

NO TRAINS TO CHICHEN ITZA



LEE

OBSESSED INTENTIONS

BOOK THREE

WIMMER

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OBSESSED INTENTIONS ©
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By
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Chapter 1

Dr. Steven Ray, DR to his friends and associates, nursed a lukewarm cup of coffee. Passing time rereading the week-old paper, he sank back on a leather sofa in his new rental home's great room. Couldn't he move past this? No, like the families—he couldn't.

The headline of the *Great Lakes Observer* clawed at him: The *Lucky Lucie*'s Silent Dead: Families' Closure Awaits Beneath Lake Michigan.

There were too many loose ends, too many reminders. And an obsessed man.

His eyes burned, blurring the subheading: Still no word on whether recovery operations will resume in the spring. Family members of those lost aboard the *Lucky Lucie* say they're not giving up hope.

Was the sinking of the *Lucky Lucie* the end of his fight?

He shoved the newspaper aside and slid his hand over the red leather cushion, cold to his touch. Like the lingering memories and the bodies still on board the casino yacht.

No one survived, except for those he and Michelle Jennings helped into an emergency boat before the *Lucky Lucie* sank. He shuddered anew over the gunfire and stepping over dead bodies on his last trip inside before the explosion. He was nearing his own escape vessel, then blackness.

Seriously, did the guy blow up his own gambling yacht just to get DR?

Where are You, God? Why won't You stop this? If not for me, stop it for the children.

Propping his elbows on his knees, he held his head in his hands. Teeth gritted. Short on answers, he almost prayed. Just why was he talking to the air?

His own shakedown cruise four months earlier was supposed to start a new journey, a new way of life, and it did. Just not one he'd chosen. Was it even his to choose, or was there a higher calling?

Yeah, right. Just great. He'd been around too many do-gooders. Now, he'd started thinking like them.

Something moved beyond the picture window. Something familiar on the lake below. After rising, he crept to the window as if he could spook the

creature from afar. An old friend, a deer, drank water from the patio of DR's old home. He hadn't planned on this view, his destroyed house across the lake. The memories hung with him like a damp towel around one's neck. They kept getting hotter the longer they hung there. It was that madman's handiwork, the *Lucky Lucie's* owner.

At least not everything had changed.

The alarm on his cellphone beeped. He strolled to the sofa, picked up the newspaper, rolled it into a tight bundle, and slid a rubber band around it. Unable or unwilling to let the story go, he tucked it into the mahogany coffee table's drawer.

In fifteen minutes, he needed to leave to pick up Debbie Holmes, his ex-fiancée. They were going to try romance again, trying love once again. This time, she'd promised not to be so impulsive and turn away.

A friend told him about a strange story from the Bible.

Every time Gomer—the wife of the prophet Hosea—left for her old life of debauchery, he went after her. Gomer walked the road of ruin, again and again. Each time, at God's command, Hosea went out and brought her home. No matter what she did. Go figure.

DR would too. Only Debbie wasn't like Gomer. She was a newly converted Christian, something he despised, yet he went.

They met on the ill-fated shakedown cruise. Guess their cruise wasn't all bad.

Only luck, bad dreams, and a stowaway saved him from joining the stiff on the bottom of the Indian Ocean then and Lake Michigan now.

That was a lot of luck. Was it luck? Nine lives, he was told.

Was that what this was? Was this God? Most said so.

No, no, no. He left me long ago!

The alarm buzzed again. Going out into the cold January afternoon, he jumped into his new Jeep. At least the vehicle had remote start. He took the longer of the two routes to Detroit, but the countryside passed by unnoticed. The ride was almost smooth since I-94 didn't have the same concrete joints as the interstate going north, allowing for more uninterrupted thought, more planning, more rabbit holes. He'd driven this route so many times, and none of the trips came with good memories.

After parking in the airport's short-term parking area, he strolled inside to Debbie's arrival gate. He adjusted his hair, pulling on the back of it.

Was this the right move? Too late for second thoughts.

She came into sight, and his chest tightened. A sickening feeling flooded his body, like one too many burritos, and his breath caught. A thousand memories fought for the space behind his eyes. He shoved them aside, hardened his chest, and sucked in a deep breath. Then, with a long gait, he strolled into her waiting arms.

“Hi, Debbie. You look fantastic.” He breathed in the essence of her perfume. Man, it felt good to be held again. To hold again. *See? It’s not all bad.*

She edged back, eyes glistening like brown diamonds. “I’ve been thinking about this moment for days, about holding you.” Then her smile drooped. Her left arm and hand held on around his neck, while her right pushed her long golden locks out of her face. “You look tired. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you too.” Kissing her once more, he ignored the tired comment. “Let’s get your bags and get out of here. Are you hungry?” Her hand in his, he started toward the baggage area.

She stopped him.

Her eyes narrowed, and her lips flattened. A couple pushed by too closely, causing her to step forward. “That’s it? That’s all the welcome I get after everything that happened?”

“There’s more. I just want to get away from all these people. Come on. Let’s grab your bags and go get a bite to eat.” He squeezed her hand and led her toward the crowded luggage area.

She was none too happy.

That went bad.

* * * * *

Debbie winced as DR hoisted her luggage onto the king-size guest bed. Some things hadn’t changed. The bed, even though it wasn’t the same one, appeared as big and lonely as the guest bed in his last home. Only this time, she felt blindsided. Yes, he’d said all the right words, but something was off. As if he were hiding something.

Maybe I’m just feeling guilty. After all, I ran out on him, and only five days before Christmas.

“It’s so good to have you home. I’ll give you some time to get your bearings.” He winked and gripped her shoulder, his warm hand and deep voice reflecting the same tenderness. “That’s a long flight from Marsala. When you’re ready, we can order in some dinner. The new restaurant in town’s supposed to have great pasta.”

She leaned into his touch, expecting something romantic. Or at least an “I’m glad you’re back.”

“On this side of the lake, you can get delivery. Does that sound okay?”

“Sure. Thanks.” Only those words had permission to pass her lips.

This was a hot mess. What had she done?

Watching his six-foot frame saunter out of the room, she plopped down on the bed and shook out her hair. Different dresser, different comforter... but something’s still terribly wrong. Was she expecting too much?

Was he a different man?

Or was she a different woman?

She sank back, taking it all in. The night he proposed, their life seemed to be on a path to easy street. Not tonight. She unzipped her luggage and filled the dresser, shaking out each article of clothing. She reached for her red lace nightgown and held it up to the light. It didn’t have the same appeal as when she last anticipated wearing it for him. It used to make her feel enticing, alive—not tonight. *When will our time come?*

While DR went on to struggle with Tom for their lives, against a foe she’d also faced on the shakedown cruise, she’d fled. Slammed her engagement ring on his hallway table. Left behind a life of promise, just the morning after he proposed.

She buried the lacy temptation deep in the drawer. Hadn’t worked in the past. Could she help it that she wanted his love, wanted to be held in that special way, again? Five years was a long time.

Her away time hadn’t erased the memories. If anything, it made her feel like a bad person.

Was it wrong to want to love to its fullest?

She didn’t mean to push back on his beliefs. She was the Christian, not him.

Girl, you’ve got to get a grip on yourself. This is your last chance.

It was coming back—that feeling of no control. She'd experienced it when her deceased husband bled out in her arms. She shivered. Clothes stowed away or hung, she steadied herself and sat on the bed. A headshake loosened her blonde strands to fall freely while she pocketed her hands.

She had to relax, take it slow... and for heaven's sake, not overthink it.

She hopped off the bed, joined DR, and settled by a window facing the lake. Dusk was edging in, and just a faint glow shared where the sun had been. Across the lake on a hillside stood a burned-out shell of someone's home. Was that—

Wow. It was his.

Now, it was nothing but ashes and busted dreams. She cringed.

Suck it up, girl. This man's been through it, and yet here he is. Waiting for you.

They moved to the granite-covered island where he unwrapped their dinner, served the pasta onto plates, and set them across from each other. Once he'd plated the breadsticks, he faced her, his eyes as cold as the frost on the windows.

Was she expecting too much? Too fast?

With how closely she watched him—how his lips curled, his eyes stared, his pinkie twitched—everything seemed to be in slow motion. Why was she studying everything so hard? What was wrong with her?

She sat up straight, tense. "I feel like I'm missing something here? Is everything okay?"

"I don't know what you mean?" The corners of his lips quirked. "Of course, everything is okay. We just have a lot to get accustomed to. Things have changed since the last time. That's all." Sliding down onto his seat, he grabbed her hand.

Finally, some show of affection.

But, after never getting the answers she needed, she returned to her home in Chicago two days later. She'd have to work out her newfound Christian faith and how it fit with his plans. Plans, DR said, that now included adopting three girls and setting up a home for trafficked and orphaned children in Atlanta. Maybe even moving there.

Could she move to Atlanta?

They discussed a trip to Cancún to get away from all of this. Meeting their friends from the cruise and getting his yacht back. Though she liked

the idea, she couldn't commit.

Would everybody think she was nuts? Was she?

Once again, she was running away. Was it because someone murdered her husband and she held him and watched him die? Was holding a bleeding DR after the attack on the *DI*, fearing she'd watch him die too, a trigger? She needed answers, but who would have them?

And the uneasiness she'd sensed in DR at the airport stuck in her memory.

Had he lost his desire for her?

Even her home in Chicago wasn't the same. Not after her friend was killed during the hunt for DR.

Were the shadows of her memories blocking the light of her dreams?

Chapter 2

DR had seen his share of good times and bad ones, especially while living in Wall Lake. Both times he'd lived here, he'd brought a beautiful woman with him. The first was Gail, his deceased wife, and now Debbie—his on-again, off-again girlfriend, briefly fiancée. This was one of the off times.

But he'd never brought three children here. Now, cleared by the Feds and back from Georgia, they were settling in. Listening to little Derifa play with their new brown Pomeranian, Bubbles, across the room was so new. She squealed, trying to get a blanket from the playful pup's mouth.

Debbie had left mere hours ago. Already, the atmosphere felt more relaxed. Best not to think about that, though.

He dropped onto the sofa, slid his phone from his pocket, and tapped the contact for Tom Hughes.

"Good to hear from you." Tom's voice followed the third ring. "I imagine your status as Wall Lake's resident hero is now etched in stone."

DR never sought that but instead shied from the spotlight. His doomed shakedown cruise set him and his friends aboard the *Disillusioned Illusion* up as international heroes after they rescued the children from trafficking.

"Forget that mess." DR grunted, the leather sofa cold beneath him. Might need some throw pillows. "Now I just want to protect and love the girls." Soon, with some help, he'd become their adopted father. Some had said—but he refused to admit—it was a God thing.

The pup released the blanket, and Derifa lost her balance, toppling into a pile of giggles. What a beautiful sound! Amazing, they could laugh.

"Sounds like someone's having fun, but I hope you know what you're getting into," Tom cautioned. "This isn't going to be a part-time gig. Those girls can't even speak English. How will you ever get them accustomed to America?"

Tom was there on that ill-fated shakedown cruise, fighting alongside DR against the hired terrorists. Then he'd gotten caught up in DR's latest fiasco, having to escape every law enforcement agency in the Great Lakes area's shoot-to-kill manhunt. All because one member of an elitist political group had become obsessed with killing DR.

“I know. Believe me, I know. Debbie hammered that home.” DR surveilled his rental on the lake. Everything was different, new, since Jennings’s obsession kicked into high gear. Only his family and business hadn’t changed, but soon the crates of treasure arriving at his local shop for processing from his archaeological dig in India would end, cutting off his only lingering tie to Wall Lake.

“What about Jennings? Aren’t you afraid he’ll try to grab the girls again—or kill you?”

Laurie, Tom’s wife, piped up in the background. Sounded like she’d told him to shut it.

DR smirked. “Is that Laurie I hear?”

“Yes. She’s elated you’re adopting the girls. She’s always the dreamer. Whereas you know me, I’m the practical, measured one. That’s why we’re so good together. Hang on a minute.”

A muffled request came over the line: “Laurie, will you please let me talk to the man?”

Then it sounded like a chair scooted across the floor and footsteps preceded a door shutting.

“Okay, she’s gone, and none too happy.”

“Better be careful. She’ll have you sleeping at your mum-in-law’s.”

“Nah... She likes to put her cold feet on my warm legs too much. When I was in the States with you, she used a hot water bottle. What’s the word between you and Debbie? Do you think you’ll get back together?”

“I hope so, but it’s up to her.”

Amal, the youngest at nine years old, trotted in from outside and dropped her boots and outerwear beside the door. After putting on slippers, she placed everything in the coat closet. She appeared at home already.

“Daddy, can I play with Bubbles? Derifa’s had him all day.”

“What did she say?” Tom asked. He couldn’t speak Arabic.

“She’s trying to claim the puppy, but Derifa keeps him busy.”

“Speaking of Bubbles, how’s that going?”

“Good, a bit of a challenge, but that’s okay. It helps the girls stay busy and gives them some structure. Tom, I need to get off here. Dinnertime is coming soon, and I’ve got to get everybody ready. I’ll talk to you soon. Give Laurie my love.”

“Will do. We’re leaving for the airport shortly. Can’t wait to do this.”

DR shut off the phone. “Okay, girls.” He spoke in Arabic. “Time to let Bubbles get some rest. He’s just a puppy. Derifa, Amal, please go with Habiba and wash up. Dinner will be here soon.”

Good thing he’d taken all those language classes with Gail. His Arabic was rusty, but it was coming back more every day.

* * * * *

Miguel Ricci, DR’s mentor and most influential confidant, calculated the *Disillusioned Illusion*’s sailing time from Marsala, Italy, at eight days, ten and a half hours, considering their top speed of twenty-five knots. Without accounting for weather obstacles, their timing to meet up with DR would’ve been shaky at best. After his experience as a sailor and decades of private exploration, as well as captaining a sailor’s cup team, he accounted for the inevitable rough seas ahead and added another thirty-six hours. On that calculation, he ordered food, fuel, and other supplies and stored the haul on the *DI* for their adventure.

After being attacked on the Indian Ocean by an obsessed member of Circle, DR’s yacht underwent seventy-five days of repair, during which angry scenes followed with Luigi Cancio, the Marsala marina’s manager. The *DI*’s captain, Lorenzo Moretti, and capable first mate, David Lucas, closely followed the repairs while taking additional nautical courses at the university, learning the business part for their expanded roles.

Now, the repairs wrapped up, the yacht in tip-top shape, the supplies and fuel loaded, they made ready to sail to Cancún, Mexico. Along with a temporary employee DR hired, recommended by the manufacturer and Miguel, to ensure the *DI* experienced no problems and had enough staff for a smooth sailing.

“Lo, it’s Miguel. Can you talk?” Watching his grandson climb up on the sofa across the room, Miguel ensured the tyke didn’t go near the roaring fire in the centuries-old stone fireplace.

“Actually, Miguel, I was hoping to talk to you. Just let me shut down my laptop.”

“Don’t bother. This isn’t going to take that long. Hang on a minute. Corey, get away from that table. Sorry, Lo. I’m watching Corey too. He’s a ball of energy today.”

“No worries. What’s up?”

“Are you ready to sail? I’m almost ready to come over. I just need to pick up our friends at the airport.” Miguel walked over to the sofa and took Corey’s hand, guiding him to his own room.

“Yes, we’re ready to put this plan into motion.”

“You read my mind. I’ll be there in two hours.” He scooped Corey onto his toddler bed for a nap, but of course, the tyke wasn’t cooperating.

“When was the last time you talked to DR?” Something like a drawer shutting clattered over the line.

“Just now. Debbie’s went and left him again, ran back to her home in Chicago after a mere two days. I don’t know about that girl. She can’t seem to stay focused on the good thing she’s got.” Miguel scooped Corey back up and strode toward the great room. Along the way, he stopped by a back window to see if the wind had died down. “DR’s a little uptight, but who can blame him?”

The flag in the front yard still billowed.

“I sure hope this wind lays down before we sail, or it’s going to be one rough ride.”

A door opened. Good.

“Lo, Kim just came home. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“It might be rough. See you soon. Tell Kim and Marco I said hi.”

The phone went dead.

Miguel strolled into the entrance foyer and hugged Kim, his daughter-in-law. “How was the market?”

“Busy, and this wind... Carts were strewn all over. We had a hard time getting out of the parking lot. Everyone’s going nuts.” She kissed his cheek.

“I talked to Lorenzo. I’m picking everyone up at the airport and heading to the marina as soon as the car comes back around. I sure wish you all were coming along.”

He took a bag out of her arms, passed Corey her way, and started toward the kitchen, calling for their cook. “Serena, Serena.”

She popped around a corner.

“Here’s the fish you asked for.” He handed over the bag.

“Thank you, Mr. Ricci.” She bowed her head, then scuttled back to the kitchen.

“Marco and I would love to go.” Kim shifted Corey to her other hip. “But it’s too far to take this rascal at his age, and it looks like the ocean’ll

be rough going at first.” She walked into the great room and nestled the sleepier Corey into the corner of the sectional, propping pillows around him so he couldn’t fall. Then she crossed the room, holding her fingers out to warm by the fire in the fireplace. As her gaze traveled to the window, a faraway look came into her eyes. “I would love to go. Maybe one day.”

“Time to go.” Miguel pointed to his car now parking by the front door beyond the same window. “Tell Marco I’ll keep him up-to-date on everything.”

Then he caught her up in a long hug. “I’ll call often. I love you.”

Moments later, he climbed into the car and waved to her watching from that same window. The car started down the drive. The coastline, just fifty yards away from their driveway, roared, and he whispered, “I know You’ve got this, God. Please don’t let it be like the last time.”

* * * * *

Craig and Trixie Robinson deplaned their jet, the warmer weather bathing them, though a brisk wind blew. He swiped his hair from his face, still sporting the long rock-and-roller hair he’d had since his teens.

“I’m liking this Marsala weather better already.” She nudged him.

Her headband kept her long curly brown hair enviably still. Now, why wouldn’t she let him wear one of those? Maybe he’d snag one from her bag on the boat.

“It will get warmer too, the closer we get to Cancún.” When they left their home in France, the temperature was thirty degrees cooler. “But this wind is unreal. Must be a storm coming in—or going out.” One hand pinning back his hair, he examined the sky. Clouds scudded by as the wind blew them.

Their luggage located, he picked up the pace while Trixie lagged. “Look, there’s Laurie and Tom. Let’s see if they’ve gotten their luggage. I could use a sandwich.”

“Wait for me.” Trixie boosted her luggage onto a cart with her knee, then deposited the cart fee into the machine that released the cart before she hurried to catch up. “You know, hubs, when you’re hungry, you have a one-track mind.”

“Hurry up, slowpoke.” Now speaking in English, he stopped while she struggled with her larger bag. He jogged back and took hold to help but

couldn't stop an eye roll. "If you didn't carry your wardrobe with you, we wouldn't need this cart."

"Stop it. I like to be prepared. That's all. You'll see. We'll have to buy you some things." She shook her head at the story she'd heard and told too many times.

Snickering, he winked. "And won't that be great? I'll get something new, and you won't." He waved over her head at Tom and Laurie, and a grin pushed out the corners of his mouth. "I don't see the Bible toter. Is he coming?"

"Shh. Don't call him that. I don't know whether Joshua is coming or not. I haven't heard." She grinned, and a knowing look and a giggle followed. As they entered the breezeway between buildings, she tucked back stray strands of hair while bustling on ahead.

When they reached Tom and Laurie, they embraced the other couple. Man, the bond forged months earlier made the exchange perfect.

"How's the champion shooter?" Trixie held onto Tom. Then, smiling at Laurie, she let go and took Laurie into her arms. She tiptoed to whisper in Laurie's ear. "I'll bet that was one scary Christmas."

"Grateful," Tom Hughes replied.

"See, honey? That's modesty." Craig patted Tom's shoulder, proud of his friend. "The man faced down Goliath, and all he has to say is grateful."

The women drifted away, allowing their men to recommence the male-bonding ritual—throwing fake punches at each other and a brotherly hug.

Laurie slipped an arm around Craig's wife, apparently wanting to do some bonding of her own. "Scary doesn't begin to tell it." Her voice drifted their way. "I was horrified after Tom told me everything. The not knowing while it was happening wasn't nearly as scary as the real story. Just think—if Amal hadn't been hiding behind that tarp on the casino yacht's deck, Tom would be dead, and DR too."

Letting go of their man hug, Craig closed his eyes and exhaled. "Here, we go again. Ever since the cruise, she's been searching for Jesus. She says something kept us alive. According to her, it must've been Jesus. Now, with what happened to you and DR, she's getting even nuttier."

"I don't know whether it was Jesus or not—that's a conversation for another day—but I do know something or someone watched out for us." Tom leaned on the luggage cart straining under his and Laurie's bags. "It

seemed like we were running every day. I'll tell you about it on the cruise. For now, let's go get a sandwich or something. It was a long flight, and I'm hungry."

"Sounds like a plan. Miguel won't be here for half an hour or so."

Trixie pointed at the luggage cart. "See, honey? It's a girl thing."

"Whoa. Those are mostly Tom's bags. I just have the one." Laurie patted a brown leather bag. She hardened her jaw, standing straight and pert. "That way, if I need something, I can get it new."

Ha! Craig bent over laughing, slapping his knee.

"What? What's so funny?" Laurie looked back and forth between her friends.

"We just had that same conversation. He said the same thing." Trixie shoved him, so he mocked a stumble.

Entering the food court where they'd meet Miguel, Craig took in the different options. One, an Indian restaurant, looked the least busy, so he drifted toward it.

"I don't think so. I tried that in Jeddah, where we saw the terrorists, and the food was awful." Laurie looked sideways at Trixie. "Oh, but you weren't there, were you? You went with the men to Mecca, while the other ladies and I went shopping. Still, just take my word for it, no Indian food, not today. Please?"

"Look." Trixie nodded across the way. "Miguel is early. He's coming up the escalator on the other side. Whatever we get, we'd better get it to go. Who is that with him?"

Chapter 3

The sunshine peeked through a gap in the room-darkening drapes and reflected off the massive dresser mirror, striking Jennings in the face. Now waking, the hungover king of an adult-entertainment empire spanning North America rubbed his eyes, a heaviness in his chest. Dregs of last night's debauched jubilation lingered. His Georgia peach—his adopted daughter, Michelle—was okay. She'd returned unharmed, so he called up friends and brought in “entertainers” to lighten the atmosphere.

Today, he didn't care if any of the guests stayed. The entertainers had left. He sent the last one away eleven hours ago, sometime around four a.m. Gingerly, he rolled his aging body to the edge of the bed. A coarse cough rattled his chest. Was the price his body would pay today worth the raucous celebration?

He tossed the drapes back to allow the rest of the afternoon light in, then ducked, and brought his left hand to his pounding head to shield his eyes.

Maybe the doctor was right. He needs to slow down.

The ornate deck reminded him of a conversation several nights ago. When Michelle was still missing, he'd broken down and spoken with a god he no longer served or followed. Though he believed most of his life, he now refused to serve God, at least this one.

Now, he asked aloud, “I don't know whether to thank You or to start making my own plans to die. Will that be the cost? Yes, I did say take me and not her, so is that Your plan now? Are You finally going to begin to answer my prayers?”

He walked out onto the concrete balcony floor. Barefoot, he soaked in the warmth of the California sun on the soles of his feet, and the breeze evoked Scripture he'd like to forget: “You never know from where the Spirit comes, and where it goes, for it is like the wind, you hear it but know not.”

Scripture had served him well when he was younger, but after his life of unchecked heartache, power, and wealth, it only enraged him now. No matter how much money he made, he'd been unable to control his destiny—losing his wife had become the clincher.

At least Michelle was okay. Whatever happened next, it'd be all right. But Ray would still have to pay.

Jennings's friends in Circle, a political shadow government, were pushing back. Tired of his failure to kill a simple archaeologist—make that *one slippery* archaeologist—they wanted it dropped.

Their plans to make the POTUS look bad had taken a toll on their affiliates who helped carry out their agenda. Now, down a US congressman, a tactical strike team, a friendly terrorist general, and countless other connections, they would cut their losses and move on. But he couldn't.

Pride was the only thing he had left, and no way would he let one man humiliate him.

He tipped his face to the sky. "You've taken everything from me, including my wife. Why not Michelle? Are you saving her for a grand finale?" He scooped his cellphone from the concrete—how it got there, he couldn't remember.

Then he shook the phone at the sky. There was no turning back.

"One day, it will be just you and me. But today, it's just Ray and me, and he's going to get his. You hear me?"

He stepped back into the house, shut the French door behind him, and checked the phone's battery status—31 percent.

More than enough.

He dialed the senator's number. As it rang, he shifted it to his right hand.

"Hello. Mr. Jennings?"

"Yeah, it's me. I need a favor. You're still in Chicago, right?" He scrubbed his left palm down his face. His eyes still had that half-stuck feeling.

"Uh, yes, sir. I'll be in town another week. How can I help you?" The man sounded weak, not like an authoritative senator should.

"No need to get your underwear in a wad. It's just a simple favor. You don't have to kill anyone. Today, anyway. Ha, ha, ha." His breath became short, probably from years of cigars. He wheezed a strangled cough.

"Especially if I die first."

"Are you okay, sir? You sound rough this morning."

"I suppose that would depend on who you ask." He frowned at the mirror. His reflection even spooked him. "Listen, I need you to get Fast

Larry to stake out Ray's girlfriend's house. Tell him not to startle her or do anything stupid, just check to see if she's home. That's all. Got it?"

"Fast Larry? Are you sure? I don't trust him."

"Keep an eye on him. If he messes up, let Shortman know. He'll know what to do. I've got to go." He hung up before Senator Brummengarten could answer. Then he shuffled down the hallway, scooting his feet over the oak floor. At the dark-stained handrail with floral carvings, he leaned over.

Two of his guests still sprawled out on the massive white leather sectional in the great room below.

"Good," he muttered. "I won't be the only one with a hangover."

* * * * *

New Year's Day two weeks in the mirror, Willie stopped by Marcie's Place, unable to resist the café's éclairs. Lattes and pastry in hand, she stepped back onto the frigid street. The gooey, chocolaty treat wasn't the only thing she was obsessing over lately. Her romantic obsession with DR *may* have returned once she suspected his relationship with Debbie was back on ice.

Willie became his deceased wife's best friend after they moved to Wall Lake to process their successful dig. She'd even led Gail to Jesus months before her death. Something DR might never get over her saying.

Lately, though, Willie couldn't let go of how Gail described their marriage and, more importantly, him. Never having been with a man made Willie's desires more urgent, as did her age. When he became engaged to Debbie, though, Willie struck up a friendship with his wife-to-be, tried to honor God, and pushed her needs aside.

Which led her to go out with Ryan McNeilly, DR's first cousin by marriage. Now Ryan was acting funny, as if he'd met someone new. What else could explain his long absences?

Her breath fogging around her, she knocked on DR's antiques lab door to get Ryan's attention. Time to find out what was going on.

The building with its brown-aluminum-framed window might've been a convenience store that lost its former glory. To keep gawkers from sneaking a peek, DR put heavy sheeting in the windows. Here, he received the Indian historic artifacts shipped from the dig he and Gail discovered in a

lost ancient graveyard. They spent hundreds, if not thousands, of hours preserving, cataloging, and processing the pieces.

Since his former employee assaulted Debbie, they kept the door locked for security purposes. The man, one of DR's original archaeological partners, left the dig before DR and Gail struck it big. DR hired him to come finish the work after Gail's death. Now, DR didn't trust him, and Ryan worked there.

Willie balanced the latte tray and pastry bag in one hand and cupped her other hand to the door's frosty window, the only window not covered. Inside, Ryan hunched over a counter in the middle of the shop, stuffing paper into bank bags. She strained to see. There appeared to be stacks of something on the counter, maybe cash. He was taking whatever it was out of the bags and replacing it with the paper. She knocked hard on the door.

Ryan jumped, as if startled, then turned her way. He stuffed the paper even faster. When he finished, he came and let her in. "Hi, gorgeous. What brings you out today?" His smile wobbled as he glanced over his shoulder at the table.

"I thought I'd pop in and surprise you. I brought you an éclair." She waved the goodie bag, then nodded toward the same counter. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing, just business." He took a latte and éclair. "Man, I needed this. Things are crazy here."

Was he trying to change the subject? Her reporter's mind wasn't about to let it go.

"It didn't look like nothing. Is everything all right? Whose money was that?" She tried to step around him, but he slid in front of her. So she sank back on her heels and narrowed her gaze.

"Are you okay, Ryan?"

"Yeah. Everything is great. That's DR's money—money he took from Jennings. I'm, uh, hiding some so Jennings can't find it. That's all." He shifted his stance, his skin becoming ashen. His lips squeezed tight.

"Where is everything? The place looks empty. What happened to all the artifacts?" She set the tray on the picnic table that DR brought in for such moments.

Ryan wiped his mouth after sipping the latte, probably so he wouldn't be rude. "We're about done. DR's only expecting two more crates from India. Then I'll have to find something else to do—or go back to Ireland."

He swirled the latte around in his cup. “My visa is only for working here, so I must renew it with another job or go home. I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

“Wow... What are you going to do? How much time do you have?” She cocked a hip against the table. *Am I sad? Or is this God opening a door? Could that be it? Is He finally answering my prayers?*

“Thanks for the éclair and coffee. It’s delicious, just what I needed.”

“I’m glad you like it.” The table’s hard edge bit into her skin through her leggings. “So were you going to tell me, or was I just going to find out?” Would Ryan do that—just disappear, no word, no nothing?

“Sure. Of course.” He set his coffee and éclair beside hers, pocketed his hands, and shifted his stance. “I wanted to know what my plan was first. Right now, it appears I’ll be going back to Ireland, at least for the foreseeable future.”

Why the relief? Was she that afraid of commitment?

“If I’m not going to be late getting back to the radio station, I’d better run.” She reclaimed her goodies—she’d need that éclair more than she’d thought. Then she spun toward the door, but the money on the counter haunted her on her way out. As did his weird expression, like a man caught with his hand in the cookie jar. His hug wasn’t as affectionate as she remembered their last. Was he going to run off with DR’s money?

* * * * *

Detective Shortman strained to hear between the boss’s strangled gargling. *The old man’s smoked a few too many cigars.* But the man was his source of bread and butter. Being a detective with the CPD barely paid the rent, thanks to the new mayor’s policies.

“Did I hear you right, sir? You want me to stall the raising of the *Lucky Lucie*?” He swiped at a fly that somehow managed to survive Chicago’s coldest winter in years. *Gotcha.*

“What did you say?”

“I’ll do my best, sir.” He took a piece of paper and slid the carcass into a trash bin. “There’s a lot of pressure coming from the press... and the passengers’ family members. Even with the lake half frozen, they want action.” He scanned the room for more intruders. Where there was one, more were sure to follow.

“I’m sending divers down. I don’t want anyone snooping around until I retrieve my money and a few other things. You never know what the press or thrill-seekers will try to take off a distressed vessel. All in the name of justice. The bodies stuck on the vessel aren’t going to walk off now.”

“Yes, sir. Who did you hire, anyone from Chicago?” He dropped the paper into the trash.

The phone crackled, followed by a deep, dry, hacking sound. The silence stretched, broken only by another low gag and a hiss from what must be a lack of oxygen.

“Are you okay, Mr. Jennings?”

The coughing stopped. His voice returned, muffled, but unwavering. “I’m counting on you. Don’t let me down, or I won’t be the only one struggling for air.”

The phone line went dead.

Holding the phone at arm’s length, Shortman shook his head. “I have got to do something. The old man is off his rocker and about to die. He doesn’t care who he takes down now.”

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