

# THE BELIAL STONE

*Book 1 of the Belial Series*

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"They elevated me aloft to heaven.  
I proceeded until I arrived  
at a wall built with stones of crystal."

*Book of Enoch, 14: 9-10*



# PROLOGUE

## TWO YEARS AGO

### HAVRE, MONTANA

THE DIRT DRIVE WAS DOING A NUMBER ON THE MERCEDES. IT DIPPED AND dived with the bumps. Watching it approach, Kenny Coleman's stomach felt like it was doing the same. The last time he'd been this nervous, it was proposing to his Mary.

"It's just a professor. No big deal," he muttered to himself. The butterflies in his stomach, however, ignored him, continuing their maniacal flying.

The Mercedes rolled to a stop in a cloud of dust in front of his porch. Lifting his head, his old Australian shepherd emitted a low growl.

Surprised, Kenny reached down from his rocking chair and patted him on the head. "Hush now, Blue."

The dog quieted. But as the car door opened, he growled again. Kenny could feel the dog's body tense as he got to his feet. Pushing himself from the rocker, Kenny grabbed hold of Blue's collar. When the driver stepped into view, Blue emitted a feral snarl and lunged for the steps, nearly yanking Kenny's arm off.

Kenny struggled to hold him back. "No, Blue, no!"

While Kenny might be pushing sixty-five, his life as a cattleman had given him muscle. He wrapped his beefy arms around the dog's torso, carrying him back to the house, ignoring the sting as claws raked his forearms.

Kicking open the front door, he half-shoved, half-threw the dog across the threshold, slamming the door shut behind him.

Stepping back, he gaped at the door as Blue slammed his body into it, again and again.

*What in the world?* Kenny stared down at his forearms. Angry red welts crisscrossed the skin. They were from an animal who'd let his grandkids flop on him while they watched cartoons. In the twelve years he'd had him, he'd barely heard him growl.

Blue was getting up there, just like Kenny was. He didn't want to think that maybe the final trip to the vet was coming sooner rather than later.

With a deep breath, he pushed his concerns for his dog's uncharacteristic behavior to the back of his mind. He felt the professor's eyes on his back and felt the flush creep up his neck. *Damn*. This was not the first impression he wanted to make.

Rolling down his green flannel sleeves, he walked down the stairs and across the expanse in front of his farmhouse.

"I'm sorry, Professor Gideon," Kenny stammered out. "He's never like that. I don't know what got into him."

"No harm done, Mr. Coleman. I appreciate you taking the time to show me your find." A polite smile graced the blond professor's angular face, but that politeness didn't quite reach his cool blue eyes.

Back in the day, Kenny knew he was considered a handsome man—strong and tall with thick, dark hair. The girls had loved to run their hands through it. And in spite of his full head of now white hair, he was vain enough to think he still was.

But he knew this professor was what currently stood for handsome: slim, with pale blue eyes perched above a patrician nose and sharp cheekbones. Dressed in expensive slacks, a brown suede jacket, and shiny loafers, he was one of those "metrosexuals" his daughter talked about.

Kenny couldn't say he ever really understood the appeal of a man

who was pretty, but hell, he never did understand much about what was cool.

Extending his calloused hand, Kenny spoke a little louder than usual, trying to block out Blue's unending barks. "I'd really like to know what I've found. I just can't figure out what something like that is doing on my ranch."

The professor's hand was soft, the shake just shy of limp. "Well, let's take a look. How did you come across it?"

"It was the strangest thing. I was looking for a stray calf one day, and I literally stumbled over the tip of it."

"How much was showing at first?"

Kenny shrugged. "Not much. Maybe four, five inches. It was just such a strange-looking rock, all black with those brown and green veins running through it. I'd never seen one like that anywhere around these parts. So, I marked the spot and went back later to dig it out. I couldn't believe it when I saw it. I took some pictures and posted them online to see if anyone could tell me anything about it. Less than an hour later, I got the call from you."

"Have you spoken with anyone else about it?"

He avoided the professor's eyes, less he read the desperation there. The last few years had been lean and if this strange rock was worth something, well Kenny could definitely use the money. "No. I wasn't sure it was anything important."

"And no one else has called?" Gideon's gaze was intent.

"No, no. You're the only one. I thought for sure I'd get a couple more people interested. But my pictures disappeared from the site I posted them on and I couldn't repost them. I'm not real good with the computer."

Realizing he might need to sell this professor on the object, he spoke quickly. "It really is an amazing sight, though. You won't be disappointed."

"Well, let's have a look, shall we?" Gideon gestured for him to lead the way.

Behind him, Blue's growls had turned to desperate howls. A chill crawled up his spine as he flicked a glance back at the door, unsure. Blue just didn't act like this. Maybe this was a bad idea.

But he knew the medical bills for his grandson were piling up. This strange rock might be his only chance of making some extra money. He sighed. There really was no choice. And besides, he was just a professor.

With a nod, he led the professor to a trail created by wild horses and buffalo generations ago. And they walked, Kenny tried making conversation. He talked about the Sioux and the Crow that used to summer in the area and pointed out where he'd hunted for arrowheads as a kid. The professor only grunted in response.

Small talk about the weather and questions about the professor's research resulted in equally unenthusiastic responses. Soon, Kenny just lapsed into silence.

For the first time Kenny could recall, he felt the isolation of his ranch press down on him. He knew there was no one around for miles. Montana was the size of New England, with only the population of Rhode Island. Generally, the isolation of his ranch was the reason he loved it. But walking next to the professor, he couldn't help but feel uneasy.

It wasn't just Blue's reaction, which, to be honest, scared the hell out of him. It was like the dog had seen the devil himself. It was also that this man looked nothing like a professor. He was too young, too good-looking, and too well dressed.

And there was something about him that just felt off. The man had barely spared a glance at the snow-topped mountains that were a backdrop to Kenny's property. He'd never had anyone come to the ranch that hadn't commented on that incredible view.

Walking next to him, Kenny was reminded of the time when, as a kid, he'd been stalked by a mountain lion. He'd had a vague sense of uneasiness that day. But until the cat screeched as it leapt out at him, he hadn't realized the true danger he was in. That day, his dad had cut the lion in half with a shotgun. Kenny gave the professor another surreptitious glance and couldn't help wishing he'd brought his shotgun along today.

"Are we getting close?" Gideon asked.

Startled, Kenny stumbled. Shaking his head at his clumsiness, he pointed to an arrangement of three small boulders twenty yards away



that stood out in the flat, almost treeless ground. "Just beyond those boulders is where I started digging. I still haven't been able to get to the bottom of the rock."

Gideon nodded and picked up his pace. As he passed the boulders, he came to an abrupt stop and stared at the small excavation.

The monolith stood five feet tall, although it was obvious there was still more buried beneath the earth. At first glance, the obelisk appeared smooth. Kenny's first thought had been that it looked like one of those fancy granite countertops. On closer inspection, though, the niches carefully carved into the black stone depicting figures and what resembled Egyptian hieroglyphs became clear.

Seconds stretched into minutes as the professor simply stared at the rock in silence. Kenny's nervousness increased. "Uh, Professor Gideon, are you all right?"

Gideon's eyes snapped to Kenny. The anger and longing in those eyes sent Kenny a step back, his heart pounding.

But when Gideon spoke, his voice was calm. "It's an amazing sight, isn't it? Would it be all right if I went closer?"

The professor's words reduced Kenny's fears, making him feel foolish. *What the hell is wrong with me today? He's just a professor interested in my find.*

"Sure, sure. After all, you're the expert." Kenny watched the professor eschew the ladder he'd placed in the hole and gracefully leap down.

Gideon reverently touched the stone, tracing some of the carvings with his index finger. "Finally," he murmured.

After a few moments of internal debate, Kenny's curiosity won out over his uneasiness. He clambered down to stand next to the man. "So, any idea where it came from? It kind of looks like something you'd expect to find in Egypt or down in Central America or some other ancient place."

Gideon looked over at Kenny. "Actually, this site predates those other sites by quite a significant margin."

"Really?" Kenny asked, astonished. "Even older than the pyramids?"

"Yes. Even older than that." He pointed to a spot on the artifact about three quarters of the way up. "Do you see this mark here?"

Kenny squinted at the etching. "That little circle?"

"Yes. That little circle is something I've been trying to find for an incredibly long time."

Kenny's eyes shifted to the professor. The man couldn't be any older than twenty-nine. This younger generation seemed to have a different view of time than his generation.

"Hmm," he murmured. "What is it?"

"Why, it's the end of the world," Gideon said with a slow smile.

"What?" Kenny glanced over at Gideon, thinking he must have misunderstood him.

Gideon turned to face him. His smile looked almost lethal and what Kenny had thought were pale blue eyes seemed to have darkened. "You've been very helpful, Mr. Coleman."

The words were polite, but the tone sent the fears Kenny had been pushing down right back to the surface. The professor pulled a gun from under his suit jacket. Kenny didn't hesitate. He shoved the professor and scrambled out of the hole.

Looking back over his shoulder, Kenny expected to feel a bullet between his shoulder blades at any minute. Instead, he saw Gideon still in the hole, smiling at him. He was even nodding. Kenny didn't understand the man's reaction and he had no interest in figuring it out.

Kenny panted as he sprinted for the house. He didn't hear the professor behind him. He hoped it stayed that way until he reached one of his guns. He had a shot if he could just get to his truck or the barn. He kept rifles in both of them. That hope kept pushing him forward as his legs turned to jelly, and his breathing to sharp, painful gasps.

The farmhouse came into view and the sound of Blue still barking urged him on.

Footfalls echoed through the empty space behind him. Panic charged through Kenny's chest. He knew he should keep running, looking behind would only slow him down, but he couldn't help himself.

A hundred yards back, the professor sprinted towards him, his legs

moving like train pistons. He didn't even look winded. How had he caught up with him so fast?

Kenny dug down deep for a last reserve of energy, but his body wouldn't comply. He was slowing. Dark spots were beginning to form around the edges of his vision, causing him to stumble and weave.

The professor had no such affliction. Kenny could feel his attention focused on him. The pounding of his feet maintained their steady cadence. He kept coming, like a missile locked on its target, covering the distance to him in seconds. As he caught up with him, he didn't pull him to stop.

To Kenny's astonishment, the professor started to run next to him. He glanced over at the man in terror. Gideon just smiled in response.

Then in a blur of motion, Gideon sprinted a few feet ahead. He came to a dead stop and whirled to face Kenny.

Kenny tried to dodge around him, but he was too exhausted and too slow. Gideon's hand snaked out and easily grabbed him by the shoulder. He turned Kenny around and pulled him close.

Kenny struggled and managed to throw a feeble right hook at Gideon's ribs.

Gideon smoothly blocked the punch and trapped both of Kenny's arms with one of his own. He leaned down into Kenny's terrified face and smiled, pressing the gun to his chest.

"Good for you, Mr. Coleman. Everyone should have such a sense of self-preservation. You'd be amazed at how few people actually do. And you've given a good effort, especially for a man of your age. You should be proud of yourself."

Kenny wanted to rail at the man. He wanted to scream at him for doing this to him and plead with him to spare his life, if only for the sake of his daughter and grandchildren. But all he managed to rasp out was a single question. "Why?"

Gideon's voice was almost a caress when he answered. His eyes looked strangely bright, as if covered in a sheen of tears. "It's the only way for my misery to end. You have brought my search to its conclusion, Mr. Coleman. I will always appreciate that." And with a beatific smile, he pulled the trigger three times.

Pain slashed through Kenny, and then, blessed numbness. He felt

himself being lifted as the echoes of the gunshots retreated. He thought of his daughter and his heart already beating unsteadily, felt even heavier. *I'm sorry, sweetheart.*

Blue's frantic barking changed to mournful howls as they approached the farmhouse. *Run, Blue, run*, Kenny shouted in his mind. But the only words that were heard weren't his.

"Don't worry, Blue," Gideon murmured. "I haven't forgotten about you."

# CHAPTER 1

## DEWITT, NEW YORK

PROFESSOR DELANEY MCPHEARSON GLANCED AT THE CLOCK ABOVE THE white kitchen cabinets. She was barely a quarter of the way through the tall stack of undergrad criminology papers in front of her.

"Crap, crap, crap," she muttered. She needed to move if she was going to make her self-defense class.

"Crap, crap, crap," Max Simmons, her roommate Kati's three-year-old son, repeated from his spot on the floor.

Wincing, Laney gave Kati an apologetic smile. "Sorry. Forgot he was there."

Jotting down two more quick remarks, she whisked the papers off the table and placed them next to the larger stack of still-to-be graded ones on the kitchen island.

She knelt down to Max and ruffled his sun-kissed brown hair. "That's a bad word, Max. I shouldn't have said it."

Max nodded at her. His bright blue eyes, which matched the Sesame Street t-shirt he wore, were solemn. "Crap bad."

Laney restrained the urge to smile. "Yes, bad."

Over Max's head, Kati gave her an exasperated look even as she struggled not to smile herself. Mother and son shared the same soft,

brown hair, slim build, and button nose. Kati's hair, now in a short pixie cut, only accentuated the similarities between them. The only difference was their eye color: Kati's were a deep brown.

"You better move if you're going to make your class," Kati warned as she nodded toward the clock.

"I'm going. I'm going." With a quick kiss to the top of Max's head, Laney jogged to the stairs.

Taking them two at a time, she ducked into her room, and rummaged through her dresser for her workout clothes.

Pulling off her pajamas, she struggled into the sports bra and yanked on a deep purple t-shirt. Pulling her long, wavy, red hair into a ponytail, she had just slid into the black pants when her phone rang.

*I have no time for whoever this is*, she thought, even as she reached over to her nightstand to check the caller ID. She smiled and flipped the phone open, putting it on speaker. "Drew. Where the hell have you been?"

Drew Master's familiar chuckle made Laney smile even wider. She pictured him sitting at his desk, his mop of curly brown hair falling over his deep blue eyes.

Her uncle had always hoped the two of them would turn their platonic friendship into a romantic one. At least, he'd hoped it up until she explained that the main stumbling block was their identical taste in men.

"Sorry, Lanes. Work's been insane."

"See? You're working too hard. You should have taken that position with my uncle." Laney's uncle, Father Patrick Delaney, was one of the Roman Catholic Church's premier archaeologists. He'd gotten custody of Laney after her parents had died in a car crash when she was eight. As a result, she'd spent almost every summer at one dig site or another since childhood.

Since Laney met Drew freshman year of college, he'd spent every summer with them as well. Even when they went to different doctorate programs, they'd stayed close. When Drew finished his doctorate, her uncle had offered him a position with one of the Vatican's dig sites. Drew turned him down. Instead he'd agreed to work

with Dr. Arthur Priddle. Not a good call in Laney's opinion, but also not her decision.

"You know I think the world of your uncle. But Arthur's research is much more in line with my own. And, at the time, I thought it would come with fewer strings."

"Not the case, huh?" Laney asked as she grabbed socks from the drawer and started to pull them on.

Drew snorted. "Hardly. He's been running me ragged. I don't think he understands that we're colleagues and I'm not his grad student. And he's been even more security conscious than usual. The man has taken paranoia to a whole new extreme."

Laney caught her reflection in the mirror, her dark green eyes reflecting her concern. This wasn't like Drew. He wasn't a complainer. He'd spent one summer in Egypt covered in bug bites, in the sweltering heat, with an unknown rash that caused his feet to swell to the point that he'd had to hobble around in sandals two sizes too big. He'd barely mumbled a complaint.

Seeming to sense her worry, he added some bounce into his next words. "I mean, it's intense, but good. Priddle really has a way of looking at things from a new angle and developing an innovative approach."

Laney opened her closet, looking for her gym shoes, and grimaced. "Right. Innovative and without any social skills or conscience."

At Drew's silence, she sighed, realizing she wasn't helping. "Sorry. Ignore that. I just don't like you being so far away. So tell me, how are you doing? Really doing? And no placating."

Drew let out another laugh, this one less good-natured and more nervous. "Okay, maybe things are a little stressful right now. But you know Priddle, perfection is his goal."

Although his tone was light, Laney heard a heavier emotion under the words. "Drew, is everything okay?"

He hesitated before answering. "I don't know. Like I said, he's been even more intense than usual lately. We've got this new project we're working on, and he won't let me talk about it with anyone. And I mean anyone."

Leaning down to tie her sneakers, Laney tried to think of a way to give her thoughts an optimistic spin. "Well, he's not exactly known for his openness. And besides, his research is so esoteric and off the map, it's often dismissed before anyone really gives it a chance. Maybe he's just trying to make sure word doesn't leak out before he can present his entire argument." She paused. "Are you regretting your choice to go work with him?"

"No. I mean, I really think ancient civilizations hold the answers to who we are and where we're going. There's so much out there we can't explain—who built the sphinx, why the older pyramids are more technologically advanced than the newer ones, the maps of Antarctica that predate our history. And those are only a few. There are thousands of examples of unexplainable history. Pre-historic civilizations are the only possible answer. And he's the archaeologist doing the most innovative research. So, I don't regret it. I just wish . . ."

"He was a normal human being?" Laney deadpanned.

Drew barked out a laugh. "Exactly."

Laney didn't disagree with Drew's interest. Before she'd turned to criminology, she'd thought hard about archaeology, for many of the same reasons that Drew had mentioned. According to mainstream archeology, the dawn of civilization began around 3,000 BC. Yet, there were more and more archaeological sites and discoveries of great skill that were being uncovered that predated that arbitrary timeline—the Piri Reis map, the research of Steen-McIntyre, Puma Punku.

None of which could be explained by the traditional timeline. So she knew why Drew was so passionate about the topic. She just really wished the academic who was top in the field wasn't also such an ass.

Grabbing her exercise bag off the bed, Laney headed down the stairs. "Well, at least I got you to laugh. And I hate to do this to you, but can I call you later? I'm heading to my self-defense class."

"You still teaching that?"

"Yup. Every Saturday, me and Rocky have a group of anywhere between five and twenty women we take through the paces." Rocky, a.k.a. Detective Rochelle Martinez, was a pint-sized powerhouse. Six months ago, she and Laney had started offering a free women's self-defense class Saturday mornings at the Y.



"Maybe that's what I need—some martial arts. I liked those classes you took me to in undergrad."

Laney smiled. She'd been studying martial arts since she'd been a kid. And she always loved introducing people to the discipline. But Drew, while a gym enthusiast, was not exactly the most coordinated student she'd ever taught. "Well, I think exercise is always good," she said diplomatically, as she cut back through the kitchen, waved goodbye to Kati, and headed outside.

Walking down the porch stairs, she crossed the lawn to her silver Pathfinder. "I really do need to go, though. Can I call you later?"

"Um, yeah. Actually, though, I do have a favor to ask."

"Anything,," she said as she unlocked her truck and opened the driver's door.

"Any chance you could read over a paper I've been working on?"

"I thought you weren't allowed to share any of that work," she teased as she threw her bag into the passenger seat.

"I'm not. But I thought maybe if I showed him something that we could send out, it would kind of pave the way for some of the bigger findings we're going to be revealing down the road. Before I give it to him, though, it has to be perfect. I want to make sure there are no glaring errors in the logic, or God forbid, a typo. But I really need you to keep this on the down low."

Settling behind the steering wheel, Laney started the truck before she placed the phone in the dashboard holder. "Not a problem. I have some papers to grade tonight. I can look at it tomorrow, though, and get some comments back to you by around lunch. Will that work?"

She could practically feel Drew's relief pour through the phone. "That would be incredible."

She started to back out of the drive. "What's the paper on, anyway?"

Drew was silent.

Laney waited for a slow-moving Honda to pass and maneuvered out onto the street. "Drew?"

The sigh was barely audible, but she caught it. "Promise me you'll be open-minded?"

"Of course."

"It's on an ancient technologically-advanced society that existed prior to written history."

Laney slammed on the brakes and stared at her phone, knowing exactly what Drew was trying to avoid saying. "Drew, are you talking about what I think you're talking about?"

"Yes. It's about Atlantis."

## CHAPTER 2

### SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

A FEW STRAY BEER BOTTLES RATTLED ALONG THE STREET, BLOWN BY THE wind. Gideon curled his lip in distaste. Neighborhoods like this disgusted him. It was populated almost solely by undergrads, with a smattering of graduate students and a few young professors who had not yet made enough money to move to better accommodations.

The houses weren't rundown because of economic shortcomings, but because of neglect. The residents didn't take pride in where they lived.

Although it was late morning, the neighborhood remained quiet. Given the hours traditionally kept by this population, that was not surprising. In fact, Gideon had been counting on it.

He'd watched the couple on the first floor of the prewar-era colonial drive away a few minutes ago. Like most of the houses on the block, this one was broken into two apartments. His target lived on the second floor. He watched the street for another few minutes, noting little activity.

Easing himself out of his car, he straightened his trench coat, pulling up the collar against the slight rain. He crossed the street and tried the front door. Unlocked. He sighed. *This is simply too easy.*

He passed the entrance to the first floor apartment and headed up

the stairs. At the landing, he followed the hallway back to the front of the house.

Pausing before the only door, he listened for any sounds from inside. A chair scraped along the floor and someone crossed the room.

Gideon rapped on the door three times, tapping his foot as he waited for the occupant to answer. He heard the locks being undone and restrained the urge to roll his eyes. No asking who it was, simple trust that nothing of harm could be on the other side of the door.

The man who opened his doors was in his late twenties, of medium height, with a mop of curly brown hair, jeans in need of a good wash, and a rumpled Henley.

"Can I help you?"

Gideon smiled. "Drew Masters?"

Drew nodded.

Gideon took a step forward, crowding Drew back into the apartment. "We need to have a little chat."

## CHAPTER 3

### DEWITT, NEW YORK

MUSCLES ACHING, LANEY SETTLED INTO THE BATH WITH A CONTENTED sigh. After the self-defense class, she'd stopped by the Kung Fu school for a little sparring.

The plan had been to stay for a half hour, tops, and then get right back to her papers. But Sifu had decided to run a bracket. Everyone paired up and the winners fought the winners of the other pairings until only one remained.

She'd tried to beg off, knowing if she didn't, she'd be up all night grading. But then one of the new guys made a snarky comment about women getting black belts due to affirmative action, and she was in. She smiled. The victory was good, but man, it hurt.

The house phone rang just as she started to doze off. She opened her eyes with a groan. *I'm not getting it. There is nothing short of fire that can get me out of this tub right now.*

Kati and Max had left an hour ago to spend the week with Kati's parents in Ohio. Quiet in this house was a rare and wonderful thing. Laney wasn't giving it up, short of an emergency—a really desperate emergency.

But then thoughts of her ungraded papers replicating like rabbits in the kitchen seeped into her brain. With a muttered curse, she pulled

herself from the tub and dried off. Throwing on some sweats, she did a quick run-through with the hair dryer and headed back down the stairs. Pouring a giant mug of coffee, she settled down once again in front of her papers with a sigh.

Twenty minutes later, she was deep into a paper on the role of neuropsychological deficits in violent crime when the front bell rang. She looked at the clock. Six o'clock. She couldn't think of who it could possibly be.

Walking to the door, still holding her paper in her hand, she peeped through the transom glass next to the door. Smiling, she undid the locks and flung open the door. "Uncle Patrick. I didn't know you were coming by."

"I called. I guess you didn't hear me," her uncle said as he stepped into the house.

His strong Scottish brogue seemed more pronounced in the quiet. She'd overheard one of his parishioners describe him as a redheaded Paul Newman.

Laney couldn't disagree. With his strong cheekbones, bright blue eyes, and just the smallest hint of grey around the temples, he did bear an uncanny resemblance to the actor.

She stepped back to let him in. "I was in the bath. We ran a bracket at the school."

He pulled her into a hug and held her longer than normal.

She pulled back and looked into his eyes. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "How'd you do in the bracket?"

"I won. But they gave me a good run for my money."

"You really should get your instructor belt. You could have had it years ago."

She waved his words away, leading him back into the kitchen. "I don't need it. I'm happy with my current belt."

"What's all this?" he asked, eyeing the papers covering the table.

"First term papers of the year." She held up the paper she was grading. "Believe it or not, one of my students actually wrote a good one. Miracles do happen."

"So I've heard." He smiled, but it lacked its usual warmth.

She frowned. Her uncle could always be counted on to bring up the

energy level in a room. Today, though, a worried expression marred his usually upbeat countenance. And his ramrod-straight posture, a remnant of his Marine Corps past and strict exercise routine, was also noticeably absent.

"Are you sure everything's okay?" She asked.

He cleared his throat. "It's just . . ." He looked around the room, anywhere except at her. His gaze locked on her coffee pot. "Could I get some of that coffee?"

Alarm bells shrieked in her head. Her uncle never drank coffee. Tea, yes, practically by the bucket. But coffee? No.

She paused before nodding. She knew from experience her uncle would tell her what was going on when he was ready and not before. Growing up, it had frustrated her to no end.

"Of course." She gestured at the table. "Take a seat."

In less than a minute, she'd placed a coffee before him. Settling back in her chair, she waited until he took a shaky sip. "Okay, you're beginning to scare the heck out of me. What's going on?"

With a sigh, he placed the mug back on the table. His hands shook. When he looked up, there was a sheen of tears in his eyes. "It's about Drew."

Even as her stomach plummeted, she shook her head. "Drew? Nothing's wrong with Drew. I just spoke with him this morning."

He leaned forward in his chair, his surprise and intensity evident. "You did? What did he say?"

Laney recounted their conversation. "So I told him I'd review the paper, and get it back to him tomorrow."

Patrick's shoulders dropped at the words. He reached out, taking both of Laney's hands in his. "That won't be necessary, sweetheart. I got a call from a colleague of mine out at Saint Paul. Drew. . ."

"No." Laney tried to pull her hands away and ignore the icy fingers of fear that ran down her back. "Of course it's necessary. I promised him I'd get it back to him."

Her uncle's hands trembled and tears ran down his cheeks. A lump the size of a golf ball appeared in the back of her throat as her own tears threatened.

"I'm sorry, honey. Drew died this morning. He committed suicide."

## CHAPTER 4

HER UNCLE WANTED TO STAY, BUT LANEY NEEDED TO BE ALONE. SHE needed to grieve, yell, and break things. If her uncle were here, she'd be focused on him and how he was reacting. But right now she needed to be selfish, just for tonight.

On the front porch, he hugged her tight. "I'll be back in the morning, right after 7:30 Mass. I'll bring bagels, okay?"

Laney concentrated on keeping her voice even. "Sounds like a plan."

He gave her one last searching look. She knew if she showed any sign of despair, he'd never leave. "I'm okay. I just need some time to myself. I need to . . . process."

Leaning over, he kissed her on the cheek. "You call me if you need me, okay?"

She nodded, but didn't speak. She knew if she opened her mouth, the ocean of tears she was holding back would burst forth. Without another word, he headed down the porch stairs to his car. He wiped at his eyes as he did so and Laney knew how much he was hurting. He really loved Drew. Laney stood on the porch and watched until he drove off.

Her arms wrapped around her, the chill crawled up legs until it covered her whole body. She felt like she'd been dropped in an ice bath.



Her whole body trembling, she walked back into the house. The tears she'd held back rained down her cheeks. Closing the door behind her, she focused on the stairs. *Just make it to the stairs*, she ordered herself. *Just there.*

Her knees gave out just before she reached them. Pulling herself to the bottom step, she collapsed, her back against the wall. The rain of tears was now a waterfall. She squeezed her legs to her chest, as if somehow she could provide herself with some comfort.

This wasn't possible. He was fine this morning. There was nothing in his voice to indicate he was that desperate . . . Was there? Had she missed something?

Replaying the conversation in her mind, she shook her head. No, something was wrong here. There was nothing to suggest Drew was suicidal. He was the most upbeat person she'd ever known. He wouldn't have killed himself. There was no way.

Her conviction drove her to her feet. "He wouldn't have killed himself," she said, needing to hear the words out loud.

Swatting at the tears on her cheeks, she walked into the kitchen. Pulling a glass from the cabinet, she filled it with water and took a long drink. *Okay, if he didn't kill himself, it must have been an accident. But what happened?*

She knew the police wouldn't reveal any information to her. But maybe they'd tell something to another cop. She pulled out her phone and punched in Rocky's number. "Detective Martinez."

"Rocky. I need some help." She quickly explained about Drew. "They're saying it's a suicide. But I know him. He wouldn't have killed himself. Can you find out anything?"

"Give me a couple minutes. I'll call you back."

A couple of minutes turned out to be over an hour. Laney tried to grade some papers while she waited. But her mind kept wandering back to Drew. She gave up when she could no longer read the words through the tears.

She needed to do something with her hands, something that would distract her. She unloaded the dishwasher, folded laundry, filled the dishwasher, swept the kitchen floor.

The whole time, doubts flooded her mind. Had she missed some-

thing? Should she have called more? Should she have pushed him more when her uncle offered him the job with the Church?

With each new question, she cleaned harder. She was about to tackle the bathroom when her phone rang. "Rocky?"

"Yeah, Laney. How you doing?"

The calm tone made Laney go cold. "What'd you find?"

"You might want to sit down."

She pulled out a kitchen chair and sank into it. "Okay. Tell me."

"I'm sorry, Laney. Drew hung himself."

Her body jolted at the words. A vision of Drew, lifeless and hanging, flashed across her mind.

Rocky continued, oblivious to Laney's response. "Apparently, a friend stopped by. They were supposed to go to lunch. When Drew didn't answer, he used his spare key to open the door. He said Drew sometimes got caught up in work and didn't hear the door."

A memory from college ghosted across her mind. Eight friends had shown up at her and Drew's place once for a night of drinking. Drew had been lost in his work, oblivious to the party that had broken out around him. An hour after everyone arrived, he'd looked up, shocked, when she'd handed him a beer.

Rocky's voice was somber. "He found him hanging from the ceiling fan and called the police."

Laney rocked in her chair, tears streaming down her face, a hitch in her voice. "There's no mistake? They're sure it was a suicide?"

"They're pretty sure. I'm so sorry, honey."

Standing, Laney paced the room. "No. You don't understand. He wouldn't do this." Her voice broke. She paused, stared up at the ceiling, and willed the tears back.

Taking a deep breath, she continued. "Was there anything off in the apartment? Anything missing?"

"No . . . nothing was missing, according to the friend."

Laney pounced on the hesitation in Rocky's voice. "But there was something, wasn't there?"

"Well, there was just this one thing. Everything was there, like I said. But his laptop was completely wiped."

Laney thought of the file Drew had sent her. "Wiped?"

"Yeah. Apparently, there were no data files, no programs except the basics that came with the model. In fact, they said that if they didn't know any better, they would have thought it was brand new. But the friend ID'd it. They figured Drew wiped it before... well, just before."

Laney's brain struggled to make sense of what Rocky was telling her. "How did they find that out? Why did they check the computer?"

"They were looking for a suicide note. He'd printed one out, but they didn't see it right away. It fell behind a dresser. So they checked the laptop for one, and realized it had been wiped. If they'd found that note, they probably wouldn't have checked the laptop at all."

"It wasn't a suicide, Rocky. And Drew would never wipe out all his work. Somebody did this to him."

"I know you're upset, honey. But all the evidence points to a suicide. You need to accept that and let yourself grieve. Why don't I come over? We can talk."

"No," Laney barked and then closed her eyes, softening her tone. "Sorry, sorry. It's just a lot to take in. I think I just need to be alone right now."

Rocky was silent for a moment. "Okay. But if you need anything, you call me, all right?"

"All right. And thanks, Rocky."

Laney closed the phone and stared out the kitchen window. The backyard was bathed in shadows. She pulled the blinds shut, the sight making her feel more alone.

She ran her hands through her hair. This wasn't right. Why would Drew wipe his hard drive?

She shook her head. He wouldn't. Drew was proud of his work. He would never just let it disappear.

*Unless he was desperate*, a small part of her brain whispered. But she shut the voice down. No. Until she knew otherwise, she was going to trust her gut. She and Drew had been friends for over ten years. She knew him. If he were ever despairing, he would reach out for help. He would ask *her*.

A chill shot through her and her head jerked up. The file. He said he was sending her a file. What if he'd asked for help and she hadn't known?

She flew up the stairs and into her office, guilt and fear dogging her steps. Flipping open her laptop, she hit the power button.

After an agonizing wait for it to boot up, she entered her password and made her way to her email program. Scrolling through the unsolicited ads and emails from students and colleagues, she found the email from Drew, entitled: For Your Eyes Only :). She smiled at the emoticon.

Moving the cursor so it hovered above the email, she took a deep breath and then double-clicked. A dialogue box opened:

*Hey, Laney. Thanks for letting me vent earlier. I think I just needed someone to listen. I've attached the file. Can you read it and get back to me with any comments? You are a lifesaver!*

*And I was thinking, I've got some free time coming up in a few weeks. Mind if I come up for a visit? It'd be great to see you and your uncle. It's been way too long.*

*Love ya lots,  
Drew*

She stared at the screen, trying to find some hidden meaning in Drew's words. But there was none. It was just what it appeared to be: a message asking for help with a paper and about getting together in the future. Nothing sinister. Nothing despairing. Just normal.

Tears once again threatened, but this time they were tinged with relief. He hadn't killed himself. She knew he hadn't. So what had happened?

Laney glanced at the attached file link. She moved the mouse to click on it and paused. *Not quite yet.*

She ran down the stairs and found her keys. Sprinting back to the office, she inserted the flash drive attached to her key ring and copied the file.

"Probably just being paranoid," she muttered.

She stared at the screen before forcing herself to click on the file. A

Word document opened up, entitled: The Belial Stone. She smiled. Drew always did like making waves with his titles.

And the term Belial would certainly do that. Depending upon the source you were reading, Belial denoted either wickedness or even the Devil himself. The term appeared in the Bible multiple times as well as in a number of Gnostic Gospels.

It was a topic she knew well. Her and Drew had developed a senior thesis for their anthropology course on the topic. It had incorporated the final apocalyptic battle between the Sons of Belial and the Children of the Light depicted in the War Scroll. But she'd never heard of the term Belial associated with a stone before.

She started reading the first few sentences, Drew's writing style so familiar to her she felt like he was in the room with her. Then the horrible reality crashed down on her.

Drew was dead.

Tears again rolled down her cheeks. She stifled a sob. She wasn't ready to read this, not yet. She closed down the file and ejected the flash drive.

An image of Drew when they'd met freshman year of college popped into her mind. He'd been hopelessly lost in the library, and she'd been equally confused. Together, they'd found the books they needed. Realizing they were both majoring in anthropology, they spent most of their time together from that point on. They'd been each other's shoulder when their love lives had careened off the rails and the person they could always count on for a laugh. He was the brother she'd never had. And now he was gone.

This time she couldn't stifle the sob that escaped her lips. And she didn't try to stop those that followed. She slid off the chair and onto the floor, giving in to the tears as grief enveloped her.

At the edges of her mind, however, a single question whispered: If Drew hadn't killed himself, then who had?

## CHAPTER 5

### NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

THE SOUNDS OF PAVAROTTI BREATHED THROUGH THE PENTHOUSE. HIS soulful tenor seemed to reach to the dome of the cathedral ceilings. Gideon stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked Central Park, his eyes closed, embracing the emotion of the music.

As the last strains of the aria died away, he opened his eyes and watched the traffic crawl through the Manhattan streets below.

He drained his wineglass and walked to the dark granite island, taking a seat at one of the high-backed leather chairs. He refilled the glass from the bottle of cabernet he'd left to breathe.

Swirling the dark liquid in his glass, he powered up the laptop in front of him. "So, Mr. Masters, let's see what you've figured out."

He pulled up the most recent documents. The title of the first one leapt off the screen at him. He quickly scanned the document.

"My, my, aren't you a clever boy," he murmured. His anger began to simmer as he realized how Priddle's trust of Drew Masters could have ruined everything. If this had gotten out . . .

A check through the remaining files made it clear how truly dangerous Priddle's trust in his colleague had been. *That fool*. He punched a number into his phone.

"Dr. Arthur Priddle."

"Dr. Priddle," Gideon drawled, his voice laced with quiet rage. "You have not been following our agreement."

Priddle's words stumbled over each other in a rush. "Mr. Gideon, I have. I've done everything you've asked."

"Really? Why, then, am I sitting here reading a paper entitled 'The Belial Stone' written by a Dr. Drew Masters?"

"Sir," Priddle said, his voice taking on an unpleasant whining quality, "I had to bring on some more help. There's just so much to do with the site and with my classes. But he was sworn to secrecy. He was never supposed to talk about any of our work."

"Well, apparently he didn't keep up his end of the bargain, either. That, however, will no longer be a problem. It seems Dr. Masters gave into a moment of despair. He's dead."

"What?" Priddle screeched.

Gideon held the phone away from his ear with a look of disgust. When the squealing died down, he said, "Perhaps you should keep the stakes in mind before you make any more unwise decisions, as well as the prize."

"Uh, yes, yes, sir, of course. It won't happen again."

"I'll make sure of it. You're leaving for the site tonight. I'll have a car at your residence in two hours."

"Uh, sir, I'll need a few days to wrap things up with the University—"

Gideon's words lashed out. "Tonight. I don't care what you tell the University. You will be on a plane in three hours' time. Do not forget who you are dealing with." Gideon disconnected the call.

He wasn't worried about whether the professor would follow his orders. He knew he would. He'd tapped into two of the professor's most motivating emotions: fear and greed.

Idly, he brought up the laptop's browser and glanced at the last few sites Drew had visited. None were problematic, except, maybe . . .

He opened the archaeologist's email program and spent a few minutes hacking into it. He glanced at the emails Drew had sent over the last day. Most were innocuous: notes to students about class, one to his mother, a few bills he'd paid online.

The last email, though, was to a Delaney McPhearson. It had an

attachment. He opened it and then cursed softly. *Damn it, more fires to put out.*

He looked up as the door opened from the bedroom across the living room. An Asian man, dressed in a tight black t-shirt, dark pants, and a long leather coat, crossed the room.

"I'm heading out. Are you sure you don't want to join me?" Pausing in mid-step, Paul Cook raised an eyebrow as he caught Gideon's eye. "Problem?"

"Yes. It seems, brother, we have another problem. I need you to track down a woman named Delaney McPhearson."

Gideon switched to a search engine and typed in her name. "She's a professor of criminology at the University of Syracuse. She lives just outside of the city, in a town called Dewitt."

With a resigned sigh, Paul crossed to the island and poured himself a glass of wine. Leaning against the island, he took a sip. "Okay. Any reason *you* can't handle it?"

Gideon grimaced. "I have to head to D.C. to deal with the Senator. He's getting antsy."

"Ah, and you need to play lap dog."

Gideon glared at him.

Paul chuckled and raised his hands. "Just kidding. I know we need to keep the Senator happy. His happiness ensures our success. So, this professor, what do I do when I find her?"

"Eliminate her."



## CHAPTER 6

### ALBANY, NEW YORK

"WHERE IS HE?" JAKE ROGAN SLAMMED K-DOGG INTO THE ALLEY'S BRICK wall. Pieces of mortar chipped off the already crumbling bricks.

Dressed in torn, baggy jeans, a wife-beater and some chains, K-Dogg was reputed to be one of the toughest members of the G7s. Although Jake and he were about the same height, K-Dogg easily outweighed Jake by about forty pounds of muscle.

Jake wasn't worried. A former Navy SEAL, he'd faced a lot tougher individuals than a gangbanger with control issues. In the mood he was in, he'd take on the whole gang to get the answers he needed.

"Man, I told you. I don't know," K-Dogg said. Jake knew he was trying to sound angry, but the tremor in his voice made that impossible.

Jake wanted to smash his face into pulp. He was the one who'd pulled his foster brother into the G7s. He glared at K-Dogg, pressing his forearm harder against his neck. "I'm not going to ask again." He enunciated each word. "Where. Is. He?"

K-Dogg grabbed at Jake's arm, but couldn't budge it. "Damn it, man. I don't know! We ain't seen Tom since he got out."

Trying to gauge his sincerity, Jake studied K-Dogg's face. With a

growl, he shoved him towards the back of the alley. "So tell me, how come you haven't talked to him? He's one of you."

K-Dogg looked over Jake's shoulder.

"Don't even think it," Jake warned.

K-Dogg put up his hands. "Wasn't thinking nothing."

"Tom?" Jake prompted.

"Yeah, Tom. He's still one of us. G7 for life, man." K-Dogg raised both hands, seven fingers pointed down, the gang's sign.

"Yeah, yeah. You're real bad asses. Now, how come you haven't seen Tom if he's G7?"

K-Dogg looked away and shrugged. "No reason. We just went our separate ways."

Not this crap again. He grabbed K-Dogg by the arm, twisted it and then shoved him against the wall. With his other hand, he shoved K-Dogg's head into the brick.

"Shit, man. Let me go," K-Dogg screamed.

"No more bullshit." He twisted K-Dogg's arm. He knew with a little more pressure, he could break it. "I'm gonna stop being so nice if I don't get some answers."

"Fine, man, fine. Just let me go."

Jake pushed him away again. "Now, why haven't you guys been in touch with Tom?"

K-Dogg grumbled underneath his breath. Jake took a threatening step towards him. Raising his hands, K-Dogg backed away. "No need to get physical, man. I'm talking." He rubbed his arm. "Tom got out a couple weeks ago. We made some overtures. He told us he didn't want to be in the gang no more. So we let him go."

Jake laughed without mirth. "Right. You just let him go. What happened to blood in, blood out?"

"Ain't gotta be that way with Tom. He done us solid. We're good."

Disgust dripped from Jake's words. "The grocery job."

Tom had gone away for five years as an accessory to attempted murder. According to court documents, Tom had admitted to knowing about the plan to rob the mom and pop shop. He hadn't known about the weapons. Tom was the lookout. When he'd been arrested, he'd

refused to turn on any of the others. He'd only been seventeen years old.

"Tom could have hung you guys for that. He did five years and didn't say a word. As thanks, not one of you went to visit him."

K-Dogg sneered. "Yeah? What about you, 'big brother'? Ain't seen or heard you since you bolted, what, eleven years ago? You go see him much?"

This time Jake looked away. K-Dogg was right. It wasn't like he'd been any better. He'd lived next door to Tom and his grandmother, Ceilia Jeffries, since Tom was a baby. Tom's grandmother had taken Jake in when his mother had been murdered. Jake had been fourteen. Tom had been six.

When he'd left four years later, he'd promised Tom he'd keep in touch. And they had for a few years. Then Jake had started getting more overseas missions with the SEALs. The letters got fewer and fewer, before they stopped altogether. And Tom had found a place with the G7s.

"So if something happened to Tom—and I ain't saying something has—it ain't got nothing to do with us. You need to go look at that new family of his, over at the church. But you know what, man? He probably just skipped. Won't be the first time."

Jake turned his back on K-Dogg and headed for the street.

"What? That's it? Ain't gonna say thank you?" K-Dogg called after him, but made no move to follow.

Jake ignored the taunt and turned left on Main Street. He tugged up the collar of his fleece. It was getting cooler. He noted how much more rundown the neighborhood looked. Or maybe, through his more jaded eyes, everything just looked less rosy.

Jake had already spoken with Tom's parole officer and the police, but they'd both been less than useless. K-Dogg had been his next stop. He'd hoped Tom had gotten back with his old crew. That would have been easy.

But nothing about this was easy. Definitely not the 'what ifs' that weighed him down: What if he'd stayed in touch with Tom? What if he'd gone to see him as soon as he'd been released? What if he'd come

home as soon as he'd heard about Mrs. Jeffries' death? What if he'd been the big brother he should have been? What if? What if? What if?

He shook his head. It was too late for 'what ifs' now. He'd raced to Albany right after Tom's pastor tracked him down. His boss at the Chandler Group put the company plane and tools at his disposal. But even with the resources of a global think tank at his fingertips, he still couldn't find a single trace of Tom. It was like he'd completely disappeared.

A shudder ran through Jake as he looked around his old neighborhood. "Damn it, Tom. Where are you?"

## CHAPTER 7

### AIRBORNE OVER THE UNITED STATES

TOM JEFFRIES WOKE UP SLOWLY. PAIN TWISTED THROUGH HIS STOMACH. His tongue felt like sandpaper. He lay on his side on a vibrating metal floor.

And it was loud—really loud. Something soft collided with him. His eyes flew open.

Only inches from his face, a man stared back at him, his face contorted with confusion and fear. Tom recoiled. With his hands bound, though, he only managed to put a few more inches between them. His eyes darted around what appeared to be the hold of an old military plane. At least, that's what he thought it looked like based on what he'd seen in the movies. He'd never actually been on a plane before.

Forty other men lay similarly bound around him. Some were still lying down, unconscious, while others had managed to sit up. Everybody was in rough shape. Stubble, rumpled clothes. Tom took in a breath and almost gagged. *Damn.*

He rolled onto his back to release the pressure on his left arm, which had fallen asleep. A sharp pain shot through his shoulders as he rolled onto his bound hands. He quickly flopped back onto his side

and sucked in a deep breath as a wave of dizziness washed through him.

He managed to wiggle his way into a sitting position. His stomach gave another painful lurch. God, he was hungry. He glanced to his left and met the eyes of the man who'd rolled into him. He'd also managed to work his way to a sitting position.

Tom swallowed a few times, trying to get some moisture into his mouth before he spoke. "Where are we?" He was shocked by how weak his voice sounded.

The man shrugged nervously, his eyes wide. "No idea. Last thing I remember, I was on my way to visit my parole officer. Two guys jumped me and threw me into a van. Next thing I know, I'm waking up here."

Tom struggled to think through the molasses of his thoughts. "I was leaving my PO and hurrying to catch my bus. And then this."

He looked at the rest of the men that littered the cargo hold. They were different races and ages, but most were dressed like him: old jeans, t-shirt, a light jacket or sweater.

And they had one other thing in common: they'd all been in prison. He was sure of that. Some had tats that gave them away. Others just had that attitude. Once a guy had done time, there was something stamped on him.

Small windows rimmed the fuselage. Getting to his feet on shaky legs, he weaved his way through the mass of prone bodies until he reached one. *My first time in a plane*, he thought in disbelief.

Panic began to overwhelm the confusion in Tom's mind. *It'll be okay. You'll figure this out.* The words sounded good, but they weren't doing much to reduce the fear bubbling in his chest.

Tom stared out the window as if the answers to his current situation were somehow hidden behind the clouds. He remembered heading for the bus after leaving his PO's office. He'd been worried he was going to be late for choir practice, and he'd really wanted to see Cleo. He'd picked up his pace so he wouldn't miss the bus. *And then what?*

His thoughts were a jumbled mess. *I walked down Jordan Street, cut*

*down the alley behind the Civic Center, and then... His head jolted upright. And then some guy stepped from behind a dumpster wielding a knife.*

He'd turned to run, only to find another man behind him. He'd felt a sharp pain and then everything went black.

He couldn't remember much after that, but he knew he'd been conscious on and off. He'd been in a warehouse. He recalled being allowed to use the bathroom and then being stuck with a needle and forced back into the black. There were two other moments of brief lucidity as well. One was in a truck, and the other must have been at the airfield. He'd heard planes both times. He struggled to make sense of it. He could have been out for days. What the hell was going on?

An hour later, Tom was no closer to answering that question. He watched the clouds give way to a landscape of ice-capped mountain-tops and green fields, followed by a plateau of flat barren land. Below there was only one small town and a handful of houses. Wherever they were, there sure weren't a lot of people.

The plane jolted. A gasp escaped Tom as he leaned into the metal wall, nearly losing his balance. The pilot must have lowered the landing gear.

Straining to see farther out the window, he saw the same barren land broken up by fields of green. What he didn't see, though, was anything that even remotely resembled an airport.

As the descent became steep, Tom began to slide towards the front of the plane. On the other side of the plane, he saw a man turn around and grab a strap attached to the side of the plane that was used to secure cargo. Tom followed his example, as did the handful of men who'd taken up positions at the other windows.

His shoulders ached, but he knew he got off lucky compared to the men in the middle of the hold. With nothing to hold onto, they crashed into one another as the plane bumped and bucked to a landing.

Almost as soon as the engine stopped, the giant cargo door at the back of the plane began to lower. Tom stared at it with a mixture of fear and curiosity. He braced himself, knowing whatever came through those doors was not going to be friendly.

He wasn't wrong.

Once the door was fully open, four commandos in dark grey uniforms holding AK-47s rushed into the hold. "Get out! Get out!"

Tom was caught up in the mass of bodies as they were herded out of the plane. A few men moved too slow and were prodded none too gently with the nose of a machine gun.

Part of his mind yelled at him that they should turn around and fight. They outnumbered these guys. They could take them. But the rest of his mind just told his feet to move faster.

Once outside, Tom scrambled up a ramp into the back of a truck. He'd barely turned around when the tailgate of the truck slammed shut and it pulled away. His face crashed into the wooden beams that lined the truck bed. Blood from his nose trickled down to his lip. It was only through pressing his chest against the beams of the bed that he was able to keep from being flung to the ground and trampled on.

Panting, he pushed his way back into a standing position. Bracing his legs, he struggled to control his breathing. His heart was having none of it and continued to race.

Around him were the endless fields he'd seen from the sky, rimmed by an incredible mountain range in the far distance. If it weren't all so surreal, he would have thought it was beautiful.

Craning his neck, he tried to find any sort of landmark. For the longest time there was nothing. Just more land. But then, in the foreground, he began to make out the outline of a structure.

"What the hell is that?" someone asked.

No one answered. Disbelief flowed through him. It was a walled enclosure, lined with barbed wire, and boasting two guard towers. It looked like a prison.

*No*, he thought as panic crawled up his throat. *I did my time. I've been doing everything right. This can't be happening.*

As they drew nearer, he noticed there were no paved roads, just a single dirt road leading to the entryway. And the wall wasn't made of cinderblocks. It was wood and huge. He couldn't actually see the end of it when they pulled to stop. In front of them was a massive gate. Whatever this thing was, it was not a prison.

A smaller structure sat about a hundred yards outside the walled enclosure. His stomach nearly dropped to his feet at the sight of it.



"Oh, this is not good," he mumbled.

The cage was made of chain link with barbed wire running through it. The top was also covered in barbed wire. A small tarp had been thrown over it to serve as a roof, although it covered little more than half of it. About a hundred men slept inside the cage, crammed together on bedrolls, spread across the ground.

Two armed guards in the same grey uniforms as the commandos played cards at a makeshift table in front of the only entrance to the cage. They glanced up for a moment when the truck pulled in and, uninterested, returned to their game.

A bear of a man decked out in head-to-toe grey camouflage strode from the entrance of the enclosure. The commandos from the plane fell in step behind him. Obviously, this was the guy in charge.

The man reached the truck and, without warning, shot off a volley of automatic gunfire above their heads. Tom dove for the ground, his head crashing into the man next to him who'd had the same impulse.

"Out," the man bellowed.

Head throbbing, Tom scrambled out of the truck with the rest of the men. Most fell a few times, their bound hands leaving them off-balance. They lined up in front of the camouflaged man in a sloppy version of military formation.

He glared at them. Tom straightened his posture in response, noticing most of the other men with him doing the same.

"I am Commander Gregory. I am in charge of this facility. You have been deemed unfit for society due to your own actions. You now work for us. Food, shelter, sleep are all at my discretion. If you work, you will be treated well. If you do not, you will not be treated well. Any questions?"

A hugely muscled man standing two down from Tom stepped forward. "Yeah. How the hell are you going to make me?"

Tom watched the commander inspect the man like a bug under a microscope. He cringed. *Oh, you idiot. Shut up and get back in line.*

The commander walked over to the man and stood directly in front of him. His face was calm, but violence radiated from him.

The man met Gregory's look with a belligerent glare. Tom knew what was coming and tensed.

Without changing his expression, Gregory kicked the man in the groin. The man crashed to his knees with a moan. Gregory pulled out his sidearm and shot the man in the side of the head. The man crumbled to the ground, not moving.

Gregory returned his sidearm to its holster and turned back to the group with a smile. "Any other questions?"

## CHAPTER 8

### DEWITT, NEW YORK

*DREW'S DEAD.*

The words crashed through Laney's mind over and over again. He was gone. She rolled over and stared at the ceiling, a sharp sting in her eyes. It had been a long night and there were simply no tears left.

Dragging herself from the bed, she flicked a glance at her reflection in the mirror as she passed. Rumpled sweats, bed hair, red-streaked eyes, paler than normal face. "Yup, looking good," she mumbled.

Stopping by her office, she grabbed her laptop and keys from the floor where she'd dropped them the night before. In the kitchen, she hung the keys by the back door, placed her laptop on the island, and poured herself a cup of coffee.

Leaning against the kitchen counter, she stared out the window above the sink. Watching the sun peek over the horizon, she was careful to keep her mind blank, not ready to face anything yet.

But the insidious thoughts found their way in. How could Drew be dead? He wouldn't have killed himself. She knew that. But what then had happened?

Her thoughts cycled over and around everything she knew, every memory she had of Drew. She twisted them and turned them looking for something, anything that would explain her current reality. But just

like last night, there was no burst of understanding, no clear path to an explanation.

Finally she gave herself a mental shake. "Pull it together."

Dumping the now-cold coffee in the sink, she poured herself a new cup. On automatic pilot, she pulled out a bowl for cereal. Staring down at it, her stomach rebelled at the thought of food and she left it on the counter.

Turning to scan the kitchen and living room, she looked for something to do. She'd tidied up the kitchen last night in her burst of frenzied cleaning, so that was out. The papers were still standing there, waiting to be graded, but she wasn't up for that task right now. Her eyes fell on her laptop. Dread pooled in her stomach, but she found herself moving forward. It couldn't be put off any longer.

She flipped open the computer. Tapping on the space bar, the password screen appeared. Hip perched against the counter, she typed in her password and began the familiar steps of getting into her email account.

Taking a deep breath, she opened Drew's attachment. She didn't read it. She just initiated the print command for the wireless printer upstairs. Once complete, she shut the computer down. She leaned against the counter with her mug nestled between her hands. Grief fell over her like a shroud.

"Drew," she whispered. Her body weakened at the mental image of him lifeless and hanging.

"No," she ordered herself as her legs began to shake. She pushed off the counter. He'd asked her for one last thing. And, damn it, she was going to do it.

Heading back up the stairs, she pulled the papers from the output tray in the office. Sinking into the overstuffed chair she and Drew had found at a garage sale a few years back, she shoved away the new agony at that memory.

Carefully, she placed her mug on the side table, pulled the printout into her lap, and dove in:

*Gobekli Tepe. The name conjures up one of the greatest archaeological mysteries of the late twentieth century. Sonar readings of the Turkish site have*

revealed a series of concentric circles arranged much like Stonehenge, but measuring out at an astounding 18,000 square meters.

The fifteen-ton limestone megaliths unearthed so far reveal incredible masonry. Animal reliefs extend from the structures and pictographs were painstakingly carved upon the hard rock. While there are many disagreements about Gobekli Tepe, there is one area upon which all agree: whatever hands created this site were truly talented.

And that is where the problem lies. The beginning of civilization is attributed to the emergence of the developments around the Fertile Crescent, in the area currently known as the Middle East and Eastern Europe, somewhere between 3,000 and 2,000 BC.

Carbon dating of Gobekli Tepe, however, indicates that the site is over 11,000 years old – almost double the age of the ruins at the Fertile Crescent. That makes Gobekli Tepe an impossibility. Mankind should not have been capable of such an incredible feat at that point. And yet, there Gobekli Tepe stands, mocking us, daring us to write off the incredible skill necessary for its creation.

The only possible explanation for its existence is that we have misidentified the beginning of civilization. Civilization, in terms of scientific advancement and accomplishments, must have begun much farther down the timeline. If that is indeed the case, it opens the door to the possibility of more ancient, unknown, but technologically advanced, civilizations. It opens the door to the possibility of Atlantis.

*Atlantis has often been relegated—*

Lifting her gaze from the paper, Laney frowned. It sounded like something was scratching at the back door. She flicked a glance at the clock. It was early but it could be her uncle if he got someone else to cover Mass.

Stilling, she strained to hear. Only silence now. She waited, but the house remained quiet.

She shook her head. *Probably just the neighbor's cat.* She'd made the mistake of feeding it once and now it showed up at odd hours looking for a little tidbit. She dropped part of the paper and reached down to pick it up. It was the beginning of the reference section. One name leapt out at her: Edgar Cayce.

"Drew, what were you up to?" she murmured.

Theories on the existence of Atlantis had been around almost since the dawn of mankind. But within archaeology, the topic was taboo. No reputable academic would give credence to the possibility of its existence, not, at least, if he or she wanted to get published anywhere.

And using Edgar Cayce as a source was not going to gain you any points, either. Cayce was a psychic from the early twentieth century. He was widely regarded as incredibly accurate in his psychic medical diagnosis. Research conducted in the 1970s put his accuracy at an astounding eighty-six percent. But it was his past-life readings on Atlantis that raised the most eyebrows.

A second citation caught her attention. "The Book of Enoch." She struggled to recall what little she could about the apocryphal text. Enoch, Noah's great-grandfather, allegedly wrote it after a visit to heaven.

Her stomach growled, interrupting her thoughts. She realized she hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday. Picking up her mug, she drained the last bits of coffee. She might not want any food, but if she was going to get through the day, she'd need the fuel.

Her mind filled with Drew's ideas, she headed downstairs. Lost in the possibilities, she rounded the bottom of the stairs, eyes cast on the ground, her mind millennia away.

"Ah, there you are."

A gasp escaped Laney as her head jerked up and she stumbled to a stop. A tall muscular Asian man stood staring at her, a slight smile on his face. "I've been waiting for you."

## CHAPTER 9

THE MAN STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE KITCHEN, NOT TRYING TO HIDE, not trying to get away. His smile deepened, which only served to increase her fear because she had never seen him before in her life.

“So nice to meet you, Dr. McPhearson.”

Laney paused. He knew her name. Not a burglary, then. He was about her age, she thought, and maybe Chinese. Idly, she noted he was impeccably dressed in dark slacks and a pristine white shirt. She wasn’t a fashionista, but she recognized expensive when she saw it.

His build was lean and muscular, but he was only a few inches taller than she was. He stood with his weight rested on his back foot. She knew that stance. It allowed balance and quick movement. It told her not to underestimate him. She’d seen some incredible martial artists almost a foot shorter than this man who could kill with the smallest movement. She had a feeling this man was just as lethal.

Her hands up in front of her, she started to back out of the kitchen, “Who are you? What do you want?”

He pulled a knife from a sheath on his belt. “Forgive me for not introducing myself. How rude. I’m Paul. And I want you, of course.” He lunged across the room.

Sprinting out of the kitchen, Laney just barely evaded his outstretched hand. Barreling through the kitchen, she flung herself at the front door. She struggled with the locks.

Sound from behind her caused her breath to hitch. She dove for the floor as the man plunged his knife into the door right where she'd been standing. He stabbed so hard, it was embedded up to the hilt. Rolling out of the way, she'd just gotten her feet under her when he yanked her up by the hair.

Without a thought, she launched her fist back, angling her body to land the hammer punch in his groin. He grunted and released her. Pulling the coat rack down as she passed, she ran for the kitchen.

Her heart rate spiked as his footsteps pounded behind her. That groin shot should have given her enough time to get to the back door at least. How was he still coming?

Waiting until the last possible moment, she whirled and slammed her left foot into his stomach. As he doubled over, she launched a side-kick to his face, followed by a round kick to his knee. The man put his hands up to cover his face as she aimed a series of straight punches that would have decimated a lesser man. He blocked them with ease.

"Now, this is a nice surprise." He grinned, catching her fist. "Someone who can fight."

He flung her fist back, followed by a right jab to the face.

She parried the punch, ready to respond, but then a flurry of punches followed. She had no time to respond, only to block. The speed and power of his movements was incredible. She blocked a hook to the ribs only to miss the jab to her face. She spun around with the force of the punch. Her stomach jammed painfully into the island.

He wrenched her back by the shoulder, but not before her hand closed around one of the knives in the block sitting on the island.

Turning her around, he dragged her towards him. "This has been fun, Professor. But I think it's time to end this dance."

"I agree," Laney spit out. She plunged the knife into his stomach and twisted it.

He howled in pain shoving her back. Tripping, Laney collapsed to the ground and began to crawl for the back door.

"You bitch." He threw himself on top of her. Pain exploded in her cheekbone and ribs as they collided with the floor. He rolled her over, keeping her pinned, the knife now at her throat.

She screamed, bringing her knee up into his groin.



With a groan, he loosened his grip. Twisting his wrist, she stripped the knife from his hand. It skittered across the floor, out of reach.

Keeping his wrist bent, she got a knee in between them, punching him in the face over and over again. Working her other leg up, she kicked him in the chest. Sliding back along the floor, she managed to give herself just enough distance to kick him in the face. Using both feet, she slammed them into his face, launching him on to his back.

She rolled to her feet and sprinted for the hall closet, ignoring the ache in her ribs and cheek. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Paul as he struggled to his feet, trying to catch his breath.

Flinging open the closet door, she frantically pawed at the top shelf. "Come on, come on," she begged.

Her hand closed around the metal shaft of the double-barreled shotgun her uncle insisted she keep in the house. She yanked it down and whirled around, her finger on the trigger, as Paul rounded the corner.

He halted, his eyes on the gun. "My, my, my. You really are full of surprises. Well, here's a little surprise for you: That won't stop me."

He sprang at her.

She pulled the trigger, catching him in the right shoulder at close range. He flew back, crashed into the wall, and slid down. A trail of blood followed his descent.

Shaking, she kept the gun trained on the prone man, giving him a wide berth. She ran for the kitchen and grabbed her keys off the hook by the door.

"Going somewhere?"

She whirled around. He leaned against the doorway to the kitchen. The knife wound soaked the bottom of his now tattered shirt in blood and the shotgun blast soaked the top. He was swaying, but somehow still upright. How the hell was that possible?

She fixed the shotgun on him, her finger poised over the trigger. "I'm guessing you're going to try to stop me."

He didn't answer her. One minute he was standing in the doorway, and the next he was sprinting impossibly fast across the room. She leapt backwards, pulling the trigger as she did. The shotgun pellets caught the man in the neck and face. He screamed, but kept coming.

Flipping the shotgun, she held it like a baseball bat, and swung with all her might. The crack of the thick stock against his skull echoed through the kitchen. She just had time to jump out of the way before he crashed at her feet.

She didn't wait to see if he'd get back up. Swiping her keys by the door, she ran out the back door, stumbling down the stairs in her haste, and leapt into her truck.

Turning the key, she slammed on the accelerator, peeling out of the driveway too fast. The truck fishtailed as she pulled a hard right. It took her a few anxious seconds to wrestle the SUV back under control.

Struggling to pull her phone from her pocket, she swerved all over the road.

She dialed Rocky. Punching the button for the speakerphone, she dropped it into the cup holder, while she white-knuckled the steering wheel with her blood-speckled hands.

"Hey, sweetheart, how you doing?" Rocky's voice was full of concern.

Laney's words came out in a rush. "I was just attacked by a man in my home. I shot him twice and stabbed him once."

Rocky's tone changed immediately. "Are you safe now?"

"Yeah. I'm on my way to the station."

"Good. Hold on a sec." She heard Rocky yelling at people in the background, before she got back on the phone. "I've got units on the way to your house, including an ambulance for the attacker. Was he down when you left?"

In her mind's eyes, she saw the man lying on her floor. For any other person, those injuries would be life-ending. But in this case, she had a sinking feeling that wasn't true. "He was down. But I don't think he's out."

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