

Chapter 1

Most of my life I'd been angry that California wasn't more stringent about the death penalty. My bastard father should have been put down like a dog for what he did. But I was finally happy he was alive, since I needed information. I tried to keep my face neutral as he sat down on his side of the glass, still as ruggedly handsome as a cigarette ad after all this time. In his orange jumpsuit he seemed more ruffled and tired than old as he picked up the receiver.

"Ellie." It was almost a question. So much nuance in one word.

He hadn't seen me since I'd let him know Grandpa died. My brother had talked me into it, told me I needed to forgive, but I'd ended up screaming at him until they'd hustled me out early.

"Hello, Ron. You look well." I tried not to make it sound like an accusation. Not sure I succeeded, but I'd need to tread lightly if I wanted him to answer questions instead of lapsing into his usual soliloquy.

He sighed. "You look so much like your mom."

My stomach dropped. I'd deliberately flat ironed the curls out of my hair and worn a stodgy black pants suit to keep him from saying that. It made me want to strangle him. I hoped my face didn't show what I was thinking. I took a deep breath. "Yes. Let's talk about Mom."

His eyes got big. "What do you want to know?"

"How did you two meet?"

He smiled for the first time. "We met at the dog park, the one in Shoreline. We both had chocolate labs and we got to talking. Do you remember Joe Boy and Bentley?"

Vaguely. I nodded.

"We worked for the same school district and I'd seen her around, but I'd never thought to talk to her. She was way out of my league." He shook his head with a faraway look in his eye.

“Yes,” I agreed. His mouth turned down. I grinned encouragingly to keep him going.

“What day was that? Do you remember the date?”

“It was June. I don’t know the date, but it was the Monday after school let out, our first day of summer break. Why?”

“I’m thinking of writing Mom’s biography,” I lied. “Do you remember what time of day?”

“Ah.” His face went slack and he sat back in his chair. “That’s why you’re here.”

I wasn’t sure how to reply. Was he disappointed I hadn’t come because I was suddenly having warm, fuzzy feelings? Did that mean this contrary ass wouldn’t tell me what I wanted to know? Crap. I wracked my brain trying to think of someone else I could ask, anyone Mom would have confided in. I came up empty.

“It was early afternoon. I took Joe Boy out right after lunch.” He stared at me, no longer cheery.

I was so relieved, I gave him a genuine smile. “Then what happened? You asked her out for coffee or something?” I wrote down what he’d said on the little tablet they’d finally let me bring through security. When he didn’t reply, I glanced up. He was looking down, his face bright pink. I’d never seen my father blush before.

“What?” I asked.

“We ended up spending the rest of the day together.”

He looked at me hard, like he needed me to understand. I nodded to keep him going.

“After the dog park, we got take-out from a little Chinese restaurant on Castro and went back to my house for dinner.” He sat back and got that wistful expression again. “We had a few drinks and laughed and talked for hours.”

I held my breath as I realized where this was going. Now I was the one blushing. I met his gaze with difficulty.

“We got married at the Mountain View courthouse in January, then you were born at the end of February.” He laughed. “You always were in a hurry.”

No wonder Mom had never told me that story. Then again, when she died I’d been too young to ask. I gripped the receiver tighter. “Now tell me about the night she died.”

He straightened up instantly and stared at the floor. “I don’t remember much.”

I tried not to glare, afraid he’d hang up and leave. “What *do* you remember?”

He fidgeted in his seat. “What difference does it make now? Dredging up bad memories won’t bring her back.”

The room seemed to heat up. I started to perspire. *You owe me this*. “Humor me.” I couldn’t help glaring now.

“I’d been out drinking.” He stared over my left shoulder.

I resisted the urge to turn around to see what he was looking at, waiting impatiently for him to continue. “Yes. What did you fight about?”

“I don’t remember a fight.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Sure you do.” I remembered shouting and thumping and fragile things breaking downstairs, then standing on the landing watching both my parents lay motionless in the entryway, and fleeing back up to hide under my covers.

“I don’t remember.” He was back to his favorite mantra.

I know what you fought about,” I said when I lost patience. “I’ve wondered about that for years and finally found out my accident.”

He glanced at me with raised eyebrows.

I smiled daggers at him. “I signed me and Allen up for one of those genealogy sites hoping to find Mom’s family in Missouri. You know what I found out instead?”

He had the nerve to shake his head.

“We have different fathers.” I paused, watching his face.

He blinked several times. “What are you talking about?”

“You found out Mom had an affair, and you killed her. You’re telling me you don’t remember that?” I yelled.

“I don’t know what you’re taking about.” His voice waivered. Tears puddled in his eyes.

“Quit your mewling and tell me the truth!”

A uniformed guard appeared behind him. “Times up.”

My father hung up quickly and leapt out of his seat, following the guard out of the room.

I slammed the receiver down.

Damn. I don’t know why I thought I could keep it together around him. As I packed the tablet into my backpack, I wondered whether time was really up, or they were kicking me out for shouting again. I had more questions. He probably knew who Allen’s father was and maybe the whole story behind it.

Oh well. Hopefully I had what I needed.

I didn’t mention my visit to the prison when I met Allen that evening. He’d make a big deal and want to know why, and I wasn’t ready to tell him about our different parentage. I tried to keep the conversation light, though he was making that very difficult.

“Since when do you kill people? I thought you were a scientist.” My brother flung his skee ball down the chute then turned to me. The ball flipped expertly into the smallest hole. Bells

dinged, lights flashed, and about a dozen more prize tickets flowed out of the dispenser. Even so, it was difficult to notice amid all the other clamor in Chuck E. Cheese.

I pushed him out of the way. “I *am* a scientist. Who said anything about killing someone?” I wasn’t ashamed about what I was about to do, but I wanted to spend the evening laughing and joking with my little brother, not being quizzed about my work. I rolled our last ball down the chute. It landed off center, sliding into the outer ring. One more ticket came out without fanfare.

“You said he’ll ‘cease to exist.’ What else would that mean?” He grabbed the tickets from the dispenser, his brown hair flopping into his eyes.

“When are you getting a haircut?” I asked.

“Quit trying to change the subject.” He stuffed the tickets into his already bulging sweatshirt pocket, then inserted a hand on either side. “How do you make someone cease to exist without killing them?”

“You know what we’ve been working on at Initech, right? You don’t need to kill someone if you can keep them from being born in the first place.” I looked around the noisy room. On the stage, the six-foot mechanical animals started another rendition of Born to Be Alive.

“What do you want to play next?” I asked. The distraction didn’t work. I could feel his disapproving scrutiny. Not sure why I thought it would. Just hoping, I guess.

“You finally got that thing to work? I need to sit down.” He stalked away, weaving between scurrying children. I trotted behind, trying to keep up with his long strides.

His interrogation resumed as soon as he slid onto the orange plastic seat.

“What are you doing exactly?”

I hated when Allen was upset with me. Ever since Mom died it had been the two of us against the world as we'd cycled through foster care. I tried to meet his gaze, but gave up and stared at our congealing pizza.

"I go back and make sure his parents don't meet. That's it. Alexei Novikov is never born so he can't steal a nuke, and things go back to normal."

Allen tapped the table for a moment. "Okay. That's noble, but will it stop there? You're boss seems crazy enough to keep going."

I bristled at my brother's judgmental tone. "What do you mean?" I folded my arms and glared at him.

He ripped a cold pepperoni from one of the slices. "Why not go back and kill Hitler while you're at it, or make sure he isn't born? Why not make sure we win the Vietnam War." He watched me as he popped it into his mouth.

"The possibilities are endless," he said his mouth full.

"You're not wrong." I sighed. "This assignment *is* a government contract, but we can only go back so far. We can barely do this." I shivered when I thought about some of the failed attempts; poor Sammy, and we still didn't know what happened to Angela.

"Too bad," He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'd want a selfie with Jesus."

"You wouldn't want to change anything?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I'd be scared to. Butterfly effect. Who says my version would be better? What about you?"

I smiled. "I'd want to hug Mom."

"That's the saddest smile I've ever seen," he joked.

I rolled my eyes. "I just never got to say good bye."

“And you’ve been whining about it for twenty years.” Allen took a noisy draw on his soda straw. “Is it dangerous?” He shook his cup causing the ice to rattle. When I didn’t answer right away, he put it down. “I’ll take that as a yes. Which brings me to my next question: why you?”

“Like I said, we have a tight window and I’m the only one trained up and ready,” I lied. The boss had suggested me and I’d jumped at the chance, but Allen definitely didn’t need to know that.

“Ok. Only you can save the world. Not buying it, but I know you well enough not to argue.” He took my hand. “When do you go?”

I moved my hand to grab a piece of pizza. “I knew you’d make a big deal.” The slice made a sloppy plonk onto my paper plate. “I leave tomorrow.”

“And you’re spending your last night with your brother? What happened to whatshisname?”

“Jeremy.” How to answer that? He hadn’t approved of my assignment either. “We had a disagreement. I’ll talk to him when I get back.” I counted the pepperoni on my slice instead of meeting my brother’s gaze. “You’re forgetting. I’ll also return tomorrow. This good bye is for me, not you.” I grinned at him.

He didn’t smile back.

“So you’re saying I’ll hear from you tomorrow or not at all.”

When I didn’t reply, he got up and left.