



8:00 p.m.

I retake my seat, preparing for the storm of questions. But there's only silence as four pairs of eyes examine me, their gazes a blend of interest and apprehension. The manila file folder shakes in my hands, and I attempt to steady them.

"On the night I visited Robert Sinclair's office," I begin, but I'm interrupted by Nick's muttered, "broke into his office."

I glance at him in exasperation but continue. "I was searching for Sly's camera, which Robert had *stolen*," I say, emphasizing the word, "I discovered this in the file cabinet. Since our last name was on the tab, I grabbed it, assuming there might be information about Sly. I stuck it in my backpack, but I forgot about it after I found the camera. When I remembered the file, I read it and, well ..." My voice trails off as I hand the folder to Sly.

She accepts the folder with the tips of her fingers as if she's frightened it might explode. Nick moves closer to her, gently placing his hand on her shoulder. She opens the file to read, and the only sound is the *tick-tick* of Grandma's clock in the dining

room. Moments later, Sly gives a strangled sob and lets the papers drop to the floor. Nick grabs them before they scatter.

Beside me, Grace and Cole move closer, an unspoken promise of protection, even though neither knows what we're facing.

Nick scans the papers, then glances up at me, his face a mask of control. "Jess, who else knows about this?"

I shake my head. "No one."

"Including us," Grace mutters, glancing at Cole in frustration.

I shift to her. "Remember, when my dad was a building inspector, he worked with Anthony Avery?"

Grace nods. "Anthony Avery, the guy who helped with Robert Sinclair's building scam."

"The same guy," Nick agrees. "And although the FBI has plenty of evidence against Sinclair, they still can't prove any crimes by Anthony Avery."

"Yet," I say.

"So, what's in the file?" Cole asks. He picks up my hand, and for the first time, I realize I'm trembling.

Nick paces the room, reminding me of the cougar we encountered earlier. "This is a report written by the girls' dad, Brian Thomas, detailing his suspicions about Anthony Avery. It accuses Avery of some serious and illegal actions. If the FBI could prove this, Anthony Avery would be in prison today."

"That's not the worst of it." Sly's voice cracks and tears gather, spilling down her pale cheeks.

"Right." Nick's grim tone and clenched jaw tell me he's read the entire letter. Everything.

"Mr. Thomas explains he was planning to wait before he sent the report, hoping to gather additional evidence. But something happened that concerned him enough to send it sooner."

Nick lifts Daddy's letter and reads, "Although I've tried to be discreet in my investigation, I'm concerned Avery suspects I

know about his crimes. I encountered him at a building site today, and he made a statement that I took as a threat. As we walked around the area, I stumbled over some discarded lumber, and Avery said, ‘Be very careful where you step, Brian. Accidents happen every day. You won’t be any good to your family if you’re injured.’”

Grace gasps and Cole tightens his grip on my hand.

Nick continues to read. “Although his words might sound innocuous, his tone and expression carried a definite warning. I must share the attached documents without delay to protect myself and my family.”

I study my sister, who is staring at something only she can see. “Sly? You saw it, didn’t you?” I ask.

At her nod, I move to kneel beside her chair. She lays her head on my shoulder, her tears soaking into my sweater.

“Saw what?” Grace whispers.

I swallow and shift to face our friends. “The date of the letter.” I struggle to make the words sound matter-of-fact but fail. “Daddy wrote that letter two days before he and Mamma died in the car accident.”

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“I DON’T UNDERSTAND.” Sly has been repeating those exact words for the past twenty minutes. She’s not alone—none of us understands.

Nick continues to examine the papers. Besides Daddy’s letters, the file holds receipts and a few photos. Remembering the pictures Sly took last month, I realize she unknowingly continued Daddy’s investigation. Her photographs of Robert Sinclair and Anthony Avery led to Sinclair’s arrest.

Grace sounds puzzled. “Why would Mr. Thomas send a report like that to Robert Sinclair?”

“He didn’t,” Nick says. “He addressed the report to,” he flips

through the pages and reads, “Clarence Delgado, the President of the Beaverhead County Building Inspector’s Commission. But I don’t understand why Robert Sinclair had it in his files.”

Nick turns to Sly and me. “Would you two be all right with me taking these papers to the FBI? This information could be the piece of the puzzle they need.”

When Nick says, “FBI,” I shiver a little. I have a love/hate relationship with the FBI. They saved my life last month (love), but later low-key yelled at me for making that necessary (hate). But while I was with them, I became intrigued by the agents’ energy and commitment to their work. My sentiments about the FBI are complicated, but I know if anyone can solve this, they can.

“I don’t understand,” Grace echoes Sly’s earlier words. “Your parents died in a car accident when they skidded on a slippery highway.” Grace’s eyes apologize for even bringing up such a terrible memory.

“True,” Nick answers before I can. “But it’s worth investigating deeper, now that we’ve discovered this information.” Nick stands and pulls Sly with him. “The timing could be a coincidence,” he continues in a tone that says ‘unlikely.’ “But we need to settle the question.”

As Nick and Sly walk to his squad car, I face Cole and Grace.

“Anthony Avery and Robert Sinclair killed my parents.” I barely recognize my voice as I grit the words and swipe away angry tears.

“Jess.” Grace joins me on the couch, rubbing my arm in a reassuring gesture. I try not to shrug her away, but I don’t want comfort. I want revenge.

“Jess,” Cole says my name too, but his tone is a caution. “We don’t know that they caused the crash. And it’s dangerous to make allegations without proof only the FBI can provide.” He emphasizes the word only, and I realize he’s advising me to stay out of the investigation. Let the professionals do their job.

“If we’d left it to the FBI, Sly would be in jail,” I say, ignoring my previous awe at their efficiency. I stand to pace around the room with increased urgency. My hands wrap around my arms as I struggle to control myself. From what? Flying apart?

Cole’s muscular arms envelop me, drawing me close. “Hey, take a breath,” he whispers, and I gulp, recognizing a smart idea when I hear one. He pulls away, peering into my eyes. “Jess, I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now. Fury, confusion, hurt.”

The tears I’d been fighting earlier win the battle and spill down my cheeks. When he sees them, Cole pulls me back to him and holds me for a long minute. The tightness eases from my body, and I sniff. “I need a tissue.”

A feminine hand inserts itself between us, waving a wad of tissues. We pull apart, surprised to remember Grace is still in the room.

Cole smiles. “Grace to the rescue.”

“Again.” We laugh, saying the word in unison, and the tension eases.

The creaking of the porch steps alerts us that Sly is returning, and Cole and I separate as she enters the living room. She and Nick must have had a similar conversation, complete with the tears.

“This is the strategy,” she announces. “Nick will give the file to the FBI for their investigation. He’ll also examine the police record from the night of Daddy and Mamma’s accident.” Her voice breaks a little at these words, but then she says, “Nick asked me to deliver a message to you, Jess.”

I perk up, anticipating an assignment.

“He said, and I’m quoting him, ‘Stay. Out. Of. Trouble.’” Sly spaces each word, and I can hear Nick’s voice in the message.

My cheeks flush, but I shrug. “Don’t worry. I’ve learned my lesson. If they stick with it, I’ll let the authorities handle the investigation. For now.” Identical frowns crease three foreheads

as Sly, Cole, and Grace take in my words. But before they challenge me, I add, “Besides, I have a new project.”

“What’s that?” Cole asks.

“I need to catch a cougar.”