

CHAPTER 5

I had decided to dedicate my Sunday morning to the Westbridge church and cemetery and the grave of my mother and grandmother. It had been the first place I'd visited after getting off the plane at Heathrow three weeks earlier. My grandmother had recently died and she had been my only real connection to this country. It seemed fitting she'd be the first person I'd visit when I returned.

The rain had abated slightly and the low sun had come out from behind a large brooding cloud. The walls of the quaint sixteenth century church were quilted with lichen and crows perched in rows like silent sentinels along the bare branches of the trees surrounding the ancient building.

The back grounds housed a multitude of small pots dedicated to the departed. Lines of gold inscribed black granite tablets were surrounded by the skeletal boughs of trees. In amongst the diminutive uniform monuments stood one imposing marble angel, weather-rippled wings, robe falling in frozen waves, and a face that seemed poised somewhere between pity and indifference.

The name next to my grandmother's on the angel was her only daughter, Elizabeth Wolfe, my mother. She had died during childbirth. That child had been me. My grandmother had stepped in and taken the place of the mother I never knew, and my relationship with my father had effectively ended ten minutes after I had drawn my first breath and my mother had taken her last. I hadn't seen my father since he left me in Hong Kong shortly after I had been sentenced to two years for attempted murder. That same gang fight had been the reason I remained in Hong Kong as part of a triad organization. Another gang

conflict seventeen years later had been the reason I had needed to leave.

Sitting beside me on a small bench before the angel was Alexei Koslov, as always, immaculately turned out in a brown full length coat beneath which he wore a black suit, white shirt and black tie. His hands were folded on a silver tipped cane, veins like maps of frozen rivers. When he breathed, it came with a soft drag like a saw through wet timber. Despite being in his eighth decade, he still had a full head of thick white hair. The vicious arc of a scar carved a path from his left temple, dissecting the edge of his left eye and finishing on his cheek bone. It was the type of scar that made people stare. Up close, it looked like a white lightning bolt that had been trapped under his skin. As kids, he'd scared the shit out of us.

Alexei was a Russian immigrant who had come to the country with his granddaughter Katherine thirty years ago. At the time, our juvenile imaginations had conjured up an alternative history of a cold war spy, or the archetypal Bond villain. The opposite was true. He was a gentle man who had brought up his granddaughter alone.

"Thank you again for this wonderful angel, Richard," Alexei said.

"It was my pleasure," I said. "It's the least they deserve."

"I'm not sure the vicar approves though," Alexie said, chuckling to himself. "Now everyone wants one. You shouldn't waste your grandmother's inheritance on such things."

"The donation didn't exactly come out of the inheritance," I told him.

It had come from the money I had taken from Finnigan on our one and only confrontation. I had given a portion of it as a donation to persuade the vicar to go against church policy and allow the angel to replace the two tiny original pots.

"The angel means he doesn't have a leaky roof any longer," I said. I neglected to tell Alexei that the roof hadn't leaked in the first place but Calbert Leon had smiled his shark

teeth smile and persuasively advised the vicar to allow the monument suggesting that a leaky roof would be the least of his problems.

Alexei had been my grandmother's second husband. I had grown up with his granddaughter Katherine but had lost contact with her when my father moved us to Japan just after my eighth birthday. She was a kick ass lawyer now, although the kick ass part of that description had been supplied by Katherine herself.

Alexei's gaze lingered on the angel's open hands. "Angels are protectors," he murmured. "But some are also warriors. Perhaps that is what is meant for you, Richard."

I smiled, wistfully, "I'm no angel," I said.

Alexei nodded. "It's hard to trace a peaceful path when you come from a life of violence."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"I too know this path," Alexei said. He stared down into his hands, twisting the wedding ring on his finger. "I fought in the war for Mother Russia."

"I didn't know," I said. "Katherine never said anything."

"She doesn't know. It's not something I speak of." The wind moved through the trees and he waited for it to pass. "I was young, only fourteen, just a child soldier when I was thrown into that world of violence. My innocence was quickly stripped from me and I'm not proud of the person I became. But it was necessary, you know, to survive."

I understood a little of what he was saying. "What did you do?" I asked, regretting it as soon as the question left my mouth.

"What all soldiers have to do when their country is being ravaged, their families butchered." His voice thinned. "There is a price for coming home, even if you never really do."

The sun faltered, slid back behind a cloud. The garden lost some of its colours. I understood a little of what he was saying. There are things a man can try to walk away from, but those things had a habit of sticking to you like a shadow.

I started to notice him wince with pain when he moved, small contractions, a shadow passing over his face. He caught me watching and blinked it away as if it were nothing.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"The aches and pains of an old man," he said. "I Just need to walk it off. Let us take a stroll around this garden."

We left the angel and walked up a curved path past a tiny pond. Sunday had the hush of a theatre just before the curtain. For the first five minutes, we said nothing.

"Have you spoken to your father since you've been back?" Alexei asked at last.

"No."

"I just thought with you mending your relationship with your brother you would reach out to your father."

"No doubt Alan will have told him what happened with my niece," I said. "But I'm not inclined to perform maintenance on that particular bridge."

He turned and stared at me. "You have come back to make a new life here, yes?"

I shrugged. "That's the plan."

"How are you settling in?"

"Good," I said. "I have some money now, with the inheritance, and Katherine is giving me bits and pieces of work from her legal firm. And she's letting me stay rent free in her apartment."

"Tell me about your work for Katherine," he asked.

"Some surveillance, some legwork," I said. "Watching people with secrets and finding

people who don't want to be found."

"And when you find them?"

"I give her the information. She does the rest."

"And you?" he said, the question gentle. "Are you still looking for the boy who left us all those years ago? The boy your grandmother loved?"

"I think I buried him in Hong Kong," I said.

"Be careful, Richard. Graves are not prisons. Things tend to climb out."

Somewhere behind us the church bells began ringing, calling to the faithful.

His mood lifted briefly. "It is my birthday next week, Richard," he said. "I have a little gathering every year. It was just me and Katherine for many years until I married your grandmother, Mary. Then last year Stephen joined us when he began his relationship with my granddaughter. I would be pleased if you would join us. You are part of my family now."

"Of course," I said. "I'd be happy to."

He smiled and put a hand to my shoulder. "Good. Very good." Then, after a moment: "A family dinner is a kind of truce where we lay down our weapons."

Maybe it was Alexei's way of trying to be a peacemaker between me and Katherine's fiancée Stephen. Our relationship to date had been a rocky one.

We stood a while longer, watching a pair of boys kick a ball against a low wall. Alexei pressed his hand against his side.

"You sure you're all right?" I asked again.

"Do not worry," he said. "It is only the cold seeping into these old creaky bones."

We had come full circle and once more stood before the angel

"Next week then," Alexei said. "Five o'clock. I will tell stories. Stephen will sit and brood. Katherine will dote on me and we will all eat and drink too much, and another year will slip

by.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said.

As we turned away, I glanced over my shoulder. The marble angel was still there, head tipped, hands open, almost invitingly. Alexei’s cane ticked against the paving, a metronome for something that was already counting down.