response morale, and it doesn’t look good on us. SIU called us in because they weren’t making any progress on their own, and they needed someone in custody yesterday. Don’t make them regret their decision, and don’t make me regret mine. Get me something I can use.”

Ouellette was right. It had been very big of the Special Investigations Unit to reach out for help; a great deal of pride must have been swallowed. They needed the offending parties caught and put behind bars, and Ouellette had entrusted Kristen with the task.

“Will do. Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight, Bailey. Don’t disappoint me.”

She ended the call and held the phone to her forehead. How was she supposed to come up with a solid lead in one month when the last three had proven fruitless? She moved to the couch, opened her laptop, and selected the video file that she’d seen so many times she had it memorized.

The scene began with Ricky Oslowe, a close-up of his bright blue eye before he moved the camera back a couple of inches and addressed his wife.

“Hi, babe. So, I don’t want you to worry, but I’ve been shot.” Here he winced, but the smile came back to his face. “I’m okay, but I wanted to send you a message, you know, just in case.”

The background was dark except light coming through the damaged slats of wood from a second-storey window that had been boarded up and then broken.

“I was taking down a drug bust. Probably should have waited for backup.” He laughed and winced again. “That’s me, though, right? Always going in guns blazing.”

A noise sounded behind him, and he turned. In the distance, a door opened. “Just a sec, babe. The paramedics are here,” he whispered into the camera. Two people wearing dark uniforms entered the frame. The light filtering in from behind made their features unclear. Oslowe put the phone down. It now captured only the dilapidated roof of the

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building—an abandoned co-op where the drug deal had gone down—but the audio remained clear. “You guys finally made it. I took a good shot to the stomach, but I don’t think it’s done any major damage.”

“Let’s have a look,” a man said.

“Okay, but I think we should wait f—” His voice was muffled, and there were sounds of a scuffle and someone gasping for breath. The camera was knocked during the commotion, and caught the final struggle, the last kicks of Ricky Oslowe’s legs, before all movement in his body ceased.

In the background, sirens began to wail, the sound getting louder as it came nearer to the building.

“Is it done?” a man asked hurriedly.

“It’s done,” the other man replied.

The camera caught the men as they turned and ran out of the building. A car door slammed, tires squealed, and the camera timed out just over a minute later. Ricky Oslowe did not speak or move again.

The surrounding traffic and surveillance cameras had both incriminated Rodrigo Cruz of breaking the rules and then exonerated him of being involved in the murder. None of the feeds had picked up a second ambulance arriving at the scene. It was a shoddy back alley with dilapidated buildings, most of which were boarded up. The one surveillance camera that faced the entry had been dead for years, and the videos further out on the streets didn’t pick up any ambulances entering the area except the one that had reported into dispatch and found the body.

Kristen leaned back on the couch. In the unit next to hers, the front door closed, and a woman called out that she was home. The squealing voices of her two kids and the bark of her golden retriever soon followed. What would it be like to have a normal life? A job she simply left at the office and someone to come home to instead of the quiet darkness and cold case files? Just the thought of the complications of a relationship had always seemed far more arduous to Kristen than coming home to an empty suite.

When she’d first started meeting women outside of the Depot, it didn’t take her long to realize that dating wasn’t for her. She’d had a

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girlfriend in high school—that had been a long month—but as a Mountie, she had a lot of secrets and little personal time.

It was late, and Kristen was too tired to even finish her beer. She was on the last night of her rotation, and four twelve-hour days combined with the heat of midsummer took its toll. It made her next four days off sound blissful.

Her cell rang again, and she closed her eyes before looking at the call display. A relieved smile quickly spread across her face.

“Hey, Jared, what’s up?”

As much as Kristen dreaded her nightly call with her staff sergeant major, she loved hearing from her brother an equal amount.

“Want to come up here? The fish are biting like crazy right now,” Jared said from the Algonquin cottage he and his wife lived in, about three hours away.

Kristen looked at her watch. “You want me to come up right now?”

“Well, in the morning. We’re actually going to head to bed soon, but we could go out early tomorrow and catch some dinner.”

She couldn’t think of a better way to spend the next few days than out on the water, fishing, drinking beer, and catching up with her older brother. Ouellette had just expedited her deadline, though, and she was cognizant of the slipping sand in the hourglass. Four days was too long to leave the case on hold, so she’d have to bring her laptop with her. The RCMP-issued computer had all the reports, files, recordings, and notes from both before and after she’d been handed the case. Clearing her head outside of the city often helped her add some clarity to her thoughts, but it meant going easy on the beers. She would just have to spend a little more time on her laptop and a little less in the boat this trip.

“Are you sure Cyn won’t mind?” Kristen asked.

“Are you kidding? She suggested it.”

Jared’s wife had always been more than accommodating of her visits. She’d liked Cyndi from the start, which was probably why Kristen had hit on her first.

“Do you want to bring someone up with you?” he asked.

Jared asked her the same question every time, and every time she gave the same answer. “Nobody to bring.”

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"Just thought I'd offer. So, we'll see you tomorrow?"

"Mmm-hmm." She swallowed a mouthful of beer. "Anything I *can* bring?"

"The usual. Booze. Illegal firearms. Strippers."

She laughed. "See you in the morning."

Kristen ended the call and let out a long sigh. She dumped the last third of her beer down the washroom sink and pulled out her toothbrush. There wouldn't be too many more weekends like this. It was only a matter of time before Jared and Cyndi got pregnant. They'd been talking about it a lot lately. Beyond the fact that the next few months might be the last they had together before a possible new arrival from the stork, Kristen also had to admit that she didn't know how long she would be able to stay this close to Jared geographically. One way or another, this job in Toronto would wrap up in a month, and although the three-hour drive to Algonquin seemed daunting the next morning, it was nothing compared to the five-hour flight Banff would be.

Sleep didn't come easily, but then, it rarely did. She groaned and turned over, trying to ignore the sound of her own heartbeat in her ear as she laid her head against the pillow. It was irritating, like the sound of someone crunching with a steady rhythm through fresh, packing snow. Her thoughts drifted, strangely, to the pretty paramedic from that afternoon. The one with honey-brown hair that fell in shining twists, the one with pale pink lips and possibly the greenest eyes she'd ever seen. They weren't as light as the typical mossy-green eyes most people had, but a fierce, natural green, like the first leaves of grass in the spring.

She turned over in her bed again. With the call she'd just had with Ouellette, she should be thinking about the case, not girls. What was it about this case? Why was nobody talking? She needed the murderers exposed soon, or she'd be stuck here with nothing keeping her in Toronto but an unsolved case and too much time on her hands. That's when she could waste her nights thinking about pretty women, but right now, Banff was calling, and she couldn't wait to answer.

# CHAPTER 3

“WHY DO WE ALWAYS GET the crazies?” Rodrigo said under his breath as he stopped the truck.

“We’re just lucky, I guess.” Ashleigh tried to lighten his mood. “Come on, it looks like this is going to be our last call of the day.” She unhooked the radio and brought it up to her mouth. “Ten-seven at Augusta and Cecil.” She replaced the radio and Rodrigo laughed. “What?”

“Only greenies say ‘ten-seven.’”

“What do you say?” she asked with mild embarrassment.

“I say ‘on scene,’ like a human being.” He laughed and nudged her to show that he meant it good-naturedly.

“I’m not green,” she argued weakly.

“One month on the job?” He shook his head. “You’ll be green for five years, Paige.”

“I was a medic before I started with EMS, you know.”

“You’re still a greenie here, though.” He flashed his smile one more time before a shout on the street interrupted their banter.

A dangerously skinny woman stood outside the window on Ashleigh’s side of the truck. She had scraggly, blonde hair that managed to look dry and greasy at the same time. She waved her rail-thin arms around and appeared to be in her sixties, but Ashleigh knew her to be younger. It was amazing how drugs could steal the years away from a person, the ones spent in the spiral and those it shaved off from the end.

They exited the truck to tend to the woman for the third time that month. “How can we help you today?” Ashleigh said with the friendliest smile she could muster.

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The woman bared her teeth in response and motioned to her wildly. “What the fuck do you want?”

Ashleigh jerked her head back, actually afraid that if she got closer, the woman might bite her. “We don’t want anything,” she said soothingly. She held her hands out, palms up, in what was intended to be a calming gesture.

“Don’t fuckin’ touch me!” the woman screamed.

“Whoa, easy now.” Rodrigo came around from his side of the truck, talking to the woman as if he were approaching a bucking mare. “We got a call to come out here, so we have to do our jobs. You know that. Now, we can see nothing’s the matter,” he said in a placating voice, “so, why don’t you help us out here and just tell us why we might have been called so that we can leave.”

“Don’t know anything about that,” she said with a rasp, but she seemed to have calmed a little.

Her eyes were more jaundiced today than the last time Ashleigh had seen her, and she had dark circles around them. There were bruises on both her arms, and her teeth were turning brown. She was an addict for certain, but what she was high on that day and what would calm her down was unclear. She had the right to refuse medical treatment, and if PD ever got there, they would need grounds to detain her and get her off the streets. Even then, throwing her in a group cell, only to be released by Court Services a day later, wouldn’t be any more beneficial to her than letting her slink back to whatever hovel she’d crawled out of.

“Is there anyone else here who we might be able to talk to?” Ashleigh asked.

“Ya can ask Frank, but he’s the shit who stole my stash.” The woman covered her mouth, realizing she had given herself away. It didn’t matter. Ashleigh looked around. There was no Frank to be seen.

“Come on, CeCe.” Ashleigh used the woman’s name to remind her of their standing acquaintance. Did she have any recollection of who they were or how many times they’d been called out to check on a disturbance she had caused? CeCe made a show of sealing her lips and offered a childish smile that made her look ghastly with her rotting teeth. CeCe hadn’t looked this rough the last time they’d been called

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out here, or the time before that. It was like she aged a year every time Ashleigh saw her.

“The cavalry’s here.” Rodrigo sneered as a cruiser with its lights flashing came into view and pulled up a few feet behind their ambulance. “Let them deal with her.”

Ashleigh’s face flushed when Constable Bailey stepped out from the driver’s side of the squad car. It wasn’t normal for someone to be that attractive. Today, Bailey wasn’t wearing her aviators, and Ashleigh found herself falling into beautiful, laughing, blue eyes.

“Paige, Cruz, what a pleasure.” Bailey quirked her head around them. “Ah, CeCe, what have you done now?”

CeCe pouted and crossed her arms, the wildness in her dissipating under Bailey’s gaze. CeCe may not have recognized Ashleigh and Rodrigo, but it was clear that Bailey’s presence affected her.

“I’ve met her a few times before. Is she dangerous?” Ashleigh asked, since Bailey seemed to know her.

“No, not if she’s on her meds.” Bailey moved her focus to CeCe. “You wouldn’t hurt anyone, would you?”

Ashleigh couldn’t help but smile at Bailey’s casualness. She found it comforting, and relaxed just being in her presence.

“Do you know if she has her meds on her?” Bailey asked.

“We’re not friskin’ her,” Rodrigo said, as if disgusted by the idea. “It’s much funner to watch you do it.”

“All right, take it easy, Captain Grammar.” Bailey walked around him to CeCe. “How are you doing, honey?” Ashleigh was taken aback by the sudden change in her tone, by the kindness in it.

“I don’t feel well,” she said sadly.

“I know,” Bailey said sympathetically. “Where are your pills?” CeCe shook her head in response. “You know you need to take those. Now, did you pick up your last cheque from Ontario Works?”

“I lost it.” The woman’s eyes filled with tears, and her bottom lip began to tremble. For the first time, Ashleigh’s heart ached for the addict, and she felt like a complete jerk for having judged her.

“Shh, it’s okay.”

If Ashleigh had been surprised before, she was dumbfounded when Bailey pulled the strung-out drug addict into her arms for a hug.

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“Shh.” Bailey rubbed her back gently, then did a surreptitious pat-down so quickly and smoothly that CeCe didn’t even seem to notice it. “It’s okay. We’re going to help you find it.”

“We?” Rodrigo said from beside her. “Fuck that. You’re here now. We’re leaving.”

Ashleigh’s eyes narrowed. When she turned toward Rodrigo, there was hatred and disgust etched on his face, and she wasn’t sure if it was directed at Bailey, CeCe, or both of them equally. Bailey’s partner, on the other hand, hadn’t even gotten out of the car yet, and on closer inspection, he was eating a rapidly melting soft-ice-cream cone.

“Don’t listen to that mean old monkey,” Bailey said with a kind smile. She slowly pulled CeCe away from her until she was at arm’s length in front of her. “Now, do you remember picking up the cheque?”

CeCe nodded.

“Good. Was it today?”

CeCe looked like she was about to start crying again.

“It’s okay. Let’s just try to retrace your steps. Where did you go after you picked up the cheque?”

Ashleigh was sure they weren’t going to get a straight answer out of her, but with a few more soft rubs to her arms, Bailey managed to finesse one.

“I went home.”

Ashleigh was surprised she had a home.

“Why don’t we check there and see what we can find, then?” Bailey said.

“No.” CeCe shook her head.

“No? But how are we going to find your cheque if we don’t look for it?”

“I don’t want the monkey to come.”

Bailey threw her head back and laughed. It was a beautiful sight. “I wouldn’t let that mean old monkey anywhere near your fine home,” she assured her.

CeCe seemed to find that acceptable, because she began to walk in the direction of what Ashleigh assumed was home, with Bailey following closely before the officer turned back to look at Ashleigh. “Are you coming?” Bailey’s gaze met hers, and Ashleigh was drawn in.

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She looked to Rodrigo, who gave a curt shake of his head.

“Yes,” she said.

Rodrigo’s gaze hardened.

“I’ll be right back,” she whispered to him before sauntering off to catch up with them.

“I knew it,” Bailey said so that only she could hear.

“Knew what?”

“That you had a backbone in there somewhere, Paige.”

Ashleigh wasn’t sure if she’d just been complimented or insulted, but the fact that Bailey had thought anything about her at all made her grin. “How far does she live?” she asked.

“Just at the end of this row.” Bailey nodded her head to indicate the rundown apartment buildings they were passing. Most of them were low-rises and had windows that were either broken, boarded up, or covered. The brick buildings were stained, and the whole neighbourhood stank of urine. “When we get in there, don’t touch anything that isn’t you. She’s as clean as a whistle when she’s manic and on her meds, but when she’s in a low or on street drugs, the place can be a real hellhole. I’ve seen as many roaches there as I’ve seen strangers. The sober her would be sick if she could see herself.”

That comment made Ashleigh sad. “How do you know all this?”

“She was one of my first calls. When I first saw her, she was high and unkempt, but it wasn’t so bad then. A lot of cops think you have to be hard with everybody to get respect, but I learned pretty quickly that people respect kindness a lot more than fear or cruelty.”

“Catch more flies with honey,” Ashleigh said.

“Something like that.”

She was surprised to hear a cop talking this way. Maybe she’d been a little judgmental, not only about CeCe but about the police as well. Ever since Rodrigo had told her about the divide between the police and paramedics, she’d wondered how it had ever eluded her. The animosity was almost palpable some days, and being an EMT, she found herself growing closer to her department and allowing the margin of that divide to grow. Being around Bailey, on the other hand, made her wish it wasn’t so.

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“She hates men, though,” Bailey laughed, bringing Ashleigh back to their conversation. “Unless she’s sleeping with them, and even then I think they get shit treatment from her. It’s just up here.” She put a hand out in front of Ashleigh to stop her. CeCe turned up a flight of stairs, and Bailey grabbed the heavy door and held it open for Ashleigh to enter. Ashleigh looked up. It wasn’t one of the boarded-up brick buildings. It was a glass and steel condo. A new build. She hadn’t expected that.

“Thank you,” she said to Bailey as she passed her.

At the top of two flights of stairs, CeCe made a turn down a well-maintained corridor, going about her business ahead of them, trailing her hand along the paint on the wall as she walked, and Ashleigh wondered if she even remembered that they were there with her.

At her unit, Bailey stopped CeCe before she opened the door. “Why don’t you let me take a look around first?” After a moment, CeCe nodded her head, and Bailey turned to Ashleigh. “Sometimes she has guests, and they don’t exactly remember each other. I’m going to clear it.” She opened the door and slipped inside, then closed it behind her.

Ashleigh’s heartbeat quickened. Bailey shouldn’t be in there alone. Anything could happen to her. She was armed, but they had no idea how many people were in there. Beside her, CeCe whimpered. When she looked at her, she was crying again.

“I’m sorry,” CeCe said.

Ashleigh wasn’t sure what to say, so she said nothing.

“You were right about him, Jenna. I should have listened.”

Ashleigh opened her mouth to answer, still unsure of what to say, when the door to the apartment opened again.

“All clear,” Bailey announced.

CeCe went in, but Ashleigh stopped Bailey at the door. “Who’s Jenna?”

“Her daughter. Why?”

“She said that she was sorry and that she should have listened to her.”

Bailey shrugged. “Who knows what she meant. I don’t know if she’s still in contact with her daughter or not. She has these moments of lucidity where she’s here, you know, but they never last.”

“That’s so sad,” Ashleigh said quietly.

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"Yeah, well, welcome to every day of the rest of your life."

"What do you mean?"

Bailey pointed at her. "Wearing that uniform in Toronto means dealing with crack addicts and indigents half of your day, every day." Bailey looked around. "Now, let's see if we can find her cheque."

Inside, the home reflected a strange dichotomy of character. There were old family pictures on the wall in beautiful frames, but they hung crookedly, and on two, the glass panes were broken. There was a picture of CeCe that looked to be taken a few years ago, but God, did she look different. She looked happy, healthy. If the photograph hadn't been in her home, Ashleigh wouldn't have even made the connection. There was a young woman beside her in the photograph, somewhere close to Ashleigh's age, with light brown hair and a kind smile. *Probably Jenna.* What had happened to make them stop speaking? *Probably the drugs.*

She continued to peer around the room. CeCe's couches were leather but worn and cracked and stained. The wood coffee table was warped and looked like someone had recently made a bed of it. Ashleigh walked into the kitchen, where a cockroach scurried into the sink.

"Paige, get in here," Bailey whispered harshly from the washroom. "What's wrong with her? I mean, medically, what are her conditions?" She handed her four empty pill bottles to examine. "I took them from the garbage."

They were standing close together in the small washroom, so close that Ashleigh could feel the warmth of Bailey's skin. She closed her eyes for a second as she breathed her in. It was both feminine and masculine at the same time, earthy and clean, and it made her light-headed.

"Do you know what the pills are for?" Bailey asked, which forced Ashleigh to open her eyes.

She swallowed and studied the small, empty bottles in her hands. "She's bipolar," she said after reading the first, then moved on to the next. "She also has borderline personality disorder." She turned the next bottle to read it.

"Borderline personality disorder? I don't think I like the sound of that."

"Psychosis and psoriasis," Ashleigh said, determined not to smile at Bailey's words.

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“What’s psoriasis?”

“Basically, chronic dry skin and scalp.”

“Oh, is that the dandruff du jour? I’ll have what she’s having then; sounds a lot sexier than saying my Head and Shoulders ran out.”

This time, Ashleigh did smile. “It’s not a good combination, that’s for sure, but if she’s on her meds, then she should be okay...and dandruff-free,” she added good-naturedly.

“We need to find her cheque, then.”

“Isn’t it likely she’s already spent it?”

“It is,” Bailey agreed. She put the bottles back into the garbage. “You carry drugs in the truck, don’t you?”

“Not for all of these things. I mean, we’re not a drug store. I have an antipsychotic and some lithium, but not knowing what street drug she’s on now, I wouldn’t want to give her anything that could cause a reaction.”

“Well, she needs something. We can’t leave her like this.”

“I found it!” CeCe called from the other room. Ashleigh shared a bewildered look with Bailey before leaving the bathroom to find CeCe holding a flyer from Walmart.

“That’s...great.” Bailey took it from her. “You stay here, and I’ll make sure to get your prescriptions filled with this money, okay?” CeCe smiled proudly, still enjoying her victory. “I mean it, CeCe. If I come back here and you’re gone, I’m going to be very sad, okay?”

Outside of the apartment, Ashleigh hurried to keep up with Bailey. “Where’s the fire?” she asked, narrowly sidestepping a dumpster in the alleyway.

Bailey laughed, never slowing her rhythm. “You sound like an old man.”

Ashleigh reddened. That was so not how she wanted Bailey to see her. Come to think of it, though, it was an expression her dad used and no one else she knew of.

“We have about fifteen minutes until she forgets we were ever there,” Bailey said, thankfully not referring to her in any other unflattering way before getting back to business. “I want to get her medication to her. Then you can figure out what she can and can’t take.”

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"And you're going to pay for it with that half-price Salisbury steak coupon?"

"Heh, I wish." She turned to her with a smile as she rounded the corner. "The pharmacy on her prescription bottles is just on this block. I'm going to see if they'll fill them for us."

*Us?* Ashleigh mused, following her into the drugstore. When they reached the counter, it took a little cajoling, but the pharmacist knew CeCe well enough. After a check of both of their government IDs—as if the uniforms weren't enough—he agreed to fill the bottles for them.

The pharmacist also had her government reimbursement information on file, so the pills came to just under fifty dollars. When Bailey pulled her wallet from one of the cargo pockets in her uniform pants, Ashleigh could not contain her astonishment. "*You're* going to pay for them?"

"Well, like you said, I don't think they're interested in the Salisbury steak coupon. Though I must say, two for five dollars sounds like a good deal." Bailey took the white paper bag but interrupted the pharmacist when he started to explain what to take when. "I've got a medic with me. We're okay."

The confidence in Bailey's voice surprised Ashleigh. If she didn't trust the paramedics to provide adequate healthcare, then why the assurance in her training now? Was it because the care was for a welfare case and not a cop? Nothing of her treatment of CeCe so far had led Ashleigh to believe that Bailey thought she deserved subpar service, so could it be that Bailey really did have faith in her abilities?

The walk back was actually a sprint, and Ashleigh was out of breath from trying to keep up with Bailey, who climbed the stairs two at a time ahead of her.

Inside, CeCe was asleep on the couch. She'd left the door unlocked. Bailey motioned for Ashleigh to step back when she approached her and leaned down to wake her.

"CeCe, time to wake up now," Bailey said softly. When there was no response, she tried giving her a little shake.

CeCe woke up in a flash, taking a swing at Bailey. Unfortunately, she had a bottle of vodka in her hand. The bottle crunched against Bailey's skull, and nausea roiled through Ashleigh. Bailey dropped to

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the ground. Ashleigh rushed to Bailey's side as CeCe got to her feet and rounded on Ashleigh now as a predator would its prey.

"Now, now." Ashleigh stood up slowly, trying to calm her. "We're only here to help you. This officer has your medicine. If you just let me check on her, I can—"

CeCe raised the bottle to strike her, and Ashleigh threw her hands up instinctively to protect her face, but the bottle never made contact.

Bailey launched to her feet and knocked it out of CeCe's hand, then grabbed for her outstretched arm and twisted it behind her back. When CeCe lashed out and tried to scratch her, Bailey pinned the woman's arms to her sides. CeCe began to spit at her, and Bailey wrapped an arm around her chest and squeezed tight, binding her lungs until the fight left CeCe. She slumped forward in Bailey's arms, unconscious.

"What the hell did you just do?" Ashleigh asked wide-eyed.

"I suppose I could have let her clobber you with that bottle," Bailey said flippantly as she gently lowered CeCe to the ground. "Would that have been preferable?" Ashleigh was speechless. "We need to take her down to your truck. We can't leave her here now."

"No kidding." Ashleigh pulled the radio from her belt up to her mouth. "Rodrigo, bring the stretcher down the alleyway. I'll come meet you at the bottom of her building."

"Ten-four," Rodrigo said, a smile in his voice as he teasingly supplied the numbered code.

"Cute," Bailey said from beside her. "You use codes like you know what they mean."

Her words stung, and Ashleigh wondered at the change in her countenance. Getting hit over the head with a vodka bottle might sour one's mood, though. She paused for a moment, trying to think of something to say back, but it was more important to get the stretcher upstairs before CeCe woke again, so Ashleigh left Bailey in the unit to rub her head while she went to meet her partner. She found Rodrigo just as he approached the condo.

"We need to hurry."

"Why? What happened up there?"

Ashleigh opened her mouth to tell him, then thought better of it. Bailey would have to fill out a report for what she'd done, and it would

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come into question if she had used excessive force, and they would be questioned as to what they were doing up in CeCe's condo in the first place. She might be new on the job, but she was sure that buying drugs and giving them to a drug addict was probably not strictly to code.

"CeCe passed out," she said and refused to answer any more of his questions on the way up the stairs.

Inside, Bailey had moved CeCe to the couch. "Thank God you're here." Bailey feigned wiping sweat from her brow as she spoke to Rodrigo. "I was so worried she'd die before you got off your ass and made it up the stairs."

"Bite me," he grumbled.

"No thanks." Bailey slipped by them to the doorway. "I assume you can handle it from here?" The question must have been rhetorical, because she didn't wait for an answer before leaving the unit.

"Fucking bitch," Rodrigo said absentmindedly as he strapped CeCe's legs to the bottom of the stretcher.

"She's not... She's not that bad," Ashleigh said, doing the same with CeCe's upper body. "She seems pretty kind, actually."

"She's PD," he said flatly. "She doesn't do anything unless she expects something in return."

If Rodrigo was right, she didn't know what Bailey expected from anyone after shelling out fifty bucks for a drug addict's medication and then taking a whack from a liquor bottle.

Once they had CeCe strapped in, they carefully carried the stretcher down the stairs. When they got to the truck, Bailey was rifling through the back of it.

"Hey, get out of there!" Rodrigo yelled at her as if she were a raccoon in his garbage bin.

"Take it easy, big guy." Bailey hopped out of the truck with a smile that did not reach her eyes. "Just taking a look around."

Bailey had several large gauze compresses fisted in her right hand, and when she turned, the back of her head was matted with blood. Ashleigh's insides quaked, and her knees wobbled. For the first time, she was sick at the sight of blood. "Let me look at that," she said unevenly as she fought off a wave of nausea.

*What's happening to me?*

## RESCUE ME

"No," Bailey said quickly. "I'll take care of it myself."

"It looks bad." She swallowed. "With that much blood, you likely have a concussion."

"I'm fine."

"She's fine," Rodrigo echoed, a warning in his voice to Ashleigh.

"She doesn't look fine."

"Just a scratch. A scratch! Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Rodrigo asked.

"No one?" Bailey looked at Ashleigh who shook her head. "*Romeo and Juliet*. Geez, don't they make you guys go to school before giving you your Fisher Price medical certificates?"

That one stung. Ashleigh was tired of hearing people ask her why she hadn't become a *real* doctor. She was proud of what she did, but she was not immune to the disdain of others, no matter how hard she tried to be.

"Are you capable of taking anything seriously?" Ashleigh asked her scathingly.

"You show me a serious problem, Paige, and I'll take it seriously." Bailey looked to her partner, who was finally getting out of the car. "Great, the backup's awoken."

"Not enjoying your partnership?" Ashleigh asked. This time, she was the one who was amused.

"Oh yeah, he's a gorgeous TO. Dumb as an ox and slow as a mule."

"TO?" Ashleigh tilted her head to the side. "Why are you riding with a training officer?"

Bailey's jaw tensed for a moment before her easy smile replaced the expression and she quipped, "He's fallen in love with me. Now, don't go doing the same, Paige. I see the way you look at me."

Ashleigh flushed from her neck to the tips of her ears. She found Bailey irritating and aloof; she hadn't been looking at her in any other kind of way—had she?

"If you've had your fun, we need to get her to the hospital," Rodrigo interrupted, looking between Ashleigh and Bailey in disgust. "I assume she isn't being charged with anything?"

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“Just tell her to start taking her meds. I hate to see her like this when some counseling and a few pills could put her back into society.” She shook her head, then winced before her eyes took on a mischievous glint. “Who knows? Maybe with the right prescription cocktail she could have your job in a week, Cruz. That’s about how long the training to become a fake doctor takes, right?”

A scowl was her reward. “Fuck you, Bailey.”

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BY MICHELLE TEICHMAN

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