

Chapter 23

When Cullen pulled up in front of Aislinn's place everything looked normal. He elbowed Keith awake. "Hey, watch the door," he said as he jumped out of the driver's seat and headed up the stairs to the main doors of the apartment building.

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Keith sat up. Looking around it took him a minute to realize where they were. This was the apartment where that girl Cullen had helped out lived. He watched the door the way Cullen asked. But he couldn't help notice the bum lying face down in the garbage next to the steps. Keith got out of the SUV and looked up and down the street nervously. It just didn't feel right.

He walked over to the poor old man lying in the garbage and turned him over. "Hey buddy, you okay?"

The old man groaned. Keith winced when he saw the bloody gash on the man's chest. Something had cut him straight through his big dirty overcoat. The old guy had a huge bump on his head as well. "Who did this to you, buddy?" Keith picked the old man up and put him in a sitting position on the ground near the steps. The old man couldn't answer. Keith pulled his cell out of his pocket and dialed 911.

Cullen took the steps up to Aislinn's door two at a time. He could smell something on the stairs that had the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. A cat of some kind. When he got to her door it was slightly open. Fear and anger boiled in the pit of his stomach as Cullen threw the door open and rushed in.

There was no sign of anything being wrong. The apartment wasn't any more disheveled than it had been when he was here before. It almost looked as though the door had just been left open. The scent of the cat wasn't any stronger here than it had been in the hall. He figured that if there had been a struggle of some kind that the scent should be stronger. Maybe she went with someone willingly. Cullen couldn't tell anything from the look of the place except that Aislinn wasn't there.

On the table he noticed her purse and headed over to it. Inside were her keys, her wallet, and her cell phone. He picked it up and looked around again as if Aislinn might come walking out of the bathroom and yell at him for not knocking. She wouldn't have left here without taking her purse if she had gone somewhere willingly with someone. At the same time he didn't have any proof that anything had happened either. He was too tired to think.

Cullen sat her purse back down on the table and headed out the door. He took a deep breath in the hall. He could smell her there. But that could just be because she lived here. He walked down the steps, considering that he could wait around and see if she came back for her purse. When he walked out the main doors he found Keith bent over a bum and talking on his cell phone.

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One look at the bum had the feeling of fear returning to Cullen's stomach. When Keith hung up he looked at Cullen. "I called an ambulance. We should get out of here before it shows up. I don't have the answers to the questions they'll be asking."

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Cullen walked out of the elevator and through his office/living room. His rooms included a main room right off the elevator that took up most of the penthouse area. On one side there was a large television with a comfortable couch positioned directly in front of it. He didn't spend much time in the great room with the others. When he felt the need for television he was much more likely to watch by himself. On the other side of the large room there was a desk and a number of file cabinets along with his computer. His favorite part of the room though was a carpeted area against the far wall with one large arm chair and the wall itself was lined with bookshelves. He had a large collection of antique history books and a few modern fiction books.

He stared at his favorite chair and his books and sighed. He hadn't had any recreational time in quite a while. Cullen promised himself that as soon as all this was taken care of he'd get a new book or two, lock himself in, and read for a few days.

He headed for a door at the back of the room. He was already pulling his shirt off over his head as he entered his bedroom. Then his cell rang. Cullen dropped his shirt to the floor and dug in his pocket for the hated source of the noise. He heard the plastic crack as his hand closed around the phone. He pulled it from his pocket with the serious intent of throwing it from the wall. When he saw that the caller was Keith he flipped it open and growled in a low warning tone into the receiver. "I thought you told me to get some sleep."

"Yeah yeah. Changed my mind. You need to come down to the great room. I can't decide whether we have a problem or a fortuitous circumstance."

"No. Figure it out then let me know tomorrow," Cullen answered.

"You'll be sorry if you don't get down here. And I'm not going to take the heat for it." Then Keith heard a click. He wasn't sure if Cullen was coming down or not. He was just contemplating calling him again when the elevator doors opened and Cullen came walking into the great room, barefoot, shirtless and looking as though he was going to kill someone.

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