

Deborah Fletcher Mello

REUNITED BY THE BADGE



MILLS & BOON
HEROES

Deborah Fletcher Mello Reunited By The Badge

Аннотация

When patients are put in danger ...two exes must reunite to save lives! When he discovers his patients' lives are under siege, Dr. Paul Reilly can only turn to one person: Simone Black. As the former lovers work together to track down the killer they rediscover unexpected feelings for one another...but their enemy will stop at nothing to keep them apart.

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A megacorporation starts killing patients...

And two exes must reunite to save lives!

When he discovers his patients' lives are threatened, Dr. Paul Reilly can turn to only one person: Simone Black. She will have his back, even if they don't agree on much else. But as the former lovers work together to track down the evildoers who are tampering with medications, they rediscover unexpected feelings for one another...even as an enemy wants to silence them permanently.

A true Renaissance woman, **DEBORAH FLETCHER MELLO** finds joy in crafting unique story lines and memorable characters. She's received accolades from several publications, including *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal* and *RT Book Reviews*. Born and raised in Connecticut, Deborah now considers home to be wherever the moment moves her.

[Also By Deborah Fletcher Mello](#)

To Serve and Seduce

Seduced by the Badge

Tempted by the Badge

Reunited by the Badge

Truly Yours

Hearts Afire

Twelve Days of Pleasure

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Deborah Fletcher Mello

MILLS & BOON

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REUNITED BY THE BADGE

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- Change justification
- Text to speech

Simone rested an elbow on the tabletop, turning flirtatiously toward Paul. “Do you know Tom and Jerry over there?” she asked softly. She reached a hand out, trailing her fingers against his arm.

Her touch proved just distracting enough to him that Paul didn’t turn abruptly to stare back, drawing even more attention in their direction. His focus shifted slowly from her toward the duo at the bar. He eyed them briefly before turning his attention back to Simone. He shook his head. “Should I?”

“It might be nothing, but they seem very interested in you.”

Paul’s gaze danced back in their direction and he took a swift inhale of air. One of the men was on a cell phone and both were still eyeing him intently.

“We need to leave,” he said, suddenly anxious. He began to gather his papers.

“What’s going on, Paul?”

“I don’t think we’re safe, Simone.”

* * *

Don’t miss future installments in the To Serve and Seduce miniseries, coming soon...

[Dear Reader,](#)

I wish I had something profound to say about this story. Something that would have bells ringing and angels dancing. But I really don’t. This story, based in fact, made me a little sad. Medical and pharmaceutical abuse against patients is very real. Too often it flies under the radar, the public completely unaware. I appreciate being able to fictionalize and bring awareness to what is a very real problem. I wish I could do more.

I loved fleshing out Simone Black. She’s fire and her love affair with Dr. Paul Reilly made my heart sing. The two together are oil and water, and they mingle so perfectly, it made writing their story one enjoyable adventure. I absolutely adore the two, and I really love his philanthropic spirit and her devotion to her man! I hope you will enjoy them together as much as I enjoyed writing them!

Thank you so much for your support. I am humbled by all the love you keep showing me, my characters and our stories. I know that none of this would be possible without you.

Until the next time, please take care and may God’s blessings be with you always.

With much love,

Deborah Fletcher Mello

www.DeborahMello.blogspot.com

To all my Jewels in The Reading Room

Know that you are much loved and valued!

You all make my heart sing!

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Chapter 1

Dr. Paul Reilly stood in front of his business-class seat, waiting anxiously to disembark the airplane. He'd been traveling for some thirty-plus hours, having started with an Air France flight from Accra, Ghana, to Paris, France, and ending with a Delta flight into Chicago. He was past the point of exhaustion and all he wanted was to be on firm ground, and home.

The cell phone in his hand began to beep and vibrate, an influx of incoming messages finally getting through after he'd taken the device out of airplane mode. He stole a quick glance at the lengthy list to determine the urgency of his responding, or not, and then he dropped the unit into the inner breast pocket of his blazer.

The line out of the aircraft began to move slowly. When he spied his first opportunity to make an exit, Paul stepped into the aisle. He reached for his carry-on bag out of the upper storage compartment and pushed forward, beating a woman who was whining about the heat and a couple with four unruly kids out the door. He moved swiftly down the Jetway to the terminal, exhaling a sigh of relief as he shifted out of the crowd toward the baggage reclaim area.

As he waited for the airlines to engage the luggage carousel, he pulled his cell back into his hands and dialed one of the first numbers in his call list. His brother Oliver answered on the

second ring.

“Where are you?” Oliver questioned, a hint of stress in his tone.

Paul took a deep breath. “The airport. I just landed.”

“Did you get my text message?”

“I got a few dozen. I haven’t had an opportunity to read any of them since I left Ghana.”

“I sent you the lab results for those tissue samples you gave me. I haven’t had a chance to start testing the drug samples yet.”

“And?”

“And, something is definitely not right. But you have a bigger problem.”

“What’s that?”

“The samples have disappeared. All of them. The tissue samples and the drug products.”

“What do you mean, *disappeared*?”

“I mean someone took them and now they’re gone.”

“But you have the results?”

“No. *You* have the only results. I emailed them to you first thing, before I even looked at them. Once I did read them, I needed to do some additional testing, but before that could happen it all vanished. Including the original first round of test results!”

“So, they got both shipments?”

“Both? You sent more than one shipment of samples?”

“Yeah. I mailed one to your office and I mailed the other to

the house in Windsor, since I knew you had plans to be there.”

“The Windsor shipment might be waiting for me, as long as no one knew you were sending it there.”

Paul blew a soft sigh, his mind racing as he tried to make sense of what his brother was telling him. Dr. Oliver Reilly worked for the federal government. He was a cancer research scientist reporting to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Like his brother, Paul had a medical degree, but specialized in emergency care and family practice. He'd chosen to be a public health practitioner over private practice.

Paul trusted Oliver, one of only a few people he knew who would have his back, whatever the situation. “Did you discuss this with anyone?”

“No. Not a soul. Which is also why I didn't file a police report. Whoever knew the samples were here, also knew you sent them. Whoever took them has access to the government labs because there isn't an ounce of evidence to point toward a break-in. Now, I'm not one for conspiracy theories, but something's going on.”

Paul took another deep breath. The carousel had just begun to spin, the passengers from his international flight crowding around like a herd of cattle waiting for something to happen. As the first bags appeared out of a hole in the rear wall, the group drew closer, preparing to snatch their possessions as quickly as they could.

Oliver called his name. “Paul! You still there?”

“Sorry, yeah. Just trying to think.”

“Look, I’m here to help any way I can. But, this feels like it might be more than either one of us can handle. Have *you* talked to anyone? The police? An attorney, maybe?”

Paul shook his head, oblivious to the fact his brother couldn’t see him through the telephone line. His eyes were skating over the crowd, a sense of unease beginning to swell in his midsection. He was suddenly feeling slightly paranoid, like he needed to be looking over his shoulder. “I’ve got to run. I’ll call you as soon as I get to the house.”

“Be careful, please,” Oliver admonished as the line disconnected in his ear.

Minutes later, Paul sat in the back of an Uber. His preferred driver, a grandmother from the island of Haiti, was chatting him up about his trip. The older woman had been driving him back and forth for the last year, her wide smile always a welcome sight whether he was coming or going.

“You need a wife,” she said, the comment coming out of left field.

Paul laughed. “Why would I want to do something like that?”
“God didn’t make man to live his life alone. That’s why he gave Eve to Adam. Someone to be your helpmate. A partner to help carry some of the burden and provide comfort when you need it. It’s why you need a wife. God has ordained it!” she professed with an air of finality that suddenly had Paul considering the possibilities.

He thought about the women in his life—one woman in

particular—then shook his head. “I don’t foresee that in my immediate future, Mrs. Pippin.”

“What about that beauty queen you were dating? Was she not wifey material?”

“No!” he exclaimed, his head waving from side to side. “She was *definitely* not wife material.” For a moment he thought about the Miss Illinois contestant he’d met in the hospital waiting room. She had captured his attention and then all focus had been lost two weeks later when she accused him of cheating because he hadn’t answered her call or returned it in a timely manner. She had keyed his car, stolen his phone and had poisoned his fish tank with bleach. He discovered later that he had fared better than her last boyfriend. That poor guy had suffered immeasurable damage when she’d superglued his junk to his leg after discovering he’d slept with her friend. Any man willing to make her his wife would have to sleep with both eyes open at night.

Mrs. Pippin interrupted his moment of reverie. “Your heart is still with that lawyer woman. The one you talk about, but don’t talk to,” she concluded, grunting slightly as she gave him a look through the rearview mirror.

The faintest hint of a smile lifted across Paul’s face. “She broke my heart, Mrs. Pippin. And she left it in a million pieces.”

The old woman grunted a second time. “She is still under your skin. She never leaves you. Like a bad juju. That is why all the other beauties you date don’t stand a chance. You should call her.”

Paul suddenly found himself pondering her suggestion, smiling at the thought of any woman being some kind of mystical charm that could sway him from other relationships. Maybe Mrs. Pippin was right, and he had himself a case of bad juju. He remembered how smitten he'd been, so possessed that he couldn't begin to imagine his life without the beauty who'd felt like home in his small world.

That woman she referred to was Simone Black, daughter of Chicago's illustrious police superintendent Jerome Black and his wife, federal court judge Judith Harmon Black. The last time he had spoken with Simone, their conversation had been tense, and he'd felt battered by the end of it. There had been an ultimatum, or two, and the predictable battle of wills when the two disagreed. Their communication had failed, and both had shut down.

He could barely remember who had started that fight or what they'd even fought about, just that it had been the end for their relationship and months of conflict between them. They had agreed to part ways, choosing to let go of each other, instead of battling for a happily-ever-after that could have lasted a lifetime.

A mission trip to Northern Thailand to treat the indigenous people of the Akha tribe, high in the Chiang Rai mountains, had kept him from falling into a fit of depression and crying into his cornflakes for months. Being able to provide medical treatment to patient populations that included local migrant workers, as well as refugee populations from bordering Myanmar, had kept him sane and balanced and unconcerned with whether the woman he

had loved was moving on without him. He had regained focus and come back with a renewed sense of purpose. The spiritual journey that had been so much about expanding his horizon and answering a calling, had become a much needed balm, a bandage of sorts on an open wound. There had been five more mission trips since and no wailing over the loss of his woman.

Now, thinking about her was adding to the frustration he was already feeling. But calling Simone, a prominent lawyer with the state's attorney's office, suddenly made more sense than not. Despite their problems, he trusted her and right then, he needed counsel from someone he could trust.

Mrs. Pippin was rambling, sharing a story about one of her many grandchildren. Paul listened with half an ear as he considered his options. He needed help and Simone might be willing to point him in the right direction. She also had connections who might prove to be beneficial in helping him solve his problem. He knew he'd fare better with her than without her, if only to get a hint or two of advice.

Paul shifted forward in his seat. "Mrs. Pippin, change of plans. I need to grab a bite to eat. Do you mind taking me to West Bryn Mawr, please? Down near North Clark Street."

"No problem at all. Just change the destination in the app for me."

"Yes, ma'am."

Minutes later she'd turned the burgundy Avalon he was riding in about and headed toward the North Side of town. He pushed

the speed dial for the first number in his phone contacts and waited for it to be answered.

Simone Black answered just as he was about to hang up. “Why are you calling me, Paul?” Her tone was wary as she said hello.

Hearing her voice sent both a rumble of anxiety into the pit of his stomach and a blanket of calm across his back and shoulders. The conflicting emotions caused him to struggle to stay focused. He took a deep breath before he spoke. “It’s important, Simone. I really need your help.”

There was an awkward pause as the woman on the other end took time to ponder his comment. When she finally responded her voice was thick with attitude. “This better be good, Paul Reilly. Do not waste my time!”

“Can you meet me, please?”

“Now? Do you know what time it is?”

“I know it’s late, Simone, but I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t important. And I mean life-and-death important. I really need to talk to you.”

There was another lengthy pause before she answered. “If it’s that important, I guess I can make the time. But you’d better not be playing games with me!”

He blew a soft sigh of relief. “I’m headed over to our place now. I should be there in ten minutes.”

“We have a place?” she replied sarcastically.

Paul shook his head. “I’ll be waiting, Simone. I’ll see you when you get there.”

As he disconnected the line, Paul noted the look Mrs. Pippin was giving him. The old woman eyed him with raised brows. Bemusement furrowed her forehead and there was a hint of hubris in her eyes. He was sure something snarky teased the tip of her tongue, but she bit back the quip, giving him an easy smile instead.

Paul chuckled. He hated admitting when the old woman was right and in the short time he'd known her, her instincts had often been spot-on. This time was no different. Because Simone Black did have his heart on lock. Even with the distance between them, and the young woman's sometimes contentious demeanor that had him wanting to pull his hair out, Paul still loved Simone more than he had ever loved any other woman in his life.



Simone Black had needed to park her car around the corner from their favorite local restaurant. Walking the length of the block in high heels was proving to be quite the chore and she was kicking herself for choosing cute over comfort. But it had been quite some time since she and Paul had been in a room together and she was determined that he saw cute when they next met.

Just hearing his voice over the telephone had sent shivers of excitement down her spine. She hadn't wanted to admit just how much she missed him, because admitting she missed him meant admitting she might have been wrong about breaking up with him. Simone had lost count of the number of times she'd kicked

herself for that decision.

Since their separation almost one year ago and him leaving the country, Simone often claimed she'd been abandoned, left pining after a man who had loved his career more than he had loved her. She conveniently left out the fact that Paul had begged her to leave with him, wanting her to follow his dreams as they worked together to fulfill her own. She had always admired his humanitarian spirit but had been ill-prepared the day he announced he wanted to serve patients overseas in developing countries. It had been a calling on his heart that she'd found admirable, but she hadn't been able to see how she might fit in the life he imagined.

But Paul had wanted a future together that included whatever they both needed, and Simone had just been too scared to commit, not wanting to admit that at that time, she didn't have a clue what she had wanted or needed.

She and Paul had met in college, becoming fast friends in a few short weeks. He could make her laugh with little effort and his energy was infectious. Paul's enthusiasm for life had brought out the best traits in Simone and where she was often snarky and difficult with others, with Paul Reilly she was like the easiest breeze on a summer day.

They had absolutely nothing in common, not even a shared interest in the same foods. He was altruistic, and she was often self-centered, thinking only about herself. He believed in a higher power and she proclaimed herself an agnostic. Where he

was willing to venture through life all willy-nilly, she was more restrained and guarded and not a risk taker. Paul had treated her with kindness in a way no other man had before. And there had been other men. Casual acquaintances who never quite measured up to the father and brothers she compared them with. The male members of Simone's family had set a standard others had found insurmountable. Paul had surpassed the challenge.

Paul had never tried to control her, allowing her the freedom to find her own way as it suited her. He was nonjudgmental, even tempered and compassionate to a fault. The friendship that had evolved between them had taken on a life of its own. Their intense physical attraction to each other and a willingness to simply trust the process had created a bond that even they didn't understand. It worked, even when it shouldn't have.

Paul leaving after weeks of begging her to join him had been devastating. It had left a hollow void in her life that she'd been unable to fill. She'd regretted the decision more times than she cared to count, and she had never told him, hating to admit that she had simply been too scared to step outside of her comfort zone. Her pride had been the biggest wall standing between them. Now, here she was, racing to see him, and trying to be cute when she got there.

Her heel caught in a crack in the concrete sidewalk and she almost tripped, barely stopping herself from falling forward. She came to an abrupt halt, pausing to take a deep breath to calm her nerves as she steadied herself. The air was crisp, evening

temperatures predicting snow in a forecast that was warm one day and practically cataclysmic the next. She sucked in oxygen like her life depended on it.

The two men entering Little Bad Wolf caught her attention. They wore matching black suits and when one shoved his hands into his pants pockets, she spied a holster beneath his jacket. They had an odd, *Men in Black* vibe that felt strangely unnatural. The duo gave her reason to pause, something about them feeling out of sync with the neighborhood. Each tossed a look over his shoulder before moving through the entrance, which made her uneasy. She wanted to dismiss the emotion, her nerves already on overdrive as she thought about Paul and his telephone call and her excitement about meeting him. But there was something that suddenly had her imagining terrorist attacks, hostage situations or something else bringing harm to a host of innocent bystanders.

She would wonder why later, but instinct moved her to reach for her cell phone and dial the number to the local police station. Two rings and an officer Simone didn't recognize answered the phone.

"Good evening. Is Captain Black available, please? It's his sister calling."

Parker Black answered the line a few seconds later. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me, Simone."

"What's wrong, Simone?"

"It might not be anything, but can you roll a patrol car out to Little Bad Wolf? I feel like they need to do a safety check of

the area.”

“Because...?”

“I’m here to meet Paul and two really shady-looking guys just went into the place. One’s carrying a gun under his jacket. I’m not sure about the other. But they’re not regulars and they don’t look like they’re visiting Chicago for our pleasant tourist sights. It’s just a feeling I get. Something’s just not right about them.” She didn’t bother to tell her brother that Paul had said his problem was a matter of life and death and that something in his voice had been concerning. She doubted the two had anything to do with each other, but she would rather be safe than sorry.

“So, you’re meeting Paul the doctor? Your ex-boyfriend Paul? I heard he was back. So, are you two reconciling or is this just a late-night booty call?”

“Just send a car, please?”

“He’s a good guy, Simone. Go easy on the brother.”

“Thank you, Parker!” she answered, her singsong tone belying her anxiety.

Her brother persisted. “It wasn’t cool how you ended things. You’re lucky...”

Simone disconnected the call, not even bothering to say goodbye. She took another deep breath and moved through the door into the space.

Little Bad Wolf was a neighborhood favorite. The gastropub was often packed, a lengthy line waiting to get inside during prime dinner hours. She and Paul had been regulars, eating there

at least three, sometimes four times, per week.

The young man who greeted her at the door looked discombobulated, although he tried nicely to mask his distress. He smiled, recognition washing over his expression. "Attorney Black, long time no see!" he exclaimed as he leaned in to give her a warm hug.

Simone hugged him back. "Jacob, hey! Is everything okay?"

The man named Jacob nodded, but there was something about the twitch over his eye that said so much more. "I'm good. Really good," he said as he tossed a look over his shoulder.

Simone smiled. "I've missed this place," she said casually.

"Dr. Reilly is in the back," Jacob said as he grabbed a menu and turned, gesturing for her to follow. "He's been waiting for you."

Simone's gaze skated around the room, eyeing the patrons who sat in conversation, laughter ringing warmly through the space. It was a nice crowd for a late hour.

The boys in black were seated at the oversize bar. The bartender was trying to make conversation, but neither was interested. One sat with his broad back to the polished, wooden structure, staring toward the other end of the room. Simone shifted to see where he was staring, her eyes finding Paul seated at their usual spot in the rear. The sight of him triggered a host of alarms she hadn't been expecting.

Simone gasped slightly, the man lifting her lips in the sweetest smile. He was still a beautiful specimen of manhood with his

hazel eyes, warm beige complexion and meticulously trimmed beard and mustache. He had always been fastidious with his grooming and lifted weights regularly to maintain a fit physique. He wore a formfitting gray sweater that looked molded to his muscles and denim jeans. He was as dashing as she remembered, her heart skipping a beat, or two, as she gawked.

His briefcase rested on the seat beside him, a pile of papers on the table that he was shifting awkwardly back and forth. His brow was furrowed, and he seemed completely lost in thought, oblivious to his surroundings. She glanced back toward the two men, shifting to put herself between them and their view of Paul. She bumped Jacob's shoulder, her voice dropping to a low whisper. "Do you know the two men at the bar?" she questioned.

"You mean the two *brutes* at the bar?" He shook his head. "No, and they feel like they might be a problem. You won't believe how they pushed their way in!" he said, squarely in his feelings about their interaction at the door.

Simone gave him a nod. "I thought so, too. It's why I called my brother and asked for a patrol car to come by and do a safety check. When the cops get here, point them in my direction. If those two do anything before they get here, just dial nine-one-one."

"Thank you," Jacob said, relief flooding his face.

They came to a stop at the edge of the table. Paul looked up, startled out of the trance he'd fallen into. He tossed Jacob a polite glance, then settled his gaze on Simone. His eyes widened, and

joy shimmered in the light orbs.

“Simone, hey,” he said, standing abruptly. He moved to wrap his arms around her, pulling her against him in a warm hug. He pressed his lips to her cheek, allowing them to linger there a second longer than necessary. His hold tightened, his arms like a cashmere blanket in a viselike grip around her torso.

Simone felt her whole body welcoming him home as she hugged him back. “Hey,” she answered, her voice a loud whisper.

Jacob dropped her menu to the table. “Thank you, again,” he said before hurrying back to the front of the restaurant.

Paul finally let her go, a warm smile filling his face. “I appreciate you coming,” he said.

“You said it was important.”

Paul nodded as he gestured for her to take a seat. Sitting down, Simone stole another quick glance toward the bar. The two strangers were both staring blatantly, not bothering to hide their interest in the two of them.

Simone rested an elbow on the tabletop, turning flirtatiously toward Paul. “Do you know Tom and Jerry over there?” she asked softly. She reached a hand out, trailing her fingers against his arm.

Her touch proved just distracting enough to him that Paul didn’t turn abruptly to stare back, drawing even more attention in their direction. His focus shifted slowly from her toward the duo at the bar. He eyed them briefly before turning his attention back to Simone. He shook his head. “Should I?”

“It might be nothing, but they seem very interested in you.”

Paul’s gaze danced back in their direction and he took a swift inhale of air. One of the men was on a cell phone and both were still eyeing him intently.

“We need to leave,” he said, suddenly anxious. He began to gather his papers.

“What’s going on, Paul?”

“I don’t think we’re safe, Simone.”

“What do you mean we’re not safe?” she snapped, her teeth clenched tightly. “Why are we not safe?”

“I’ll explain, but I think we really need to leave.”

Simone took a deep breath and held it, watching as he repacked his belongings into his briefcase.

“We’re not going anywhere until you explain,” she started and then a commotion at the door pulled at her attention. She turned to see two of her brothers, Parker and Armstrong, and two uniformed police officers standing at the entrance talking with Jacob. Their chatter carried through the room, the conversation casual. They all appeared to be old acquaintances greeting each other warmly.

The two strangers suddenly began eyeing each other nervously. Their earlier bravado seemed to be momentarily eliminated. Simone shot Paul a look but said nothing. They continued watching and another quick minute passed before the duo finally rose from where they sat at the bar and moved toward the exit door. Sighs of relief seemed to billow throughout the

whole room.

The Black brothers were slowly moving toward their table, both eyeing the other two men as they passed each other. Parker acknowledged them with a nod of his head but there was no response. As the two men exited the building, the uniformed cops followed behind them.

Detective Armstrong Black greeted them with a wide grin. “Well, well, well. Isn’t this a pleasant surprise!” he said. He extended his hand in greeting and the two men bumped shoulders. “How’s it going, Paul?”

“It’s good to see you, Armstrong.”

Armstrong winked an eye at his baby sister. “Simone.”

“Armstrong.”

Parker shook his head as he leaned to kiss Simone’s cheek. He and Paul shook hands. “Everyone okay?”

Simone nodded. “You two didn’t need to come. You could have just sent a patrol car.”

“We just wanted to make sure everything was good.”

“You two just wanted to be nosey.”

“That, too!” Parker said with a chuckle. His phone rang, pulling his attention as he stepped away to answer the call.

Armstrong took a seat at the table with them. “So, one of you want to tell me what’s going on? Why the concern?”

Simone turned toward Paul, folding her arms over her chest. Raising her brows, she gave him a questioning look.

He heaved a deep sigh, closing his eyes for a split second.

“I made a mistake. I should never have called Simone. I just... well...” He paused. Then shrugged, as if unable to find the words to answer the question being posed.

Simone rolled her eyes skyward. “It’s nothing,” she said. “Those two just looked sketchy and I didn’t like how pushy they were being. I was worried that something might jump off and figured we were better safe than sorry.”

Armstrong looked from one to the other, perhaps sensing a half-truth and a blatant lie being told. Before he could question them further, Parker rejoined the conversation.

“My guys ran their license plate. It’s a rental car that came back to a man named Thomas Donald. That ring any bells?”

Paul and Simone both shook their heads.

Parker continued. “We didn’t get a hit on anyone named Thomas Donald and we don’t have any reason to hold either of them.”

“What about the gun I saw?”

“He had a valid FOID.”

“What’s that?” Paul questioned. “FOID?”

“Firearm Owners Identification card. It makes it legal for him to carry a concealed weapon,” Simone answered.

Parker nodded. “They’re gone now, so I wouldn’t be overly concerned. I think you may have just overreacted.”

“Simone? Overreact? Not my little sister!” Armstrong said facetiously as he pressed his palm to his broad chest. “My little sister *never* overreacts!”

“Don’t you two have someplace to be?” Simone said, annoyance painting her expression.

Armstrong shook his head. “Nope. We’re officially off duty!”

Paul chuckled, a moment of amusement washing over him. It passed quickly but Simone was the only one who noticed. She met his eyes and held the gaze a second longer than necessary before turning back to her brothers.

“You’re intruding on my date.”

“So, it is a date?” Parker asked, his grin widening.

“Mom will be very excited. I can’t wait to tell her,” Armstrong added.

Paul laughed out loud. “How is your mom?”

Simone tossed him another look. “Please don’t entertain them. If you talk to them, they won’t go away. And they need to go away!” She looked from one brother to the other.

“My feelings are hurt, Simone!” Armstrong said. He pushed his full lips out in a full pout.

“Mine, too, but the hint is taken,” Parker said. He rose from his seat, adjusting the jacket of his navy-blue suit.

“I need to get home anyway,” Armstrong added. “I have a wife waiting for me!” He grinned smugly as he waved his ring finger, like they needed to be reminded that he was a newlywed, having recently married another detective on the Chicago police team.

Parker laughed. “I have someone waiting for me, too, but she’s not a wife.”

“Not yours anyway,” Simone quipped.

Laughter rang around the table.

“It was good to see you guys again,” Paul said, the trio shaking hands one last time.

“Good luck,” Armstrong said, his voice dropping to a loud whisper. “She’s still mean as hell!”

“I heard that!” Simone exclaimed, her eyes rolling skyward.

The brothers grinned, both leaning to kiss their sister’s cheek one last time.

“Stay out of trouble, Simone,” Parker said.

“Please,” Armstrong echoed.

The couple watched as the two men strolled back toward the door, pausing briefly to chat with an elderly couple who sat near the front of the room.

“I see things haven’t changed much,” Paul said casually.

“You don’t get to do that,” Simone snapped. “You don’t get to pretend nothing’s wrong when clearly something’s not right. Now spill it! Why did you call me? Why are we not safe, and who were those two men?”

Contrition furrowed Paul’s brow. “I shouldn’t have called you, Simone.”

“But you did, so tell me why. What’s going on, Paul?”

Jacob interrupted the conversation, dropping two drinks onto the table. “Courtesy of Captain Black,” he said, smiling brightly.

Simone shook her head. “What is this?” The beverage was a beautiful shade of pink, topped with a fluff of cotton candy and skewered raspberries.

“We call it the Honeymoon Special.”

Paul laughed again, relieving the tension between them. “Your brothers have a keen sense of humor.”

“They really are not funny,” Simone responded, though she felt the slightest smile pulling at her mouth.

“Are you ready to order?” Jacob asked.

“I think we’re going to have to take it to go, Jacob,” Paul said. “I hope that’s not a problem.”

“Not at all, Dr. Reilly. Your usual?”

“Yes, sir. The Bad Burger with a side of fries, please.”

“I’ll take the mac and cheese,” Simone said. “Also to go.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll put that order in for you. And I’d like to throw in a dessert on the house. We have a spectacular carrot cake tonight. I’d also highly recommend the vanilla brownie.”

“The carrot cake sounds good,” Simone said. “Thank you, Jacob.”

“And for you, Dr. Reilly?”

“Whatever the lady is having sounds good to me,” Paul said.

“Two slices of carrot cake to go. I’ll be back shortly with your food,” Jacob said as he backed away from the table and headed toward the kitchen.



A pregnant pause bloomed full and thick between them. Simone stared, the look she was giving him so intense that Paul felt his stomach flip as the air was sucked from his lungs. She was

even more stunning than he remembered, and he remembered everything about Simone.

Her hair had been freshly cut, her lush curls cropped short in a style that flattered her exquisite face. Chocolate-chip freckles danced across her nose and cheeks, complementing her warm copper complexion. Her dark eyes were large and bright and light shimmered in her stare. And she had the most perfect mouth, her full, luscious lips like plush pillows begging to be kissed. It took every ounce of fortitude he possessed not to lean over and capture her lips with his own. He took a deep breath and held it, hoping to stall the emotion that had swelled between them.

If anyone had asked, Paul would have had to admit to falling in love with Simone at first sight. She'd been the most beautiful woman he had ever seen as she had skipped across the university's quad. He'd stepped into her path and had introduced himself, asking for directions he hadn't needed. Simone had walked him to the destination, talking a mile a minute, which she later admitted had been to calm her nerves about a class that had her concerned. Their friendship had been like spun sugar: threads deeply entwined, intensely sweet and delicately fragile. Simone treaded cautiously, wherein he was always ready to take risks.

After spending a decade together, he had never imagined life without her until the day she'd told him to leave, unwilling to follow where he needed to go. He was still in shock, still hurt by the loss, still hoping for a reconciliation, even if he never said the words aloud. There was just something about the two of them

together that worked, making it feel like all was well in the world, even when they were off-balance with each other.

He finally spoke, Simone still waiting patiently for him to say something. “I think Lender Pharmaceuticals is poisoning patients who are taking their drugs.”

Simone blinked, her lashes fluttering as she processed the comment. “That’s a serious accusation, Paul,” she said finally.

He nodded. “I know, and I don’t make it lightly, but I believe that I have irrefutable proof that Lender Pharmaceuticals is purposely providing contaminated medications to doctors and medical facilities here in the United States and abroad.”

Paul continued to explain. “I’ve been working in a clinic in Ghana. In Accra. It’s not a large facility but it supports the local orphanages in the area and has been a refuge for the community. I have patients that I had treated for a measles-related virus on a previous trip who should have been well by now, but they’re either still symptomatic, showing rapid deterioration or have succumbed to the illness. And not one or two patients, but dozens! The disease is spreading too quickly in communities that should be thriving when you consider the preventive and curative medications that Lender Pharmaceuticals has been providing. On this last trip I think I may have poked a bear by throwing accusing questions at them that the company wasn’t expecting.”

“What’s the drug we’re talking about?”

“It’s a synthetic drug called Halphedrone-B, which is being used worldwide to treat patients with autoimmune diseases,

most especially in impoverished communities, because allegedly Lender is practically selling it at cost. But I think it's the drug that's killing them."

"What kind of proof do you have?"

"The drugs. The patients. The fact that since I called BS on their products, I feel like someone wants to stop me from going public with the information."

"How? What's happened that you haven't told me?"

Paul took a deep breath. He hadn't given the series of mishaps while he'd been abroad any thought until he'd spoken with his brother. He'd experienced several minor accidents that could have been potentially devastating. There had been a car traveling too fast that had just missed hitting him, and a fire, the cause unknown and devastating the hut he'd been sleeping in. Lastly, the close encounter at the airport in Africa with a stranger he'd dismissed as mentally ill, a man swinging a machete haphazardly in his direction until security had taken him down. Considering all of it together, and now the two strangers who'd clearly had him in their sights, had him concerned.

When he finished detailing the incidents, Simone shook her head, the gesture slow and methodic. "What else?"

Paul took a deep breath and blew it past his full lips. "I overnighted blood and tissue samples, and drug samples to my brother. I asked him to run some tests for me. The samples have disappeared."

"Define *disappeared*."

“Someone took them. They knew he had them and they stole them right out of his lab.”

“Do you think that someone is tracking you?”

“I don’t know what to think, Simone. Hell, I’m not even sure what to do with what I do know.”

“So, you called me?”

“I trust you.”

There was a moment that passed between them as Simone remembered what that trust meant to them both. How important it had been to protect and nurture each other. To have complete and total faith in what they shared. She suddenly resisted the urge to wrap her arms around him, wanting to pull him close to tell him everything was going to be okay. To say it, even if she wasn’t certain that it would.

“You probably shouldn’t go back to your apartment. Not until we’re sure it’s safe. You can stay with me while we figure it out,” she said instead.

“I need to go to the hospital. I need to follow up on patients I have here.”

She started to argue and then she didn’t. “I need to do some research. I also have a sorority sister at the FDA. I’ll call her tomorrow to see if they have any open investigations against Lender. I hope you’re wrong, Paul, but if you’re not, I’ll do whatever I can to help you take them down.”

Paul reached for her hand, his palm sliding warmly against hers as he entwined her fingers between his own. For as much as

he trusted her, he knew Simone trusted him, too. He'd spent most of his adult life assuring her that he would never walk her into trouble he couldn't get her out of, and until now, he'd been certain that he could do that. Now he had doubts and that uncertainty felt like a sledgehammer to his abdomen. "Thank you, but I don't want to drag you into this. Especially if it looks like it might get ugly."

"You should have thought about that *before* you called me."

"I honestly didn't think you'd come."

"You knew I'd come."

Paul held the look she was giving him. He didn't bother to acknowledge that she was right. Nor did he admit that he hadn't really thought it through. He knew he didn't need to tell her that he was suddenly feeling like he was out of his element, or that he was scared. But with her by his side, he had faith it would all work out. He didn't need to say it because Simone knew. She knew him better than anyone.

Minutes later he had paid for their meals and they were walking back up the block toward her car. Neither had spoken, nothing else needing to be said. Both had fallen into their own thoughts, planning what needed to come next, or not. Paul carried the bags of food and Simone had looped her arm through his, lightly clutching his elbow as she steadied herself on her high heels.

The car lock disengaged when Simone pressed her hand to the door latch. Paul opened her side door, closing it after she

was settled in the driver's seat. He moved around the back of the vehicle to the passenger side, pausing to rest their dinners on the back seat. He had just opened his door when a gunshot rang loudly through the late-night air. The windowpane in the storefront behind him shattered, glass sounding like breaking chimes against the concrete sidewalk. The building's alarm rang loudly, the harsh tones loud enough to wake the dead. A second shot shattered the car's back window.

Panic hit Paul broadside, rising fear holding him hostage where he stood. He was discombobulated, but he ducked, his gaze sweeping the landscape for an explanation. Simone shouted, the words incoherent as she shifted the car into Reverse. Paul jumped awkwardly into the passenger seat as she pulled forward, grazing the bumper of the car parked in front of her. A few quick turns and they were driving seventy miles per hour on Highway 41 until both were certain they weren't being followed. When she finally slowed to the speed limit, Paul cursed, the profanity moving Simone to toss him a quick look.

"What now?" she asked.

"Whatever it takes," Paul answered, still trying to catch his breath. "We'll do whatever it takes to shut these bastards down.

Simone nodded. "Let's not get killed trying to do it."

Paul took a deep breath into his lungs and held it. His mind was racing, his thoughts a mishmash of questions with no answers. Confusion had settled deep into every crevice in his head; it felt like sludge was weighing down his thought process. "We should

find somewhere to lay low,” he said. “Until we can figure it all out.”

“We can go back to my house...” Simone started.

“No. Now that they’ve seen us together, I don’t trust that they won’t find us there.”

“Then we should go to the police station.”

“Let’s just get a hotel room. I don’t think we should involve the police just yet.”

“Someone shot at us, Paul! We need to file a report! My brothers need to know!”

“I know that, Simone! But I need to think this through. Please, just give me a minute to think!”

“We might not have a minute, Paul!” Simone’s voice rose an octave and the tension between them suddenly increased ten-fold. Before either could blink, the conversation took a sharp left turn and they were yelling back and forth, each determined to prove a point when there was none. It was Bickering 101 and reminiscent of when their relationship had gone all kinds of wrong.

Chapter 2

The no-tell motel they'd found by the highway was fetid, reeking of debauchery and sin. The smell of cigarettes, marijuana, sex and body odor was pungent through the late-night air. Simone distorted her face with displeasure as Paul closed the door to room thirty-eight and tossed the key card on the laminated dresser. He sat down on the foot of the mattress beside her and exhaled his first sigh of relief since leaving the restaurant. Simone had finally stopped shaking and Paul felt like he could breathe normally again.

Neither spoke. Both were still reeling from the fight they'd had in the car. Simone had wanted them to drive straight to the police station. Paul had refused, insisting that it would only make things worse. He was adamant that they needed additional proof to substantiate his claims and the only way to get that was if no one knew where they were or what they were after. Simone knew her family wouldn't take them disappearing lightly and she trusted her brothers would look for them. They still hadn't come to an agreement. The argument had been contentious, the intensity of their emotions palpable.

"It doesn't make any sense," Simone finally said, breaking the silence. "No one we know would think our not going to the police is a smart thing to do." There was still an air of hostility in her tone.

And a hint of defiance in his as he responded. “No one knows what we’re up against. Even we don’t know yet, Simone.”

“Which is why going to the police would make sense. I know my brothers would back us up.”

“I don’t agree. All that’s going to happen is that the police will dismiss my concerns because the proof I have is shaky at best. The preliminary test results Oliver sent me still need to be analyzed and there’s more testing that needs to be done. Lender will be tipped off that we’re on to them and we won’t be able to prove what they’re doing or stop them.”

“In the movies when people don’t go to the police, they die. They fall off cliffs, demons get them, all kinds of horrors,” Simone said facetiously.

“In the movies I’ve seen the police get it, too.”

“You’re watching the wrong movies.”

“You watch too many.”

Simone tossed up her hands in frustration. “I’m an officer of the court, Paul! I have a responsibility to uphold the law. I have a damn badge, for heaven’s sake!”

Paul cut his gaze in her direction, a smile pulling at his mouth. “Why do they issue you a badge anyway? You’re a prosecutor.”

Simone shifted her body, turning to stare at him. “Are you making fun of my badge?”

“I just asked the question!”

Her tone was laced with attitude. “It makes me official. It says that I represent the courts of the state and that I took the

Attorney's Oath and I've promised to honor its tenets. Don't you dare make light of what I do, Paul Reilly. It's as important to me as the Hippocratic Oath that you doctors take."

"I'm not, Simone. I was just curious about the badge. They don't give us doctors one."

"No, they give you those white jackets with your names embroidered over the breast pockets. Same thing, different medium."

"I cannot believe we're sitting here arguing over a tin emblem." He lay backward on the bed, pulling his arms over his head.

"We're arguing about involving the police. Don't change the subject."

Paul blew a soft sigh as another wave of silence swept between them. Both sat listening instead to the noise in the room. An alarm clocked ticked loudly from the nightstand next to the bed and water leaked from the faucet in the bathroom. There was a steady rhythm of clicks and plops, both just loud enough to be annoying. Minutes passed before he spoke again. "I'll do whatever you think is best, Simone."

"You will?"

"Yeah," he mumbled as he folded an arm over his eyes.

She nodded. "I'll call my brother. We need to at least tell him that we're safe. We can also tell him what we know in an unofficial capacity. If they can help work it from their end, it can't hurt. Until we figure out what the hell we're doing, we can use all the help we can get."

“Okay.”

“Okay? Really?”

“Yeah, baby, okay.”

A noise outside the door pulled Simone upright. “Did you hear that?”

Paul mumbled, “No. I didn’t hear anything.”

Simone stood and moved to the window to peer through the blinds. Outside, three working women were gathered in the parking lot changing their clothes. Bare asses and boobs were on full display and no one seemed to be concerned. Laughter rang through the late-night air, their good time fueled by the bottle of booze being passed between them. Simone exhaled, turning back toward the bed. “I don’t know if I can stay here...” she started.

The rest of her comment stalled in midair, warm breath the slightest whistle past her lips. Paul had fallen into a deep sleep, jet lag and exhaustion fully claiming him. He snored softly and for a quick moment Simone realized just how much she missed hearing him beside her at night.

Shaking the thought, she grabbed her cell phone from her purse and her food from the meal bag. She took a seat on a cushioned chair in front of the small desk and dialed Parker’s number. As she waited for someone to answer, she took the first bite of her macaroni and cheese.



“Where are you?” Parker questioned. “I’m sending a patrol

car.”

“We’re fine, big brother. You just needed to know what happened. I also took the bumper off some guy’s car, I think. You’ll handle that for me, too, right?”

“If they knew Paul was at that restaurant, they’re probably tracking his cell phone. They may even be tracking yours.”

“We thought that, too, so we tossed the sim card in his phone and powered it off. I’m using my other phone. The one that’s in mom’s name. My primary phone was dead, so I left it at the house on the charger.”

“You need to come in, Simone. Until we figure out who shot at you, we can’t trust that either of you is safe.”

“We can’t, Parker. Paul truly believes this company is killing patients and he’s determined to stop them. If we come in, we might lose our window of opportunity to prove his theory.”

“I wasn’t asking, Simone. That was an order.”

“I stopped taking orders from you when I was ten.”

“Then I’m calling Mom and Dad.”

“Don’t you dare! I just need you to trust me.”

Parker yelled, “You don’t know what the hell you’re doing! Neither of you has a clue what you’ve gotten yourselves into! Now, where are you?”

Simone sighed. “I love you. And I’ll be okay. I promise.”

“Don’t you dare hang...”

Simone disconnected the call abruptly. She took another bite of macaroni and sat in reflection as she polished off the last of her

meal. She didn't have the words to explain to her brother what she was feeling or why they were suddenly acting like fugitives. She honestly wasn't sure what the hell they were doing. But they were together and she instinctively wanted to do whatever necessary to support Paul. He needed her and it had been forever since she'd felt like she added value to his life. Wanting each other had never been the problem between them. Needing each other, and admitting to it, had been a whole other animal neither had been willing to claim. But now necessity had put them together, if for nothing more than to hold on to each other for emotional support, and Simone had no intentions of failing him.

Paul was now snoring loudly, and she instinctively knew that it had been days since he'd last rested well. She was reminded of those days after medical school, during his residency, when his shifts at the hospital seemed to last for days before he was able to come home and fall out from exhaustion.

She dropped her fork and empty container back into the bag. After reaching for her phone she dialed again.

Her brother Mingus Black answered on the second ring. "What's wrong, Simone? And why is Parker texting me to ask where you are?"

"I need you. I'm at the Karavan Motel on Cicero Avenue."

"Karavan? On the South Side? What the hell are you doing there?"

"Someone tried to kill us tonight," she said, explaining all that had happened since Paul Reilly had called her.

“So, you two check into the city’s seediest motel?”

“We’re not planning to stay, and they take cash,” she continued, hoping to rationalize why the no-tell motel had been a good idea and why Paul felt going to the police was not. Even after saying it out loud Simone knew it sounded like she and Paul had lost their collective minds. And she definitely couldn’t tell any of them that she just needed to be with Paul because she had missed him terribly.

Mingus listened, taking it all in. A private detective by profession, he heard his sister’s dilemma with a different ear than their police officer brother. He didn’t yell or give her orders he knew she wouldn’t heed like Parker did. Instead, when she was done talking, Mingus said, “Sit tight. I need to put some things in place. I’ll be there before breakfast tomorrow. Are you carrying?”

“Yes,” she said, taking a moment to check the weapon in her handbag. The Glock 43 had been a gift from her father, the patriarch ensuring she and her sister both knew how to handle a firearm just as well as their brothers. Regular visits to the gun range kept her shooting and safety skills honed.

“Keep it close, and if you need to use it, don’t hesitate to pull the trigger. You can always ask questions later.”

“What are you going to tell Parker?”

“That I didn’t put your leash on you this morning. That he should check with whoever did.”

“Thank you,” Simone responded, chuckling softly.

“Get some rest. I’m sure you’re going to need it,” Mingus concluded.

After disconnecting the call, Simone moved back to the bed and kicked off her heels. Laying her body beside Paul’s, she eased an arm around his waist and shifted herself close against him. She nuzzled her nose against his back, inhaling the scent of his cologne. The familiar fragrance reminded her of their last trip together, a two-week excursion on the island of Jamaica. They had walked hand in hand along the beaches of Negril, had swum beneath the cascading waters of Gully Falls, and had danced under a full moon in Montego Bay. They’d fallen asleep in each other’s arms and woken each morning making love. It had been as magical as any holiday getaway could possibly be. Weeks later, they were no longer a couple, barely talking to each other about the weather.

Taking deep breaths to calm her nerves, Simone closed her eyes and settled into his body heat. She couldn’t begin to know what he had gotten her into and despite trusting that Paul would have never purposely put her in harm’s way, running from gunfire added a whole other dynamic to his situation. The nearness of him only put her slightly at ease, not enough that she could fully relax.

Sleep didn’t come as quickly for Simone as she lay listening to the occasional sound outside the door and the steady rhythm of Paul’s heavy snores. Simone hated showing any vulnerability, but she was scared. This was bad and had the potential to get worse.

Her mind continued to race as she thought about what she might need to do to help her friend. Thinking how much she had missed him when he'd been gone and being grateful to have him back, even under the dire circumstances they found themselves trapped in. Wondering if she should heed Parker's advice and run for the security of the police department and shelter with her law-abiding family. Her father was, after all, Jerome Black, the Superintendent of Police, leading the entire Chicago Police Department. Her mother, Judith Harmon Black, was a federal court judge, and both were well respected in Chicago's judicial system. With two brothers on the police force, another who was an attorney in private practice, the baby boy in the family a city alderman, her favorite sibling a private investigator, and her only sister front and center in state politics, law-abiding protection was a given.

Despite her best efforts she couldn't turn her brain off. For another two hours she lay pressed against his back, not wanting to disturb his rest and needing him near, even if they weren't a couple anymore. Thinking about the past and the present, Simone's thoughts ran the gamut from sane to senseless until sleep finally slipped in and delivered her from her misery.

Chapter 3

Outside, the morning sun was just beginning to rise. Paul stood at the foot of the bed staring down at Simone's sleeping form. Fully clothed, she was curled in a fetal position around a pillow. Her mouth was open, low gasps expelled from her lush lips. Her freckles were like stardust across her nose and her skin shimmered under a layer of light perspiration. Simone was a beautiful woman, but there was something about her when she slumbered, where she seemed most angelic and at peace. In those moments her beauty was extraordinary, leaving him to wonder what he had done to get so lucky.

In that moment though, he was wondering what he needed to do to ensure she was protected. How to get her, and himself, out of the mess he'd pulled them into. He sighed, feeling as if things might implode if he didn't tread cautiously. But he had neither the time or the wherewithal to play nice with Lender Pharmaceuticals.

The knock on the door pulled him from his reverie and startled Simone out of a deep sleep. She sat upright, clutching at the well-worn spread atop the bed. Bewilderment furrowed her brow. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she threw her legs off the side of the bed as Paul moved to look out the window. He heaved a deep sigh as he sidestepped to the door and opened it, greeting Simone's brother Mingus. The two men embraced

like old friends, an exchange of shoulders bumping and chests grazing.

“You two good?” Mingus questioned as he entered the room, carrying two large duffel bags over his shoulder and a tray of coffees from Starbucks.

“No,” Simone muttered as she flipped her hand at him. “I need to pee, and I want a shower.”

Mingus and Paul exchanged a look, both smirking slightly. Her brother shook his head at her as he extended the duffel bag in her direction.

“Well, I brought you some things from your house. Clothes, your toothbrush...”

“My toothbrush!” she exclaimed, jumping up and down like a four-year-old. “I love you, big brother!”

Mingus laughed. “Until you see what I packed for you. Knowing you, I’m sure it’s all wrong.”

“As long as you brought me clean panties, I’ll be a very happy woman.”

“Panties? Ohhh...well... I didn’t...”

Simone’s eyes widened, a hint of saline suddenly pressing against her thick lashes. “Please, don’t tell me you didn’t get me any clean underwear. How could you not think to pack me clean underwear? I can’t believe you...”

Mingus held up his hand to stall the rant he knew was coming. He winked an eye at her. “Vaughan packed clothes for you. I’m sure you’re good.”

Relief flooded Simone's expression. "You talked to my sister?"

"She had the spare key to your town house."

Simone nodded. "Excuse me, please, while I go freshen up."

Mingus dropped to the chair, his clasped hands resting in his lap as he gave Paul a look. "Don't rush," he said.

Simone looked from one man to the other and back, then rolled her eyes skyward. "Don't hurt him, Mingus."

Mingus narrowed his gaze and pushed his shoulders skyward. "No promises."

Paul chuckled, dropping his large frame to the bedside. He clasped his own hands together in front of his face as he rested his elbows on his thighs.

She gave them both another look, then moved into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. "You two work it out," she muttered under her breath. "Not my problem." The pipes rattled loudly as the shower was turned on in the other room. When the rain of water sounded steadily on the other side of the door, both men shifted forward to stare at each other.

"I talked to your brother. He packed that other bag for you. He said to tell you he's headed north to lie low for a few days. That you would know where to find him. He doesn't like how folks are looking at him. He also said he has enough equipment there if you need it. He said you knew what that meant, too."

Paul nodded. "Did he tell you where *north* was?"

"No, and I don't want to know. And, if that's where you're

planning to go, you don't need to tell Simone until after you get there."

"I don't know if I can keep her safe, Mingus."

"You better," the other man said with conviction. "She's already a target. They know she's connected to you. If they can't get to you through regular channels, they'll get to you through her. I know I would."

Like all the members of the Black family, Mingus was just as dedicated to the municipality. But he usually worked alone, sometimes in the dregs of the community, beneath the cover of darkness, getting his hands dirty. He sometimes did what others weren't willing to do and he did it exceptionally well. Paul had no doubts he knew what he was talking about.

"I need to go to the hospital. I have patients there I need to check on. I also need to get my hands on some of my files and maybe a new sample or two."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I don't have a choice. I have to go, but I'm not taking Simone with me. She can stay here until I get back."

"If you get back."

"Such faith!"

"In my line of business, we deal in facts, not faith. And the fact is someone is gunning for you. And maybe it's because you know something about that pharmaceutical company that they don't want you to know. Or maybe not. For all I know, it could be a spurned lover out for revenge."

“Your sister had an alibi. She was with me, so she didn’t have a reason to try and kill me.”

Mingus chuckled. “Touché!”

Paul sighed. “I need to print the emails my brother sent me so I can study the results from the tests he was able to run. I’ll swing by a FedEx office first and then head over to the hospital. I’ll be in and out in thirty minutes. Forty-five max. Then Simone and I’ll get on the road.”

“The print shop is going to want a credit card. Go here,” Mingus said, jotting an address down on the hotel notepad that rested on the desk. “Ask for Liza. Tell her I sent you. She’ll print whatever you need. You can also use her computers. She can back-door you into any system you need to get into. Tell her what you need, and she’ll find it for you.”

“And she can be trusted?”

Mingus shot him a narrowed look but didn’t bother to answer. Instead, he passed him a set of keys. “I’ll take Simone’s car,” he said. “There’s a black BMW parked outside beside it. The registration won’t come back to either of you. If you get stopped, the car belongs to Black Investigative Services. Tell them to call and I’ll confirm you’re authorized to be driving it. But don’t get stopped. I did a little digging last night and the men at the restaurant were a professional team. They didn’t miss by accident. They wanted to scare you, not kill you. But if they had wanted you dead, you would be.”

The sound of the shower suddenly came to an abrupt halt,

Simone cursing loudly about there being no more hot water. The two men exchanged a look and shook their heads.

Mingus continued, “Lender Pharmaceuticals has deep pockets. They can afford to pay well to silence you. If you keep digging and they get pissed off enough, whomever comes next might not miss.”

Paul rose from his seat and Mingus stood with him. Both stole glances at their wristwatches.

“One hour,” Mingus said. “Go to the hospital. Get in, get what you need and get out. Simone and I’ll meet you at that address I gave you in one hour. Then you two need to put some distance between you and Chicago.”

Paul nodded and the two men shook hands. “Thank you,” he said. “I really appreciate your help.”

Mingus chuckled. “Don’t thank me. Thank the nuisance in there. If she didn’t love you, I’d kick your ass for getting her in this mess. I still might. No telling about me!”

Paul hesitated as he pondered Mingus’s comment, wondering if it were possible that Simone did still love him. If they might be more than old friends. If when all of this was finished, Simone would still find favor with him. He suddenly wanted it more than he’d ever admitted to himself previously. He felt a mist of saline press hard against his lashes and he swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand.

Paul gave Mingus a wry smile and then he turned to leave, his hand on the doorknob. For a split second he thought about telling

Simone goodbye. Just in case they didn't make it back to each other. Then he reasoned there was no point in tempting fate.

He turned back to face Simone's brother. "I really love your sister. I hope you know that. I never meant for any of this to happen," he said.

"Yeah, I know," Mingus replied. "We all do."

Paul spun back toward the exit, then he stepped out into the early morning chill, closing the door behind him.

Chapter 4

It was the new day shift change, the hospital employees focused on updates about patients and not on him. Paul managed to enter the building and make his way to his office with only two nods of his head and one *good morning* to an elderly man rolling his way down the corridor in a wheelchair. Paul stole a quick glance out the glass partition before closing the blinds.

There were manila folders resting on the center of his desk and a boatload of pink message slips. He didn't bother to look at either pile, instead reaching to unlock the bottom drawer with the smallest key on his key ring. At first glance, it appeared that the drawer held indexed files and nothing more. What Paul was after was duct-taped to the underside of the inner drawer. He pulled the flash drive from its hiding spot and slid it into the back pocket of his denim jeans.

Just as he relocked the drawer, after pausing to grab his calendar from the desktop and sliding it into his briefcase, there was a knock on the door. Paul froze, his eyes skating from side to side. There was a second knock, someone calling his name. He took a deep breath and held it as he considered his options.

Paul secured the zipper on the briefcase and rested it in the seat of the chair. He moved from behind the desk to the door and pulled it open. The voice that greeted him was overly exuberant for such an early morning hour.

“Dr. Reilly! You’re back!” The nurse standing before him looked relieved. “Kelly said she thought someone was in here, but she wasn’t sure. I wanted to make sure we didn’t have another intruder.”

“Good morning, Grace. *Another* intruder?”

She nodded. “Someone was in here yesterday, rifling through the files on top of your desk. We called security but by the time they got here, the men were gone.”

“Men? There were more than one?”

“There were two men actually. Both white, dark hair, wearing dark suits,” she said.

Paul nodded his head slowly. “Do you know what they were looking for?”

“No, sir. I checked everything afterward and nothing was missing. All the files there for you were exactly as you left them. They made a mess, but they didn’t take anything. At least I don’t think they did.”

Paul paused in reflection. He had a good idea who’d been there and what they were after. He also knew that the flash drive was now in his possession and he needed to ensure it stayed with him. He gave his nurse a slight smile. “Well, I’m glad it wasn’t more serious, and I appreciate you looking out for me, Grace. Actually, I was just headed out the door. I only stopped in to check on a few of my patients. I’m not officially back for another week.”

“Well, we can’t wait to have you back with us.”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m good. It’s been busy around here. We’ve been short staffed, so you’ve really been missed. You’re one of the only doctors who’ll roll up his sleeves to pitch in and help out.”

Paul smiled. “I appreciate that.”

Grace took a deep inhale of air. “Did you hear about the Lukas kid?”

“David Lukas?”

She nodded. “Poor little thing died last week. We were all heartbroken. Parents brought him into the emergency room suffering from seizures. He didn’t recover.”

There was a moment of pause as Paul took a deep breath and held it, his eyes closed as he recalled the youngster who had touched the hearts of everyone who knew him. The child had been six years old when he’d first been admitted. His symptoms had mimicked those of influenza, hepatitis and yellow fever. Weeks of testing hadn’t been able to find a cause for his symptoms until Paul and his medical team discovered the child had been away on a tropical holiday twelve months earlier. Paul had ordered another round of tests and little David had been diagnosed with malaria. The rashes, high fevers, anemia and subsequent seizures had been consistent with the disease, but the parasites had been missed in the initial testing due to malaria’s rarity in the United States.

The treatment plan and prescribed drugs Paul had ordered should have had him back to climbing trees and playing games with his little friends. Learning that the child had died

felt like a punch to his gut. The antimalarial drugs sold by Lender Pharmaceuticals were used worldwide and Paul had been confident about their capabilities before he'd learned of Lender's duplicity. Now, that baby was dead, and the guilt was suddenly consuming. Paul no longer had any confidence in any product with the Lender name attached to it.

He opened his eyes and took a second breath. "Did they do an autopsy?"

"The official ruling was complications from pneumonia. I can get you a copy of the autopsy report if you'd like me to."

"I'd really appreciate that. He was doing better when I left. I need to know what happened."

"I understand completely. Dr. Hayes was attending when he was admitted. He may be able to answer some of your questions, as well. Would you like me to see if he's in yet?"

Paul shook his head. "Don't worry yourself. I'll run down to the morgue and see what I can find out myself. I appreciate your help, though."

The iPhone that rested on the woman's hip suddenly chimed. "Duty calls," she said as she reached for the device.

Paul smiled. "Don't let me keep you from your rounds."

"It was good to see you, Dr. Reilly," she said as she exited the room to answer the call.

"It was good to see you, too, Grace."

Paul moved back to the desk to claim his briefcase. He exited the office, locked it behind him and headed down the corridor.

Grace had been called into a patient's room and she waved one last time as he passed by the door.

As he neared the nurses' station Paul saw them before they saw him. The two men from the night before stood with a hospital administrator, questioning one of the staff members. He made an abrupt turn as he heard them speak his name, asking about his whereabouts. As he made it to the opposite end of the hallway and turned toward the stairs, they spied him, the administrator pointing in his direction.

Without giving it an ounce of thought, Paul took off running, descending three flights of stairs and tearing out a side door, through the emergency room bay, to the car parked in the back lot. As he pulled the vehicle onto the main road, the two men stood outside the hospital building, spinning in circles as they tried to figure out where he'd disappeared to. Paul kept driving, not bothering to give a second look behind him.



Simone stepped out of the bathroom. She was drying her damp hair with a thin white towel. Her brother was on his phone, texting intently as he sat waiting for her.

"Where's Paul?" she questioned as she moved to the window. She pushed the drapes aside to peer out at the parking lot.

"Hospital," Mingus answered, never lifting his eyes from his cell phone screen.

She blinked. "Why didn't you stop him?"

“Why didn’t you?”

She winced, her hands falling to her hips. “If I’d known he planned to leave, I would have.”

Her brother shrugged his broad shoulders, his gaze still focused on his phone. “He said he had patients to see.”

“And you didn’t think that might be a problem?”

“Should it be?”

“Uhhh, maybe? Or did you forget someone was shooting at us last night?” she quipped.

Mingus finally lifted his eyes to give her a quick look. “It’s doubtful anyone will take a shot at him in broad daylight,” he said.

“And you know this how?”

“I don’t really. It’s just a hunch,” Mingus said as he slid his cell phone into the inside pocket of his leather jacket. He changed the subject. “You need to finish getting dressed. We need to meet your boyfriend in forty-five minutes.”

“Meet him where?”

“You sure do ask a lot of questions, Simone! Can you just get ready to leave, please?”

“I ask questions because I need answers and you’re not telling me anything.”

Mingus blew air past his full lips. “You two need to get out of Chicago. I don’t know where you’re going, and it’s best no one knows, but I trust Paul is going to keep you safe. Now, let’s get moving, please. You need to call your job so they’re not looking

for you. And, you need to call our mother. Tell her Paul is taking you away for a few days to reconcile. I'm sure she'll be very excited! Throw something in there about grandbabies and she won't worry about you for at least a month!"

A wave of panic hit Simone like a gut punch to her midsection. She and Paul were leaving Chicago and the uncertainty of what lay ahead for them suddenly felt daunting. She had a lengthy list of what-ifs and no sustainable answers about the future filling her head and she knew it showed in the angst-filled expression on her face. Her brother picking at her didn't help the situation.

"Talk about planning a wedding and that might buy you two months of freedom from parental interference," Mingus was saying.

Simone's lips twisted and turned, her face burning hot with annoyance. She shook her index finger at her brother. "I really don't like you," she said as she shuffled back in the direction of the bathroom.

Mingus laughed. "I love you, too, Simone. You're the best little sister in the whole wide world."

"And don't you forget it," Simone muttered as she slammed the bathroom door closed after her.



Paul's mind was racing as he searched out a parking space in the West Loop neighborhood. His anxiety level was at an all-time high and he took two deep breaths to calm his nerves. After

shutting down the engine of the luxury vehicle, he checked and then double-checked the address Mingus had given him before stepping out of the car.

Paul paused at the chain-link fence that bordered the property. He looked left and then right, assessing his surroundings before he stepped through the latched gate, then reclosed it behind him. He took the steps two at a time and depressed the doorbell. As he waited, he paced, his eyes darting back and forth across the landscape.

The elderly woman who answered the door eyed him with reservation. "What'cha want, baby?"

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm here to see Liza? My name's Paul Reilly. Mingus Black sent me."

The woman didn't respond, still staring at him intently. She was petite in stature, wearing a floral housecoat and a full-length apron that stopped below her knees. There was a dishcloth in her hand and a light brush of white flour dusting her chubby cheek. Her gaze swept over him, running the length of his body from head to toe. After sizing him up she finally unlocked the door and pushed it open to allow him entry.

"Come on in, baby. I'm Pearl Hill but e'erybody calls me Mama. You want somethin' to eat? I got a pan of biscuits 'bout to come out the oven. I got some fatback and bacon, too, but Liza don't eat no meat. You ain't one of them vegans, too, are you?" she asked, her words laced with a Southern drawl and coming in what sounded like one long, drawn-out sentence before she took

another breath.

Paul smiled. “No, thank you, ma’am. I’m good.”

She sized him up a second time. “You know you hungry,” she said with an air of finality. “I’m gon’ make you a plate.” She pointed down a flight of stairs. “Liza’s down in the basement. She’s expecting you.”

Paul nodded as she continued toward the back of the home and the kitchen. The stately greystone, an architectural staple in Chicago since the 1890s, was built from Bedford limestone and named for its color. It was oversize, the craftsmanship evident in the exterior detail. The interior of the duplex featured wide-plank oak flooring, high ceilings and an abundance of natural light. Moving down the steps Paul discovered the lower-level bonus room with walls of computer screens and a young woman who looked like a bag of Skittles candy had exploded over her.

Liza was very young. Much younger than he’d expected, and he hadn’t known what he might have been walking into. Her royal blue hair had a streak of white in the front that was swept across her brow and was pulled into a high ponytail adorned with a barrette of yellow flowers. She wore an orange, yellow and pink tie-dyed sweat suit with red Converse sneakers. She was the Rainbow Brite character on steroids, and she made Paul smile.

“Hey! Mingus didn’t come with you?” she said, her hands coming to an abrupt halt atop the keyboard she was typing on.

Paul shook his head. He couldn’t help but wonder what she did for Mingus and how they knew each other. “No,” he answered,

“but I think he’s coming.”

She shrugged and resumed her typing. “Mama Hill’s going to be pissed. She’s up there cooking bacon for him right now and she knows how much I hate the smell of pig cooking in the kitchen. He better come.”

“He...well...it’s...”

“No worries. We’ll see him when we see him. Until then though, you’ll have to eat the bacon.”

Paul took two steps forward. “Is Mama Hill your grandmother?”

Liza shot him a look. “She’s everyone’s grandmother. So, what do you need?”

“I just have messages on my phone that I need to print out.”

Liza gestured for him to take a seat beside her. “What’s your email address?” she asked.

Paul reached for his phone, stopping when she asked him again.

“I just need your email address, not your phone.” She pushed a pad of paper and an ink pen toward him.

After writing down his personal email address, Paul pushed the pad back to her. “I just need any messages that might have come in the last three days,” he said softly.

A few short minutes later paper was spewing from a Xerox multifunction printer in the corner of the room. Liza gestured with her head, pointing him toward the ream of documents filling the output tray.

“So, you’re a hacker,” Paul said as he began sorting through the papers for those he needed and the ones he didn’t.

“I prefer ‘skilled computer expert.’”

“You just look so young.”

Her brows raised but she didn’t look in his direction, studying the screen before her instead. “I’m older than you think,” she muttered.

“Can you get into anyone’s computer system?”

“What do you need?”

“Everything you can get on a company called Lender Pharmaceuticals and what they have on a drug called Halphedrone-B. Not sure where you’d look, but maybe start in their research and development department? Maybe any communications about the drug between their management team?”

Liza typed, her head shifting from side to side as data filled the two screens on the desktop and then more information began to cover the larger screens on the walls. Liza stopped typing and stared from one screen to another, deciphering code that looked like a foreign language to Paul.

He was impressed with Liza’s expertise as he watched pages of emails and reports begin to fill the computer screens and he wasn’t sure why because what they were doing was highly illegal. If he didn’t already have enough problems, this might top his list and send him straight to prison. But curiosity had gotten the better of him. And Simone wasn’t there to play devil’s advocate

and make him change his mind about asking for the information. He knew Simone would not be pleased, and he was sure she'd have his head when she found out. He took a deep breath as he imagined the choice words she would spew.

"This may take a minute," Liza said finally, pulling at his attention. "They have some serious firewalls up to keep people like me out."

"But you can get in without them knowing?"

She gave him a look, her expression twisted with evident annoyance at his question. "Go eat some bacon. I'll call you if I need you." She reached for a remote that rested on the table and music suddenly filled the room. It was something classical, a poetic blend of flutes, violins and a piano. She threw him one last glance as she turned the volume up high, then she resumed typing, her blue hair swaying with the music.

Upstairs, Mama Hill had set the kitchen table with five places. A feast for twenty sat table center. There was a platter of hot biscuits, crispy bacon, buttered grits, blueberry muffins, scrambled eggs, a bowl of sliced fruit and a pitcher of freshly squeezed orange juice.

The old woman winked an eye at him as he entered the room and pointed him to the chair. She stood at the stove, stirring something in a large cast-iron pot. The aroma wafting around the room was mouthwatering and a hunger pang rippled through his midsection. Paul stole a quick glance toward his wristwatch, noting the time he was quickly running out of. Wondering if

Simone was on her way, or if perhaps she'd changed her mind.

“Sit!” Mama Hill snapped, seeming to read his mind. Her dark eyes narrowed slightly. “You need to eat!” She stopped stirring the pot she was standing over. “Answer the door first, though. Make yourself useful.”

Paul hesitated for a moment, then turned on his heel. He hadn't heard the doorbell, but the look the old woman threw in his direction had him thinking there might be a problem if he protested. He made his way back to the front of the home and pulled open the door. Simone and Mingus stood on the front porch. As Mingus brushed past him, entering the living space, he rolled his eyes skyward. Paul instinctively knew Simone was not a happy camper. He didn't know if he should be scared or not, but the sight of her instantly calmed his nerves.

“Hey,” he said, greeting her softly.

When Simone didn't respond, instead giving him a dirty look before she followed her brother, Paul figured it probably wasn't a good time to tell her about the two strangers being at the hospital. Laughter suddenly rang loudly from the kitchen, the matriarch in high spirits as she greeted Mingus. Paul blew a soft sigh. He closed and locked the door and moved back toward the kitchen.

Mingus was making introductions. “Mama Hill, this is my baby sister Simone. Simone, this is Mrs. Pearl Hill, but everyone calls her Mama. Mama has helped me out with a few cases in the past.”

Mama Hill pulled Simone into a warm hug. “Any family of

Mingus's is family here. Y'all sit down. We was just 'bout to have us some breakfast." She pointed them toward the table.

"It smells good, Mama. And you made your special candied bacon!" Mingus chimed as he pulled out a chair at the head of the table and sat down.

The older woman grinned, her toothy smile gleaming under the morning light. "Made it just for you. I know how much you like my bacon."

Simone looked all kinds of confused as she sat down next to her brother. She clearly had questions, but she sensed she needed to wait before asking. She was also tense, her nerves feeling like she might explode. She was angry at Paul and relieved and all she wanted was to throw herself into his arms and then slap his face for making her worry.

For the briefest moment she stared in Paul's direction, then snatched her eyes away when he sat down and stared back. There was a hint of relief in her gaze and then that sliver of anger revved back up to full throttle. Paul smiled, vaguely amused by the wealth of emotion she was struggling to contain. Mama Hill suddenly tapped him against the back of his head, snapping him back to attention.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed as he reached to rub the offending bruise.

Simone and Mingus both laughed.

"Mama was asking you a question," Mingus said.

"Sorry," Paul responded. "I wasn't paying attention, Mama

Hill. What were you saying?"

The old woman chuckled, her head shaking from side to side. "Liza is calling for you. She needs you to come downstairs."

"Who's Liza?" Simone suddenly questioned, giving him another look.

Mingus grinned, eyeing him with a raised brow.

Paul shook his head, looking slightly flustered by the sliver of jealousy that blew over her spirit. "She's a friend of your brother's. She's helping us out."

Mama Hill looked from him to Simone and back. "Take Simone downstairs with you and introduce her. Then the three of you come back up dem stairs and get you some breakfast. Tell Liza Mingus is here."

Paul nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Simone sat for a second too long before the older woman admonished them both. "Y'all ain't got all day now!"

Mingus laughed, a deep belly guffaw that made Simone shift her annoyance in his direction as she stood and followed Paul to the basement.

Chapter 5

“Dude! Did you know that the pharmaceutical industry raised prices on thousands of drugs this year? Including medications to treat arthritis, high blood pressure and diabetes? Some of these guys hauled in over \$25 billion in profits last year. That’s some serious price gouging!” Liza looked astonished as Paul and Simone went downstairs.

Paul nodded. “Americans routinely pay more for prescription drugs that are just a fraction of the cost in other countries. The bigger question is why we’re the only industrialized nation that allows pharmaceutical executives to raise prices with zero consideration for public health.”

Liza pointed her index finger at him. “This really is some shysty mess!” She shifted her gaze toward Simone. “Who are you?”

Paul tossed a look over his shoulder. “Liza, this is Simone. Simone, this is Liza, Mingus’s friend.” He emphasized the word *friend* so there was no doubt in Simone’s mind about his association with the young woman.

“You a friend of Mingus’s, too?” Liza questioned.

“Mingus is my brother. He’s upstairs, by the way. He got distracted by the food.”

Liza’s excitement shimmered across her face. “Cool beans! It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” Simone said, her eyes sweeping the room and taking in all the technology in the space.

Paul could see the questions that caused her brow to furrow. “Liza is trying to find some information for me.”

“I see. And how many laws are we breaking right now?”

“You really don’t want to know,” Liza answered, shooting her another look.

“Were you able to find anything?” Paul asked.

Liza pointed to the printer. “You know none of this is admissible in a court of law, right?”

Paul nodded, moving swiftly to the stack of paper spilling out of the machine.

Liza stood. “The CEO of Lender Pharmaceuticals is a freak, too. He has all kinds of porn on his computer.”

“Porn?” Simone questioned. “What kind of porn?”

“Golden showers seem to be his perversion of choice. Some real nasty stuff. But his emails make for interesting reading.” She suddenly jumped up excitedly. “And do you know that if he leaves the company his severance package will pay him over eighty million dollars? How crazy is that mess!”

Paul was shifting through the printed documents, having barely heard Liza’s last comments. His focus was singular, his attention distracted. He was surprised by the volume of information Liza had managed to obtain and a lab report had him crunching data in his head.

Liza shrugged her shoulders and headed for the stairs. Simone

started to follow but Paul suddenly called her name, looking up abruptly from the documents he was reading. She turned around to see what he needed.

Paul was staring at her intently, emotion flooding his face as he struggled with how to make things right between them. How to assuage her anger and get her to understand how much he appreciated her help. He was searching for the right words and struggled with finding them. How best to give her an out before they were both too deep in the midst of it to find their way out.

“Yes?”

“I would understand if this is too much for you to handle. If you didn’t want to see this through with me.”

Simone bit down against her bottom lip, twisting her hands together anxiously. “Does that mean you don’t want me to help?”

“It means I understand if you think it’s too much for you to handle.”

She gave him a nod and turned, her hand on the railing. He called after her a second time.

“Simone?”

She took a deep breath before turning back a second time, her brow raised ever so slightly. Her tone was soft, just a hint above a whisper. “Yes, Paul?”

“I still love you. I never stopped. I don’t know what may happen, but I needed you to know that.”



When Paul admitted his love for her, time seemed to come to an abrupt halt, the minute hand on every clock stalling. Words caught in Simone's chest, a wealth of emotion smothering her thoughts. They stood staring at each other, something shifting in their relationship that clearly neither had anticipated. Unable to find the words to respond, Simone could only give him a nod of her head and then she turned, almost running back up the stairs.

Hearing his declaration had been everything Simone had wanted. He still loved her. He had never stopped. Despite the time that had separated them, they had slid back into sync with each other and all she needed to do was say the words back. He needed to know she felt the same way, and she needed to ensure she didn't screw it up like the last time.

When Paul finally joined them at the breakfast table, Simone was regaling the two women with a story about Mingus and one of his many exploits as a child. Mama Hill and Liza were both laughing heartily. The matriarch gave him a stern look as she passed him the plate of bacon.

"Sorry, Mama. I didn't mean to take so long."

The old woman tossed Mingus a look and he was grinning like a Cheshire cat. "I like this one," she said, nodding eagerly. "Yes, I do. I like him a lot." She shifted her gaze toward Simone. "He's a keeper. Not that you asked my opinion, but if I were you, I'd hold on to him. Hell, if I were a few years younger I'd give you a run for your money!"

"No, we're...just..." Simone started, suddenly unsure how to

identify the two of them. There was still so much they needed to figure out and even more that needed to be said. Telling people she'd barely known for a hour that Paul was the love of her life had her feeling completely out of sorts.

"Friends. We're just friends," Paul concluded.

Simone gave him a quick look, then dropped her eyes down to her plate.

Mama Hill looked from one to the other and then she burst out laughing, her head waving from side to side. "Friends my ass!" she said. "You young people kill me! Even a blind man can see the kind of *friends* you two are!"



As soon as the meal was finished Paul headed back to the basement with Liza and Mingus. Simone hesitated just long enough for Mama Hill to point her toward the sink and the pile of dirty dishes. Her eyes widened and for a moment she almost balked, catching herself when the old woman pressed a wrinkled hand against her cheek.

"Why are you so sad?" she asked, eyeing Simone intently. "You know that young man has deep feelings for you."

Simone felt a tear slip past her lengthy lashes and Mama Hill brushed it away with a calloused thumb. She nodded. "I do. He's a great guy, but it will never work out. We're too different."

Simone hated saying those words the minute they left her mouth. Hated that she'd even had the thought and had given

it life. Every ounce of doubt and fear she had about their relationship manifested in those words, already rationalizing why them being together was destined to fail. Instead of thinking how to tell Paul she loved him back, Simone was reasoning why they shouldn't be together.

Mama Hill fanned a dismissive hand. "Girl, please! If you want it badly enough, you make it work. My late husband and I were like oil and water. That man worked my good nerve on a regular basis, but I loved everything about him. I fought hard for our marriage. Giving up would have been easy but the fight was so much sweeter."

"So how long were you two married?"

"Thirty-eight years. He passed on back nine years ago. Was sitting right here in this kitchen fussing at me when he had a heart attack and never woke up."

"I'm so sorry."

Mama Hill passed Simone a dry towel and then she turned toward the sink. "We was good as gold while we lasted, even with the challenges we faced. I missed him something awful. Wasn't sure I was going to make it when I happened upon Liza. She was just a little bitty thing and smart as a whip. Her mama was lost out here in these streets and her daddy was incarcerated. I became her foster mother and she's been here raising hell ever since." The woman chuckled, joy shining in her eyes.

She continued. "I fostered a few other strays over the years. Then last year they said I was too old. So, now it's just me and

Liza and I can't get her away from them computers long enough to meet a man. I keep telling her I want to see some grandbabies around here before I die." She laughed as she rinsed suds from a dinner plate.

Simone smiled. "My mother says the same thing. My brothers will probably give her grandkids before I or my sister do."

"How long have you and that pretty doctor been playing games with each other?"

"Games?"

"Yes. Loving on each other one day, then mad about absolutely nothing the next day."

Simone blew a soft sigh. "Since we were in college together. It's been off and on over ten years now."

Mama Hill shook her head. "Like my Douglas use to say, that's enough time to piss or get off the pot. What are you waiting for?"

Simone pondered the question, dropping the dishrag in her hand down to her side. She had often asked herself that question. When Paul had been overseas the answer had seemed obvious. Now he was back, proclaiming to still be in love with her, and she had no answer that would make an ounce of sense to anyone else.

If Paul had been solely responsible for their future, they would have been married with a dozen kids. He had always been open about wanting marriage and a family to balance his medical career. Simone hadn't needed either and earnestly believed she would be happier without the picket-fence fantasy. She had routinely stalled his quest to move their relationship

forward, convinced she didn't need a piece of paper to validate her commitment to him. She had fought him at every turn and he had still loved her. She was feeling pretty crappy about the whole thing as she brushed a fall of moisture from her cheek.

She lifted her eyes to find Mama Hill staring at her. Simone shrugged, forcing a smile to her face. She couldn't find the words to answer, struggling once again not to cry.

Mama Hill clasped a hand to her hip, the look she gave Simone scolding. "Let me give you another bit of advice you didn't ask for," she said. "Love ain't easy. In fact, it's damn hard work! But as long as that love isn't toxic, it's worth every ounce of effort you can give it. You love him and he loves you. Stop fighting it and just let yourself enjoy whatever it has for you."

Mama Hill untied the apron from around her waist. She crossed to the other side of the room to hang it on a hook near the door that led out to a rear deck. "I think I'm going to go watch me some Dr. Phil. I may fall asleep and if I do, don't y'all wake me up. Whatever trouble you two done found yourselves in will work itself out. Just trust your instincts and hold tight to each other and everything will be okay."

"Thank you, Mama," Simone said softly. "Thank you for everything."

The matriarch laughed. "Baby, thank the Lord! Pay me—advice ain't never been cheap!"

Simone laughed with her and when she disappeared behind a closed door at the end of the hallway, Simone turned toward the

basement.



“How do you not test a drug? Federal regulations demand they test any product they put on the market. There have to be test results and research data somewhere besides the damn brochure!” Paul snapped, irritation blessing his words.

He was sorting pages into individual piles and then slipping them into manila folders. With a permanent marker he jotted notes on the front of each, his scribblings only making sense to him. He met Simone’s stare as she eased her way to his side, her expression questioning as she peered down at the papers in his hand. He gave her a slight smile as he turned his attention back to Liza.

Liza tossed her hands up in frustration. “I’ve looked in every file I could get into. There’s nothing there before it hit the market.”

“And you looked everywhere?”

“Everywhere I could without setting off any alarms that would let their IT department know I was there snooping. I ain’t interested in going to jail!”

Paul closed his eyes, falling into thought. Clearly, what he had fathomed was turning out to be true. But there were still questions that needed to be answered. Things that didn’t make sense and he wasn’t sure if he was even asking the right questions or searching for the correct answers. Mostly, he needed to understand why.

Mingus cleared his throat. "You two need to get a move on it," he said. "It's starting to get too hot for you to hang around here much longer. The police superintendent wants to see you both for questioning."

Simone gasped. "Daddy called you?"

"Not yet. Parker messaged me so it's just a matter of time."

"Where should we go?" Simone asked, a wave of anxiety washing over her.

Her brother tossed Paul a look. "I'm told it's handled. Just send me a text when you get there to let me know you're safe."

Paul had opened his eyes, looking from Simone to Mingus and back. "You can still stay here with your brother," he said. "I'd understand. It might actually be the best thing for everybody."

"That's not an option," she snapped.

Silence rose full and thick between them. Paul finally nodded. "We'll be okay," he said, throwing Mingus one last look. Despite his uncertainty about what might come next, he was happy to know he hadn't run her off and Simone was as determined to be with him as he was determined to be with her.

He changed the subject. "Liza, can you give me all the info they have on the drugs they've manufactured over the last ten years?"

Liza nodded. "That's a lot of paper but if you want it, I can get it for you."

"Please," he said. "I would really appreciate it."

"You know I can put it on a flash drive."

“I know. I’m going to need hard copy. And this, too, please.” He reached into his back pocket for the storage device he’d taken from the hospital. “If you can print out everything on here and then give it to Mingus for safekeeping.”

“What’s on it?” Mingus asked, eyeing them both with a raised brow.

Paul took a deep inhale of air. “Proof. Data I’ve been collecting since I first suspected something wasn’t right.”



An hour later Simone moved to the opposite end of the large work table. She leaned in to her brother’s side, wrapping her arms around his waist as she hugged him goodbye. Mingus was on his phone with their mother, purposely avoiding answering questions about her and Paul. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hugged her back before pressing a light kiss to the top of her head, then pausing to push the mute button on his phone. “Take this,” he said, pulling a roll of one-hundred-dollar bills from his pocket and slipping it into the pocket of her jacket. “Do not, under any circumstances, use your credit cards,” he said. “If you need more, you call me.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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