

CHAPTER 20 cont.

She scans the room from behind oversized dark sunglasses, all business in her grey slacks, brown sweater vest and oddly mismatched running shoes. She fixes her gaze directly on me; walks over to my table as if I was holding up a sign with her name on it.

Am I that obvious? I'm a liar if I say her casual assessment didn't bump up my paranoia level a notch.

"How did you know it was me?" I ask.

She says, "I'm a therapist. I listen to people all day. You're the only guy in here with an Adam's apple big enough to produce the voice in the message you left. That, and you raised your eyebrows just a hair when I looked over at you, a sign of recognition."

Impressive.

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“You’re much prettier in person,” I say, “but then, you already know that because you watched my pupils dilate—a sign of approval.”

“And attraction.”

“Would you like some tea?” I ask, deflecting her accusation before I can acknowledge it with a grin. She declines. Under different circumstances, I’d remove her sunglasses and gaze intently into her eyes and say something like, ‘I guess it’s mutual.’ But now it would come off as disrespectful. Plus, her apparent flirtation is really just a tactic. If I take the bait, she’ll lose all respect for me, having spotted yet another beta too eager to put pleasure before business.

“And by the way,” she says, “you can stop with the *mirroring*, the *induced obligation through reciprocation*, and all the other rapport-building techniques, because I see right through them. Just tell me how you can help me find [[Cindy]] and you’ll have my trust.”

Playing poker with this one would cost you.

I consider her question. Indeed, how can I help find her friend?

“Would you mind taking off your glasses?”

She hesitates just long enough to let me know, that she knows, that this is another technique on my part, but she takes them off all the same.

Her eyes are bloodshot-framed-blue, as if she’s been crying. I look into them a very long time, until the corners of her mouth tease upward, no more than a millimeter, while her lips remain pursed, as if she were holding back a smile that comes naturally every day but today. I don’t look away until her pupils dilate a pleasing amount and she blushes, knowing that *I know* she likes what she sees.

“You have good reason to worry about [[Cindy]].”

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I pause, not so much for effect, but to choose my words carefully. *A good reason because [[Whitmore]] himself is dangerous?* or, more accurately, *because [[Whitmore]]'s associates are ruthless men?* If I bring up outside involvement in [[Cindy]]'s kidnapping I'm opening the door to an array of questions I'm not ready to answer.

But [[Mercy]]'s intelligent. Because of how easily the police and the media were led astray, she has to know there's more behind [[Cindy]]'s disappearance than a washed-up academic turned scripture-geek. She'll suspect some kind of conspiracy at work. If I contradict her suspicions, she'll become more suspicious of me.

Still, it's not like I can give her specifics of who else is involved, or even why they'd want to kidnap her friend... *You see, [[Mercy]], The Sons of Jared are using [[Cindy]] to lure in Nephilim, whom they will then ambush, murder, and brand in order to please [[God]].* Yeah, I'll get baptized and start preaching the gospel before she'd swallow that.

She raises an eyebrow—just one. My delay is looking more like calculation than drama.

“As I'm sure you've surmised, [[Whitmore]] didn't act alone. The coercion of the authorities and the press both point to an organization of considerable influence and power. [[Whitmore]] has become involved with this organization in some way, and unfortunately, [[Cindy]]'s relationship with him put her on their radar. I believe they're holding [[Cindy]] to ensure [[Whitmore]]'s cooperation in some matter of importance to their leaders. Extorting him.”

Come to think of it, this scenario makes as much sense as my initial assumption—that the Sons of Jared were using [[Cindy]] as a lure. More sense, in fact. I mean, If I'm a guy with the meager means of a second-rate evangelist, twenty years her senior, I'd consider myself very

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lucky to have a girl as attractive as [[Cindy]] Hernandez on my arm. What *wouldn't* [[Whitmore]] do to keep her safe?

Satisfied with the way my story's coming together, I continue: "Bottom line, [[Mercy]], I need to find these men, and [[Henry]] [[Whitmore]] is my only lead. As for [[Cindy]]'s disappearance, my reasons to help you find her are purely selfish."

She leans in close and whispers passionately in my ear, "Well you're shit out of luck then. Don't you think I'd be on my way to get [[Cindy]] if I knew where he'd taken her?" Her breath is an incense of lager spiced with dry, pungent cannabis. Not a bad combo for dulling the grief and anxiety she's dealing with.

"I'm sure you would. You're resourceful. Getting [[Cindy]] on the Amber Alert system proves that. And you're not a quitter. Which is why you need to let me help you. These men [[Whitmore]] is involved with, they're not going to make any more mistakes. You saw how easily they manipulated the police. And now they know how tenacious you are. If they think you're a threat to their operation..."

"Oh I get it. This is the part where you tell me I'm in danger and that you're the only one who can protect me from the bad men. But in return, you'll need my help. Something like that?"

Her spot-on assessments have gone from impressive to antagonizing. She's right of course, but being right isn't going to help her find her friend any faster. Frankly, I'm growing impatient playing the role of reasonable, well-intentioned stranger. Every minute I spend persuading her to help me is another minute for the SOJ to bleed out another cousin.

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“Look. Maybe it sounds a little [[Hollywood]], but yes, you are in danger, and yes, I’m the person most qualified to protect you, and yes, I would like your help. We’re on the same side here.”

“Maybe we are, but you still haven’t answered my question: *how* can you help me find [[Cindy]]?”

She’s starting to perspire and she strips off her sweater vest to cool down. The tight, low-cut cotton shirt she’s left wearing creates such a distraction that it takes me a moment to notice the small crucifix she wears on a necklace.

OK, maybe we’re *not* on the same side, I think, but say, “All I can tell you is that if we find [[Whitmore]], we’ll find [[Cindy]]. And I *will* find him eventually, you can bet on that. The question is, will I find him in time to save your friend? With your help, I’m sure the answer will be ‘Yes.’ Without it...”

“OK, so what makes you so qualified to find them? What are you? Some kind of [[Secret Agent]]? CIA? FBI? ATF?”

“Something like that,” I say, keeping it vague. ‘[[Secret Agent]]’ is actually a decent cover. But only because [[Mercy]] arrived at the idea herself. If I suggested it, she’d be skeptical.

“Great. So you can’t tell me anything. Can’t elaborate on who these ‘bad men’ are that [[Henry]]’s supposedly involved with. That about right?”

“I’m sorry, it’s classified.” It’s all I can do not to laugh.

“OK Mr. [[Secret Agent]]. Show me some ID.”

She’s good. But not quite good enough to rattle me. I hand her my wallet.

“Patrick Daly. From New York, huh. So where’s your credentials? There’s nothing here that proves you’re an agent.”

“That’s not my real name. Everything’s fake. I can’t carry legit ID. Too risky. If I were captured, and the enemy realized my agency was on to them, it could compromise the operation.” Without specifics, everything I’m telling her is the honest truth, and I think she’s buying it.

[[Mercy]] doesn’t say anything, just stares at the indigo surface of my tea as if she could see the future there without need of the leaves. She grasps the crucifix and rubs it like a kernel of wheat plucked from the stalk; a nervous habit, what she must do in place of twirling her hair, or biting her nails, or chewing on the inside of cheek—all of which I’d find more appealing.

I sigh again, a little louder this time. Half impatience, half disgust. Another slip, one that’ll cost me.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I say, and start to ask if she’s going to help me or not—anything to change the subject—but she cuts me off.

“Nothing my ass. What was that little sigh about? Are you getting impatient with me? What? I’m not thinking fast enough for the total-fucking-stranger asking for help?”

Her voice is starting to carry more than I’m comfortable with. Exactly what I don’t need: people remembering my face because we’re making a scene. I need to calm her down.

“I’m sorry. There’s just a lot at stake here.”

“You think I don’t know that?” she asks, her voice back down to an intense whisper.

“Of course you do. I’m sorry. It’s not fair of me to rush you.”

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She takes a deep breath and lets it out slow and her shoulders ease down an inch, softening the muscles in her neck; supple levers replacing taut cords.

“I forgive you.”

She didn’t have to say that, and her peace offering emboldens me to go where I probably shouldn’t.

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

“I guess.”

“Are you religious?”

“Oh! *That’s* why you were staring at my breasts a minute ago. It was my necklace.”

“You sound disappointed,” I say, grinning, happy to take the edge off the conversation.

She blushes. “Uh, yeah, well...I don’t like the term ‘religious,’ but I have faith in [[God]] and I pray. I’m a Christian, if that’s what you’re asking... Why? is that a problem?”

There’s no way I can lie convincingly on this topic, so I tell her the part of the truth I able to.

“This group [[Whitmore]] is involved with has certain...religious aspects to it. Which explains in part why he has dealings with them. I just want to make sure you won’t have a problem opposing a group that might share your beliefs.”

“Anyone that would kidnap [[Cindy]] doesn’t share my belief in [[God]].”

Don’t be so sure, I think, but tell her, “Fair enough.”

She’s laser-focused on what tea remains in my large to-go cup. I can tell she’s close to a decision now—close to realizing I’m her best option to find [[Cindy]]. I gulp down most of my

lukewarm tea and lean back into the bench, in effect, giving her space. I'll let her draw her own conclusions. Keep quiet.

It's not easy. I'm very tempted to throw her over my shoulder and forcibly remove her from the café.

A closer look at her body distracts me from this urge, and fortunately, she's too lost in her thoughts to catch my appraisal. I like what I see: Legs like a soccer player's, or a runner who favors the hills. Curves enough, and in all the right places. A sufficiently narrow waist, but without the overly masculine 'six-pack' look favored by too many women these days. Lean arms, toned shoulders, and a lithe neck just dying to show off a strapless evening gown. And her breasts, having already proven a formidable distraction...what more can I say? Other than I'm staring past a crucifix to admire them--

And just a nanosecond too long because I'm busted.

“Still staring at my necklace, eh?”

I'm relieved to see her admonishment delivered with a wry smile. More so as she subjects me to a once-over of her own—and now a twice-over—with absolutely no attempt at subtlety, either. Well, I deserve it.

Apparently satisfied she says, “Yeah—you look like you could do some protecting. [[Steroids]]? Private trainer?”

“Genetics,” I say.

She does the eyebrow thing again. Before, with pursed lips, it said 'incredulous.' This time, while *licking* her lips, the gesture translates closer to 'yummy.'

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“OK. I’ll help you find [[Henry]]. But you have to promise me, that no matter what happens, you’ll help me find [[Cindy]]—even if you find [[Henry]] first and he leads you to this...*organization* you’re after—promise me you’ll still find [[Cindy]].”

“I promise.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to swear it to me. Swear to [[God]] that you’ll help me find [[Cindy]] no matter what.”

“I can’t do that.”

“What do you mean you can’t do that? You can’t swear? What? you don’t believe in [[God]]?”

“It’s not that. It’s just...look, it’s complicated.”

Knowing [[God]] exists and believing in Him are two entirely different things, but I can’t go into all that right now. Nor will I compromise the honor of my father, banished to darkness, by going along with social convention in order to make my life easier, or to make someone else feel comfortable around me. She’ll just have to accept a promise from me far more binding than some empty ritual mocked by criminals in courtrooms on a daily basis.

“I give you my word, [[Mercy]], I will help you find your friend, no matter what.”

Let thy word be known... This is no different. A pact until my last breath.

I can see in her eyes that she feels my sincerity.

“So what now? You want to follow me over to [[Henry]]’s apartment? Help you search for clues? How do we do this?”

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“Not so fast. First I need to take care of some business in Coronado. You’ll need to ride with me,” I say, and before she can complain on [[Cindy]]’s behalf, add, “It’s related.”

“OK, but I need to move my car. I’m on a meter and I don’t want it getting towed.”

“Leave it. Getting towed is the best thing that could happen to it. It might be bugged. We’ll go in my rental. Here, take my hand and snuggle close to me as we walk out.”

“Do what? Why?”

“I’m tired of hearing people call you ‘bitch.’ They won’t say it if you’re with me. Later we’ll get you a better disguise. The sunglasses aren’t enough. You’re too striking. For now, snuggle.”

We walk out together and [[Mercy]] snuggles enthusiastically; arms around my waist, cheek to my chest, swaying and giggling like she’d had too much to drink. I get the distinct impression she’s enjoying herself. She’d make a great actress. She understands how a masterful performance is all in the minutia, beneath the surface detail lesser performers never get past—like exhaling her hot breath on my nipple and squeezing my pec just now. These tiny essences of couplehood that make her all the more convincing...even though, *ahem*, the street’s empty and we’re already to the car.

“How was I ‘Agent Daly?’” she asked with air quotes.

“Very convincing.” I hold the door for her as she ducks down into the passenger seat. “Call me ‘Jequon.’”

I’m not sure why I tell [[Mercy]] my real name. The last woman to know it was murdered over fifteen-hundred years ago; the last woman I loved.

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