



THEY RAN FROM LOVE,
TO EACH OTHER,
AND FOR THEIR LIVES

BROKEN FAITH

A ROMANTIC SUSPENSE



LOIS CLOAREC HART

BROKEN

FAITH

by Lois Cloarec Hart

Dedication

Day

We leapt in faith

We landed in love

Acknowledgements

Revising *Broken Faith* was a trip back in time. When I originally wrote the novel, Facebook didn't exist, smart phones were in the early stages of development, texts still referred to books, and only birds twittered. I chose to keep the technological anachronisms intact, so don't be shocked when a couple of characters don't even carry cell phones.

One thing that hasn't changed is how much my writing improves with the skilled input of my trusted long-time collaborators. *Broken Faith* was the first story that my wife, Day Petersen, worked on with me from concept to completion. Kathleen GramsGibbs, who has spent years editing my stories, was also involved in *Broken Faith's* revision process. They are a joy to work with, and I am deeply grateful to both.

This time around I also had the benefit of working with Ylva's Renaissance woman, writer-editor, Sandra Gerth. Sandra, you took on the task of breaking me of a lot of bad habits, and you did it with kindness, tact, and a great sense of humour. I don't know when I've enjoyed a challenge as much. Thank you for all you taught me and for making it fun and (relatively) painless. I look forward to our next collaboration, *The Rise of the Autonomous Body Parts*.

Chapter 1

Marika leaned against her apartment door, her shoulders slumped as she listened to the muted rumble of the elevator down the hall. Long after the sound died, she pushed herself upright and returned to her living room. She stood silently until Spooky wound himself through her legs. With a faint smile, she stooped and picked up her feline companion.

She stroked his soft fur as she wandered to the sliding door that opened onto a small balcony. She pushed the door open and went outside. Usually, she found the breathtaking panorama of distant mountains and winding river soothing, but on this day, it did nothing to calm her heart or mind.

With a sigh she turned back into her apartment and raised the cat to eye level. "I sent your buddy away, Spooky."

The cat blinked.

"You know I had to, Mister." Marika cradled the cat against her shoulder and whispered into his fur, "It was the right thing to do. She doesn't love us, Spook. At least not that way."

When the feline began to squirm, Marika set him on the floor. They parted company: the cat headed for his favourite perch on the couch and Marika for her piano under the large bay window.

Marika trailed her index finger over the shining mahogany of the Baldwin baby grand, circled it, and pulled out the bench. Once seated, she contemplated the keys for a long moment, then began to play.

The melancholy sounds of Chopin's *Prelude in E Minor* filled the room. Suddenly, Marika slammed her hands down on

the keys and startled her somnolent cat with the discordant cacophony.

“Well, Spooky, I told Terry I had a date tonight. I wouldn’t want to be a liar, would I?” She strode to the phone and punched in a number. “Cass?”

Marika winced at the burst of triumphant laughter in her ear.

“The last time I saw you, you said you wouldn’t be back,” Cass said. “Changed your mind?”

Marika rubbed the fine furrow that had appeared in her forehead and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Yes. Look, are you up for some company tonight?”

“I trust you remember what to bring?”

“I do.” Marika’s voice was sombre.

“All right. Then I’ll expect you within the hour. Don’t make me wait.”

“I won’t. I’m leaving now.”

A click sounded on the other end of the line.

Marika hung up the phone and glanced over at her cat. “Guess you’ll have to look after yourself tonight, Spook.” She grabbed her handbag and stopped to deposit an affectionate caress on her pet. “You be good, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

Spooky stretched and purred under Marika’s hand.

She whispered, “I’m sorry,” then turned and walked out.

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The grocery bag held only essentials, but it felt heavier than usual to Rhiannon. Even the backpack slung over her opposite shoulder was unusually burdensome. She raised her downcast eyes and looked down the street for her bus. *I must’ve missed the 7:40. Figures. What else can happen to screw up this lousy day?*

Someone rushed around the corner of the plaza and slammed into Rhiannon.

The impact drove the breath from her lungs and the pavement from under her feet. She flew back and lost the contents of her bag all over the sidewalk.

Rhiannon raised herself on scraped elbows and stared at the oranges rolling across the sidewalk. *Shit. They weren't even on special.*

“Oh my God, I’m so very sorry,” the person who had slammed into her said. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Rhiannon accepted the proffered hand and stumbled to her feet. To her surprise, she knew her inadvertent mugger.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Ms. Havers. No harm done.” Rhiannon knelt to gather her scattered groceries. *Except for my oranges.* She frowned at the sight of her now less than perfect produce.

Marika Havers helped with the recovery process. “Do I know you, Miss?”

“I work for Mr. Owen.” Rhiannon stuffed her groceries into the rumpled brown bag.

“Oh, of course.” Ms. Havers’ voice was uncertain.

She has no idea who I am. Not that it matters. Rhiannon rose and balanced her bag.

Ms. Havers tucked the last couple of items into the top and picked up the backpack. She hung it over Rhiannon’s shoulder and peered at her with concern. “Are you sure you’re okay? May I offer you a ride somewhere?”

“No.” Rhiannon realized her rejection sounded brusque, but she lacked the energy to allay her assailant’s guilt. “Thanks anyway, but my bus just arrived.” She hurried to catch her bus. When she was on-board, she looked back at the plaza in time to see Ms. Havers disappear into the liquor store.

Rhiannon settled back and decided that the collision had been an appropriate end to a very bad day. She leaned her head

against the window. She felt as if she'd run a marathon, though she'd been at her desk the entire day.

Rhiannon flexed her back, but stopped when a muscle threatened to knot.

When the bus approached her stop, she picked up her grocery bag and swayed toward the middle exit.

As she approached her house, Rhiannon glanced across the street. She wasn't aware she held her breath until she released it in a sigh of relief.

The King brothers and their cronies were mercifully absent. Winters were usually quiet on her street, but spring and summer drew the thuggish brothers out into their filthy, littered yard. They would lounge on their motorbikes and drink beer with their buddies to the raucous accompaniment of cranked up music.

Neighbours had long ago learned to stay out of the brothers' way. Mrs. Greeley had called in a noise complaint to the police three years ago, only to have most of her windows mysteriously broken, garbage strewn about her yard, and her Corgi hung from a mailbox two nights later.

When the police came to question the King brothers in the matter, their pals provided alibis. The neighbours, who had gathered when the police arrived, watched helplessly as the officers drove off while the brothers laughed and sneered. Mrs. Greeley moved away, and since then, everyone else played deaf, dumb, and blind while the brothers lorded it over their small, captive kingdom.

Rhiannon kept her head down, scurried to the gate leading into her yard, and nudged it open with an elbow. She stepped deftly around broken pavement, and went up the creaky wooden steps to the front door. She pushed her way in and winced at the sound of voices coming from what her aunt grandly called the parlour.

"Anne," her aunt called.

Rhiannon cursed inwardly, but responded to her aunt's summons.

Her aunt stood in the parlour doorway and clutched the arm of a tall, weedy man Rhiannon had never seen before.

For a long moment, Rhiannon eyed the stranger, struck by the sheer homeliness of the man. Well over six feet tall, and spare to the point of gauntness, he had thinning blond hair, deep-set pale green eyes, and a prominent Adam's apple. Wire rimmed glasses perched on a prominent beak, and he reminded her of a caricatured Ichabod Crane.

She glanced past him and her aunt's bulk.

The other three members of the "henhouse"—as she termed her aunt's closest friends—clustered in the parlour.

"Anne, I want you to meet our new priest, David Ross. Reverend Ross, this is my dear niece, Anne."

Rhiannon grimaced at the phony affection in her aunt's voice, but nodded at the Anglican priest.

He smiled at her. "It's nice to meet you, Anne."

"It's Rhiannon."

Reverend Ross' pale eyebrows rose. "Rhiannon, then. I've been looking forward to meeting you. Your aunt speaks highly of you."

Rhiannon choked back a snort of disbelief and caught the warning glitter in her aunt's cold, flat eyes. "Nice to meet you, too, Reverend Ross. If you'll excuse me, I've got to get these groceries put away."

"May I give you a hand?" Reverend Ross reached for the grocery bag.

Rhiannon backed away and shook her head. "No, thanks. I'll take care of it." Unwilling to linger longer, she scrambled up the narrow flight of stairs.

"I hope I'll see you again soon, Rhiannon."

Rhiannon would have laughed at the minister's words, but was mindful of her aunt's presence. "Not this Sunday, Reverend."

"I'm afraid my niece is something of a lost sheep. I haven't been able to convince her to come with me to services for years now, though Lord knows I try."

Rhiannon gritted her teeth, but didn't bother to rebut her aunt's comment. Compulsory church attendance had been one of a multitude of bewildering rules that had overwhelmed her when she had been remanded into her aunt's unwilling custody as a frightened eleven-year-old. "Never again, auntie dear. You lost the right to dictate anything to me the first time you took my rent money in your fat, greedy, money-grubbing fingers." Rhiannon knew her words were inaudible to those downstairs as she stalked down the hall to her room, but it still felt good to vent.

She reached her bedroom door and set the backpack and groceries down while she dug keys out of her pocket. The padlock had been another non-negotiable item when she agreed to alter her household status to that of a paying tenant. She entered the room and closed the door behind her.

Rhiannon set the grocery bag on the table under the two narrow windows, but before she removed her purchases, she took a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and surveyed her walls. She examined the multitude of drawings displayed on every available patch. It was getting harder and harder to find a place to put her latest renderings.

Finally, she spotted an opening between a dragon and child flying a kite. She re-arranged two pictures of her late parents that had long ago curled with age, and pinned the new drawing beneath the dragon.

She stepped back, studied the altered layout, and nodded. Her gaze settled on the latest addition and she smiled fondly. It

was a drawing of her boss, Len Owen. She'd done it on her lunch hour, before his disconcerting afternoon announcement.

Her smile faded. *Damn it. Why'd you have to take the Vancouver position anyway?*

Rhiannon shook her head. The odds of finding another boss who would treat her as kindly as Mr. Owen were longer than Hettie turning into a loving relative.

With a sigh she turned to put away her purchases in the cardboard boxes that held her dry goods and limited assortment of dishware.

She poured herself a bowl of cereal and covered it with milk before depositing the container and oranges in her old bar fridge.

Rhiannon sat down on the room's single, straight-backed chair to eat as she idly contemplated the dilapidated and wheel-less car in the yard across the alley. She had long ago decided that sparse meals were a small price to pay to avoid her aunt's kitchen. She managed fine with what she had, and since she was responsible for the cost of her own groceries, her aunt couldn't protest the arrangement.

When she finished her supper, Rhiannon took her dishes and backpack down the hall to the bathroom. She hung her towel and bathing suit over the shower rod and then rinsed her dishes in the sink.

Rhiannon finished drying her dish and spoon and returned to her room. Voices droned downstairs, and, aware of her aunt's fondness for talking people's ears off, she smirked in sympathy for the captive priest.

Back in her room, she browsed the stack of library books on the table. She'd read most of them already, and neither of the two still unread caught her attention tonight. Instead, she opened the bottom drawer of the legless bureau to retrieve a bankbook.

Rhiannon snapped on the naked overhead bulb and lay down on her bed. She doubled the thin pillow behind her head and opened the well-thumbed book to the last page with notations on it.

She stared at the balance and did some calculations in her head. *Won't be too long now. Maybe six or seven more paydays and I'm at the magic five figures.* Rhiannon laughed softly. *I can just see the look on Hettie's face when I toss her the house keys. I won't even say goodbye. I'm sure as hell not going to tell her where I'm going.*

With every payday, Rhiannon's dream drew a little closer; and, safe within her locked room, she allowed herself the luxury of dreaming of the day she had been working toward for so long.

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David awkwardly disengaged from the clutches of the nattering women and made his exit.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he shook off the stultifying after-effects of an hour in his congregants' company. As was his custom, he lost himself in contemplation while he walked to his church and the rectory, situated a few blocks away in the inner city.

What an odd duck Hettie Walker's niece is. Just this side of hostile, Rhiannon was an enigma. Her intelligent, penetrating eyes held a deep reticence, but David sensed that was their usual state and not directed specifically at him. He wondered what caused such wariness in one so young, and felt a budding compassion for her.

Miss Walker had deflected his initial attempt to inquire about her niece, which only made him more curious. David had allowed the subject to drop, but his inquisitive mind refused to let go of the memory of Rhiannon's suspicious eyes. If he were

to believe Hettie and her friends, Miss Walker had heroically borne the burden of her ungrateful niece's care because it was her Christian duty. But David had honed his instincts through two decades of ministry and he knew he'd only heard one, very slanted side of the story.

Tupper. The thought made David smile. If anyone would know both sides of the story, it was the ancient, garrulous sexton who did everything around the church from sweeping floors to setting out hymnals.

Deep in his ruminations, David stepped off the curb without looking and barely avoided being hit by a car. The angry driver signaled his outrage in no uncertain terms. David waved sheepishly as he chastised himself for his lack of attention, well aware that he was prone to lose sight of the outer world while he wandered happily in his inner one. Determined to at least make it back to his rectory in one piece, David carefully checked the street before starting across it again.

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Across town from her condo, Marika stopped before Cass' door and drew a deep breath. She didn't allow herself time to reconsider as she quickly knocked and waited.

The door swung open. Cass leaned against the frame and eyed Marika for long moments before she smirked and held out her hand.

"It's Walker Cardhu." Marika handed over the brown bag.

Cass checked the contents and grinned. "Aren't you such a good girl." She twisted the cap off the scotch.

Marika wondered again why she had come. Even so, she knew she wouldn't leave. She had tried to stay away. It certainly wasn't as if Cass put a gun to her head to force her return. Not that Cass ever showed surprise when Marika did

reappear. Most of the time Cass wasn't even at home if Marika turned up unannounced, but when she was, Marika knew she'd be greeted with the same knowing smirk. .

Marika studied Cass as she drank from the bottle. *What is it about her? What pulls me back here?* Marika knew the answer to that, but shied away from admitting it, even to herself.

Cass replaced the bottle's cap and pinned Marika with her gaze.

Marika flinched. Cass would never stand out in a crowd. Her appearance was utterly mundane, but her eyes...her eyes were those of a predator; hungry, manic and focused intently on her.

Marika shivered, but was about to push past Cass when the sound of women's laughter coming from inside the apartment made her stop.

Cass regarded her with an insolent grin.

"You didn't tell me you had company."

Cass shrugged. "So?"

Marika retreated to the hall, and Cass made no move to stop her. They stared at each other until finally Cass called into the apartment, "You two get the hell out of here."

Loud complaints sounded until Cass turned and took a few steps inside. "Don't make me tell you twice."

Responding to Cass' snarled command, two women stumbled by Marika's averted eyes and down the hall. "She don't mean shit," one of them said to her friend. "We'll be back here before Monday."

Marika winced and quietly closed the door behind her.

Chapter 2

Marika called up another file on her computer and shook her head. Her client had a weak case for being granted refugee status, and she was hard pressed to find adequate substantiation for his hearing in three weeks.

A knock sounded on her open door. Marika looked up.

Len Owen stood in the doorway, his usual easy-going grin absent.

“Hey, stranger. I haven’t seen you for a while.”

“Hi, Marika. Do you have a moment?”

“For you, anytime. Come on in. Have a seat. What brings you down from Corporate?”

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I’ve taken a position in the Vancouver office, and I’ll be leaving in a couple of weeks. I’m pretty much just wrapping things up right now.”

“I had heard something about that. Congratulations. I’m sure you’re going to enjoy living out on the coast.”

“It’ll be different, that’s for sure,” Len said. “I’m going to take quite a hit on housing costs out there, but I sure won’t miss Calgary winters. Look, I’m hoping we might help each other out here. Human Resources said that your legal assistant is leaving soon on maternity leave, is that right?”

“Yes. Marion starts her leave in two weeks, though I’m not entirely sure she’s going to last that long.”

“She does look ready to pop any day now. I was wondering if you’ve found a replacement for her yet.”

Marika shook her head. “I haven’t really had time to look into it. I was going to call Human Resources and tell them to

send me floaters for now. I might even go that route for the entire six months until Marion's back."

"I think I have a better idea. I have a top notch assistant, and I think you'd be very pleased with her work if you take her on. I'd really like to find her a position before I leave, and with you in the market for a replacement assistant, I thought this might work out perfectly."

"Since Marion plans to come back after her leave is up, I'm not looking for anyone permanent. Can't your assistant go into the floater pool?"

"Certainly that's what she'll do if you're not interested, but she's a good kid. I'd like to see her settled with someone who'll treat her right, even if it's only for a limited time."

Marika considered the case Len made for his assistant. She wasn't surprised that he was trying to do something nice for the woman. His reputation as an all-round nice guy was well established. But his voice held an unusual undertone of urgency that made her curious. "What is it you're not telling me?"

"I'm not trying to put one over on you. Rhiannon really is the best assistant I've ever had. She's got a first-rate mind, and she's probably the hardest worker in this building. She never balks at overtime, and countless nights I've left here when she's still hard at it."

"Maybe she can't get her work done within regular hours."

Len shook his head. "That's not it at all. Her output is phenomenal. I couldn't begin to tell you how many times her research has bailed me out. Sure, that's what she's paid for, but, damn, Marika, she really makes me look good in front of the clients. I'd take her with me to Vancouver if I could."

"So what's the drawback to this paragon of legal assistants?"

"Well, to be blunt, Rhiannon's people skills aren't the greatest." Len hastened to add, "Don't get me wrong, she's

always perfectly polite and correct in her behaviour with me and toward the clients.”

“But?”

“But she’s the oddest duck I’ve ever run into.”

“Odd how?”

Len stood and paced to the windows, which overlooked the heart of downtown Calgary from seven floors up. “Well, for instance, even after two years, I can’t get her to call me anything but Mr. Owen. I’ve told her dozens of times to call me Len, but she always nods agreeably and treats me as formally as always.”

“That doesn’t sound all that bad. I know it’s outdated, but office formality has its place. Maybe she’s shy.”

Len shook his head and turned to face Marika. “No, it’s not shyness, exactly, though she is reserved. I’d almost say she doesn’t like people, but once she comes to know you enough to let down the barriers a little, you can tell it’s not that she’s a misanthrope, she just doesn’t trust people.” Len resumed his seat. “Look, the thing is, if you’re looking for someone warm and fuzzy to have cheerful morning chitchats with, Rhiannon isn’t it. If you’re looking for a dedicated, talented worker, she’s your girl. I’d like to see her with you because you treat your people decently. I’m afraid that if she goes into the floater pool, she’ll end up working for someone like Nolan.”

Marika grimaced. She despised the way Troy Nolan treated his assistants. He was petty, disdainful, and spiteful to anyone unlucky enough to be assigned to his office, and as far as she was concerned, a disgrace to the entire firm. *Unfortunately the partners can’t seem to see what’s so clear to the rest of us.* “I suppose I could give her a chance. I’d need her to work with Marion for at least a week before Marion goes on maternity leave, so that she’s up to date on our procedures here in Immigration.”

Len beamed. “Excellent. I know you won’t regret it. And there’s no problem sparing her to start training right away. As I said, I’m in the process of wrapping things up right now, and I can always grab a floater if necessary.” He stood and shook Marika’s hand. “I’ll send her down later this morning. She’s running an errand for Henry right now. One of his witnesses showed up here rather than at the courthouse. His assistant had already gone over, so he borrowed Rhiannon to escort the lady there since he was still busy.”

“He couldn’t have just given her directions?”

“I don’t think her grasp of English was very good. She was wearing one of those Middle Eastern robes, you know—where you only see her face?”

“You mean a chador?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what it’s called. Anyway, when Rhiannon gets back, I’ll have her come down and introduce herself, all right?”

“That’s fine. I’ll have Marion begin briefing her on our procedures.” Marika escorted Len out.

He stopped at the door. “You won’t regret it. Treat her fairly, and you’ll never have a more dedicated employee.”

After Len departed, Marika filled Marion in on her replacement.

A raised eyebrow greeted her announcement. “Rhiannon Davies? Are you sure about this, Marika?”

“Why? Len said she’s a very hard worker.”

“Well, yes, she is that, but she’s about the most unsociable person I’ve ever met. I don’t think I’ve ever heard her utter a single word that wasn’t work-related, except maybe to ask if there’s more coffee. Hell, she doesn’t even come to our monthly luncheons. It’s gotten so we don’t bother asking her anymore.”

“I know Len said she’s not much of a people person, but as long as she’s competent, I can put up with anything until

you're back." Marika smiled at Marion. "Besides, no one could really replace you."

"You got that right. Okay, if you're willing to put up with Miss Ice, I'll train her up right."

"Miss Ice? No, forget it. I don't want to know." Marika returned to her office.

An hour later, Marion poked her head into the office. "Rhiannon is here. May I bring her in?"

Marika looked up from her computer and nodded. "Sure." She rose to greet her new assistant.

Marion walked in followed by a slight young woman. Short, brown hair with gold highlights framed her gamine face, and freckles splashed across an upturned nose. There was a stubborn tilt to her small, square chin, and her dark blue eyes had a look of perpetual wariness. Her clothes were business beige, perfectly suitable for the office, but drab and unflattering.

Marika's eyes widened. *I know her. Oh, my God. She's the woman I knocked over at the plaza.*

Rhiannon showed no signs of being nonplussed. Apparently, she had already made the connection between her assailant and her new boss.

Marika took a deep breath and extended her hand. "Rhiannon? Come in, and we'll talk about what your responsibilities will be."

Rhiannon stepped forward, gave Marika's hand a single, firm shake, and sat down.

Marion hovered, until Marika dismissed her with a nod.

Marika resumed her seat and regarded her new assistant. She didn't appreciate feeling off-balance, though she couldn't in fairness blame Rhiannon. *I was the one who knocked her ass over tea kettle. If anyone should hold a grudge, she should.* Marika took in the rigid, wary set of Rhiannon's shoulders and the clear, cool eyes that returned her gaze steadily.

They sat in silence for long moments. Rhiannon didn't squirm under her scrutiny.

Marika consciously projected her stern "I will tolerate no fools" look. She had used that expression to induce a cold sweat and trembling knees in grown men, but Rhiannon did not flinch. *She'd probably sit there like a stone until dismissed.* "You come well recommended. Len thinks highly of your work habits. I trust his opinion, and I'm sure you'll extend the same quality of performance to this office." Marika paused.

Rhiannon gave no indication of accepting the conversational opening, but the intensity in her eyes assured Marika that her new assistant was paying attention.

"Over the next couple of weeks, I want you to work with Marion and get up to speed on our procedures. I know that Immigration will be quite a change from Corporate, but I'm sure you'll handle the transition smoothly."

That at least got a nod.

Marika sighed softly. This was the point where she would normally engage in some polite conversation to elicit something of the new employee's personal history, but she doubted that any such attempt would be welcomed. *I wonder if Len knows anything of Rhiannon's background. I'll have to ask him.* "All right. You should join Marion and get started."

Rhiannon stood. "Thank you, Ms. Havers."

She withdrew abruptly and was almost out of the office when Marika said, "You can call me..." She trailed off weakly, "Marika."

Rhiannon stopped and looked at Marika over her shoulder. "Yes, ma'am." She closed the office door quietly behind her.

Marika stared out her office windows. Rhiannon had stopped to talk to Marion at her desk, and Marika studied her new assistant. *Did I just make a very big mistake? Damn it, Len. What have you gotten me into? This is going to be a long*

six months. I guess she and I won't be having any heart-to-hearts anytime soon.

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It was almost noon when a cheerful voice sounded at the office door. "Nose to the grindstone, eh? Good to see it."

Marika looked up with a smile.

Lee's tall, solidly muscled frame loomed in the doorway. A dark blue company blazer was tossed over one shoulder, and she sported a wide grin.

"Well, as I live and breathe, if it isn't the notorious Lee Glenn. I thought for sure they'd toss you in jail down there in Mexico, and I'd have to come bail your ass out."

A deep, contagious laugh erupted from Lee. She strolled over to perch on the edge of Marika's desk. "Nah, though I did have one run-in with an overly enthusiastic customs agent."

Marika stood and hugged Lee. "That's quite the tan you have. I thought you were going down there to work. Looks like you put in some time on the beach."

"Not you, too. Ever since I got back, I've been trying to convince Dana that I wasn't on holiday without her and Eli."

"Uh-huh, well, if I were that lady of yours, I'd put a long leash on you the next time you claim you're heading out of the country on 'business.'" Marika poked Lee's solid thigh. "So, did you bring me anything from your southern sojourn?"

Lee winked. "I brought back a bottle of tequila, so fresh from the factory that the worm is still doing cartwheels."

"That sounds interesting. Bring it over sometime this week, and we can catch up."

"Sure, but I was also thinking I might take my favourite lawyer out to lunch, if you're free, that is."

Marika glanced at the stubborn file she had poured over all morning and then back at her friend. She firmly closed the file.

“I’m all yours.” She chuckled at Lee’s comical leer. “God, you’re incorrigible. How does Dana put up with you?”

“Dunno. I ask myself that pretty much every day,” Lee said as she trailed Marika out of the office.

Marion waddled back to her cubicle, followed by Rhiannon with an armful of binders.

Marika gestured at her assistants. “I’m just going to let them know that I’ll be out for lunch.” When Lee didn’t answer, Marika glanced over her shoulder.

Lee stood staring at Rhiannon.

“Lee?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, okay. Sorry, I didn’t realize she was one of yours.”

Marika raised an eyebrow at the cryptic remark, but didn’t stop to ask for clarification. “Marion, I’ll be out of the office for the next hour. May I bring you back anything?”

“No thanks, Marika. Have a good lunch.”

Lee and Rhiannon exchanged grins.

“You two know each other?” Marika asked.

Lee shook her head. “Not well. Lady Mouse and I only met this morning. How are you doing, Miss Rhiannon?”

“Fine, thank you. And you, oh great saver of women in distress?”

Banter from Miss Ice? Oh, Lee is so going to tell me this story.

Lee bade Rhiannon goodbye and secured a shy smile and a nod of farewell in return.

Marika tried not to gape, but as they walked to the elevator, she laid a hand on Lee’s forearm. “What was that all about?”

“I’ll tell you the whole tale over lunch. Now c’mon, before all the tables are gone.”

They left the office tower and walked two blocks over to the Tudor Rose, an English style pub that they both enjoyed.

They were fortunate to get an empty booth in the popular lunch spot. Lee immediately ordered ale, but Marika opted for coffee.

Marika eyed her old friend affectionately. She couldn't suppress a snicker at how far away Lee had to hold the menu to read it. Lee stubbornly refused to admit that she needed reading glasses, which forever exasperated her long-suffering partner, Dana.

Marika found her friend's quirk endearing, and it really was Lee's only personal vanity. *But I don't have to live with her.* "So, why do I have the pleasure of your company today? I thought after your trip, you were going to take some time off."

"I was pretty tired, all right. Setting up a consulting company in Mexico is a whole new experience. We had to twist ourselves into some pretty strange knots to get the contracts signed. I was relieved to finally wrap it up and drop it in Juan's capable hands." Lee shot Marika a grin. "But you know how indispensable I am. We're considering bidding on the security contract for your building when it's up for renewal next month, so Willem dispatched me to look things over. I'll be hanging around and poking into corners for the next week."

"That's wonderful. It'll be a treat seeing you around the office. Maybe we can get together for coffee breaks."

"Or go out for lunch again," Lee said. "It's on you next time."

"Not the next couple of days, though. I have hearings scheduled, and they're pretty unpredictable in length, so it's hard to make plans. How about we look at Friday?"

"Great." Lee's eyes brightened as the waiter placed her meal on the table. She finished long before Marika and eyed the tempting dessert menu at the end of the table.

Marika smiled to herself. She loved that Lee had a huge appetite for life and all its pleasures.

"The mud pie looks pretty good, doesn't it?"

“It’s meant to,” Marika said dryly. “They’re trying to entice you.”

“And doing a damned fine job of it, too. I’d certainly hate for someone to have done all that work for nothing.” Lee signaled the waiter and ordered dessert and another ale.

Marika pushed her plate aside and reached for her coffee. “So, you were going to tell me the story of how you know my new assistant.”

“Right. I was. Well, it all started this morning when I was on my way to your building. I was a few blocks away when I noticed two women turn down an alley. The only reason I paid any attention is that one of them was wearing a chador, and you don’t see that in Calgary every day, but I didn’t think too much of it until I saw a couple of punks follow them in. It was Pike and Eddie King.”

“The guys you had a run-in with when you were a military policewoman?”

Lee nodded. “Yeah. They know better than to cross me, but this morning they thought they’d come across a couple of likely victims. By the time I reached them, Pike and Eddie had them trapped between the wall and a dumpster.”

“Oh, no. What happened?”

“Pike taunted and threatened them, but I gotta say, Rhiannon didn’t give an inch. She wasn’t going to let the two lowlifes get at Mrs. Khalil either. She was between the King brothers and the lady, and she ordered them in no uncertain terms to back off.” Admiration shone in Lee’s eyes. “So I came up from behind and scared the bejesus out of them. Not to mention that I irritated the hell out of Pike. He hates his real name, so of course I called him Francis right off the bat.”

“Do you think it was wise to antagonize him, Lee?”

“Might not have been wise, but it sure was fun.” Lee laughed. “Besides, they’re just your basic, garden variety bullies. I threatened to call their PO and let him know what

they were up to. That pretty much took the wind out of their sails. Like all bullies, Pike has a healthy sense of self-preservation when the odds aren't heavily in his favour. He's meaner than a hungry rat, and while Eddie's got the brawn, he doesn't have two spare brain cells to rub together. He does whatever his brother tells him."

"Still, I wish you wouldn't take chances."

"I wasn't taking a chance. Your new assistant was. If I hadn't come along, I'm not sure what would've happened, though I wager she'd have given as good as she got if it had gotten physical."

"Oh, I don't know, Lee. She's awfully small. I doubt she'd have stood a chance."

"If there's anything I've learned in my business, it's that size isn't everything. Pike called her a mouse, but she's one mouse with a lion heart. I'm telling you, there's more to that woman than meets the eye."

Marika sipped her coffee as she pondered Lee's assessment. "I don't know if she told Len about the incident, but she certainly never said a word about it when I interviewed her."

"Does that surprise you?"

"No. She strikes me as somewhat reticent." *To put it mildly. She never even mentioned that I ran over her like a bulldozer.*

Lee chuckled. "She strikes me like a sphinx."

"But not with you." Marika smiled. Lee had a gift for connecting with people from all walks of life.

"True. Anyway, that's how Rhiannon and I met. I had no idea she worked for your firm until I saw her in your office."

"She only started this morning. But on a completely different topic, I've come up with the perfect gift for you to give Dana this weekend."

Lee looked up with a guilty expression "Um, I sorta already took care of that."

“Oh, no. Lee, you swore after the last disaster that you’d never buy Dana another birthday, anniversary, or Christmas gift without consulting me first. Have I ever steered you wrong?”

“No, no, you haven’t,” Lee said. “But I came up with the perfect idea, and I know she’s gonna love it.”

“Okay, let’s hear it. What did you get for the love of your life this time?”

“I got her a new motorcycle helmet.”

“You got her what?”

“I had it custom painted in the Sukuzi’s colours. You should see it; it’s gorgeous—all black and purple, with her name on it.”

“I’m sure the helmet is lovely, but this is your anniversary. Perhaps a more...romantic gift is in order.”

Lee frowned as she poked at the remnants of chocolate on her plate. “It’s romantic,” she said, though with a noticeable lack of conviction. “After all, it says I’m thinking about her safety when she’s riding with me, and that I want her alive and kicking for a long, long time.”

“If that’s really what you wanted to say, you’d get rid of that damned bike. Now that would be a great gift.”

Lee stared at Marika as if she’d just proposed that Lee offer her first born in sacrifice. She loved her Suzuki 1100 touring bike almost as much as she loved Dana and Eli.

Marika started to laugh as a pout emerged on Lee’s face. It looked so out of place.

“Okay, so maybe the helmet wasn’t the best idea,” Lee said. “Aw shit, I don’t know what to get her.”

“That’s what you have me for. Lee, have you thought that maybe it’s time to consider a ring for Dana?”

“A ring?”

“Yes, a ring. After all, how long have you two been together now?”

Lee frowned at the ceiling. “Well, how long ago did you and I break up?”

“About five and a half years ago.”

“Okay, so this is our fifth anniversary.”

“Then don’t you think she might be expecting some sign of commitment from you?”

“We bought a house together. We’re raising her son together. If that isn’t commitment, what is?”

Marika patted Lee’s hand. “I know, and I agree. But I really think Dana might like a ring and a ceremony to formalize your union in front of all your friends and family. I think she would like to know that you’re fully committed to her and Eli.”

“You think so?”

“I do.”

“I’ll think about it.” With a grin Lee added, “But I’m still giving her the helmet.”

Marika rolled her eyes. *Sorry, Dana. I tried, but a helmet it is. Maybe next year.*

“So, what’d you do with yourself this weekend?” Lee asked.

Marika flinched. “Oh, not much. Pretty much stayed in most of the weekend. Me and Spooky kept each other company.”

Lee studied her.

Marika quickly sought to change the subject. “The party is still on for Saturday, right? I told Dana I’d be there early to help set up.”

“Uh-huh.” Lee regarded her intently. “What’s going on, Marika?”

“Nothing’s going on.” Marika refused to meet Lee’s eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“Goddamnit. You went to Cass, didn’t you?”

Marika sat perfectly still and stared at the table.

“Sonuvabitch. You promised you’d stay away from her.”

Marika shrank into her seat and crossed her arms over her chest. “I am an adult, in case you hadn’t noticed. I have a right to see whoever I choose.”

Lee reached out, took Marika’s hands, and gripped them tightly. “She’s bad for you. Please, please, stay away from her. Jesus, you’re so much better than that.”

Marika looked away. “Am I?”

Lee sighed and gentled the grip on her hands. “Yes, you are. She uses you, my friend. It’s not healthy.”

“Maybe I use her, too.”

“I suppose in a way you do, but you don’t hurt her the way she hurts you. Frankly, I don’t even think she has a heart to hurt. But you do. Of all people, I know you do. Oh, Marika, why?”

“There’s no expectations, no confusion. We both know what we’re getting out of it.”

“You have so much more to give than that. Why do you settle for someone like Cass when you could have someone like Dana?”

“Could I?”

Lee frowned. “Of course you could. Why would you question that?”

“Why? Look at my track record.”

“I admit that you haven’t had much luck, but that doesn’t mean you should stop trying.”

“It’s not a matter of luck. Every time I meet someone I might be interested in, I either end up bored and can’t wait to get rid of them, or I go the opposite way and smother the life out of the relationship.”

“So you’re just going to give up and go to Cass when you need to get your jollies, is that it?”

The barb hit home, and Marika fought back tears.

“Aw shit, I’m sorry. Sometimes my big mouth gets away from me.” Lee released Marika’s hands. “Look, I just think you

deserve a lot better than Cass. I know you've had romantic issues, but you know what? You're great at friendship. Maybe that's the problem. You need to concentrate on being friends with a woman first and see if anything else develops, rather than trying to get all hot and heavy the moment you meet someone."

"When did you become Dear Abby?"

"I know you'll do what you want, but I don't have to like it. I hate watching you treat yourself like this, or even worse, allow her to treat you like that. She's bad news. Nothing good can come of seeing her."

"I have to get back to work." Marika motioned for the check, which the waiter swiftly brought.

Lee took the check and laid down some cash. She regarded Marika somberly but said nothing. Silently, they rose and made their way out of the pub.

Chapter 3

David's footsteps resonated in the vaulted nave as he and Tupper shuffled along each pew, straightened hymnals and the occasional Book of Common Prayer, and raised padded prayer kneelers back into their stored position.

They reached the last pew at the same time.

"Tupper, do you have a minute?"

"Yup. Som'pin on your mind?"

"I've been meaning to ask you about Miss Walker's niece."

"Little Anne? Where'd ya meet her? I haven't seen her in church for a couple of years now."

David gestured to a pew. "Sit for a moment?"

"Sure." Tupper slid onto the hard wooden bench.

David took a seat beside him. "I met her at her aunt's house when I was doing visitations last week. She seemed..." David hesitated, unsure how to express his unease. "Unhappy." It wasn't entirely accurate, but it was the best he could come up with.

"Well, would ya be happy if ya'd spent twelve years livin' with Hettie Walker?"

I'd be unhappy if I'd spent ten minutes living with Hettie Walker. David ducked his head. *Sorry 'bout that, God. I know better. She's one of your children, too.*

"Ya know, I was here when that little girl come ta live with her auntie. I don't know that I've ever seen her with a real, face-splittin' grin. Never met such a quiet kid. I'd try talkin' ta her after services, but her aunt would always come and pull her away. Don't think she thought I was a proper influence or sum'pin."

“Do you know why she stays with her aunt? Hettie said her niece was twenty-three now, so she could certainly move out if she wished.” David’s curiosity had been stoked by Hettie’s complaint about the miniscule rent Rhiannon paid despite her good job.

Tupper rubbed his grizzled cheek. “Seems like ta me that the girl’s parents died, so the authorities asked Hettie to take her. Not real sure ’bout all the details, but I ’member Hettie makin’ a big deal out of what a sacrifice it was, takin’ the child in and all.”

David considered that a moment and then recalled another oddity. “You and her aunt both call her Anne, but she insisted her name was Rhiannon. Is one short for the other?”

“Dunno. I just went by what Hettie called her. Kid never said nothin’ different ta me.” Tupper frowned. “Ya know, far as I could see, that kid never gave Hettie a lick of trouble, but ta listen t’her and her crew, you’da thought Hettie Walker was a pure saint for takin’ the child inta her home. I know it ain’t Christian, Reverend, but I got no time for folks making themselves out to be martyrs. She usta haul the little girl ta all her church lady meetin’s, and the kid would just sit in the corner drawing away ’til Hettie was done. Kid was the durndest thing for drawin’. I usta save the old leaflets and give ’em to her for scrap paper.” His face darkened. “Saw Hettie whaling on the child for drawin’ during a service one time. Hell, I don’ blame the kid. We had Reverend Alwyard then, and his sermons could put the saints ta sleep.”

David was disturbed by the picture Tupper painted. “Why do you think she stays with her aunt now that she’s grown? You’d think she would’ve left as soon as she could.”

“Well, could be home is home, even when home stinks, ya know?”

“Perhaps,” David murmured, unconvinced. His mind began to wander as he pondered ways to reach out to someone who obviously had no interest in being reached.

“Speak of the devil.” Tupper pointed out the side window to the street beyond. Hettie and two of her cronies walked down the street. “Goin’ ta their regular Saturday afternoon meetin’. They all go over ta Miz Carter’s house right as rain for a prayer meetin’. I’m thinking there’s more gossip than prayer, but they love ta tell folks how they’re prayin’ for the lost sheep of the world. Hell, if I wuz a lost sheep, I’d rather wait on Jesus’ comin’ than have them lookin’ fer me.”

David grinned, and an idea surfaced. “So how long do these meetings normally last?”

“Dunno ’zactly. I think they usually have dinner together. That’s how they get away with callin’ it fellowship. Gotta have food.” Tupper looked at him quizzically. “Why?”

“No particular reason, but, Tupp, I do believe I’m going to find a little fellowship myself.”

~ * * * ~

David walked down Rhiannon’s street and was delighted to spy her sitting on the front stoop of Hettie Walker’s house. He’d suspected that the combination of the brilliant spring day and her aunt’s absence might draw Rhiannon out of her lair.

He pushed open the gate, strolled up the pathway, and ignored the forbidding frown on Rhiannon’s face. With her slight frame and gamine features, she reminded him of a short, truculent Audrey Hepburn. He knew he would never get an invitation to sit, so he chose to plop down without permission.

Rhiannon promptly drew away. “My aunt’s not here.”

David nodded. “I know.” *Let’s see what wins out—her hostility or curiosity. I think I’ll wager on the latter.* He tilted his face back to absorb the welcome warmth of the sun.

Reminds me of the time me and Jimmy waited out that badger one warm July night. Took almost three hours before it came out of its tunnel. I sure hope she's not going to be as stubborn.

Finally, Rhiannon broke the stillness. "So what do you want, Ichabod? Out recruiting?"

Eh, I've heard worse insults. At least she acknowledged my existence. "Not at all. I was out for a walk, enjoying a lovely day."

"You want something. Everyone does."

"Nope, not me. Just looking for a place to rest my weary feet." David waggled the extraordinarily long feet he had crossed in front of him.

Rhiannon snorted, but she didn't retreat into the house or throw him out of the yard.

David waited.

"I'm not going to church, you know? There's nothing you say can change my mind on that."

"Wasn't trying to." David voice remained placid.

"If you've got anything else in mind, you can forget that, too."

David threw his head back and laughed until his eyes welled over. Then he noticed that Rhiannon had edged as far away from him as she could. *Uh oh. C'mon, Davie. You don't want to scare the kid.* Slowly, David sat forward and folded himself into a smaller space, careful not to make any sudden move in her direction. "Rhiannon, I have a daughter not all that much younger than you. I assure you, I have no ulterior motive. I simply felt like sitting in the sunshine and chatting with a friend."

"I'm not your friend." Despite Rhiannon's caustic words, she no longer looked poised to flee.

"No, but you could be."

"I don't need any friends."

"You mean you don't need any 'more' friends."

Rhiannon refused to look at him. “Meant what I said.”

“That’s an unusual attitude.” David was careful to keep his tone neutral.

Rhiannon shrugged but said nothing.

“What about your old school friends? Don’t you see them anymore?”

“Good joke, Ichabod.”

Unmistakable bitterness under laid the words, but David had long ago learned the value of patient silence. He waited to see whether she would add anything to her cryptic comment.

“I was one of the school freaks. There weren’t many kids who’d even talk to me, unless they wanted me to draw something for them. Then they’d be nice, but only until I delivered. Took me a while to understand my role. At first I thought when I drew something for them, they’d be my friends afterwards. I learned different.”

“Surely there must have been someone who didn’t go along with the crowd?”

Rhiannon shot David a quick glance, then looked away again. “There was one—Patsy. They made her a pariah, too, because she was a native kid. We used to hang out some.”

“Do you ever see her now?”

“She dropped out of school in tenth grade. I think it just got to be too much for her. We were only school friends, so I never saw her outside. I always wondered what happened to her. The day she left, she gave me a dream catcher she made. I wish I’d known she wasn’t coming back, so I could’ve drawn something special for her.”

David allowed himself time to let the lump in his throat diminish. He knew any sympathy he offered would be rejected and could undermine what small gains he had made. Instead, he turned the conversation on a safer tack. “So, you just sitting out here working on your tan?”

Rhiannon shrugged and looked out across the street. “I was thinking about my new job.”

David allowed a note of cautious interest into his voice. “What do you do?”

“I’m a legal assistant. I’m still with the same firm, but I transferred from corporate to an immigration lawyer this week.”

David tucked one long leg under the other and studied Rhiannon. *Something’s bugging her, but this time I don’t think it’s me.* “That’s quite a switch. How’s the new boss?”

“Okay.” Rhiannon shrugged. “She’s decent, at least so far. She pretty much tells me what she needs and leaves me alone to do it.”

Somehow I get the feeling being left alone is exactly what she wants...at home and work. “So what don’t you like about the job?”

“Who said I don’t like it?”

David raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, so the work itself is fascinating, a lot more so than the corporate work I was doing.” Her voice trailed off, and she stared into the distance.

“But?” David prompted.

Rhiannon pulled herself back from wherever her thoughts had taken her. “My job is to dig up research and help my boss substantiate cases for immigrants requesting refugee status. A couple of days ago, the woman I’m replacing gave me a case to work on, and I haven’t been able to get it out of my head.”

Rhiannon fidgeted, and David waited. *I wonder if she’s ever confided in anyone.*

“It was the case of a Romany man, you know, a Gypsy?”

David nodded. He remembered a Romany family from his posting in Fort St. John.

“His name is Marius, and he’s in his mid-thirties. He had a pretty rough time growing up as a Gypsy in Romania. His

father was a political prisoner for a few years, and his uncle was executed. Even after his dad came home, he had to report in every month to the Romanian secret service. Anyway, this guy grows up, gets married, and even has a couple of kids. After the revolution in '89, he thought things were going to get better, but they didn't. He lost his job because he's Rom, and because of his family's dissident history."

Rhiannon slipped into her narrative so completely that she unconsciously rested one hand against David's knee for a moment. "Finally, Marius had enough. He joined the Roma Party with his brother, and they were assigned to go around to the Gypsy communities telling them of their rights and teaching them how to vote. Immediately, the authorities started harassing the brothers. They're stopped, beaten, arbitrarily arrested, but still they keep up their political work."

"Sounds like he and his brother were very committed to their cause."

Rhiannon instantly stiffened and drew back. "You're not getting the whole picture. Marius wasn't the only one to suffer. The police went to his parents' house to look for him. When his mother tried to stop them from ransacking the place, they beat her, too. At the hospital, the doctor told Marius' father that it wouldn't be any loss if a Gypsy woman died. By four in the morning, she was having trouble breathing, but the nurse wouldn't do anything without a doctor's authorization. She died an hour later."

"That's terrible. No wonder he emigrated."

"Hell, that's not the worst of it. After the autopsy showed his mother died of a clot on the brain, her husband was sent to prison for beating his wife to death. Sometime after that, Marius and his family were walking home from a Roma Party meeting when four men came up and forced them into a car. They were taken to a fenced-in yard, where they beat him and raped his wife in front of their children, while they cried and

begged for mercy. When they were thrown back out on the street, they realized they'd been in the backyard of a secret service building."

Rhiannon's story chilled David. *God, what can I say? No wonder it haunts her. It would haunt me too. It has haunted me, too.* "What happened then?"

"I guess it was the last straw. Marius bought a fake Hungarian passport on the black market, and a contact smuggled him out across the Hungarian border. Everyone figured that with him out of the country, his family would be safe, but the police came looking for him, and when they didn't find him, they beat his wife up and raped her again. She hid out all summer until her family could save enough money to get her and the children out of the country."

"So now they're together...here?"

"Yeah. But don't you see? He failed them. If it was just him, on his own, giving everything for his political beliefs, then I could understand. But what he did hurt his family. His mother died, his father was put in prison, his wife was raped and his kids terrorized, but he didn't stop. All he cared about was his little crusade. What kind of man puts that ahead of his family?"

And so we arrive at the crux. Tread carefully, Davie, m'lad. "Maybe he felt he was doing what was best for them in the long run. You know, working for a better future where things like that wouldn't happen. Maybe he felt the price was worth it."

Abruptly Rhiannon stood and paced in front of the small stoop. "Did he ever ask them if they were willing to pay the price? Or did he just make that decision for them?"

"I don't think we can second guess what happened, not knowing him or the circumstances, but I'd assume that at least he and his wife talked it over and decided supporting the cause

was worth the risk.” When Rhiannon turned on him, David was struck by the anger in her eyes.

“And what about the little kids? Who was looking out for them? They were the parents. They’re supposed to be doing what’s best for their children!” She sank down next to David and rested her head in her hands. “It never does any good anyway. One man can’t stand against the tyrants.”

“I don’t believe that. One man can stop a line of tanks.”

“Only if the tanks choose to stop for him, Ichabod. Otherwise, they keep on rolling and squish him into a puddle of nothing. Then what good is his noble gesture?”

“It matters, Rhiannon, it matters.” David shook his head. Her disillusionment sat painfully at odds with her youthful passion. “It matters because one man stood up, and if he can, then more will stand after him, until so many stand up that the tanks can’t possibly run over them all.”

A tiny, unwilling smile flirted with Rhiannon’s lips. “You’re okay. You’re wrong, but you’re okay.”

Startled, David smiled back. “Aw, you’re not so bad yourself, for a baby cynic.”

“Who’re you calling a baby?” Rhiannon growled, but there was no heat behind her words.

David was about to tease her in return when Rhiannon’s shoulders stiffened and she turned her head to stare down the street. David followed her gaze. A motorcycle came toward them. Rhiannon watched it intently and relaxed only as it continued past them and up the street.

“Problem?”

Rhiannon shook her head. “No. I just thought it might be my neighbours coming back early. They’re usually gone all day on Saturdays.”

“Not your favourite people, I take it.”

“Not anyone’s favourite people around here. I had a bit of a run-in with them earlier this week, and I’ve been trying to

avoid them ever since. I changed my route coming home, and so far they haven't seen me."

David straightened. "If you're really afraid of them, then maybe we should call the police."

"We? You really are new around here. Trust me, there's nothing the police can do. Pike and Eddie are very good at covering their tracks, and they always have alibis."

"Well, we can't sit still and allow this to go on. Maybe I should call a neighbourhood meeting to deal with the issue."

"God, you're such an innocent. Believe me, the people around here are too cowed to stand up to the King brothers. You call a meeting, and no one will come. You go to the police, and maybe they'll run a patrol car through here once a night, but they can't do anything until a crime is committed. We don't fork over a lot of taxes around this area, so it's not like they're going to pay a whole lot of attention to a couple of neighbourhood bullyboys. You just don't get how it works down here."

"This isn't the first inner city parish I've been assigned to. Nothing worth having ever came easily, but that's what it's going to take. Do you really want to live like this for the rest of your life, scared of every street sound?"

Rhiannon looked at him with a glint of defiance in her eyes. "I'm not going to be living like this the rest of my life. A year from now, I'm going to be a million miles away from the King brothers."

"And your family?"

"Especially my family." She practically spat the words.

She does not like her aunt. While David understood the sentiment, it also saddened him. *She seems so alone.*

"What about your family? You said you had a daughter."

David was caught off guard by the change of topic. "Liz, yes, and a son, Dylan. They're back east in Nova Scotia."

"Why aren't they with you?"

Fair's fair, I guess. “Because my wife took my son and daughter with her when she left me ten years ago to move back to her home in Halifax.”

“Huh. So why did she leave?”

“She didn’t like the assignments I was given. She was tired of raising our children in rundown neighbourhoods and decided to take them home to her folks.”

“Couldn’t you have asked for parishes in better locations?” Her eyes were alight with interest.

“Yes, I suppose I could’ve asked, but no one else was willing to take those postings. I felt the work I was doing was worth a few broken windows and stripped down cars.”

“Worth more than your family?”

I’ve asked myself that a thousand times since Hannah left. I still don’t have an answer. Don’t know that I ever will.

When he didn’t speak, Rhiannon snorted. “You’re no better than Marius.” She shook her head and stood up in a single, sharp motion. “I’ve got work to do.” Rhiannon went into the house and closed the door behind her.

David stared at the door. Finally, he stood and walked back down the path to the sidewalk. He pulled the gate closed behind him and started down the sidewalk. “Well, that went brilliantly, didn’t it?”

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