

BIG SHOT

A LAUGH-OUT-LOUD COZY MYSTERY

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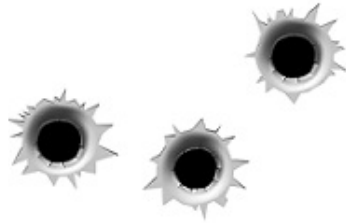
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CHAPTER ONE



JUST TO BE CLEAR, it wasn't my fault.

It wasn't my responsibility either. But when your client slips you a mickey, there's a principle involved. Though after falling down a flight of hotel stairs, I wasn't entirely sure what that principle was anymore.

I staggered to my feet, lost the rest of my dinner in a potted palm, and careened through the door into the hotel lobby.

Guests turned to stare, and why not? My blond hair fountained out of a high, pre-makeup-removal ponytail. Camo pajamas and flip-flops completed my tipsy party-girl look.

I staggered deeper into the chic gray and white lobby. Lights glinted off the chrome chandeliers, and I winced at their dizzying starbursts.

My fist clenched on my phone. Or at least I thought they did. My fingers were a little numb. But I'd expelled most of the drugs, and I was going to catch my wayward client, Toomas Koppel, and surveil him until it hurt. Him. Hurt *him*.

That wasn't ego. I was well aware of my many flaws. But I also knew who I was and what I was. I was very, very good at surveillance.

Plus, I was an optimist. Personal protection agents, otherwise known as bodyguards, frequently were. We liked

to think we were tough and cynical, since our job was to watch for trouble. But you didn't get into this business if you didn't think you and your client would survive it. Maybe that was why I'd been snookered by mine. I still had no idea why he'd drugged me, but I was going to find out.

I pushed through the hotel's revolving door, tripped over my own feet, and fell flat on the sidewalk.

San Francisco was a beautiful city in the summer and particularly tonight. Fog coiled low above the streets and blurred the outlines of the elegant buildings like something out of a Sam Spade novel. But not even Sam Spade would voluntarily lie on a San Francisco sidewalk.

A wary doorman in green approached. "Mm, may I help you, Ms. Sommerland?"

"Where'd he go?" It was the first time I'd tried out my voice since I'd been drugged, and it was embarrassingly slurry. I clambered to my feet and rubbed my bare arms, chilled by a gust of fog. It blotted out the stars, and ghostly wisps reached with coiling arms to the street.

"Who?" the burly doorman asked.

"The guy I was with. Toomas Koppel."

He pointed to the darkened street. My black Hummer glided past.

"Son of a..." I gaped at my swiftly vanishing vehicle. Shaking myself, I whirled on a valet. "How'd he get my car?" My Hummer was less than a year old, the first treat I'd had since my divorce. The thought of Koppel driving it made me ill.

The green-coated valet edged backward.

I exhaled, trying to get a grip. "Why did you give him my car?" I asked in a level voice.

"He had your room number," the valet sputtered and raised his hands in a helpless gesture. "You two were together."

My lips pinched. The entire hotel thought I was Koppel's mistress. I didn't *look* like much of a mistress. I'm a beanpole—too tall and too much lean muscle. But I'd been dressed to kill on the few occasions we'd been seen together. There were also our adjoining suites.

I scanned the street for a cab.

“Ms. Sommerland?” The bellhop pointed at my feet.

Red yarn trailed from the revolving door to one of my flip-flops. The yarn was the remains of a sweater I’d been knitting, and my left eyelid twitched. I’d been working on that sweater for *weeks*.

A silver-haired couple in formalwear emerged from a yellow taxi beneath the concrete awning. I yanked the yarn free and jogged erratically toward them.

The male half of the couple stuck his head in the open, front passenger-side door. He fumbled with his wallet and coughed, his mercury silk scarf dangling. “I know I’ve got a fifty in here somewhere...”

I squeezed through the open door and sat beside the cabbie. “I’ll pay it. Follow that Hummer.”

“But young lady, it’s nearly fifty dollars,” the man said. Judging by the suit, I guessed he’d come from a symphony or opera—both popular events on a Friday night.

The black-haired driver eyed me. “No one rides in front. And I don’t go anywhere until I get paid.”

I pulled my credit card out of the slipcover on the back of my phone and handed it to the cabbie. “Use this.”

“I insist on paying.” A hundred dollar bill dropped from his wallet to the sidewalk.

I leaned out and picked it up, handed it to the man. “Seriously,” I ground out. “I got this.” Straightening in the seat, I turned to the driver. “Let’s go.”

The cabbie’s jaw stuck out mulishly. “Not with you up front.”

“Fine,” I snarled, and stepped from the cab.

The old man shook his head. “But—”

“Enjoy your stay in San Francisco.” I hopped into the back and slammed the door. The cab smelled like pine freshener. “Now can we go?”

“Go where?” the driver asked.

“Follow that...” My Hummer was gone, and I bit back a curse. “Hold on.” I pulled up the anti-theft tracker on my phone. “Go two blocks east and make a left.”

He pulled from the curb. “So,” the cabbie said brightly. “You’re following someone?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“A client.” My client might be a blackmailer and all-around jerk, but he still got confidentiality. At least until he got to court.

I couldn’t wait.

The taxi sped up. “What sort of client do you have to follow?”

“The kind who stole my car.”

His shoulders twitched. “Ouchy.”

I hadn’t caught a whiff of trouble around Koppel until now. What was he up to? My stomach tumbled unpleasantly. Was this a run for the border? It made sense. Why else would he reject protection from the feds? Aside from the fact that he hated them with a red-hot passion.

I checked my phone. “Turn left at the next light.” It glowed green, turned to yellow.

“I don’t see a Hummer.” He shot through it and past rows of Victorians, partially hidden behind gloomy cypresses. “All I get are taillights.”

“Slow down. I don’t want him to see us.” It was after eleven, but that didn’t mean much in this city. Koppel was driving too fast, weaving in and out of traffic. If he scratched my new car, I was billing him double.

“And you’re getting too close again.” I glanced down at my phone.

“Are you some sort of PI?”

I snorted. *As if.* “No. Personal protection.”

“Uh, what now?”

“A bodyguard.” Technically, my specialty was countersurveillance, watching for trouble from afar while the client’s close protection team took care of any trouble that gets close. I was the early warning system. Tonight, that system had been compromised.

“Sure, sure...” His head bobbed. “You travel a lot?”

“Yes.” I studied my phone. “Take the next right, at the church.”

“Must be hard on relationships.”

My gaze narrowed in the rearview mirror. My relationships were just fine. I didn't have any. And after my divorce eighteen months back, a little distance seemed like a good thing. I obviously couldn't trust myself to make good decisions in that arena.

He cleared his throat. "Why are you wearing pajamas?" he asked. "It doesn't seem professional."

A mini disco ball jiggled from the rearview mirror. I had to pick a critic, a disco fan, *and* a chatty Cathy? It wasn't my fault I was in pajamas. My usual dress code was business casual. "Can you just drive? And turn right at the light."

"Looks like he's heading to the bridge," he said. Horns blared. "Hey, I think a Hummer just changed lanes up ahead. That yours?"

To the Golden Gate? Then Koppel wasn't heading to Mexico. *To Canada?* "That's mine. Hang back. We don't need him to see he's being followed." The cabbie slowed in the traffic—still heavy even this late at night—and a horn blared behind us. "You're still too close."

The taxi slowed. "Lady, as car chases go, this ain't very exciting."

"It is for me," I said, grim.

We followed the blinking light on my phone all the way to Sonoma, where the light stopped moving.

My pulse accelerated. *Gotcha*. "Slow down."

I checked the clock on my phone. It was almost midnight, and we were nearing Sonoma's town square. The streetlamps glowed dully in the fog.

The cabbie sighed heavily. "If I go any slower, I'll get a ticket."

I bounced my heel. "My car's stopped. It's five blocks up and another two over."

We drove past low brick shops, arched windows dark, potted topiaries bracketing their doors.

"Over in which direction?" the cabbie asked.

"Right. Turn here." We were heading into the business district. Was Koppel meeting someone?

I switched to my phone's video camera. Slouching down, I raised it just above the door frame. That familiar adrenaline rush flowed through my veins. "I got you, you son of a—"

The cabbie cleared his throat. "Uh, I don't think you're getting your car back." The cab glided to a stop.

I jerked upright in my seat and sucked in a breath.

My Hummer was accordioned against the grill of a tomato truck. Tomatoes and pieces of scrap metal lay scattered across the Sonoma street.

I swore and leaped from the cab, my flip-flops crunching across broken glass. "Call nine-one-one," I shouted over one shoulder.

The door to the tomato truck snicked open. Its driver tumbled out, his seatbelt still hooked around one shoulder. It snapped free when his feet hit the reddened pavement.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" I gripped his bicep, steadying the man and held up three fingers. No bleeding. No visible wounds aside from the lump forming on his temple. The cab of the truck itself was dented but not badly damaged. The seatbelt had saved him, but he'd need to be checked out by the paramedics.

The truck driver groaned. "Three."

"You win. Help's on the way," I said. "Don't move. You're going to be fine." I squeezed his shoulder, hurried to my SUV, and started to reach through my broken driver's side window.

Abruptly, I withdrew my hand. My fingers curled inward. Toomas Koppel was dead. There was no question as to how. He *hadn't* been wearing his seatbelt.

The street smelled like burned rubber and marinara, and my stomach twisted. I focused on the scattered tomatoes instead of the car and what was inside it.

I'd never look at spaghetti the same way again.

The cabbie appeared at my elbow and whistled. "Damn." He shook his head. "I called nine-one-one."

I nodded and blinked rapidly. I'd known Koppel was a horrible human being from the jump. But after three weeks

of building rapport and pretending to be the jerk's friend, my subconscious had gotten a different message.

I returned to the truck driver. The lump on his head had, if possible, grown bigger. So... *possible concussion*. I sat him against a rear wheel of his truck so he wouldn't fall.

The police arrived. I gave a young officer my statement. The cop looked at me oddly and told me to wait.

I walked across the street and called my boss, Buck Jackson. Terse, I explained the situation. The fact that my boss also happened to be my ex-husband had absolutely nothing to do with the edge to my voice.

"You were chasing him?" he shouted.

I jerked the phone away from my ear and winced. "I was *following* him, in a yellow cab—"

"Tell me you didn't panic him into speeding."

I stiffened. "Of course, I didn't. Koppel had no idea I was on his trail. I was following the tracker on my car."

Buck exhaled. "Okay, okay. Sorry. I know you wouldn't spook him. Now I want you to get back in that cab—is it still there?"

I looked across the street. The cabby was sitting on the hood of his yellow cab and talking to a cop. "Looks like the driver's being questioned." *Again*. A wisp of fog twined around a streetlamp. When there was a fatality, the cops liked to take their time. That was the way it should be. So why was my stomach jumping? A crow alighted in a nearby elm tree and cawed.

"Alice?" Buck was saying. "You still there?"

I pressed the phone closer to my ear. "Yeah." But I didn't *feel* here. The early morning mist gave the scene a dreamlike quality. None of this seemed real. For a moment, I wasn't even sure if I was real.

Was I in shock? I didn't think so. But I'd been in this business for ten years. I'd never lost a client before, even one who'd revolted me, even one I wasn't physically protecting.

"Koppel should never have been able to *get* to that valet, let alone get your car," Buck said. "Where was his other protection team?"

“Down for the night is my guess. They probably thought he was in bed.” *With me.*

Buck snorted.

“We knew he didn’t trust them,” I continued, “or he wouldn’t have hired us—your firm.”

Toomas had had his own team of heavies surrounding him. And if anything looked off, I was to phone Koppel, not his team. It wasn’t the way it was supposed to work, and my shoulders curled inward. I should never have taken this assignment. But Buck had asked, and I’d been trying to prove... What? That we were really okay? Just friends? No biggie?

“Are his guys at the crash scene yet?” Buck asked.

“No,” I said, drawing the word out.

“Why weren’t you watching him?”

I sucked in my cheeks and didn’t respond, let the silence extend. Buck cursed, long and colorfully. It was an impressive display of verbiage for a man who rarely cracked a book. But like me, he’d had a lot of practice in the military. We hadn’t met there—I might have been smarter about things if we had. We’d met on assignment in Marrakesh. People do all sorts of stupid things there. But at least we knew we could work together.

“Why?” he asked. “Why’d he run?”

Heart leaden, I watched three firemen in canvas coats extract the slender body from my SUV. “Probably to prove he could.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I should have seen it coming. Koppel had been arrogant and psychotically confident. It’s why he’d relied on me and his own team rather than taking up the feds’ offer of protection. Of *course* he’d think he could ditch his protection.

But a man was dead. A man I’d failed to protect, a man the justice system had needed alive, even if he was a scumbag. *Because* he was a scumbag. My stomach rolled again.

Across the street, the tomato-truck driver rubbed the back of his neck.

Buck groaned. “This is a disaster. Is the press there yet?”

My jaw clenched. *For God's sake.* Who cared about the press? "No." If I kept to single syllables, I wouldn't yell at him.

Though clusters of people with cell phones snapped pictures of the proceedings. And of me. It was tough to look inconspicuous when you were five-ten and wearing camo pajamas.

"And you gave your statement to the police?"

"Yes."

"Then get out of there," he said. "ASAP."

I blinked, certain I'd misheard. "Excuse me?"

"Get. Out. Of. There. They're going to pin this on you."

"The police? They've got the truck driver in custody, but judging by the skid marks, Toomas was driving like a maniac. My cabbie and I didn't get here until it was too late—"

"Finish with the police. Go back to your hotel. I'll let the FBI know where you are. They'll want all your surveillance footage. Don't edit it down to what you think they want. Give them everything. Then lie low, go home."

Another agonizing silence stretched between us. We both knew I didn't have a home to go to. I'd been living out of suitcases since the divorce, throwing myself into one job after another, recreating the stale, globe-trotting existence that had ended my marriage. And I guess trying to prove it had been worth it.

Buck cleared his throat. "There's something else you should know. Did Koppel, um, talk about his family?"

"A little. He said they were estranged."

"Estranged. Good word. Yeah."

Threads of panic squeezed past my helpless anger. "You're stalling. Why are you stalling?"

"So, his family... They're uh, mafia. Estonian mafia."

I burst out laughing.

"I'm not kidding," he said.

I wiped my eyes. "I know. I mean, Koppel told me. But he didn't take them seriously."

"Well, I do," Buck said. "And his team isn't going to want to take the blame."

Realization chilled my blood. No, they wouldn't want to take the blame. They'd want to blame me, the odd woman out, the person who *wasn't* part of their team. And I'd been first on the crash scene.

Plus, his close protection team didn't know about me. Koppel had insisted I stay undercover. But I couldn't be certain he'd kept that part of the deal.

"Take a vacation," Buck was saying.

I dragged my attention back to the conversation. "A what?"

"Is there somewhere you can lie low for a while? We need to keep you out of the public eye."

Hot anger flushed from my heart to my scalp, but my only movement was the tightening of my hand on my phone. "We lost a client. Forget the public eye."

"You *always* do this. You never took my company..."

Seriously, I finished in my mind.

He drew a deep breath. "Toomas Koppel was the key witness in the biggest underage girls and blackmail ring since Epstein. Everybody who's anybody wanted him dead. And now Koppel is dead, and the undercover BG who was supposed to be watching him *somehow* let him steal her car and get himself killed."

Since a lot of guys in protection found the term *bodyguard* mildly irritating in the industry, BG had become the approved substitute. "But—"

"No one's going to believe that. They're going to think it was murder, and you were in on it."

A news van with a satellite dish on the hood pulled up beside a store that sold over a hundred different kinds of olive oil.

I shook my head. "But the police—"

"Aren't you listening? I don't care what the local police think. No one cares what the police think. In about thirty minutes the rest of the world is going to think you're a conspirator to murder."

I turned away from the news van. *Maybe in less than thirty.* I rubbed the back of my neck, my stomach tightening.

"There's got to be somewhere you can go," he muttered.

“Put me on another assignment, maybe in Russia...” Or maybe not Russia. The Estonian mafia might be small potatoes, but they had ties to the Russians. “Latin America?”

He laughed hollowly. “An assignment? Don’t you get it? No one’s going to want a BG who took a payoff and let their client get killed.”

My legs wobbled. I braced my hand on an ornate lamp post. A *payoff*? No one who mattered would believe that. I had friends in the industry, a reputation. “I didn’t—”

“I know you didn’t, but no one else is going to believe you just let him borrow your car.” I could actually hear his quote marks around the word *borrow*.

“But it’s not *true*.” Despite the cool fog, sweat broke out on my brow. “I wasn’t even his close protection. No one expected me to shove him out of the way of a bullet.”

“So?” Buck demanded. “What does truth have to do with anything?”

My mind raced. I could fix this. There was always a solution, even if I hated it.

I swallowed, closed my eyes. “What about Afghanistan?” I’d gone there once to do a security training and nearly got dismembered by an angry mob with rusted farm implements. I’d gotten my client out, but it had soured me on the country.

But Afghanistan was the place that failures went to launder resumés the way the mafia laundered money. No one knew what went on in Afghanistan—they were too scared to check. Resumés came out clean.

He huffed. “Are you nuts?”

“I’ve worked there before.”

“Yeah and look how that went.”

I swallowed. There was one other place, but these days, it made Afghanistan look like a day spa. “Sudan?”

“No.” He paused. “You’re still gawking at the crime scene, aren’t you?”

“Crash scene, not crime scene.” I strode away from said scene and down a tree-lined street. “And no. I’m moving.”

“There’s nowhere to put you...” He trailed off as if he’d just gotten an idea. “Nowhere...”

I stopped short beside a mailbox. He couldn't think... "You can't be serious."

"It makes sense. I'm the only one who knows where you're really from. It's enough to stall the press for a couple weeks, and you can get there fast. It's only a few hours from the crime scene."

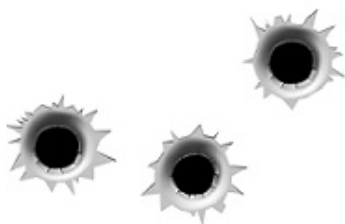
"Crash scene." I strode past a clothing boutique.

"And I'll know where to find you," he said, sounding more cheerful.

Nowhere. I shook myself. Okay. This wouldn't be so bad. All I had to do was lie low. How hard could that be? This would blow over, and my career would get back to normal.

But that was my stupid optimism showing. I had no idea what the real problem was. The accident had set something in motion much worse than I could ever have imagined.

CHAPTER TWO



I WAS IN NEVADA early the next day. An illuminated billboard flashed past on the dark, mountain highway:

BIG THINGS IN NOWHERE

Despite the disaster that was my life, I smiled. A tangle of my blond hair escaped the cracked window of my rented SUV. I clawed it back inside and rolled up the window.

Every state has a Nowhere. Forgotten towns with empty storefronts, their only citizens old-timers with nowhere better to go.

Plus, my brother, Charlie.

It had been two years since I'd been back. That was too long, and I wasn't proud of my absence, though I was fairly sure Charlie would forgive me for that, or for showing up on his doorstep without calling. But there hadn't been time, and it was too early now, and he was a better human being than I was.

I crested the Sierras. A yellow, Bigfoot Crossing sign beside a tower of granite boulders flashed past. I frowned.

Did I really need to hide? The FBI, San Francisco *and* Sonoma PDs had agreed it wasn't my fault. The cause of death had been a tomato truck and reckless driving.

But I went over Friday night again in my head, searching for mistakes. Taking the job had been mistake number one.

But Buck had asked.

And now he was being overly cautious, sending me into hiding. There was no way this could rebound on his company.

I squinted into the rising sun, my hands clenching and unclenching on the wheel of the SUV.

This would blow over. Buck and I would do an after-action review, figure out what went right and wrong. We'd move forward.

Soon there'd be a new protection assignment, and I'd vanish somewhere slightly more glamorous. Ethiopia. Kazakhstan. Baku. Because my career *would* get back to normal. It had to.

I didn't have anything else.

My chest tightened. I'd never lost a client before, either.

I drove through a black-rock canyon, and I knew every twist and boulder. The tension in my muscles loosened. *Home.*

I passed another billboard.

DON'T MISS THE BIG THINGS IN NOWHERE

Bemused, I drove on.

The town had great hiking trails, but the only thing *big* was the old silver mine. There'd been some talk of turning it into a tourist attraction. Maybe they'd actually done it.

I slowed, rounding the final bend. The tops of Nowhere's old-west brick buildings came into sight above the pines. A punch of longing surprised me.

I'd stayed away too long. Sure it was small and dying, but Nowhere had been home.

Nowhere, where nothing and no one changed. It had been a place I'd had to escape, to break free from, to break out of. It had been five years since my father's death and twenty years since I'd first left after graduating high school. Now I was back.

I turned onto Main Street, passing a scattering of neat Victorians. Back to Nowhere, where nothing and no one changed—

My jaw slackened. I gave a slow, disbelieving head shake. My SUV glided to a halt at the four-way stop.

Okay, something had changed. And just like the billboards had said, it was big.

Ahead and on my right, a giant coffee pot towered over the Sagebrush Café. The pot was in the Scandinavian style, with a stylized blue bird on the front.

Mechanically, my head swiveled left, toward the park across from the café where my brother and I had spent our youths. Its basketball court and swing sets had vanished. Now, pastel mushrooms and flowers the size of small trees sprouted from the manicured lawn. A Japanese-style wooden fence ribboned past a gravel path.

A horn blared. I glanced in the rearview mirror and sketched an apology wave to the red Tesla behind me. Letting up on the brake, I let the SUV roll forward.

Tires screeching, the Tesla passed my rental.

I pulled to the curb in front of the café and stepped from my car, a Mitsubishi SUV that I still hadn't mastered. Baffled, I crossed Main Street to the mushroom park. Pine trees towered behind the mushrooms.

The mushrooms, the flowers, were taller than me. I was a child again, when I knew the world was full of mystery waiting for me to explore.

Whoosh.

I leapt backward, but not fast enough to avoid the park's sprinklers, sputtering to life. Water droplets darkened the hem of my blue travel slacks. I had a lot of professional travel clothes—stretchy and tough to wrinkle.

"Aaaah!" A person in a white-rabbit suit wailed and raced past on the sidewalk.

I rubbed the back of my head. "No, this isn't strange at all."

Across the street, three beefy young men in over-priced hiking gear lounged against the Tesla, parked in front of a stationary shop, and laughed. Perversely, watching three jerks laugh made me feel better. They'd seen the rabbit too. I wasn't hallucinating.

The giant rabbit raced across Main Street and vanished behind an enormous green-and-white can of peas. It stood on the other side of a narrow alley between the park and a

four-story brick building that used to be an old cannery. Even when I was a kid the place had been abandoned.

I looked at the giant mushrooms. The giant coffeepot. The giant peas where the rabbit had disappeared. Edging off the lawn and onto the cracked sidewalk, I gazed south down Main Street.

An odd, flamingo-pink bubble nosed past the top of a building toward the end of the road. Were hot air balloon rides a thing in Nowhere now too?

Slowly, I walked past the cannery. The old-timey brick structures from Nowhere's heyday as a silver mining town were still there.

I scanned the street for more changes. The feed store was gone, replaced by a knitting shop, and my heart gave a joyful hop. Nowhere had a knit store? In its window, beside colorful displays of yarn and knitwear, a sign proclaimed:

KNITWITS

WORLD'S BIGGEST BALL OF YARN

COME INSIDE AND MARVEL!

I kept walking. The pink bubble swelled. As I walked closer, I could see it was tipped with black... I reached the end of the building obscuring the object and stumbled to a halt, my skin tingling.

On the corner of Town Hall's wide lawn, a lawn flamingo three stories high stood.

Hands on my hips, I turned in place. This *was* Nowhere. Or maybe an alternate-reality Nowhere. I swayed. *Could* we be living in a simulation?

No. That *would* be crazy. I laughed nervously.

The flamingo squinted down at me. Whoever had developed the giant art must have decided you can never get too much of a good thing, because Big Things were everywhere.

I crossed the street to the bowling alley. Its unlit sign promised the world's largest bowling pin inside. Returning in the direction I'd come, I wandered past the world's biggest winged corkscrew, standing in front of a wine store.

Experimentally, I lifted one of the corkscrew's wings. The worm turned smoothly.

"Good God." You could kill someone with this thing. If they laid down beneath the rim and let you.

I kept walking. All the shops were closed at seven AM. A spot between my shoulder blades heated, the flamingo's gaze following me. Shaking myself, I turned the corner, walking down an alley, and explored more of my old hometown.

All the big art—if you could call it that—seemed to be on Main Street. On the streets behind it, the two-story buildings were boarded up, their windows covered in paper.

Main Street was like a massive old-west false front. Behind its facade, Nowhere was still dying. I wouldn't say I was surprised to see it. I was surprised by how depressed the sight made me.

I returned to town hall and retraced my steps, taking more time to study the details of the changes. A sign in the cannery's windows promised rental spaces coming soon and the site of a new art center.

My gaze clouded. Nowhere had never been an artsy town. We'd had a rodeo and a cannery. Both of those had gone away, and then Nowhere had just had people, commuting to work in Reno, forty minutes away.

I stopped in front of the giant can. A small brass sign off to one side proclaimed:

WORLD'S LARGEST CAN OF PEAS

I laughed shortly. "Of course it is." Then I looked around to make sure no one had seen me talking to myself.

There was another sign, high in the cannery's second story window. I stepped backward onto the soft earth around the can of peas for a better look. My low heel caught on something, and I stumbled backward.

Normally, this wouldn't have been an issue. I was fairly light on my feet. But a howling mass of gray fur flew around the corner of the building at the same moment. I threw up my hands to protect myself and thudded into something hard and muscular.

Powerful arms wrapped around my chest. And since my hands were protecting my face, the arms grabbed a very sensitive spot. Two sensitive spots, actually.

“Watch it,” a masculine voice rumbled.

I jerked away, and he released me. Embarrassed and indignant, I whirled and glared into a pair of green eyes full of mirth.

My gaze moved upward to his dark, curling hair. For the first time since the accident, I felt like I was in the real world. He was *real*.

He was also at least six-foot-two, because he was four inches taller than me. He looked like the Greek god of war—not the Ares from the marble statues, the one from that old TV show, *Xena, Warrior Princess* (my hero). The effect was in no way diminished by his white t-shirt and jeans stained at the knees.

“There are easier ways to get to know me,” he said.

“I wasn’t—there was a gray dog...” I looked around. The dog was gone. “He must have run off.”

Maybe behind the can of peas the man had just rounded. I might have been a little off my game, but I wouldn’t have missed a man like him walking down the sidewalk. He had to be the best-looking man in Nowhere. Granted, with a population Nowhere’s size, he wouldn’t have a whole lot of competition.

He raised a brow. “Sure there was. And you’re supposed to stay off the grass.” He pointed between my sneakers.

I looked at the bare earth we were both standing on. “The grass,” I said flatly. “That we’re standing on.”

“Oatgrass.”

I looked down again. Had my hometown gone completely insane while I was away? “Can you see this grass?”

His mouth twisted with amusement. “No one can see it.”

Right. It was invisible grass.

“Seriously,” he said. “You’d better move. Terrence gets salty when he sees people standing there.”

I looked around. We were the only ones on the street. “Terrence isn’t a giant white rabbit by any chance?”

“Nope, no giant white rabbits in town. Unless Harvey’s come to visit.”

The rabbit from that old Jimmy Stewart movie? “Does he visit... often?” How many imaginary friends did this guy have?

A wild-haired man rounded the can of peas. He wore paint-spattered clothing and was in his forties, a few years my senior. His watery eyes bulged. “Can’t you read?” He jabbed his finger at a small wood sign stuck to the bottom of my shoe.

I lifted my foot and read it upside down.

KEEP OFF THE GRASS

“We just seeded.” The first man smiled slightly, the skin crinkling around his green eyes.

“You could have led with that,” I said, pulling the sign free.

“Well?” the wild-haired man demanded. I presumed he was Terrence. “Move!”

“Oh.” I hopped backward and thudded into someone soft.

“Watch where you’re going,” a woman huffed.

I whirled.

My childhood neighbor and nemesis, Mrs. Malone, drew in a deep breath, then blinked. “Alice? Alice Sommerland?” A yellow track suit hugged the old woman’s ample curves. It clashed with the sturdy brown purse slung over her arm.

I pressed my palm to my stomach. How had I not noticed her approach? Nowhere was dissolving my surveillance skills in a puddle of confusion. “Mrs. Malone,” I said, relieved. “It’s great to see you again.” She hadn’t changed a bit, right down to the one-inch white roots in her dyed-black hair.

Sure, she’d told my brother and me off more than once for biking too loudly past her house, or for playing too close to her property line. But that was then, and we were adults. She was the first person I’d recognized since arriving. I wanted to hug her.

“I’ll take that.” The green-eyed man plucked the sign from my nerveless hands.

Mrs. Malone sniffed, leaning on her cane, and clutched her purse closer. “I suppose you’re here for the drugs. Tell your brother my driveway’s cracked.” The older woman turned

and stalked into the park, the tip of her cane thudding rhythmically. “Fredo!” she shouted.

I blinked. *Drugs? Driveway? Fredo?* “Okay...” I watched her vanish into a stand of pines.

The wild-haired man, Terrence, scowled at the green-eyed Ares impersonator. “It’s my *vision*.”

“All right,” Ares growled. “Though the Russian sage blooms longer than the lavender and is hardier.”

“My *vision* is lavender,” Terrence said.

“Sorry about the grass,” I muttered and left them arguing about the landscape.

I wandered toward the Sagebrush Café feeling out-of-sorts. The life of a surveillance specialist wasn’t as glamorous and exciting as the movies made it look. A car chase, a car crash, and a giant coffee pot were not all in a day’s work. Had I been in an accident? Maybe I was in a coma, and this was all a bad dream.

I pushed through the diner’s glass door. The same trio of old-timers that had always sat there perched on the same faded, blue barstools at the counter. A knot in my chest unraveled, and I smiled.

Then I halted on the checkerboard floor and rubbed my forehead. They *weren’t* the same men, but I still recognized them. When I’d been young, these three particular men hadn’t been that old. Maybe they’d just seemed ancient at the time.

A smattering of people I didn’t recognize sat in booths and at tables. A TV ran silently, high in the right corner of the room, opposite the counter. Closed captioning ran across one corner of its screen.

My muscles re-clenched, and I forced myself to relax. It had been over twenty-four hours since my client’s inglorious death. The media cycle must have moved on by now.

I walked to the counter and sat on one of the sky-blue barstools.

The elderly man on my right turned. His gray hair was close-cropped, curls tight against his skull. He grinned, his brown eyes crinkling. He wore a faded blue windbreaker over

his white, button-up shirt. “Well, I’ll be damned. If it isn’t Baby Alice.”

The others turned, smiling. “Baby Alice? You’re back.”

My face warmed, my pleasure at seeing familiar faces muted by that stupid childhood nickname. I was five-ten. The nickname didn’t apply. *At all.* “Hi, Mr. Washington.”

“Are you back for the rodeo?” Mr. Washington asked. “I’m afraid you’re too big for the mutton busting this year.”

The other men guffawed.

My face warmed. “The rodeo’s back?”

“You boys leave Alice alone, or she’ll leave without buying any breakfast.” Coffee-pot in hand, the owner, Molly Haanson, approached the counter. Her straight blond hair was bound up in a bun. There was more silver in it than the last time I’d seen her, two years ago, but she was still athletic-looking and smiling. And tiny burns from kitchen accidents still marked her hands and forearms. “What can I get you, dear?”

“Coffee,” I said. “Black.” Maybe caffeine would snap me out of it.

She turned over an empty coffee mug and filled it. Her blue dress was the same color as the coffee pot outside, and nearly the same color as her eyes.

“So what brings you back to Nowhere?” Mr. Washington asked. “Not the drugs, I hope.”

“Uh, what drugs?”

“Marijuana,” he said.

“Oh. No.” Nevada had recently legalized marijuana. But I could get that anywhere in the state—not that I wanted to. I didn’t think I could afford to lose any braincells.

“Never mind them,” Molly said.

Mr. Washington sighed. “No one ever does.”

The three men burst into laughter and slapped each other’s backs.

“Charlie must be thrilled you’re home,” Molly said. “Where is he?”

“He doesn’t know I’m here yet. It was sort of a spontaneous thing, and you know how he likes to sleep in.” I sipped the coffee. *Heaven.* “What’s with the giant coffee pot?”

“Nowhere’s trying to be the town with the most record-breaking Big Things,” Molly said. “We get tour buses now.”

The coffee mug froze inches from my mouth. “Buses?” Slowly, I put it down. Nowhere had tourists?

I crossed and uncrossed my ankles. It didn’t matter. No one would care about me. I hadn’t been part of Koppel’s close protection. It wasn’t like I was news.

“Mr. Washington’s son, Marques—you remember him?” Molly asked, her eyes glowing. “Marques Washington? He thought it up. Most of us thought it was nuts, but I have to give it to him, it’s bringing people in. Most afternoons, the Sagebrush is full.”

“That’s great.” Nowhere would be a ghost town without some new moneymaking venture, even if it was quirky. “And the rabbit?”

Her brown brows drew downward. “Rabbit?”

“I saw a white one running down the sidewalk.” I gestured toward the windows with my mug. “About yea-tall.” I raised my hand to shoulder height.

“Rabbits don’t run down sidewalks,” Mr. Washington said. “They hop.”

“This was...” I brushed back my hair. “Never mind.”

Molly bustled into the kitchen, and I swiveled toward the TV. The Reno Aces had lost to the Vegas Aviators. *Eeesh.*

A newscaster arranged his face into a solemn expression. A photo of me appeared on the screen. It was an old photo, one Buck used in the *About Us* section of his company website. I was smiling too hard in it, giving me a desperate air.

Caught off guard: Toomas Koppel’s bodyguard claims she fell asleep when Koppel fled in her SUV before his “accident.”

Heat rushed through my veins. I hadn’t fallen asleep. I’d been drugged and had valiantly regurgitated said drugs to leap into action. And what was with the quotation marks? It *had* been an accident.

“Hey, Alice,” Mr. Washington said. “That looks a lot like you.” I gulped my coffee and put a fiver on the counter. “You think?”

Okay. No big deal. This was my fifteen minutes of fame. Or *infamy*. I’d be forgotten soon enough.

The elderly man squinted. “No, it really does look like you.”

I studied the picture. My brain did something funny, and for a moment, it didn’t look like me, not even like desperate me. It looked like a stranger.

“Huh,” I said, mouth dry, “well, I’ll see you around.”

“Say ‘hi’ to Charlie for us,” Mr. Washington said.

I hurried from the café and got into my rental. *Okay. Okay.* Buck would deal with the press and set them straight if the FBI didn’t. This would be okay. I picked up my cell phone and dropped it in the cupholder. *Stay cool, Alice.* When Buck had new information, he’d call.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. Then I gave in and called my ex-husband. It went to voicemail. A hot burst of anger flared in my skull, bright enough to dizzy me.

“Take my picture off the website,” I snarled. “It’s all over the news.” So there was little point now in removing my photo from the site. But the call made me feel marginally better.

I hung up and checked my watch. It was eight-thirty. Charlie would probably still be sleeping. But it was the time for normal people to be up and about, and he’d forgive me.

I stopped by a donut shop. It did not have the world’s largest donut in its driveway, and that was a disappointment. It had, however, donuts piled high with children’s cereal, chopped up candy bars, and crumbled cookies.

I scanned the glass cases filled with mutant pastry.

“Can I help you?” a man barely out of his teens asked.

“Have you got any chocolate old-fashioned?”

He blinked. “What’s that?”

No chocolate old-fashioned? “Never mind.” Progress had come to Nowhere. Progress could bite me.

“Our Big Donuts have chocolate frosting,” he said helpfully. “One serves twelve people.”

Of course they did. I ordered half a dozen of the most obnoxious-looking donuts they had and drove to Charlie's house. Our neighborhood was only a five-minute drive west of Main Street and in a low-maintenance residential neighborhood of ranch houses and rusted cars.

Parking on the street, I sat, my rental car ticking as it cooled, and I took in the house I'd grown up in. It had a fresh coat of beige paint, but otherwise, the ranch house looked the same. Good even. Charlie was taking care of the old homestead.

I smiled at the massive pine in the front yard. We'd built a tree house in it when I was thirteen. I'd been determined to spend the night in it that summer, until the bugs had driven me inside.

Charlie had stuck it out and woken up the next morning covered in bites. I'd gotten in serious trouble for leaving a three-year old outside in a tree house. And I'd deserved it.

I grabbed the pink box, walked to the porch, and rang the bell. Charlie would forgive a lot for donuts, even being woken early.

The door opened. A tall, gray-haired stranger stared out at me. "Yes?" He adjusted the cufflink on his white button-up shirt.

Who was this guy? I took a step backward. "I..." I shifted the donut box to my other hand. "Sorry, I'm looking for Charlie. Charlie Sommerland?"

"Oh. He moved."

My stomach bottomed. *Why? Where?* "He moved?" Why hadn't Charlie told me? He couldn't have moved far though. Molly had said he'd be excited to see me.

"He, er, sold the house," he said.

My insides tightened. Why would my brother sell the house without telling me? Not that he needed to. It was his house. But a heads-up would have been nice.

"Who is it?" a woman shouted from somewhere inside the house.

"I think he's staying in a tree house on Big Sky Lane," the man said.

I took another step backward. My heel hit the edge of the wooden step and my ankle twisted beneath me. I steadied myself. “He’s staying in a tree house?”

“If it’s those religious people,” the woman yelled, “don’t engage.”

“It’s someone for Charlie,” he shouted over his shoulder. To me, he said, “It’s a friend’s tree house. That’s what I heard, at least.”

“Oh. Okay.” I edged backward. “Thanks.”

I wrinkled my forehead. Why was my little brother living in a tree house? He must have gotten *some* money for selling the home.

The man’s brow wrinkled. “Wait. Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?”

I froze. Had he been watching the morning news? How bad *was* the news?

He snapped his long fingers. “You’re Charlie’s sister, that mutton-busting girl, Alice.”

“Wow.” I braced one shoulder against a wooden post. “That old rodeo story will *not* die.” I laughed uneasily. “And you—? I’m sorry, I don’t remember your name.”

“Why would you? You were just a kid, and I was a boring adult, and then we moved away. I’m Donald, Donald Rigby.”

I still didn’t know who that was, but I nodded. “Oh yeah. Mr. Rigby.”

“You can call me Donald. So what brought you back to Nowhere?”

“A mistake,” I muttered.

He chuckled. “There’s a lot of that going around.”

“Sorry, I came to visit my brother. I’m just... surprised he’s not here.”

“Donald?” the woman shouted. “Are you still talking to that church person?”

“I’d better go.” I backed away. “It was nice seeing you again.”

“Tell your brother no hard feelings, okay?”

“Sure. Okay.” Baffled, I returned to my SUV. Once inside, I opened the box and ate a donut.

Then I ate another.