

1

Emma Sharpe opened all the windows in the small Maine coastal house she shared with her husband of almost four months, ending with the stubborn one above the kitchen sink. A crisp, salt-tinged breeze blew in on her, and she shut her eyes, taking it in, relishing it after her slog of a drive up from Boston. She'd left her FBI office early, hoping to beat the worst of the foliage traffic. Maybe she had. Maybe it was even worse now, at rush hour.

The weather forecast called for a sunny, cool weekend, perfect for leaf-peeping, hiking, kayaking—or a family wedding.

I'll be there for the wedding, Emma. Promise.

That was three weeks ago. Long weeks, Emma thought. Hard weeks. The details of Colin's whereabouts were on a need-to-know basis, and in her role as an art crimes analyst, Emma didn't need to know.

But tomorrow, after many ups and downs, her brother-in-law Andy, a lobsterman and third-born of the four Donovan brothers, and his marine biologist love, Julianne Maroney,

were finally getting married in their small hometown of Rock Point, Maine.

A fresh, gusty breeze caught the calendar Emma had bought in Ireland and hung on the wall by the refrigerator, one of her touches in the Craftsman-style house. Colin hadn't objected. They'd met a year ago...fallen in love fast...married in June...a whirlwind of a love affair, every second etched in her memory. But the last weeks of summer and first weeks of autumn had been a blur of grief, work and long walks in the Irish hills with her grandfather, mourning his only son, her father...gone too soon...and Colin, the hardheaded, hard-driving man she loved, away on his latest FBI undercover mission...

Emma noticed the calendar was still set to August. She pulled it off its prosaic nail and flipped past September to October. The blank weeks reminded her of the passage of time since she and Colin had last been here, in the house he'd bought before they'd met. She'd added a few touches of her own here and there. In time, she'd add more.

She hung the calendar back on its nail and admired the photo of Moll's Gap on the southwest Irish coast. She and Colin had stopped there in June on their honeymoon. Holding hands, taking in the stunning views of the mountains and lakes, it was as if time stood still and nothing bad could ever happen to them.

Faintly unsettled, she took off her lightweight leather jacket and hung it on the back of a chair at the table. She was in black slacks and a white blouse, but would change into something more casual for tonight's rehearsal dinner, a casual affair at Hurley's, a favorite Rock Point watering hole on the harbor. Would Colin get back in time?

Emma yanked open the refrigerator. Three bottles of a

local craft beer sat on the top shelf. Colin wouldn't mind not coming home to actual food in the fridge, but beer? A staple for any Donovan. She wondered how many times in the past weeks he'd thought about the beer waiting for him when he finally made his way back home.

Then she spotted a glass jar of local, whole-milk yogurt tucked on a shelf in the door. Had she left it on her last visit?

She shook her head. "No."

As she shut the refrigerator door, she felt the flutter in her stomach she always felt when she knew Colin was near.

And he was, she thought. He was here.

Footsteps sounded on the back stairs. She saw him through the screen door as he pulled it open and came into the kitchen. Her heart skipped a couple of beats. The tousled dark hair, the blue-gray eyes, the small scar on his upper cheek. The broad shoulders. The slight, knowing smile. He wore jeans and a dark blue sweatshirt. His Maine clothes, his undercover clothes—it didn't matter.

He shut the door behind him. "Hey, there. Did you see I got you your favorite yogurt?"

"I did see that."

"I got your favorite granola, too. It's in the cupboard."

"You're the best, Colin Donovan." Emma smiled as he slipped his arms around her. She'd pulled back her hair, fair and straight, but a few strands came loose as she took in the feel of him, his warmth, his strength. "When did you get back?"

"After lunch. I went for a walk."

Of course. "Felt good?"

"Not as good as this." He drew her closer, opening his palms on her hips. "How are you, Emma?"

"Happy you're here, safe and sound." She eased her arms

around his waist, settling them where sweatshirt and jeans met on his back. “How did you get here?”

“Mike picked me up at the airport in Portland. I didn’t want to fly into Boston and risk not getting here in time.”

Mike was the eldest brother, a Maine wilderness guide and an occasional security contractor. “You didn’t want to miss tonight’s rehearsal dinner,” Emma said.

“And you. I didn’t want to miss tonight with you.”

Heat spread through her, a contrast to the cool late-afternoon breezes blowing through the small house. “Now here we are.”

“Yes.” Colin’s eyes held hers. “Together again.”

“And you are safe and sound, yes?”

“I am.” He pulled her closer. “Our lives won’t always be like this, Emma.”

“Thinking about doing puffin tours again?”

“Cap’n Colin. I have three brothers in Maine. We’d make puffin and whale tours and such work.”

He was at least half-serious. Emma was familiar with this reentry mood, understood the appeal of a quieter life here in his hometown. “No doubt in my mind. Whatever you decide is next for you is fine with me. Right now, the work you do, the absences...” She leaned into him, solid, warm, here. “That’s fine, too.”

“I love you, Emma,” he said, as his mouth lowered to hers.

He lifted her and carried her into the front room and on to the entry. He was a strong, fit man, and although Emma could see the fatigue in his face, he continued up the stairs without a pause.

Their thing, from their earliest days together.

He carried her up the stairs without breaking stride, ducked into their bedroom at the back of the house and laid her on

the bed. She sank into the soft quilt. He wasn't the least bit winded, but she could hardly get a decent breath. Nothing to do with exertion, everything to do with having him here again, with her.

"I'm sorry I had to leave when I did," Colin said. "Your dad... Emma..."

"I needed that time on my own. You knew that."

"Because I know you." He kissed her softly. "It's good to be home."

"I'm glad you're here," she managed to whisper, before speaking became impossible, and unnecessary.

Julianne and Andy chose to have their wedding at the old sea captain's house the Donovans had converted into an inn out on the harbor, and Emma couldn't imagine a more perfect day for the hometown pair. The bright, clear autumn weather continued through last night's rehearsal dinner and the wedding, held outside on the inn's expansive lawn, with colorful leaves reflected in the quiet water and coordinating with Julianne's golden-brown hair and warm white dress. The Donovans and Maroneys had simple tastes and a modest budget, but they knew how to have a good time.

Even gloomy Franny Maroney, Julianne's widowed grandmother, couldn't find much to complain about. "Beautiful wedding," she said next to Emma at the cake table. Her white hair in tight, neat curls, she wore a flowing burgundy dress and sturdy shoes. At seventy-five, she was a bundle of energy. She sighed, eyeing the rows of cake slices on small plates. "No Donovans in tuxes, though. Andy nixed them. I think Julianne was in on it, though."

Emma smiled. "Disappointed, are you?"

“I’m not the only one. We had powder blue tuxes at my wedding. It was at the church. It seems like yesterday.”

“Weddings bring back memories. Have you had cake yet?”

“I tried all three kinds.”

“That’s my plan, too.”

Unable to decide on just one cake, Andy and Julianne had opted for three. Coconut, apple spice and chocolate. There were autumn-decorated cookies, too, but Emma had to draw the line at overindulging somewhere. She wore a deep coral knit dress, comfortable and forgiving even with how much food she’d been consuming, both last night—fish chowder, rolls, pie, whiskey—and today with the generous buffet and, now, cake and cookies.

Franny wandered off, and Emma helped herself to a small slice of the apple spice cake. Maybe she’d stop there, after all, or maybe she wouldn’t. Colin was at the outdoor bar, looking sexy in his dark suit as he engaged in what appeared to be an intense conversation with his youngest brother, Kevin, a state marine patrol officer.

In another moment, Colin nodded and started across the yard to her. “Kevin’s heading out to check on possible food poisoning at a yacht party. I’d like to tag along. Okay with you?”

“Of course. He looks as if he’d appreciate the company.”

“He’s miserable. He’s feeling sorry for himself because he came to the wedding alone.”

Emma grabbed a fork for her cake. “He’s the only unattached brother.”

“He’s also the youngest. I told him he could have brought his dog. No one would have minded.”

“And he was unamused?”

“Very.”

“Was he as rough on you when you were unattached?”

“Rougher.”

Emma was getting used to the banter between the brothers. She'd rarely seen it go too far, but she imagined sometimes it did, not that anything would ever break the bond between them. The Donovans were a tight-knit lot. In their own way, so were the Sharpes, but now it was just herself, her grandfather, her brother and her mother.

“Kevin's trying not to inflict himself on the rest of us,” Colin added cheerfully. “Drunken partiers puking off the sundeck of a fancy yacht will give him perspective.”

“Lovely,” Emma said. “Wear gloves and a mask. And a gown. Maybe goggles, too.”

“Kevin's got gear in his truck, but I'm letting the medical types deal with any bodily fluids. Fun talk at a wedding, isn't it?”

“You're a good brother. I'll save you and Kevin cookies.”

Colin kissed her on the cheek. “Save us a good Irish whiskey instead.”

He crossed the lawn to join Kevin, already at his truck on the narrow outer harbor road. Colin had started in law enforcement with the state marine patrol. He'd know the drill, not that either of them needed to respond. But she loved seeing how relaxed Colin was, so soon after a weeks-long deep-cover mission.

As she ate her cake with its not-too-sweet cream cheese frosting, she noticed Finian Bracken, the Irish priest and friend who'd officiated the wedding, peel away from several guests and walk toward her. In his late thirties, blue-eyed and handsome with his angular features and dark hair, he'd also officiated at her and Colin's wedding in June.

“Emma,” Finian said, kissing her cheek. “It's good to see you.”

“It was a beautiful wedding, Finian.”

Across the yard, Andy, with his strong Donovan frame and ocean-gray eyes, swept his bride into his arms and started up the front steps into the sprawling early nineteenth-century house, presumably to get ready to leave on their Irish honeymoon. Julianne laughed, the autumn sun catching the golden highlights in her hair. They’d known each other forever and had settled some epic battles between them before discovering how much in love they were, and how enduring that love was.

“They’ll be at the cottage in time for lunch tomorrow,” Finian said, obviously pleased.

Emma knew he was referring to the traditional Irish stone cottage he owned in the Kerry hills, with stunning views of Kenmare Bay. He seldom, if ever, stayed there given the bittersweet memories it held of his wife and two young daughters, who’d died in a sailing accident eight years ago, a tragedy that had ultimately led him to Rock Point.

He looked preoccupied as Emma set her cake plate on a stack of other empty plates. “I’m finished here,” he said. “Why don’t we drive to the rectory together? I could use your opinion on something.”

She eyed him. He obviously didn’t want to provide details. “Sure. Let me grab a few cookies.”

She placed a dozen cookies in one of the boxes set out for that purpose and followed Finian to his BMW, the one obvious symbol of his past as a successful whiskey man, owner with his twin brother, Declan, of Bracken Distillers backhome in Ireland. It was just a few minutes’ drive to the residential streets above the harbor, and he said little before parking at the homely vinyl-sided Greek Revival house that served as the rectory for St. Patrick’s, Rock Point’s struggling, and only, Roman Catholic church. The small, granite-faced

church was next door to the rectory, a short walk from the house Emma shared with Colin.

As she got out of the car, she saw what had prompted Finian's troubled mood, and his invitation to join him.

More specifically, who.

Henrietta Balfour stood in the middle of the rectory's front walk, twirling a red leaf by the stem, her reddish curls pulled back loosely with a large clip. She wore a long flowered skirt, a denim jacket and ankle boots, looking more like the garden designer Finian would know her as than the MI5 officer she was.

Behind Henrietta, Oliver York looked on from the front steps. Tawny-haired and green-eyed, he was a mythologist, a gentleman farmer, a former art thief and, lately, an MI5 asset.

They were all friends, after a fashion.

Henrietta greeted Emma with her infectious smile. "What a stunning day for my first visit to Maine. I love the sea air this time of year. We left a dreary rain in London." She shifted her attention to Finian as he started up the walk. "Do you rake the leaves once they've fallen or just leave them on the ground through winter?"

"We rake," Finian said. "I should say, volunteers from the church rake."

"I love raking." She tossed her leaf into the grass. "It's relaxing, unless one gets blisters, which is utterly tedious."

Emma pinned her gaze on her priest friend. "What's going on, Finian?"

"Henrietta and Oliver are here for a visit. Oliver texted me as Julianne and Andy were cutting the cake."

"We didn't want to distract you and Colin from the wedding," Henrietta said. "We hopped on a plane and here we are. Sometimes one needs to do things at the spur of the moment."

Oliver got to his feet, his graceful movements suggesting his expertise in martial arts. He and Henrietta were in their late thirties, and they'd known each other forever but only recently had become a couple. He gestured to the bags at his feet. "We accepted Father Bracken's gracious invitation to stay here at the rectory." He settled his cheeky gaze on Emma with the slightest smile. "Separate bedrooms."

Henrietta nodded to the box Emma had tucked in one arm. "I hope that's wedding cake."

"Cookies," Emma said.

"Cookies, then. Brilliant. Shall we put the kettle on?"

Oliver picked up his and Henrietta's bags by the steps. "Where's your charming husband, Emma?"

Colin had warmed up to Oliver in the past year, but it was a stretch to call them friends. "He's checking on food poisoning aboard a yacht in Heron's Cove."

Just the slightest flicker in Oliver's eyes, but it was enough to arouse Emma's suspicion. Henrietta, on the other hand, didn't give anything away.

2

“What about that ER nurse you were seeing before I left town?” Colin asked as he and Kevin approached the sleek, expensive yacht, moored among a half-dozen much smaller pleasure boats at a private marina on the tidal river in Heron’s Cove. A knot of first responders were gathered on the pier. “Is she still in the picture?”

Kevin shrugged. “Sort of.”

“Why didn’t you invite her to the wedding?”

“Andy’s wedding? With all three big brothers there?”

Colin could see Kevin’s point. “So you’d have invited her if it hadn’t been a family wedding?”

“Doubt it.”

“Okay. I give up.”

“Good. The wedding was nice. Glad those two figured out they’re meant for each other. For a while I thought Julianne might throw Andy overboard and leave him to drown.”

“More likely she’d have done him in on land. She wouldn’t have left you to find his body.”

“Ha. True.”

Nothing like gallows humor while checking on a drunken yacht party.

The upscale marina was next to the main offices of Sharpe Fine Art Recovery, founded sixty years ago by Wendell Sharpe, Emma’s Irish-born grandfather. Colin glanced back at the gray-shingled Victorian, newly renovated to the rigorous standards of Lucas Sharpe, Emma’s older brother, who ran the family business. The offices were closed for the weekend, and Lucas was in Ireland with his semiretired grandfather, working and keeping each other company in the aftermath of Tim Sharpe’s death. Wendell had moved to Dublin and opened up offices there after the death of his wife sixteen years ago.

Colin reminded himself he had no reason to suspect the yacht and its ill-fated party had anything to do with the Sharpes. He shifted his gaze to the narrow channel that marked the boundary between the tidal river and the Atlantic, sparkling in the distance. The channel was just wide enough and deep enough for the yacht in question.

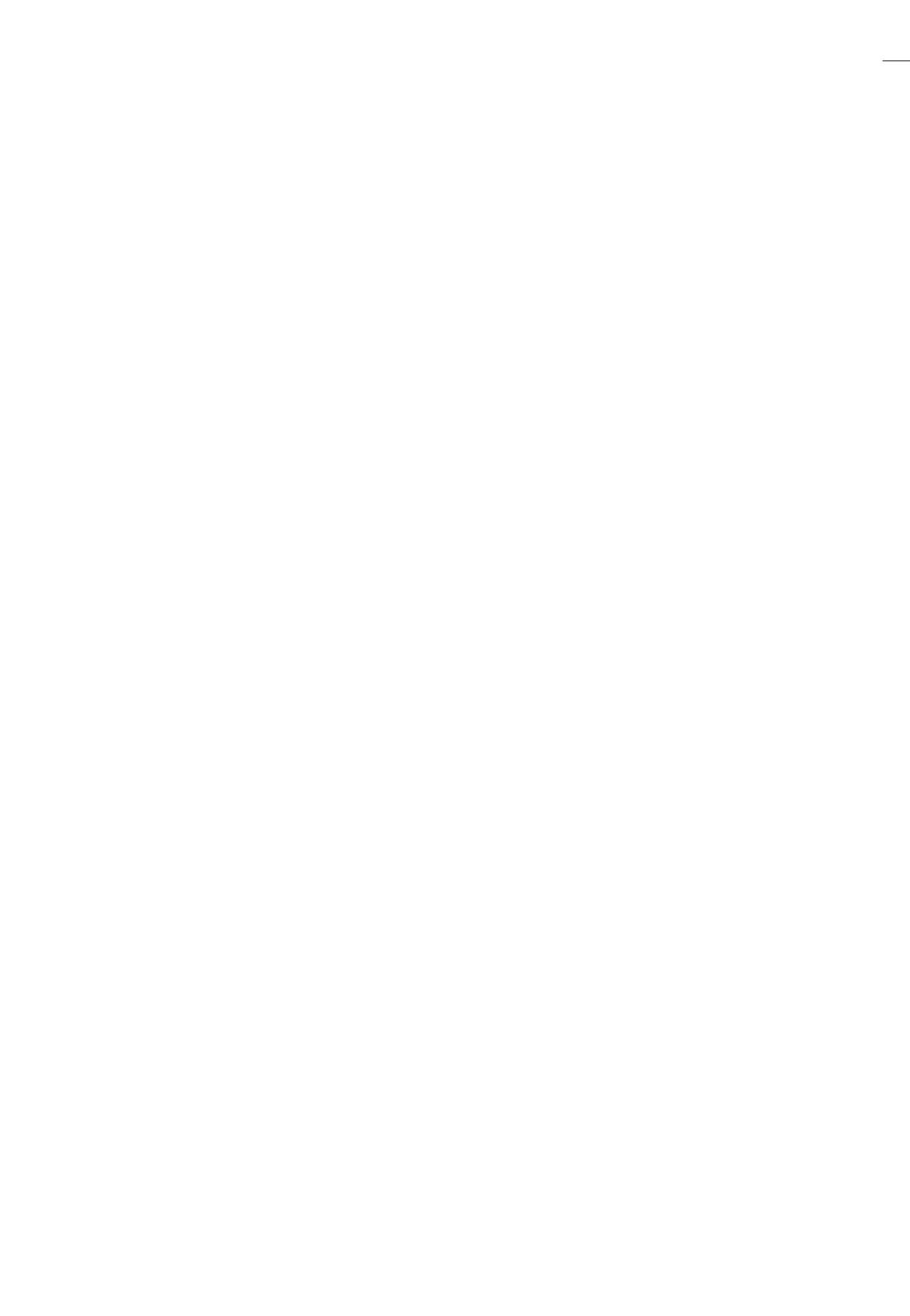
“You’re not going to tell me where you’ve been the past month?” Kevin asked.

“Nowhere I had to sidestep barf.”

The smallest of smiles from his brother. “Life is good, then.”

They slowed their pace as they came to an ambulance crew. Two khaki-clad middle-aged men staggered off the yacht onto the pier but shook off help from the EMTs. Guests, not passengers, they explained. They were here just for the party and would make their way home after they got some air. They didn’t get ten yards before one of them collapsed to his knees and barfed into the river. The EMTs ran to him.

Kevin grimaced. “Yeah, I know. We could be having cake and whiskey right now.”



"I don't mind missing the cake." Colin got out of the way of an EMT pushing an empty stretcher. "Any idea whose yacht?"

"Money guy and his wife. They chartered it out of Boston. Own crew."

That didn't tell Colin much. He and Kevin boarded the yacht but didn't have to sidestep vomit until they reached the sundeck, where the party had taken place. Except for a few splatters and pools of vomit, the sundeck was appealing with its cushioned seating, bar and Jacuzzi. It looked as if people had been having a good time and then started getting sick with a sudden onset of symptoms.

A young woman in a navy polo shirt and tan khakis was loading plates, glasses, flatware and napkins onto a tray. "Not everyone made it to a head, as you can see. Whatever it was took people by surprise." She set the tray on the bar. She was small, even waiflike, with short blondish hair, pale blue eyes, freckles and an unexpectedly brisk manner. She spoke with an English accent. "My name's Georgina Masterson. I'm the chef. I'm not sick, but I didn't eat any of the food."

Kevin introduced himself, then Colin. "Is everyone on board accounted for?"

"Richie is doing a head count. Richie Hillier, the captain. I don't know the exact number who were on board. Six passengers and four crew, but how many guests came just for the party? I couldn't say. Another ten people, maybe. It was a last-minute thing. Heron's Cove wasn't one of our planned stops. It was added last night."

"Why's that?" Colin asked.

She shrugged her thin shoulders. "One of Melodie's whims. A New England foliage cruise was her idea." Georgina snatched a wet rag out of an unseen sink and slapped it

onto the shiny bar. “And you have no idea whom I’m talking about. Melodie and Bryce Fanning chartered the yacht. They’re newlyweds, actually. They’re celebrating their one-year anniversary. We arrived here at the marina early this morning. Next thing, I’m pulling together a party for twenty people.”

Colin walked over to the bar. “Where are the Fannings now?”

Georgina waved a slender hand vaguely toward the stairs.

“EMTs took Bryce out on a stretcher. Melodie’s going with him. She’s sick, too, but she’s rallying. The EMTs and local police have been great. I’m just... dazed, I guess you’d say. I can’t believe this is happening.” She abandoned the rag and added more dishes to the tray. “We were supposed to leave late this afternoon and make stops in Camden and Bar Harbor, but who knows what will happen now. I don’t know why the police are here. I don’t know what made people sick, but it’s nothing criminal, I assure you. And it’s not due to anything I prepared.”

Colin wasn’t surprised at her defensiveness. He’d done a few food-poisoning checks on various types of boats and ships during his marine patrol days, and rarely did anyone want to lay claim to causing it. “Could someone have brought contaminated food on board?”

She seized on that one. “Yes, absolutely. I wouldn’t necessarily have noticed. I was in the galley most of the time. It’s so easy to make a mistake with food, especially when you’re transporting it. People think they know what they’re doing, and they don’t.”

“Happens all the time,” Kevin said.

She flicked the wet rag back into the sink. “One of the passengers took off down the stairs. He looked terrible. I think he was bolting to his cabin to be sick. I hope he didn’t pass out on the stairs or something. Would you mind taking a

quick look for him? I'd feel better knowing he's okay, or that the EMTs found him. I just..." She gulped in a breath, her eyes wide, her pale skin ashen. "I don't want anyone to die."

She grabbed a fresh tray and set off from the bar to a cluster of chairs.

Colin followed Kevin down the narrow stairs. They didn't run into anyone until they reached the guest cabins on the lower deck. A man lay sprawled on his side across the threshold of a small, well-appointed cabin. He had one arm clamped on his lower abdomen, his teeth clenched in agony. A pool of orange vomit was soaking into the cream-colored carpet by his head. He was in his late forties, trim, fit, with gray-streaked dark hair.

When they were open, the sick man's eyes were pale gray.

Colin swore under his breath and knelt next to the man he knew as Jeremy Pearson. Might be his real name, might not be, but it wouldn't be the name he was using aboard Bryce and Melodie Fanning's chartered yacht. The scars on his hands and face attested to his decades with the SAS, MI6 and now MI5, but they could be explained away. Car accident, bar fight, cooking mishap.

"Hold on, Kevin," Colin said. "Stand back."

Colin scanned Jeremy for any signs he wasn't experiencing some kind of ordinary food-borne illness. Excess saliva—classic foaming at the mouth—or effusive sweating. Pinpoint pupils. Convulsions. Delusions. Unresponsive. All could point to a neurotoxic reaction characteristic of exposure to a chemical weapon, one of Jeremy's areas of expertise.

"It's just food poisoning," he managed to mutter through clenched teeth.

"You need medical attention," Colin said.

Jeremy tucked his knees up as he was obviously seized by severe abdominal cramping. “I need a bloody coffin.”

Colin looked up at Kevin. “Can you fetch the EMTs?”

His brother nodded. “You’ll wait here?”

“Yeah.”

Kevin hesitated half a beat, long enough for Colin to get the message. His brother knew something was up, but he said nothing as he rolled off to get help.

Once Kevin was out of earshot, Colin shook his head at his British friend and colleague, pale and writhing in agony. “I hope to hell you’ve expelled whatever’s nailing your sorry ass, because, damn it, I need answers.”

“Don’t blow my cover. I’ll explain once I’m done dying.”

Jeremy moaned, curling up into a ball in obvious agony. Colin knew he didn’t have much choice. He’d have to wait. That meant Kevin would, too, and he wasn’t patient, either. Patiently waiting for answers wasn’t a Donovan strong suit.

“What is your cover?” Colin asked.

“Art consultant.”

What the hell? Colin got out of the way as Jeremy rolled out of his tight ball, tried to get up on his hands and knees and hurled again. No question the EMTs would decide to transport him to the emergency room for assessment and treatment.

Jeremy finished puking and collapsed. The guy was a mess. “Guess you had more to expel,” Colin said. “I’ll get you fresh clothes for the hospital. You’re going to need them.”

He stepped past Jeremy and entered the small, well-appointed cabin. He glanced around for any obvious indications that could explain why a senior MI5 officer—a friend—had slipped into his wife’s hometown—land of the Sharpes—as an art consultant. As far as Colin knew, Jeremy Pearson’s knowledge of art was limited to the *Mona Lisa*.



He got a change of clothes from a closet, keeping an eye out for any evidence that might explain what the sick MI5 officer was up to on the Fanning yacht. He didn't expect to find anything before Kevin returned with the EMTs, and he didn't.

Just that his British colleague was a boxers guy.

EMTs got Jeremy Pearson onto a stretcher and loaded him into an ambulance. Colin had shoved his friend's things into a laundry bag hanging in the closet and used it as an excuse to follow the ambulance to the ER.

Kevin didn't say anything until they were back in his truck, en route to the hospital. "You going to tell me what's going on?"

Colin watched out his window as the truck wound through the pretty village of Heron's Cove with its weathered-shingled shops and restaurants, another world from Rock Point. "I don't know what's going on," he said finally.

"The guy just now. William Hornsby. British art consultant. Sharpe world?"

Hornsby. So that was Jeremy's cover name. "I need room to maneuver, Kevin."

His brother sucked in a breath. "Okay. Do your thing. For now."

Colin debated asking Kevin for a list of everyone on board for the party, everyone who'd gotten sick. Passengers, guests, crew. He wanted names, addresses, phone numbers. Whatever he could get. But food poisoning wouldn't necessarily trigger that kind of response. So far, he had no evidence it wasn't what it looked like—accidental.

Kevin slowed for an elderly couple crossing the street. Summer was the busiest season for Heron's Cove, but fall was a

close second, the village center crowded with leaf-peepers. “I bought apples yesterday.”

“Apples,” Kevin said. “Right. Good, Colin.”

“Cortlands. Emma says Cortlands are good for pies. They’re still in my truck. She likes to bake pies to relax.” He paused, wondering why the hell he’d brought up the apples. “The biggest decision I expected to make this weekend was whether to add a dash of nutmeg to the pie or leave it out. That’s a thing with her.”

“Would you notice one way or the other?”

“Doubt it. You?”

Kevin shook his head. “No.”

“I bought the apples at a local orchard. I made Mike stop on the way from the airport. He stayed in the car.”

“You were away for a good spell. Apples and autumn. Nostalgia.”

“I guess.”

Kevin sped up when they got onto the highway, the ambulance long since leaving them behind. “If I hadn’t dragged you to Heron’s Cove, you could be peeling apples with Emma right now.”

“I don’t think so,” Colin said.

Kevin glanced sideways at him. “What?”

Colin held up his phone. “Just got a text from her. Oliver York is in Rock Point.”

“Our cheeky art thief.”

“You’re not supposed to know that.”

“But I do.”

“Henrietta Balfour is with him. They’re an item these days. Grew up together.”

“She was involved with that business in August.”

Colin nodded without comment. *That business* included an

opioid overdose in London that Henrietta, Oliver and Emma's grandfather had navigated, and then Tim Sharpe's death in Maine. A hell of a blow that had been.

"I'll save my questions," Kevin said. "We'll get this sorted out. One step at a time."

Some of the tight knots in Colin's stomach loosened. Whatever was going on with his and Emma's British friends, he wouldn't have to deal with it on his own. He wasn't in the midst of a solitary undercover mission. He was home. He had Kevin, Mike, Mike's fiancée, Naomi, his folks, Finian Bracken, and he had Emma.



Rival's Break

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