



The  
Last  
First Time

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# Prologue

The sun reflected off the windows, obscuring the view of the shop inside. Still, Nadia was hyperaware of the products on display. She shuffled her feet and coughed but didn't move towards the door. In the window, she caught the reflection of Saba's easy smile, as if she frequented sex toy stores all the time.

"Have you been here before?" she asked quietly, her breath coming in white clouds in the cold air. Snow lay in icy, dirty clumps at the edges of the pavement, melting in the gutters to murky puddles.

"Yes. I've been watching it, studying it. For our mission." Saba didn't even seem phased—by anything. It was as though she had surrendered to the will of God already, as though he moved her, directed her, and she was but his instrument. She was calmness itself, at peace with where she was, with what they were doing. It seemed almost as though the ultimate consequences of their actions were not to be their last. As though Saba had all the time in the world, and these weren't her last few moments in it.

Nadia couldn't help but admire her and wished she could be as composed or as resolute. They wanted the mission to be a success; they'd planned for it, prayed for it, and, it seemed, watched for it too. She still wasn't sure she'd have been able to step foot inside this cesspit of human perversion to properly prepare, the way Saba had. But it was Allah's will that they strike. And Allah's will would be done.

Christmas carols blared annoyingly over loudspeakers, pouring out of every shop on the High Street. But this was the shop they had picked—the one that they had to destroy. The one that had destroyed so many hopes and dreams, so many lives. The very symbol of all that was wrong and festering in the society of infidels and kaffirs, with its mockery of wholesomeness displayed in the window for all

to see. Children walked by and stared at the skimpy outfits. Red, barely-there-lace, green ribbon, and black fishnet stockings covered a mannequin in a lewd representation of a sexy Mother Christmas. This was the right thing to do. This was the only thing they could do. The weak and morally corrupt had taken the sweet and innocent symbols of their own defective religion and fouled it beyond redemption.

But perhaps it would be enough for her redemption. To atone for her own weakness. To want, to desire, another woman's husband was a sin, one Nadia had fallen foul of. With all her heart, she wanted him for her own. But he was not free to be hers. And for her crime, her life was forfeit. At least in her martyrdom he might remember her name, if she could face her judgment with courage in her heart and purity colouring her soul.

"Are you ready?" Saba asked.

Nadia rubbed her hand across the protruding mound beneath her burqua. It had been cannily crafted to look like a developing pregnancy. Not an experience that would be in her future. Hers—theirs—was a higher calling, a calling unto God to mete out his wrath and bring justice in his name. This was her judgment day, and her entrance to heaven was ordained. No matter what other sins she had committed, she was a soldier. A warrior earning her place on the battlefield of icons and the rank stench of commercialism.

She glanced through the window again at the dozens of women touching scraps of cloth, giggling at squirming silicon objects, and grinning lecherously at goods piled high on shelves.

"Are you ready?" Saba asked again.

Nadia nodded. "Allah's will be done."

"Insha'allah." Saba mirrored her gesture with her own "bump" and slipped her hand into her pocket. She pulled out a small switch and waited while Nadia did the same. She touched the two black boxes together—as the kaffirs did with glasses of alcohol when toasting good fortune—then turned towards the door. "Insha'allah," she said again as the automatic doors slid open and they stepped foot inside the devil's den.

## CHAPTER 1

Gina glanced into the shop window at the Ann Summers High Street store and cringed. Stella seemed to have no such qualms. She looked a little excited, no, giddy at the prospect of walking into the adult shop.

“Have you been in here before, Stella?”

“Gina, I’ve been married and divorced three times.” She turned to look at her. “Of course I have.” She led Gina past a couple of pregnant Asian girls staring at the window display and through the automatic doors. “I wouldn’t have survived without a good vibrator.”

Gina shook her head, trying to dislodge the image Stella had firmly placed there. It wasn’t working. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

Stella shrugged unrepentantly. “You invited me on this little shopping expedition.”

“Yes, for your advice. Not insights into your sex life.”

Stella lifted one blonde eyebrow and picked a skimpy gold bikini from one of the racks. “I think turnabout’s only fair play.” She checked the sizing label and dropped it back on the display rack with a sigh.

Gina frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Stella twirled her hand around. “You’ve asked me to come and help you pick out a Christmas gift for your girlfriend, Kate, my work colleague—the one I take the piss out of all the time and the one who returns the favour whenever she can. You don’t think you’ve put the odd image or two into my head?”

Gina swallowed. She hadn’t thought about it like that. “I’m sorry. Maybe this was a bad idea.”

Stella laughed. “It so was, and in January, Kate is never going to live this little expedition down. But in the meantime, I can keep a secret, and you said you needed some help.”

“Yes.”

“So what do you need help with?”

“Well, I haven’t exactly bought a gift for a girlfriend before.”

Stella nodded. “No, me either.”

Gina frowned. “I thought you were straight.”

“I am. Hence why I’ve never bought a gift for a girlfriend before.”

She rolled her eyes at Gina.

Gina chuckled, partly at Stella, but mostly at her own nervousness.

“Right. Yeah. Sorry.”

Stella shrugged. “So why did you invite me here?”

“Well, you’re her friend. I thought you might have a little insight.”

“Into her taste in sex toys?” Stella’s voice rose an octave. “Why the hell—”

“No. Lingerie.” Gina pointed towards the racks of silk negligees and short robes.

“Oh.” Stella’s eyebrows dropped from her hairline, and she blew out a heavy breath. “Well, that’s better, I suppose, but I still don’t know how much help I’ll be in this department. I mean, yes, we’re friends, but we’re work colleagues first. We talk about police stuff and take the piss out of each other.” She shrugged. “I don’t know what her tastes in this stuff are. Surely you’re better placed to know about that. You’re her lover, after all.”

Gina’s cheeks burned, and suddenly the carpet beneath her feet was incredibly interesting.

“Oh. Wow.” Stella wrapped her hand about Gina’s arm and tugged her close. She whispered in her ear, “You haven’t slept with her?”

Gina knew that even her ears would be red by now. She shook her head.

“But she *is* your girlfriend, right?”

Gina nodded.

“And we’re here.” Stella twirled her finger again to encompass the whole shop. “So is Kate the one stopping you two from doing the deed? Do you want to use this gift to entice her into your bed—”

“No! She’s been amazing about it all.”

Stella said nothing, but the question was clearly written on her face. She might as well have said the words. *Why the hell not, then?*

“It’s me.”

Stella smiled gently. “Well, if it wasn’t Kate, then I figured it had to be. I am a detective, you know.”

“I know.” Gina snorted a soft laugh, desperate to hide her embarrassment, and shook her head. She had no need to be embarrassed about her issue. It was something she was dealing with, something she’d made huge amounts of progress with in a really short time. With the help of her counsellor, Jodi, and Kate’s patience and understanding, of course.

“Want to talk about it?”

Gina did, but she didn’t at the same time. Her counselling sessions with Jodi about the attack Ally Robbins had carried out on her had been going really well. She was coming to terms with the scars that she carried as a result of Ally’s knife skills, and every day, she felt a little more like her old self. More like a woman who could be desirable. Less like the patchwork monster of Frankenstein fame. She’d made huge steps forward and knew she was ready to show Kate how she really felt about her. To share herself with her. But they’d waited so long now that she wanted—needed—it to be special.

Kate had told her about how she’d wanted to savour their first kiss before it had happened. To build up the anticipation and make it last, because they would only ever have one first kiss. And she fully intended that first kiss to be the last first kiss she ever had. Gina thought the idea was so very beautiful that she wished she’d had the forethought to savour it the same way. It was something she’d never even considered before. In the past, she hadn’t sought a relationship. She’d never expected anyone to stick around, anyway. Not with a precocious nine-year-old like Sammy as part of the package. Instead she’d sought out the occasional fling, and speed rather than memorability had been the order of the day.

Not anymore. She wanted this time, her and Kate's first time together, to be perfect. The last first time. This—Kate, their new relationship, their future—all meant so much to her.

She knew how she felt about Kate—knew she loved her already—and this would be the first time she'd make love to a person she was truly in love with. This was the first time it really mattered. Her string of one-night stands and weekend flings may have satisfied her physically—sort of—but not one of her previous lovers had touched her heart. Touched her emotionally.

As far as she was concerned, Kate had already claimed her in every way that truly counted. Sex alone didn't equate to the feeling of intimacy she got when she was alone with Kate. It was something she'd never experienced before. Something that wasn't about the way someone touched or kissed. It came more from the sentiment behind it. She felt more—everything—when Kate simply held her in her arms than she had when other lovers had brought her to orgasm.

And Gina knew that part of the reason for that was the way Kate had refused to even contemplate the kind of connection Gina had become used to. *More than a weekend*, she'd said. *I want more than just a weekend*. No one had ever asked for that before. They'd simply taken what she offered and then gone away. Just like she'd wanted. Just like she'd expected. Once in a while, there had been someone with whom she'd hoped for more, had asked for more. *Sure, babe*, they'd said, then never called. So Gina had never asked anyone again.

But Kate had refused to even contemplate a relationship like that with her. *More than a weekend*, she'd said. And that had only been the start. Not only did Kate want more than a weekend, she wanted forever, and she was prepared to wait until Gina was ready to give her that. No rushing, no pushing, no pressure.

Well, Gina was ready now. No matter what demons she had to battle to prove it. "It was just everything that happened with Ally," she told Stella. "I needed some time."

Stella nodded and gave her the time and space to say more if she wanted to.

“To adjust.” She shrugged. “You know how it is.”

“I get it.” Stella pulled down on the collar of her shirt to show the edge of a puckered pink scar. “I got caught by a glass breaking up a fight when I was still in uniform. This was before we all wore stab vests all the time. Tells you how old I am.” She chuckled. “Anyway, after it healed, I was very self-conscious about it. Didn’t help that my husband at the time was a prick who couldn’t look at it and keep it up. Said the scar made me look manly.” She let go of the fabric. “Reason enough for divorce number one, isn’t it?”

Gina nodded but didn’t say anything. Stella looked anything but manly. Heading north of forty, she was an attractive woman: blond hair that hung just below her ears in a short bob and was still blond, blue eyes that sparkled with intelligence and mischief, high cheekbones, a strong jaw, and a slightly large nose. Her large bust and hips pointed to a few extra pounds, carried in all the right places, and her ex had to have been an idiot.

“Took me a while after that to trust a guy enough to let him see me without my clothes on. So, yeah, I get it. But the scar Carl inflicted—”

“Carl?”

“Ex-husband. Anyway, the scar he inflicted, reacting that way, was much worse than the one I still carry on my chest.”

“Exactly.”

“But Kate’s being supportive?”

Gina smiled and nodded. “She really has been. She couldn’t have been any better.”

“Good. Cos I happen to know she’s got a decent collection of brand marks of her own.”

“I know. She showed me most of her scars, trying to show me that they didn’t matter to her at all.”

“Did she show you the one shaped like a fish?”

“On her hip?”

“Hip? Is that what we call that part of the body now?” Stella asked with a laugh.

“She said it was on her hip, sort of. I haven’t seen it. She said she was saving it. You’ve seen it?”



Stella wiggled her eyebrows and grinned. "It's a beauty."

"Where is it?"

Stella shook her head. "Nope. I'm not going to spoil her surprise for you."

Gina stared at her. "Tell me."

"Nope."

"Please."

"Uh-uh."

"You have to."

"Why?"

"Because she's my girlfriend."

"Then get her to show you."

"But why have you seen it and I haven't?"

"Well, Gina," Stella said and leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "I've seen the lovely Kate in all her glory."

Gina's eyes glazed over as she imagined the picture of Kate in all her glory. Green eyes shining, red hair glistening in the gentle light as one item of clothing after another disappeared from her body until nothing remained. She could imagine the tiny freckles that would cover her shoulders. Could imagine kissing them all and hearing Kate's breath hitch in her chest. She could imagine tracing her fingers over each rib as she explored Kate's body and made it her own.

"Wake up!" Stella snapped her fingers in front of Gina's face. "Trust me, whatever you were imagining just then, and I do believe it was the lovely Kate in all her glory, the real thing is so much better." Stella smiled. "She's a gorgeous hunk of woman. If I were into girls, I'd have been in there like a shot."

Gina licked her lips. "Bitch."

Stella laughed. "I live to serve."

"How have you seen her naked?"

"Changing room at work. She has a tendency to get herself into all sorts of messes. Haven't you noticed that?"

Gina nodded, still trying to get her brain to function properly again. "Yes."

“Well, since I’ve seen the goods, perhaps I am better equipped for this shopping expedition than I thought.”

Gina closed her eyes, sighed, and chuckled. “Fine. Let’s get started.” She cast her gaze over the rack of red lace negligees and immediately dismissed them even as Stella picked one up and held it against her clothes.

“This is nice.”

“If you’re a working girl.”

“I am a working girl, Gina,” Stella said with an evil grin.

“Not that kind of work.” She plucked the hanger from Stella’s fingers and put it back on the rail. “If you’re looking for yourself while we’re here, I’d say look for something with a bit more, I don’t know, class, maybe.”

“Meow.” Stella pretended to paw the air with her fake claws.

Gina tossed her hair over her shoulder, kept her head pointed slightly towards the ceiling, and moved on to the next rail. A deep-forest-green satin baby doll negligee seemed to call to her. It was simple in its design: soft lines, solid colour, wide shoulder straps. It wasn’t until she held it up that she noticed how short it was. On Kate’s curvy body, this would barely cover the, erm...important...parts. Her mouth watered.

“Oooo.” Stella’s chin rested on her shoulder. “Is that what you mean by classy?” She rubbed a handkerchief across Gina’s chin. “Drooling, babes.”

Gina laughed out loud and slapped her hands away. “Is that what you two do all day when you’re supposed to be catching criminals?”

Stella frowned as if deep in thought, then nodded solemnly. “Yes. But I swear we make the boys do some work while we take the piss.”

“Uh-huh. Do I look like I was born yesterday?”

Stella opened her mouth and Gina slapped her hand over it.

“Don’t answer that.”

Stella’s eyes twinkled, but she nodded.

“Anyway, I happen to think this would be perfect for Kate.”

“Yup.” Stella nodded. “For both seconds you’ll let her wear it.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I might let her keep it on a bit longer than that.” She turned the hanger in her hand. “I can reach everything I need without—”

Stella put her fingers in her ears and rocked her body forwards and backwards. “Too much information, Gina. I’ve still got to work with her. You know, catching criminals?”

“You said you left that to the boys.”

“Pft. Please. Without me and Kate, they couldn’t find their way to the coffee shop, never mind find a criminal.” She wandered away a little and rifled through another rack of lace scraps and satin straps. “Oo. Here, what about this?”

Stella lifted up a black, midhigh-length, modestly cut robe. But the fabric was so sheer that Gina could see Stella’s hand through it as she lifted it towards the light.

“No, I prefer this one for Kate.” She flicked the green dress towards Stella.

“I meant for you.” She held it against Gina’s torso. “If you’re still a bit nervous.”

Gina understood what she meant and was grateful for the thought, but the more she considered it, the more she realised that it was essential that she was able to face Kate without hiding behind something...even if that wasn’t very much.

She needed to know she could show every aspect of herself to Kate. Emotionally and physically. Letting Kate see that last barrier between them fall, allowing herself to be that vulnerable, was important to her, and it was important to Kate too. She needed to know that Gina was truly able to move past it all and fully embrace their relationship.

But Gina had to admit the idea of being shrouded by the voluminous sheer fabric as she kissed Kate and ran her fingers up Kate’s arm made her tingle with delicious delight. Well, if Kate was going to be wearing the green satin number, why shouldn’t Gina start out wearing the black one? As long as it came off easily enough. She glanced at the wide sash belt and smiled. No problem.

“Thanks.” She lifted the second garment from Stella’s hands and folded it over her arm. “Seen anything you fancy?”

Stella laughed. “I’ve got plenty of batteries at home, thanks.”

Gina snorted a laugh and shook her head as she walked to the counter and got in the queue. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I do my best.”

“So does that mean you’re single at the moment?”

Stella eyed her suspiciously. “Possibly. Why?”

“Well...” Gina drew it out.

Stella shook her head. “I don’t do blind dates, other coppers, or girls. I decided a long time ago that I need to be the only drama queen in my relationship, so don’t try setting me up.”

“I was going to ask if you’d babysit Sammy for me one night so I could seduce my girlfriend.”

“Oh.”

The look on Stella’s face was the perfect mixture of delight and disappointment. Gina wasn’t entirely sure how she could have managed that.

“Of course.”

There was only one staff member on the checkout, and the queue seemed to be at a standstill.

“When did you have in mind?”

“Hmm.” Gina pulled her wallet out of her handbag and slipped out her card. “Well, do you have any plans this weekend?”

“Nope.”

“How does tomorrow night work for you?”

“Sounds good. If you want, Sammy can stay at mine. We’ll have a girly night in.”

“Do not let her watch *Nightmare on Elm Street* again.”

“It’s a classic.”

“She’s still having nightmares, Stella.”

“She said she loves scary movies.”

“She’s nine!”

“So Chucky’s out?”

“I swear you only do this to wind me up.”

“Maybe.”

“If it’s not a PG, she can’t watch it.”

“What about a U?”

Gina laughed. “Then she wouldn’t want to watch it.”

Stella cocked her head to the side. “Fair point. Jesus, what’s taking so long?” She stood on her tiptoes and craned her neck to see over the people in front of her. “Fuck.”

## CHAPTER 2

Stella pulled Gina close and whispered in her ear. “Head for the door, and put the hangers on a rail as you go. Don’t look back. Just walk slowly and get out.”

“What’s going on?” Gina spun and her eyes fell on two women draped in black cloth.

Each had an arm raised in the air, a small black box grasped in their hands. Thumbs poised over a switch. They looked to each other and then grasped the cloth and uncovered their pregnant bellies.

Except they weren’t pregnant bellies.

Small blocks of silver tape were strapped to a vest that hung low over their abdomens. Wires protruded from them and slinked up their shoulders, out of sight.

“Is that...?”

“A suicide vest?” Stella whispered hoarsely.

Gina nodded, unable to tear her gaze away.

“Yes,” Stella confirmed and shook Gina until she was looking at her again as she dragged her closer to the door. “Now do what I said. Get out of here. When you get outside, call Kate—”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“We don’t have time for this. Just do it. Call Kate and tell her to get—”

“For Allah!” A woman’s voice rang out above everything else in the shop, then a loud bang cut off the words.

Gina was forced to the ground.

Stella’s body was heavy on top of her, her hands thrown over her head.

Glass shattered, fragmented, splintered apart, and disappeared. She could hear people screaming through the ringing in her ears. Vaguely. Sort of.

Cloth and metal fell on them from what seemed like every direction.

She closed her eyes, only to realise they were already closed and she was merely scrunching them tighter. She didn't want to see anything around her. Hearing it—or rather not hearing it—was terrifying enough.

Then everything was silent.

Except it wasn't. She could hear everything—the cries of terror, the moans of pain, and the concussive roar of air being forced too quickly into spaces too small for it to fit made her ears throb. But everything she heard seemed far too far away for it to be real. It was like she was listening to a muted TV that was making the sounds in her head rather than her actually hearing them.

Stella's lips were moving, but Gina couldn't make out what she was saying. It was just movement she couldn't make sense of.

Just like the smell that invaded her nostrils.

There was the metallic scent of iron pervading the air, almost strong enough to hide the other scents that Gina didn't want to think about, yet couldn't ignore. There was a rotten-egg aroma of something sulphurous that she could guess at, but she desperately wanted that guess to be wrong. The scent of explosives, residue, whatever the fuck it was that experts called it—she didn't know and she didn't care—filled her nose and hung heavy in the air. It had to be that. Nothing else made sense.

But above it all was an acrid, burning odour that clung to every molecule she sucked into her lungs and stuck to her tongue. She could taste it. It smelled like meat burnt on a BBQ. And the horror of that began to sink in. There was no BBQ. There was no meat. There was nothing cooking but human flesh. And Gina fought the urge to vomit, the vile burning of stomach acid inside her far more preferable to her palate than the tang of anything else around her.

For a moment—one blessed moment—everything around her went black and cold and silent. So silent that Gina wondered if she'd gone deaf. Every noise seemed to stop. All she could hear was her own heartbeat and her own laboured breath, and all she could taste was

the fear and blood on her tongue. The thoughts in her head seemed so overly loud, as though she were screaming them rather than thinking. *I'm so sorry, Kate.*

She held her breath. *I wish—*

“Stay down,” Stella whispered into Gina’s ear, and the world rushed back in a cacophony of raucous screams, wails, and cracking glass. The resounding boom of falling bricks and debris seemed to echo for a split second and then disappear. It was the terrifying howl that brought Gina fully back to the present. The holler of a woman screaming, “My legs! Where are my legs? Oh my God. Oh my God! My legs!”

Gina tried to control her breathing, her voice, and her rising panic. Now was not a good time to have another panic attack. Now was not a good time to freeze. If she could hear Stella, she was still alive, and they would be fine. They had to be. “Stay down?” she whispered, and she could hear the confusion in her own voice.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know if that explosion was both of them or just one. If it wasn’t, and they think we’re all dead, then they might not detonate the second bomb.”

“Oh God.”

“Listen, we need to call for help, and we need information.”

“You don’t think someone will have already called the police?”

“I am the police, Gina. The more information I can get to the relevant people as fast as possible, the better it’s going to be for everyone.” Her words were slurred, and her hands were clumsy as they slowly moved across Gina’s body.

“Need your...phone. Mine’s in my bag, and I’m...not sure where...dropped it somewhere.”

“Back pocket of my jeans.”

“Right.” Stella moved her hands across her hip.

She shifted slowly to give Stella enough space to slip her hand behind her back and pull the phone from her pocket. Her abdominal



muscles complained at trying to hold her weight up off the ground... and Stella's. "Who are you going to call? Kate?"

"No. Detective Inspector Timmons."

"Your boss?"

Stella nodded, and her eyelids fluttered.

Gina bit her lip. Something was wrong with Stella. Something was very wrong. "But I don't have his number," she whispered, hoping the words would somehow help Stella focus.

"S'okay...know it." Stella placed the handset on Gina's chest before freezing again. "Passcode?"

"2601." Gina could hear the tiny chirp as Stella pressed the numbers and unlocked her phone.

Gina's hearing was starting to return to something approaching normal. Or maybe she was just getting used to the incessant ringing and everything sounding like she was listening to it through water.

"DI Timmons, it's Goodwin...Major incident...sir, Ann Summers, Ki-King's Lynn. H-high Street...bomb. Multiple...multip casualties..."

Gina lifted her head and looked at something other than Stella for the first time. She wished she hadn't.

Both of the women were gone.

As was everything she remembered of the shop.

Racks and rails of clothes were shredded. A glass display shelf beside the counter had shattered, and hundreds of chocolate penises littered the floor. Red ribbons tied the squeaky cellophane closed. Shards of plastic and twisted hunks of metal created a gory avant-garde sculpture park the likes of which would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life.

Screams drowned out whatever Stella was saying into the handset on her chest, and Gina tried not to think about the scene around her. Gina wanted to be at home. No, she wanted to be at Kate's. She wanted to be with Kate. And Sammy and Merlin, Kate's adopted border collie. Oh God, Sammy! What else was she going to put the child through? Gina wanted to be wrapping presents and hiding them before she got home from school. Even wading through the mountain of paperwork

on her desk would be nice. She wanted to be anywhere but here, lying on the floor at Ann Summers, wishing she'd bought Kate's gift online.

"Yes, sir...still in the shop. Haven't heard anything more to suggest the other bomber is still—"

"She's gone too," Gina said quietly.

Stella looked at her, clearly trying to focus on Gina's face. One pupil was blown. Gina didn't know how Stella was still conscious. "You sure?" Her words were even more slurred.

Gina nodded, and Stella shifted off Gina's body and flopped onto her back. The movement was clearly the last straw for Stella. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she dropped Gina's phone.

Gina turned onto her side, and quickly grabbed the phone as she placed two fingers against Stella's neck. Her pulse was strong and steady; at least that was a good sign.

"Hello? Goodwin? What the fuck's going on?"

"Mr Timmons, this is Gina. Stella's injured. She's passed out. We need..." Gina looked around as she ran her spare hand over the back of Stella's head.

Everywhere she looked there was carnage, destruction like she had never imagined before. The screams of the women had faded into the background, and Gina could no longer tell where one stopped for breath and another began, as they blended together in a macabre choir of agonised screeches. And Gina waited, expecting the panic to take over, expecting her body and mind to shut down. But it didn't. The images—every vile, horror-inducing image—registered instead. Every fragment of it branded itself into her brain.

There was a woman slumped against a wall, perhaps fifteen feet away, trying to sit up. She lifted her legs to leverage their weight against that of her body, but the attempt failed. So she tried again. And failed. Again. Each failure caused her to slump further to the ground. But she continued to try.

Gina knew she'd fail. She was always going to fail because there simply wasn't enough weight in her legs to leverage her body anymore. Instead of knees and calves, and feet, there were ragged wounds of

muscle, sinew, and bone pumping blood into a pool around her. Each time she raised the stumps they squirted a river of red across broken glass and twisted hunks of metal. But with each attempt, the distance of the spray lessened significantly. Logic and far too many movies and TV shows told Gina that meant the poor woman was bleeding to death, and there was nothing she could do to help her. Nothing. But Gina's mind simply couldn't comprehend it. She couldn't accept that something like this could happen in real life. It just...couldn't.

Her hands shook, and she could feel the warm, sticky blood covering the back of Stella's head, but she couldn't tear her gaze from the scene before her. Blood decorated the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Tissue she couldn't identify clung to the ceiling fan—what was left of it—and above it, a hole gaped wide like a massive mouth. Slowly the rain slipped inside and kissed her face.

The woman lay still, no longer trying to sit up. No longer moaning or crying or asking where her legs were. Her eyes were open as she slumped against what was left of the wall, staring up at the hole in the ceiling. Raindrops streaked rivers through the dirt, blood, and grime that covered her face. The tears of heaven washing away the woman's pain.

“Hello? Gina?”

Timmons's voice was rough. Anger? Frustration? She didn't know. She couldn't honestly say she cared, as she turned her head, only to be confronted by a woman's hand half-buried by wrappers of condoms. A left hand with purple nail varnish and a ring on its finger. Diamonds and sapphires. An engagement ring. A beautiful engagement ring, on an elegant-looking hand. But there was no thumb. No wrist. And nothing at all beyond.

“What do you need?” Timmons growled.

“A miracle,” she whispered.

“How do you mean?”

“There were two of them, with bombs.” She moved on autopilot, barely registering that she'd slipped Stella into the recovery position as she spoke. “There are a lot of people here.”

“Dead?”

She couldn't stop herself glancing at the woman with her missing legs. “Oh, yes.”

“Injured?”

“Many.”

“Are you hurt?”

Was she? Physically she didn't think so. But her soul...that was a different story. “I'm okay.”

“Look after yourself, then. We're on our way, Gina.”

Gina sat for a moment just listening. The sounds of people crying in pain. The crunch of more broken glass beneath someone's shoes. Sirens in the distance. Ambulance? Police? Both? How many people had died? How many were dying? There were people around her now, dying, as she sat there doing nothing.

She was alive, she was breathing, and, most importantly, she wasn't hurt. And she wasn't panicking. *Maybe that'll kick in later. Maybe shock explains this numbness I feel right now. Can that happen? Does shock make you feel like you're looking at everything through someone else's eyes?*

She flexed her hands in front of her face, watching as each finger moved stiffly but obeyed commands from the brain in charge of it. Which wasn't her brain. She was fairly sure of that. But something was controlling her body as she slowly dragged herself to her hands and knees.

Cellophane crinkled beneath her palms, creating a sound she couldn't stop herself from focusing on. The high-pitched, almost static-like sound normally grated on her nerves, but today it felt like she'd never heard it before. Even though she knew she had. She rubbed two bits of it together to hear it again. It sounded false, fake, plastic. *That's because it is plastic, moron*, she told herself, but her brain still wasn't cooperating. It still insisted that she was a passenger along for the ride and that the body was functioning just fine without her, thank you very much.

The sensation—that distant feeling—reminded her of a film she'd watched years ago, *Being John Malkovich*, where people went through

this tiny door into a tunnel and then found themselves inside the brain or the consciousness of the actor John Malkovich. They saw what he saw, did what he did, felt what he felt, but at first they had no control. They were simply voyeurs in his life. She felt the same way. She saw what her eyes saw, felt the glass cut into her knees through the denim of her jeans, but she had no control over anything. None.

Was this a new manifestation of her panic attacks?

To her left, a woman whimpered. Gina saw her own hand move forward, felt her legs move beneath her as she crawled towards the sound. She wouldn't give in to another panic attack. She couldn't. No, she didn't have to. She was stronger now. She was the one who could be in control. Just like the character John Cusack played. The puppeteer. Eventually he learned to control the body he inhabited. He learned to make John's body do everything he wanted, and eventually he controlled the mind too. All she had to do was the same.

She tried to focus on her breathing. If she could control pulling air into her lungs, then it was a start. Gina closed her eyes and concentrated on that one thing. Drawing air into her lungs. She put a hand to her belly and envisioned herself making that hand move by simply breathing. Once, then twice, until she shook off her daze and felt as though she were in control of her body again.

The soft moan drew her attention out of her own self again, and she moved quickly to the woman's side. Panic, shock, someone else in her head—whatever it was, it was done with now. She was in control and she was focused. Most importantly, she was focused on helping someone else.

The woman's blond-white hair was streaked with blood and shards of glass. Her lipstick was smeared, and her white jumper was quickly turning a deep claret. Blood bubbled on her lips, and her eyes looked glassy.

Gina grabbed at the first bit of fabric she could reach and pressed it against the wound in the woman's belly. "You're going to be all right. The ambulance is bound to be on its way by now."

The woman pushed at her hands.

“It’s okay. I’m trying to help you. I’m sorry if this hurts, but I need to try and stop the bleeding.”

“Too late,” the woman whispered. Her breath caused the bubbles on her lips to pop and spatter blood across her cheek. “Help someone else, girlie.” Her Irish accent was thick and lilted like a lullaby as she tried to shoo Gina away.

“Not a chance. I’m here and I’m helping you, so get used to the idea.” She smiled down at the woman and saw that she was considerably older than Gina had first thought. Crinkles at the corners of her eyes spoke of the years she’d seen and laughed her way through. Middle age was well behind her, and Gina would have placed her in her late sixties, maybe even a little older. “I’m Gina. What’s your name?”

“Pat.”

“Nice to meet you, Pat. Now, hold still while I take a quick look at this wound, okay?”

Pat nodded.

Gina lifted the bloodstained satin, then Pat’s jumper, before quickly pushing them all back in place. Blood gushed from the wound the moment she relieved the pressure. Bad. Very bad.

“How’s it look?” Pat asked.

“I’ve patched up worse cuts on my nine-year-old when she jumped out of a tree.”

Pat chuckled, then moaned. “You’re not a very good liar, Gina.”

Gina snorted. “Well then, it doesn’t look great. I definitely think you need to see a doctor. Probably wants a stitch, maybe even two. Better?”

“Don’t make me laugh. It hurts.”

“Sorry.” She smiled weakly. If help—of the trained medical variety—didn’t get there soon, then it would be too late for Pat. Maybe it was already.

“You said the ambulance was coming.”

Gina kept one hand pressed against Pat’s middle and held her hand with the other. “Yes. My friend called before she...before she passed out.” She glanced over at Stella, grateful and scared that she hadn’t moved.

“Your friend’s hurt?”

Gina nodded. “But she’s a police officer. She called in the cavalry before she...before she gave in.”

“Brave.” Pat closed her eyes and grimaced, clearly fighting the pain she was in.

“Hmm. Something like that.”

“You don’t agree?”

“Oh, I think they’re brave all right. I just worry.”

“She’s your friend. Of course you do.”

“Yeah.”

Pat opened her eyes and looked at Gina. It was a piercing look, a penetrating look, one that Gina knew was looking deep into her soul. “Oh. I see. Not just a friend.”

Gina frowned. “No, Stella is just a friend. But her work partner is also my partner.”

“Sounds like fun,” Pat said and then coughed. More blood slipped from her lips and dribbled down her chin.

“Try to keep still. I’m sure help will be here any moment.”

Pat nodded and closed her eyes again.

Gina wasn’t sure what to do, but she was pretty sure that her closing her eyes and going to sleep wasn’t a good idea. At least it always seemed not to be when they died in films and on the telly. “Stay awake, Pat. You need to stay with me. Tell me why you were in here today?”

“Probably same reason as you.”

“You wanted to buy sexy lingerie for your girlfriend? Go, Pat.”

Pat chuckled and moaned again. More blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. “In that case, not the same reason. I came for something for myself.”

“Oh.”

“Recently divorced. Usual old cliché, I suppose.”

“Never too late to discover one’s inner self, Pat.” She winked.

Pat coughed again, and more blood dribbled down her chin. “I hope not.” She squeezed Gina’s hand in hers and tugged her closer. “I let

too much time go by. Wasted too much. I didn't tell the people I loved that I loved them enough. I didn't enjoy life enough." Her voice faltered a moment, then returned with more strength than Gina thought she would have been capable of. "Where's my bag?"

"I don't know. What does it look like?"

"Brown leather, shoulder bag. Big."

Gina saw one a few feet away and stretched to grasp a handle without lifting the pressure from Pat's stomach. "This one?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Here you go."

"My purse. There's a picture."

"You want me to get it out for you?"

Pat nodded.

Gina unzipped the large bag using her foot to keep tension and make it a little easier to open. The purse was on top, and the flap popped open easily. The picture under the plastic cover was of a very young Pat and a soldier. The picture was badly faded. The miniskirt she wore and the mod haircut spoke of the late sixties, maybe early seventies. She couldn't be sure.

"Is this your husband?"

Pat shook her head. "No. He's the man I should have married. My George." She smiled and lay her head back down.

The wistful look on her face made Gina wonder about the pain she must have been in. It almost seemed like it had gone, as if whatever she was thinking about had taken it away from her.

"Why didn't you?"

"My father. The great Paddy O'Shea." She said his name with a sneer. Clearly not a great father-daughter relationship. "He wouldn't let me marry an Englishman. And certainly not a soldier. Murdering bastards, that's what he called 'em. Not his daughter, not over his dead body." She coughed up more blood. "Not a good Catholic family like we were."

"Oh. I see."

"Aye. I had to marry another good Catholic boy, even if I didn't love him and he didn't love me." Pat tapped the plastic. "But my George.



He loved me. Wanted to run away with me, he said. Said he'd go AWOL and everything to get me away from Ireland and the troubles."

"You refused?"

Pat nodded. "Couldn't. Didn't want to ruin his life." She laughed a bitter-sounding laugh. The movement caused her to cough up more blood.

"Please be careful, Pat. You need to keep still. Where the bloody hell is that ambulance? It must be coming by now."

Pat waved her hand in the air. "Too late for that now, Gina. Too late." She sucked in a gurgled breath.

Gina could feel tears wetting her own cheeks.

"Now, now. Enough of that, girlie." She smiled. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't, Pat."

"It is what it is, child. Life's funny like that." She tapped the picture again. "His name's George Boyne."

"That's unusual."

"There's a letter in there for him. I always said I'd find him and give it to him."

"Then you should definitely do that, Pat."

Pat closed her eyes again. "No time." She squeezed Gina's hand. "Find him for me. Find him and give him the letter."

"No." Gina shook her head. "You can do that, Pat. Just as soon as the ambulance gets here, we'll get you better, and then you can go find your George."

Pat shook her head again. "Find him for me." She wheezed, the Irish lilt shifting from lullaby soft to gutter harsh as she begged. "Please." Her grasp relaxed. "He deserves to know the truth." The strength in her arm faltered completely and fell from Gina's wrist. "About everything."

"Pat? What do you mean?" Gina grabbed at her hand again and shook her arm. "Pat?" She dropped her hand and slapped at her cheeks gently, trying to wake her. "Pat? Come on, now. Wake up and tell me more about this dishy soldier of yours."

Pat didn't move.

Gina lifted the cloth from her stomach, and the blood oozed slowly. No more gushing. No more pumping. The tension was gone from Pat's body, and Gina realised for the first time that she was kneeling in a pool of the other woman's blood.

Gina didn't know how long she'd been there but she had no intention of moving. She wouldn't leave Pat—she simply couldn't. She'd seemed so lonely that Gina couldn't bring herself to leave her all alone.

Instead, she stared at the picture of Pat and her soldier. How many years had she carried it with her? In her purse? Where a woman would normally keep a picture of her husband, her children...grandchildren even. Instead she'd carried his picture. Just since her divorce? Or longer? How many years had she dreamed of finding him again? Was it even something she could do? Did she want to? Was it something she should do?

Gina looked at Pat, her face relaxed in death as the pain of her injury was taken from her. Only the blood that marred her skin belied the fiction of a peaceful slumber. That and the pool of blood that surrounded them both, soaking into Gina's clothes.

Whoever she'd been in life, Pat hadn't deserved to die like this—terrified, in pain, and, for the most part, alone. From just the few moments they'd spent together, it had been so obvious that Pat had a wicked sense of humour and an adventurous spirit. She must have done, to be here in a sex shop at sixty or seventy or whatever.

She didn't deserve to die like this.

No one did.

## CHAPTER 3

Kate blindly pulled up behind the string of cars already blocking the exit to the bus station. Nothing would be moving in or out of there for a good long time. Well, except the ambulances that were flying past at a rate of knots, ferrying the wounded to hospital.

A small flurry of snow drifted between the buildings, and a heavy clump slid from the roof of the bus shelter, landing in a sodden heap close to her feet. Snow in Norfolk was a rarity. When it fell, it was always in much lower volume than the rest of the country, and it didn't seem to last long. Except this year. Inches lay across the fields she passed daily. The surface had turned to an ice crust, reflecting the sun with blinding shafts of light.

She spotted Timmons in the middle of the walkway towards the main shops, next to the entrance to the supermarket, directing officers and first responders alike. She ran over to him.

"Sir," she said.

"Brannon, good. We've got a fuckin' mess here."

"What happened? There's absolute bullshit flying about. Some idiot's spreading a rumour this was a bomb going off." She kicked the soft snow from her boots. A habit she'd formed already in an attempt to remain on her feet in the winter conditions.

"Bullshit."

"Exactly what I said, sir."

"It was two of 'em."

Kate froze in midstep. "What?"

He turned to look at her. "Two bombs went off. Goodwin was on the scene when it happened. She's injured. I'm going to see her now." Timmons shrugged his massive shoulders and ran his fingers through what was left of his hair. "Gonna be a bloody nightmare, this."

“Bloody hell. Bad?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know yet. When I spoke to her, she was slurring her words. Sounded pissed. Probably a head injury.”

“Shouldn’t she already be on her way to hospital, then, instead of waiting here for you to speak to her?” She didn’t like the idea that the tough-as-nails DI would put Stella in jeopardy for a bit more information, but like herself, coppers did tend to have a one-track mind when it came to things like this. And Timmons might be her boss, but she wasn’t afraid to stand up to him. She’d learned over the past couple of months that he respected that. Stella was her friend, and she clearly needed medical attention.

“I’m not holding her here, Sergeant. I’m going there now to make sure the bloody paramedics don’t fanny about and get her to see the quacks as quick as fucking possible.”

Kate stared; his thinning hair was wet and looked like he’d scraped his hands through it so many times it was ready to stand up on its own. His eyes were bloodshot, and he was breathing heavily. He clenched his fists over and over as he led her through the shopping centre and along the street.

“Sorry. I thought—”

“I know what you thought. But my officers mean more to me than that, Brannon. All of you.”

She ducked her head. “Understood.”

“Good. So, we’ve got two suicide bombers in a shopping area two weeks before Christmas. Two women, Asian, wearing burquas, who looked to be pregnant, walk into a sex shop and blow the fuckin’ roof off.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“How many injured?”

“We’ll find out in a minute. The boys from the counterterrorism unit will be taking the lead on this one.”

“Sir, we don’t need—”

“Yes, we do.” He pointed to what was left of a row of shops. She knew that there’d been a shoe shop, a chemist, a card shop, and a

clothes shop along the street next to the Ann Summers shop that was at the centre of the row. There wasn't a window left intact. Walls were crumbled in places, plaster hanging perilously in clumps, swinging on the wind. Kate held her breath, waiting for the clump to fall.

The wail of sirens, car alarms, and burglar alarms sounded a high-pitched chorus to a sickening melody of crying and screaming people. Paramedics, firefighters, and first responders of all kinds crawled over debris from one person to the next, offering assistance, comfort, and sometimes a shroud.

Knowing there was nothing more she could do for the fallen and the injured, she scuffed the toe of her boot in the glass. A blackened nut skittered away from her, pinged into a couple of ball bearings and a bent nail sticking out of a fragment of half-melted plastic.

"Shrapnel," he said. "They put them inside the vests to cause maximum damage when they...when they detonate."

Kate nodded. She knew that. They all did. Unfortunately.

Detective Constables Tom Brothers and Jimmy Powers stood together outside the front of the shop. Jimmy's face was ashen, verging towards the grey spectrum, and he seemed unable to tear his gaze from the floor.

Kate couldn't stop herself. She nodded in greeting to them both, even as she stared down at Jimmy's feet. Or, rather, at what was laid at Jimmy's feet.

A child's pushchair rested upside down on its front. Only one wheel was left, and it swung idly in the gentle wind. The canvas fabric of the chair was shredded and blown inside out. The arms and legs of the child that had been inside it protruded at sickening angles. Its clothes were torn, as was the little flesh she could make out. Bright-red blood pooled and cooled, forming a frozen pond around the sickening sight. Scarlet darkened to crimson and stood in stark contrast to the greying snow that clung to the stone paving slabs.

Her breath fogged as it left her lips in short, sharp gasps, and a cold that had nothing to do with the weather seeped into her soul.

Tom pointed to a dustbin that was mangled and dented. "Puke over there if you got to."

Kate put her hand to her mouth and fought it, letting her head swing from side to side. She'd never been the weak woman on the force whose emotions got in the way of doing her duty. She'd never vomited at a crime scene. Never ducked out of a postmortem. She didn't intend to start now.

Tom clasped his hand on her shoulder and said softly, "It's okay, Kate. We both did."

She nodded, but still she fought it.

"Fuck's sake," Timmons muttered. "Do we have a name? Age?" he asked no one in particular.

"Not yet, sir," Tom said.

Timmons nodded towards the pushchair and then the other bodies on the pavement. "Brannon, get yourself to the hospital. Make sure Goodwin gets seen to. Quickly. The rest of us will be gathering witness statements and securing the scene while the CSIs do their thing. We'll be basically standing around with our thumbs up our arses on standby to help as needed with the investigation under the purview of the National Counterterrorism Network." He looked her in the eye. "If you can get statements from Goodwin and your girlfriend, that would be a bonus. She'll need to be checked over too, after all. Two birds, one stone and all that."

"Wait. Gina's here?"

"Bollocks," he said under his breath. "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"Seems Gina and Stella were having a girly shopping day or some bollocks when this shitstorm hit."

"Oh my God." Kate's stomach threatened to reject her breakfast for the second time in less than a minute, and she was pretty sure her face had gone grey. All the blood in her body was rushing through her ears at that moment, so it must have done. "What happ...is she... where...where is she?"

Timmons wrapped a meaty hand around her arm and held her up. "When Stella called me, she passed out part way through. Gina talked to me. She's fine." He shook her gently. "Look at me, Kate. Look at me."

She tried to focus on what he was saying. Gina had spoken to him. That was good. Right?

“She was in Ann Summers when I spoke to her. She should still be there. They’ve only moved the critically injured so far.”

Kate tried to swallow around the lump of pure fear that was lodged in her throat. “She...she wasn’t injured?”

“No. She’s fine. She was absolutely fine when I spoke to her. She got Stella into the recovery position, and she was moving around a little in there.”

Relief washed over Kate, and the noise of the surrounding area came rushing back to her. The discordant sounds hit her full force, like a twenty-foot wave crashing over her head. “Okay. Okay, that’s... that’s good.” She smiled in relief, then frowned as she remembered Timmons ordering her to take them both to the hospital. “Wait. Then why do I need to take her to the hospital?”

Timmons squinted at her. “Precaution. Purely precaution.” He pulled her a little closer. “There may be minor cuts or bruises to be checked out. No doubt there was a lot of flying glass.” He dipped his head to look her in the eye. “Cry now if you need to, but when you get to her, you need to hold your shit together. What went down in there... Well, I was fucking shitting myself when Stella was on the phone to me, Kate, so I can only imagine how Gina’s feeling right now.” He shook her gently. “Get me?”

Kate nodded, let out a long shuddering breath, and buried her face in her hands. And the tears fell. The sobbing began as Timmons wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her.

She’d never cried in a man’s arms before. Never cried on the job, or on the shoulder of her boss, but today she finally didn’t give a shit. She truly didn’t. Gina and Stella were what was important now, not the ridiculous fronts they all affected for the sake of the job. Gina and Stella had gone through something she couldn’t even imagine, a horror she didn’t *want* to imagine. And God alone knew how this was going to affect them for the rest of their lives. But at least they still had their lives.

Kate wanted to know how many had died, but she didn't think she could face the knowledge yet. She wanted to ask how many were injured, but she didn't want to know that either. Not yet. Later, her police brain would need the answers, but right now she wanted to just be Gina's girlfriend and help her through her emotions. Whatever Gina needed, Kate knew she would do.

"You're sure she's okay?" she whispered into Timmons's shoulder when her sobs subsided.

He nodded and pulled back a little. "Positive."

"Right. Okay. That's okay, then." The feeling of relief was palpable. Her lungs began to filter oxygen again, and the flood to her brain kick-started it into gear. "Why were they in Ann Summers?"

Timmons frowned. "Shopping, I assume."

Kate frowned. "Right. But why? Why in there?"

He rolled his eyes. "Isn't that what women do on girly shopping trips?"

"No."

"Well, colour my delusions shattered." He turned her towards the debris-strewn entry to the shop. "Come on. Let's make sure they both get out of here now."

A mannequin in barely decent attire lay across the concrete slab—head missing, leg in half, and one arm reaching out towards her like it, too, was begging for her help. Racks of lingerie, sex toys, DVDs, and books were scattered across the shop floor and out onto the street.

"Bloody hell."

Kate crunched her way through the shop until she found Gina kneeling beside the body of an older woman and clutching a brown leather bag to herself. She was covered in blood. She was still, though. She didn't appear to be hurt anywhere. Well, not seriously, anyway. She just stared at the woman on the floor.

Kate approached her slowly. Like she would a frightened animal. "Gina, sweetheart, are you okay?"

Gina didn't look up, so Kate got a little closer. "Gina, baby, are you hurt?"



Gina shook her head. "Pat died."

Kate looked at the woman on the ground. "Is this Pat?"

Gina nodded.

Kate looked up at Timmons.

He shrugged and moved over to Stella. He bent down and touched his fingers to her neck. Nodding, he checked his watch. Counting off her pulse, no doubt.

"Gina, I'm sorry about Pat. Are you okay?"

Gina finally looked up at Kate and smiled softly, sadly. "Yes. I would like to go home, though. I didn't want to leave her alone, but I think...she's gone now, so I think she'll be okay now. Is that all right?"

Kate nodded. "We can leave anytime you want. But we need to go to the hospital first."

"Why? I don't want to go to the hospital. I'm fine. I just need a shower and some fresh clothes."

"I know. But Stella needs to get checked out. Boss's orders."

Gina glanced over at Stella. "Is she okay?"

Timmons offered Gina a gentle smile and nodded to Kate. "Like she said, boss's orders. For you too. Can't have you deciding we didn't take care of you at an incident and then suing us later. I've got my pension to think about."

Gina snorted. "Fine. But you better find me something else to wear." She motioned to her bloodstained jeans and jumper.

Kate didn't have the heart to mention the future that lay ahead for Gina's clothes. Timmons, it seemed, had no such compunction.

"No worries, Gina, that lot's all evidence now," he said. "Maybe Kate can get you a pair of those scrubs they all wear on casualty or something."

"But this is my favourite jumper."

Timmons looked her up and down. "You'll never get all that blood out of it anyway. Ex-wife used to say that white wine was good for getting stains out, but you could probably buy a new jumper with the amount you'd need to get rid of that lot."

Kate shook her head, trying to dislodge the image of Gina covered in blood, but it was no use. It wouldn't be until she got her out of there

and into something clean and dry. She tried not to think about what could have happened. There were just too many ways today could have gone wrong. No, that wasn't right. It was wrong. All wrong. So wrong she couldn't even think straight. But it could also have been so much worse.

Gina was whole, and she was talking to her. Everything else they would deal with when it came up.

She had no doubt this would affect Gina in the future. How could it not? Kate knew it was going to affect *her*, so how could it not affect Gina too? Seeing that baby outside, so young and so completely innocent, struck down without thought or care. How could anyone think this was justified in any way, shape, or form? It wasn't. It was barbaric and cruel, and so entirely senseless. Such a waste.

Gina had fought so hard—worked so tirelessly to get herself back to some semblance of normal after Ally's attack, and now this. How was Gina supposed to deal with this too? How could any of them deal with this?

"Brannon? You okay there?"

Timmons's voice shocked her out of the desperate thoughts whirling around her head.

She caught his eye and dipped her head once, acknowledging that she was far from okay and thanking him for dragging her out of the whirlpool of unanswerable questions—the what-ifs and the could-have-beens.

This wasn't getting them anywhere. They'd be here all day at this rate, and she needed to get Gina away from here. She needed to get herself away from here. "Can you stand up?"

Gina laughed. It was a sad laugh that seemed hollow and unnaturally light as it floated out of the gaping hole in the roof like a helium balloon taking flight. Her gaze slid behind Kate and seemed fixed on something Kate didn't want to look at.

"I can." Gina's voice was thick and clumsy. Almost as if her tongue was suddenly swollen and too big for her mouth. She coughed and carried on. "I might need some help, though. My feet have gone to sleep."

Kate reached out and helped her stand slowly as the paramedics loaded Stella onto a backboard and lifted her onto a trolley. They were heading out of the door by the time Gina looked down her body and said, “Jesus, it’s even worse than I thought.”

“We’ll get you cleaned up. Don’t worry.” Kate turned towards the door.

“I’m not worried.” She reached up and touched her hand to Kate’s temple. “You’re here.”

Kate smiled a smile she knew didn’t reach her eyes. It said, “I’m always here”. A smile that only Gina would ever see. “Whenever you need me.”

“I know.” She looked down at the woman on the floor again, and whispered something to her, but Kate couldn’t make out the words. It sounded a little like “I’ll find him for you”, but that didn’t make any sense.

Timmons acknowledged them leaving with a wave and a wiggle of his hand between his ear and his mouth. His sign to call him.

Kate nodded and led Gina back to the bus station and her car. She wanted to get to the hospital as close to Stella’s arrival as possible.

She covered the passenger seat with a plastic sheet. This, too, would be brought in for forensic analysis. Not that she expected it to be revealing. The bombers were dead, and Gina had had no direct contact with them anyway. The most that sheets were going to tell them was who the blood belonged to.

“I really don’t need to go to the hospital, you know. I’m fine.”

Kate looked at her. She looked a little pale. Blood smears on her cheek added to the ghostly pallor, but her eyes looked clear, her gaze was focused, and her demeanour seemed far more normal than Kate had expected. If she didn’t know any better, she wouldn’t have suspected that Gina had been at the scene of a terror attack. Shock? Maybe. Would the reality of it set in later? Maybe. But right now, Gina did indeed seem to be handling everything better than Kate was.

“I’m sure you are, but our protocol is to have you checked over by a doctor,” she said eventually, then offered what she hoped was a

cheeky grin. “Like Timmons said, it’s a safety thing so you can’t sue, sweetheart.” She winked at Gina. Just in case she wasn’t sure she was joking.

“I would never.”

Kate reached over and kissed her cheek. “I know. But we also need to collect your clothes for evidence. And that really needs to be done in a controlled environment. The hospital’s as good a place to do that as the police station is. Maybe better. For you, anyway.”

Gina glanced down at the plastic-covered seat. “At least I won’t dirty your seats with that on there.”

“I really wouldn’t care if you did,” Kate said earnestly. All she cared about was Gina being okay. She helped her into the car before getting in herself and pulled away from the scene slowly, not at all like her normal self, but fully aware that she was in shock. Add to the fact that she had to dodge a plethora of people running, ambulances pulling away, police cars blocking almost every inch of the roads, and CSIs suiting up in what appeared to be a staging area under the covered walkway.

A crowd was growing. An angry crowd. Circling the bus station and filling the road. People were whispering amongst themselves, calling out to people within the cordoned area. Demanding information. And hurling insults when it wasn’t forthcoming. Kate wasn’t looking forward to the fallout from this.

At the other side of the road, news crews were gathering. Reporters stood in front of cameras, making sure to get the bus station in the shot behind them as yet another ambulance tore away, lights flashing, sirens screaming, and Kate followed in its wake, hoping it was Stella’s ride.