

Wright/Sacrificed/1

# SACRIFICED

by

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Wright/Sacrificed/2

For Sheila Crandles

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**MONDAY**

## CHAPTER 1

Midnight.

I sank a little lower in the front seat of my Karmann Ghia and sipped the last of my coffee. Parked here in the shadows of Murphy's Auto Repairs, the Karmann Ghia lined up with a dozen wounded road warriors, I was all but invisible. And bored. I had nothing to do but listen to the creak of Murphy's sign as it swayed in the wind and watch the occasional pair of headlights go past on the highway leading to the ferry docks. And wait. I am not a patient waiter.

A particularly icy gust of wind swept across the highway from the ocean, and I shivered, zipping my windbreaker higher and jamming my hands into my pockets. Why hadn't I remembered my gloves? Late October on Vancouver Island is definitely gloves weather. I wiggled my fingers and found my phone — the phone on which only several hours before I had received the cryptic text that had brought me here to this desolate stretch of highway. The text read:

*Please help me. I can pay you \$500. I have a package I need you to take. Meet me at the Donut Stop on Saanich Highway about midnight.*

*Shrew*

I'd texted Shrew back immediately but she hadn't replied. High melodrama indeed! Ordinarily I might have ignored such a strange proposition — after all, I'm an animal crimes investigator, not a parcel retrieval service — but October had been a rough month. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I hadn't seen hide nor hair of a paying job in thirty days. So I made an exception to my own First Commandment (Thou Shalt Take No Off-The-Wall Clients) and agreed to this nocturnal rendezvous. Just to be on the safe side, however, I parked one establishment down from the Donut Stop at Murphy's. Caution is one of my middle names. When Shrew drove up to the Donut Stop, I'd assess things, then decide if I wanted to take this mysterious package.

"C'mon, Shrew," I muttered. "It's past midnight. I'm freezing my hindquarters off and missing my sleep. Let's get on with it."

But nothing happened. The wind moaned a little louder in the branches of the Garry oaks, Murphy's sign creaked even more ominously, and a tangle of paper cups, hamburger wrappers, and newspapers went scudding across the Donut Stop's parking lot in a crazy tarantella. Somewhere nearby an owl hooted, a mournful, tremulous sound. I turned, checking out the shadows for gremlins, and saw the bulk of Mount Douglas looming like a hulking beast against the night sky. Suddenly I remembered — in a few days it would be Halloween, the night

when ghouls and witches were abroad, speeding along the roads on their errands of mischief. I snorted.

In North America, Halloween has become nothing more than a children's celebration, a meaningless night of freeloading and silly costumes. But Halloween has its origins in a solemn Celtic celebration. It marked the end of the bright season and the beginning of the dark, and on the Yeats farm in Ireland, huge bonfires called *Samhnagen* had been built year after year for centuries to call the shivering ghosts of our family's dead in from their wanderings.

Although I had never seen such a bonfire, the idea was oddly appealing. My grandmother Aoife had explained it all to me when I was very young. If farmers took pains to move cows and sheep from the summer pastures into the barns where they could be cared for during the winter, would they do any less for the spirits of their beloved departed? She assured me that farmers always lit bonfires on the hills to call the newly dead home for one last evening of warmth and hospitality before they went on their way to the spirit world. I knew Aoife was disappointed that we couldn't have a *Samhnagen* in the little bungalow where we lived in Ottawa, but life in the modern world of Canada proved a constant disappointment to her.

As did I, I reflected. The night she died, she took my hands in hers and made me promise to build her a *Samhnagan*. Faithless grandchild that I was, I never had.

While I brooded, watching the night sky, a silver fingernail paring of moon pushed its way out from behind Mount Doug, casting an unhelpfully wan light

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over Murphy's and the Donut Stop. I was getting morose, thinking of my grandmother and my childhood, and I resolved to put such thoughts aside. Where the hell was Shrew anyhow? I peeled back my sleeve and looked at my watch. Twenty-five after twelve. Five more minutes, then I was heading home to a hot bath and my bed.

A pair of headlights turned into the little Donut Stop parking lot and I sat up straight. At last. With a protesting squeal of tires, a red VW Bug roared into the lot and made a pass around the garbage dumpster, where something was tossed in. Something in a medium-sized white bag. Then the VW stopped, motor idling.

The VW's driver rolled down the window and a woman's sandy, spiky-haired head emerged. If this was Shrew, she was clearly taking a good look around.

As I approached through the shadows to the driver's side of the VW, she turned in my direction, and called to me over the sound of the idling motor. The voice belonged to a young woman. A frightened young woman.

"Are you Kieran Yeats?"

"Yeah," I called back. "And you are . . ."

"Shrew." She looked back nervously over her shoulder. "Thank God you're here. I didn't know if you'd show. So I tossed the things I had for you in the dumpster."

Frightened? Amend that to terrified.

"I'll call you later. Don't come after me. And, God, don't leave the others behind. They only have until Saturday. Oh shit! He's right behind me."

“But — ”

The screech of tires cut me off. Fairly leaping off the pavement, the little Bug went careening out of the parking lot. For my part, I decided to beat a hasty retreat back to Murphy's. As I crouched down behind a battered Corolla, a big white SUV — a Sequoia maybe — rocketed into the Donut Stop lot, slowed for a moment, then hurtled toward the exit in pursuit of the VW. I had one fleeting glimpse of a bearded male profile as the car shot past. I cursed the feeble light of the new moon, which made it impossible to make out any of the letters or numbers on the license plate. All I registered was that there seemed to be something unusual about it. Then, with a shower of sparks from a low-slung muffler, the SUV disappeared south into the darkness after Shrew's car, toward Victoria.

I dithered for a moment, tempted to walk away from this, but recalled the terror on the young woman's face. All right, all right, I'd go fetch the damned package. As for the gibberish about “the others”, well, who knew? Maybe she'd make that clear when she called me.

Still crouching behind the Corolla in the shadows, I hesitated. Even though no one had popped out of the bushes, I didn't like this one bit. Packages that can't be delivered in the light of day, by UPS or FedEx or Canada Post, usually have nasty, embarrassing, or incriminating contents. I had already decided that if the package contained drugs or money, this was a game I did not want to play. Frightened or not, Shrew would just have to find someone else.



Hurrying to my car, I took a flashlight out of the glove compartment, and headed over to the Donut Stop lot. A cold finger of wind found its way down my collar, and my teeth began to chatter. Grabbing the edge of the dumpster and hoisting myself up onto my elbows, I shone my light into its depths. It was far from empty.

“Great,” I muttered.

A layer of garbage, bagged and unbagged, lay two feet deep on the floor. I clamped my nostrils shut and tried to breathe through my mouth. Then, before I had a chance to change my mind, I heaved myself up and over and dropped down into the smelly depths. Things I refused to imagine squished underfoot, and I resolutely told myself not to think about maggots. Or rats. The package Shrew had tossed in lay in the far corner and seemed to be a coarsely woven white sack. I bent and picked it up with my free hand, and as my fingers closed over the drawstring, something inside seemed to squirm.

“Shit!” I exclaimed, dropping the drawstring and stumbling backward. Shining the flashlight on the sack, I saw that it was indeed squirming.

Now what? I swallowed, gingerly reached for the drawstring, and pulled the sack toward me. It was heavier than I expected, maybe five or six pounds. And now I had no choice but to pick it up. Holding the sack at arm’s length, I waded through the garbage back the way I’d come and tossed my load over the side of the dumpster. Jumping out, I landed on the asphalt beside the sack. Fortunately it wasn’t squirming now. I felt encouraged. Maybe it hadn’t squirmed

at all. Maybe it had been my imagination. I shone my light on the sack and, to my dismay, it gave a convulsive heave.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I moaned.

Grabbing the drawstring, I held the sack as far away from my body as I could. Then I hustled over to my car, fishing the keys out of my pocket as I went. I opened the trunk, intending to heave the sack inside, and was just preparing to do so when I heard a sound. From the sack.

“*Mair*,” a voice said mournfully, hopelessly.

“What?” I said in amazement.

“*Meeair*,” it reiterated, with a great deal more feeling this time.

“No,” I said, my numb fingers wrestling with the sack’s drawstring. “It can’t be what I think it is.”

But it was. As soon as I had loosened the drawstring, a head popped out. A cat’s head. A small, striped tabby head, which swiveled in the direction of my voice. But there was something terribly wrong. I shone my light on the sack and bent closer, an atavistic dread gripping me. What in hell had happened to its eyes? Instead of being yellow or green or golden, they were . . . bloody. A fiery red, the fur around them coated with some yellow substance that I didn’t want to think about. And they evidently hurt him a great deal because after one look at me, he squinted them shut. With a cry of horror, I stuffed the cat back into the sack, then stood there in the parking lot for a moment, the small weight clasped in my arms.

Hugging the cat closer to my chest, I closed the trunk, then opened the passenger side door and placed the sack gently on the seat.

“No wiggling, guy,” I whispered as I got into the driver’s seat and started the car. As I put one hand on the sack, I felt the cat begin to purr. My heart broke a little here, because I knew he was purring from pain, not from pleasure. “Son of a bitch,” I said helplessly.

Easing the Karmann Ghia into gear, I drove slowly out onto the highway, trying to cushion the inevitable bump where the parking lot met the street. The cat gave a soft cry and my heart contracted a little.

Eyes wet with tears, fury in my heart, I thought of Shrew speeding in terror through the night, the big SUV pursuing her.

“I’ve got him now, Shrew,” I said. “I’ve got him.”

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**TUESDAY**

## CHAPTER 2

I stood in the cold wind, pounding on my friend veterinarian Zaira Lau's door. I'd called ahead, explaining as much of the situation as I knew, and she assured me she'd be ready for me and the cat. Her daughter — my goddaughter, thirteen-year-old Jen — met me at the front door, short, dark hair standing up in tufts. She was clad in pink-and-green checkered flannel pajama pants and a black sweatshirt that proclaimed in red MEAT IS MURDER. I winced. Jen had recently become a vegan and was unabashedly evangelical about it.

"I didn't mean to wake you up, too, kiddo," I apologized. It was two a.m. for cripe's sake.

She shook her head. "It's no problem. Mom says go on into the clinic." Jen looked anxiously at the sack in my arms, her brown eyes worried. "Is that the cat?"

"Yeah." I clasped the warm living weight of the little tabby to my chest.

“I’m supposed to be in charge of making tea,” she said quietly. “But I wanted to know —”

“Jen!” Zaira called from the hall. “Have you — ”

“— put the kettle on? Yeah, but can I come into the clinic with you and Kieran? I could help.”

Zaira, or Zee, as most people called her, gave me an appraising look, clearly wanting me to make the call. I shrugged. I was sure Zee could use Jen’s offer of assistance. The kid was calm and cool-headed in emergencies. I, on the other hand, was not at my best tonight. Waiting for Shrew, wading through the garbage, discovering the maimed cat, racing through the dark . . . I really was a wreck. So I nodded.

“All right,” Zee said. She pushed the sleeves of her navy turtleneck up above her elbows. “Go ahead in and get things ready for an exam, Jen.”

Jen hurried away down the hall and Zee glanced meaningfully at me. A small, slight woman of Asian descent, perhaps forty, she was one of my best friends. I’d known her and Jen for all of Jen’s thirteen years, ever since I’d come to Vancouver Island from the east. She’d known me in my previous incarnation as attorney in the Crown Counsel’s office and had held my hand as I made the scary transition from real person to private investigator. Hers was the doorstep I usually ended up on when things got rough. Like tonight. Sometimes I thought I was too hot-natured for this business, but Zee assured me my psychological temperature was just right. She raised an eyebrow but said nothing. However, I got it. Zee’s eyebrows spoke volumes. Tonight they said: *“What on earth?”*

“A frantic two a.m. phone call,” she remarked, “and a cat in a cloth bag. Life as your friend is never dull, Kieran.”

“Yeah, well,” I equivocated. “I couldn’t think of where else to bring this guy.”

“You did the right thing,” she said. “Let’s go take a look.” She held open the swinging door to the exam room.

“How will we do this?” I asked, edging through the door, blinking in the bright overhead light. Strangely, I found I was reluctant to let the cat out of my arms.

Zee smiled. “Well, for starters you could put him down on the table,” she said, washing her hands at a little sink set into the counter. “He’s safe now.”

I did as she asked, setting him down gently on the stainless steel exam table. But now I found that I couldn’t take my hands off the sack.

“Kieran, do you want me to unfasten the drawstring?” Jen asked, evidently puzzled by my paralysis. “Or do you want to do it yourself?”

“Kieran,” Zee said, quirking her mouth in a smile, “we’ll take good care of him. Why don’t you go into the kitchen and make tea?”

“Erm, all right,” I said, realizing that I was a liability in the exam room. I’d grown fiercely protective of the cat in the sack. Oh brother, how had that happened? I’d known him for maybe two hours, tops. And all I’d seen of him had been his head.

I went through Zee’s little kitchen to the front entryway where I removed my smelly shoes. Ugh. Nothing like a midnight scamper through a garbage

dumpster to ruin a good pair of sneakers. I wondered if they could be saved. With my shoes off, I realized that my socks were dismayingly damp and, reluctantly, I shed them, too.

Padding barefoot into the kitchen, I rummaged in a cupboard beside the stove and found Zee's favorite blue teapot, some loose Dragonwell green tea that she was particularly fond of, and three white mugs. I took the kettle off the heat, made tea, and while it steeped, I sat at the table and tried to make sense of this case. Because a case it evidently was. I had a client, albeit with an odd name, who had hired me to perform a service, which I had done. But what about "the others" Shrew had mentioned and the "behind" where she had enjoined me not to leave them. Too many questions. Well, she said she'd call me. Okay. I checked my phone. Yup, it was on. So, I'd wait. She'd call eventually.

I heard the door to the exam room open and close, and Jen came to join me at the table. She poured tea for herself and me and took a sip, looking at me over the rim of the mug, eyes filled with concern.

"What happened to him, Kieran?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, kiddo. I was just hired to pick him up."

"Mom got all tight-lipped when she saw his eyes," Jen said. "She actually *hissed*."

"Shit," I muttered.

"She gave him a shot of painkiller and a sedative. She says she'll work on him tomorrow. He's sleeping now. His eyes look terrible. All red and goopy. Like he has URI, but ten times worse. And there's some yellow stuff on his face. Mom



says that before you got him, his eyes had been clipped open,” she said in a small voice. Then, “I don’t know what that means? Do you?”

“No, I don’t,” I said, feeling helpless.

Jen sniffled a little and wiped her nose surreptitiously on the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

I held out my hand and she took it. Who was comforting whom, I wondered? We said nothing, sitting at the table together, my thirteen-year-old goddaughter and I, united in our sorrow for an animal we didn’t even know.

“You’re a good kid, Jen,” I said.

She sniffled again, then drained her mug. “I’d better go to bed. I don’t want Mom to have to remind me.”

“How’s that playing at school?” I asked her, motioning to her MEAT IS MURDER sweatshirt, trying to lighten the mood.

“What? Oh, this.” She grinned. “My billboard. Better than you might think. We have a vegan club now. My friend Charlie and I started it. We have ten members already.”

“Charlie?” I didn’t want to pry, but the last time Jen and I had talked about friendships, she had forthrightly quizzed me about being gay, asking when I’d known about myself, and whether she was too young to know. I assured her she wasn’t. So I wondered about Charlie. Kids change their minds and feelings as often as they change their socks. Maybe not their feelings about their gender identity . . . but I wanted to get things straight, so to speak. I wanted to be on the same page as Jen insofar as the important people in her life were concerned.

She blushed furiously. “Charlie’s not a boy in case you were worried about *that*,” she said disdainfully. “She’s Charlotte. A friend at school.”

“Ah,” I said. “Is she the friend you were talking about that day in the car? The day we saw the geese?”

If it were possible, Jen blushed even more deeply. “Well . . . yeah.”

I squeezed her hand. “It’s okay, kiddo. Thanks for telling me.” Then I changed the subject. “It’s good that you’ve got a vegan club. Ten is a good number. You guys can support each other.”

Serious, Jen informed me, “People need to know about meat. And other things.”

I smothered a smile. “Indeed they do, sweetie. And I can imagine you’re just the person to tell them.”

“Maybe,” she said thoughtfully. “Anyhow, Mom says she’ll be out in a minute. Night, Kieran.”

“Night, Jen.”

Jen got up to rinse her mug at the sink. As she put it in the dish drain, she turned to me. “Um, one thing.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Tris and Aliya were over here on Saturday and we were talking about the sweatshirts. I’d just picked them up. I explained they were for the vegan club.”

“Oh, no,” I said in dismay, willing to bet I knew what was coming next. Tris was Tristan, my eight-year-old adopted daughter, and Aliya was Tristan’s nanny, tutor, and much-loved guardian angel.

“Oh yes,” Jen said breezily. “I gave her a sweatshirt. We talked a little about it. About meat being murder.”

“Ai yi,” I said, imagining how veganism would play at Tristan’s school where I was sure they ate chicken nuggets for lunch.

“Well, why not?” Jen asked defensively. “It’s the truth. And it’s never too early to be thinking about our relationship with animals, is it?”

“Well, in Tris’s case it might be a smidge too early,” I suggested. “She’s only eight.”

“Well, anyhow,” Jen said with a yawn, “I’m off to bed. I just thought I’d let you know. In case Tris wants to wear the sweatshirt to school.”

I wondered briefly if Zee had anything stronger than tea in the cupboard. Meat is murder, midnight assignations, maimed cats. If I were honest with myself, what I really wanted was to go home, quaff a dram or two of something alcoholic, and pull the covers up over my head.

“He’s resting now,” Zee said, coming from the hall into the kitchen. She took a seat across from me at the table. “Do you have any idea what happened to this cat?”

“Not a clue,” I said. “My client tossed him into a dumpster. I retrieved him.”

Zee poured herself some of the now-lukewarm tea and shook her head. “I really won’t be able to tell how badly his eyes are injured until I can wash them out. I’ll know more tomorrow. Speaking of tomorrow, will I see you then?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Tomorrow?”

“Today actually. Later. You have an appointment for Trey.”

I groaned. “I do, don’t I? Thanks for reminding me. Tris wants to come along. She’s pretty worried about him.” Trey was my portly gray cat, and he’d been behaving oddly this last little while. His appetite had vanished and he’d taken to hiding in odd places: a box of rags on the back porch, behind the toilet, in the pantry. Time for a visit to his favorite vet. “I’d better go home and get some sleep.”

I left Zee in the kitchen and made my way to the front door. Donning my soggy socks and smelly shoes, I hurried out to my car, started it up, and pointed it down the highway in the direction of home, heater switched to high. It was that odd hour of the night when darkness had almost trickled away, but morning had not yet arrived. The ancient Romans called this time the hour of the wolf. They believed it to be the time when demons had heightened power and vitality, when nightmares occurred, when most people died.

Hmmf. Such silly nonsense. Still, I came from a line of mystical Irish poets, and I found the idea oddly appealing. What had my famous forbear written?

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last  
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

Of course what great-uncle William Butler Yeats had meant by those oft-quoted lines had no relevance to what had happened tonight, I told myself. But the lines had occurred to me for some reason. I shivered. Something — the lateness of the hour, the strangeness of my errand, the horror of the tortured cat — had certainly laid its hands on me. What rough beast did I see in the shadows?

I was halfway home, thinking with one part of my brain about the hot bath I craved and with another part about Shrew's cryptic instructions, when it hit me. What she had said. *All* of what she had said. I'd been so horrified by the injured tabby cat that I'd temporarily forgotten. Wasn't it: "the things I had for you"? *Things*, Kieran, *things*. Plural. More than one thing. Worse yet, was that what she had meant by "the others"? Was the dumpster teeming with maimed cats that I had somehow overlooked? Or . . .

Fanciful thoughts of wolves and slouching beasts vanished from my mind. With a yell, I drove onto the shoulder of the road and turned my car around. So much for the hot bath. It seemed as though another trip to the dumpster was in my future.

### CHAPTER 3

Thankfully, there wasn't a gaggle of maimed cats waiting for me in the dumpster. Apart from bagged garbage and loose trash, the only thing I could find of interest was a sealed brown envelope with my name on it. Shrew must have thrown it into the dumpster along with the cat but, due to the poor lighting, I hadn't noticed it. It felt lumpy, and I put it on the seat beside me as I headed finally for home.

Still no phone call from Shrew. I had passed from being irked to being worried as hell. *C'mon, Shrew*, I broadcast mentally to the universe.

I let myself into my house through the back door, closing it softly behind me. It was odd not seeing my big black feral, Vlad, up in the rafters of the little enclosed porch, but Vlad had moved on to better things. My friend Miranda Blake ran an animal sanctuary up-island and had started a Rodent Ranger program for the unadoptable felines in her care. As her program literature described them, these were the hissers, the pissers, the litterpan-missers; the growlers, the

howlers, the midnight prowlers; the biters, the fighters, the up-all-nighters. No manners? No problem. Working in a barn, a warehouse, a factory, or a stable didn't require manners. The cats were neutered, vaccinated, microchipped, and provided at no charge. Kind of a green pest control. Miranda had graciously extended the program to Vlad, who now worked in a wildflower seed warehouse that had previously been overrun with mice growing fat and insolent from feasting on all those tasty seeds. No longer. The warehouse manager said that when Vlad arrived for his "interview", he'd made one pass through the warehouse and about 1,000 mice fled squealing for the exits. Needless to say, Vlad was hired on the spot. He got two square meals a day and, in exchange, presented his employer with at least one rodent daily. A card-carrying touch-me-not when he had lived with me, Vlad's new profession — and the attendant praise — had mellowed him. He now had a cushy bed in the manager's office, a spiffy red collar, and a bowl with his name on it. Warehouse personnel vied with each other to see who could bring him the tastiest treats. The merely-tolerated human supplicants received a slit-eyed squint of recognition from Vlad; the favored ones, an approving lick.

Snapping on the kitchen light, I draped my windbreaker over a chair and laid the brown envelope on the table. I tiptoed over to the door leading to the living room and closed it. Aliya was probably asleep on the sofa — it was now well after three in the morning — and I didn't want to wake her. I thought about coffee then decided, nah, too much trouble. Rootling around in my kitchen drawer of odd things, I found a pair of scissors and cut open the envelope, emptying it onto the table. Out tumbled one cell phone, one key card and

lanyard, one computer flash drive, and five one-hundred-dollar bills. I took the phone in my hands and tried to turn it on. Nothing. Either it was dead or locked. Was this the reason Shrew hadn't called me — because she couldn't? But surely there were other phones in the world.

A tentative knock sounded on the kitchen door. "Kieran?" a voice called quietly.

I smiled. "Yeah, come in, Aliya."

A small woman with short, curly, dark hair and dark brown eyes, Aliya came in and closed the door behind her, pulling on a red hoodie with the name CAMOSUN on it in white. "You're so late," she said, brows drawn together in worry, straightening her sweatshirt. "Did everything go all right?"

I'd told Aliya only that I was off to a midnight rendezvous when I asked her to stay with Tris. She knew what I did for a living and was used to the strange hours and errands of my profession.

"Not exactly," I sighed.

She nodded. "I thought as much. Can you tell me . . ." She let the question hang.

I thought about the maimed tabby cat now sleeping in a cage in Zee's clinic and shook my head. No need to share those facts.

"I had to pick up some things a client left for me." I gestured to the phone, key card, and flash drive. "But I can't get the phone to work."

"May I?" Aliya asked, motioning to the phone.

"Sure," I said. "In fact I was hoping you'd ask."



She shot me a quick smile. In addition to the roles she filled for Tris, Aliya was a computer sciences student at Camosun College. A few years ago, when I'd met her at my friend Lawrence's photography shop, she'd been a twenty-year-old newly arrived in Victoria with her parents from Lebanon, the ink barely dry on her degree in humanities from the American University of Beirut. Now, in addition to working for Lawrence, she was finishing another college degree, and was morphing into a tekkie.

"It's the new Samsung," she said. "Nice. It needs to be charged, though. Maybe that's all that's wrong with it. If not, then it's locked."

"Huh. Can you unlock it?"

She shrugged. "Well, maybe. But let's charge it first. My charger's in the next room. I'll just get it."

"How's Sprout?" I asked her when she returned, plugging the phone into the charger and the charger into a power outlet by the coffeemaker. Sprout was my nickname for Tristan, a name I'd given her six months earlier when I'd met her as a boy named Trouble. Then he was an abandoned kid who lived in the woods with a neglectful grandfather, an abusive drug-dealing uncle named Connor, and Con's two hangers-on friends, Peter and Stephanie. Trouble and I had had quite an adventure, and together we ended up saving each other's lives as well as the lives of twenty-six pets that Con, Peter, and Stephanie had stolen in order to sell to underwrite their drug habit. I'm not quite sure how the nickname Sprout had come into existence, but it had stuck. We both liked it. Tris grinned

every time I used it, and when she did, I felt a kind of blossoming in that region of my metaphorical anatomy called the heart.

“Homework all done with no problem,” Aliya reported. “I’ve never seen a kid so eager to do homework, if you can imagine such a thing. I used to race through mine on the bus going home from school so I could spend the evening watching music videos. I had a misspent youth,” she said confidentially.

“Hey, how misspent could it have been?” I asked her. “You ended up in college. You studied humanities. You graduated. And now you’re becoming a tech guru.”

“Well, maybe not a guru,” she said. “But I sure do like what I’m doing. Anyhow, Sprout. She’s doing well.”

I’d shared Tristan’s history with Aliya when I asked her to be the kid’s tutor, and she understood the reasons for the appalling state of Tris’s education. If ever there was someone who’d had, as the orphans said in the movie *Annie*, a hard-knock life, it was Tristan.

The kid’s father, Canadian Armed Forces Sergeant Andrew Malvern, had died a war hero in Afghanistan when she was just a baby; her mother had been killed in a car wreck not too many years later; and her grandmother, in whose care Tris had been placed, had keeled over dead one day from a heart attack. All this before Tris was six. The only good thing that had happened to her, it seemed was that her grandmother had taught her to read and write. Reading is an amazing gift: it’s an escape hatch. If you can read, you can fly away. To anywhere — the Orient, the high seas, and, in Tris’s case, the Amazon jungle,

the location of her favorite series of books. There, a boy named Bomba had animal friends, met kindly explorers, and searched for his parents, who had unaccountedly misplaced him in the jungle after a plane crash.

After her grandmother's death, when the legal dust had settled, Tris had found herself packed off to the home of her only remaining relative, with her stuffed cat, a garbage bag of clothes, and only one of her Bomba books. Thomas Malvern, her grandfather on her father's side, was a despicable old guy — an animal thief called a buncher — to whom Tris, not realizing she was related, had come to refer to contemptuously as “the old dog man.”

To be fair to Malvern, he hadn't always been an animal thief. He'd operated a legitimate kennel business that unfortunately came to an end when he fell off the roof one day fixing something. He wrecked his back and began taking opiates to kill the pain, which never relented. Soon his other son, the only occasionally employed Con, and the low-life hangers-on who lived with him, began helping themselves to Dad's drugs, and everyone ended up hooked. All thoughts of the little six-year-old girl who had been placed in his care apparently vanished from Malvern's head. After Con's pal, the dogfighter Peter, burned her arm with his lighter when Tris asked if she could have one of the stolen dogs as a pet, she assumed the persona of a boy. She decided to live up to, or down to, the name those brave men gave her: Trouble. If they messed with her, she was going to give them trouble all right. She bought an air pistol from Amazon, dressed in Con's cast-off camo clothing, tried not to come within six feet of

anyone, and kept her head down. Life with her grandfather and the guys must have been a succession of horrors.

I smiled at a memory. Tris had come to me with literally just the clothes on her back. So we needed to go on a shopping expedition, right? Something every kid would enjoy. Tris confided in me that she would never wear anything pink, or anything with a unicorn or a rainbow or a fluffy bunny on it. I thought I'd listened, but still I found a way to step in the, er, crap with her. I remembered ruefully the day of our shopping trip when we stood in the girls' T-shirts' section of that huge superstore that we all love to hate. Thinking I might help Tris with her rehabilitation, I held up a Wonder Woman T-shirt.

"How about this, Sprout?" I suggested. "She's a kick-butt superhero. She doesn't take any nonsense from anybody. Kind of like you."

Tris looked at the T-shirt carefully then, clearly puzzled, up at me. "Why is she in her underwear, Kieran?"

Oops. I put the T-shirt back on the stack and we went home to cyber shop. There were fewer pitfalls there, and I let Tris tell me what she might feel comfortable wearing. She now owned a dizzying array of bird and animal-themed T-shirts and sweatshirts, none of them pink, and none of them featuring women in their underwear.

I loved Tris immoderately, and as far as I could tell, so did Aliya. Indeed, her devotion to Tris was one of the reasons she was moving into my remodeled basement. She liked her job as Tris's tutor and worried, as did I, about the irregular hours I kept. So as well as tutor, she'd taken on the job of nanny. Tris

was delirious with happiness. Especially since today was the longed-for day, the day Aliya was due to move in.

“Say, Aliya,” I said, just checking. “Are we still on for today? Reilly and sons are coming in —” I looked at my watch and groaned “— three short hours. Some carpeting, a little vinyl in the bathroom, and then the downstairs suite will be yours. No second thoughts?”

Aliya grinned. “Not a single one.” When she’d needed to move, apparently she did a fair amount of looking around and found the rents to be pretty astronomical here in Victoria. Which is why I offered her the downstairs suite. “You’re a life-saver!”

“Yeah, well,” I said. “I had ulterior motives. I didn’t want Tris’s nanny and tutor driving around Victoria in the wee hours. Some of those new intersections are murder, even at night. There’s so much traffic.” Victoria sure wasn’t the sleepy little backwater it once was. It had become a mini-metropolis. “I’m afraid we’ve been discovered.”

Aliya yawned. It was contagious. I did the same, looking at my watch again. Almost four.

“I’ll get Tris off to school in the morning,” she told me. “Then I’ll go over to Lawrence’s shop for a while. I’m working on a couple of projects for him and I need to finish up. After all, he’s letting me borrow the shop’s van to move my things. My brother doesn’t know it, but I’m going to borrow him, too. I have some computer stuff, a work table, bookcases, a futon, boxes of books, clothes on

hangers . . . that sort of thing. I thought I'd bring everything in the early afternoon if that's okay? Then I'll just . . . stay."

"Sounds good," I said. Tris and I were going to take Trey to visit his vet, just before four.

"I'll pick Tris up at school," I said. "And by the way, any sign of Trey?"

She shook her head. "No. But I noticed he hasn't eaten any kibble."

"Fooley," I said. "Well, I'm hoping Zee can sort him out. Let's get some sleep."

Aliya gestured to the phone still charging on the kitchen counter. "You could try the phone later. It ought to be charged by breakfast."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "I need to find out who the owner is. She said she'd call me later, but I can't think how she'd do that when I have her phone. Well, she could borrow one, but still. No one throws their phone away."

Aliya frowned. "Not willingly. And it's too expensive to be a burner."

"It's beyond me," I said. "I'd just like her to damned well phone me. I'm worried as hell about her. Anyhow, my brain is fried. I can't think about this case any more tonight."

## CHAPTER 4

So the hot bath didn't happen. Neither did clothes-doffing or pajama-donning. I guess I just collapsed on my bed, smelly sneakers, damp socks, and all, wrapped in my comforter, because, before I knew it, my clock radio began warbling: the oldies station, which I usually enjoy waking up to, but not this morning.

"*Gaak*," I said, not certain if I were alive or dead. When a bouncy tenor assured me that my kiss was on his list of the best things in life, I thought briefly about thwacking the radio but realized I hadn't the energy. Besides, someone was shaking my foot. I opened one eye. A small person was standing at the bottom of the bed. Curly blond hair, bright blue eyes, it was Tristan, looking scrubbed and combed.

Today she sported one of her animal T-shirts, a tough black one with a toothy, pointy-nosed, buff-colored, catlike creature on it. KEEP CALM AND HUG YOUR MEERKAT, the shirt read. A little peculiar, but thank heavens it wasn't

Jen's MEAT IS MURDER sweatshirt. It was much too early in the day for an ethical debate.

"Are you all right, Kieran?" Tris asked, frowning. "You still have your shoes on. I have coffee. Aliya says it's the heart-starting special."

"Am I all right? Hmm. When I escape from the anaconda-like coils of this comforter, I'll let you know. In the meantime, how about handing over that coffee? My heart could sure use a little starting."

Tristan giggled, as I knew she would, and carefully handed me the mug of coffee, taking a seat in the rocking chair in the corner of my bedroom.

"Mr. Reilly's downstairs," she said, eyes sparkling.

"He is?" I said, feigning ignorance. "What can he be up to at, what, eight in the morning? Do we have burst pipes, a clogged toilet, a rodent in the drywall?"

"*Kierannn*," Tristan said, "he has *carpet*. For the floor in the suite. Remember?"

I smote myself theatrically on the forehead, careful not to spill the coffee, which was indeed a heart-starter. "Oh, yeah, I remember now. We're getting a tenant. But I forget. Is it Samir, Alexa's brother? I know I rented the suite to one of the twins."

"No! It's Aliya!" Tristan said, laughing. "You're just being silly. She's moving in this afternoon."

"So she is," I said. "I remember now. Thank heavens I have you around to keep things straight for me."



“Breakfast!” Aliya called from the kitchen. “It’s just Egg McMuffins from McDonald’s, but there’s one for you, too, if you want it, Kieran.”

“Gotta go,” Tris said, wiggling out of the rocking chair.

“I might skip breakfast right now,” I told her as she was vanishing out the door of my bedroom. “Don’t you eat mine though, you ravening beast. I’ll probably want it later. Just ask Aliya to leave it in the microwave. I don’t want Trey nibbling on it. And don’t forget . . . I’ll see you after school. Three-thirtyish. Trey and I are picking you up.”

“Uh-huh. I remember,” Tris said. “Trey has to go to Zee’s. I’m going, too. I’ll see you outside the school. At the big door. Bye, Kieran.”

I closed my bedroom door on the sounds of happy kitchen domesticity and lay back down on my bed with a groan. When had late nights gotten to be such a trial? As my dreaded fortieth birthday edged ever closer, I guessed. I felt as though I had been beaten up and cast away for dead. Well, a shower ought to improve things. I bent to remove my sneakers (no, they couldn’t be saved, I decided) and was just untying the laces when the traffic report came on the radio. The morning show hosts, Buzz and Mandy, decried the latest in an all too familiar string of traffic mishaps on Victoria’s streets.

“Another accident at Ravine Road and the Pat Bay Highway, Mandy,” Buzz said. “It seems that every other morning we report an accident there, and this morning, tragically, it’s a one-car accident, but a fatality.”

“Yes, Buzz,” Mandy said. “So unfortunate. According to Provincial Police, about four a.m., a red VW Bug crossed over the median between the east and

westbound lanes of the highway and just . . . fell into oncoming traffic. Now I know that spot well — I pass it every day — and it sure isn't easy to just jump the median. It's a raised grassy bank. You have to wonder how that happened.”

Buzz continued. “BCPP asks anyone having information about this accident, anyone who saw anything, to please call. A young woman died, Mandy. If we had better lights at Ravine Road to slow down traffic, well, maybe we wouldn't be reporting a fatality this morning. I don't know about you, but I'm very upset about our continuing traffic mess here in Victoria. How many deaths will it take . . .”

I stopped listening, a wretched sense of foreboding descending upon me. C'mon, Kieran, I told myself, there must be hundreds of red VW Bugs in Victoria. Well, scores. Right? Right.

I tossed my sneakers into the corner, thought about a shower, then thought, oh to hell with it. I knew what I needed to do. I needed to make a phone call. To someone who could answer a question for me. And I needed to make the call now.