

## Chapter Five

"Here you are burger and fries and your short stack," Lynn said as she set the plates down in front of the corresponding customer. "Anything else I can get you gentlemen?"

"Just your number, baby cake," one leered stroking her hand.

Lynn removed it trying not to show her revulsion. Through a stiff smile she said, "Sorry, that's not on the menu."

"Come on, baby. Sit with us and chat for awhile," the other joined his friend. "You've been working hard and could use a break, yeah?"

"I have other customers," Lynn backed a step and retreated behind the counter. She paused at the sink looking at her shaking her hands. Even she didn't know if she was shaking from anger or fear.

"You all right?" Gretchen asked eyeing the pair at the table. If they had gotten more persistent she would have intervened and kicked them out. She didn't need that kind of business hanging around her diner.

"Fine. Just the usual."

"I'll keep an eye on them."

At sixty years Gretchen had never known a life beyond food service. She was careful with her money and eventually she and her husband had been able to buy their own restaurant. It was a far cry from the upscale establishments elsewhere but the food was good and it was theirs. He passed on some time ago forcing Gretchen to make do with a hired chef and taking on some of the cooking duties herself.

When Lynn saw the help wanted sign it had actually been for a cook but Gretchen hired her on the spot as a waitress sensing the young woman was in dire straits. A few months later when Lynn began showing her rapidly progressing pregnancy, it was all the confirmation the older woman needed. She never asked about the father. When Lynn couldn't find a babysitter Gretchen encouraged her to bring the triplets to work volunteering to watch the trio herself while Lynn minded the tables.

Gretchen and her husband never had kids of their own so being able to play doting grandma was fun. She purchased toys and games and books to distract the trio getting new stuff as they grew. Lynn would never accept unearned money but Gretchen snuck in extra meals whenever she could to help out especially with two growing boys and secretly giving Lynn the majority of the tips which should have been an even split.

"Let me know if they get to be too much," Gretchen reiterated. She had no qualms tossing out rude customers.

"It's ne," Lynn shook her head. "It's just...Why do men have to act like that?"

"You mean dressing up s\*\*\*I harassment like they're doing us a favor?"

"Yeah."

"A question for the ages," Gretchen shrugged. "Men are pigs and they've been allowed to get away with it for so long we automatically end up a b\*\*\*h if we call them out on it."

Lynn shook her head, "I can't imagine why they'd even pay attention to me anyway. I mean, I've had three kids."

"Hate to tell you this but you don't look like you've had three kids with that petite gure of yours," Gretchen chuckled. "You don't even look old enough to have had three kids."

Lynn rolled her eyes. She had lost her girlish gure long ago. Her body was riddled with stretch marks from carrying the triplets. Her breasts sagged from breast-feeding them and she still retained a bit of extra weight around the waist she couldn't seem to lose. No one had to say it, she knew her body denitely changed from what it used to be and would never be a body comparable to Tracy whose form was still tone and trim.

Gretchen chuckled knowing better than to argue. There was no cure for how a woman viewed her own body. The ideal body image continually foisted on them was tall, leggy proportions that simply weren't realistic for most body types. Lynn's petite form was well-proportioned. If anything she was too thin due to long workdays and moderate meals. But her body was that of a mature woman, one who had had three children. What she viewed as awws were merely the body's natural changes that occurred as a result.

"Mom!" Theo excitedly called as he and his siblings entered. He held the door as Sean ushered in their sister.

"Hey mom!"

"There you three are," Lynn hurried out of the kitchen and around the counter to greet them. She quickly took Alexis into her arms and kissed the top of her head. Theo and Sean received similar greetings when it was their turns. "I hope they were good for you Tracy."

"Of course," Tracy laughed. "They're such good kids. And the boys take good care of their sister."

"You mean I do a good job of taking care of them," Alexis corrected. "If I wasn't around they'd be in trouble twenty-four, seven."

"No we wouldn't," Sean argued.

"Yeah...I mean, we have to sleep some time," Theo agreed with a smirk.

"Well I better get going," Tracy said, "I got a meeting after lunch."

"All right well thanks for picking them up," Lynn hugged her. "Stop by later?"

"Maybe, depends on how my next meeting goes. I may need to vent."

Lynn chuckled as Tracy departed before turning back to her three troublemakers, "All right, I still got a few hours left so you three: homework."

"Kay."

"Sure."

"Fine."

Lynn shoed them down to a table in the corner that had long been reserved for the trio. The baby toys were long gone but there was still a collection of board games stashed beside it to keep them entertained during their mother's long shift when they invariably finished their homework too quickly.

Theo slid into the booth first allowing Alexis to sit on the outside while Sean sat across from her. She immediately pulled out a tablet with foldable keyboard. Alexis didn't want to even think about how expensive the tablet was. The school had purchased it as part of a grant to make lessons assessable to students with disabilities. It made completing her homework a far simpler task. Sean plugged it into the outlet as she inserted one of her earbuds. She left the other out so she could listen to her brothers too.

Theo reluctantly pulled out his homework annoyed by his sister's responsible attitude. Sean followed suit as they simultaneously chose their math book first. It took a few moments for Alexis to start up the program that would read off her math problems and describe any visuals she couldn't see.

The program was something the school had purchased as part of a suite for her and other kids who were visually impaired through she was the only one legally blind. The tablet technically belonged to the school though they had given it to her to use for the term. This was their last year of primary school before moving to a middle school. She wondered what their new school would be like and if it would be as accessible as their current school. Alexis just hoped they wouldn't treat her like an invalid. She wouldn't stand for that.

"Here you go," Gretchen said delivering three glasses. "Sprite for Theo, Root Beer for Sean and Sweet Tea for Alexis."

"Thanks!" the trio smiled. After ten years Gretchen knew their drink preferences by heart.

"Of course. Don't tell your mom but here are some mushroom poppers, potato skins and cheese curds," Gretchen winked. "I'll bring dinner around a little later."

The trio chuckled. Gretchen was like a grandmother and always offered them any snacks they desired. Knowing how much their mother hated taking advantage of her generosity they kept their requests to a minimum but it was rude not to accept what she offered freely. Left alone they turned their attention to their homework.

\* \* \*

Outside the diner a black SUV pulled up behind another. The occupants watched as the trio were dropped off. A few minutes later the blonde who had given them a ride departed driving off in her unremarkable sedan.

Inside the SUV sat two rather burly men which made even the roomy interior of the vehicle seem cramped. Both maintained a regular workout routine that included defensive and combat training. As members of Prescott's private security team they were never sure when they would be deployed or for what purpose. More often than not they were set to secure a venue and prevent party crashers. But this time their mission was quite different.

Four men were chosen and given several photos depicting a petite, cute brunette and three children. Their mission was to guard them in secret. They were split into two two-man teams: one to watch over the woman, the other to watch over the children. To aid them they had been given their home address on the Lower East Side, the kids' school and the diner.

No other information had been given: no names and no indication how long this watch was to continue. All they knew was that these four had caught their boss's attention and he wanted them protected. Since the teams were forbidden from making contact and were to act as if invisible implied the foursome were unaware of their boss's attention. A tap on the passenger window startled them and they rolled it down. Unsurprising it was a member from the team assigned to watch the woman.

"Hey Mike," they greeted.

"How'd it go?"

"Nothing much. After she dropped the kids off they had a normal day at school. It's frustrating we can't go inside though. And it's impossible to vet everyone who enters the building. School staff is one thing but then there are all the parents of their classmates."

"Two grown men armed with tactical gear might be frowned upon in a school setting."

The others chuckled. Their boss certainly had the clout if he wanted to exercise it but for now he wanted them to maintain their distance. It wasn't so bad now but it was already late November and winter was around the corner.

"Got that right. We can't even patrol the perimeter unless we want to attract attention. The only action was at recess. The boys are pretty good basketball players. How about the mother?"

"She's been working since she got here," Mike said. "Taking orders, bussing tables. Just a normal waitress."

"Yeah normal. This is weird isn't it? Why would the boss be interested in a normal family? At first I thought it might be some secret information ring but..."

"You mean like an info broker?"

"Something like that. I mean it would be real easy for kids to pass notes in school or even for a waitress to pass something off while she's serving."

"You read too many novels." Mike shook his head.

"No kidding. You saw the last one he was reading?" the driver asked. "What was it called? The Foxglove Files by Rosemary Thomas or something like that."

"Hey that is a really good one and according to the author's blurb they spent over a year working in a school to make certain they got the details right. You know what they say: truth is stranger than ction."

"I suppose...maybe one of us should check it out," Mike said.

"No contact. Remember?"

"I'm not going to make contact. I'm just going to order a coffee and get a closer look at what she's doing."

"I don't know..."

"If I take off my coat and holster and go in street clothes they won't even know. I mean, they're just civilians."

The others shared a look, "Fine. We'll move down the street. Two identical SUVs will attract attention."

Mike shrugged. It seemed like they were needlessly concerned but it didn't matter. Once he could observe their targets more closely he would gure out the mystery swirling around them. Returning to the other vehicle he explained the situation to his partner before removing his jacket and shoulder holster. Once those were gone he grabbed a loose button up to go over his tee-shirt. To hide his earpiece he took it out of his ear and tucked into the shirt's collar. Once he was done he did look like any other civilian on the street.

With a nod to his partner Mike headed across the street and entered the diner. As he let the door close behind him the woman they had been assigned to watch passed by with two arms loaded with four plates.

"Hello there. Just have a seat anywhere. I'll be right with you." She continued on to a booth with two couples. "One burger, no tomato; chicken sandwich; shillet and mushroom swiss."

She set the plates down carefully placing them in the delivery but she seemed person. None offered to assist despite the precarious nature of the delivery but she seemed used to it.

Mike headed in the opposite direction selecting the booth across from the trio of ten-year-olds. His gaze swept over their table noting the open text books and math problems with a quick glance as he sat down. The diner had a long, narrow oor plan. There was a long front counter lined with stools and booths lined up along the wall. On the other side it opened up to include a couple of tables but on this end it remained just a narrow aisle between booths.

"All right, here we go," the woman arrived a minute later with a cup and carafe. Pouring him a cup of coffee she also gave him a menu. "Here you go. Sugar and cream are on the table. I'll give you a few minutes to decide."

Mike muttered thank you even as she was off to her next table. He watched her as she cleared nished plates, collected the tip and wiped it down with practiced ease. It was clear she had performed these tasks for years.

"Can I have a refill?" a customer held up a cup.

"Absolutely," she said retrieving the carafe from its hot plate and lled the cup without missing a beat.

Mike eyed the simple, two-sided menu nding many traditional fair foods and fast food options: mostly fried or grilled. There was nothing trendy but this kind of menu was also rather nostalgic. In fact the diner itself with the interior décor harking to the fifties and would be quite familiar to anyone who had lived it. He hadn't intended to order anything but now a short stack sounded good.

"Okay, what can I get you?" the woman returned taking out her order pad and pencil.

\* \* \*

Alexis, Sean and Theo quietly worked on their class studies. In truth they really didn't have much to do even though their teachers gave them accelerated lessons. From early on their comprehension was distinctly advanced for their ages. Doing complex math solutions in their heads was a simple task and their reading level was much higher than their classmates. In the third grade a teacher took them to task for not paying attention and they had to explain they weren't paying attention because they already knew the answers.

Not believing them the teacher had them take a basic skills test for fifth graders only to have them pass without a single wrong answer. After that they were given a series of tests before it was clear their learning had to be accelerated. Though their school work still wasn't very challenging at least it was occasionally entertaining.

Alexis tapped as the computer program read a lesson about ancient Egypt. Across from her Sean lapped his pencil but it wasn't on boredom. It was morse code. They learned it years ago allowing them to pass messages to each other without speech.

"Check out the guy next to us. I don't think he's a normal customer."

"What makes you say that?" Theo tapped back.

"He's paying too much attention to everything else. Like he's casing the place or waiting for someone to join him or he's watching someone."

"Who do you suppose?"

"I don't know. It's dinner rush. And he's sitting so he can watch most of the diner at once."

"Well there's a simple way to find out," Alexis tapped. "Theo watch him. When something catches his attention, cough. Sean watch the diner. When Theo coughs note who's moving around."

"Good plan."

The brothers complied. Being blind Alexis couldn't assist but she did shift her attention to the strange man her brother pointed out. She noted the scent of his aftershave had a distinct peppermint smell. It didn't quite cover the smell of cigarette smoke and tequila meaning he had a few vices he was trying to disguise. He sat quietly as he ate his pancakes so she knew he wasn't particularly nervous or prone to dgeting. That meant he was content, maybe even trained. A trained observer, maybe even a professional?

Theo coughed. A few minutes later he cleared his throat. He did it one more time before reaching for his drink while they waited for Sean's results. They knew from experience that three times was enough to set up a pattern others would notice so it was important to switch up signals after that.

"He's watching mom."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. She was the only one moving each time."

"Why would he be watching mom?"

"I don't know."

"Make sure you two memorize what he looks like. We'll have to keep an eye out for him on the way home."

"Got it."

"At least the walk home won't be boring."