

One

January 1902

Marianne ventured farther onto the frozen river despite the people warning her against it. “Don’t do it, ma’am!” someone shouted. “You’re going to fall through the ice!”

Several other bystanders urged her back to safety, but she couldn’t ignore the pitiful howls of Bandit, who had fallen through the ice. The dog wasn’t going to be able to get out on his own. Marianne had already spent an agonizing five minutes encouraging the border collie to clamber out. Bandit tried, but each time it looked as if he’d succeed, another section of ice broke, and he plunged back into the freezing water.

Marianne crawled on all fours across the ice, the cold quickly penetrating her thin leather gloves.

“If the ice can’t hold a dog, it can’t hold you!” someone on the shore shouted.

Maybe, but she knew the Boundary Channel better than most of the city dwellers who walked alongside this oddly shaped tail of the Potomac River in the heart of Washington, DC. She had photographed it last spring, wearing hip-high galoshes and wading into the shallows to take pictures for the Department of the Interior. Most of the lagoon was shallow and only got deep out in the middle where Bandit had fallen through. The ice beneath her was probably frozen solid.

Probably. If she thought about it any longer, she’d be too scared to continue, so she lowered herself to lie flat on the ice, using her feet to nudge closer to Bandit.

“Get him, Aunt Marianne, please!” Sam was the only person among the dozens on shore who urged her forward. What nine-year-old boy didn’t love his dog? She had to at least try to save Bandit. The only tool she had was a fishermen’s net that had been abandoned on the riverbank. She’d throw it toward Bandit and hope she could pull him out.

Her teeth chattered. Was it from cold or fear? Probably both. A layer of crusty snow atop the ice gave her enough traction to creep farther ahead.

Then a man’s voice, louder than the others, sounded over the crowd. “Luke, don’t be a fool!”

“Please, mister,” Sam begged. “Please help Aunt Marianne save my dog!”

She risked a glance over her shoulder, grateful to see another man crawling out onto the ice. She hadn’t wanted to do this alone, but no one else volunteered.

“I don’t think the ice can hold both of us,” she called back to him, her voice shaking from the cold.

“It can where you are,” he said, then lowered himself to his stomach. He gave a healthy push against a post sticking through the ice and propelled quickly across the frozen channel toward her.

What a handsome man. Black hair, dark eyes, and a face animated with both fear and exhilaration. He was soon alongside her, his breath coming in white wisps.

"Hello, Aunt Marianne," he said. They both lay flat on the ice, side by side. An odd way to meet a perfect stranger.

"Careful," she cautioned. "The water gets deeper only a couple of feet ahead. I don't think it will hold us both."

"I *know* it won't," he said. "Hand me the net."

"Are you sure? I'm lighter. It might be better if I go."

His gaze flicked down her length. They both wore long wool coats, gloves, and boots, but he was a lot taller than she was.

"One of us is probably going to end up in the water," he said. "Your skirts will be a big problem if it's you. I'll be okay."

"I don't think it's safe." Her teeth started to chatter again.

"Of course it's not safe." He grinned. "Hand me the net."

"Luke, get back to shore this instant!" an angry voice commanded, but Luke didn't even glance back.

"Don't worry about that guy," Luke said. "It's only my brother, Gray. Being a worrywart is what older brothers are supposed to do."

She laughed a little. "I know all about big brothers. I've got one too. Here's the net. If you can make it a few more feet, you can toss it to the dog."

He nodded, but instead of taking the net, he grabbed her hand and squeezed. "This is sort of fun, don't you think?"

"Actually, I'm a little terrified," she admitted.

"Me too."

How odd. He was afraid but still seemed elated. Her eyes felt captured by his, and even through their gloves, it felt like a spark of electricity hummed between them.

"Luke!" Gray shouted again from the shore. "The ice can't hold you. Both of you need to come back. Someone has sent for a boat."

Bandit wasn't whining anymore. He was barely even moving, just wiggling enough to keep his snout above water. Marianne met Luke's eyes. Going back would be the prudent thing to do, but she'd come too far to turn back now.

"Bandit can't last until the boat gets here," she said.

"I know. Give me the net, and I'll go get him. Wish me luck, Aunt Marianne."

With that, he began sliding forward. The stern man on shore continued to holler warnings, but others cheered him on. Luke was moving over the deeper part of the lagoon now, where the ice wasn't solid. It let out a *crack*, and Luke stopped, still a few yards from the dog. The net would extend his reach a few feet, but not much. After a moment Luke began inching forward again. Bandit sensed help was near and started struggling, reaching a paw onto the ice and trying to climb out.

More cracks sounded, like whips slicing through the air. The ledge of ice tilted, and water sloshed up, soaking Luke with a wave of icy water in his face, but he calmly tossed the net toward Bandit, whose scrabbling paws got caught in its mesh. Luke began tugging, but the ice broke, and he plunged into the water.

A cry tore from Marianne's throat. Luke was completely submerged, but within seconds, his head rose above the surface, and with a mighty push, he shoved Bandit up onto the ice. Cheers rose from the crowd as Bandit staggered toward land.

Luke was still in the water and needed help. He flung the net toward her, still hanging on to one end. She reached for it but screamed in frustration when it proved a few inches beyond her reach. She held her breath and moved forward, terrified the ice would break, but Luke's stricken face was white with pain. She moved another inch, stretched her hand farther, and managed to wrap her fingers around a loop in the net.

"I've got it!" she yelled. She tugged but couldn't pull Luke out.

"Hang on, ma'am. We're coming."

The grim voice came from behind her. Luke's brother was traversing the solid portion of ice, lying flat as he reached out toward her. He grabbed her ankle and pulled on it, but she slid only a few inches before the slack in the net went taut with Luke's weight, and she stopped.

Another set of hands grabbed her other ankle and pulled. The bystanders on the shore formed a human chain as the men pulled with all they had. The net between her and Luke squeaked from the tension, but it gave Luke enough momentum to climb out onto the ice. Now that he was out of the water, the men were able to pull a lot harder, and Marianne zoomed backwards toward the shoreline, Luke following. She scrambled safely up onto solid land.

Luke arrived right behind her. His teeth chattered, and trembling racked his entire body. A pair of men hauled him upright to yank his sopping coat off, then his shirt. His skin was blanched white as his brother bundled him into a dry coat, then used a scarf to dry his hair.

Luke was laughing. He still quaked with cold, but she'd never seen such a good-natured smile as people reached out to shake his hand and slap him on the back. He looked around for Bandit, who was getting a rubdown from Sam. Luke went to meet the dog.

It was the perfect photograph.

She raced to the juniper tree where she'd abandoned her government-issued Brownie camera. It didn't take long to fling the lanyard around her neck and return to the bank. By now Luke had picked up Bandit, holding the shivering dog against his bare chest, still laughing.

"Can I take your photograph?" she asked.

His smile deepened in a combination of pride and happiness. It was all the permission she needed. She steadied the boxy camera against her diaphragm as she looked down through the viewfinder, slid the aperture open, and pressed the lever to take the photograph. The sun reflecting on

snow made plenty of ambient light, so it only took a few seconds to capture the image.

“Thanks,” she said.

Luke bent over to set Bandit on the ground. “Thank *you*, Aunt Marianne.”

He looked like he wanted to say more, but his brother, a tall dark-haired man who looked similar to Luke except a lot more serious, was dragging him toward a carriage.

“Let’s get you home and in front of a warm fire,” Gray said. “We’ll be lucky if you don’t catch your death of cold.”

“Always a ray of sunshine,” Luke chided, but he didn’t resist as his brother nudged him toward the carriage. Luke climbed inside, but before he closed the carriage door, he met her gaze across the frozen landscape and flashed her a wink.

The carriage rolled away, and just like that, the most amazing man she’d ever met was gone.

Luke Delacroix wrapped his hands around the mug of hot cocoa, leaning so close to the fireplace that the heat from the flames baked the side of his face. He savored the sensation, for he was still chilled to the bone. A weird sense of elation lingered as he thought of that moment on the ice, lying flat with his hand clinging to a woman who had more courage than all the bystanders on the shore put together. She was a complete stranger who didn’t feel like a stranger at all. She had dark hair and pretty blue eyes filled with trepidation, but she was out there. He’d been in her presence for only a few minutes but already admired her. Sometimes people revealed their true character very quickly.

He didn’t know who she was, but he’d have it figured out before the end of the day. It would be easy. Number one: he was a spy and good at ferreting out information. Number two: the Brownie camera she used had a government stamp on the case, meaning she probably worked for the Department of the Interior. How many female photographers named Marianne worked for the Department of the Interior?

Gray stomped into the parlor and set a bowl of steaming chowder on the table along with a wedge of cheese.

“Eat all of it,” he ordered, still annoyed over what had happened at the Boundary Channel. They had been on their way to move in to Luke’s new office when snarled traffic slowed their carriage and Luke noticed the bystanders watching a lone woman venture onto the ice to save a floundering dog. He’d ordered the carriage to stop so he could help.

Luke exchanged the mug of cocoa for the soup and began eating even though he wasn’t hungry. The chowder was hot, filling, and the doctor said he still needed to gain another ten pounds to replace the thirty he’d lost in Cuba.

“Should I send a wire to the landlord, telling him we can’t take possession of the office today?” Gray asked. “I don’t want you leaving the house if your hair is still wet. You could get pneumonia.”

Luke was thirty years old, but Gray still smothered him like a mother hen since he got back from Cuba, sick and emaciated. Luke didn’t mind. He’d put his family through a lot over the past year, and he owed them. So he tolerated Gray’s fussing, ate even when he was no longer hungry, and tried to behave himself.

Tried but didn’t always succeed. What sort of man would he be if he ignored that woman attempting to rescue a dog all on her own?

He leaned his head toward the fire, rubbing his hair to make it dry faster. “We can still move in today. I need to get the Washington bureau of the magazine up and running. The November elections might seem a long way off, but I’ve got an interview with Dickie Shuster at the end of the week. I need to be moved in before that.”

“We have to be careful,” Gray said, and this time Luke knew the warning had nothing to do with wet hair or proper nutrition. It had everything to do with the fact that Dickie Shuster was slick, underhanded, and probably the cleverest reporter in all of Washington. “Dickie is still an ally of the Magraders. He will be quietly working to undermine you in hopes of promoting Clyde and the Magrader cause.”

“Wrong,” Luke replied. “Dickie will do whatever is necessary to promote *himself*.”

The Delacroixs and the Magraders had been bitter rivals for generations. They’d never liked each other, but their animosity boiled over shortly after the Civil War. The Delacroix family, long one of the wealthiest merchant families in Virginia, had lost everything in the war. Their home was burned to the ground, and all four of their merchant vessels were seized by the federal government and never returned. Following the war, their ships were put up for auction. Luke’s father attended the auction to bid on *The Sparrow*, the smallest of the ships, in a desperate attempt to start rebuilding their fortune.

Gloating at the auction was Jedidiah Magrader, the patriarch of the Magrader clan, who drove the price higher and higher. Luke’s father couldn’t compete, and the Magraders bought *The Sparrow* for a fraction of its worth. The Magraders didn’t even export their goods, so they had no need for a merchant ship. They simply bought it to rub his father’s nose in the fact that they could. If there was any doubt about the Magraders’ motives, that was put to rest when Jedidiah stripped the ship of its valuables, then burned it in the harbor. “We had a great Confederate bonfire!” he had bragged to the press.

That incident elevated the bitter family feud into one of seething hatred, and it grew worse over the years. The Magraders weren’t above bribing journalists to throw mud at the Delacroixs, and they’d used Dickie Schuster in the past.

“Dickie can be flipped, and I intend to flip him,” Luke said.

It wouldn't be easy, but Luke had plenty of connections in this city. He was also smarter than the Magruders. He didn't mind cozying up to Dickie Shuster in order to get an upper hand in the local press. Now that his health was on the mend, it was time to resume his life as a journalist, and that meant moving into his new office.

Freezing air shocked his system the moment he stepped outside again. He ignored it and climbed into the carriage, Gray following. If all went well, they could still get him settled into his new office by the end of the day. He tried to beat back his shivers as the carriage set off toward downtown Washington.

"Have the Magruders made any progress stealing revenue from our spice business?" Luke asked, desperate to get his mind off the chill seeping into his core again.

The corners of Gray's mouth turned down. "They're trying. Their bottled spices went nowhere, but they're stealing a ton of my business in vanilla extract."

The Delacroix family had built their fortune on expensive spices and seasonings, while the Magruders became even richer by selling canned foods. The families had always been rivals, but now the gloves were off and the stakes were higher. Clyde Magruder, the leader of the family, had been elected to Congress and would surely try to wield that power to grind the Delacroixs into the dirt.

"The Magruders are using chemicals to imitate vanilla," Gray continued. "It's a concoction cooked up in a laboratory, made of wood-tar creosote and chemical flavorings. It costs pennies to produce by the vat, so I'll never be able to compete on price. Yes, they're hurting our business."

And Delacroix Global Spice was a very lucrative business. They imported the finest spices from around the world and were the most prestigious brand on the market. The Delacroix name was synonymous with quality and prestige, but the Magruders were the opposite. They made their fortune mass producing consumer staples like canned beans and potted ham. They adulterated their products with fillers and preservatives, but they kept their prices low. Now they were encroaching into the spice business, and it was a threat.

Luke pulled the edges of his coat tighter as he stared out at the gloomy January cityscape. He wore his warmest winter coat, thick gloves, and a wool scarf, but the chill was still getting to him. Even the air in his lungs felt cold, and he began shivering again.

"Luke, this isn't a good idea," Gray said.

If they could just get to the new office building, he wouldn't be so cold. It had a coal-fired heater, and he'd be able to warm up eventually.

"I'll be okay," he said, wishing his teeth did not chatter as he spoke. "And I really hate the Magruders. Or *Congressman* Magruder, I now must say. Can you believe it? I heard he's renting the fanciest town house on Franklin Square. Now that I'm back in Washington, I'll make sure his chances for reelection evaporate."

Gray leaned forward and opened the panel behind the driver's bench. "Please turn the carriage around," he instructed the driver. "We're heading home." He settled back into his bench, concern darkening his face. "Don't let impatience lead you into doing something foolish. You'll be out of the action for weeks if you come down with a case of pneumonia."

Luke sighed. Gray was probably right, but this was about so much more than the enmity between two families or the price of spices. This was about the niggling, insatiable need to take Clyde Magruder down a peg. The man didn't belong in Congress, and Luke could get him out.

His gaze strayed out the carriage window to where the Capitol Building loomed in the distance, its iconic white dome a symbol of the power wielded by the men of this city. Somehow he was going to figure out a way to influence what went on beneath that dome. It would probably take decades, but he'd get there in the end. Gray was right. He couldn't afford to get sick just because he was impatient.

The carriage turned around, and he noticed a flower cart brimming with roses and carnations. The rest of the city was dreary, overcast, and covered in snow, but the splash of red caught his eye.

"I wonder how they get roses to bloom in January."

Gray followed his gaze to the flower cart. "The Department of Agriculture has acres of greenhouses. They can force anything to bloom."

"Stop the carriage," Luke said impulsively. In a world blanketed by ice and snow, it was suddenly vitally important to admire those flowers. Once the carriage stopped, he bounded outside and reached for the largest bundle of roses on the man's cart. "Can you have these delivered?" he asked.

A young boy helping at the cart eagerly accepted the task in exchange for a few coins.

"Do you want to send a message with it?" the vendor asked.

He did. The vendor handed him a card. Luke's hand shook from the cold, but he quickly jotted a message.

Thank you for a memorable morning. Luke.

"Send them to the Department of the Interior, addressed to Miss Marianne," he said.

He beamed with elation as he returned to the carriage.

Two

Marianne Magruder arranged her photographs on the dining room table, wishing she had more room to spread them out. She had moved into this town house when her father was elected to Congress last year. It was one of the most spacious town houses in all of Washington, but it was cramped compared to the dining room in their Baltimore mansion. Here, there was barely room for the mahogany table and sideboard. There was no natural light, but the room had electricity that provided a flood of brightness no matter the time of day, and her father wouldn't be home until late.

This review of her photographs was a special weekly ritual. She picked the best of her work and laid them out for her father's insight, because he understood the needs of Washington bureaucrats better than she did, and his advice was priceless. This week she selected photographs of the Washington Monument, the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station, and children playing in the snow outside the Library of Congress.

"Why don't you add the one of that man with Sam's dog?" her mother asked. Vera had been alternately horrified and impressed by Marianne's adventure on the ice, and the photograph of the soaked man holding Bandit in triumph was the best picture she'd taken all week. She had been dazzled as she watched the photograph develop in the dark room. The man she knew only as Luke must have been freezing, but it didn't dim the exuberance in his laughing gaze as he stared straight at her with Bandit hugged against his bare chest. The photograph captured a raw, heroic man only seconds after emerging from the ice, his impulsive act the embodiment of masculine courage and strength.

"It's not the sort of picture the government hired me to take," she said as she set out more mundane photographs.

She hadn't been able to stop thinking about Luke, especially after the arrival of a dozen red roses. They had been waiting for her when she arrived at work the day after the incident. She wished he had signed his complete name to the card so she could send a note of thanks, but just like his quick arrival and departure at the ice, he seemed to dip into her life like a whirlwind and leave just as quickly.

"The picture of the man with the dog is better than these boring shots of buildings," Vera said as she scanned the photographs. She let out a delicate yawn and fought to keep her eyes open.

"Why don't you head up to bed?" Marianne asked.

Vera waved her question away with a perfumed handkerchief.

"Nonsense. I want to be here when your father returns."

That probably wouldn't be for at least another hour. Clyde Magruder had spent most of his first year in Congress at meetings, business dinners, and in smoke-filled rooms. Tonight he was dining with the chairman of the Committee on Manufactures, which was Clyde's only committee appointment, and he was eager to impress the young chairman.

Life in Congress had been a difficult adjustment for her father. He was used to helming one of the richest companies in America, but now he was a freshman congressman who answered to a man half his age. It was rare for him to return home before nine o'clock. And sometimes he didn't return home at all.

As much as Marianne idolized her father, she wished he could be a better husband.

Still, she wouldn't change this past year in Washington for anything in the world. She and Vera had grown extraordinarily close ever since moving here. Her mother had been nervous about leaving Baltimore, where she was the reigning queen of high society. Now she had to start over in a new city as a mere freshman congressman's wife, and suddenly she had grown very dependent on Marianne. They did everything together. They shopped together, planned Vera's tea parties together, and even gossiped together. For the first time in Marianne's life, it felt like they had a normal mother-daughter relationship, and she savored every hour of it.

Vera wandered over to the sideboard where the week's rejected photographs were in a stack. She pulled out the one of Luke and wiggled it suggestively. "This is the best of the lot. Go ahead and add it into the stack to show your father."

Marianne considered the suggestion. Although the Department of the Interior primarily wanted photographs documenting specific government initiatives, they liked occasional artistic shots taken in the city.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Marianne said. Yesterday she'd told Papa about the incident with the dog, but not about the photograph. Something about it seemed too personal. It was a shared moment of communion between herself and a complete stranger as they embarked on a daring venture together. It had been one of the most exciting moments of her life, and she wasn't ready to share it yet. Normally she let her father witness her entire life through her photographs. She showed him everything. But she didn't want him seeing that man with the dog. Something warned her against it.

It was almost ten o'clock before her father arrived home, and masculine voices outside the door indicated Clyde had brought company. Vera immediately fled upstairs in horror. Her mother had already taken her hair down and wore nothing but a casual lounging dress without the painfully tight corset. Appearances were everything to Vera, and she would never let herself be seen so casually attired.

Marianne had no such qualms and did nothing aside from straightening the collar of her blouse before heading to the entryway to greet her father, who was already hanging up his jacket. His guest was a redheaded man with an enormous walrus mustache. She suspected he was Congressman Roland Dern, because Clyde had told her how much he disapproved of that mustache. Congressman Dern was in his mid-thirties and the chairman of her

father's only committee assignment. That meant Congressman Dern was her father's boss.

"Roland, I'd like to introduce my daughter, Marianne. She's the one I brag incessantly about."

Congressman Dern gave a polite nod. "I've come to see your photographs," he said. "I didn't realize when we began our dinner that you have a standing appointment with your father every Thursday night. I'm sorry to have delayed the ritual, so let's not beat around the bush. Show me your pictures."

She looked to Clyde for permission. Normally the weekly ritual was an event she and her parents enjoyed together. Clyde seemed uneasy as he gave a stiff nod of consent. How awkward it must be for her father to be beholden to a man young enough to be his son, but Marianne pretended not to notice the tension as she led the way into the dining room where the best of her photographs were on display.

The scent of cigar smoke lingered on both men as they circled the table. Her father paused before the photograph she'd taken of children playing in the snow outside the Library of Congress. The picture captured the spirit of unabashed joy as the children romped and played.

"This belongs in a museum," Clyde said, chuckling at the snow-encrusted children. "The lighting, the expressions, the composition . . . all of it is sheer poetry captured on celluloid. It makes me want to pick those boys up and take them home with me."

She smiled but didn't miss the hint of regret in his voice. Clyde had always wanted lots of children, but her mother's fragile health precluded more.

"The government pays you to take photographs like this?" Congressman Dern asked, disapproval plain in his voice.

Her father heard it and jumped to her defense. "They need as many photographs as possible in preparation for the McMillan Plan."

The McMillan Plan was an optimistic vision to tear down old government buildings and clear the way for a huge national park around which new cultural and administrative buildings would be erected. Everyone she knew, including most of the people at the Department of the Interior, thought the McMillan Plan was an extravagant waste of money. That was why she'd been assigned to photograph the existing architecture and how people used the public spaces.

"The entire McMillan Plan is a misuse of taxpayer funds," Congressman Dern said. "It's all so that Washington can compete with the great capital cities of Europe. I say the business of our country is *business*. Not lavish green spaces."

"I agree," Clyde said as he wandered over to her collection of images of the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station. "This one is okay," he said after a pause.

It was faint praise. Her father was no artist, but he had keen instincts, and she trusted his judgment.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asked.

He continued frowning at the picture as he studied it. “Do you have any others of the train station?”

“I haven’t enlarged them, but I’ve got a dozen or so other shots.”

“I’d like to see them.”

The other pictures were only three by five inches in size, the standard format of the Brownie camera. After she developed the film, she selected only the best photographs to enlarge. The eight-by-ten-inch pictures would be added to the government repositories that would document the city for future generations. Even without the McMillan Plan, Washington was undergoing a state of regeneration as the red brick buildings of the colonial era were torn down and replaced by monumental buildings in the neoclassical style. She’d been hired to document the process as old buildings were torn down, the land graded and levelled, and the skeletal frameworks of new buildings were erected.

She brought over the other pictures of the Baltimore and Potomac and handed them to her father, who flipped through them quickly, identifying three and setting them on the dining table.

“These might make your case better,” he said.

“Why?” she asked. The three close-up photographs seemed boring and didn’t capture the gothic beauty of the station. The B&P was only thirty years old and a masterful example of Victorian gothic architecture. It was made of red brick and featured three towers with slate roofs and ornamental ironwork. Its beauty made it one of the most popular images on the postcards bought by tourists. It was only three blocks from the Capitol and was the primary railroad station used by everyone serving in Congress.

“If the McMillan Plan passes, the B&P is slated for demolition,” Clyde said. “Congressmen see it every day, but your close-ups highlight the expense that went into creating the hand-carved entablatures and the ornamental ironwork. There’s value in that. Roland? What do you think?”

The younger man nodded. “If the government tears down a perfectly good railroad station for the benefit of a public park, I think the nation should know what we stand to lose.”

Clyde walked over to the sideboard to return the smaller pictures, then paused. “What’s this?”

She stiffened. Her father held Luke’s photograph in his hands, and his face was a mask of disapproval. True, Luke wore no shirt in the picture, but it wasn’t a lewd photograph. A coat was draped over his shoulders, and Bandit covered most of his torso.

“That’s the man who got Bandit out of the ice,” she said. “I couldn’t resist taking a picture.”

“*This* is the man who rescued Bandit?” he asked in a surprised tone.

“Yes. He was very heroic.” She was about to say that he had even sent her roses afterward, but the grim look on Clyde’s face made her reconsider.

After a moment he set the picture back on the stack. “It’s probably best you don’t see that man again,” he said stiffly.

He gestured for Congressman Dern to follow him into his private office, leaving Marianne to stare after him in bewildered confusion.

Luke's jaunt beneath the ice turned out to be more troublesome than expected. He didn't catch pneumonia or anything drastic like Gray had feared. It simply sapped his strength beyond all reason. He spent the next few days buried underneath a mound of blankets in his bedroom, as it seemed each time he emerged from beneath the covers, he got the shivers again.

What an irony. For fifteen months he'd been locked up in a Cuban jail cell, sweltering in the relentless heat and tormented by fantasies of a tall, ice-cold glass of water. God must have a strange sense of humor, for now Luke never wanted to experience ice water again.

By Monday he was ready to take possession of the new office. The faster he could get the Washington bureau for *Modern Century* magazine established, the quicker he could launch his bid to knock a handful of congressmen out of office. The November elections seemed a long way off, but researching these men's weaknesses and beginning the subtle campaign to take them down would need careful planning.

His desk, the meeting table, and the shelving had already been delivered to the new office, but the books, typewriter, telephone, and office equipment all needed to be lugged in. The most difficult item to navigate up the twisting stairwell was the six-foot bulletin board. Luke banged his shin three times on the journey to the third floor.

"Where do you want it?" Gray asked when they finally got the bulletin board inside the office.

"On the wall behind the desk."

It was a large room with two windows overlooking a working-class part of town. The desk was on one side of the office, the table in the middle, and the hip-high bookshelves lined the walls beneath the windows. There was a separate table for a telephone and typewriter. For now Luke was the only reporter, but if the Washington bureau proved fruitful, there might someday be more.

The board was soon hung, and the first thing Luke tacked onto it was a list of five congressmen's names. Beside it he pinned a postcard of the Philadelphia skyline.

Gray cocked a brow as he studied the list of congressmen. "I already know why you want Clyde Magruder out of office, but what's wrong with the guy from Michigan?"

"He's in Clyde's back pocket," Luke replied. "All these men are following Magruder's lead in blocking reform of the food and drug industry. If any congressman looks the other way while manufacturers dump chemicals into the nation's food supply, I'm going to ensure he loses the next election." He gave an angelic smile and placed a hand over his heart. "My civic duty."

Gray stared at the postcard of Philadelphia, his face suddenly sad. “Luke . . . I think you need to ease up. What happened to those people in Philadelphia wasn’t your fault.”

Philadelphia would forever represent Luke’s greatest shame. Five years ago, their family had briefly tried to forge a truce with Clyde Magruder. Luke had been chosen to lead the charge because there was too much bad blood among the other members of their family. The Delacroixs and the Magruders would never be friends, but the hope was to ease the tension with a modest joint venture. The plan would combine the Delacroix reputation for quality with the Magruders’ ability to mass produce food. Clyde Magruder proposed a line of pricey coffee, using the Magruder packaging facilities but branded with the Delacroix name. Both companies stood to gain.

Luke held his nose and worked with Clyde on a distribution plan. Gray imported the finest coffee beans from Kenya, and the Magruders did everything else. They rolled out the new line of coffee in Philadelphia, a city famous for its fine coffeehouses.

Luke should have known better than to trust Clyde Magruder, who adulterated their top-notch coffee with cheap ground chicory and artificial flavorings to mask the chicory aftertaste. The resulting coffee tasted fine, with a smooth flavor and enticing aroma, but the cannisters bore no indication that there was anything but coffee inside. The chemical combination proved fatal to three people within a week of the coffee going on sale. While most people could easily digest the cheap concoction cooked up in the Magruder factory, some people had sensitivities to chicory root that proved fatal.

Three people died because of that coffee. All of them had family, friends, and children. The devastation left in the wake of the tainted coffee would ripple through those people’s lives for decades, and no, Luke couldn’t blithely forget about it.

“Could you help me with this box of books?” Luke asked. He didn’t really need help with it, but he’d do anything to divert the conversation from Philadelphia.

Gray moved the box over to the bookshelves. “You’ve been taking risks and pressing your luck ever since Philadelphia. You practically killed yourself in Cuba. When are you going to move past it?”

“Maybe when those five congressmen have been booted out of office. Maybe when there are finally laws to stop the Magruders from polluting their food with fillers and adulterants. That would be a start.”

“Luke, what happened in Philadelphia wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known. You tried your best.”

“And my best resulted in three dead people.” He wandered to the window, staring out over the bleak view of wet concrete and melting slush. “Whenever I start to laugh, I think about them,” he whispered. “When I hear beautiful music, I am reminded that they can’t hear it too. They are three ghosts who sit on my shoulder wherever I go.”

“And are they good ghosts or bad ghosts?” Gray asked.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, they’re *ghosts*, Gray! The kind who wake you up at night and steal your joy and make you pray to God for forgiveness. That kind of ghost.”

Slow footsteps indicated Gray was coming up behind him, but Luke kept staring out the window, even when his brother laid a hand on his shoulder. “Then you’re going to have to defeat them. Or turn them into something that inspires you to be a better man.”

Luke pushed away from the window and began unpacking the books. For years Gray had been trying to nudge him toward a life of safe, law-abiding good sense. Obey the rules, stay within the lines, don’t rock the boat. It wasn’t in his nature.

“I really hate the Magruders,” Luke said. “They never paid a dime to those people in Philadelphia.”

“But we did,” Gray said. “Those families were all compensated and signed off on the legal settlements.”

“*You* paid them. The Magruders got off scot-free. They’ll do anything for money, so I intend to strike where it will hurt. First I’ll knock Clyde out of Congress, then I’ll go after their company. I’ll burn it down and force them to start over.”

“Absolutely not!” Gray lashed out.

Luke let out a snort of laughter. “Don’t be so literal,” he teased. “Of course I won’t actually burn down their factory. I bet it’s fully insured, so where’s the advantage in that? I’ll expose the Magruders for who they really are, ruin their business, and change the laws so that they can never exploit those loopholes again.”

Across the room, Gray still looked at him with that mournful, somber expression. While Luke used to tease Gray about his overly protective ways, Gray had been a hero over the past year. Luke wouldn’t have survived the crucible of imprisonment in Cuba if Gray hadn’t made repeated visits to keep his flagging spirits alive. They were complete opposites, but over the past year Luke had learned to love and admire his older brother.

“Gray, I’m sorry,” he said. “When I was in Cuba, I thought I was going to die. My biggest regret was that I was going to leave this world without making so much as a scratch on it. That wasn’t how I wanted to leave. I told myself that if I made it out of there, I would do something to make the world a better place. I had fifteen months with nothing to do but read the Bible and pray to God. In the end, the only sense I could make of what happened in Philadelphia was that it was a clarion wake-up call. A blast from a trumpet shaking me out of complacency and setting me on a course to do something important. And getting Congress cleaned up will be a good starting point.”

Gray sighed. “Luke, you’ve already accomplished great things. You single-handedly broke up a spy ring in Cuba and stamped out corruption in the War Department. The articles you write for *Modern Century* go out all over the nation to sway opinion. I spend my time figuring out a better way to sell pepper or paprika, but your stories move the world. I’m proud of you. Dad never said it, but I will.”

Luke paused. Gray was twelve years older than he was, so he'd always been more like a father than a brother, and his opinion meant the world to Luke.

"Thanks for that," he said, a little embarrassed at the emotion in his voice.

Gray turned away and lifted a thick package wrapped in butcher's paper from the box he was unpacking. "What's this?"

The breath in Luke's lungs froze. "Nothing! Let me have it." He crossed the office in two steps and snatched the package, then shoved it into the bottom drawer of his desk. He was tempted to lock the drawer except it would be a dead giveaway that these papers were precious to him.

"Good heavens," Gray said. "Love letters? International intrigue? I can't imagine what's got your protective hackles so raised."

Luke scratched behind his ear and looked out the window. "Like I said, it's nothing."

"When you were a little kid, do you know how I could always tell when you were lying?"

Luke quit scratching behind his ear. It was an old tell he'd forgotten about. He folded his hands across his chest and grinned. "Fine, it's something," he admitted. "I'm not ready to tell anyone about it yet."

"Whatever it is, it's making you blush."

He was blushing because he was nervous and embarrassed. He wasn't ready to peel back the layers of his soul and expose this wildly romantic, overblown experiment to his fusty older brother.

"Maybe someday I'll be brave enough to show it to the world, but for now?" He leaned over and locked the drawer. "For now, I'm keeping it to myself."

Once Luke's office was operational, he set about tracking down the lovely Marianne. He knew almost nothing about her except that she was pretty and valiant and that he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her in the two weeks since they met on the ice.

The Department of the Interior was housed in a massive building on F Street with two marble wings built atop a granite foundation. The department was a hodgepodge of government agencies that didn't neatly fit anywhere else. It oversaw the US Geological Survey, the Census Bureau, the Patent and Trademark Office, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Pensions, and a dozen smaller agencies.

Luke had an old friend who worked in the department's accounting office. Oscar might have access to payroll records that could lead to Marianne's identity.

Luke got straight to the point after entering Oscar's crowded office. "I know the department has a team of photographers documenting the state of the city," he said. "Do you know one named Marianne?"

Sadly, Oscar had no access to employee records. Over six hundred people worked for the Department of the Interior, and Oscar didn't know of anyone named Marianne, but he managed payments for the department's external vendors.

"I pay a weekly bill for our photographers to use a darkroom on Twelfth Street every Friday morning," Oscar said. "You could probably track her down there. Better hurry, though. There's a rumor that the government photographers will be getting the axe soon."

"What do you mean?"

Oscar rolled his eyes. "Penny pinchers are always looking for ways to trim the budget. They're saying that the government has plenty of blueprints to document all our buildings and bridges, so they don't think the photographs add anything."

Luke frowned. It was hard for a woman to make her way in this city, and he didn't like the thought of Marianne losing her job because of tightfisted government bureaucrats.

"Thanks," he said to Oscar, casually strolling from the office.

Where did this clawing sense of urgency to protect Marianne come from? He didn't even know her, but felt an instinctive need to look after her. He had connections throughout the city, and if Marianne needed help, he would be there to provide it.

Three

Marianne trudged down the sidewalk on Friday morning, cradling the satchel of photographic negatives for the pictures she'd taken this week. Ice and a crusty film of snow covered most of the sidewalk, but she aimed for the few patches of bare concrete as she made her way to the Gunderson Photography Studio. It was the largest studio in the city, with a gallery in the lobby, a studio for making portraits, and darkroom space that could be rented by the hour.

It was mercifully warm inside. She flashed a smile toward old Mrs. Gunderson at the front counter. "Is the government darkroom available?"

"Abel Zakowski is still using it, but he should be out soon." Abel also worked for the Department of the Interior, although they performed drastically different tasks. While she took photographs of people and buildings all over the city, Abel took photographs at government speeches and events.

Marianne took a seat in the waiting area. It was crowded today, with a number of families lined up to have their portraits made. Photography was becoming more affordable, with some people coming every few years for new family pictures. Marianne's gaze ran across the photographs mounted on the wall. None of them were to her liking. They were formal poses taken before props of Grecian columns or painted backdrops, whereas Marianne preferred capturing people out in the real world. Sometimes it was pictures of workday routines that were the most moving. Last year she had photographed girls working in a fish cannery down by the wharves, and those pictures had been submitted to the Bureau of Labor to argue for better enforcement of child labor laws. Three of those girls were only fourteen years old, and seeing their young faces drawn with exhaustion was more persuasive than any dry government report.

She still had a few minutes before Abel left the darkroom, so she took a well-thumbed novel from her handbag. Opening the book, she was soon transported to the arid landscapes of seventeenth-century Spain and the adventures of long-ago people.

"Hello, Aunt Marianne."

She caught her breath as her gaze flew up to the man standing beside her chair.

"Hello, Luke," she said, trying to block the thrill from her voice but probably failing. He'd come looking for her. This couldn't be a coincidence. Not after the roses, and especially not after the way he was currently gazing down at her with roguish delight. "Thank you for the roses."

"You're welcome. May I join you?"

There was an empty chair beside her, and he filled it the moment she nodded.

"Have you recovered from the ice?" she asked.

"Fully. How's the dog?"

“Bandit is doing well, and my nephew thinks you are the bravest man in the city. How did you know I would be here?” Her heart still pounded at Luke’s unexpected arrival, for he was as attractive as she remembered.

“Rumor has it that the photographers who work at Interior get their photographs developed here on Friday mornings, and I couldn’t resist the temptation to seek you out.” There wasn’t much room in the crowded lobby, so he was pressed close to her side, and energy and excitement immediately hummed between them.

“I’m glad you did,” she said, seeing no reason to be coy.

His gaze dropped to the book on her lap, and he tilted to read the spine. “*Don Quixote*?”

“It’s my favorite novel,” she said.

Luke slanted her a disapproving glance. “But you’re reading a terrible translation.”

“I am? I didn’t know there was more than one.”

“*Don Quixote* has been translated into English eleven times in the last two hundred years,” Luke said. “The twelfth will be out later this year, and it’s the best.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m the translator.”

She burst into laughter. “No!”

He grinned. “Yes!”

“Why are you bothering to translate a book that’s already been translated so often?”

“Because the other translations are lousy. I’ve read them all, and know I can do better.”

It was such an arrogant thing to say, but it was impossible not to smile at his unabashed boasting, and if he had read eleven different translations of *Don Quixote*, he must love the novel as much as she did.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” he continued. “This translation is shamefully close to my heart, and aside from my editor at the publishing company, no one knows about it.”

The fact that he shared the secret with her triggered a tiny thrill. “Why haven’t you told anyone about it?”

“It’s embarrassing.” He blushed madly as he spoke, so apparently he was genuinely sensitive about it. This was a man who risked his life to save a stranger’s dog but was embarrassed about his secret translation project. “It’s not a traditional translation. I’ve modernized it. I’m not as long-winded as Cervantes, and English is a very different language than Spanish. I’m afraid I took some literary license. A lot, actually.”

Marianne’s brows rose. “Are you allowed to do that?”

He shrugged. “I’m doing it. The other translations are so literal. A word-for-word translation sounds unnatural in English. I want the text to heave with emotion. I don’t want Don Quixote to be sad, I want him to rend his garments and howl in despair. I want blood and tears on the page. It’s going to be a controversial translation. A lot of people will hate it.”

“Blood and tears on the page? My, we *are* extravagant today.”

He preened at her comment. “We are extravagant every day,” he admitted. “Passion is what sets the world ablaze and drives men to strike out for the horizon and discover new worlds. It makes me get up in the morning looking for a new dragon to slay or an antiquated text begging for the breath of new life.”

She couldn’t wait for his *Don Quixote* translation. If he wrote with the same fervor with which he spoke, the book would probably burst into flame while she read it.

“The darkroom is all yours, Marianne.”

It was Abel Zakowski, her fellow photographer from the department, nodding to her on his way out the front door. Never had she been less eager to head into the darkroom.

She sent an apologetic glance to Luke. “I only get an hour, so I can’t loiter.”

“I’ve never been in a darkroom,” Luke said. “Can I join you?”

She longed to spend more time with him, but a darkroom wasn’t the ideal place. “It can be a little stinky.”

“I don’t mind stinky,” he said with a good-humored wink.

She had a lot of work to squeeze into the next hour, so she tucked *Don Quixote* into her satchel and stood. “Then let’s go,” she said, and he rose to follow her.

Was this really happening? Was the world’s most charming and exciting man only steps behind her as they headed down a narrow hallway toward the darkroom?

She led the way inside, where the sharp scent of silver nitrate was ever-present in the air. She pulled the heavy drape away from the only window to let daylight into the room.

“This is where all the magic happens,” she said. The room wasn’t much bigger than a closet, with a worktable mounted against a wall and shelves laden with jugs of chemicals. She watched him scan the room, noting the bathing trays, the glass plates, the wooden frames, and stacks of mounting paper. Taking pictures was easy. It was developing them that was the challenge.

“I was planning to enlarge pictures today,” she said. “My camera only takes small photographs, but the government needs them to be at least eight by eleven inches, so we use an enlarging box to make them bigger.”

“Don’t let me interfere,” Luke said. “Do exactly what you would do on any other day. Pretend I’m not here.”

“As if that would be possible,” she quipped as she took a stack of small photographs from her satchel. She kept the negatives in a tin box but would only enlarge the best of them because paper and developing solution was expensive. “Here,” she said, handing Luke the stack. “Have a look and tell me which you think I should enlarge.”

“I’d rather sit here and watch you work. You’re more interesting than”—he glanced at the top picture—“a photograph of the US Capitol. I see

it every day. *You* on the other hand, are a living piece of art. A Gibson Girl. A Fragonard milkmaid. A Botticelli nymph.”

“I’m not a Botticelli.”

“No? Botticelli’s women are beautiful.”

“They’re naked.”

His smile was pure mischief. “Not *all* of them.”

“Most are. Look at those photographs of the Capitol and tell me which you think I should enlarge.”

She watched his expression as he studied them. He moved through the photographs quickly, but the narrowing of his eyes indicated complete concentration.

Then he froze, his expression shocked. “You took this?” he said, his voice aghast as he showed her a photograph of the Capitol dome.

“I did.”

“You had to be crawling on the dome to get this shot!”

“I was.”

“Are you insane?”

She fought not to laugh. “No. And I’m proud of that photograph. I had to work hard for it.”

“You had to risk your *neck* for it. How did you get up there?”

In truth, it had been rather daunting, but her father had pulled strings to get her access, and he was with her the whole way. The dome was eighteen stories high, and she climbed a series of interior spiral and zigzag staircases to get most of the way up. Things didn’t get truly frightening until she climbed higher, where interior metal trusses supported the weight of the dome. It gave her a claustrophobic feeling, and the windowless space made her feel like she was in the hull of a ship, completely surrounded by trusses peppered with bolts the size of her forearm to hold up the concrete dome.

She and her father crawled outside onto the narrow exterior workmen’s ledge so she could photograph the city from two hundred feet in the air. Stepping out into the bright sunlight had been awe-inspiring, but the wind tearing at her hair and clothing had been the biggest surprise. She’d gotten spectacular panoramic photographs of the city, as well as some close-ups of the embellishments on the Capitol dome.

She described the process of getting onto the dome, and Luke seemed both fascinated and appalled that she had done such a thing.

“My father was with me the whole time,” she said.

“He actually permitted you to do such a foolhardy thing?”

“My father has never stopped me from doing anything I truly wanted,” she replied. “Just the opposite. From the time I was a child, he taught me to dream big, and that if I wanted something badly enough, he’d let me fight for it. It didn’t matter that I was a girl. I’ve always known that he would be behind me the whole way.”

“Your father sounds like a wise man.”

She nodded. “I’m very lucky. Now, tell me which of the dome photos you think I should enlarge. I can only do four close-ups and five cityscapes.”

Luke handed the stack back to her. "I'm not an artist. You pick."

She quickly selected the shots that showed the dome at its worst. An appropriations bill for restoring government buildings would be voted on soon, and the top of the dome wasn't something officials could examine themselves.

She attached a large piece of bromide paper to a frame on one end of the enlarging box, then slid the original negative into a smaller frame on the other side.

"Now we need to darken the room, but I'm going to use the arc lamp to send a bright beam of light through the lens and then wait two minutes. The image will be imprinted on the larger piece of paper."

She pulled the drapes closed, plunging the room into darkness, then switched on the tungsten bulb to provide a dim amber glow in the room. The arc lamp at the small end of the enlarging box beamed through the negative, casting the image onto the bromide paper.

"I feel like I should whisper," Luke murmured in the darkness.

"You don't have to," she whispered back. "All we have to do is hold still and not jostle the box. The chemicals are doing all the work."

She repeated the process to enlarge twelve additional pictures, then began the process of developing the photographs.

"This is the stinky part," she warned as she poured solution into the developing trays. She set the first page into the chemical bath, and Luke stood by her shoulder, watching as she gently tipped the tray to keep the liquid gently washing the paper. The images developed quickly, but if she didn't lift them from the solution in time, they darkened to an unacceptable degree. After a minute, she lifted the paper out with tongs and set it in the stop bath to neutralize the chemicals. Ten seconds later, she set it in the final tray to fix the image. Then she clipped the photograph onto a clothesline to dry.

After Luke watched the process a few times, he wanted to try. He caught on quickly, and soon she happily turned the task over to him. He was fun to watch as he went through the steps she'd taught him.

"Do you like being a government photographer?" he asked as he clipped another photograph to the clothesline.

"I love it. Developing the pictures is the most tedious part, but now that I've got you on the job, my life is just about perfect."

He smiled, but it vanished quickly. "I've heard some rumors about the photographers who work at your department."

She wondered about the note of concern in his voice. "That they're going to give us the axe?"

"That's the one."

"Maybe. All the photographers are compiling portfolios of our best work. The hope is that we can convince the department that a picture can tell an important story, but I'll be fine no matter what happens. My father won't let me starve."

Luke continued clipping up her photographs, and even in the dim light she could see the affection on his face. "If your father lets you down, let me know," he said. "I like rescuing damsels in distress."

"I'm not a damsel in distress."

"Could you pretend? I'm actually just searching for an excuse to see you again. Do you think that's something we can arrange?"

"I hope so." She'd never in her life been so attracted to a man, and she scrambled for an opportunity for them to be together. "My father has tickets to a performance at the Lafayette Square Opera House. He'll let us use them if I ask nicely."

Luke let out a low whistle. "He must be well-connected. I tried and failed to get tickets."

"He's a congressman. People tend to offer him things like that."

Luke swiveled to look at her. "Oh? Who is he?"

"Clyde Magruder, representative from the fourth district in Maryland."

Luke blanched and swallowed hard. She smiled, because despite her father's lofty title, he wasn't an intimidating person.

"Your father is Clyde Magruder?" he asked in an awful whisper.

"Yes. Do you know him?" It could be the only reason for his strange behavior.

"Did you know my last name is Delacroix?"

It felt like her heart stopped beating. She blinked, hoping she had misunderstood. "As in Delacroix Global Spice?" she finally stammered.

"Are you joking?"

"I wish I was."

She felt like a sleepwalker as she wandered to the window. The Delacroixs were terrible people. They were arrogant, privileged snobs who looked down on hardworking people like her father and grandfather.

"Your brother has said horrible things about my family," she managed to say. "Unforgivable things."

"That was a long time ago," Luke said.

Not long enough for her to forget. She still remembered coming home from school one blustery autumn day, delighted that she'd finally passed her math class, only to see her mother's tear-stained face as she held a magazine on her lap. Gray Delacroix thought nothing of slandering them in the press, and that interview in which he attacked their entire family caused her parents no end of pain. Her grandfather won a libel suit against him, and the Delacroixs had to pay a shocking settlement fee, but money couldn't restore a tainted reputation.

Her mother wasn't the sort of person who could absorb a punch. Words could leave scars, and that was one her mother still carried.

"Your brother said my grandfather had dirt beneath his fingernails," she said in a pained voice. "That he wasn't fit to be in the food industry."

"That was my brother, not me."

She placed a hand over her heart, willing it to stop racing. She couldn't blame Luke for something his brother had said. After all, it was years ago,

and Luke was too young to have been involved in that nasty lawsuit. He was a good man. He risked his life to save Bandit. They held hands and laughed on the ice, even though they'd both been afraid. The Delacroixs had been trying to drive her family out of business for decades, but surely that was other people in his family, not Luke.

She risked a glance at him. "You don't believe all those terrible things your brother said about us, do you?"

She wanted an immediate denial, but the sadness and regret on his face was all the answer she needed. He *did* believe those things. They *were* enemies.

"Marianne, I'm so sorry," he said. "You seem like a great person, but there's too much bad blood here. We probably shouldn't see each other again."

"You're probably right," she admitted. Any sort of liaison between them would be too difficult, but that didn't stop the wanting. "I only wish we could have had another day or two before we found out."

"Maybe a week," Luke agreed.

"A month?"

"How about a year?"

She had to laugh at how easily he bantered with her. He was fun, but seeing him would be like throwing a bomb into her family's home. It wasn't worth it. At least now she understood why her father got so annoyed when he saw her picture of Luke with the dog. He'd known who Luke was and suggested she have nothing more to do with him. Blood was thicker than water. *Even ice water*, she thought inanely.

At the door, Luke turned to her with an impish smile and wagged his finger in her face. "No more crawling on the Capitol dome, young lady."

"Too dangerous?"

"Too dangerous," he affirmed.

"It probably was," she admitted. "Good luck with the *Don Quixote* translation. I'll look forward to it."

He winked at her. "It will be the best."

Then the amusement in his face turned into reluctant admiration as he glanced back at the photographs hanging on the clothesline. "No matter what else happens, I think your pictures are wonderful. And so are you."

He closed the door behind him, and Marianne felt like she'd just lost a good friend.

Luke was still mulling over his bad luck as he rode the streetcar back to the Alexandria neighborhood where he'd been born and raised.

Marianne Magruder. *Magruder*. Luke had plenty of friends, thousands of acquaintances, a handful of rivals, but only one real enemy in the world, and his name was Clyde Magruder.

Luke wouldn't let an inconvenient attraction stand in the way of a lifelong grudge. No matter how much he admired Marianne, he intended to get Clyde kicked out of Congress.

He walked the last few blocks to the three-story colonial town house he shared with Gray and his wife. He was inexplicably tired as he mounted the steps and prepared to unlock the front door, but then paused.

Arguing voices could be heard inside. He cocked his ear closer to listen, for it was clearly Gray's voice berating Annabelle over something, and that was odd. Gray worshipped the ground Annabelle walked on, and they were still newlyweds. Luke didn't want to walk into an embarrassing quarrel, but he still couldn't tell the nature of their disagreement.

It sounded like they were arguing about Annabelle's job. She'd been working as a lab assistant at the Department of Agriculture for over a year, and she loved the work, but they were clearly squabbling about it. Annabelle said she liked her supervisor and didn't want to quit.

Then Gray said something too low to hear, and they both started laughing. It was freezing out here, and since it didn't sound like a horrible lover's quarrel, Luke inserted his key in the lock and let himself inside. Gray and Annabelle were in the kitchen down the hall, and he stamped the snow from his feet to let them know he was there.

"Luke!" Annabelle said warmly. "Come into the kitchen. I've made lamb stew for lunch. You're the perfect person to help me talk sense into Gray."

Luke loved the sound of her voice. Everything about Annabelle was cheerful and optimistic, but as usual, Gray looked brooding and annoyed. The scent of simmering meat was too tempting to resist, and he helped himself to a bowl before joining them at the small kitchen table.

"There's a new initiative in the chemistry division at the Department of Agriculture," Annabelle said. "They're finally getting serious about proving the detrimental effect of chemical preservatives on human health and are launching a controlled scientific study to document the consequences."

"Excellent!" Luke said, wolfing another mouthful of stew. "Long past due, if you ask me."

Annabelle worked in the cereal grass laboratory, but lately she had been spending a few hours per week at the lab that tested some of the worst of the preservatives being pumped into the nation's milk and meat supply. Borax, benzoate, and formaldehyde were supposed to extend the shelf life of dairy and meat, but none of them had ever been proven safe. There were no laws against the sale of adulterated food, and cost-cutting methods were shockingly creative. Butter was often only beef tallow steeped in yellow food dye. Chalk powder was used to disguise milk diluted with water. Children's candy was colored with lead dyes.

And sometimes coffee was adulterated with chicory and chemical flavorings, leading to three dead people in Philadelphia.

He looked at Gray. "What's your problem with the study? We ought to be dancing in the streets now that someone is finally doing something about this."

Gray's face was somber. "They're planning to use human test subjects," he said quietly.

Luke glanced at Annabelle. "True?"

"True," she confirmed. "But Dr. Wiley will be overseeing the experiment, and surely he wouldn't do anything to harm the volunteers. He's a medical doctor, after all."

"He'll be feeding people borax!" Gray said. "Formaldehyde. How does one safely consume formaldehyde?"

It looked like he wanted to say more, but Luke interrupted him. "Who will the test subjects be?"

"We'll be looking for twelve healthy young men," Annabelle said.

"They'll get free room and board in exchange for participation."

Luke sagged back in his chair, a world of possibility opening up. For five years he'd been tormented by his role in the death of those people in Philadelphia. This could be his chance to repay his debt. His chance to strike a blow at the Magraders and any other food producer who pumped chemicals into their food. If he served as a test subject, he could cover the story as a journalist from the inside, and it would make news around the world.

"Where do I sign up?" he asked. He was suddenly on his feet.

"Oh, for pity's sake!" Gray roared. "Sit back down. You're not going anywhere."

"I'm going to sign up," he repeated, looking at Annabelle, who seemed as stunned as Gray. "Tell me where I go to volunteer."

"Luke, I don't think you're healthy enough to volunteer," she said.

"You're sick and underweight and not thinking with a clear head," Gray said.

Luke took his bowl to the stove, adding two more heaping scoops of meaty stew. "I won't be underweight for long."

A new field of combat in his war against the Magraders had just opened, and he was going to be on the front lines.