

SAME BUT DIFFERENT



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EPILOGUE

Seamus Kip O'Doyle raced past half his young associates at his law firm, trying to get his attention, as he hurried to make the elevator, praying he would make it to his beloved daughters' ballet class on time. His wife, Lilly, often marveled at how her husband, despite promising to leave the office in five minutes, would still be late, even though he should have had plenty of time to make it to class.

Kip, who loathed the name Seamus, chuckled to himself as he revved up his brand-new Porsche, fully aware that he had ample time to meet Lilly and the girls.

The girls, ages five and four, radiated pure joy, their faces lighting up like the morning sun whenever Kip entered the room. Their beautiful, big, blue eyes sparkled with a love so pure and innocent, as if the world had paused to witness the magic of their bond. The eyes that Lilly had whenever he walked into the room.

He chuckled to himself mightily when he noticed his three blonde-haired cuties were not at ballet when he walked into the studio. Lilly was always punctual, while Kip was frequently late for everything and anything.

The lesson had already begun when he tried calling Lilly on her cell phone. He didn't worry at first, but as the minutes ticked by and her phone went to voicemail every time, concern began to gnaw at him. By the time the class was three-quarters over, panic set in. Lilly was always meticulous about keeping him informed of her whereabouts. The ex-Boston College linebacker and Heisman Trophy winner felt a surge of dread, rushing out of the studio in a frantic dash.

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He had barely driven two miles when he encountered a scene straight out of a nightmare. Lilly's Lincoln Navigator lay scattered across the street, transformed into a grotesque sculpture of twisted metal and shattered glass. Beside it, a mangled F-250 stood as a silent witness to the devastation.

The former Detroit Lions Super Bowl champion received devastating news from a captain in the Folsom, California Fire Department, once he stepped out of his Porsche. He learned that his wife and daughters had perished in the crash. Overwhelmed by grief, he collapsed to his knees. Law enforcement officers gently lifted him off the ground and escorted him to a cruiser, where he was taken home by a California State Trooper.

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Kip sat on his bed after the funeral, clutching Lilly's pillow to his chest, inhaling deeply to capture the lingering essence of her sweet scent. In the span of a single day, his world had been irrevocably altered. He found himself grappling with a profound sense of loss, unable to recall a time when he couldn't navigate life's challenges.

"Honey, not today, not tomorrow, and not any day in the next 1000 years is any of this your fault," Lilith Emmers told him after the funeral. Since the day Lilly brought him home to meet her, Lilith had become a mother figure in his life.

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Carl and Lilith Emmers, the parents of Lilly, were proprietors of the most extensive supermarket chain in the Pacific Northwest. Having already suffered the loss of their daughter and grandchildren, their greatest fear was also to lose Kip.

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At the funeral, Kip's best friend, Clayton Hall—a former teammate at Boston College and six-time Pro Bowl safety for the New England Patriots—extended an invitation to his home in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Clayton, who owned a charming tavern there, suggested Kip spend a few weeks processing the devastating loss of his family without any outside distractions. Initially reluctant, his Pop persuaded Kip to take the trip and escape the sorrow that had engulfed him in California.

He packed a bag, took one last look at his daughters' rooms, and decided to drive to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. His Pop offered to fly him on his luxury airplane; however, Kip believed the drive would do him some good. There were so many things he had to sort out, he wanted to have a clearer head when he arrived to see Clayton.

The uneasy glances he received while refueling his car left him feeling unsettled. California's cherished son had only chosen to pursue a career in law after enduring a severe neck injury during the Super Bowl, on the penultimate play of the game. He never regretted his brief three-year stint with the Detroit Lions; his sole remorse was that he had failed his fans, the team, and the sponsors who had invested so much in his success.

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In his heart and mind, he felt he had let Lilly and the girls down by not picking them up and taking them to ballet. As he hit the highway, his thoughts were scattered, but one persistent question haunted him. *Would they still be alive if I had left work early and picked them up from home? Would they be alive?*

CHAPTER ONE

Kip had spent three years in New Hampshire since the tragic loss of his wife and daughters, passing the New Hampshire bar exam and dedicating his work solely to Clayton, the Emmers, and his Pop. He also tended bar at Clayton's famous watering hole.

“Pour me another one, Kip,” voiced Kevin O'Malley, a carpenter in town, who always came in after work for a couple of beers at the microbrewery.

Kip smiled at him before pouring his beer. “Tough day at the office today, Kevin?”

Kevin returned the smile. “You could say that.”

Fred McKnight, the town's veteran old-timer, added, “Better pour one of those for me.”

Kip chuckled to himself. Fred and Kevin were the only two at the bar; a few others were eating in the downstairs pub for a late lunch. The upstairs dining room was closed until 4:00 pm.

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“When don't you want another one?” Kip voiced.

The three men engaged in some small talk before Kip's cell phone started to ring. It was Clayton who spent most of his time traveling, with Kip running the tavern.

“How is Key West?” Kip asked when he went into Clayton's office. “Why don't you come down and have some fun?”

“I wish I could, but I can't. I have Carl and Lilith coming here this weekend. You know how they don't want to spend more than a couple of weeks without seeing me.”

“Are you ever going to see them in California again?”

“As much as I love bartending, I don't plan on spending the rest of my life in New Hampshire,” Kip said sardonically. “Even though I had this big, beautiful house built here, New Hampshire isn't my home. California is.”

“It has been three years.”

“I know, so far there isn't really a reason to go back.”

“That's because you have everybody coming here instead of you going there. You have the largest and most prestigious law firm in California, if not the United States. Running it through my office at the tavern and at your house, must be getting old.”

“Lynn has been running it amazingly since I have been here. As I said, I will go back sooner rather than later. It is probably time for me to face what I have been delaying facing, I guess.”

“I am sure your clients will be pleased.”

“Pleased? The only clients I have are you, Pop, and the Emmers. I technically relocated the Emmers' corporate headquarters to New Hampshire, so if I need to file anything, I do so

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here. It certainly keeps me from having to go back and forth. Plus, I have Rachel to help me if I need anyone to do something out in California.”

“Oh, sure. Tell that to someone who doesn’t know you,” said Clayton, “How is our former Boston College classmate?”

“You know, Rachel, she is still Rachel. She is as big of a spitfire as she was in college. Thank God I have Rachel and Lynn back there. I know I owe it to them to get back,” Kip said. “What else did you call me for? I have a feeling there is something else on your mind.”

“You know me so well, my brother.”

“Do not tell me you need another pre-nuptial agreement,” Kip said sardonically. “I have written four of those suckers and you are still single.”

“Donna and I are just talking about it right now. Nothing is set in stone, but she has given several hints. I want to have one ready in case I decide to ask her.”

“You don't pay me enough to keep doing this; in fact, you do not pay me at all.”

“Why..... why would I pay you?” Clayton laughed from the belly. “I give you all the free beer and food you can put away in that six-pack of yours.”

“I could not eat \$500,000 worth of food in 10 years.”

Clayton gulped. “Seriously?”

“I do not have any billable hours right now. I might have to start collecting from the clients I do have?” You know what I mean, my friend?”

“Your Pop, who raised you, is one of the richest men in the world. He might be your uncle, but he is loaded,” Clayton began, “Plus, you have all the money that your father left you.”

“Thank you for reminding me.”

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“While we are at it, don't forget all your football money and endorsement money.”

When Kip was just three years old, his world was shattered. His parents, Seamus and his wife, Kelly, were brutally murdered by a group from Ireland with a vendetta against him. He had been a member of the Directorate of Military Intelligence, the military branch of the Defence Forces in the Irish Defence Forces, Ireland's national intelligence service. The tragedy left Kip orphaned and marked the beginning of a life filled with challenges and resilience.

Both love and tragedy marked Seamus and Mario's childhood in Ireland. Their parents, Finnegan and Maeve, were devoted and caring, but their lives were cut short by Tuberculosis when the boys were just eight and seven years old. Tuberculosis remained an incredibly significant cause of death in Ireland until the mid-20th century, and it still occupies a prominent position in the folk memory.

Orphaned and vulnerable, Seamus and Mario were sent to an industrial school, where Mario also fell victim to the same disease during a devastating outbreak in Ireland. The brothers' resilience and bond were forged in the crucible of hardship, shaping their future in ways they could never have imagined.

By the grace of God and the intervention of an old Irish priest, the boys were saved. The priest's brother, a priest himself, found a family to adopt them. They were welcomed into the loving arms of a wealthy Italian family in Florence. The Renzis adored the boys from the moment they arrived, ensuring their happiness and health. Mario pursued his studies at Harvard, focusing on economics, while Seamus senior immersed himself in Ireland's military when it was time for them to find themselves.

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The Renzis were a family with members involved in banking and industry, including some who engaged in activities that did not adhere to legal standards. Mario took after the strait-laced members of the Renzis, while Seamus was not afraid to break the rules.

Kip and Clayton exchanged a few more words, their conversation a tapestry of camaraderie and shared memories. As the call ended, Kip felt a pang of urgency. He had to pick up his in-laws at the private airstrip in Plymouth, NH. With a practiced ease, he grabbed his bag from behind the bar, where he had just poured a few drinks for the locals, who had trickled in. Leaving his tips in the jar, as was his custom, he headed straight for the airport, a thirty-mile journey that lay ahead.

CHAPTER TWO

Kip sang along to the radio as he drove down to Plymouth, his heart swelling with anticipation at the thought of seeing Carl and Lilith. They had been his pillars of strength, offering unwavering support and understanding as they navigated their shared grief. The bond they shared was a testament to their mutual love for Lilly and the girls, and Kip cherished the fact that he was their last living connection to them.

Hugs were passed out generously as soon as Kip set eyes on his in-laws. He carried their bags to his Range Rover, watching Lilith take the front seat as usual. Carl always wanted Lilith to take the front seat.

“Why do you two look like you are sucking in your flatulence?” Kip voiced, 10 minutes into the ride. “Come on, give it up, will you, you two?”

Lilith turned around and glanced at Carl. “Have you tried to start dating again, sweetheart?”

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“Mom, I have had a few dates, but I waited almost two years before I even thought about speaking to another woman to ask her out on a date. Why do you ask?”

“Kip, the last thing we want is for you to spend the rest of your life alone,” Lilith said gently. “Your big, beautiful heart deserves to be shared with someone special. It doesn't mean you have to forget Lilly and the girls; it means you need to start living your life again. You can't keep hiding out here in New Hampshire when so many people are waiting for you to come home,” she sighed, “Do you understand what I'm saying, sweetheart?”

“I do, Mom. Believe me, I am definitely not averse to finding someone to spend the rest of my life with. Just haven't found that person yet.”

Carl said, “You will find the right person. When you least expect it, expect it. But trust me, you should get rid of that Grizzly Adams' look.”

Kip chuckled to himself, looking at his beard in the rearview mirror. “I like my beard. It keeps people from recognizing me easily.”

“Sweetheart, why don't you want to be recognized?” Lilith asked.

“When I get recognized, it is so hard to listen to individuals wanting to talk about how sorry they are. Being in New Hampshire cuts it down a little bit, but the beard seems to work more than anything. Trust me, I'm not trying to ignore people, I like my peace and quiet.”

“Eventually, your peace and quiet will end once you go home and go back to your law firm. You had some major wins not just on the football field, but in the courtroom.” Lilith squeezed his hand. “You are doing amazing, having to deal with all of this, these last three years. People want to let you know they are still thinking about you.”

“I know, Mom. People have really been great. Sometimes I don't like listening to it.”

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“Neither do Lilith and I. At times over the last three years, I often wonder how you managed to get through it all. I could not be more impressed by how you handled yourself, not only in the media, but with us.”

“We were so afraid we would lose you, too, Kip.”

He squeezed her hand. “The two of you will never be able to lose me. No matter if I meet someone or not, you will never be able to lose me.”

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Kip, Lillith, and Carl shared a weekend filled with laughter and activities, creating memories that would last a lifetime. The long weekend seemed to fly by, and as Kip drove them back to the airport, he held Lilith’s hand, cherishing the moments they had spent together.

After bringing their luggage to the airplane, he hugged them both. “I have decided to come home for Thanksgiving. Most likely for good.”

Carl and Lilith embraced him tightly, their hearts swelling with emotion. As Lilith ascended the stairs to board the airplane, she turned and waved, her gesture filled with tenderness. She blew him a kiss, and a single tear rolled down his cheek, a testament to the profound connection they shared.

Kip cranked up the volume in his sleek BMW 7 Series as he cruised back to Woodstock. Just as he was nearing town, he spotted a small SUV pulled over on the side of the road, surrounded by four women in their early thirties. One of them, a light-skinned black woman, gave the flat tire a frustrated kick, which made Kip chuckle. The jokes he had in his head about three blondes and a light-skinned black woman, who was a combination of Kat

Graham and Megan Tandy, danced in his mind. He decided to pull over and offer his assistance, parking his car behind their vehicle.

“Can I offer you some assistance?” Kip asked.

Tire-kicker answered, a frown on her face. “We have been trying to get the nuts loose on the wheel, but we can't seem to loosen them up.”

He took the tire iron from her, finding out her name was Whitney. “I will change it for you. It will just take me a second or two.” The tire was changed in less than 10 minutes.

“You ladies are good to go. I suggest you visit Dave's Tire tomorrow morning. He is about 1/2 of a mile up from where you are staying.”

“How do you know where we are staying?” asked a beautiful blonde named Donna.

“I noticed the visitor's pass on your front rearview mirror. The Nordic Lodge makes everyone put their tag there if they want to park in their parking lot.”

The five of them conversed for a brief fifteen minutes, their words weaving a tapestry of camaraderie and shared stories. Kip knew he had to make his way to the tavern, where Sally, one of the bartenders, had requested he cover for her for a couple of hours. Kip didn't mind at all; Sally had always been there for him, stepping in whenever he needed a helping hand.

“What could we do to repay your kindness?” Whitney voiced.

“You could come to the microbrewery tonight, and I could buy you guys a beer.”

Donna, Evelyn, Mindy, and Whitney all agreed to stop at the microbrewery. They playfully argued with Kip about who would buy the beer.

Mindy quipped, "I'll buy the beer, but only if Kip promises to give me a ride in that fancy BMW of his."

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Evelyn chimed in, "Oh, please, Donna. Kip's car is nice, but have you seen his smile? That's worth buying a round for!"

Donna laughed, "Forget the car and the smile. Kip, if you can tell me a joke that makes me laugh, I'll buy the beer."

Whitney added with a grin, "How about this? Kip buys the beer, and we all get to enjoy his company. Win-win!"

Donna then teased, "Alright, Kip, what's the secret to your charm? Is it the car, the smile, or the jokes?"

Kip chuckled, "It's definitely the jokes. Want to hear one?"

Evelyn leaned in, "Go on, Kip. Impress us."

Kip grinned, "Why don't scientists trust atoms? Because they make up everything! What can I say, I'm a climate change denier."

The ladies burst into laughter, and Mindy declared, "Alright, Kip, you win. The beer's on me!"

The ladies were all aflutter as Kip drove off in his sleek BMW, each one wondering how they might get the chance to know him one-on-one. *Kip wondered why anyone in the world would laugh at a dad joke.*

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Whitney and her three best college friends laughed from the belly when they noticed Kip serving drinks behind the bar. Once they sat down, he motioned them over and put napkins on the bar in front of them.

” Can I interest you ladies in some of the best microbrewery beers in the country?

Whitney ordered a stout, and the other girls each ordered the maple wheat special.

“When you said you were going to buy us a beer, the last thing I thought was that you were the bartender here. Then again, maybe you own the place.”

“I am not a bartender. Well, maybe I moonlight as one, but I definitely do not own this place. My best friend does.”

Kip effortlessly served the patrons at the bar, his charm and playful demeanor captivating everyone around him. As he moved with grace and confidence, the girls couldn't help but be drawn to him, their conversations filled with admiration and curiosity. His interactions with the customers brought smiles to their faces, creating an atmosphere of warmth and camaraderie that enveloped the entire bar.

Donna said, “Just to make sure we all still agree, whoever he keeps talking to the most gets to stay here while the others go back to the lodge.”

The four friends agreed, each secretly hoping Kip would favor them the most. Every time Kip took a food order or poured a drink, he returned to stand in front of Whitney. Her heart soared with joy each time he did.

The aroma of freshly brewed beer and sizzling food filled the air, mingling with the sound of laughter and clinking glasses. The warm glow of the bar's ambient lighting cast a cozy atmosphere, making Whitney's cheeks flush with excitement. She could feel the

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smooth wood of the bar under her fingertips, grounding her in the moment as she eagerly awaited Kip's subsequent return.

"I know I know him from somewhere," Donna stated, "He looks so familiar."

"You are the reporter, Whitney. Who is he?" questioned Mindy.

"Ladies, I am a reporter in the state of California. I have no idea who he is, but he certainly does look familiar. He looks like a football player."

"Why don't we just ask somebody?" Evelyn said, stopping one of the waitresses.

"Excuse me, my friends and I were wondering if you could tell us who the bartender is."

"His name is Kip. Many individuals come in and think they know who he is. I know at one time he was a hotshot football player." The waitress smiled and walked away.

"We already know his name is Kip. She was not very helpful," Evelyn admitted.

"Whoever he is, it's not up to us anymore. He's all Whitney's," Mindy said. "And since Whitney won the honor, she should pay the bill."

Whitney laughed, "Oh, come on, Mindy. You know I don't mind paying the bill. Besides, Kip's attention was worth every penny."

Donna chimed in, "I agree, Kip's charm is something else. I think we all had a great time tonight."

Evelyn added, "Absolutely, I can't remember the last time we had so much fun at a bar. Kip really knows how to make everyone feel special."

Mindy nodded, "Well, here's to more nights like this. Cheers, everyone!"

The friends raised their glasses, clinking them together in a toast to the memorable evening they had shared. They were all disappointed that, besides Whitney, they did not steal Kip's attention.

"Did you win a bet or lose a bet?" Kip voiced, standing in front of Whitney after noticing her friends had left. He had been taking a large food order. "I would have to guess you won the bet. I had hoped to get you alone to ask you what you were doing the rest of the night."

"I have no plans," Whitney said with a beautiful smile.

"There is a beer festival at the mountain tonight," Kip began. "Would you like to check it out with me?"

"I would love to, but aren't you working tonight?"

"Believe me, I don't work here. I was covering for one of the bartenders. She is here now; I am ready to take off." Kip grabbed his jacket and came around the bar to join Whitney. His eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief as he flashed her a charming smile.

The bar's ambient lighting cast a warm glow on his face, highlighting the rugged features that had captivated Whitney from the moment she first laid eyes on him. As he approached, the aroma of freshly brewed beer and sizzling food mingled with the sound of laughter and clinking glasses, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie and excitement. Whitney's heart raced with anticipation, knowing that the night was about to begin.

"Ready?"

"Ready," Whitney replied. She slid her arm into his. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Kip smiled. "What am I forgetting?"

"Your tips in the tip jar"

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“I never take the tips I make. I leave it for the next bartender. They certainly need it more than I do. Don't worry, I have enough money to take you out tonight.”

She giggled mightily, walking arm in arm with him out of the microbrewery, straight to the parking lot, and to the Range Rover. “What happened to the BMW?”

He opened her car door for her. “It is hard enough being a celebrity with a \$120,000 car. The Range Rover is a little less conspicuous, don't you think?”

"Oh, my God, who is this guy? And when is he going to tell me who he is?"

Whitney's thoughts raced as she watched Kip, a mixture of curiosity and excitement coursing through her. His enigmatic presence and effortless charm had captivated her from the moment they met. The sunlight cast a warm glow on his face, highlighting the rugged features that made him so intriguing. *And those damn muscles, popping out everywhere.*

CHAPTER THREE

Kip's hand never left hers as they made their way to the ticket booth at Loon Mountain. The annual microbrew festival was in full swing, a vibrant celebration that drew enthusiasts from far and wide. The mountain buzzed with excitement, the air thick with the aroma of craft beers and the sound of laughter. Kip's presence was magnetic, his charm effortlessly drawing Whitney into the festive atmosphere. Together, they navigated the crowd, their connection growing stronger with each step.

“Hello, Kip,” Tara began, who was working the ticket booth at the mountain. She smiled at Whitney. Tickets are \$55 apiece. You receive these two mugs, the T-shirts in the mugs, and it is all you can drink.” She giggled. “Make sure you can walk out of here and drive because you know how the officers are in town.”

After expressing their gratitude to Tara, Kip and Whitney strolled over to a brewer's tent, where they were treated to an exceptional stout beer. Kip then led Whitney to one of the

nearby picnic tables. They settled in to savor their drinks and engage in conversation, the atmosphere around them buzzing with the lively chatter of festivalgoers.

"I love it here, Kip. What a phenomenal place," Whitney said.

"A friend from college, who just so happens to own the microbrewery, is my best friend in the whole world. He needed some help, so I came and assisted him.

The microbrewery, nestled in the heart of this quaint ski town, is a haven for craft beer enthusiasts. My friend, with his passion for brewing and his warm, welcoming nature, created a space that feels like home to everyone who walks through its doors, especially the microbrewers he allows to hone their craft at his place."

Whitney smiled brightly as she took his hand across the table, asking him question after question in hopes of discovering his true identity.

"Tell me a little about you, Whitney. Your friends told me you are a reporter."

Why don't you share a bit about yourself first, Kip?

Whitney's voice carried the weight of her recent promotion: "I am an anchor on the weekend news on KNTV channel 11 in San Jose. I have just been promoted from a field reporter in the last couple of months." Her phone interrupted the moment, ringing insistently. She glanced at the screen, her face paling. "Kip, I have to take this. It's my mom. She never calls me when I'm on vacation."

"Go. Go. I am not going anywhere."

As she answered, her voice trembled, "Mom? What's wrong?" Kip watched as her expression shifted from concern to sheer panic. Her eyes widened, and she clutched the phone tighter. "No... no, that can't be true. Are you sure?" Whitney's voice broke, tears streaming down her face. "I'll be there as soon as I can." She hung up, her hands shaking.

Kip immediately rose from the table, his heart aching at the sight of her distress. Without hesitation, he pulled Whitney into his arms, offering her the comfort and strength she so desperately needed. "Whitney, what is wrong?"

"Kip, something terrible has happened. My brother, KJ, has been arrested for murder. I need to get home. We need to find a lawyer. How can we get a lawyer?"

"KJ Springhouse, the all-American basketball player, is your brother?"

She nodded on his chest.

Kip gently raised her chin with his finger. "I will help, Whitney. I am a lawyer."

"We need a California lawyer, Kip, don't we?"

"I am a California lawyer. My friends call me Kip, but my real name is Seamus O'Doyle. I am sure that you've heard of me."

Whitney re-lost the breath that Kip gave back to her with this hug. "Oh, my Lord, it is you. I see that now. The beard and that long blonde hair had me all thrown off," Whitney said, barely over a whisper. "You will come to California and help me, help us?"

He nodded. "I will figure it all out on the plane ride. I will borrow my Pop's plane, he leaves for me in Plymouth, at the airport, hoping and begging I go home."

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“You really haven't been home in three years?” Whitney voiced on the plane ride to California.

Kip had showered and changed before the flight. His beard was no longer, but he still had his long blonde hair. “I did not want to go home, Whitney. It is not like I couldn't come home; I really didn't want to face anyone.”

“And you are coming back now, why?”

“You and KJ need me. I had planned to come home for Thanksgiving anyway. Just this past weekend, I was telling Lilly's parents that I would be home over Thanksgiving. They, along with my Pop, have been urging me to return since the week after I arrived in New Hampshire. In fact, I was on my way back to Woodstock after dropping off Lilith and Carl at the airport when I found you attempting to kick field goals with the flat tire on your rental.”

She flashed a smile, a small one, but a smile for the first time since she found out about her brother. “Sorry, I was a little frustrated.”

He returned the small smile. “Please, please try not to worry. Believe it or not, I am a pretty good lawyer. Hopefully, your parents and KJ feel the same way.”

Before she could even respond, her phone started to ring. “Hi, Mom..... Oh, sure..... Let me hand him the phone.” She handed the phone to Kip. “My mother would like to speak to you. Is that OK?”

He took the phone from Whitney. “Hello. Kip O'Doyle speaking.”

“Hello, Kip. This is Catherin Springhouse,” she began, with a thick Irish brogue, “Stop looking at my daughter. Her father might be black, but I am as Irish as Irish can be and as white as snow.”

He chuckled. “I can imagine you would be with that brogue of yours.”

“Thank you, you sweet man. I know you will do everything to help my son. I know that in my heart.”

“I have called several individuals already. The best basketball player, in a generation, and from what I've been told, one incredible young man, doesn't just all of a sudden murder someone at a frat house.”

“Everyone at Stanford is completely enamored with him. Kevin Junior doesn't have it in his DNA to do something like this.”

They spoke for a few more minutes, said their goodbyes, and hung up the phone. Whitney stared at Kip, dying to know what was said.

“And? What did my mother have to say?”

“Thanks for telling me that your mother is from the homeland.” He shook his head. “Also, I know we just met; however, you could have told me your father is a reverend.”

She, again, gave him a small smile. “Oops, sorry, Seamus.”

“Seamus? No one calls me Seamus.”

“I like Seamus better. Besides, if gazillionaire Mario Renzi doesn't call you Seamus, it doesn't mean I can't.”

“We will have to revisit this at a later date. I'm not a Seamus kind of guy.”

Whitney hugged his arm, putting her head on his shoulder. "Is this OK?"

He kissed the top of her head, typing away on his laptop. "Try to get some sleep if you can. It is going to be a long day. And to answer your question, it is definitely OK."

She smiled up at him.

"Look, Whit, everyone in my world has begged me to get back on the saddle and date again. Carl and Lilith came all the way here this weekend, not just to see me, but to try to convince me to date again. I've been on a few dates; however, I just haven't found someone that I really want to spend time with."

"I have been so busy trying to advance my career at 32, I haven't even had time to date. But I am open to all possibilities, though." She giggled through a yawn.

He kissed the top of her head again. "Try to get a little rest, OK?"

She nodded and then fell asleep.

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"One hears you are flying with the beautiful Whitney Springhouse," Mario told Kip on the phone. "I hear her brother is in a bit of trouble. Want to fill me in?"

"You know about as much as I do right now. I have some people looking into it, of course. I have only heard bits and pieces so far."

“Give me some of the bits and pieces.”

"From my sources within the Palo Alto Police Department, I learned that two students were tragically killed at a fraternity party, along with Kevin James' roommate. Kevin, drenched in blood and heavily intoxicated, was found attempting to flee the scene in his car. His escape was short-lived as he crashed into several parked vehicles, leading to his immediate arrest by campus police.”

“Doesn't sound right to me?”

Kip huffed. “Doesn't sound right to me either.”

“I will let you get back at it. What do I have to do to make you stay a little while?”

Mario had a lump in his throat. “Please tell me you at least come to the house before you head back to New Hampshire.”

“Pop, I don't think I'm going back to New Hampshire. It is probably time to stay here, don't you think?”

“It is definitely time.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

O'Doyle and associates had one of their drivers, from the office, bring Kip and Whitney to the Palo Alto County jail, where KJ was being held. The driver, Alton, gave Kip a big hug as soon as he laid eyes on him.

“Wonderful to see you, my friend,” Alton said, choking back tears, opening the doors for Kip and Whitney. The seven-foot, 50-year-old Alton was a basketball star at Pepperdine.

Kip reached up to the front seat and put his hand on Alton's shoulder. “I heard a young medical student is doing quite well at UCLA.”

“She wants to thank you again for the gift you gave her after she finished her first semester,” he said.

“We actually talked a couple of days ago. You should be so proud of her, my friend.”

Kip was very close to Alton. He had missed his friend. “She gives me a call every couple of weeks. I think she believes I'm her good luck charm.”

“I have to agree with you there, my friend.”

The media presence was astronomical as Alton drove into the Palo Alto Sheriff's Department. Whitney could barely hold her nerves after noticing the local and national news presence at the lockup.

“Kip, I cannot believe the media presence here,” Whitney said.

“I am not surprised,” Kip said.

“Why are you not surprised, Kip?”

“Because I called them. The prodigal son has returned, and I wanted everyone to know that he returned to get KJ out of this mess.”

“Nice to see you did not lose your beautiful brain in New Hampshire,” Alton said, getting out of the reinforced bulletproof Explorer.

Kip looked at Whitney, giving her a reassuring kiss. “You stay here, and I will go and help out KJ after I have a small chat with our friendly reporters.”

Whitney said, “Please tell my brother I know he didn't do this, and please tell him I love him with all my heart.”

“I certainly will,” Kip said. “This definitely has been the most interesting first date that I have ever had. If they are all going to be like this, I will not be able to wait for each one.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

Kip exited the vehicle with a determined stride; his eyes fixed on the throng of reporters gathered in front of the Palo Alto Sheriff's Department. The air was thick with anticipation, cameras flashing and microphones thrust forward, eager to capture his every word. Kip had meticulously planned his approach, knowing precisely what he needed to do. He had developed his plan a good twenty minutes before they crossed the Mississippi, giving him ample time to prepare for the media frenzy. As he approached the reporters, he took a deep breath, ready to face the barrage of questions and the weight of the public's scrutiny. This was his moment to take control of the narrative, to ensure that the truth would be heard above the clamor of speculation and doubt.

"In case you have been living under a rock for the past two decades, my name is Seamus O'Doyle. Before any questions arise—because there won't be any—I will make a statement and then speak to my client," Kip began with unwavering confidence. "I am here to ensure KJ Springhouse is exonerated swiftly. Not only is he the best basketball player in college basketball, possibly on the planet, but he is also an all-American scholastic scholar. As usual, the press has hastily jumped to conclusions about the events at Stanford last night. I am not surprised by the rumors and innuendos that have spread like wildfire. If it weren't for fake news, there would be no news at all."

Kip strode past all the reporters without stopping to answer a question. He did wink at a couple of friendly faces, whom he had used plant information in the past when necessary. If needed, he would undoubtedly use them again in this situation.

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

#####

“He has a presence, doesn't he?” Whitney voiced.

“Always has, Ma'am.”

“Alton, please call me Whitney.”

He looked into the rearview mirror. “I certainly will.”

“I see that you and Kip have a very special relationship.” She stared out the window, looking at all the reporters still outside the county lockup.

“One evening, I picked up Kip to take him to an event. I had taken over my father's limousine company, which he had run for over three decades. At the time, my father was gravely ill and burdened with significant debt. Kip, recognizing the situation, bought my father's company and merged it with O'Doyle and Associates. Now, I work directly for Kip, but our partnership has flourished, and together we've built a thriving transportation empire. Kip's support helped me fulfill my father's dreams and turned our family business into a legacy.”

He was also a part-time investigator for O'Doyle and Associates.

Whitney was becoming more impressed with Kip by the second. “He truly is something. The pain he has suffered in these three years must be unbearable.”

“The pain was unbearable for him, and probably still is. It certainly does not mean he cannot love again and open his heart to someone else. My friend has a huge love of life.

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Even when my family went to visit him in New Hampshire about six weeks ago, you could see that love of life coming back.”

“Hopefully, his love of being a lawyer is still there to help my brother.”

“Believe me, when I tell you this, Whitney, with Kip O’Doyle on board, you don’t have to hope he will help your brother. He will get to the bottom of this; I am sure of it.”

#####

“Nice to see you, counselor,” the front desk sergeant said after Kip handed over his laptop bag to be searched. The sergeant didn’t even bother to search the bag, as Kip had been in front of him several times.

“Glad to see you, too, Bill. Is my friend, the sheriff, here?”

“He told me to tell you to go right to his office when you arrived.”

Kip took his bag, nodded to the sergeant, and headed straight to the office of Tom Dwight, a former teammate and best friend of Kip’s from Boston College.”

“This is the shit-show you decided to come back to California for?” Tom voiced. He stood up immediately to hug his friend. "I have him uncuffed in an office with the guard out front. Totally against protocol.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

Kip frowned. “You owe me for hosting your wonderful family two weeks ago in New Hampshire. Plus, all the free beers I gave you.”

“I have to admit, you and Clayton treated us like royalty.”

“Why wouldn't we? You are our best friend. How do you think you were elected sheriff? Clayton and I were at every single one of your fundraisers.”

“And here I believed you helped me get elected sheriff to help out your clients.”

“There might be something to your statement,” Kip said with a laugh.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kip acknowledged the officer with a nod and proceeded to open the door to the conference room where KJ was located. KJ had his head on his arm, sleeping at the desk in the conference room. He looked a lot younger than his 21 years.

“KJ, my name is.....”

“Seamus O'Doyle. You are a legend around here, especially in the law department. And, of course, you are a Heisman Trophy winner and Detroit Lion.” KJ winced after he said it.

“How did you know that I was here?”

“I was actually on a date with your sister when your mother called, telling her you might be in a pickle. She is actually in the parking lot with my friend Alton right now,” Kip said. “She told me to tell you that she loves you and she knows you did not do this.”

KJ relaxed a bit. “I didn't do this or whatever they're accusing me of.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“Why don't you tell me what you can remember?”

“There was a party at my fraternity house last night. My girlfriend, Tara, and I had dinner before attending the party. Neither one of us is a big drinker.”

“Go on.”

“I dropped Tara off at her sorority house for her to get dressed, and I headed to the frat house. She told me she would be over in about an hour.”

Kip was writing everything down.

“I went in to go see my roommate to say hello, and when I arrived there, he was lying on the floor, blood everywhere. I immediately checked his pulse; I did not find any, so I started CPR.” KJ started to snifle. “I was doing CPR for about a minute and then someone hit me on the head with what felt like a bat.”

“Jesus,” mouthed Kip. “And then what happened?”

“I struggled to my feet, feeling like I didn't know where I was, but somehow I was able to follow the guy out of the frat house. I watched him leave in a Mercedes, noticing my car keys were in my pocket and my car was right next to me.

“The man was driving at a breakneck speed, and I knew I had to catch him. I jumped into my car, adrenaline coursing through my veins, determined to follow him. But somewhere along the way, darkness claimed me. When I came to, my Jeep was a mangled wreck, surrounded by a sea of smashed cars. The chaos of the scene mirrored the turmoil in my mind. What had happened? How had I ended up here? The answers eluded me, lost in the haze of that fateful chase. Before I knew it, the police were arresting me.”

“You have to be kidding me!” Kip just shook his head. “Do you have a lump on your head?”

KJ nodded.

He felt the huge lump on KJ's head and immediately started yelling for Sheriff Tim Dwight. "These idiots wouldn't know their arse from their elbow."

"What the hell are you screaming for?" Tim voiced after walking into the room.

"Did you bother checking on KJ when he came into your custody? What the hell kind of department are you running here anyway?"

"You told me not to touch him when he got here."

"I didn't tell you not to check for a concussion. He was performing CPR on his friend, and he obtained a nice whack on the back of the head. I should whack you on the back of the head."

KJ instantly sensed he was in safe hands. Kip winked at him before telling the sheriff he planned to hit him on the back of the head. The O'Doyle wink. The wink that assured many that everything would be alright. The wink Kip had used since he was a boy, always melting his Pop's heart.

"Did anyone bother to get a blood alcohol test on KJ?" asked Kip. "Let me guess, I can answer it for myself, the answer is no."

"Kip, I will get the nurse in here to give him a blood alcohol test. And before you say it, I am sure that, if KJ didn't drink anything or if he did drink anything, the blood alcohol breathalyzer test will let us know."

"Do you think so, Sheriff?" Kip said sardonically.

They were waiting for the ambulance to arrive, to take K away to the hospital, giving Kip a few moments alone with him. Kip's relief was palpable; he was sure KJ had no part in

the incident. More than anything, he was eager to deepen his connection with Whitney. Thanking the Lord above, KJ was innocent.

“Feeling better?”

KJ nodded. “I feel better about not being considered a murderer, but I lost my best friend, Jamal. We were like brothers,” choked out KJ.

“I know, pal.” He tapped him on his arm. “Believe me, I know what it's like.” Kip took a deep breath. He truly felt for KJ. “I'm not even going to pretend to know what it feels like, in your heart, about what happened last night; however, once we get you situated, I am going to have to ask you some questions because what happened wasn't done by a bunch of college kids.”

“OK,” mouthed KJ

Kip patted his shoulder again, reassuringly. “We are in this together. Always remember that. Always. Always.”

#####

“If you put handcuffs on him, I'm going to knock you straight to the moon.”

“Kip, you know that a prisoner has to be cuffed if he is being transported. You have not officially exonerated KJ yet,” said Sheriff Dwight.

“Correct me if I'm wrong, but the care of all prisoners is the responsibility of the sheriff. Take custody of KJ and take him to the hospital.” The O'Doyle wink was sent in KJ's direction. “Tell our good sheriff you will behave, KJ.”

"I promise, Sheriff Dwight, I will behave." KJ smiled at him. His first genuine smile since he found Jamal deceased in their room.

Sheriff Dwight huffed. "Alright. Alright. I will go with him to the hospital."

"Smart move," Kip said.

"Why did I miss you so much? You have bullied me since college."

"I did not bully you. I only wanted to make sure you never fumbled the ball after you caught it. You had fumbling problems, not I."

"You possess hands that are notably large, comparable to a catcher's mitt. Their size is the primary reason you have never experienced fumbling."

"They did help me win the Heisman."

"Very true," Sheriff Dwight said with a chuckle.

"Have the two of you always been this way?" KJ asked.

They replied in unison, "Yes."

"KJ, I would like to remind you that you do not say a word to anyone, especially this twinkie over here. We must ensure that no one takes anything you say out of context. Isn't that right, Twinkie?"

"You do know that I believe you, right?"

"You didn't believe me when I told you Clayton would not get married each time he became engaged, correct?"

"Good point," the sheriff admitted.

KJ was loaded into the ambulance, which then left the sheriff's department for Palo Alto General Hospital. Kip quickly went through the barrage of reporters, without saying a word, and went straight into Alton's vehicle. His smile had Whitney completely at ease.

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“Please tell me that smile of yours means KJ didn't do this.”

“KJ definitely didn't do this,” Kip stated. “He is actually quite the hero, and in the next few hours, the whole world is going to know it, too.” He proceeded to tell Whitney and Alton exactly what had transpired the night before and how he figured it all out. “I went to law school with the District Attorney out here. It won't take much to convince her of what went on. Thank God, my best friend is the sheriff.”

“Makes me nervous that the person who hurt KJ and his friends is a professional.”

“Concerns me too, Whit. At least I now know what I'm dealing with. I will make sure KJ and Tara are safe. I spoke to her father before I left the lockup. She's going to meet us at the hospital. Did not take much convincing for her parents to allow her to see him.”

“Besides her father being a future Senate candidate, possibly, they really love my brother.”

“It certainly sounded that way to me. KJ is very lucky. She's a blonde-haired cutie who just so happens to be one of the best volleyball players in the world.”

Alton said, “Who do you believe these guys might be connected to?”

“I wish I knew, pal. We are certainly going to find out, though.”

CHAPTER SIX

Upon entering KJ's hospital room, tears streamed down Whitey's face as she exclaimed, "I was so worried about you."

KJ embraced Whitney and remarked, "Thank goodness you were on a date with Kip." Turning to Kip, he continued, "I just caught one of your legendary games on ESPN. You recorded 20 tackles, three sacks, and scored two touchdowns during goal-line offense. Boston College truly outperformed the Irish." KJ expressed his admiration, adding, "You may very well excel as an attorney even more than you did as a football player."

"I do alright, my friend."

Whitney's interaction with Kip marked a significant moment of closeness and connection. As she leaned back into him, allowing his strong arms to envelop her, it became evident that she found solace in his presence. This embrace was not just a physical act but a manifestation of trust and reassurance. Observing from a distance, KJ could not help but notice the genuine smile on his sister's face, a clear indication of her emotional well-being.

It was a smile that had been absent for some time, suggesting a rejuvenation of her spirit through this comforting bond.

The Reverend and Catherine Springhouse entered the room moments later, their presence immediately filling the space with a sense of warmth and love. Catherine, with a tender smile, gently placed her son into her loving arms, cradling him as if he were the most precious treasure in the world. Her eyes sparkled with joy and maternal affection, a sight that could melt even the coldest of hearts. Reverend Springhouse, with his strong yet gentle demeanor, wrapped his arm around Whitney in a comforting embrace, offering solace and support. The Springhouse's children, who had been eagerly awaiting their parents' arrival, erupted with love in their hearts and with eternal gratitude. Their faces lit up with pure delight, reflecting the deep bond and unwavering love that held this family together. It was a moment of pure, unadulterated happiness, a snapshot of familial bliss that would be cherished forever.

“Mom and Dad, I would like to introduce you to the venerable Seamus O’Doyle,” Whitney said. “He goes by Kip, by the way.”

Catherine hugged him hard. “Thank you, you sweet man.”

“Please don't thank me until you get my bill,” Kip joked.

“Take it easy, son, I have a reverend’s salary.”

“I will consider that when I present the bill to the treasurer at my office. You are a man of God. I don't want to be in trouble with the man upstairs.”

Catherine said, “Let's not scare the boy away. To me, our daughter seems a bit smitten.”

Whitney beamed with a genuine smile. "I'm not concerned about it, Mom. I believe he has some affection for me. After all, God must send a good man into my life, especially since my father is a reverend."

Kip exited into the hallway to answer a phone call. On the other end was his chief investigator, Jason Walsh, a former captain with the California Bureau of Investigation. Renowned for his expertise, Jason was the finest in the field, and Kip compensated him accordingly.

"What do you have?"

"I spoke to several individuals at the party," Jason began, "a member of the fraternity mentioned they heard an individual speak with an Irish brogue."

Kip said, "Plenty of people in California speak with a brogue."

"Not one who practically ran over one of the basketball players with blood all over his shirt. He had to be the guy who murdered KJ's roommate."

"This absolutely doesn't make any sense to me. The kid is the best basketball player on the planet, who was already railroaded into a murder charge. Now you are telling me, someone probably from the homeland, murdered his roommate. KJ isn't going to have any peace until we find out what the hell happened. Keep on it, please."

Jason agreed, hanging up with Kip, who immediately went back into KJ's room. Catherine was sitting on KJ's hospital bed, doting on her son.

"Kip, will you be my agent when I turn pro next year?"

"Certainly, there are three stipulations; however. The first stipulation is that my directives must be followed. When I provide you with statements for the media, you are to convey exactly what I instruct you to communicate."

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“I say what you tell me what to say, check.”

“Second condition, treat every fan as if they are your closest friend. Always be willing to take a selfie or provide an autograph. For some, meeting you could be a defining moment in their youth. While it is almost certain that you will secure a contract worth nearly a quarter of a billion dollars or more, taking a moment to sign an autograph or two is a small gesture,” Kip acknowledged.

Catherine and Reverend Kevin, both of whom wore broad smiles, agreed with his sentiments.

"The quickest way to lose endorsements or fail to gain any is to be disliked by your fans. Please demonstrate that you value them even more than they value you. Being a good person requires little time or effort. Continue to be the wonderful person you are in public. There will be days when you experience the disappointment of a loss, but remember, your fans are more concerned about you, their hero, than the outcome of the game."

“I promise to do right by the fans.”

“Finally, you will manage your finances wisely. You will be assigned a budget that you are expected to adhere to. Unsurprisingly, you will soon be presented with numerous opportunities from emerging businesses. I will ensure that you have a small fund available to assist friends who aspire to advance in their endeavors. While it is commendable to support those close to you, it is essential to evaluate the investment carefully and consult with me beforehand. The funds you receive have the potential to benefit your family for generations to come. The financial advisors who work for me, well, technically my Pop, are among the best in the industry. The last thing you want is to squander your newfound wealth.”

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“My son, thank the good Lord, someone like Kip has entered your life. We want the best for you; however, we also want you to have someone to look out for you as you begin your journey. I know you have a great head on your shoulders, choosing Kip is the best move you could make,” Reverend Springhouse said.

Catherine and Whitney were in complete agreement. Catherine recognized Kip had experienced the same challenges as KJ, having been selected as the first overall pick by the Detroit Lions. She felt a profound sense of gratitude that this former football player, now an exceptional lawyer, would be looking out for her son.

Tara entered KJ's hospital room with a timid smile directed at everyone present. She expressed her gratitude to Kip with heartfelt thanks before embracing KJ in a warm and affectionate hug. Much like Whitney, she felt a deep sense of relief, confident in her belief that KJ would never harm anyone, particularly Jamal.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“My parents think you walk on water,” Whitney said on the way to Kip’s house. She let out a small yawn. “I’m glad my parents and Tara are with KJ. The press conference you gave with the DA at the hospital has certainly made it all over social media.” Whitney showed Kip her phone quickly. “He is being hailed as a hero.”

Kip entered his home address into the GPS, which surprised Whitney.

“Did you forget where you lived?”

”I’ve never been to the house. After I left for New Hampshire, Lynn and Rachel bought me a new house and moved all my things there. I couldn’t face going back into my old house without my family.”

She squeezed his hand, noticing how tense he had become. “I’m with you, Seamus. You are definitely not alone. I will be right there with you. We will do it together.”

“Hey, Whit?”

“Yes, Seamus?”

“I am not worried about going into my house.”

“What are you worried about?”

“The uncertainty surrounding the attack on KJ and his roommate raises significant concerns, particularly regarding the identity and motives of the assailant. The suggestion that the perpetrator may belong to a professional group implies a level of organization and intent that could complicate the investigation. Such groups often operate with a high degree of sophistication, making it imperative for law enforcement to thoroughly analyze the circumstances of the attack. Understanding the potential affiliations of the attacker could provide critical insights into their motivations and the broader context of the incident. As the investigation unfolds, it will be essential to gather intelligence and evidence that could lead to identifying the individual responsible, ensuring justice for the victim, and enhancing community safety.”

“How long did it take you to come up with that bullshit answer?” Whitney said with a giggle. She kissed Kip on the cheek.

Kip's instincts told him that Mrs. Catherine Springhouse was a woman of many layers, far more complex than her role as the church's music coordinator. With a team of elite hackers at his disposal, he had the means to uncover secrets that most would prefer to keep hidden. As he delved deeper into the shadows of her life, he discovered that Catherine was not just a talented musician; she was also an analyst at the same organization where Kip's father was employed inside the Irish Intelligence Service. This revelation sent a shiver down his spine. *Was there a connection between her covert activities and the recent attack?* The uncertainty gnawed at him, compelling him to tread carefully as he pieced together the puzzle, aware that the truth could be more dangerous than he ever anticipated.

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Kip's voice trembled with a mix of anger and concern as he spoke, his eyes narrowing with determination. "I had that answer on speed dial in my mind," he continued, the weight of his words hanging in the air. "And in all seriousness, I don't like the fact that the person who killed Jamal is out there somewhere, free to roam while we're left grappling with the aftermath of his loss. It's infuriating to think that justice hasn't been served, that someone could take a life so carelessly and still walk among us. We owe it to Jamal, to his memory, to ensure that the truth comes to light and that the person or persons responsible face the consequences of their actions. It's not just about closure; it's about making sure that no one else has to endure the pain KJ is feeling right now." Kip's passion was palpable, igniting a fire in Whitney. "Keeping KJ safe is my number one priority right now. I want to know what the hell's going on."

As they approached the house, Whitney couldn't help but feel a mix of awe and trepidation. The grandeur of the structure loomed before her, its intricate architecture telling stories of a time long past. Each window sparkled in the fading sunlight, reflecting the warmth of the day, while the sprawling gardens whispered secrets of nature's beauty. She sensed the weight of history in the air, a palpable connection to those who had walked these grounds before her. In that moment, she felt a deep yearning to belong, to understand the lives that had unfolded within those walls. The silence between them was heavy, yet it allowed her to absorb the beauty around her, igniting a flicker of hope that perhaps this place could become a part of her story too.

"Oh my God, did your old house look like this?"

"Same size, but totally different."

"Why does anyone need a house this big?"

He chuckled as they left the car. “If you think this is big, wait until you see my Pop’s house. His house is pretty much three times the size of this one.”

Whitney felt a sense of warmth and happiness as she listened to Kip enthusiastically discuss his Pop’s house. The way he spoke about it, filled with fond memories and nostalgia, resonated deeply with her. She could picture the stories he shared, the laughter that echoed through the halls, and the comfort that the house provided to him and his family. It was clear that his Pop’s place held a special significance for Kip, and Whitney appreciated the glimpse into his life that he was offering her. This moment not only strengthened their connection but also made her eager to learn more about his past and the experiences that shaped him.

She lost her breath at the beauty and marvel of the home once inside. “Did you even see pictures of this place before Lynn and Rachel purchased it for you?”

“And they even sent a video.”

As they walked hand in hand through the house, their footsteps echoed softly against the polished floors. The tour was brief but thorough, allowing them to appreciate the layout and design of each room. They admired the living area, with its large windows that let in natural light, and the cozy kitchen, which seemed perfect for gatherings. After completing the tour, they made their way to the bedroom, a space that promised comfort and intimacy. The anticipation of settling into Kip’s new home filled the air, as he envisioned how he would personalize the room to reflect his taste and experiences.

“You can sleep here; I’ll go into one of the guest bedrooms,” Kip acknowledged.

“Please stay. I could really use those big, powerful arms wrapped around me while I go to sleep,” Whitney admitted, already sitting on the bed. She grabbed him by his belt, guiding him to lie with her. “I have not done this in so long. Please be gentle.”

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As Kip lay beside her, the warmth of their shared intimacy still enveloping the room, he felt a pang of reluctance to leave the comfort of their moment. He knew that the world outside awaited him with its demands and responsibilities, but the tenderness they had just shared lingered in his heart. The thought of meeting with his technological team and then Jason felt daunting, especially as he was notorious for struggling to find rest amidst the chaos of his professional life. Yet, he also understood the importance of his role and the impact he could make. With a gentle sigh, he slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb her peaceful slumber, and prepared himself for the challenges ahead, holding onto the memory of their connection as a source of strength.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As Kip stepped out of the elevator, the atmosphere in the office shifted dramatically. The hum of conversation and the clatter of keyboards seemed to fade, giving way to a palpable tension that hung in the air. Faces that had been animated just moments before now wore expressions of surprise and concern, as if they had just witnessed a ghost. It was a curious sight; the office, usually bustling with energy even at this late hour, suddenly felt like a stage where all eyes were drawn to the enigmatic figure of Kip. His presence commanded attention, and the whispers that followed him hinted at a mix of admiration and apprehension. *What had he done to elicit such a reaction?* Was it his reputation, the death of his family, three years away from California, his unyielding confidence, or perhaps the air of mystery that surrounded him? Whatever it was, one thing was clear: Kip had a way of making an entrance that left a lasting impression, even in the most ordinary of settings.

Lynn's heart raced as she dashed into Kip's office, her emotions spilling over like a dam that had finally burst. In his open arms, she found solace and strength, a refuge from the

storm that had engulfed her life. They were more than just best friends; they were family, bound by a deep love and understanding that transcended words.

A year had passed when Lynn lost her husband to cancer, a devastating blow that left her grappling with grief and uncertainty. With two young children to care for and no life insurance to cushion the fall, she felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. But fate had a different plan. Through a mutual friend, who worked for Kip, she met him, who not only saw her potential but also recognized her struggle. Without her knowledge, he had taken it upon himself to ensure her financial burdens were lifted, paying off her back bills before she even set foot in the office. When he hired her as his personal assistant, it was the beginning of a remarkable journey. In a whirlwind of determination and talent, Lynn quickly rose through the ranks, ultimately becoming the CEO of Kip's prestigious 300-lawyer firm. Their bond, forged in adversity, blossomed into a partnership that would change both their lives forever.

“You are here.”

“Yes, Lynn, I am here in the flesh.”

“You are back. Thank God, you are back. This place needs you; I need you, and the whole wide world is a better place when you are back to being yourself.”

“I know,” Kip mouthed.

As Lynn settled into the chair, the atmosphere in the room shifted, charged with unspoken words and lingering emotions. Kip leaned back, his fingers drumming lightly on the desk, a nervous habit he couldn't shake. The soft glow of the desk lamp illuminated Lynn's face, highlighting the mix of determination and vulnerability in her eyes.

"We need to talk about what happened," she said, her voice steady yet tinged with uncertainty.

Kip nodded, the weight of the moment pressing down on him. He had been dreading this conversation, but deep down, he knew it was necessary. The air was thick with anticipation, each second stretching out as they both prepared to navigate the complexities of their relationship, hoping to find clarity amidst the chaos.

He filled her in the best he could about what happened to KJ and Jamal. "We have to identify who did this and see if this guy was a lone wolf or not."

"Are you back for good?"

"I was coming home for Thanksgiving anyway. I'm sure you've probably heard that from Lilith. You two are close. I guarantee that you tell each other everything, probably as fast as you find out. Not that I really care."

Lynn, with her nurturing spirit and wisdom that came from her years, became a pillar of support for Kip during his tumultuous times. While the age difference between her and Kip was minimal, it was her emotional maturity that truly distinguished her. She had always shared a special bond with Lilly, but it was during Kip's struggles that her connection with Lilith deepened. They rallied around Kip, forming a tight-knit circle of friendship that provided solace and strength. Lynn often found herself playing the role of the mediator, helping to bridge the gap between Kip's pain and everyone's unwavering support. Together, they navigated the stormy seas of heartache, laughter, and healing, proving that sometimes, the bonds of friendship can be the strongest lifeline in the face of adversity.

"Tell me about Whitney," Lynn said.

Kip grinned widely, and Lynn immediately took notice. “She is something else. I hope I get to know her better and better,” he said. “I had to call Lilith on the ride home so she would not find out I was in California through the media. I see that she already told you about Whitney.”

“Open your heart, Kip. You deserve to be happy again, and that young lady needs the best of Kip O’Doyle. The best of you is better than anything she could have ever imagined.”

He frowned.

“Don't you dare frown at me, young man.”

“Lynn, you are like 5 minutes older than me.”

“Listen, I don't need any negative feedback from you. Take what I'm telling you, take it to heart, and listen, please.”

“OK. OK.”

“Good, now for the question I can't wait to ask.”

He interrupted, “Yes, Lynn, I'm open to taking new clients.”

”Thank you, Jesus. Do I have a case for you. It is a case that would have brought you back to California anyway.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, Kip, seriously.”

#####

Kip placed the vibrant colors of the flowers on her nightstand, which danced in the morning light, each petal a brushstroke of nature's artistry. As Whitney inhaled their sweet fragrance,

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memories of sunny days and laughter flooded her mind, wrapping her in a warm embrace. The delicate scent seemed to whisper promises of new beginnings and adventures waiting just outside her window. With a smile tugging at her lips, she felt a surge of gratitude for the simple joys that life offered, reminding her that even in the quiet moments, beauty could be found. Inspired, she decided to carry that feeling with her throughout the day, letting the flowers be a symbol of hope and renewal.

“I see you're enjoying the flowers,” Kip said. “I stopped by the all-night supermarket on the way back home. I hope you like them.”

“Like them? I love them!”

He kissed her lips sweetly.

“Were you able to get a lot done last night?”

“Yes, actually. I met everyone I was supposed to meet, and I was able to have my tech team try to do a deep dive on the man who killed Jamal. I don't know what they'll be able to do, but I have a few tricks up my sleeve. I hope that KJ was able to get some of the assailant's DNA under his fingernails when he grabbed him.”

“They can do that?”

“Yes, they can do that. We have a lab in our office building. I ensured we had a DNA sample to check ourselves.”

“You have your own lab? Why am I not surprised?”

“We are a full-service office. I never want to lose a case because we are unprepared. The firm has unlimited resources. Those resources allow us to be the best of the best.”

“The Springhouses are certainly glad that you put those resources to good use.”

Whitney kissed him sweetly. “I have to wonder if your law firm makes any money. You seem to have invested heavily in the firm.”

He chuckled. “We make plenty of money, trust me. Investing in the firm is a long-term proposition, if you know what I mean?”

“To me, it seems like you have your own private FBI agency in your building. How much space do you lease in your building?”

“I have unlimited use of any space in the building I need. I do not own the property; my Pop owns the building. He acquired it when it became available for purchase following the company's bankruptcy. I consider myself fortunate that there was a building undergoing bankruptcy proceedings.”

Whitney chuckled. “Must be the bankruptcy proceedings to get such a beautiful building at a relatively low cost.”

He shrugged. “You do what you can.”

“Seamus, I eventually have to go home to get some clothes if I'm going to stay here until you think it's safe for me to go back to San Jose. I have nothing to wear to go to your Pop's house tonight, which I very much look forward to.”

“You said you had to do a little work this morning, correct?”

“I have to write an article for our news station's website. My boss is giving me a little leeway, considering I am going through what I am going through, and of course, you are allowing me to interview you for a special on the network.”

“Please do not remind me.”

CHAPTER NINE

Kip took a seat at the restaurant located on the ground floor of his building to have breakfast. A reserved table, which had remained unused for three years, awaited him.

Marla practically ran across the restaurant to greet Kip, tears in her eyes. She wrapped him up in her arms. “I missed you so, so much.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I missed you, too. Very much indeed.”

Several years before Kip departed for New Hampshire, he invited Marla and her spouse, Fred, to a meeting, extending an irresistible offer. He provided them with a complimentary lease for the restaurant, granting them complete authority to manage it, provided they maintained operating hours from 6:00 am to 11:00 pm on weekdays and from 6:00 am to 8:00 pm on weekends, with vending machines available during off-hours. Marla and Fred expressed immense gratitude for his generosity and were particularly appreciative that Kip preferred not to have them present on weekends, allowing them to enjoy their lives.

She always reserved a table for Kip, where he conducted most of his meetings with the law firm's staff. The table had a reserved sign on it for three years. They both adored him.

Marla departed before Lynn joined Kip for breakfast. They traditionally hold breakfast meetings at the beginning of each day.

"Here are your new business cards," Lynn said, handing him a box of business cards. "I added psychologist to your card after you decided to get your PhD in psychology at Boston College during your time away."

"Lynn, you are aware of my motivations for pursuing this path. I sought healing, and there was no better avenue for me than obtaining my PhD from my cherished alma mater, guided by some of the most exceptional educators and clergy in existence. The impact on my healing journey is beyond words. My aspiration is to one day extend the same level of support to others that I have received."

"Now everyone will know that you have that ability to help repair someone's spirit and ensure that their legal issues have a positive outcome. We are all so proud of you, Doctor O'Doyle." Lynn beamed with pride.

He frowned. "Sure, Lynn. You are all proud of me because my family died."

"That is not what I meant, and you know it," Lynn snapped.

"I know, and I am sorry."

"Good, do not bring it up again," she said.

Kip immediately tried to change the subject. "You had mentioned you have a case you want me to take on. Would you like to give me a little bit of background on it?"

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“Certainly, there's a 12-year-old who went to a party, and accidentally overdosed on Fentanyl, barely surviving the overdose. She has been ostracized at her Catholic school for being at a party where drugs and alcohol were present.”

“Jesus,” he mouthed. “Who hosted the party?”

“Ironically enough, the football team. She was part of the cheering squad invited to the party. Her young mother told me she only grabbed a Pepsi, or so she thought.”

“Does she have an appointment to come in?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Let's get to the bottom of it. They both must be going through the unimaginable.”

#####

Whitney and Kip traveled to San Jose to collect some items for Whitney. He dispatched KJ and Tara to New Hampshire for their safety. Tara's parents immediately approved of Kip's plan, especially after Kip promised to keep them under armed guard.

Upon reaching San Jose, guided by Whitney's instructions, he found himself on her street, trying to spot her car. “Where is your car, Whitney?”

“Here is the sitch?”

“Sitch?”

“Situation. My older BMW was stolen a couple of days before I left for New Hampshire. I reported it to the local Police Department, and so far, I have not heard a word back on if they located it or not,” she said with a shrug.

His mind started to spin. “You are just telling me this now? I'm sure you didn't realize that this might have been something you might have told me.”

“There is so much going on, it slipped my mind.”

“What else has slipped your mind? Inquiring minds would like to know.”

Whitney giggled. “That's about it.”

“Maddening,” Kip mouthed.

Kip kept shaking his head on the way into Whitney's rented condo. There was no doubt in his mind that her car being stolen was somehow connected; he didn't know how.

“What floor?” Kip asked once they walked into the elevator of her building. “This elevator smells like dog urine.”

“6th floor,” Whitney replied. “We have complained about the smell of the elevators for several months, to no avail. Maybe a strong-worded letter from an attorney extraordinaire would help our plight in getting something done.”

“I do have an office here in San Jose,” Kip said with a smile.

Whitney put her key in the door, turned the key, and let out a shriek, quickly burying her head into Kip's chest.

“Still think your car being stolen isn't related?” He hugged her hard.

Whitey's condo was tossed and tossed and then tossed again. “What could they possibly be looking for?” It took her several seconds to catch her breath. “I don't understand.”

Kip took out his phone and said, “Check if you can get what you need, and we can buy the rest. I need to bring my team in to see what we can find, especially what these guys or girls were after.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

Whitney gave him one final hug. “Thank God you were here. I do not know what I would have done without you.”

“Until further notice, I am not letting you out of my sight. We are going to leave it that way.”

#####

“Dude, did you see the size of that guy?”

“That is Seamus O'Doyle, dude. I seriously hope he is not dating Whitney Springhouse. I don't care how much they are paying us. Let's go back to the surf shop and forget we even were here. He could snap us like a twig.”

“I see that, but who the hell is he?”

“He's the all-American football player who used to play for the Detroit Lions. Have you lived under a rock your whole life? You better lay off the weed, bro.”

“I know who he is now. Ah, shit. I would rather lose the surf shop than deal with that guy. We were just supposed to go in there and steal some video of what Whitney Springhouse had on the Fentanyl that has come to San Jose.”

“I don't know why they sent us back in. We couldn't find it the first time.”

“It was your idea to try to go back in. Only getting \$10,000 to find videos that a reporter took doesn't seem like a great idea now. They only gave us \$2,000 to look. We need the rest of the money if we are going to keep the shop.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“I’d rather take a chance on selling the molly and ecstasy we have than try to find videos. They had mentioned that we steal her laptop. I’m not going to try to steal her laptop when she leaves the news station. No way, no how.”

“Sounds good to me. I like my head between my shoulders, dude.”

#####

“Run that by me again?” Kip was on the phone with Jason while Whitney dressed to go to Mario’s. “I’m not sure I heard you right.”

“Jamal wrote an article for the school newspaper on how Fentanyl has been sold on campus. It looks like he was on the street investigating known drug dealers.”

“He was a journalism major, from what I understand.”

“Who knew that he would be doing hard-hitting investigative reporting?” Jason voiced. “Secondly, Whitney was doing an exposé on Fentanyl in San Jose.”

“This is all starting to make sense.”

“What does not make sense to me is someone with a brogue.”

“Actually, it does. Ireland has increased its Fentanyl production by over 1000%. What better place to push their Fentanyl production than California?”

“Not exactly comforting, Kip.”

“Not comforting at all. Are we starting to go through the cameras around Whitney’s apartment? Has to be something there.”

“We just sent it all to the tech weenies.”

“Let me find out immediately once you have something. I know it's probably going to take a while, but I have to have it sooner rather than later.”

“You will be the first to know.”

They bid farewell. Kip was beginning to connect the dots. Whitney and Jamal had uncovered something significant; he required all the information Whitney possessed regarding the Fentanyl crisis in San Jose. There was insufficient time to gather it before he needed to be at his Pop's place.

Whitney waltzed into the room looking absolutely dashing, a smile all over her face.

“What do you think, Attorney O'Doyle?”

“Absolutely breathtaking,” Kip muttered.

“Thank God they didn't ruin this dress.”

“Thank God indeed.” He kissed her sweetly on the lips so as not to mess up her lipstick. He gave her his arm. “Are you ready, my dear?”

“You have no idea how much I look forward to this. I have never eaten with a billionaire before. Plus, I cannot wait to see his house.”

“You'll be impressed. It is actually the house I grew up in.”

Whitney started to think back to earlier in the day, when she first smelled the flowers Kip had brought her.

“Your chariot awaits, my dear.”

Kip opened the passenger-side door of his Porsche for Whitney to get in. Rachel replaced his Porsche a few months ago.

“Sweet ride,” Whitney said. “How far does Pop live from you?”

“Less than 1/2 hour. It would be quicker, but there are many back roads to get to his house. I try to go the speed limit. Safety first.”

Whitney knew precisely why. “And we are off.”

Approximately 15 minutes into the journey, Kip observed a Mercedes rapidly approaching. He became immediately alert, and a look of concern swiftly appeared on his face.

“Do not look now, but we have somebody fast approaching us.”

“Where?” Whitney asked. She turned her head and looked through the rear window.

“Are you talking about that black Mercedes?”

“That's the one.” Kip put his foot on the gas. “Call, Pop”

His Bluetooth said, “*Call Pop is not listed.*”

“Call Pop damn it!”

“*Call Pop damn it is not on your call list.*”

“This damn thing is starting to piss me off.”

“*Sorry.*”

“Call Pop.”

“*Sorry.*”

“Oh, crap! Call Mario,” he shouted.

“*Calling Mario Renzi.*”

Kip's phone, through Bluetooth, started to dial his Pop's number.

Gunshots started pelting off the Porsche. Mario owned the company that made every vehicle bulletproof. It was cheaper for him to buy the company than to spend the money upgrading the cars he purchased.

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

"I hope you're close, Lucinda has the food almost ready," said Mario after answering.

Kip had been driving the Porsche at speeds exceeding 100 miles per hour for the past five minutes. "I will arrive if we survive," Kip shouted. He hurriedly described his experience amidst Whitney's screams.

"I will send Leonard and the team. I have you picked up on the car's GPS." Leonard was the head of Mario's security. He was very fond of Kip, having been with him since Kip was a small child. "Do what you have to."

Kip put his face out the window and started firing back.

"Are you insane? You are going to get shot!"

"You want to see insane, watch this?"

Kip sped up, even faster, spinning the car 180°. He started to drive straight for the Mercedes, deciding to play a game of chicken, hoping they would blink first.

"What are you doing?!"

The Mercedes driver did, in fact, blink first, driving his car off the side of the road, rendering the Mercedes useless.

"Thank God," said Kip above a whisper.

She softly hit his arm. "Tell me right here and right now, you will never do that again. Oh my God, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I have been taught by the best drivers in the world how to drive. I knew what I was doing. Do you think I would take a chance after all I've been through?"

Whitney squeezed his hand for all it was worth for the rest of the ride to Mario's. Excitement was flowing throughout her body. She did not know whether to laugh, cry, or

scream. His huge smile calmed her right down after pulling into Mario's. She had no idea why she was so thrilled when Kip drove straight at the Mercedes.

“Ready?” Kip chuckled. “We made it here in 17 minutes, who would have thought?”

Whitney could only smile and giggle, walking hand in hand with Kip, straight into Mario's house. “I thought your house was the most amazing thing I've ever seen, this place definitely beats it. Without a shadow of a doubt.”

“You are an adrenaline junkie. Heaven help me.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Pop, I would like to introduce you to the beautiful and talented Whitney Springhouse.

Whitney, this is my much beloved Pop, Mario Renzi.”

Mario took her hands in his and kissed her on the cheek. “What a lovely lady you have brought to see us.”

“Thank God we made it here in one piece,” Kip said, watching Mario's significant other walk into the room. He kissed her on the cheek. “So lovely to see you, Alyssa.”

She tried to hold back her tears, but she could not. “And who would this beautiful lady be? Stunning, absolutely stunning.”

Alyssa and Mario were together for almost 30 years. Neither one was in any rush to marry, and they loved each other completely and unconditionally.

“Please let me introduce you to Miss Whitney Springhouse,” Kip said.

She welcomed Whitney with warmth and invited her to the wine cellar to select several bottles of wine for dinner. Alyssa, a connoisseur of wine and winemaking, managed Kip's

winery. Even during his time in California, he was unable to find the opportunity to assist her as much as he would have liked.

Mario and Kip exchanged pleasantries, their conversation flowing effortlessly as they navigated through the initial moments of Kip being home. The air was filled with a sense of anticipation, a subtle undercurrent of excitement that hinted at the significance of the business they were about to discuss. Kip's eyes sparkled with keen interest, while Mario's demeanor exuded calm confidence; each man brought his unique energy to the table. As they transitioned from casual small talk to the more serious matters at hand, the room seemed to come alive with the promise of new opportunities and the potential for groundbreaking ventures. Their dialogue, rich with insights and strategic thinking, set the stage for what would undoubtedly be a pivotal moment in their father-son journey.

“So, who was trying to kill us, Pop?”

“Your guess is as good as mine as of now.”

“Did you run it by my father?”

Seamus O'Doyle was undeniably alive. He had narrowly escaped the car bombing that claimed the life of his cherished wife. He felt incapable of raising Kip without his wife. At that time, Mario recognized that his brother needed to dedicate himself to ensuring Kip's safety. Just out of college, he assumed the role of primary caregiver for his nephew, cherishing every moment of nurturing Kip as if he were his child. Building their company and raising Kip became everything to Mario, while Seamus re-enlisted in the Irish intelligence agency.

“Your father has everyone he knows, and then some, looking into this.”

“Seamus, your father is still alive?” asked Whitney, coming back into the room.

#####

Whitney was in complete shock at dinner when Kip and Mario explained everything about Kip's father, and even more shocked when she found out Alyssa was former CIA.

“Anything else?” Whitney asked, still trying to take it all in.

“Plenty,” Kip admitted. “But we wouldn't want to scare you away.”

“Why do I have a feeling you are always in the middle of it?”

“Your statement is not exactly true,” Mario said. “He has plenty of help, my dear. Well, when he listens, which is most of the time.”

“I always listen,” Kip said. “Most of the time anyway.”

Whitney giggled. “This is going to be a blast.”

“Speaking of listening,” Alyssa began. “Have you decided what you are going to call the new Meritage your winery is about to produce? I have been asking you for almost a month.”

“You have a winery?” Whitney asked excitedly.

“I do,” Kip said. “Alyssa actually manages the property and the wine company. And to answer your question, Alyssa, I plan on taking Whitney to the vineyard tomorrow for lunch after I meet a client in the morning. We will figure it out then.”

Whitney beamed with excitement, completely forgetting, for a moment, the ride to Mario's. “Did you have any plan to tell me about this?”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“I was going to tell you about it on the way here, before we were rudely interrupted. Considering our last date was interrupted.”

“Why do I have the feeling that interrupting dates will not be a one-time thing?”

Mario and Alyssa had a good chuckle, knowing full well what Kip’s life was like. It did not bother Lily, although Kip wrapped her in a bubble with the girls. Neither Mario nor Alyssa was sure if Whitney would stay in the bubble Kip would provide for her.

#####

“What a lovely evening,” Whitney said on the ride home.

Kip took one of Mario's slick new Mercedes to go home. “You mean, besides being shot at, it was a lovely evening. Technically, I have no idea who they were shooting at, you or me.”

“I’m sure it was me.”

Kip could only shake his head. “That doesn't exactly give me a warm and fuzzy feeling, my dear. No one should be shooting at us.”

“I completely agree. Thank God KJ and Tara are tucked away in Hampshire.”

“They are protected completely. No one will ever know that they are there.”

“That is definitely a relief. The last thing that I need to worry about is those two when we have our date tomorrow.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“I promise it'll be a date you will remember for the rest of your life.”

She hugged his arm hard, paying attention to other cars on the road. “Tell me a little bit about your father.”

“Believe me, I love my father. But Pop is my dad in every way. There were times in my life when I didn't see my father for months. As I grew older, I understood why more and more; however, it didn't hurt any less. Pop always made me feel loved and always picked up the pieces when my father left. My father fights the world to keep me safe, Pop is my world, and that made me feel safe,” Kip said. “He kept me from sinking into the abyss after I lost my family. The Emmers were always there, but Pop refused to let me give up.”

“He seems to be a wonderful person. You are fortunate to have him. Alyssa seems like an angel. She spoke very highly of you when we were in the wine cellar.”

“She has been with Pop for almost 30 years. I keep waiting for them to be married.”

“Do you think it will ever happen?”

“Hopefully sooner rather than later. I keep asking them what they are waiting for.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kip smiled at two very timid ladies whom Lynn brought into his office. “Please have a seat, ladies. They do not bite.”

Colleen and Kyra Dolan both took a seat, sharing a shy smile. They placed their hands on one another's, Kip immediately observing their evident fear.

“Ladies, I am on your side. I know it is easier said than done, but please try to relax. I am one of the good guys.” He offered them chocolate from the jar on his desk, they both refused. “I read the intake report you gave Lynn when you called, Colleen, about your daughter. My heart breaks for what the two of you have gone through.”

“Attorney O’Doyle.....”

Kip interrupted, “Colleen, please call me Kip.”

“Kip, we have been going through so much since the day Kyra was given Fentanyl accidentally. I have been fired from my job, and we have been harassed and harassed since the day we told the police the truth about what happened.”

“I heard that Becker Academy has some real jackarses that play football there.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

Colleen and Kyra laughed softly.

“Well, they are,” Kip said.

“Trust me, they are, although I'm sure you can help us. I don't see any way of being able to pay for your services.”

“I'm doing this pro bono; you do not have to pay me a thing. You are being bullied. I hate bullies more than anything in this world. You have my whole office at your disposal.”

“How?” Kyra voiced.

“I don't take a whole lot of cases because I help the lawyers in the firm with theirs. There are times when I take a case because I believe it's important. This case is important to Lynn. When it is important to her, it is important to me.”

“Do you really think you can help us?” Kyra asked.

He nodded. “There is no doubt in my mind your troubles are now over, and a bunch of football players' troubles are just about to begin.”

#####

“Jason, make sure you have an armed guard in front of their house,” Kip said. “Use females. The last thing I want to do is scare them more than they already are.”

Kip waved in Lynn, hanging up the phone with Jason. “What can I do for you?” He asked.

Lynn ushered in Lilith. “We have a few things we need to go over before you pick up Whitney.” They took their seats.

“Hey, Mom, what are you doing here?”

Lilith swallowed hard. Lynn stared down at the floor. Kip immediately tensed up.

"Could someone please tell me what's going on?"

"Kip, allow me to explain this to you," Lynn stated. "I was the one who received the initial call. When Colleen contacted me, she requested to arrange a meeting with you first."

"Go on."

She blew out her breath, taking Lilith's hand in hers, exactly what Colleen and Kyra did.

"Colleen is not Kyra's mother."

"They have to be related somehow; they look alike."

"Who else does Kyra look like?" Lilith asked.

"My girls? Kyra looks like every blonde-haired cutie in California."

"Kyra's true mother is Meredith O'Connell," Lynn said.

"Meredith O'Connell?" Kip muttered. "You are trying to tell me Kyra is my daughter? Why didn't she tell me? Where is she?" His head was about to explode. There were a million questions that he wanted to ask.

"Four years ago, Meredith O'Connell succumbed to cancer. At that time, Colleen, who was 23 years old, was entrusted with the care of Kyra. Meredith intended for Colleen to inform Kyra of her biological father when Kyra turned 18, allowing her the choice to disclose this information to you or not," Lynn acknowledged. "Meredith always told Kyra that Colleen was her mother. Colleen told me they wanted to make sure Kyra never found out you were her father until she was 18. Colleen told me Meredith did not want to ruin your life."

"Ruin my life? No, she just believed it was better to ruin Kyra's life."

"She was a model when you dated her, correct?" Lilith asked.

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

He nodded. “She was batshit crazy even back then. It is why we broke up; she never forgave me. But to do this to our daughter is way over the line. Not to mention what she did to poor Colleen. I am beside myself.”

“When Kyra took the Fentanyl, Colleen called me immediately.”

“And then Lynn told me about it when I came back from New Hampshire after visiting you. We were planning on how to tell you.....”

“Before you could tell me, I had to help Whitney and KJ,” Kip said, interrupting. “Now I have to put two people back together. This is unbelievable, uneffingbelievable.” He sucked in several breaths. “How am I going to raise Kyra as my daughter?”

“You mean to tell me that Seamus Kip O'Doyle doesn't have the biggest heart I have ever seen? Tell me if I'm wrong, didn't you open your heart for Whitney?” Lilith asked.

He shrugged.

“I came here when I was down and out, and you loved me through the death of my husband and getting me back on my feet. It is what you do.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“You have a 12-year-old daughter?”

“I do, but she doesn't know it yet.” Kip proceeded to tell Whitney the rest of the story on the ride to the vineyard, recounting everything.

“Seamus, this doesn't change anything,” Whitney said, taking his hand in hers.

“You are amazing,” he mouthed.

“Yes, I am,” she said sprightly.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “I would like you to go with me tomorrow to Colleen's and Kyra's house. I might need some help.”

“Of course, I will be there. I cannot believe what their mother did to those poor girls. And I cannot believe how she kept you from your daughter.”

“I wasn't a choir boy, Whitney. And for that, I am sorry.”

“You didn't even know me. Besides, did you apologize to Lily?”

“I did.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“Oh,” she said above a whisper.

“I will never lie to you, Whitney. You might not like my answers, but I will never lie to you. I could never do that to somebody I love.”

She smiled widely on the inside, kissing his cheek. “I love you, too.”

They traveled in near silence until they arrived at the vineyard. Whitney was astonished by the striking beauty of the expansive vineyard.

“Come,” Kip said, opening her door after they parked the car at the vineyard. He held out a hand. “Let us spend a few hours worrying about just us.”

“I could use a few hours without worry.”

Kip aided Whitney in ascending to the highest viewpoint in the vineyard, offering an awe-inspiring panorama of the most beautiful vineyard imaginable. They settled at a wine barrel table, crafted by a local artisan, adorned with a white tablecloth. A bottle of the best Merlot from the vineyard was set on the table, accompanied by two wine glasses.

“Tell me what you think,” Kip said.

“It is absolutely outstanding. Thank you for taking me to the most beautiful place and feeding me wine, to boot.

They engaged in some small talk before a harp player and a violinist came to play Irish medleys. Whitney could not contain her enthusiasm. She had a huge glow all over her face.

The lunch was presented, featuring T-bone steaks, mashed potatoes, and asparagus. Whitney was astonished that he was aware of her preferred dish.

“How did you know this is my favorite meal?” Whitney inquired.

“I asked your brother and your mother what your favorite meal is. They both told me the same thing. I figured it couldn't hurt my chances to make you smile by serving you a

medium rare T-bone steak,” Kip said. “I was pleasantly surprised. T-bones are my favorite steak. I could eat about 10 of these when I was playing football.”

Dessert was an apple crisp, accompanied by a port from a local vineyard. The musicians made their second appearance, playing some more Irish medleys.

“This is the best first date I have ever had,” Whitney admitted.

“Same here, Whitney. Come,” Kip said, standing up, offering up his hand. He guided her about 50 yards away from the table. “This is where I am about to build my new house. I bought the winery on a whim while I was in New Hampshire. The original owners were my clients when I was practicing here in California. I once told them that if they ever sold the vineyard, I would like to be given the first opportunity to buy it. They put it up for sale and I bought it. I had hopes that someday I would meet someone and start a family again,” he choked out.

“You would want to start a family and get married again someday?”

“As I have been reminded again today, my heart still has plenty of love to give. Thank God, it does, because it seems like I have a young girl who needs that heart.”

“It's not just a young girl, Seamus.”

#####

“Didn't you just eat about two hours ago?” Whitney questioned on the way to meet Kyra.

“Why do you want to stop and get cheeseburgers and french fries?”

“The food is for Kyra and Colleen, although I might have a lettuce wrap burger. I always need fuel,” he said with a chuckle. “Besides, food relaxes people.

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“You might have a point, Seamus. I'm always relaxed after I've eaten.”

“My dear, you will realize I have many points. Not all of them make a lot of sense,” he said, chuckling again. “Let's go inside and grab some food.”

As they resumed their journey after obtaining the food, Whitney inquired, “Are you aware of how you will inform Kyra that you are her father?”

“I thought it would be best to take her for a walk and clarify the entire situation. What other options do I have? I do not believe that hosting a party is the most appropriate response. It is not as if we could organize a gender reveal or a welcome celebration for becoming an O'Doyle.”

Whitney beamed at him and said, “Must you always be charming when responding to inquiries? I agree. I believe you ought to take her for a stroll and share the truth with her.”

“Taking her for a walk is your answer? How original.”

She chuckled. “Yes, I will speak with Colleen and get to know her while you take Kyra for a walk. Be honest with her. I'm sure she will appreciate 100% honesty.”

Kip and Whitney pulled up in front of Colleen and Kyra's house. Kip grabbed the food and, with Whitney, proceeded to the house.

Kyra answered the door wearing a Boston College jersey with the number 58. Kip introduced Whitney to Kyra, who already knew who she was from the nightly news.

“Please tell me you have a burger for me. I absolutely love Mac's Burgers.”

He noticed her beautiful smile all over her face. *Whitney was absolutely correct; I have to take her on a walk and be completely honest with her.*

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“Of course, I brought you a burger and french fries. I definitely plan on stealing a fry or two. Plus, I bought a lettuce wrap burger for myself. Have to stay away from those carbs.”

He handed Kyra the bag of food. There was enough food in the bag for an army.

“Now I know why you skipped the potato at lunch,” Whitney said.

Colleen entered the room; introductions were made. They all sat down at the kitchen table to enjoy their food. Kip handed Whitney her small french fry, grabbed his lettuce wrap burger, and passed out the four milkshakes he had bought.

“Kyra, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?” Kip asked.

She swallowed hard. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Did you ever, at the football players’ party, actively participate in doing drugs?”

“I would never do a drug. Ever, ever, ever!”

“That’s all I needed to know,” Kip said. “I knew you would be honest with me if you were ready and willing to talk about the party.”

Kyra blinked her big, beautiful eyes. Kip eyes.

They finished their food and spoke only of the local football game that was scheduled for 8:00 pm. Kip asked Kyra if she would like to take a walk so they could discuss her case strategy. Kyra practically jumped out of her seat to go for the walk.

“I think I need to head to a football game tonight,” Kip said as they started their walk. “I would like to have a meet and greet with some of these parents.”

Kyra looked up at him, a scared look on her face. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

His broad smile instantly calmed her anxiety. “These individuals must understand that they have overstepped their boundaries. What more effective method could there be for them to realize the extent of their transgressions than to expose their actions publicly?”

"I see your point."

Kyra was a brilliant person, possessing the renowned O'Doyle intellect. Kip was confident that with some assistance, the O'Doyle tenacity would also become a part of her character.

Kip swallowed hard. He hoped what he was about to say would be the right thing.

"Kyra, what do you know about your father?"

"My mother told me she made a mistake with a guy from high school who wanted nothing to do with her when he found out she was pregnant."

"Your statement is not entirely accurate," he said quietly, wishing to proceed with caution. "Kyra, my dear, your biological father was unaware of your existence until just yesterday." Tears began to fill his eyes. "You must understand, honey. Your mother chose not to disclose your father's true identity until you reached the age of 18."

"Why-y-y-y wouldn't she tell me?" She could see Kip getting all emotional.

"Because your mother didn't like me very much when we decided to go our separate ways. We dated for a while when I was playing for the Lions. She never told me she was pregnant."

Kyra's intelligence took over after the initial shock that Kip could be her father. "You could not possibly be my father. My mother was only 15 when she became pregnant. You would have been a little old for her, yes?"

He placed his arms around her shoulders. "Sweetie, Colleen is not your mother; she is your half-sister. Your mother is your grandmother?" He halted his steps. "Your grandmother was a renowned supermodel who wished to keep her pregnancy a secret from the world. She

irresponsibly passed that responsibility onto Colleen before she had the chance to reveal that she was your biological mother. I am your biological father.”

The only thing that resonated with her from Kip's words was the realization that he was her father. “You are my father?”

Kip wrapped her up in his arms. “I am so sorry, baby girl. I truly didn't have a clue she was pregnant when we ended our relationship. I was playing football in Detroit, and she was out here modeling in California. I called her a few times, asking how she was; however, she never returned my calls.” He hugged her tightly. “I would have never forsaken you, not for one solid minute. I would have raised you myself.”

“Wow,” she said above a whisper. Her mouth was open, but no words were coming out.

Kip kissed the top of her head. “Believe me, kiddo, I know pain, trust me, I know pain. There is a pain in my heart because I didn't know about you for the first 12 years of your life. Today is not a day for painful tears; it is a day for happy tears.”

“These are happy tears,” Kyra said through a sob.

“Mine are too, sweetheart.” Kip gave her his big O'Doyle smile. “We have a lot to learn about each other. And I'm going to love every single second of it.”

“Do I get to call you Dad '?”

“I hope so. Your sisters called me Dad.” He winced.” They would have loved you and you them, sweetheart.”

“Will you tell me everything about them? Mom...I mean, Colleen told me what happened, I do not have any words to say about it.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

Kip and Kyra resumed their stroll, holding hands. They engaged in conversation continually until they arrived back at the house. He sensed that he and Kyra were on the verge of embarking on a lovely, lasting journey together full of promise and love.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Whitney asked on the way to the football game.

“Patently, you are suffering from needless anxiety. Don't you believe I know what I'm doing, love? Well, at least I believe I know what I'm doing.” Kip said. “I know parents believe their children walk on water. Kyra might have had a famous or semi-famous grandmother who could have helped her secure a scholarship. However, some of these guys on the football team have parents who couldn't care less about people like Kyra and only want to protect their sons no matter who they have to walk over.”

“And your answer is to address it, in public, at a football game?”

“Something like that.”

“You are incorrigible, Seamus.”

He let out a chuckle. “I may bear a slight resemblance to that implication.” He enjoyed watching Whitney attempt to conceal her lovely smile. Never in his most extravagant dreams did he think he would develop feelings so quickly for someone. Nevertheless, he was sure that she was the person he wished to be with.

“I will repeat it, incorrigible.”

He smirked, shaking his head, pulling into the parking lot of the high school football stadium—the rivalry game between East Riverside and Becker Academy.

“Ready for this bleep show?” Kip asked.

“You said you were going to behave, at least you said sort of,” Whitney said with a giggle. “I am so looking forward to this.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Lily would have never allowed me to do this,” Kip said to himself.

Kip and Whitney walked hand in hand to the ticket booth, cut off by two large men in black suits who towered over them. One of the large men picked up Kip like a rag doll and gave him a huge bear hug, surprising Whitney.

“Let me go, you big ogre,” Kip said with a shriek.

The man put him down, and before a word could be said, the other man gave Kip a big bear hug as well. Whitney could see the large men clearly emotional, calming her immediately.

“Another ogre squeezing the life out of me,” Kip said with a chuckle. Could you please put me down so I can introduce you two?” The large man put him down. “Whitney, let me introduce you to Giuseppe and Luigi, two men who have watched over me since I was a child. Ogres, let me introduce the lovely and talented Ms. Whitney Springhouse.”

Whitney hugged both of them, surprising the two men. “It is my honor to meet the two of you.”

The two Italian men nodded.

“Did I mention they are very talkative?” Kip voiced.

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

Whitney laughed from the belly. "I believe you failed to mention that."

Kip softly spoke into her ear, "They arrived in America following my father and mother's passing. My relatives in Italy ensured that nothing would give me a bad day."

At that moment, Whitney realized how tough Kip had had it throughout his life. He knew pain like few others knew pain. There was no way he was going to allow Kyra to feel that pain.

"Oh Lord, Seamus O'Doyle. Is there any way I can get a selfie with you? My daughter goes to Boston College right now. I have always hoped to run into you one day," the man collecting tickets said. "I would really appreciate it."

"I would be honored," Kip said. Even though the ticket collector had on a Becker Academy sweatshirt, he never said no to a selfie or an autograph.

"Ms. Springhouse, would you please get in the picture as well?"

Whitney, who had been noticed for her time in the media, agreed. Kip handed the ticket collector's phone to Luigi to take the snap. Giuseppe had no idea how to operate the camera on a phone. Snap taken, he paid for four tickets and walked Whitney over to the souvenir stand.

"What can I get for you?" The counter lady asked.

Kip said, "I would like a 3X hooded sweatshirt for me and an extra-large sweatshirt for the lady. We love Becker Academy."

Whitney couldn't hide her smile as she put on her sweatshirt. All she could do lately was smile. "How does it look?"

"I will remember how beautiful you are in it when we burn them later."

Whitney and Kip walked to the side of the field where the Becker Academy team was located. He told her to sit in the front row, telling the ogres to keep an eye on her. His plan was about to commence.

With one minute and 23 seconds left in the first quarter, he walked up to the press box and asked for the microphone for the PA system. The announcer was initially reluctant until he recognized who was asking for the microphone.

Kip tapped on the microphone before the teams broke the huddle. “Could I please have your attention? In case you've lived under a rock for the last 20 years, my name is Seamus O'Doyle.” He could see the whole stadium snap to attention. “A couple of weeks ago, my daughter Kyra went to a party at one of these Becker Academy football players’ houses. An innocent 12-year-old left the house in an ambulance with fentanyl poisoning.

“Instead of owning up to the mistake, these players and their self-absorbed parents have tried to turn my daughter into something other than the sweet and innocent angel she is.

“I understand parents trying to keep their children from ruining their lives; however, when you try to hide what your sons have done and attack my beautiful daughter, I am not going to have it.

“Therefore, I expect the six individuals who threw the party in my office with their parents at 10 AM tomorrow before I take it to the next level. And you do not want me taking it to the next level, trust me.”

Kip handed the microphone back to the announcer in the booth. He could see several members of the San Jose Police Department heading his way. Luigi and Giuseppe stood up, clearing a path for him and Whitney to walk right through the officers.

“I cannot even begin to tell you how turned on I am,” Whitney said.

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

He laughed from the belly. However, before long, he could only think about how scared Kyra had to have been, being taken out in an ambulance, if she was even conscious when she was en route to the hospital. He reviewed several reports, noticing that she had been given Narcan during the ride.

The Irish are renowned for having a reputation for a fiery temper. He wanted to go to each of the football players' residences and ring their necks and their parents' necks for intimidating Kyra.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lilith was waiting in Kip's office at 8:00 AM the next morning, before he was going to go downstairs for breakfast. Kip had set up Whitney in one of the empty offices for her to work before she joined him for breakfast at Marla's.

“What are you doing here so early in the morning?” Kip asked after kissing her cheek.

“I came here for two reasons, the first, I came to find out how yesterday went with Kyra. The second reason is to request your legal services.”

“Kyra is amazing. Absolutely amazing. She was giddy with joy after watching what I did at the football game last night. I had someone from my office live stream the whole encounter.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“I was definitely impressed. I saw the whole thing live when you sent me the link. Your father-in-law and I got a big kick out of it. I see the old Kip is back. And I have missed him so very much.”

“Many have missed him. And I apologize for not being there for you.”

"Were you not present in our lives? Our greatest fear was losing you, too. Did you disregard us? No, we met you all over the country outside of California. You never cast us aside. And you helped us heal our broken hearts. Yes?" she inquired.

He nodded.

“Then I don't want to ever hear anything like that out of your mouth ever again.”

Kip sat straight up. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Good. That is settled,” she said. “Now, for the second thing I came here for. We have decided to sell the grocery business.”

“Wait, what? You are selling the grocery chain?”

“We decided that we would like to start a new venture. We bought the property adjacent to the vineyard and decided to start an almond milk company.”

“That stuff tastes like dirty bowling shoes. Why would you sell a company worth over a billion dollars to make fake milk?”

“Have you ever even tasted almond milk?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then how do you know what it tastes like?”

“I have eaten a lot of almonds, never in a million years would I ever eat an almond that milk would come dripping out of. Henceforth, whatever they do to make almond milk will taste like dirty bowling shoes.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

She laughed from the belly. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Love me forever.”

“That is a given, Kip.”

“Good,” he said. “Do you have a buyer lined up for all this?”

“Your uncle.”

“Why would Pop be buying your grocery business? That doesn't seem to fit into his portfolio, considering he decided to divest from his shares in a Northeastern grocery chain.”

“I said your uncle, not your Pop.”

“Which uncle?”

“Vito.”

Kip's Uncle Vito was once one of the most notorious gangsters in Italy and throughout Europe. Little did people know it was all a ruse to help law enforcement all over the globe. Vito decided to take the Renzis legitimate on the coaxing of Seamus, his brother. Going legitimate did not mean that the Renzis were completely above board, though.

“Good old Uncle Vito, whose idea was it for him to buy the grocery chain?”

“I believe it was your Pop and your father's idea. I am sure that this means they want to keep an eye on you with your beloved Uncle Vito. And from what I understand, Vito has been looking for more investments in America.”

“Where do you want to invest the proceeds of the sale?” He asked, trying to hide his smirk.

“Your father-in-law and I have decided to put it in a trust fund for Kyra and any other children that you may have. You know, I am an only child, and Carl's sister doesn't need money. You are our son in every way. Carl and I have more money than we know what to do

with. We want to give that money to our grandchild now and any future grandchildren we have.” Lilith took his hand from across the desk. “Kyra will be our grandchild in every way.”

“Humph.”

Lilith was taken aback. “She won't be?”

“Of course, she'll be your grandchild. That is not it at all.”

“Then what is it, darling?”

“You do not have to give all the money that you made from years and years of work to your grandchildren,” Kip said. “And who said I am having any more children?”

“Do you see Whitney not wanting children?” Lilith asked. “Carl and I are over the moon that we will be having dinner at your house tonight.”

“I look forward to you and Carl meeting everyone tonight, since you have Whitney and me already getting married in your mind.”

“Tell me I'm wrong.”

He whispered, “You are probably right, Mum.”

#####

Jake Thomas, Paul White, Steven London, and John Templeton were seated in Kip's office alongside their parents, filled with dread, as the formidable attorney gazed down at them. The boys' attorney, Helen Glover, was positioned next to them. She was excited to reunite with Kip,

although she had never encountered him in a courtroom setting where her hand was raised in victory. He had been a source of frustration for her in multiple respects.

“The five of you know the only reason you're not spending the next five years in jail is because of me, correct?” Kip voiced. He had told Helen he was going to give the boys a stern warning. She had no choice but to agree to his terms.

They nodded their heads.

“And do you five dimwits realize Kyra is my daughter, yes?”

They nodded their heads again.

Kip grabbed five folders from his desk, handing one each to the boys. “Inside these folders are your penance. First, you will each attend therapy downstairs in my psychology practice once a week, until I inform you that it is no longer required. Secondly, you will be going to NA until you all leave for college. I don't care if you have done drugs or not, nor do I care if you think you don't need to go. The five of you are some of the best football players in the state. I know a little bit about football, and the last thing you want to do is to lose your scholarships in your way because you think a good party is the way you blow off steam. Blowing off steam means a good book and plenty of time in the library, if you catch what I am saying.”

“We understand,” Paul White said.

“Good,” Kip said. He spent the next several minutes discussing his days at Boston College and emphasizing how he expected the boys to behave once they arrived at college.

He gave one last warning to the boys, staring directly at the parents, who he knew tried to bury what happened at the party at Kyra's expense.

When he checked the time, he couldn't believe how long the meeting had lasted. He was looking at having lunch instead of breakfast with Whitney.

"Thank God you are here. I was about to eat my arm," Whitney told Kip when he arrived at the office, he had given her.

"I apologize for being so late. The meeting with the boys took longer than I had anticipated. Their parents are a bunch of bloody wankers. I wanted to knock a few of their smug looks right off their faces."

"Seamus, I would not have wanted to bail you out of jail. Although I have a feeling you would not have even been arrested."

"I wouldn't have," he said with a shrug. "Because of social media, the whole world knows what those pricks did to Kyra."

They walked hand in hand to the elevator to go downstairs for breakfast, which was more like lunchtime because of the long meeting.

"I hate to say this, but I could really go for a cheeseburger with chili cheese fries," Whitney said once they sat down.

"How do you maintain that amazing body, eating what you eat?" Kip asked.

"First of all, I have a significant metabolism, and second of all, I spend quite a lot of time making sure this body stays the way it is. Not everyone has to be a world-class athlete to maintain the best body they've ever had; the four years I played soccer in college taught me how to keep my body in peak shape."

"I'll keep that body in good shape," he said wryly, chuckling mightily as they stepped onto the elevator. "Don't worry, honey, we could work out together in the actual gym."

She playfully punched his arm. "Do not make me hurt you, Seamus."

Marla handed them menus, kissing the top of his head before leaving their table. Whitney smiled at her before she walked away.

“I think it is absolutely adorable how much she and her husband adore you. You would think you are some ex-superstar football player or something.”

“Aren't you the funny one?”

“I have a serious question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“What is the governor like? I've seen her a few times, obviously, in person. But I've never had the chance to interview her yet, which I'm sure is going to change.”

“She is remarkable. There is no other way to characterize her. Her husband, Peter, is equally steadfast. They were never able to conceive children; thus, Lily and the girls became akin to a daughter and grandchildren for both of them. She aspires to become president someday,” he admitted. “She thinks I'm going to be her chief of staff; she has another thing coming if she thinks I'm going to take that job.”

“That is because you have your eyes on the Oval Office, isn't it?”

“Umm, I'm 39 years old, there is no way I want to be the president of the United States at this stage or anytime in the next 35.”

“That is not a no.”

“I don't make any long-term decisions, especially ones that are 30 to 35 years away. If I do decide to run, you will be the first person I tell.”

Kip gave Whitney more details on what Emmers and McIntyres were truly like before their meals came. Whitney did indeed order her cheeseburger and chili cheese fries, while Kip ordered a steak and cheese wrap and a homemade bowl of fish chowder.

He was just about to take his second bite of the sandwich when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a brunette woman racing to his table. The woman immediately sat down next to Whitney, hugging her tightly from the side.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, you darling girl,” she said.

“Whitney Springhouse, let me introduce you to Ms. Eccentric, the lovely and talented attorney Rachel Ward. Rachel, the woman you are hugging the life out of is Miss Whitney Springhouse, reporter and news anchor extraordinaire.”

Rachel and Kip met during their freshman year of college, when they attended orientation together. At first, they dated each other, becoming best friends after Kip decided Rachel was a little bit over the top for him. They both loved each other deeply, as Rachel and Kip were practically attached at the hip with Clayton and Tim. It was Rachel who seduced Kip one night in New Hampshire, hoping to encourage him to start living life again. The fact that she received several orgasms in the process was an added bonus.

“How is the lovely Florence?”

“She appreciated my help immensely, even though you had already done the heavy lifting when her husband, excuse me, ex-husband, was tried for financial crimes.”

“Whitney,” Kip began. “Florence was one of our law professors at Stanford. Rachel ultimately earned her MBA before beginning law school. We were in our first year of law school at the same time. Florence was a visiting professor whose rental ended up catching fire after the first few weeks of school. Since Pop bought me a beautiful house in Palo Alto, we asked Florence to move in with us. We did have five bedrooms; therefore, there was plenty of room to spare.”

“She was our roommate before becoming the wife of the president of France,” Rachel said.

“They should remember Kip was the one who studied French law and helped her get her ex-husband acquitted.”

“I actually remember the media coverage of the trial,” Whitney said.

“She begged me to come to France. Pop made me attend the language institute and learn several languages when I was young. Never really thought it would come in handy until Florence begged me to help out her daughter's father.”

“I totally forgot you were all over the news when the trial happened,” Whitney said.

“That is why half of France hates my guts, and the other half thinks I'm the greatest thing since sliced bread. The country is currently facing its issues, right now. The last thing they need is for me to be caught in the middle again. There are some nasty people in France when you are not on their side. The French forget that if it weren't for Americans, they would be speaking German.”

Whitney and Rachel shared a hearty laugh.

“What? Tell me it isn't true,” Kip exclaimed.

They all had a good laugh before Marla took Rachel's breakfast order. Kip and Whitney filled in Rachel as best they could about what was happening in Kip's world since Rachel had been away helping Florence.

“Where is Kyra now?”

“Colleen and Kyra are with Pop, Alyssa, and the Emmers. They are introducing themselves to their new granddaughter. I have their stuff being boxed up,” Kip said. “Colleen has always wanted to go to law school. I am going to have Colleen work at the firm until she starts law school. There is a law school at Sacramento State where she can actually start after Christmas.”

“You have done a lot since finding out she was your daughter,” Rachel said.

“I have to. Now that the whole world knows Carrol is my daughter, I have to make sure she is well protected and that she and Colleen can adjust quickly. As I've told you, we're still trying to solve a murder and a break-in because the police seem to have their heads up their proverbial arses.”

“Doesn't it seem like you never left?” Rachel said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kip embraced Kyra warmly in his office upon her arrival, following the drop-off by the two ogres, who were put in charge of her security. His thoughts were in turmoil after his conversation with Jason Walsh. There were alarming discussions on the dark web regarding attempts to eliminate KJ. Additionally, he was aware that the governor was not bringing favorable news and would require a significant favor from him. He could not help but think that the two situations were somehow related.

“How was it getting to know your grandparents?” Kip asked when they broke their embrace. He could see her beautiful smile extend all the way up to her eyes.

“Dad, they could not stop hugging me. I don't think I've been hugged that much in all my life. Papa asked Colleen to move in with him.”

“He did?” Kip asked. Half of him was surprised, and the other half was not surprised at all. “What did she say?”

“She agreed. She said it would be easier to live there when she started law school. I think she wants to start having her own life instead of being stuck with me.”

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“Honey, don't ever think that way. I have talked to her several times now, and the last thing she believes is that she was stuck with you. If you ask me, helping raise you was the greatest gift she could ever have,” Kip said. “While I agree with you, it is time for her to shine. When she talks about you, her eyes shine brightly. I promise you.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I know so, sweetheart. Do not look into anything further than the fact that she loves you, and she wouldn't have changed a thing.”

“Thank you, Dad,” she said, smiling again.

“Are you ready to meet the governor this evening?” he asked.

“I am going to meet the governor?” she asked.

“Grandpa Carl's sister is the governor. I know she is really looking forward to meeting you. Auntie Jennifer was very close to your sisters. Very, very close. Nobody believes you are a replacement for your sisters; however, they are certainly excited that they have someone to love and fawn over.”

“I think I like being fawned over,” she said with a giggle.

“Tragic, isn't it?” He smiled at her, causing her heart to skip a beat. “There has been a lot of sadness in several individuals' lives over the last few years. Your beautiful smile and sweetness have once again captured the hearts of many. Especially mine.” He stood up and gave her a big hug, kissing the top of her head. “A little birdie might have mentioned you would like to become a lawyer someday, besides being a soccer phenom. How would you like to help me out at the office a couple of days a week?”

“Really?” she asked excitedly.

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“I asked Auntie Lynn if she could use your help, and she is all for it. Plus, I have plenty for you to do. You might be only 12 years old, but I was learning about law when I was your age. I believe you will really find out if you want the law as a career.”

“Way cool!”

“Way cool, huh?”

She nodded her head enthusiastically, a big smile all over her face.

#####

“Whitney sure is a bit smitten with you,” Kyra said to Kip, watching Whitney in the kitchen, helping Maria get things ready for company, who was coming over.

Maria had worked for Mario for the last several years. She loved Kip and gladly accepted his invitation to help him at his house with Mario's blessing.

“I certainly hope so, young lady. It would certainly be a nuisance if she didn't.”

Kyra giggled. When she found out Kip was her father, she couldn't stop giggling, her face beaming with the most beautiful smile. She was a daddy's girl without a father until she discovered Kip was her father.

Mario, Alyssa, and Colleen joined the Emmers and Lynn in the living room. Kyra helped pass out the drinks as Whitney put out some hors d'oeuvres.

Kip noticed Alyssa holding Colleen's hand, who was sitting between her and Mario. He could not help but smile on the inside. Both Mario and Alyssa told him they were looking forward to helping her adjust from being a mother to an aunt.

They all sat, enjoying their drinks and hors d'oeuvres before the governor and her husband, Peter McIntyre, were escorted in by Maria. The governor immediately hugged Kip before being introduced to Kyra and Colleen. She gave both a great big embrace.

“Kip, do you have a minute where we can talk?” Jennifer asked.

He took her hand in his. “Certainly. Let me show you the gardens. I have to say they rival Pops, which he would never admit to.”

Jennifer said, “Not your pop. He definitely wouldn't admit to that.”

“Kyra, would you like to take a walk with the governor and me?”

The governor gave him a stern look. “I don't think the conversation we're about to have is age appropriate for your new precious daughter.”

“I started learning the family business when I was knee-high to a grasshopper.”

“Being a lawyer is the family business?” Kyra asked.

Kip chuckled mightily. “Well, it is one of the family businesses. We actually have an even more important one.”

#####

Kyra, who had Kip's arm around her shoulder, practically lost her breath after hearing what the governor wanted from her father. “So let me get this straight, the drugs that could

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have killed me most likely came from Ireland. And the person who killed KJ's roommate is probably part of that group. Talk about a popsicle headache.”

Kip shrugged his shoulders. “You are picking it up quickly, honey; however, you didn't pick up how the governor is going to ask me to help try to figure out the connection between the two. She doesn't want to ask me because I'm definitely going to say no. Everything she says to me right now is going to go through one ear and out the other. Isn't that correct, soon-to-be presidential candidate Jennifer McIntyre?”

“Auntie Jenny, are you going to run for president?”

“Your father certainly thinks I'm going to. I'm not quite sure yet. It has been on my mind for a while now.”

“Honey, your Auntie Jennifer is being a politician right now. She is definitely running, but she can't even think about it until the drugs from Ireland to California are stopped.”

“I'm asking you for your help, Kip. I promise that I will not ask you to be my chief of staff if I am given the honor of becoming president.”

“Dad, you have to help Aunt Jenny, and you have to make sure KJ remains safe.”

“Sweetheart, I have every intention of helping both. But, and I mean but, you cannot tell Whitney or KJ why we have to go to New Hampshire.”

“We are going to New Hampshire, Dad?”

“Unfortunately, yes. We have to go to New Hampshire to try to find out what's going on. I need to bring in the big guns, and your Uncle Clayton is dying to meet you.”

“Thank you, Kip.”

“Don't thank me yet, Jenny. I'm not sure even the big guns are going to be able to give me even a clue how I can attack this fiasco.”

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Jennifer smiled at him. “Again, thank you.”

“Again, don't thank me yet.”

“Dad will figure it out, Aunt Jenny.”

Jennifer knew everything about Kip. “Have you asked your father about this. I am sure some of his contacts might put you on the right path.”

Kip noticed Kara's eyes open wide. “Jenny, I haven't had a chance to tell my daughter everything about the O'Doyles,” he said. “Honey, what Aunt Jenny is trying to say is that my father is very much alive, your grandfather. He is part of the Irish intelligence service. Your grandfather hides his identity and makes sure the world knows that he is no longer with us. He did it to make sure I was safe as a young child. But, between my pop and my father, I don't need protection, if you know what I mean.”

She nodded her head, still stunned.

“Your father is definitely not lying there.”

“Jennifer, please quit while you're ahead before I decide to change my mind and let your underpaid and overworked California Bureau of Investigation deal with all this.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Sweet ride,” Kyra told her father on Mario's private plane, heading to New Hampshire. She had only ever been on a plane once before. “Dad, who owns this plane?” She could not get over the size of the private plane.

“I actually think I do, honey. Somehow, I think your Papa ended up gifting it to me, but I very well could be wrong,” Kip said.

Whitney and her parents accompanied them on their way to New Hampshire. Kip thought it was a good idea to bring them along. He was hoping to have some alone time with Catherine over the next couple of days.

“You don't know if you own the plane or not?” Whitney questioned.

“Whit, I never know what I own when it comes to my Pop. Sometimes he puts things in my name, sometimes he keeps it in his name, or shall I say, his company's name. Trust me, I am amazing with finances, but my finances are all intertwined with Pop's. He has about 10 million accountants to figure all that stuff out.” He winked at Kyra. “It is not like I really need to worry about it, if you know what I mean.”

“Sure is a wonderful plane though,” Reverend Kevin said. “I think I will purchase the next size up.”

Everyone had a good laugh as the stewardess brought in drinks and snacks for them to enjoy. They were about two hours from landing in New Hampshire.

“How worried should we be about KJ, Whitney, and Tara?” Catherine voiced.

Kip looked her dead in the eye to acknowledge to Catherine, without anyone knowing, that he knew exactly who she was working for. His research team at the office had no trouble finding out all about Catherine Springhouse. “I know basketball and volleyball seasons are right around the corner, and I'm sure KJ and Tara want to return to campus; however, I have been in touch with the California Bureau of Investigation constantly as KJ and Tara's lawyer. They are still not sure who is involved in the attack at Stanford.”

“Thank the good Lord above, you have plenty of security watching over them in New Hampshire right now. I'm not sure how having security around would work on the campus. If I know my son, he will not feel comfortable with it,” Catherine said.

Kip squeezed Whitney's hand gently. “I am sure Whitney feels precisely the same way. No one returns to life as they knew before we discover who is behind all this. It is more challenging to watch out for everyone's security when you don't know who you're watching out for.”

The five of them started on lighter topics within a few minutes. Kip did not want to divulge too much, even though he had little to reveal. He was enthralled listening to Kyra speak about her interest in computer science, something he had enjoyed learning since he could practically read and write.

“How did you get so interested in computer science?” he asked his daughter.

“Colleen was taking several computer classes when I was about seven years old. I used to read her schoolbooks and tried to learn all I could. One thing led to another, and my grandmother, whom I knew was my mother, bought me a few programming books that came with labs and activities to complete on the computer. I always believed she was just a doting grandmother, boy, was I wrong.”

“Whom, huh? Perfect O’Doyle English,” he said with a slight chuckle. “From what I gather from your now sister, your mother loved you very, very much. While you might not approve of some of her actions, she loved you deeply.” Kip put his arm around her shoulders. “I look at it this way, sweetheart, whether she was right or wrong, she did the best she could under the circumstances. I am certainly not going to hold anger in my heart; besides, she gave me you.” He kissed the top of her head. “I cannot try to fix everything in a day, but I certainly can love you and cherish you every day for the rest of my life. You have my word on it.”

Kyra, Whitney, and Catherine's eyes became moist as they heard Kip’s words. Even Reverend Springhouse’s eyes started to well up with tears. Kip, being the psychologist, immediately picked up on their emotions.

“I don't know why you're all emotional. New Hampshire is a great place. I am sure you are all going to love it.” Kip smiled widely.

They all had a good laugh. The group was all smiles after landing. Kip’s security was there to meet them and bring them to the house.

“This place is incredible,” Whitney said once they arrived at the house.

“Thanks,” Kip said. “I built most of this place myself. Come. Come. Let me show you the place. I'm sure TJ and Tara are inside.”

SAME BUT DIFFERENT

KJ and Tara immediately greeted them as soon as they walked in. Catherine could not stop hugging both of them. A massive sense of relief when she saw the smiles on their faces.

“Kip, your house is absolutely sweet,” KJ said. “Your friend Clayton has been stopping by every day. He told me how hard you worked on this house.”

“My Papa owns a construction company. I used to work for them in the summers in high school and college. I guess I liked architecture and did a lot of it on computers, but there is nothing like putting what's on the computer into reality.”

Kyra was instantly captivated by KJ and Tara, and they felt the same almost right away. She had a deep passion for athletics and was well-acquainted with them during their time in college. Occasionally, she had to pinch herself, as it seemed like she was living in a dream.

Kip told everyone to make themselves at home, asking Catherine if she could have a little talk in his office for a minute or two. He mentioned to Whitney that he wanted to go over some security measures with her mother immediately after getting to the house. She did not have the foggiest idea what he actually wanted to speak to her mother about.

“Alright, sandbagger, when were you going to tell me who you worked for?” he asked, offering her a seat. “I can't wait for this explanation.”

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