Passions Redux 2003: Star-Crossed Lovers

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Summary

It's July 2003 in the New England town of Harmony. In an effort to stop Miguel Lopez-Fitzgerald and Charity Standish from consummating their love, Tabitha Lenox casts a spell that reverberates throughout the entire community and alters the course of everyone's storylines. This story focuses on Luis/Sheridan/Beth/Antonio. Tabitha's spell results in Beth having to move Sheridan from the pit in her basement, leading to Sheridan's discovery by Luis. Beth is forced to find a new way to break the couple up...

Notes

This is one of multiple stories, all part of the same series and taking place concurrently in the same universe. The subtitles are drawn from NBC's old website for Passions, which, in its History section, demarcates the relevant plots and characters as follows...

Supernatural Shenanigans: Miguel, Charity, Kay, and Tabitha
Star-Crossed Lovers: Luis, Sheridan, Beth and Antonio
Friends and Lovers: Chad, Whitney, Fox and Theresa
Torn: Theresa, Ethan and Gwen
Past and Present Collide: Sam, Grace, David, and Ivy
Secrets and Lies: TC, Julian, Liz and Eve
Prelude

It's mid-July, 2003, in the New England town of Harmony. Of course life is anything but harmonious for the residents of this picturesque community.

Pregnant Sheridan Crane has been kidnapped by Beth Wallace and her psychotic accomplice, Charlie, and is being held captive in a pit in Beth's basement. Beth is currently faking a pregnancy of her own, and plans to eventually deliver Sheridan's baby and pass it off as her own. "And then we ice the blonde!" Charlie has said on more than one occasion. Beth still hasn't figured out what to do with Charlie once Sheridan's out of the picture; Charlie is in love with her, but Beth's sole ambition in recent years has been to win the heart of her high school sweetheart, Luis Lopez-Fitzgerald.

Of course Luis is currently searching for Sheridan, his long-professed soul mate. Luis has already ordered one town-wide, door-to-door search for Sheridan, only to be overruled by his boss, chief of police Sam Bennett. Despite receiving an email and later a video from Sheridan (she was forced by her masked kidnappers to send the messages), claiming to have left town for Paris, where she hopes to carry her child to term away from all the drama in Harmony. A big part of that drama: Her husband Antonio Lopez-Fitzgerald. Antonio believes Sheridan's messages and thinks Luis' suspicions are unfounded.

Across town at Harmony's tiny domestic airport, Chad Harris, Whitney Russell, and Fox Crane are boarding the Crane private jet, bound for Los Angeles. Whitney is pursuing a singing career there along with boyfriend, Chad, who hopes to make it as a record producer. Fox is going because he carries a torch for Whitney, but his excuse is he wants to get away from his family, in particular his father, Julian. The two have had an acrimonious falling out because Fox recently sold The Blue Note (Harmony's sultry jazz club) to Liz Sanbourne.

Liz is currently at the Russell home, preparing to expose her sister, Eve, who used to sing at the Blue Note many years ago. Liz is banking on Eve's past — which included more than just show tunes — destroying the now upstanding community member and physician. That Eve was once in a relationship with TC's arch enemy, Julian Crane, only makes her downfall more imminent in Liz's eyes. Liz holds an envelope containing a recent photo of Eve and Julian kissing. "I have something I think TC needs to see," she says.

As this is going on, it's a much quieter scene at the Bennett household not so far away. Sam is still struggling with the disintegration of his marriage to Grace, who he recently found in bed with David Hastings, her supposed first husband. Sam is in his bedroom, flipping through a photo album, remembering happier times. The past two years have been nothing but chaos and heartache, ever since it was revealed that Grace had been married to David before they met. And that they share a son, John.

Of course Ivy Crane, who is wheelchair bound and living in the Bennett's garage, was the mastermind behind that deception. She hired David to pose as Grace's husband, also threatening him with some mysterious piece of information any time David began to second guess his decision. Ivy is in the garage suite, getting ready for bed. She considers tipping herself from her wheelchair and calling Sam for help.

Grace and David, meanwhile, are at David's house, sharing a late meal. Grace is trying to find a way to mend her relationship with daughters Kay and Jessica, both of whom resent her for the way things have gone between her and their father. Grace is a devout Catholic, and feels it's important to honour the commitment she made to David all those years ago in front of God. The only family member who has shown her any sympathy is her niece, Charity Standish, but that's unsurprising. Charity has
always had a preternaturally caring way.

In fact, it was her wholesomeness (not to mention her fair and waifish beauty) that immediately caught Miguel Lopez-Fitzgerald's attention when Charity first arrived in Harmony four years ago. The two fell deeply in love, but have yet to consummate that love — thanks to the machinations of her cousin Kay Bennett and Tabitha Lenox. Tabitha, a 300-year-old witch, is determined to stop Charity and Miguel from making love, which she says would bring Charity into her full powers as a white witch. Also worth noting: Tabitha is pregnant with the child of Julian Crane, although no one is aware of this yet except Kay.

Charity is currently at Miguel's house. He's comforting her after a string of dark premonitions she had about the whereabouts and fate of Sheridan. They sit on the end of Miguel's bed, Charity leaning into Miguel's strong chest as he holds her. They begin kissing.

Downstairs, Miguel's mother, Pilar, is counselling her daughter, Theresa. They sit in the kitchen, a pot of tea steeping on the table between them.

"Mija, this has gone on long enough," Pilar says. "You need to accept that Ethan is not going to leave Gwen to be with you."

"I know, mama," Theresa says, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her eyes shimmer with tears. "It just isn't fair. How can it really end this way?"

"Life isn't fair, Teresa. Believe me when I say I know a thing or two about that."

Theresa nods, although she's barely listening. She thinks about Ethan Winthorp and Gwen Hotchkiss, who are currently sleeping in their kingsize bed at Crane Manor.

"Teresa, you need to get away from all this pain and heartache," says Pilar. "Whitney and the others are going to Los Angeles. You should go too. A change of scenery will help you get over Ethan once and for all."

"I can't take a vacation right now. What about Little Ethan?" Theresa says.

"I will look after my grandson while you're gone. I think this would be better for Little Ethan in the long run. To have his mother in a healthy, happy frame of mind."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. If you packed quickly, you might still be able to catch them before the Crane jet takes off."

Watching this conversation from afar are Kay and Tabitha, peering into a large magic bowl of water at Tabitha's house.

"Tabitha, I don't care what's going on in Miguel's kitchen, I need to know what's happening in his bedroom," says Kay, irritably. She is eight months pregnant with Miguel's child.

"Alright, alright!" says Tabitha. "Sometimes I feel like I'm tuning an old radio with this bowl." She waves hand over the water's surface and the images change. Now they can see inside Miguel's bedroom and the sight makes Kay's eyes widen in fear. Miguel is no longer holding Charity on the foot of his bed — they have since disrobed and are under the blankets, Charity atop Miguel, rocking her hips slowly as she kisses his face.

"Tabitha!!" Kay screams. "Do something!!"
The sight has terrified the old witch, too. They are almost making love! They must be stopped, before it's too late!

Tabitha immediately sets to work. She grabs handfuls of tiny bottles and tinctures from a nearby shelf and begins pouring them into the bowl with seemingly indiscriminate haste. She's mumbling incantations under her breath all the while. Kay paces the floor behind Tabitha. Her unborn child is restless inside her. Tabitha feels her own spawn kicking and moving about fiercely in her womb.

Charity stops grinding against Miguel long enough to whisper "I love you" and then to take his sizeable manhood and put it inside her. She gasps at the sensation and he looks worried.

"Is it ok? We can stop if—"

"No," Charity says. "I don't want to stop. Just move slowly for now." And Miguel obeys. He strokes her breast with one hand, the other on her hip. The feeling is incredible for both of them, and little by little Charity and Miguel begin moving as one.

"Stop them!" Kay is wailing. "This can't be happening!

Tabitha isn't paying attention though. She finishes saying the last line of the spell. She rubs her palms together and then———

A light issues from the magic bowl so bright that both women have to shield their eyes. A powerful yet invisible magical force follows. It ripples out from the bowl. It expands outwards through the entire town. It passes through the Lopez-Fitzgerald house, but not before touching nearly everyone in Harmony, some in greater ways than others.

At the Russells', Liz is holding up the envelope as TC and Eve watch on. She reaches in to retrieve the photograph when the wave of energy passes through her. At that very instant, TC and Eve vanish into thin air.

At Crane Manor, Ethan and Gwen sit up in bed simultaneously. Gwen has been having a difficult pregnancy, and the two are still considering moving to L.A. for the remaining two months so that they can be closer to a renown medical specialist. Gwen touches a hand to her stomach. "Ethan, something is ... different," she says.

At David's house, the pulse passes through him and Grace. The feeling startles David who jumps to his feet so suddenly that he is thrown off balance and falls backwards, smashing his head against the wall and crumpling into a heap on the floor.

At the airport, the Crane jet is taxying down the runway. The pilot is just lifting the plane up off the ground as the wave passes through it. All the control dials and lights flicker, and the plane shudders as if from sever turbulence. Whitney screams and clutches at Fox beside her, as Chad watches on.

At the Wallace household, Precious, Edna Wallace's orangutan/live-in nurse, senses the energy pulse before it reaches them. (How is it that animals are always the first to know?) She scampers past Edna and hides under a table. Beth is in the cellar with Charlie dressed in their clown disguises. Beth is leering over the edge of Sheridan's pit, ordering their captive to record a convincing message for Luis and Antonio, when the strange metaphysical force passes through them all. It knocks Beth forward, into the pit.

But most importantly for Tabitha, the spell reaches Miguel and Charity. He has not come to completion, however, Charity orgasms at the very moment the force hits them. The effect is like two trains speeding head-on into each other. A physical aftershock echoes through Harmony.
"What's happening?" Theresa screams, as she and Pilar duck for cover.

Houses across town rumble and shake. Ivy's wheelchair flips over. Grace covers David with her body, fearing that the roof might fall in on him. Beth and Sheridan watch in horror as a small fissure opens up in the dirt pit where they lie sprawled. And at the airport, huge cracks form along the runway. In fact, cracks are appearing around the entire perimeter of Harmony.

The tremor lasts only a few seconds. Except in one place: Tabitha's house.

"Tabitha what have you done??!" Kay screams, clutching her belly protectively.

"I don't know!" Tabitha confesses, shouting over the roar of the earth. Not just the earth — a sound deeper and darker and more sinister than that of an earthquake. Beneath their feet they can feel the warmth of hellfire below the house. Tabitha's magic bowl shatters, spilling water everywhere. Tabitha is stunned.

"We have to get out of here!" says Kay, grabbing one of the witch's heavily bangled wrists. "Come on!"

The house is falling apart around them as they rush past the basement door — (seconds later it explodes off its hinges, spewing flames and the stench of sulphur) — and stumble out into the front yard. Sam comes out of his house next door just in time to see Kay fall to her knees. He rushes to her, shouting her name. Kay is sobbing and holding her belly. Sam kneels beside her, trying to ask if she's OK, if there's anyone else inside.

Tabitha doesn't hear any of this though. She's standing, numb, facing her home as it is engulfed in flames. She holds a hand to her own stomach, which moments before had been round and full with child like Kay's. Tabitha's stomach is flat now, as though her own pregnancy has vanished in a puff of smoke...
Chapter 2

BETH

Beth cried out as she toppled into the pit, almost landing on top of Sheridan. She was stunned at first and clearly her captive was too. They watched in horror as a crack began to open on the far side of the pit. Then they stared at each other in silence for what felt like an eternity — 'She's going to recognize me. She's going to recognize my eyes,' Beth thought — and then suddenly Sheridan lunged at her, hands outstretched. She was going to rip the mask off Beth's face.

It took all Beth's self control not to shout to Charlie for help. Sheridan might not know Beth's eyes, but most certainly did know her voice. The electronic voice distortion device they had used when ordering Sheridan around had landed on the other end of the pit.

Beth batted away Sheridan's hands and scrambled towards the device.

Why the hell wasn't Charlie doing something?

"You fucking psycho," Sheridan screamed. "You want me and my baby to die down here? Well if that's what's going to happen, you better believe I'm taking one of you clowns with me!"

Beth took hold of the device and brought it to her mouth, only to have it knocked from her hand by Sheridan.

"You monster!" For someone who had been living in a pit for weeks — pregnant, no less! — Sheridan was surprisingly strong. Beth grabbed her by the wrists in an effort to stop Sheridan from unmasking her, and the two fell back to the ground, rolling around they fought.

"Ladies!!" Both women turned to look up at the other clown, which was pointing at the crack on the far side of the pit. It was widening. Beth used the momentary distraction to her advantage, wound up and sucker punched Sheridan in the side of the head. She was down for the count, landing flat on on her stomach.

"Fuck," Beth said in a whisper. For a second, time seemed to stop. Beth was intensely aware of her surroundings — the smell of soil, the dim basement lighting, an old bicycle hanging on the wall up above the pit. She stared down at Sheridan, who was not moving. The ground trembled beneath them suddenly, shaking Beth out of her stupor. Had Charlie been calling down to her that whole time? There was a rope dangling into the pit.

"C'mon! You have to get up here now! It looks like a sinkhole forming behind you!"

It was true. The far side of the pit was slowly crumbling.

Beth knelt by Sheridan and checked for a pulse.

"C'mon! The blonde's as good as dead! Let me pull you up here!"

Beth was still unwilling to speak aloud in Sheridan's presence. She shook her head, grabbing hold of the rope. 'Arms or legs?' she asked herself. The ground moved again. She glance back and was seized with fresh panic at the sight of the sinkhole, which had engulfed almost half the pit. A pit within a pit, the bottom of which Beth could not see. She could the distance sound of water though, as its mouth inched closer and pieces of dirt and rocks fell down.
She wrapped the rope around Sheridan's ankles, knotting it firmly. Charlie swore, but wasted no time reeling the unconscious woman to the basement floor, hauling her roughly over the lip of the pit and dumping her off to one side.

The sink hole had almost reached Beth. She now stood on a ledge, overlooking the deepest, darkest well. An abyss. The sound of water far below was indisputable. This sinkhole likely led out to sea. Beth wondered if she would die on impact, or drown in the underwater caverns below. Would her body ever be found? Maybe it would become tangled in some fishermen's net. Would Luis mourn her the way he would have mourned Sheridan, had she been the one to die?

Suddenly there was the rope, swinging against her face.

"GRAB HOLD!"

Without thinking, she did just that, gripping the rope with all her might and gasping as the earthen ledge fell out from beneath her. She was dangling now, and her upper body threatened to betray her. Beth put her feet against the pit's wall and step by step, pulled herself up. Charlie must have tied the other end to a pipe or a shelf because there she was, leaning towards her, arms outstretched.

As soon as she was out of the pit, Beth wanted to collapse into Charlie's arms. She had no affection for this rough, homicidal lesbian — in fact, she hated Charlie, in spite of the older woman's apparently unwavering loyalty to her — but in this moment, Beth wanted to be vulnerable with someone. That someone should have been Luis, her childhood sweetheart, the love of her life. She gritted her teeth and pushed herself away from Charlie, who had removed her clown mask.


"Don't use my name in front of her!" Beth hissed, pointing at Sheridan's body.

"What, her? Don't worry about that bird. She's out cold. She ain't hearing nothing."

"I don't care. I can't risk her finding out who we are." Still, Beth took off her own mask, which had become stiflingly hot. She paced the wooden basement floor.

"All we have to do is roll her into that pit and all our problems are solved!" said Charlie. "But you can't look away. We're in this together. Got it?"

Beth stopped pacing and looked at Charlie. A chill had gone through her, which she hoped wasn't apparent. Obviously they were in this together, but Beth's underlying discomfort with the 'Charlie situation' had never felt closer to the surface. What was she going to do about Charlie when all was said and done? The woman was dangerous and unpredictable, not to mention madly in love with her.

"We need Sheridan alive. How-the-hell else am I supposed to pull off my own pregnancy? Where's the baby going to come from?"

Charlie touched her arm, but Beth slapped it away. "I'm thinking about our next step! Just give me a second!"

Charlie frowned but said nothing, instead walking to the edge of the pit and peering down. She whistled. "A blondie goes down that hole and there's no chance of ever seeing her again." She turned to face Beth. "You owe me your life, and this is the thanks I get? Not even a fucking kiss??"

"A kiss? Is that all you want?" Beth was seeing red. She walked up to Charlie and, in a moment that
seemed to catch both of them equally by surprise, Beth shoved Charlie backwards.

Charlie's eyes opened wide in horror. "BETH!" she cried. Except it wasn't her normal voice. It was a man's voice. It was a man's voice that Beth recognized, though couldn't place.

But that was the last and only thing Charlie uttered as she fell, disappearing into the black abyss.

**Luis**

When the course of Harmony's history shifted irrevocably, Luis was in his office at the police station, poring over a map of the town. He could have throttled Sam for putting a halt on the door-to-door search for Sheridan. Protocol be damned, Luis was convinced his lover was somewhere within city limits. He could feel it in his heart.

"Damn it all to hell!" He slammed a hand down on his desk.

The video Sheridan sent, supposedly from Paris, there was something off about it.

"I wanted you to see that I'm really alright, that's why I'm sending you this DVD."

She had looked well. The Eiffel Tower was visible in the background, the weather looked warm.

"I've always loved this city. That's why when I was feeling stressed and scared that someone was trying to kill me, all I could think about was running away to the place that I care about most."

"But why would she leave if she felt threatened? She would have known no one could protect her like me."

"Like you? Since Sheridan and I returned to Harmony from St. Lisa's, she's nearly lost her life countless times. I'd say you do the opposite of protect her."

Antonio, the eldest Lopez-Fitzgerald child, was standing in the doorway of Luis' office, his arms crossed.

"What do you want? Are you here to help or are you just going to insist that I'm deluding myself."

"You're like a dog with a bone," Antonio said, shaking his head. "Sheridan is my wife, and I trust her. I know her in a way you never will, and this move on her part doesn't feel totally out of character. A bit rash, but heck in her situation, I would probably do the same. She's going to do whatever it takes to protect our child."

Luis felt the back of his neck growing hot at the mention of Sheridan's unborn child. It was far more likely the baby was his, but even Luis couldn't deny it might actually be his brother's. The thought made him sick with anger. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair.

"What do you want Antonio?"

Antonio's tone softened. "I didn't come here to fight. I came here because, uh..." He scratched the back of his head and stumbled over his words. "It's... No. Never mind. This was a mistake. I'm sorry I bothered you."

He turned to leave but Luis called after him to stop.
"What's wrong? Is this about Sheridan?"

Antonio chuckled. "For once, this has nothing to do with my wife. At least not directly. My medical expenses have all been totalled and, well... I don't have health insurance..."

"But surely you'd be covered under Sheridan's plan?"

"I thought so too. It didn't occur to me that with her disappearance off the coast of Bermuda, she was declared legally dead. She never got her policy re-instated when her memory returned, and we meant to fix that, but things just kept coming up and..." He was rambling. Luis knew what was coming, and knew how difficult it was for his brother to ask.

"You showed up here to borrow money from me, and you kicked things off by picking a fight?"

Antonio's face reddened.

"I knew this was a bad idea. I'm sorry I said anything. I should suck it up and ask Sheridan to wire me the money from Paris, it's just—"

"No, look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I want to help."

It was true. Luis hated the fact that Antonio was suffering from some rare, fatal condition, the name of which Luis could never recall. This was why no one had been able to tell him the truth about Luis and Sheridan — the shock could literally kill him. Luis didn't want the financial strain of all those medical bills killing him instead. And he knew in his gut that Sheridan wasn't in Paris, she wasn't in any position to be sending him money or dealing with health insurance. She was somewhere in Harmony.

"I didn't know who else to ask..."

"It's fine. Just give me the number and I'll take care of it."

"As soon as Sheridan gets back, we'll sort things out and pay you back in full. I mean it."

Before Luis could respond, a wall of energy washed through the room, causing both men to almost lose their balance.

"What was that?" Antonio asked, glancing around the room for any sort of clue.

Suddenly the floor beneath them began to tremble. An earthquake! The lights flickered, Luis' desk rattled and shook towards one side of the room. A window smashed in one of the station's other rooms and Luis' framed certificate from the police academy fell from the wall, shattering. However, before either man could run for cover, the quake subsided. Outside they could hear car alarms blaring and dogs barking.

"Are you ok?" Luis asked.

"Yeah. That was so strange."

Luis went to window and glanced out. The roof of the department store across the street had caved in. Smoke was billowing from multiple places in the distance. The phones in the dispatcher's office down the hall began to ring. 'Damage around town could be significant,' he thought, going into police mode. That's when another thought occurred to him.
"Sheridan!" he said. What if she was hurt? This emergency could also be the perfect pretence for him to finalize his door-to-door search. He immediately picked his map up off the floor and placed it back on the desktop.

"Sheridan? Oh for fuck's sake, you're unbelievable Luis. That's the first place your mind goes? This ridiculous missing person's angle?"

Luis clenched his fists. He wanted to say that if Antonio truly loved Sheridan, he'd pursue every angle possible until there wasn't even the faintest uncertainty.

"What if she's here in Harmony? What if she's being held in a building that's collapsed? She could be hurt!"

Antonio looked somewhere between incredulous and disgusted.

"What about your pregnant girlfriend, Luis? The woman who's carrying your child as we speak! Beth could be trapped at her house or the Book Cafe, and you're here talking about Sheridan, who we all know is back in France."

At this remark Luis flushed. Beth and the baby hadn't even crossed his mind. A wave of guilt passed through him and the blush crept further up his neck. Antonio was right. What if Beth or Mrs. Wallace or Precious were injured?

"I..."

Antonio's cellphone began to ring. He flipped it open. "Liz? What's wrong? Are you OK? ... Where are you, is anyone hurt? ... Liz, I'll be right there. I need to check on my family, too. You and the Russels need to get out of the house in case there's an aftershock." He hung up.

"What was..."

"Liz is hysterical. I've never heard her like this before, she's always been so calm and in control."

"What did she say?"

"She's at the Russels' house. I couldn't understand what she was saying about TC and Eve. I'm going over there right now. Then up to check on Mama and the others."

Luis nodded.

"I'm heading straight to find Beth. If there are no injuries at her house, we'll come and meet you up at Mama's. Otherwise, we'll be at the hospital. Call me as soon as you know anything?"

"Absolutely."

There was a split second when both brothers almost went in for a quick hug, but they hesitated and then the moment passed. They parted ways, Luis grabbing his holster and gun in case there was trouble.
Chapter 3

BETH

When Beth was eight years old, her mother went on a weekend trip to Las Vegas with one of her gentlemen friends. She told Beth not to leave the house or even turn on the lights, if anyone came to the door she was not to open it or make a sound under any circumstances. Some parents like Edna might have invented a story about a monster outside the house as the pretext for such strict instructions, but that wasn’t necessary in this case. Beth was a good girl, one who wanted so desperately the approval of her mother that she would have done anything Edna told her. Beth ate Cheerios for breakfast, lunch, and supper the first day. When that was gone, she moved on to peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. When she ran out of bread, she ate tuna from a can. Then scraped the last of the peanut butter from the jar. Monday came and went, and still there was no sign of Edna. Beth worried that something might have happened to her. She also worried what her teacher would think about her missing school. (Beth sought the approval of all adults.)

By Wednesday, Beth hadn't eaten for 24 hours. She was frightened and weak. She would drift around the house, checking and re-checking cupboards, hoping for something, anything. That was when she heard a faint tapping at the back door.

"Beth?"

It was Luis!

She rushed to the door but hesitated when she got there.

"Beth, are you in there?"

"Luis!" she said in a whisper, as though her mother might overhear. "I'm not supposed to talk to anyone. Or let anyone in. I'm not supposed to let anyone know I'm here."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I'm just not."

"So does that mean you can't come out to play?"

Beth yearned to join him outside. They had been working on a tree fort in the woods down near the estuary.

"No. I can't."

There was a long silence on the other side of the door.

"Hopefully my mom will be back tomorrow. I'm starving."

"You don't have any food in there?"

"I shouldn't have eaten it all so fast..."

There was silence again. Finally Luis said, "I'll be right back!"

Beth felt a surge of panic. Was he going to come back with Pilar? Or worse, with Sam and Hank's dad, who was chief of police...
But when he did return, Luis was alone.

"Here. I brought you something. Open the door."

"I can't. I told you, I'm not allowed."

"Just for a second. Please!"

She opened it a crack and peeked out. There was Luis, holding a bulging brown paper lunch bag. Before she could say anything he shoved it through the door.

"My mom is going to have a cow when she sees all her empanadas are gone," he said, grinning. "So now we've both got secrets from our mothers. I'll keep yours if you keep mine."

He smiled at her and she wanted desperately to lean through the doorway and kiss him. Her eyes started to well up, and she abruptly closed the door on his face. She didn't want Luis to see her cry. Only stupid girls cry.

But she whispered against the door: "Thank you, Luis. Our secret."

When Edna returned Thursday night, Beth still had half the bag of empanadas, hidden under her bed. She could hear the thudding of luggage dropping on the floor, then of Edna herself thudding on the floor before getting up again. Beth knew these sounds intimately. Her mother was drunk.

Beth came out of her bedroom and went to the top of the stairs, looking down at Edna as she stumbled up the steps, gripping the bannister with both hands.

"Mom, where were you," Beth said. "You were only supposed to be gone for a couple days. Not a whole week!"

"Bethie? OH puh-leaze. It wasn't a week, it was six days. You should be thanking me for letting you skip so much school."

Her face clouded over angrily and she shouted, "I like school!!"

Edna winced and put a hand to her temples. "Don't talk back to your mother! I raised you better than that."

Beth didn't know what to say. Emotions were roiling inside her. She wanted to apologize. She wanted to cry. But she also wanted nothing more than to hurt her mother.

"I hate you!" she shouted.

This time Edna slapped her across the face. It wasn't the first time Edna had struck her daughter, but what came next had definitely never occurred before. Beth raised both hands and shoved Edna backwards with all her might. Edna let out a garbled howl as she clutched at the railing in vain. She flew through the air, clearing half the stairwell before she went bouncing and tumbling down to the bottom. Little Beth covered her face in horror. Had she just killed her own mother? Slowly she peeked through one finger, then another. Edna lay in the darkened hallway, motionless.

But she was alive. Beth knew because Edna's snoring started drifting up to her. The next morning Edna had no memory of their encounter, and she chalked up the fall to one too many drinks.

All these years later, the memory of that incident flashed through Beth's mind as she watched Charlie vanish into the sink hole. The sink hole that was growing!
"Fuck!"

Adrenaline pumping through her body, Beth grabbed the unconscious Sheridan under the arms and dragged her up the stairs and out of the basement. The house shuddered.

"BETHIE!!" Edna wailed. "It's the rapture!! And I'm not wearing clean underwear! I mean, I was until the earthquake hit, but—"

"Not now, mother!" Beth pulled Sheridan through the living room and then the kitchen. She needed to get Sheridan out of the house. Beth paused before exiting the back porch and stripped off the cheap, baggy clown costume, kicking it out of sight into a corner. She was sweating like crazy. It wasn't easy hauling dead weight like this. The sack of sugar Beth wore around her stomach to replicate a baby bump didn't make it any easier.

The night air was pierced by alarms and screams from frightened citizens nearby. The street lights had all gone out, as had the few that lined the lane behind the Wallaces' yard. Beth glanced around to make sure the coast was clear, then she hustled to pull Sheridan down this pitch-black alley. The third house from the corner, the old Camden place, had been vacant for years. If she could just get there...

Sirens now. Distant at first. The sound was like ice in Beth's veins. She nearly dropped Sheridan, but held tight, knowing that if she let go now, the last of her strength would go too and she'd have to abandon Sheridan right there, in plain sight.

"Thank god," she breathed when a police car and a fire truck both flew past the far end of the lane, speeding away to some destination across town.

Beth hauled Sheridan into the empty home's overgrown back yard. She dumped Sheridan in the grass near an oak tree. When the power was restored to this part of the block, surely a neighbour would notice her and call an ambulance. Beth's eyes were adjusting now to the dark, and she gasped at what she saw when stealing one last glance back at Sheridan.

Blood.

A dark stain had formed on the front of Sheridan's pants. It was growing too. Given all the physical trauma the pregnant woman had endured that night, it shouldn't have come as a surprise. Still, Beth felt dizzy and nauseous at the thought of what this meant.

She raced back down the alley, through the gate into her own backyard, and made it almost to the back door when she wretched, falling to her knees. A mess of vomit pooled in front of her. She needed to get inside. Hide the evidence of what had gone on. She threw up again. The strain of all the pulling, the terror of the earthquake and what she'd done to Charlie and then Sheridan's bloody crotch... It was all too much for her. Her head was spinning. Dimly she was aware of someone standing over her.

"I need... to get inside..." she panted.

"No, you can't."

"Need to... go ... in..."

"No, Beth, you're not thinking clearly! It's not safe."

She felt two hands on her face. It was Luis staring at her, his chiseled features swimming into focus. He was kneeling in front of her.
"I'm calling an ambulance."

"No..." she said, weakly.

LUIS

"I need an ambulance," Luis said into his cellphone, giving the dispatcher Beth's address. He thought about Mrs. Wallace, who he had encountered on the front lawn when he pulled up in front of the house. She could probably stand to be checked out at the hospital too. She had been deeply agitated, sputtering and pointing at the house and making little sense.

"Where is Beth??" Luis had said, grabbing hold of Edna's walker to keep her shuffling in aimless circles. It was Precious who pointed him in the right direction, leading him to the walkway that led around to the backyard.

Now he held Beth in his arms as she gasped for air, her brow soaked with sweat. He could see she had thrown up on the ground.

"I have a pregnant woman here who's in acute distress. I need an ambulance NOW!"

Beth mumbled something, barely coherent. She then winced and clutched her belly.

"Beth, are you OK? Is it the baby?"

She winced again and nodded.

"Luis... I think I may have—" (she gripped her stomach again in obvious pain) "—lost the baby."

"No..." He said in disbelief. "No Beth, don't say that. It's going to be OK. You'll see." He moved to put a hand gently on her stomach but she swatted it away, and doubled forward.

"I don't want to be touched," she said. "I don't want anyone to touch me. Please! I don't want an ambulance. I don't want doctors. I just want my baby!"

"Beth... You need medical assistance. An ambulance has already been dispatched, and your case is top priority during the crisis because of your condition. It's not too late!"

The street lights in the neighbourhood flickered but did not come on for more than a second.

"How is she?"

It was Mrs. Wallace, the orangutan care aid by her side. Luis tried to convey, without words, that it wasn't looking good. Beth was rocking slightly, cradling her round belly. Luis felt tears welling up in his eyes. When he'd found out Beth was pregnant, he'd been secretly filled with dread. There had been a time when the thought of having a child with Beth, his high school sweetheart, would have filled him with joy. But now? His heart belonged to Sheridan. On more than one occasion he'd silently, secretly hoped Beth might miscarry and that all the complications surrounding their relationship would vanish in a puff of smoke. Now, the prospect that the wish had come true filled him with an aching sadness. He looked at his friend, who'd always been there for him, who'd accepted the fact that he no longer reciprocated her feelings, and was filled with anguish at the thought of her loss. Of their loss. It would have been an unconventional upbringing for their son or daughter, it's true. But he could think of no better co-parent than Beth. Except of course, Sheridan.

"Beth..." He stroked her cheek with a finger. "We're going to get through this. I promise."
Suddenly the ground beneath them began to tremble again.

"An aftershock!"

"No!" said Mrs. Wallace, shouting to be heard over the sound of wood splitting and objects smashing inside the house. "Sinkhole!"

"What?"

"A sinkhole! Under the house!"

Precious let out a shriek and grabbed Mrs. Wallace by the hand, tugging her in the direction of the back alley. Luis scooped up Beth in his arms and followed them through the yard, the ground rumbling beneath his feet. It sounded like a wrecking ball was tearing through the Wallace house. He looked back in time to see the house break apart at the foundation as a widening hole opened up around it.

"Holy shit..." he breathed, nearly dropping Beth. Mrs. Wallace had been right — (How had she known?) — there was indeed a sink hole. The house seemed to crumple in on itself, disappearing into the pit.

Some of the neighbours had gathered in the laneway behind the houses as well. Everyone was gobsxed at the sight of Beth and Edna's home, swallowed entirely. In its stead was a gaping hole, ominous and dark.

"Everybody, clear the vicinity!" shouted Luis. "We have no idea how much bigger that hole's going to get. C'mon people, move it!"

He hadn't needed to tell Edna and Precious. They were already nearing one end of the laneway, near the old Camden place.

Luis tried to wave people in that direction, without losing his hold on Beth.

"Don't worry Beth, I'm gonna get you out of here. Help is on the way."

He started moving in the same direction as her mother, when Beth spoke up: "No! Not that way. Luis, we should go towards Maple Street."

He looked at her with confusion. "Beth, that's further away. And the ambulance will surely approach from west end of the alley."

"No, not that way," Beth insisted. Her strength seemed to have returned with miraculous speed.

But there was no time to argue with her. She was injured and obviously disoriented. Despite Beth's plea, Luis followed the other neighbours running to the end of the laneway. Beth almost seemed to be resisting him now, struggling to break free.

"Beth, be careful! You're going to fall!"

That's precisely what happened too. She wriggled from his arms fell onto the ground, rolling twice and then curling into the fetal position.

"Beth!!" He knelt beside her. "Beth, talk to me! Are you ok?"

The crowd of neighbours stopped. One of them got down beside Beth as well. "She's breathing," the woman said. "Beth, you should sit up." The woman started to put a hand near Beth's belly, only to
have it shoved aside.

"Don't touch me!" she snarled.

The reaction shocked Luis, who had never heard Beth talk in such a tone. She looked like an animal, dusty and dirty from the fall, sweaty and clutching at her stomach protectively. A mother bear with its cub? Luis felt another pang of sadness for his dear friend. There would be no baby cub in her life. And least not this time, and certainly not one sired by Luis.

"It's OK," Luis said to the neighbour. "I called an ambulance."

"Look! Oh my angels. Look! Is that Sheridan Crane??"

Luis' head shot to attention. What had Mrs. Wallace just said?

"Holy fuck, it is!" some one else said. They were standing a few yards away, at the edge of the old Camden property. Precious was pointing.

Luis sprinted towards them. Two men from the crowd entered the yard first, but Luis was running past them in a matter of seconds. Sheridan!

Sure enough, it was her. She was lying on her back in what looked like dirty, blue silk pyjamas. Her eyes were closed.

"Sheridan!" With no memory of his movements, Luis was suddenly on the ground, holding Sheridan in his arms. He brushed some of the dirt off her face. She was so filthy, it was like she'd just crawled out of the ground. That was when he noticed the front of her pants. A dark stain covered the crotch and upper legs. It was blood, and it looked fresh.

The crowd stood around them. That same woman who had come to Beth's aid after her brief tumble now knelt by Luis.

"I'm not a doctor, but I know first aid. We need to check that she's breathing. And be careful not to move her around too much — if she was in an accident, she may have injured her spine."

But Luis' instincts as a cop told him this was no accident. But none of it made sense.

That's when the wail of an ambulance's siren pierced the night air.

"Someone get out on the street and flag them! Make sure they know where we are!"

The vehicle pulled down the laneway, its lights flashing and illuminating the Camden yard in a disturbing crimson shade.

"Sheridan, you're going to be OK," Luis whispered. "I knew you were still in Harmony. I could feel your presence. I still feel it. I'm not going to lose you now."

The paramedics were carrying a stretcher through the overgrown yard.

"Luis!" one of them called. "This is the pregnant female you called about?"

"It is!"

But it wasn't. They were loading Sheridan onto the stretcher. Luis gave his head a quick shake.

"Shit. Fuck. This is a different pregnant female. But she's in worse shape, than—"
Beth was standing at the entrance to the property, leaning against the dilapidated wooden fence. She held her stomach.

"He called it for me, but Sheridan needs you more right now," she told the paramedics.

"Beth..."

"Get her to the hospital. Now. I'll be right behind you."

"Surely there's room for Beth, too, in the back of—"

"Time is of the essence, Luis. Don't fight me on this. Go. Precious has her driver's license. She'll get me there." For a half second Luis thought Beth was serious. But she smiled weakly. "Now go."

He nodded. The stretcher was already at the back of the ambulance as they prepared to load Sheridan in.

Luis kissed Beth's cheek.

"Thanks Beth."
ANTONIO

The whole drive from the police station to the Russell's house, Antonio thanked God his wife was in Paris, far away from this craziness. The power was out in sections, whole neighbourhoods in darkness while others were abnormally bright, like they were experiencing an electricity surge. Aftershocks occasionally rippled through the area and felt like speed bumps underneath his tires. 'This is stupid,' he thought. 'I should not be driving right now.'

But Liz had sounded so distressed on the phone. Had she been injured? Maybe hit on the head?

"They're gone. They're gone, Antonio. One minute here, the next minute— No more!"

He rounded the bend onto Carter Crescent where the Russells lived, in a beautiful New England colonial-style home. He almost didn't see it at first because of a power outage and an enormous elm tree that had toppled over in their front lawn. Another had fallen from a neighbour's yard into the middle of the cul-de-sac. Antonio's SUV crunched over branches as he sped up the Russell's driveway.

"Liz!" he shouted the moment he was out of the car. "Eve! TC!"

He banged on the front door, which was locked. The house was silent.

"Simone! Whitney! Anybody!"

He was about to ram his shoulder against the door in an attempt to break his way in when he heard the click of a lock on the other side.

"Liz?" He slowly opened the door and there she was. One of his oldest and dearest friends in the world, sitting at the foot of the staircase just inside the front hall. She was staring into space. He knelt in front of her. "Liz, where is everyone else? You said something about them on the phone but I couldn't make it out."

"Gone," she said, voice barely above a whisper.

"Are Simone or Whitney here? Are they gone too?"

Liz shook her head slowly, still not looking Antonio in the eyes.

"Whitney off to L.A. Simone out with Jessica somewhere."

"And what about Eve and TC?"

"Gone," she said again.

Antonio noticed for the first time that Liz was holding a manila envelope. Gingerly he reached for it. When she didn't react, he slowly pulled it from her fingertips and looked inside.

"Liz... What is this?"

Inside was an 8.5x11 reproduction of a photograph of Eve and Julian Crane. They were kissing! Liz didn't respond. She just mumbled something again. "Gone" perhaps.
Antonio didn't know what to do. The Liz Sanbourne he knew was unflappable. She had hired him on at her resort when he first moved to the island of St. Lisa's near Bermuda, after he left Harmony to start a new life. Brian O'Leary was the name he'd given himself. He could still hear Liz shouting "O'Leary!!" whenever he'd screw something up, which in the beginning was all the time. He was terrible in the kitchens, disastrous in housekeeping, and even failed miserably as a handyman. Only when she moved him to the resort's marina did "Brian" discover his greatest strength was as a fishing guide for tourists. If he'd failed at that, Liz might have finally given up on him. She was hard-nosed manager and business person, a strict disciplinarian, but also clearly saw some talent or skill in him.

"O'Leary!!"

He took her by the shoulders now and gave her a shake. It seemed to do nothing to change her state so he left her long enough to go to the kitchen — noting the mess on the floors where items had fallen off shelves or pictures from the walls — and filled a small glass of water at the sink. He returned to the front hallway and immediately splashed Liz in the face.

This appeared to work. She blinked and jerked her head to look up at him.

"Brian," she said. "I mean, Antonio. Antonio, what happened?"

"You tell me! You've been making no sense since the moment you called me." Not that any of this made sense. Harmony wasn't on any sort of geological fault line. New England wasn't prone to earthquakes. He sat down next to her on the stairs and took her hand. He held up the photograph of Eve and Julian kissing. "Why don't you start with this?"

"Oh god," she put a hand to her face. "Can we table that for now?"

"Liz, you've gotta help me understand here. I've never seen you like this before. You sounded hysterical on the phone when you called."

She stood up and began pacing.

"This is going to sound crazy, but I came here to confront Eve about... something. I had something to tell TC. Something I felt he should know."

Again, Antonio held up the photograph.

"Yes, ok," she said, resigned, taking the picture from him. "We were in the living room when this strange wave of... I don't know what, it was almost a spirit or a force of some sort passed through me. It was strangest sensation. It was like it passed through the whole house because it knocked shit off the walls and the mantle and out of the china hutch in the dining room. I could hear the glass shattering."

"That was the earthquake."

"Earthquake?"

"The earthquake. All of Harmony's been affected."

"It wasn't an earthquake. I didn't feel anything shaking."

"Then what broke all the—"

"I told you, it was the energy!"
There was an awkward silence. Antonio didn't take his eyes off her. Could Liz have maybe hit her head? Is that what was causing this strange behaviour?

"I felt it. I was with Luis at the station. And there was damage all over Harmony. There's a tree down in the Russell's front yard."

Liz seemed genuinely surprised to hear this.

"I don't... I don't know how to explain it..."

"Where are Eve and TC? Did Eve go straight to the hospital?"

"Antonio..." Liz took a deep breath. "I know you're not going to believe this, but I'm going to tell you anyway. When that wall of energy hit the living room, Eve and TC vanished."

"Like, they left without telling you where—"

"No, I mean they literally vanished. Into thin air." Before another awkward silence could open up between them, Liz went on. "I know how crazy it sounds. Antonio, have you ever known me to make up things like this? They were standing right in front of me and then suddenly they were gone. In the blink of an eye."

"Liz.. I don't know what to say." Antonio knew how crazy it sounded. People didn't just disappear magically. But Liz sounded dead serious. It was the old Liz, his former boss from St. Lisa's. His one-time girlfriend, before Diana/Sheridan came into his life. She was emphatic and unflinching in her conviction.

"Antonio, that's what happened. I wish I could explain it. I was standing right in front of them. I could have reached out and touched either and then suddenly they were gone."

He sucked in a deep breath.

"Ok, Liz. I'm going to believe you because other than my wife, I know you better than I know anyone else. You're not prone to crazy fantasies or delusions. I don't know how to explain it but won't fight you on this."

"Thank you."

"But if you tell this to anyone else, they're going to put you in the looney bin and throw away the key! You have to think about what you're saying and how that will sound to other people. If Simone or Whitney ask — hell, if Sam or Luis ask?? What are you going to say then?"

She was silent, as though none of this had occurred to her.

St. Lisa's was located within the Bermuda Triangle, which meant there were always tourists arriving in search of paranormal activity or mystery. Locals or folks like Antonio and Liz, who had lived there for many years, knew that such superstitions were silly. But they were all definitely complicit in playing up the region's supernatural qualities to paying resort guests. When Antonio eventually left his guide job there for work as a commercial fisherman, he never once noticed any strange or ominous events out on the open ocean. And Liz was the same. Neither of them believed in disappearing airplanes or ships, alternate dimensions or magic.

And yet here was Liz, insisting there the Russells had vanished without a trace.

"If what you're saying is true, then Eve and TC could just as easily re-appear, right?" It was the best
he could come up with. "And if that doesn't happen, you need to think of something else to tell the authorities. At least until we can get a better idea of what may have happened tonight."

Liz nodded slowly, taking this all in.

Antonio's cellphone rang. It was Harmony General Hospital.

"Is this Antonio Lopez-Fitzgerald?"

"It is."

"Sir, your wife just arrived in the ER. She's in critical condition."

"Excuse me?"

"Sheridan Crane is your wife, correct?"

Antonio felt as though he'd been punched in the gut.

"Mr. Lopez-Fitzgerald?"

Liz could see something was wrong and put a hand on his elbow.

"Y-yes. I'm here."

"You need to come down here right away."

"But.. How is this possible? Sheridan's been in Paris."

"I'm afraid I don't have any more details than what I just told you."

Antonio hung up, in shock.

"What is it?" asked Liz.

"It's Sheridan. She's here... She's here and she's in the hospital. I have to go! And you need to come with me."

"Antonio, I'll just be in the way."

"I'm not leaving you alone right now. Come with me right now."

He didn't have to tell her twice. He helped her up into the SUV and together they raced across town. Everything looked different, the power out in some places and not others. People drifted through streets, avoiding downed power lines and broken glass.

"You weren't kidding about the quake," said Liz. "But I swear to you, I felt none of it back there. Just the... the pulse of energy. I don't know how else to describe it but I swear—"

"It's OK, Liz," he said. He reached over and gave her hand reassuring squeeze. "I promise."

The hospital parking lot was as chaotic as the rest of Harmony, and they were forced to park several blocks away. Inside was pandemonium, the halls crammed with people. From what Antonio could tell it looked like a lot of bumps and scratches, no one looking severely injured. He hoped that was the case for Sheridan, although the person on the phone had said "critical condition". His heart rate quickened, as did his pace. Liz wasn't keeping up, but didn't want to slow him down.
The ER was the most crowded. Here he saw people with broken limbs. There was a gurney off to one side of a corridor that was soaked in blood but had yet to be moved. They seemed to be understaffed. Antonio's mind flashed to Dr. Russell for a moment, but there was no time to think about that anymore.

"Antonio!" A man had grabbed him by the arm. He was white, brown hair, early 20s. Who was this kid? "I'm John Hastings. Grace's son."

"Oh!" Antonio had forgotten about Grace Bennett's long lost (and forgotten) son who had recently returned to her.

"Is your mother here?" John asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Pilar. Is she OK?"

Antonio squinted at him in confusion and shook his head.

"Look kid, I don't know anything. Just that my wife is here somewhere and I need to find her."

"Yes! Sheridan Crane. They wheeled her past me into the O.R. not long ago. My dad is here. He hit his head."

"Thanks!" Antonio said, pushing past him and sprinting in the direction of the operating room. When he got there, a staff person had to stop him from barreling straight in.

"Mr. Lopez-Fitzgerald, you're going to have to wait out here. A nurse will come get you as soon as they're finished in there."

He looked around the crowded waiting room. He felt dizzy. He wanted to cry.

"Antonio." Now he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Luis.

"Luis," he said, weakly. "Luis.. You were right. You said she was still here and I dismissed you again and again. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

He pulled his brother into a hug and, when Luis slowly returned the embrace, Antonio found himself unable to stop the tears. His brother held him tighter as he choked back sobs.
A mix of emotions was stirred up in Luis after Antonio's arrival. He had to mask the extent of his concern about Sheridan even though every part of him was struggling not to do as Antonio had attempted — push past the hospital staff and go to her side.

"Where was she? How is it possible she was here this whole time?"

"She was found in the backyard of an abandoned house. In a cruel way, we were lucky that the Wallace house was swallowed up by a sinkhole because it drove us and the neighbours into the back laneway, where Sheridan was found under a tree."

Antonio shook his head in disbelief. "Beth's house was destroyed?" Luis nodded.

Beyond the place where they found her, Luis didn't have much more to tell Antonio. He had been with her in the ambulance, held her limp hand until the paramedics moved him aside during their work. He couldn't bring himself to tell Antonio about the blood-soaked front of her pants. The look the paramedics exchanged upon seeing it...

"When we're no longer in crisis mode, Luis and I will investigate the Morris Camden property where Sheridan was found," said Sam. He was just one of several people in the waiting room.

Sam had come in with Kay, Tabitha, and Ivy. He'd discovered Ivy after coming to Kay and Tabitha's aid on the front lawn; Ivy had been on the floor of the Bennett's garage suite, unconscious. Kay was under examination, but all initial signs seemed to point to her and her unborn baby being fine. Tabitha was in shock. She'd hardly uttered a word the whole time. The Wallaces weren't the only ones out of a home — Tabitha's house had burned completely to the ground.

"It was the eeriest sight," Sam had told Luis earlier as both men waited for word on their loved ones. Between the flames and the smoke and the street lights flickering, strange shadows had been thrown about the neighbourhood that almost looks like spirits, swimming frantically into the night sky.

Luis had barely been listening though. The only thing on his mind was Sheridan. When John and Grace arrived with David, also unconscious, John had immediately asked him how Pilar was. It was the first time since finding Sheridan that Luis had thought about the rest of his loved ones. He tried calling Pilar, Theresa, and Miguel but none had answered their phones.

"Thanks Sam," said Antonio. "For now I just wish I could be with my wife."

"So do I..." Sam murmured, more to himself than anyone else. Grace was across the room. John had gone to get her some water. Grace told them that David had fallen during the quake and hit his head pretty badly. He still hadn't come to.

Luis shifted his weight uncomfortably, not wanting to get in the middle of the Bennett family drama. He had enough drama of his own to think about right now without adding anyone else to the mix. As if on cue, Gwen entered the room looking extremely concerned, Ethan right on her heels.

"Luis!" she said, rushing over to the cop. "I just heard that Sheridan was admitted! You mean to tell me she was here in Harmony all this time?"

"Jesus, how does word get around this town so quickly?"
"I was just upstairs," she said. "I thought something was wrong with my baby. We woke up around the time of the quake, although I don't remember anything shaking..."

"We came down to the hospital right away," said Ethan.

"But it was a false alarm. No problems. Gwen put a hand on her baby bump. "That's when I overheard one of the doctors saying that Sheridan had been brought in to emerg. Where is she?"

Antonio left his friend, Liz, and moved forward.

"She's in the O.R. right now," he said.

"Oh yes, Antonio." Gwen blushed. Luis hoped Antonio didn't pick up on anything. Gwen was Sheridan's best friend. She knew more than anyone the struggle Sheridan was going through to keep her love for Luis a secret from her husband. Everyone had to play their part if they wanted to keep Antonio alive. "I didn't see you there. What do you know?"

"Not a whole lot. Just that Sheridan was found behind an abandoned house here in Harmony after the earthquake.

"I was there when Mrs. Wallace found her," said Luis. "It looked like she'd been dumped and left for dead."

"Mrs. Wallace? Beth's mother?" A suspicious tone entered Gwen's voice, but Luis didn't catch it. The mention of Mrs. Wallace reminded him once again that his best friend, the future mother of his child, had once again been the furthest thing from his mind... Had she made it to the hospital? How were she and the baby doing?

"Yeah, I'd gone to check up on Beth. The earthquake, uh, during the earthquake something happened to Beth. She fell and was sick, I called an ambulance." He looked down at his phone but there were no missed calls. "That's when we found Sheridan, who needed the ambulance more."

Gwen's eyes narrowed. She was deep in thought.

"How is Theresa?" asked Ethan.

Now Gwen threw up her hands. "Of course you'd go there."

"I was just asking!"

"I don't know how she's doing," Luis interrupted before they could go any further. "I'm going to keep trying her phone." He moved away from them to attempt a call. Other people's drama. Drama, drama, drama. He had hoped Theresa would finally leave those two alone and give up on her obsession with Ethan. There was no answer on Theresa's phone.

The minutes dragged by as they waited for word on Sheridan.

Eventually a doctor came into the room and everyone rushed over to see what it was about.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bennett, I'm pleased to tell you that your daughter and her baby are going to be just fine."

Sam and Grace both breathed sighs of relief. They reached for each other, almost hugging, but then stopped themselves awkwardly. A few moments later Kay emerged.

"Daddy!" she said, giving Sam a hug. "Thank you so much for being there."
Grace moved in to hug her, but Kay scowled and brushed her away. Instead, she went to Tabitha, who was the only one who had remained seated, still staring into space. Kay sat next to her and put her hands atop the elderly woman's.

"How are you doing?" she asked, quietly. She got no response.

Sam said he was going to take them both home, that Tabitha could stay with them for the time being.

"Once I have them home, I'm joining the rest of the guys out in the field," he said, turning to Luis. "We need every man out there."

Luis opened his mouth and closed it again, almost objecting because he needed to be here until he got an update on Sheridan. Antonio looked at him expectantly.

"You're not going to come back to check on Ivy?" Grace muttered, passively aggressively.

Sam wheeled on her.

"No, Grace. I'm not. Our son Ethan is here for her. And anyway, I'm not here as her lover or ex-lover. I wish I could say the same about you and David."

She was going to object, but Sam didn't give her a chance. He helped Kay and Tabitha to their feet and the three of them left the waiting room without looking back. At the same time as they exited, Beth entered, pushed in a wheelchair by Precious. Edna followed closely behind with her walker.

"Beth!" Luis went to her. She wore a pair of hospital pants, and looked pale and tired and weak. Her stomach also looked completely flat. A pang of sadness struck him so suddenly he instinctively put a hand to his chest, as though his heart was breaking. The look they exchanged didn't need words. She nodded, her eyes glassy with tears. She forced herself to her feet and he took her in his arms, holding her tightly with one hand on the back of her head.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Beth," he looked at her. "You have nothing to apologize for. I only wish I had been there for you. Not just tonight, but throughout your pregnancy."

This time she was the one to pull him close and hug him tightly. Her head on his chest felt nice. He longed to feel Sheridan against him like that. Only when Precious wriggled between their legs and wrapped her arms around Luis' thighs did they move apart from each other.

"When Luis said you were sick tonight and he called an ambulance, I couldn't help but wonder just why you weren't also here in the emergency ward," said Gwen, stepping towards them. Ethan tried to take hold of her arm, but Gwen maneuvered away from him. "We came here right away when I thought there was something wrong with my baby. They sent us upstairs to be checked out. Why weren't you here?"

Luis frowned.

When Sheridan first went missing, there had been a tense scene one night at her cottage where the search party had gathered. Gwen had been throwing barbed comments Beth's way all night, as though Beth were somehow responsible. Luis had always been wary of Gwen, in part out of loyalty to his sister who had been battling with Gwen for years now. But there was something else about her that struck him as cold and cunning. That Gwen would insinuate... whatever she was getting at right now, so shortly after Beth's miscarriage, was too much for him. Normally Luis sought to keep the peace with Gwen due to her relationship with Sheridan, but now he was unable to bite his tongue.
"You need to back the fuck off, Gwen," he growled.

Ethan moved up beside her protectively.

"Hey now," Ethan said. "There's no need for any of us to be talking like this. Everyone's just tense because of the earthquake. There's a crazy energy in the air tonight."

"Who was your doctor?" Gwen insisted, her arms crossed.

"Dr. Russell," said Beth.

This got a surprised reaction out of Antonio and Liz.

"She's here??" Liz asked. It was the first thing Luis has heard her say since arriving in the ER with Antonio.

"No, sorry, not Dr. Russell," said Beth quickly. "I thought you were asking who my GP is... My doctor tonight. His name was..." She looked around, lost. She was touching both hands to her flat stomach.

"Dr. Redford!" said Mrs. Wallace, her voice as loud and obtrusive as ever. "Oh wait no, that's my hubby, Robert. Dr. Quinn was it? Dr. Caligari?"

"Mother," Beth said. "She obviously can't remember his name either. But she can confirm he exists."

"Of course! Of course!"

"I wouldn't be surprised if medical personnel have come in from Hillsdale and Libertyville," Grace spoke up. "There are definitely some unfamiliar faces around the hospital tonight."

Precious nodded vigorously.

"You were with her the whole time?" Gwen asked of Beth's mother.

"I was indeed. Saw the whole thing. They had to throw out Bethie's pants because the bleeding got so bad. Down there." (Luis' mind flashed to Sheridan for an instant. The way she had looked, sprawled out and bloody. He wondered how she was doing.) "I know the baby's not with us anymore. Angels— and now Edna clasped her hands together in prayer "—please guide and watch over her and make sure she finds her way to the path of light, to the Lord, to the righteous way! Don't take her to hell and eternal damnation. Oh God, please show her your ever-loving—"

"Her? She?" Luis said.

Beth, who had lowered herself carefully back into the wheelchair, looked up at him and nodded gravely.

"That's right," she said. "I'm sorry Luis. Our baby was a little girl..." At that, Beth burst into tears and covered her face.

Gwen looked stricken by the scene. She was ashen faced and moved closer to Ethan. Her pregnant belly couldn't have looked more conspicuous.

"Beth, I..."

"No, say whatever you want Gwen," sobbed Beth. "You've always hated me. Say your worst. I couldn't feel any lower than I do now. You have your baby, and I wouldn't wish this kind of pain on
you no matter how you treat me.

"I am so, so sorry..." Even Gwen was beginning to look teary. "I never meant to.. I just...

Ethan stepped in: "Like I said, the earthquake has unleashed a crazy energy tonight. We all need to rest if we can." He put his arm around Gwen. "I'm going to take Gwen home to bed, then come back to be here for my mother. I'm sorry for your loss, guys. This is terrible."

Murmurs of assent came up from everyone else in the room. Grace made the sign of the cross and quietly whispered a Hail Mary. Ethan and Gwen moved towards the exit, but Gwen stopped and turned back.

"Antonio," she said, "will you get in touch with me as soon as Sheridan is out of the woods?"

"Of course," he nodded.

She gave the room a grim, embarrassed look, and then left with her husband.

"I'll do the same for you, buddy," Antonio said, patting Luis on the shoulder. "As soon as there's any word, I'll make sure everyone knows. For now though, shouldn't you be joining Sam?"

"Yeah. Yeah I should."

"Any chance we could bunk with you, Officer Lopez-Fitzgerald?" asked Mrs. Wallace. "Seeing as we are sort of officially totally homeless right now?"

"Mother!" Beth swatted at her. "It's fine. There's an apartment above the Book Cafe that's currently vacant. We're going to stay there."

"Let me take you guys," said Luis. "And as soon as Sam gives me the all-clear, I'll come back to help out however I can."

"Back of a cop car, how fitting..." Edna mumbled. Beth elbowed her. The comment was no doubt a reference to Mrs. Wallace's wilder days. Luis remembered the stories vividly from his childhood with Beth.

"Thanks Luis," Beth said. "I've never experienced anything so terrible as this. But we're going to get through, it right?"

"Right."

Precious let out one of her indecipherable simian screams.
Sun was streaming through the window of their private room when Sheridan opened her eyes. The train was rolling gently beneath her.

"You missed a beautiful sunrise," said Luis in the seat across from her.

"Why did you let me sleep then?" She started moving to lean over and swat him playfully, but he held up a hand to stop her.

"Hey, be careful!" He said. "You're not the only one sleeping late this morning."

He was right. For the first time she noticed there was a little boy, three or four years old, asleep with his head in her lap. Not just any little boy. It was her son with Luis. Marty.

Luis knelt in front of them and gently stroked Marty's sandy blond hair. He stirred but did not wake.

"We should probably get him up him soon," Sheridan said softly.

"We will." Now Luis reached over and touched her cheek with the back of his fingers. He was so tender, with both of them. "For now I want to have this moment, just the two of us."

They were passing through a valley. Lush, green fields and rolling hills beyond them were like nothing Sheridan had ever seen. It was like Eden.

"Did you sleep well?"

"I did," she said. "I'll be happy when we get there, but part of me could ride the rails with you two for the rest of my life."

"Me too."

"I could also really use a coffee..."

"I'll go to the dining car and get you one."

"My hero." Sheridan settled back into her seat. She wished they'd splurged on a room with beds, but this was better than nothing. So long as she was with Luis and Marty, they could be in steerage on an ocean liner and she'd be happy. "Maybe get a muffin or something for Marty?"

He nodded. He gave her a wink and then stepped out into the corridor.

Sheridan stared out the window. A cloud was creeping towards the morning sun.

Suddenly Luis was throwing open the door to their compartment.

"Sheridan!" he shouted. "Get up! We have to go. NOW!"

She simultaneously jumped to her feet and clutched Marty to her body.

"Mommy?"
"Come! Now! They're here!"

She was flooded with panic. Without questioning him, she rushed into the tight corridor and headed in the direction of the front of the train. Luis was right behind her. They ran down the narrow halls, from one car to the next, never encountering other passengers. It was like they were the only ones there. Except that wasn't true. They were also on the train. Coming for her and her little family...

"What are we going to do?" Sheridan shouted, not looking back. She could sense the pursuers, like a shadow inching closer.

"Keep going!"

Her legs were suddenly like putty. And Marty was heavy. So heavy. And the train, the way it rocked and clattered, threatened to knock her off her feet.

Now the train entered a tunnel. The lights flickered overhead.

"Luis, please! I don't know how much longer I can go on like this." She felt weak. She was a mother. She should be able to do anything to protect her child, and yet here she was, ready to lay down and give up.

Marty sobbed in her arms. The train felt like it was going a thousand miles an hour, some horrifying rollercoaster ride with no end in sight.

Luis grabbed her arm and pulled her to a door on the right side of the car.

"When we get out of this tunnel, the train is going to slow down just long enough for us to get out. You have to be ready, OK?"

She nodded. She kept glancing towards the entrance to their car, waiting for them to suddenly step through.

The train burst out of the tunnel and into the blinding light. She flinched and put a hand to her eyes. There was no squeal of the train's breaks, they were not thrown forward. And yet the train had stopped at a platform.

"Let's go!" cried Luis, pushing Sheridan off the train. The platform stood alone in yet another valley, this one with steep dry slopes on either side. There was a sign written in Italian on the platform, as well as a newspaper box, the paper's headlines all in Italian too.

No sooner had they tumbled off the train then it was moving again. Sheridan watched it pulling away and her eyes widened in horror at who was staring out the window at her.

"Luis!" She screamed, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and pointing hysterically at the train.

It was Marty. Marty was somehow still inside the train. He banged on the glass calling out to her as the train picked up speed. Sheridan wanted to leap onto the train before it was gone, but it was already moving too quickly. Luis pulled her back. They watched as the train sped away. And then, just before it left their sight, an explosion. The train and the wooden trestle it was crossing went up it a huge ball of flame and smoke.

Sheridan fell to her knees, screaming and rocking. "Marty!" she sobbed. She turned to hug Luis but now he was gone too. She knelt alone on the platform in this unknown land.

"Luis! Luis!!"
Now she jolted upright in bed. "Luis!!" Her eyes were wide open and her surroundings took a minute to come into focus.

"Sheridan!" Someone took her hands. A man. Not Luis. "You're awake. Oh thank god, you're awake!"

Antonio. Her husband. He had tears in his eyes and he hugged her now. He kissed her cheeks. She had no reaction. She was trying to process everything. She could see she was in a hospital room with cream coloured walls and drawn curtains. There was a monitor of some kind attached to her finger, a screen nearby beeped and displayed a mess of graphs and numbers.

"I'll go get the doctor," a woman said. That's when Sheridan noticed they weren't alone, there were two other people in the room. Pilar and Gwen!

Pilar left the room and Gwen moved closer to the bed.

"Oh Sheridan, you had us so worried," she said, reaching down to touch her friend's shoulder. "But we all knew you'd pull through. You've always been a fighter."

Sheridan tried to force a smile.

"And where's Luis?"

"He's not here, but I'll be sure to call him and let him know you've come to," said Antonio. "I'm not surprised you're asking about him. It was Luis who found you."

Antonio then proceeded to tell her about the earthquake and how she'd turned up in the backyard of an old house. He told her about how Tabitha's place had burned down and how the Wallace house collapsed entirely into a huge sinkhole. He told her about Beth's miscarriage and how she, Mrs. Wallace, and Precious had moved in above the Book Cafe. Then Pilar returned with a doctor who Sheridan had never seen before.

"Where's Eve?" she asked.

"I'm Dr. Ross," said the woman in a white lab coat. She was young, maybe a recent grad, but was officious and clearly knew her stuff.

After the doctor checked Sheridan's vitals and asked questions, Antonio informed Sheridan that Eve and TC had gone missing during the earthquake. It still wasn't clear where they had gone or why. A search was underway, and their daughter Whitney was coming back from L.A. to assist in locating them.

"Now Sheridan, I don't know if your husband has had a chance to tell you yet," said Dr. Ross, carefully. Pilar, standing in the background, bit her lip. Gwen put a hand on Antonio's shoulder, not wanting to move closer and come between him and Sheridan. "I'm very sorry to say that your baby did not survive."

Sheridan closed her eyes. She waited for the tears to come but they didn't. Her mouth felt dry, and now a sickening feeling in her stomach made her wonder if she might throw up. She thought of the dream, a little boy she called Marty on the train as it exploded. The news didn't shock her. She simply felt numb.

Antonio squeezed her hand.

"It's perfectly normal to feel a bit... overwhelmed," Dr. Ross said. "I'm going to run through some
tests on another blood sample, and then can prescribe you some Ativan, just to take the edge off. You're probably experiencing a lot of emotions right now."

That was an understatement.

When Dr. Ross left and it was just the four of them, Sheridan opened her mouth but no words would come.

"I have been to see Father Lonigan every day since you were admitted here," said Pilar. "I've been praying you would be ok. All things considered, I mean."

"How long ago was the earthquake?"

"Four days."

"And Luis?" she asked, quickly adding, "And Theresa? And Miguel?"

"They're all ok," said Pilar. "Thank you for asking."

"And you Gwen? How are you and Ethan? How is your..." Her voice cracked.

"We're all fine," said Gwen, softly. "Don't think about us though. You need to focus on yourself. I came over here to relieve Antonio — he's been by your side 24/7 since you were found."

Sheridan smiled weakly. Her knight.

"You should go home and rest," she said to him, patting his hand. "I'm going to be falling back to sleep soon. It's all too much..."

"I don't want to be away from you for even a minute. Especially not now that I have you back."

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

Antonio looked torn, but Pilar came to him and said, "I think Sheridan is right, mijo. You need to rest in your condition, you'll be no good to Sheridan if you don't take care of your own health. If you were to go blind again.. Or worse..."

"I know, mama, I know. You worry too much."

"It never seems to be enough," Pilar said absently.

Antonio kissed Sheridan and vowed to return later.

"Will you tell Luis?" Sheridan asked. Pilar glanced nervously at Antonio.

"Of course," he said. "I'll make sure he and Sam come as soon as you're up for speaking with them. They are dead set on getting to the bottom of your kidnapping."

She nodded. So much of it was a haze, and she couldn't bring herself to think about it too much right now. There were details she remembered and needed to share, but now wasn't the time.

Antonio left.

"I'm so, so sorry," said Gwen.

"What do you have to apologize for? None of this is your fault."
"If I had been looking at the whole situation more carefully.. I should have known you weren't in Paris. It didn't make sense."

"No one could have known. The people who did this to me, they were so thorough. The messages they forced me to record... All of it. Who wouldn't be fooled into thinking I'd left town?"

"Luis wasn't," said Gwen. "He insisted the whole time that you were still here."

Pilar cleared her throat.

"Sheridan, I cannot begin to imagine the pain you're experiencing right now. The loss of an unborn babe..." She made the sign of the cross. "But I came over here today to tell Antonio he needed to go home and sleep. It's important that none of us forgets how tenuous his situation is."

'How could I ever forget?' Sheridan thought bitterly. It was because of Antonio's medical condition she had been unable to divorce him and be with Luis. Who knows, maybe this whole ordeal might have been avoided had she and Luis been together the way they were meant to be.

"I know, Pilar..." she whispered.

"Your feelings for Luis are painted across your face every time you mention him. It's a good thing my son is so consumed by his love for you, or else I'm sure he would see it. Please Sheridan, don't forget your promise. You must not let Antonio find out about you and Luis."

"Pilar," said Gwen in a harsh tone. "I can't believe you would say something like that. At this time. How can you be so inconsiderate?"

"I'm... I didn't mean any offence," she said. "But I'm a mother, as you will be soon, Gwen. I have to do everything in my power to protect my children."

"Pilar, please," said Sheridan. She felt emotional now, yet still there were no tears. "I haven't forgotten my promise. Please, though, just leave me now. I want to sleep."

Pilar nodded.

"Thank you," she said.

When Pilar was gone, Gwen shook her head, incredulous.

"Has she no decency? You've literally just came out of a coma, and already she's lecturing you about not breaking your vows to Antonio. Maybe that's where Theresa gets it..."

Gwen could be a bitch, but Sheridan was always grateful to have that bitch on her side when things got tough. Sheridan knew what Pilar said was true, but that didn't make it any less frustrating.

"I know Pilar is a mother," said Sheridan. "But did she really have to remind me of that now? Now of all times?" She laid a hand on her stomach, remembering how it had felt to have a little life growing inside of her.

"Oh Sheridan," said Gwen, heartbroken.

"I think I do need to rest," said Sheridan. "I just want to sleep for a little while. Hopefully it'll be dreamless..."

"I'll come by tomorrow to check on you. And the next day. And the next, until you're out of here."
"Hopefully it won't be so long," said Sheridan, wincing now at a new pain in her abdomen. She'd have to ask the doctor for something to help with that.

"Is there anything I can do for you before I go home?"

"Yes," Sheridan said in an unexpectedly firm tone. "Tell Beth I need to talk to her."
"I already told you everything I know," Liz said, exasperated. "What more do you want from me?"

Sam and Luis exchanged a glance. It was true, they'd already asked Liz everything they could. Twice. Something was off but neither of them could figure out what it was, or why Liz Sanbourne — a newcomer to Harmony — would have any reason to lie to them about the disappearance of Eve and TC.

According to Liz, she'd gone to the Russell house to speak with Eve about a personal medical problem. As soon as she said the words "irregular menstruation," neither of the officers asked any further questions about the nature of the health concern which brought her to Eve that fateful night. They talked privately — TC has been in the other room, watching the game — and then Liz left. She didn't have a prescription or anything to show for the meeting; she had made plans to come see Eve again during proper clinic hours. It was as she walked home that the earthquake struck. Liz was thrown to the ground but avoided any falling trees or power lines. Shortly thereafter, as Antonio was rushing to check on Pilar and the rest of his family, they spotted each other and he picked up Liz. Antonio confirmed this part of the story, and both Sam and Luis had seen the two of them at the hospital a little while later. Her story seemed to check out. So why did Luis have this niggling feeling that Liz wasn't being completely forthright with them?

Part of it might have had to do with Julian Crane, who had adamantly insisted that Harmony PD re-question her. Julian was positive she was involved in the disappearance in some way. However, when pressed for details, Julian was vague and obscure. He had been positively obsessed with the case since the moment Eve and TC's disappearance was reported. Even right now, he was out in the station lobby, pacing like a caged leopard.

Both Luis and Sam were more suspicious of Julian than Liz, ever since they received an anonymous letter in the mail containing a photograph of Julian and Eve kissing. They were sitting on that little piece of evidence for now, waiting until the right moment to spring their knowledge of it on Julian. His alibi unfortunately held strong; there was security footage proving he was at the Crane Mansion throughout the entire earthquake.

"One last question then," Luis said. "Do you have any reason to believe Eve might have been involved in an extramarital affair?"

At this Liz's eyes widened in surprise.

"Eve? No. That's impossible. Her marriage to TC was the cornerstone of her life."

Luis believed her. The photo of her kissing Julian — Julian Crane of all people! — had stunned Luis and Sam, too. Sam was TC's best friend and swore he'd never heard any talk of marital strife between the two of them. It made the mystery of their disappearance just that much more confusing.

"Thank you, Liz," said Sam. "You're free to go."

They walked her out of the office and to the lobby. Julian was there, as well as his... girlfriend? Wife? Luis couldn't keep track. Rebecca Hotchkiss was tugging on Julian's hand, trying to get him to leave, but she shook her off.
"Unhand me woman! I'm not leaving until I see... her, in handcuffs!" he said, just as Liz and the others entered the room.

"Pookie! Your obsession with the Russells is unhealthy. Especially that quack you won't stop talking about. It's making me want to tan your hide, and not in the way I normally do."

Luis shuddered internally.

"Please, keep me posted on any developments," said Liz before leaving.

"What!" Julian was outraged. "You're letting her go?"

"We have no reason to keep her," said Sam. "Frankly, you should be more concerned about yourself."

That's all Sam would say for now though.

"So you haven't any developments? What about Simone? She must have thought of something."

"Simone has been helping us all day," said Luis. The Russell's youngest daughter was as shocked as anyone to learn of her parents' disappearance. She was staying with John Hastings, since the Bennett house was full now that Kay was back and Tabitha staying there too. "Right now we're giving her a break until Whitney arrives from L.A. She should be getting in later tonight, although had to fly into Boston because of all the damage to Harmony's runway."

"You're positive, Julian, that you don't have any information about the Russells you've been keeping from us?" asked Sam.

Julian scowled, but did not answer right away.

Rebecca's phone suddenly starting ringing. It typical Rebecca fashion, she answered it without respectfully stepping away from their circle.

"Gwen? Is everything OK?"

All three men looked at her irritably, then stepped aside themselves in order to continue their conversation.

"There is one thing..." Julian said, after some apparent internal debate. "This may be nothing — he's often away on business and obviously does not check in with me about his schedule — but my father has been... incommunicado since the night of the earthquake."

"Allistair Crane?" Luis and Sam both said in disbelief.

Julian nodded.

"As I say, it's probably nothing. His personal secretary is not authorized to release details about his travel and personal business, but I do feel it's odd I haven't heard from him in four days."

"And you think this could be related to Eve and TC?"

"I don't think so."

"Why didn't you report this sooner??"

"I'm not even sure I'd consider this a report," Julian said. "I don't think anything has happened to
him. It's just odd that all of them are gone without any evidence as to where or why."

"OK, so let me get this straight," Rebecca was saying loudly behind them. "Sheridan has a message for Beth, and wants you to deliver it, but you feel too awkward because—"

Luis had whirled around the moment he heard Sheridan's name.

"Sheridan's awake?" he said to Rebecca, grabbing her by the shoulders. Rebecca nearly dropped her phone.

"Not so rough, officer," she said in a breathy, almost flirtatious tone. "I mean, I like it rough, but foreplay is key if you want—"

"Rebecca! Answer me!" Luis wasn't in the mood for her humour.

"Yes," she said. "Gwen tells me that Sheridan came out of her coma and—"

Luis turned immediately and headed for door.

"I'll be back!" he called to Sam, without so much as a glance over his shoulder.

Sheridan was awake! Sheridan was awake! The thought kept repeating in his mind the whole drive to Harmony General. He had to resist the urge to turn on his lights and siren. Would she remember him? It wouldn't be the first time an accident had resulted in her amnesia.

Luis' palms were sweating as he rushed into the hospital. A nurse said Sheridan Crane was recovering in Room 118. "But sir, you need to be on our list of approved visitors in order to get in there!"

But he wasn't going to let anyone stand in his way. He raced to 118, sliding skillfully out of the way when he encountered anyone in the corridor, never slowing down. When he arrived outside her room, he took a deep breath to steady his nerves. His racing heart had nothing to do with his run. Gingerly he opened the door and peered in.

There she was. The curtains were drawn but a ray of silvery light came in from a light on the side of the building outside. She lay on her back, hands folded on her stomach atop the blankets. She was so still he might have thought she was dead, were it not for the monitor beside the bed that quietly beeped every few seconds. He had a flashback to the funeral held for Sheridan when the FBI staged her death in order to throw a French drug cartel off her trail. Luis had seen her there at the funeral parlour, lying like she did now, still as a statue.

"Sheridan..." He whispered, more to himself than to her. He approached her bedside and lay a hand on hers. He didn't want to wake her. Just wanted to be with her in the knowledge that she was alive and safe. He already knew she had lost their baby. The news had hurt, but it was tempered by the knowledge that at least he had not lost them both.

Her eyes slowly opened then, and she turned to him.

"Luis."

A smile came to her lips. Neither of them was dreaming. This was the real thing.

"I was so scared I'd never see you again," he said.

"Me too." She put her hands to his face, touching his lips, touching his dimples. "It's really you."
"I'm probably looking a little haggard," he said with grin. "I haven't got much sleep since the night we found you. Since the night you went missing, actually."

"You're even more handsome than I remember," she said, sitting up. Luis moved to help her, but she waved him off. She was stronger than he expected her to be after all she'd endured. "I want to get out of here as soon as possible. That means pushing myself."

"You just came out of a coma," he chided her sweetly. "I think you can give yourself a day or two to recover."

"Does that sound like me?"

He agreed that it did not. Sheridan's strong will was what had drawn him to her in the beginning. Well, it had also brought them to loggerheads on many occasions, but it meant they were that much deeper in love when both finally let their guards down.

They kissed. It was as electric as ever. He'd thought about this moment unendingly while she was gone. How good it would feel to touch his beloved. He could tell from her reaction that she was experiencing something similar. Sheridan moved to one side of her bed and Luis climbed up so he could sit beside her and hold her. There, by the light through that small gap in the curtains, they talked. He told her about the search for her, she told him about the pit, about her mask-wearing assailants. The final moments of her time in captivity were spotty at best. There was a wave of energy that had passed through her and caused one of the kidnappers to fall into the pit with her. She remembered throwing a punch but other than that, her memory was blank.

Luis promised they would find the people who did this to her and bring them to justice.

What remained unspoken between them was the child they lost. Neither wanted to go there. For now, what mattered most was they were reunited. They kissed tenderly, lost in each other's arms. The miscarriage, the kidnapping, the ongoing issue of Antonio, the general chaos that had engulfed Harmony — it could all wait. What mattered most was they had each other.

**BETH**

"I don't want to hear it, mother!" Beth said angrily. She had come upstairs from the Book Cafe to change her shirt, after the steamer sprayed hot bubbling milk all over her shirt front. Edna immediately cornered her, demanding something to eat.

"What do you expect me to eat? Precious?"

The orangutang let out a shriek and shook her head vehemently.

Beth was in a bra, scrounging around the apartment in search of a suitable new shirt. All around the apartment there were unpacked boxes of clothes and donated items that had been dropped off by Good Will. There was no elevator to the building's second floor, which meant it was a challenge for Edna to get up and down the stairs. Beth preferred it that way — to keep her mother largely locked up here out of sight. Of course it meant that any time Beth came home, she was immediately swarmed by Edna, who had a million questions and was always demanding something.

"There's a frozen pizza in the freezer!" Beth said, taking hold of a black blouse and putting it on. "Even you should be able to manage that," she said to Precious.

"Bethie! Please, don't go! I'm ever so bored with no television and only this ape for conversation. She cheats at chess and poker, too! I can't live like this."
Beth ignored her, heading back towards the door. The Book Cafe reopened the day after the earthquake. Beth knew that people in the community were going to want someplace familiar to come, in the wake of all the confusion and destruction. The cafe had largely been spared any damage. Just books, knocked off their shelves, and Jessica Bennett had been kind enough to offer to help Beth re-shelf them.

"Mother, I told you, you're just going to have to make do."

"But the not knowing is killing me! How is Sheridan doing? And has she pointed the finger at us yet? Is Officer Luis Lopez-Fitzgerald going to throw us in the clinker??"

"It's talk like this that reminds me why I can't take you in public," Beth said, without turning around. "Bye you two."

Back downstairs, the cafe was busy, even at this late hour. Ernesto, one of two full-time employees, was hastily serving coffee while Mariana wiped down tables.

More than one person thanked Beth as she made her way to the front counter. She smiled. It felt good to be there for the community at a time like this. The Book Cafe had been a dream of hers since high school, and it had ingratiated her to the good people of Harmony, who were all loyal customers. Even when her mother's medical bills forced her temporarily sell the building to Julian Crane, she had quickly been able to recupe her money and buy it back. (At Crane's wildly inflated price...)

Luis had been in at least once a day to check up on her since the quake. He was concerned at how much she was working, given how recent her "miscarriage" had been, but Beth insisted that the work was a welcome distraction. It was true. In recent years, throughout her repeatedly foiled attempts to steal Luis from Sheridan, her job had always been a refuge from the scheming and the manipulation that took hold of her like a psychosis.

"Beth!" said Ernesto. His thick Spanish accent made it sound more like "Bet". He had proven a really good hire for her. He was in the country on a temporary work visa from Guatemala and could always be counted on. "We're almost out of muffins. Are there any more out back?"

She shook her head. "It's OK, Ernesto. It's getting late anyway."

The bell above the door jingled and in stepped Rebecca Hotchkiss. She looked all around her, an expression of mild disgust on her face.

"Hi there," Mariana greeted her. "If you'd like to grab a seat, I can bring you something to drink. Or if you're looking for something to go, just head over to the counter there and see my friend."

Rebecca sniffed disapprovingly.

"Oh, I have no intention of consuming something produced... here. I need to speak to the owner. Miss Beth Wallace. Is she around?"

Mariana nodded, leaving Rebecca to browse the shelves while she retrieved Beth.

"Someone here for you, Beth," Mariana said. "Seems kinda a bitch."

Beth was surprised when her employee pointed to Rebecca, who was running a finger along the top of a book as if checking for dust.

'Rebecca? What would she want to talk to me about?'
Beth wiped her hands on a dish towel and then went up to meet the woman.

"Hi there! Can I help you?"

"Is this what a library is like?" Rebecca asked, mildly amused. "I must confess, I've never been in one. Although my daddy did buy a couple of them back in the day. Just because."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind!" Rebecca waved a hand in her face. "I'm only hear because my daughter wanted me to relay a message to you."

A stab of fear. Gwen.

"What does—"

"Gwen apparently feels awful about something she said to you. Was too embarrassed to come tell you herself. Personally, I don't know where that girl gets it. She certainly doesn't come from common stock. No need to trifle herself over such silly things as other people's feelings."

Beth was clearly confused.

"Sheridan Crane is out of her coma, and has a message for you: she wants to see you."

Another stab of fear, this one even icier. Beth's skin prickled at the thought. She remembered being in the pit with Sheridan. Their battle as Sheridan tried to rip off her mask. What if she had somehow seen her face? Or what if she had opened her eyes at some point while being dragged down the alley and dumped?

"W-what for?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Rebecca. "I don't know how urgent it was. No need to go now; I was at the station when Gwen phoned, and Luis practically knocked me over to get out the door. I'm sure he and Sheridan are wasting no time getting busy. Miscarriage or not." She then looked at Beth and said, "Oh. You had one, too, didn't you? Is that the sort of comment I should apologize for?"

But Beth wasn't listening. Sheridan was awake. And Luis was already over there!

Beth knew there was no way they would be having sex, but the thought of them together, bonding (or, worse, discussing her kidnapping), burned Beth to the core.

"Thanks," she said, turning from Rebecca and heading to counter. "Hey Ernesto, do you think you guys can close up without me? I forgot there was some medicine for mother I need to pick up over at the hospital."

"Sí, no problem boss!"

In a minute she was gone. When the sink hole consumed her house, it also took with it the front and back yards as well as her driveway. As a result, Beth's car was gone but Luis secured her a rental the day after the quake. It was one of the many things he'd done in an effort to take care of her following the disaster. Every time she drove it, it was a reminder to her of what a life with Luis would be like — he would dote on her, look out for her, do everything he could to make sure she was safe and secure and happy. They would laugh and flirt over the counter at the Book Cafe when he and his fellow officers stopped by coffee and donuts. They would take trips out to beach. Maybe down to Boston for a concert. They would make love every night.
Of course none of this would come to pass so long as Sheridan was in the picture, constantly getting in the way and screwing everything up.

"Which room is Sheridan Crane in?" Beth asked the on-duty nurse.

"Oh no." The woman shook her head. "I made that mistake once already tonight. Visiting hours are over anyway."

Beth gritted her teeth. She wanted to reach over and punch the woman. Instead she stalked the hallways, peeking into the rooms with windows and opening the others to stick her head in. That was how she found them in room 118.

They were lying in Sheridan's hospital bed, facing each other. Luis was in his uniform, Sheridan in an unflattering green hospital gown.

They both looked up at the sound of the door opening.

"Beth!" Luis said, surprised. He got off the bed and came to her. "Is everything alright?"

For a split second she considered making something up. Telling him she had come to the hospital because of complications related to her miscarriage. But that would lead to too many questions. Instead she said: "I just got a message from Gwen. She, uh, she said Sheridan needed to see me..."

'Shit. Shit. Shit.' This was a mistake. If Sheridan had found her out, having Luis here was only going to make things worse. What would he think if Sheridan accused her of the kidnapping? What if they investigated her? What if they found out she also knocked her accomplice into the sinkhole? There was no way Charlie could have survived that fall. She was more than a kidnapper, she was a murderer...

Beth was unraveling on the inside. On the outside, however, she looked like a concerned friend.

"That's right," Sheridan said. "I do. This is very, very important." Beth couldn't tell from the tone of Sheridan's voice just where this was going.

"I can always come back if you two are busy..."

"No."

Luis looked to his lover and then his ex. "What is it Sheridan?"

"Come closer, Beth."

She took a few steps into the room.

"Closer."

She came up to the bedside.

Sheridan took hold of her hand, and Beth flinched.

"I heard about what happened to you and your baby during the earthquake," she said. "I am so, so sorry." Now there were tears in Sheridan's eyes. Beth didn't know this, but it was the first time since coming out of her coma that Sheridan had cried. "It's... It's the worst feeling in the whole world, isn't it? To lose the life you've had growing inside of you."

Beth looked helplessly to Luis, as if he knew what to say. His eyes were wet with tears as well.
"I know this was a weird and complicated mess between the three of us. Me with Luis, then with Antonio, then you with Luis, then me again, and both of us getting pregnant along the way. It's fucked up, but I never hated you for what happened. Life is just complicated sometimes. I always knew you would be a good mother to Luis' child. And that your little one and mine would half-siblings but almost like twins. Pretty much the exact same age."

Unexpectedly, a wave of emotion came over Beth and she found herself genuinely crying now.

"I'm only just beginning to reckon with this loss, but I'm so glad to know that I'm not alone. We aren't alone. You can call me any time. We can support each other. We can get through this."

Now Sheridan wrapped her arms around Beth in a hug. Beth stood rigidly, shaking slightly in her tears. This was fucked up. Suddenly, she felt the urge to confess. To confess it all, right then and there. Let the chips fall where they may. But then Luis approached from behind and put his arms around both of them. Beth could feel the warmth of Luis through his uniform and her blouse. The curve of his pecs, the ridges of his abs. She could smell him, that manly mix of sweat and Old Spice and testosterone.

Just as quickly as it arose, any thought of confession evaporated. It was replaced by determination. Luis would be hers. No matter what...
***THREE MONTHS LATER***

LUIS

Mrs. Dunham thanked Luis for stopping by. She knew there wasn't a whole lot he or anyone else from the police department could do about the vandalism, but it still meant something that he'd come over to have a look around. Some person or people had smashed her five jack-o-lanterns the night before. She swore she'd carved them to look like the most recent presidents — Bush, Clinton, Bush Sr., Reagan, and Carter — but staring at the pile of smashed gourds on her front porch, it was hard to imagine any of them having borne recognizable visages.

"At least we know it wasn't politically motivated. This wasn't a partisan attack."

He could tell she was trying to decide if he was making fun of her or not. In the end she just grinned and said she would invite him back to see her replacements.

"Maybe I should go with First Ladies this time..." The elderly woman murmured as she swept the pumpkin chunks into a dustpan.

It was a crisp October day. Halloween was still a couple weeks away and there would surely be similar vandalism still to come.

Luis smiled to himself and hopped back into his cruiser. There was a time when these were the sorts of calls he dreaded as an officer. Now, given all the bigger stuff he and his fellow officers had dealt with in recent years, some pre-Halloween antics by rowdy high schoolers — he would gladly deal with that.

In the weeks and months since the earthquake, Luis had made no headway on any of his main cases. Eve and TC were still missing. Their bank accounts had not been touched. Neither of their daughters and none of their friends had been contacted by them. Whitney had returned to Harmony for six weeks to help out with the search and the investigation, but eventually she returned to LA, this time joined by Theresa.

The investigation into Sheridan's kidnapping had been similarly fruitless. Sam tried to delegate the bulk of the responsibilities for that one to Hank, but Luis insisted on taking the lead. It was hard to argue with him. He was so determined. Sheridan had been drugged and removed from her cottage, waking up later at the bottom of an earthen pit. She hadn't been able to see much, but had noticed shelves filled with old tools and boxes. Typical basement stuff, really. The kidnappers had always appeared dressed in clown costumes, their faces obscured by masks and their voices disguised with distortion devices. She had a feeling that one of them might have been female — this was the one she'd wrestled with in the pit. Sheridan couldn't swear to it, but the person underneath the baggy clown outfit had felt like a slim woman.

Sam and Luis had scoured the property where Sheridan was found. They even brought Sheridan there and into the basement, but she was certain that was not where she'd been held.

"It felt... lived in," she had said, standing in the dusty living room of the Camden place. "Like, the
The third mystery plaguing Harmony's men in blue (or, more accurately, men in beige) was the disappearance of Alistair Crane. Like the Russels, he hadn't been seen since the night of the earthquake. His team of lawyers weren't making the investigation any easier, constantly obstructing the police, citing privacy laws and obscure instructions they'd received from their client in case of any "period of absence". However, until he returned, large portions of Crane Industries were directionless and certain funding streams and trusts Alistair controlled were frozen. Julian was shocked to learn just how much his father had controlled Julian's decision-making authorities within the company. Sheridan was shocked to find that the trust fund her money came from was locked down entirely and over the past three months her finances had dried up entirely.

She and Antonio still had her cottage to live in, so rent wasn't an issue. But everything else, including Antonio's medical treatments, had to be paid for. Antonio wasn't well enough to work on a fishing vessel but Luis called in a favour from one of the guys down at the docks and Antonio got work in one of the canning warehouses. The pay was shit, but it was something. Sheridan needed to find work as well, but for now...

Luis glanced at his watch. Antonio would be at the docks for another three hours.

He was knocking on Sheridan's door in ten minutes.

"I'm responding to a noise complaint," he said coyly when she opened the door.

"That one never gets old." But he could tell she loved it, especially when she called him "officer".

He lifted her up and then brought her down to kiss him.

"God I love you," he said.

"D'you know what? I kinda feel the same." They laughed and he carried her into the bedroom and tossed her onto the bed. "Are we going to be noisy this time, officer, or is there a 'public disturbance' bylaw to consider?"

She unbuttoned his uniform and ran her hands up and down over his torso.

"How about slow and steady? I want to savour every second I'm inside you."

She was slipping off her pants now. "That sounds perfect."

When they were together like this, neither of them thought about the fact that she was married. To Luis' brother. Nothing else mattered when they were alone and intimate. At times there was even something a little erotic about the sneaking around. They were like teenagers, afraid of getting caught by their parents. In the case of Luis' mother, this was actually true. Pilar was constantly reminding them they needed to stop for the sake of Antonio. Pilar's accusations were becoming especially stressful for Sheridan, who seemed to be the sole wrongdoer in Pilar's eyes.

But right now, together on Sheridan's bed, Luis rocking his hips and he moved back and forth inside her, Pilar was the last thing on either of their minds.

The past three months — aside from the Antonio factor, hanging over them like the sword of Damocles — had been the best they'd ever known as lovers. There was no kidnappings, no explosions, no imposters posing as one or the other in an effort to break them up. It was the nearest they'd come to perfection in the four years since they met.
When they were finished, they lay facing each other in bed. Sheridan played with the dark hair around Luis' naval while they talked. She told him about the book she was reading. "I feel like this is what my life has become," she sighed. "Lazing around the house, reading, waiting for my secret lover to call."

"Sounds luxurious."

"Maybe it would be if I still had the Crane fortune supporting me... I need to get a job. I'm starting to feel useless. If we hadn't lost Marty, I'd be close to giving birth right now. Then he'd be my job..."

Sheridan had taken to calling the child they lost "Marty" and Luis never questioned it. She was doing well mentally, following the kidnapping and miscarriage. He was impressed, as was her psychiatrist (when she could still afford sessions). She was doing well, but every so often she'd mention "Marty" and a quiet sort of sadness would pass over them.

He kissed her nose.

"I should probably be going soon." An hour and half had passed without them even realizing it.

"Wow, yes, and I should be doing laundry." She slipped on a silk robe and began stripping the sheets.

"Antonio never notices your guys' bed has immaculately fresh sheets ever single day?"

"No, he's usually too tired after work. Plus the smell from the cannery..."

Luis pretended he was about to throw up. She laughed and swatted him.

"This is awful. We shouldn't be laughing. He's working so hard to take care of me, and this is how I repay him?"

"Hey, you're working hard to take care of his health. If he wasn't sick, you would have left him now." There was a pause and then Luis asked: "You guys still don't..."

"No. We don't. Although at a certain point it's going to be hard for me to keep denying him... I don't want to be with any man but you."

That was something else that made both of them feel dirty — that Antonio accepted without question that Sheridan still wasn't feeling sexual since losing the baby. She never corrected him.

"Some day this is going to be behind us. And Antonio will come to understand you two were never destined to be together. Not like us."

She nodded.

"Although it'll be over Pilar's dead body..."

"Sheridan!"

"I didn't mean I wanted to kill her! That's not what I was saying. I just meant she's set on keeping you and me apart. Always talking about 'protecting her firstborn'. I used to think I was the luckiest daught-in-law in the world..."

"Hey now," he said, putting a hand on her waist. "Mama will come to understand. Things will go back to normal."
"I know."

He helped her load the bed clothes into the washing machine, and then went to the door.

"Maybe you could get a job over at the station? I think Sheila needs another admin assistant. Wouldn't it be fun, seeing each other every day at the office?"

"Are you kidding? We'd never get anything done."

He knew this was true.

"I'll see you soon." She kissed him.

He hurried down the path to the street. Brown and orange leaves were falling through the late afternoon sun. The days were getting shorter. He always kept his cruiser parked a couple blocks away, and he admired the pumpkins adorning the porches and walkways on his route. It occurred to him that he and Sheridan had never carved jack-o-lanterns together. Just one more for thing on a long list of 'some-days'...
Chapter 9

BETH

"Pumpkin spice latte, Ivy." Beth added a tiny dash of cinnamon to the warm, frothy drink before pushing it across the counter to her customer. Some people said that by early November pumpkin spice season was over, but Beth didn't care.

"Oh, thank you, Beth." Ivy took her cup to a table facing the Book Cafe's front door. Sam was supposed to meet her, but she was worried "that shrew" (Grace) might have lured him over for a shoulder to cry on. Ivy hadn't been talking to Beth so much as talking at her, but Beth had a million things on the go and so was happy when Ivy went off to simmer on her own.

Business was steady as ever at the Book Cafe, and unfortunately Mariana had recently left them to take a job somewhere else. It was just Beth and Ernesto now, and he wasn't in at the moment. The bell above the door jingled and she looked up, hoping it was him. It wasn't. Ivy had also looked up expectantly, only to be disappointed by some anonymous Harmonyte.

Apparently Sam was struggling with post-traumatic stress after shooting and killing a man just before Halloween. Ivy was trying to paint herself as just a concerned friend, trying to be there for him, but it was obvious to Beth what was going on. She had been living at Sam's for months, and it was no secret to anyone that their old romance was rekindling. This was one of the many perks associated with working at the Book Cafe — she was always getting the latest local gossip, sometimes witnessing it with her own eyes.

Beth had been surprised to learn Sam was struggling so much in the wake of the shooting. He'd always seemed solid as a rock, and don't they get training at the police academy for that sort of thing? She had seen him just before it happened (he was in getting coffee), and had seemed his usual self. It was a foggy night about two weeks earlier, so foggy, in fact, that even the full moon hadn't been visible. Sam was walking near Gabriela Park when a man leapt out of the bushes with a knife and tried to stab him. Sam drew his gun and with one bullet it was over. The strangest part of all: his attacker had been buck naked. The story was chilling, and Beth decided to take the plunge and invest in a couple security cameras inside and around the Book Cafe, just in case anyone else like him was prowling around some night.

Sam's torment over the killing naturally gave Beth pause and made her think about Charlie. That queer, mannish voice as Charlie fell backwards into the sink hole. Everything had been happening so quickly that night, Beth never really processed it. She was a killer too. And unlike Sam, it hadn't been self-defence in her case...

She shook her head and tried to snap out of it.

Ivy had also filled her in on her other children. Pretty and Fancy were both off studying in Europe. Ethan and Gwen were enjoying LA and celebrating the birth of their baby, a little girl they named Sarah. Theresa was on the west coast too and Ivy was furious. She was certain Theresa was going to do something to ruin Ethan's growing family. Or maybe sink her claws into Fox, who was also over there and would, in phone calls, allude to being interested in someone but refuse to spill any details to his mother.

It had been a major relief to Beth when Gwen and Ethan left Harmony to live in LA, near a birth specialist who was helping ensure Gwen carried her baby to term. Gwen was probably the only person in Harmony who ever questioned Beth and her motives, although she'd toned it down after
their encounter at the hospital on the night of the earthquake.

Beth was wiping down a sink and taking someone's order at the same time when Ernesto walked through the door with a man. The man was probably in his early 50s, rumpled coat and business attire. Ernesto waved and they approached. It turned out the man, George Liptak, worked for the department of immigration. Ernesto had been hired through a special foreign-hires program through the federal government, and Liptak was there to check-in and make sure everything was working out. Beth assured him it was.

She answered a number of other questions, after offering Liptak a coffee on the house, which he drank greedily. There was something about this man she did not like. Maybe it was dull smell of cigarettes or the way he licked his lips every couple minutes.

"Well, you just let me know if ol' Ernesto here gives you and grief and then—" He whistled and made a tossing gesture "—I'll have him flat on his ass back in whatever Guatemalan slum he crawled up out of."

Ernesto laughed awkwardly. Beth definitely did not like this guy. But, as she'd been her whole life, she was pathologically incapable of revealing her disapproval. She smiled sweetly and forced a laugh. Liptak handed her his card before leaving, and she hoped he hadn't been flirting with her at some point.

When he was gone Ernesto wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Is it just me or was that the slimiest bureaucratic outside of Washington, DC?" she joked.

"Oh yes, Mr. Liptak is as slimy as they come," Ernesto said, glancing around quickly to make sure he hadn't been overheard. "But I'm going to let you in a little secret, Beth..."

She was stunned (though probably shouldn't have been, given what she'd just witnessed) to discover that Liptak was about as crooked as they come, and he had actually pulled strings to get Ernesto his special visa.

"He can get anybody into the US. Anybody! I don't know how he does it, but he can — what is the phrase in English? — pull the strings."

"You've gotta be careful with people like that," she said.

"Oh you don't have to tell me. He can get anybody in, but I swear, he can get anybody out! Even Miss American Apple Pie Beth Wallace!" Ernesto winked. "He'd find a way to boot you up to Canada or something."

"Well maybe he can help us get a new worker here," Beth said, struggling to restock a napkin dispenser. "I love ya, Ernie, but I can't survive on you alone!"

"He could definitely do that. I can ask him if you want? I don't know how much it'd cost you, but it might be worth a shot."

"We'll see," Beth said.

The bell jingled and Beth half-expected to see Liptak slink back in, bringing with him a cloud of cigarette smoke. Instead it was Sheridan Crane.

Beth's heart immediately began racing. That always happened when she saw Sheridan. It went back to normal after a minute or two, but initially there was always the fear that Sheridan was going to
identify her as one of the kidnappers.

In reality, Sheridan had been kinder than ever since the earthquake. She obviously felt a kind of bond with Beth, both having lost their babies on the same night. She was always inviting her out for walks, asking if she wanted to join her book club, even if she wanted to join her and Antonio for dinner or drinks. This last activity was a double-edged sword for Beth, because she knew Sheridan wanted her to bring Luis so that they’d have an excuse to see each other socially. But it was also an opportunity for Beth to hang out with Luis, even if it was more or less a sham date. Every time they were together, there was the chance that Luis might start to realize he was wrong to have passed her up.

Sheridan waved at Beth, who waved back.

"How's it going?" Sheridan asked.

"Oh, not too bad. Busy as heck around here, but no complaints."

"That's actually what I came to ask you about."

Beth nearly dropped the saucer she was carrying.

"I was wondering if you're hiring."

For a second Beth didn't know what to say. The pros and cons of having Sheridan as an employee flashed quickly through her mind. Ernesto had clearly overheard the comment though, because he said, "Wow! We were lit-er-ally just talking about this! We've been having an impossible time finding someone."

Sheridan looked hopefully to Beth. She nodded. "It's true."

"Well what do you think? I can't say I know how to make latte art... Or, lattes in general... But I'm a fast learner!"

Beth imagined a jet of scalding hot water spraying up in the beautiful blond's face. She smiled.

"We'd be happy to have you on board. Just watch the floors. They're gonna get slippery with you around here."

"I promise, no spills!" she said.

"I meant because Ernesto is gonna be drooling all over the place with you around here."

Beth wasn't convinced it would be a good idea having Sheridan working here. Precious had gotten better at helping Edna up and down the stairs from the apartment, which meant they'd be seeing more of those two if Sheridan were here. Her mother had a way of running her mouth a little too much when Sheridan was in the vicinity. But she also didn't know how she could have said no. If Luis found out, he'd be so disappointed in her.

As Beth had learned through the general gossip mill of the Book Cafe, Alistair Crane's disappearance had left the Crane empire in disarray. It had also left Sheridan without access to any of the money she normally had at her disposal. Beth had taken secret delight in the socialite's financial downfall. Beth knew what it was like to have no money and have to scrap and save to support yourself. She'd been glad to hear Sheridan might finally get a taste of that for herself.

Alas, the experience just made Sheridan appear more grounded and human than ever. She shopped
at the local thrift store and always found the best deals. She joined some local clubs that were free. She went jogging. Meanwhile Beth was working sunrise to sundown, not to mention living with her mother and an ape that clogged the shower drain with orange hair...

Sheridan started on at the Book Cafe and most definitely did not live up to her "no spills" promise. But it was actually really satisfying having her around, getting to be her superior, making Sheridan do all the tasks she liked least of all. Any time Sheridan was cleaning the toilets on her hands and knees, Beth always found an excuse to pass by a couple times.

There were also the major brownie points this had scored her with Luis. The day after she hired Sheridan, Luis stopped by her apartment after closing hour to thank her. He was so happy for Sheridan he even kissed Beth on the lips and held her hands as he thanked her. When he was gone, Beth danced excitedly around the living room.

"You do realize how pathetic it is that this is what you're celebrating? Luis is happy because you did something nice for the woman he loves, and here you go twisting it to be all about you!" Edna had said. Precious hadn't been paying attention, instead lying on the couch and looking at an issue of US Weekly while the Wallace women bickered around her.

Soon it was early December. The first snow had fallen outside — a light dusting — and Beth decided it was time to haul out the Christmas decorations for the cafe. They were stored in a crawl space in the back room, and naturally Beth sent Sheridan to retrieve them. They'd enlist Precious to help stick paper snowflakes up along the tops of book shelves.

It was a fairly quiet morning. Father Lonigan was reading a braille book in an armchair on the far side of the cafe. John and Simone were at a table, possibly on a date. Pilar was at the counter making small talk with Beth while Ernesto brewed some tea for her. At one point in their conversation, Beth noticed a strange look in her eyes as she stared at the young possible-couple.

"Is everything OK, Pilar?"

Pilar snapped out of it and smiled, a little embarrassed.

"Oh yes, Beth, I was just thinking about poor Simone and how there's still be no word on either of her parents. I know that when Martin left us without any warning, my children all took it very hard. Very hard, but each of them in different ways. Theresa says Whitney is holding up. But I'm sure it's easier, too, for her being on the other side of the country. Must be harder for Simone, surrounded by all her memories of TC and Eve."

Beth could only nod in agreement.

She'd heard rumours that TC and Eve had left town to start over somewhere else, completely fresh. Others said the mob had put a hit out on them — something about gambling debts and TC's coaching — and their bodies had been tossed off one of the piers. Edna insisted that the rapture had taken place during the earthquake and the heavenly angels had lifted the Russells up to paradise. She had no explanation for why the only other person similarly vanish that night was pure evil, Alistair Crane.

The door bell jingled just as Ernesto was handing Pilar her tea. It was Luis.

"Mama!" he said.

"Mijo!" She kissed him on the cheeks. "How are you doing?"

"Just wanted to pick up some of Beth's world famous donuts to take to the guys back at the station,"
he said.

Beth blushed. "You know I just buy these down at the Safeway and re-sell them, right?"

He just winked.

"Luis!" Sheridan had emerged from the storage room, a box of decorations under one arm. She was covered in dust and cobwebs. He and Ernesto both burst into gales of laughter at the sight of her. "Oh very funny guys."

Beth joined in the laughter but was internally seething. Only Sheridan Crane could emerge in her cheap secondhand clothes, covered in grime, and still look like a supermodel.

She and Luis went to each other and embraced. Luis brushed her lips with his thumb before kissing her.

Pilar cleared her throat.

They let go of each other and turned to her.

"You know I think this is a very dangerous game you two are playing," Pilar said. "I don't know why you are hellbent on seeing Antonio wind up in an early grave."

"Mama, we—"

"I don't want to hear it, mio. It's bad enough you two are running around behind Antonio's back while he slaves away at the cannery. But to do it public? What if he had walked through that door and seen you?"

"Pilar, it's—"

"No, Sheridan. Listen to me—"

"No Pilar, you listen to me. Luis and I love each other. We're making the best of a bad situation, and I would thank you kindly to back the hell off. I'm sick of you trying to micromanage our lives."

Now John and Simone were both watching from their table. Father Lonigan was no doubt listening from his chair. Beth covered her mouth feigning shock, but really she was trying to hide her smile. This was too perfect.

"I don't want to hear any more about this from you," Sheridan said. Her fury had taken Beth by surprise. She'd never heard Sheridan speak ill of Pilar before.

"Well I can't be expected to hold my tongue when I see something I so strongly disagree with."

"Then don't come around here. I don't want to see you anymore if this is how you're going to treat me."

"Sheridan," Luis said in a hushed voice. "Maybe we should step outside and get some air."

"No, Luis. Your mother needs to hear this."

"Ay! Dios mio. This mujer will drive me crazy," said Pilar, glancing skyward as if communicating directly with the Lord. "In my family in Mexico, you would get a slap in the mouth for speaking this way to your mother."
"Well guess what, Pilar, you're not my mother and this isn't Mexico. If you don't like it, why don't you go back."

At this Sheridan turned and stormed out of the Book Cafe.

Luis looked torn between what to do, who to go to, and in the end he chased after Sheridan calling her name.

Everyone remaining in the cafe was stunned into silence. Beth hadn't noticed John stand up and step towards them. She also hadn't see Father Lonigan rise.

"Pilar, my friend," he said in his most priestly of voices. "I can hear such anguish in your voice. Why don't you come with me back to St. Margaret Mary's. I can take your confession and—"

"D'you know what? Cram it, Father." Now it was Pilar's turn to storm out.

Beth and Ernesto looked at each, wide-eyed. Simone took John's hand and got him to sit back down. And Father Lonigan cleared his throat awkwardly and fumbled for his cane.

"Wow, I did not see that coming," said Ernesto.

"Me neither," said Beth. The explosion between Sheridan and Pilar had come out of nowhere. But it sparked a memory in Beth, a memory of a conversation and a person and now that memory had turned into an idea. She knew how she was going to break up Sheridan and Luis once and for all...
ANTONIO

"Pour me another, Liz."

It was date night with Luis and Beth, but so far Antonio was the only one at the Blue Note. Liz filled a tall glass with draft and slid it across the counter to him with a napkin. There was music playing faintly in the speakers; the live entertainment — a pianist and singer from New York — didn't start until later.

"Everything OK?"

He took a long drink of the beer. "Getting better now."

Mostly he was doing alright. He was tired from work, distracted by an argument he'd recently had with Miguel (Miguel had become weirdly moody in recent months), but overall he knew he really shouldn't complain. He hadn't had any health scares, he seemed to be getting stronger. There was Sheridan's strange behaviour though. That was a concern. Apparently she had flipped out at his mother for no discernible reason. John Hastings had witnessed it a few days earlier at the Book Cafe and went out of his way to tell him.

"Look, I just thought you should know, your wife lit into Pilar. Tore a strip off her. You should really speak to her about the way she treats her mother-in-law."

Antonio had not been impressed. Who did this 20-something kid think he was?

"I'll ask you not to talk about my wife OR my mother," Antonio told him. "Mind your own business!"

But in truth, John's news had perturbed him. He tried to speak with Pilar about it; she got an irritable look on her face for a second before she flatly denied there had been any altercation with Sheridan. Antonio could tell Pilar was lying, but he couldn't bring himself to broach the subject with Sheridan. Maybe he would tonight, when she arrived.

Antonio relayed the story to Liz, who nodded knowingly.

"I heard about it from Simone. She was with John when it happened." Liz had taken on an aunt-like role with Simone since the disappearance of her parents.

"Are she and John an item?"

"She's certainly trying," Liz said. "As for Sheridan: I wonder if maybe this is related to her kidnapping and miscarriage. That's a pretty traumatic experience. And she bounced back from it awfully fast. Maybe too fast."

Antonio nodded. It was plausible. There were definitely times when she behaved strangely. She was easily startled by Antonio. Sometimes she changed the topic of conversation for no apparent reason. But she never lost her temper. He wanted to take care of her and protect her, but often it felt like that was her primary concern with him. They had yet to make love since she had been found again, and more and more Antonio was thinking it might be healthy for them to rekindle that part of their marriage. He was growing tired of relieving himself in the shower each morning. He wanted to feel Sheridan beneath him, wanted to look her in the eyes as they made love.
"Hey, Liz, what does a guy have to do to get a drink around here?"

They turned. It was Sam, seated at the other end of the bar. Antonio almost didn't recognize him. He'd grown a beard and wasn't looking like his normal, well-groomed self. He even sounded gruff.

"Sorry Sam. I'm not actually the bartender, but my girl is running late tonight. What can I get for you?"

"Whiskey. Double."

Antonio opened his mouth to make conversation, but hesitated. Something told him that Sam was not in the mood to chat. Thankfully Antonio was spared the awkwardness.

"Hey guys!" Beth called from across the room. She and Luis had arrived for their double date night. She had her arm linked with Luis', although he fidgeted free as they approached the bar. She and Liz hugged, and Antonio kissed her on the cheek during their own embrace.

Beth looked great. She was wearing a red skirt with spaghetti straps, and no bra that Antonio could see. He couldn't help notice her physique. Or the way it was making him aroused...

"Hey buddy," said Luis, clapping him on the shoulder. Luis wore a black dress shirt under a brown blazer. He seemed distracted already.

"Where's Sheridan?" Antonio asked.

"Oh, she had to stay late at the Book Cafe," said Beth. "We sometimes get slammed just before closing. She shouldn't be too long."

One of Liz's employees showed them to a table on the other side of the lounge. She brought them a round of cocktails on the house, and when the bartender arrived Liz joined them while they waited for Sheridan. They talked about the ongoing search for Alistair Crane. Antonio noticed Julian was there, slumped forward in a seat near the stage.

Luis snorted. "The definition of class, that guy."

Liz sighed irritably. "He's here every night."

"Why is that, d'you think?" Beth asked. "Alistair's disappearance couldn't possibly be driving him to the hit bottle like this."

Liz almost looked like she was going to say something, but then didn't. Instead she excused herself and spoke to the bouncer about escorting Julian out of the Blue Note. Antonio remembered the photograph Liz had been holding on the night of the earthquake, the one of Julian and Eve kissing. He never brought the photo up again with Liz since that night and she had never offered any details. In some ways that hurt Antonio. There had been a time when Liz had known all of his secrets. 'Except,' he reminded himself, 'she didn't know all my secrets at all. She knew Brian's secrets. Who knows what Liz might have kept from you...'

At that moment Sheridan walked in the door. She was wearing the same jeans and white top she'd worn to work that morning. There was a fresh coffee stain on the front of it.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, kissing Antonio and then hugging the others. "I somehow misplaced my house keys. I couldn't get into the cottage to change."

"You should have called me," said Antonio. "I would have come to let you in."
"It's fine." She waved him off. "I'm just sorry to be so underdressed. Beth, you look lovely."

"So do you, Sheridan," Beth insisted.

"Yeah, incredible," added Luis.

An awkward silence was beginning to settle over the table. Beth piped up with news that she'd been invited to join the Harmony Chamber of Commerce, to fill the spot that had been vacated by a Crane Industries rep who normally sat on the board. Apparently with Alistair gone, so too was the money he paid for that company rep. It was great news for Beth.

"What's the first order of business?" asked Antonio.

"They're still bringing me up to speed, but I was at my first meeting today about the town Christmas tree, which the Chamber funds each year. We're a little behind schedule but should have it up in time for this weekend."

Luis seemed lost in thought again.

"Remembering past tree lightings?" Antonio asked. It was a family tradition of theirs every year, and was one of the things Antonio had missed most of all about Harmony during his years on St. Lisa's. The question startled Luis, who shook his head.

"No. But I think I'm going to get some air. I'll be back in a minute."

Conversation continued with the three of them until Sheridan excused herself and went to the bathroom. When it was just Antonio and Beth, he asked her, "How is everything with Luis? He usually seems distracted on these nights out."

Beth sighed.

"I wish I could say."

"Are you guys...?"

Antonio could still remember their ill-fated double-wedding. He had been blind at the time, just like their priest. Standing at the alter holding Sheridan's hands, feeling on cloud nine having both just said "I do". However, when it was Luis and Beth's turn, Mrs. Wallace had cried out from the audience and collapsed. Her garbled speech had been especially unnerving to Antonio, with no visual cues to go with it. That had been a dark note on which to begin married life with his beloved. It was in the wake of the failed wedding that Luis had called off his engagement to Beth. Ended their relationship entirely, which had perplexed Antonio. What could have been so wrong? Luis and Beth were only a year younger than him, so he'd watched them as kids, both practically attached at the hip. And in high school they were the same, only then they were in love and sneaking into and out of each other's bedrooms. He couldn't remember how their relationship had ended after high school.

"A couple?" Beth sighed and looked away, sadness and bitterness mingled in her voice. "No." She forced herself to smile. "Not yet anyway. I don't want to push him into something he's not ready for, but I have a feeling it won't be long. He's going to remember the specialness of what we had."

Antonio smiled.

"I know he will too. My brother can be little obtuse when it comes to love. Sometimes he can't see what's been right in front of his eyes all along."
Beth chuckled, then nodded her head in agreement.

"These date nights have been a good reminder for him," Antonio went on. "Especially when his date is looking like you are right now."

Beth blushed. "Oh, stop."

"I mean it. If Luis doesn't wake up and come to his senses, he's going to miss out."

"Oh yeah, because guys are just lining up outside the Book Cafe to be with me."

"Maybe Sheridan could set you up with somebody. I think she'd be an excellent matchmaker. She's got great taste in men, if I do say so myself." He winked.

"Sheridan already has the man I want..." Beth mumbled.

"What did you say?"

"Sheridan already has to, uh, do what I want. At work, I mean. She's already doing enough for me as an employee." Beth looked flustered, but then flashed her winning smile.

"Aw, you girls are friends, not just co-workers! I doubt she would mind." He looked around. "Where is Sheridan anyway? She's been gone for ages." Antonio started to rise, as if to go look for her, but Beth put a hand on his arm.

"She's probably stuck waiting for a mirror in the bathroom," Beth said. "I'll go check. You wait here and order me another manhattan if you see our server."

By now the Blue Note was quite busy. The live music had started and couples were on the dance floor. Antonio had a hard time picturing Sheridan waiting around for a mirror to powder her nose, but then again, she had told him stories about her more... superficial days. It was funny to think that while he was fishing off St. Lisa's, coming home to Liz each night with sun-beaten brow and calloused hands from a day on the boat, Sheridan Crane was living Paris, rubbing shoulders with the highest of high society.

Her best friend was Diana Princess of Wales. Incredible.

Sometimes he worried that she could never be happy with a simple fisherman like him from small-town USA. But when he held her close at night, he knew they belonged together.

"Two for the price of one!" Beth joked, returning to the table with both Sheridan and Luis. "We ran into this creep loitering outside the ladies' room."

"Har har," Luis said. "Did I miss anything?"

"Nothing," said Antonio. "I was just about to order another round for the table. Unless we'd like to do a bit dancing first?"

"Yes!" Sheridan and Luis said at the same time.

However, Antonio found it to be the strangest thing; even though Sheridan sounded eager at his proposition, she only danced with him once before calling it quits and heading back to their table.
Chapter 11

EDNA

It was Monday. Or was it Tuesday? No, it had to be Monday, because the Book Cafe closed early on Mondays, and Beth was home in the apartment. For Edna Wallace, all the days sort of blurred together into a meaningless streak. She used to go to church on Sundays, until her driver's license was revoked and Beth stopped taking her. That was when Edna set up a little shrine at home where she could worship in her own style and any time she wanted.

Edna Wallace had been baptized and raised Catholic, like most of Harmony's residents. She grew up in a poor household — grew up on the "wrong side of the tracks," literally; the rougher part of town was just south of the rail yards — but her mother had been a fierce believer in Christ and had always sworn that with enough prayer, they too would come to know the Lord's bounty.

Edna rebelled against it. She ran away a lot as a teenager. Those had been turbulent times. She'd known love for a couple years, from sixteen to eighteen, and that was probably the most stable she'd ever been. Samuel Bennett — who eventually went on to become Harmony's chief of police and father to two handsome sons, Sam and Hank — had been Edna's first love. And while there had been many men in the years after Samuel, many "loves" along the way, Edna couldn't recall ever feeling the same way she did with him.

Now she could barely recall what day of the week it was...

But it was Monday. Yes, definitely Monday because the Harmony Christmas tree lighting had been the day before. Beth had refused to take her, but Precious helped her into her winter coat and down the stairs from the apartment. It had been a beautiful ceremony, especially the golden angel placed at the very top of the tree.

Then it was back to the drudgery of the apartment. Edna was going stir crazy up there, rarely with anyone but her nurse for company.

"Any jacks?" Edna asked.

Precious made a smacking sound with her lips that meant "Go fish".

"Ahh, I'm sick of this game anyway," Edna said, tossing her cards into a pile on the table. She turned in her seat and grabbed her walker, then shuffled into the kitchen where Beth was on the phone.

"That would be perfect," Beth said into the receiver. "And you're positive this won't be traced back to me? Excellent. Yes, I can pay you in cash. Oh yeah, duh, of course it would be cash." That was when she noticed her mother for the first time. Beth scowled and made a shooing gesture, but Edna didn't budge. "Thanks again. I'll see you soon. We can go over the details again in person."

"Bethie, I don't know what you're up to, but I know it ain't no good. This has to do with that beautiful Sheridan, doesn't it?"

"Quiet mother." Beth stalked past her and towards her room, but Edna followed, her walker clacking with each step.

"I thought maybe, just maybe, you had finally given up on your evil plans, but I can see I was being totally delusional!"
"You are deluded, mother. I know better than to discuss anything with you." Beth caught Precious' gaze. "Or you."

Edna moved over to the cabinet where she kept a small altar with angel statues and candles. It wasn't until much later in life that Edna had found God again and reconnected with her Christian roots.

And it had taken her a while to rebuild her quirky shrine since the earthquake had swallowed everything up, but now her place of worship was back. She even had one of her original angel figurines. The recovery of that one had truly been a miracle. Someone found it on the beach a few months after the quake. They brought it to the Book Cafe because it had Edna's name inscribed on the base. A reporter from the Gazette even did a story on the bizarre find, and quoted a geologist in the article who said much of the Wallace house was likely still beneath Harmony, smashed to pieces but trapped in the many watery underground chambers there. Bits of debris would make their way through these subterraneous channels and into the ocean, but this would take place over a long period of time. Edna's angel statue turning up like it did was happenstance, through and through, but it made for a sweet story.

Beth had not been happy with it, crumpling up the newspaper and throwing it in the fire place. She hated the thought of potential evidence surfacing somehow. She preferred to think the sinkhole had taken everything with it. Especially clues as to Sheridan's kidnapping and Charlie's death...

Kneeling in front of her shrine, Edna touched the angel and then clapped her hands tightly together.

"Oh heavenly angels, SMITE my daughter Beth before she can do anymore harm to poor, innocent Sheridan!" Edna opened one eye to check that Beth was still within earshot. "She already treats Sheridan like a slave downstairs. A veritable Cinderella! Please don't let my wicked, wicked daughter cause her any new pain."

"Be quiet, mother! Sheridan isn't Cinderella. She grew up a total princess. I'm the Cinderella — raised in poverty, an evil mother punishing me unfairly. Plus I'm much more beautiful than she is."

Precious let out of squawk of what could only be interpreted as laughter. The simian clamped a hand over its mouth when Beth whirled around to give her a sour look.

"Beth, please. I know I didn't do my best for you growing up, but the darkness in you is something purely your own. Maybe from your father's side of the family, but not mine!"

Beth laughed cynically. "Like you even know who my biological father is."

"Based on your behaviour, he must have been Satan himself!"

"I wouldn't put it past you to fuck the devil."

Edna made the sign of the cross and turned back to her shrine.

"Don't listen to her, angels. Please, show my Bethie the light. And thwart whatever she's up to this time."

Edna had been starting to think that maybe the old Beth was returning. Not since the night of Charlie's death had Beth been at her most despicable. Yes, she'd hired Sheridan — no doubt so she could lord what little authority she has over her — but otherwise life had taken on a more or less normal rhythm for the Wallace women. But now this suspicious phone call...

"So ... who was that you were speaking with?" Edna asked eventually, hoisting herself up and
making her way to the couch.

Beth laughed. "Like I would make the mistake of telling you."

Many times Edna had considered revealing her daughter's true character. But by now she was an accomplice to Beth's deeds. She should have done something to save Sheridan when she was still in their pit. But now? The best Edna could hope for would be maybe figuring out what Beth had in store for Sheridan this time and finding a way to sabotage her efforts.

"Maybe I could help?"

Beth laughed again.

"No thank you, mother. I have all the help I need."
Just one week until Christmas. The yuletide spirit was in the air at the Book Cafe. It should have been infectious, but Sheridan just couldn't seem to get into the mood. (Although she masked this expertly when chatting with customers.) Ernesto had taught her to make snowflake latte art, which patrons were always delighted by.

"This is so pretty!" Jessica said before rejoining her cousin, Charity, on one of the sofas. "Thanks Sheridan."

"Merry Christmas," Sheridan said smiling. Inside though, there was an immutable sadness welling. Gwen would be home soon from LA for the holidays, bringing with her little infant Sarah. As much as Sheridan was happy for her best friend and her cousin, Ethan, (ex-cousin, technically) she knew that seeing the new baby was going to be rough. Gwen had been considerate enough not to gush about the birthing experience or to talk incessantly about Sarah when they chatted on the phone. But some of it was unavoidable — sometimes Gwen would have to go because Sarah would start crying or sometimes the babe could be heard gurgling or laughing in the background — and Sheridan's thoughts would immediately go to the child she lost. Marty.

Sheridan wished she could get back to normal. She wanted to be a good auntie to little Sarah. When they both found out they were pregnant, Sheridan and Gwen had promised that each would be godmother to the other's child. There had been no mention of that pact since Sheridan lost Marty, but she still hoped to be Sarah's godmother, even if she didn't yet have a babe of her own to return to the honour. She wanted to be pregnant again. She wanted to start fresh. Just not with Antonio's child... The fear of an accidental conception with Antonio was one of the reasons she was still holding out on him sexually. She couldn't risk another uncertain paternity.

"How much longer can we keep this up?" Luis had asked her at the Blue Note the week before. She had slipped out onto the patio to have a moment alone with him while Antonio and Beth were back at the table.

"I don't know." She was leaning against him, her head on his shoulder. The tiniest of snowflakes drifted down, glinting in the light from a nearby street lamp.

"We could run away."

At this she jerked her head away and looked at him sharply.

"I can't believe you would say that."

"Is it so crazy? There was a time when you and I were going to elope in secret at the courthouse."

"Yes, except that someone didn't show up."

"We've been over this, I—"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I don't want to rehash that whole mix-up again. But Luis, it's not fair for you to propose running away. You're not married to a man whose health has turned him into a ticking time bomb."

"He is my brother. It's not like he's chop liver to me."
"We should go inside. They're going to be wondering what happened to us."

"Just one kiss then, before—"

As if on cue, Beth had poked her head out the door and cleared her throat. "You guys might want to come back. Antonio was inquiring. I said I'd come and get you, Sheridan."

Sheridan's face had turned scarlet. "Let's go," she said. Luis grudgingly followed. "Thanks Beth. Sorry for keeping you guys."

The memory made Sheridan feel frustrated all over again. That Luis would put her in that position. Sometimes she felt like it would better if they didn't go out on these farcical double-dates. It just posed a risk that one of them might slip up in front of Antonio. And Sheridan didn't know what Beth got out of the dates, unless she secretly had a thing for Antonio and wanted an excuse to be near him. Things between Beth and Luis were over and done; it would be so convenient if Antonio fell for her and vice-versa. That would make all their problems go away.

"Hell-ooo! Earth to beaner! I asked for medium, not dark roast!"

She snapped out of her thoughts. A man was standing at the other end of the counter, scowling at Ernesto.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Liptak. I must have misheard."

"Well 'no comprende' doesn't fly here. This is the United States. You'd do well to remember that if you expect to call this place home."

"Yes sir. Pardoname. I mean, I'm sorry. We have a new bag of the medium roast out back. I will grab it and have a fresh coffee brewed for you. On the house!" Ernesto fled to the storage room.

This Liptak man leaned against the counter, picking at his fingernails, waiting for Ernesto to return. He was in his 50s, balding, and had yellow teeth with a monstrous overbite. Sheridan approached him.

"Excuse me, sir, you can't speak to our employees like that. You can't speak to anyone that way, certainly not on our premises."

"And who are you?" He looked at her with a withering combination of irritation and amusement.

"I work here. But even if I didn't, I wouldn't stand for that kind of racist, xenophobic treatment of another person. I think you should leave."

His lips curled back in a wet grin.

"It's a free country. I can say what I want. And it would behoove grimy little spics like Ernesto here to get that through their heads now."

Sheridan couldn't believe this man. She wasn't naive. She knew about racism — hell, her father was one of the worst racists she'd ever known — but hearing that kind of language, about anyone let alone a friend and co-worker, had her seeing red.

Suddenly she grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him forward so they were almost nose-to-nose. Surprise flashed across his face for a second, but only a second. He continued to grin. The stale stink of cigarettes off him was almost overwhelming.
"This is a private business, so you can take your racist free speech and get the fuck out. Got it? Or I'll have my boyfriend — who's a cop — come and haul your ass down to the police station for trespassing."

For long time neither of them said anything. Sheridan gripped his shirtfront a little tighter.

"Do I make myself clear?"

He raised his hands.

"I'll go." And now his whole demeanour changed completely. He did a 180 and now looked scared. "I'll do what you say." He gave a little bow and hurried out the door.

Adrenaline was coursing through Sheridan's veins. When Ernesto returned a moment later, her hands were still clenched in fists by her side.

"Where did Señor Liptak go?"

"I think he decided to try Dunkin Donuts for his morning coffee instead."

Ernesto look puzzled, but didn't probe any further. He took the medium roast beans to the grinder and continued with his tasks. Sheridan tried to do the same, but the incident had her rattled. She shouldn't have flown off the handle like that — 'What is wrong with me?' she wondered — but it did feel kind of good to put someone like that in his place. Except she had alluded to her "cop boyfriend"... She hoped that wouldn't come back to bite her somehow.

"No," she murmured to herself while opening a box of books to be shelved. "I'm done with feeling bad for doing the right thing."
Chapter 13

LUIS

Midnight mass at St. Margaret Mary's. Another Christmas tradition — like the tree-lighting a little over a week ago — that he was forced to endure without Sheridan. Instead he had to watch her with his brother. Of course that hadn't stopped them from sharing a quick kiss in the church hall before the service. (Sheridan had to arrive early with some large coffee urns from the cafe. They only had time for one kiss but it had left his heart pounding until well after they'd stepped apart and went back to pretending they weren't lovers.)

After the service everyone would migrate out into the front of the church. The moon was full, there was snow on the ground, and Luis could already see the children who would be chasing each other around the nativity scene until finally joining the grownups in the church hall for cocoa and marshmallows. There would also be coffee, tea, and cookies. It was always fun to see folks who had moved away but were back for the holidays to see family.

As parishioners were slowly filing into the church, Father Lonigan asked Luis and Hank if they would take on the collection duty mid-way through mass. All the money from that night was going to be donated to a charity that provided presents to low-income families. Luis didn't want to do it, but Hank elbowed him playfully. "C'mon Mister Grinch. Do you want coal for Christmas this year?"

"You know what I want for Christmas," Luis said.

"Mijo!"

They both jumped a little. Pilar had been standing within ear shot.

"You need to watch what you say, Luis. You know who could easily have overheard."

"Mama," Luis said irritably. "I didn't even say her name!"

"I'm not going to get into this here. Ivy just arrived, I'm going to see how she's holding up. Just please, let us get through the holiday without a disaster."

Luis couldn't get a word in before she turned and walked over to Ivy. It was the first time Luis had seen Ivy since she was released from the hospital. Her face was still covered almost completely in bandages. She had been out snowshoeing when a lynx attacked her, raking its claws across her face in one big swipe. If Sam hadn't found her, she almost certainly would have died.

Ivy was there with her youngest daughter, Pretty, who had apparently come home to be with her mother at this difficult time. Pretty could relate to what Ivy was going through. Pretty wore a hat and scarf and glasses, which together hid her face from view. Luis was morbidly curious; he'd heard rumours of Pretty's disfigurement — something about acid and a jealous sister — but didn't know the full story.

"What was that all about?" Hank asked, referring to Pilar.

Luis shook his head. "Oh god, where to begin? My mother has been obsessive when it comes to keeping me and Sheridan apart."

"For the good of Antonio's health?"
Luis just nodded.

They watched as Grace and the Hastings arrived and found a seat close to the front. Kay arrived carrying baby Maria, followed by Miguel and Charity. Miguel could barely fit into his church clothes; he had really let himself go in recent months. Where his brother had once had washboard abs, now he sported a belly so round it looked like he’d swallowed a basketball. Luis had tried on more than one occasion to get Miguel to join him to shoot hoops at the rec centre, but Miguel always declined. He'd become furtive and secretive, but maybe it was just the stress of fatherhood that was affecting him. It couldn't be easy to navigate raising a child with his girlfriend's cousin...

Next Beth and Precious arrived.

"No Mrs. Wallace tonight?" he asked.

"Not this year. It's getting harder and harder for my mother to stay up past 10. Precious wanted to come though."

The orangutang shook it's head "No", which made Hank and Luis laugh.

"Good thing Father Lonigan can't see that," said Hank.

"I'll save you a seat, OK Luis?"

"Just go up and join my family. I'll be there in a minute," Luis said. When she was gone, he asked Hank, "Hey, where's your brother? I thought Sam would be here with Ivy."

Hank looked around. The rest of the crowd was filing inside now.

"I don't know. I had assumed he would be coming with her. I guess he's running late. Hopefully nothing came up at the station."

With that they turned and made their way in to their seats.

The sermon was as slow and monotonous as ever. Luis was beginning to think Lonigan just re-used the same script over again, year after year, but then he made some reference to the earthquake from that summer and the need to give thanks for such a low death count, all things considered. Two people had died when a tree fell into their house and four were killed in a car accident, caused by a crack that had cut across Main Street. Otherwise that was it. Unless, of course, you counted the missing: Eve, TC, and Alistair. Luis didn't like to think about that though. He hadn't given up on his search for the Russells, but it no longer commanded the same level of resources and attention it had in the initial months.

Halfway through the service, Luis and Hank slipped from their pews and stood near the front of the church on either side, waiting for their time to walk down the aisles with the collection baskets.

Luis surveyed the church. All his friends and family were there. His mother held baby Maria, alongside Kay, Miguel, and Charity. Next to them were Beth and Precious (the latter looked his way and blew him a big kiss). And then there was Theresa in the row behind them. She was seated not just with her song, but also Gwen and Ethan, all of them home from LA. That had been an unexpected sight, to see all three of them getting along. Theresa was even holding baby Sarah right now! He shook his head in disbelief; maybe there were such things as Christmas miracles. He'd have to take Theresa out for a beer before they headed back west to find out what the heck had happened there. Next to them were Fox and Whitney, also home for the holidays, and Simone sat next to her sister. No sign of Chad.
Luis' eyes had been avoiding Sheridan and Antonio, who were seated with Liz and... Julian Crane? That was almost as unexpected as Theresa and Gwen! Expect Liz and Julian definitely didn't seem to be getting along. He was whispering something in her ear and whatever it was, there seemed to be menacing undertones.

"And now brothers and sisters," said Father Lonigan, raising his hands, "I would ask that you—"

Suddenly the doors to the church flew open with a loud bang. Every head turned to see who it was. Two men who looked like soldiers entered. They wore black leather boots, navy uniforms, and black vests. ICE was written on their shoulders. They were also armed with guns on their belts. Behind them was another man in a brown, knee-length coat. He surveyed the room. Everyone was stunned.

"Who is it? Who goes there?" asked the priest.

The man in the brown coat took a badge from his coat and held it up.

"My name is George Liptak," he said loudly. "I'm with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. I have a deportation order for an illegal alien who has been living here under forged citizenship papers."

People murmured amongst themselves and glanced around.

Luis put down his collection basket and instinctively reached for his own badge. Unfortunately he must have left it in his cruiser. Why would he ever have thought it would be necessary at midnight mass? He'd dealt with the feds before on cases and they were always the worst. They thought small town cops were glorified meter-maids.

"If Pilar Lopez could please step forward, we don't want to make this any more difficult than it has to be."

Now a gasp ran through the congregation. Luis' heart leapt into his throat. He looked to his mother whose eyes were wide as saucers. She looked speechless.

One the officers said something to Liptak and pointed in her direction. The three of them moved towards the front of the church. Pilar passed Maria to Kay, and stood up shakily. John Hastings leapt to his feet across the aisle and brushed Grace away when she tried to stop him.

"What are you talking about?" John said. "You're wrong!"

"John!" Pilar said sharply. "Be quiet. This is just a mistake."

Luis was moving now, walking down to them. He could see Antonio had also stood up.

"You're under arrest for unlawful entry to the United States and for the falsification of official government documents," said Liptak.

"Think again!" said Luis. "You buffoons have the wrong woman. My mother is an American citizen."

"Son, this is even harder for us than it is for you. But we have a job to do." Liptak’s smile betrayed his words. "Your mother has been living here illegally for over 30 years. We were only recently tipped off that we could expect to find irregularities in her immigration files."

"Sir, please," said Pilar, politely but nervously. "You truly are mistaken. I came here legally and earned my citizenship. I went through all the proper channels."
Liptak scoffed.

"Are you going to come peacefully or are my men going to have to arrest you forcibly?"

Luis could have decked the man right then and there.

"Sirs!" said Father Lonigan from the alter. "This is a place of worship. Whatever Pilar's immigration status, she can claim sanctuary here and you are not allowed to remove her."

"Father, there's no need for me to claim sanctuary because I'm an American citizen."

"Come with us, ma'am," said one of the officers. He reached out and took Pilar by the wrist.

"Get your hand off her!" John lunged across the aisle at them. The other officer knocked him backwards and then pinned him on the floor.

"I think we're going to need backup," Liptak spoke calmly into a small microphone in his sleeve. Tears came to Pilar's eyes for the first time.

"I don't know where you guys got your intel, but you're way off!" said Theresa angrily, putting a defiant hand on her mother's shoulder. "My mother is not only a legal citizen, she also married an American. Now go back to HQ and leave my family alone."

"We have a falsified marriage license on record. We tried to contact the 'Martin Fitzgerald' listed there, but he conveniently hasn't been seen in almost 20 years."

Now it was Theresa's turn to scoff. "Are you suggesting my father never existed? News flash, four of his five kids are here right now!"

Liptak flashed an oily, fiendish smile.

"I'm not suggesting you don't have a father named Martin Fitzgerald. What I'm saying is that you and your four siblings are all technically bastards."

Miguel made a motion to stand but then winced in pain and sat back down. Kay passed Maria to Charity and put a hand on Miguel's arm, whispering something in his ear.

Theresa was shocked and couldn't find her words. Luis was ready to throttle Liptak, but Hank held him back. Instead, Ethan stepped forward.

"I'm a lawyer, and—"

"Do you represent Ms. Lopez?"

"I.. I do."

Liptak gave him a dubious look. As he did, four more ICE agents entered the church.

"If you're her legal representation, then you can meet us at our detention centre in three days for a meeting with your client—"

"Three days??" Antonio said. Sheridan put a hand on his chest in and effort to stop him just as Hank had stopped Luis.

"Why yes," Liptak said innocently. "It's the holidays, after all. Our processing staff won't be in until
the 27th."

There was an uproar among the crowd but no one dared intervene. One of the ICE officers put Pilar's hands together. Luis watched in disbelief as they handcuffed his mother.

"Mama!" he said. Both he pulled away from Hank and made a move for her but this time he was intercepted by Sheridan.

The ICE agent began walking Pilar down the aisle.

"Pilar, no. They can't do this to you!" John said. He was on his feet again. There were tears on his cheeks. He reached out towards her, managing to sidestep the officer in front of him. Pilar moved to John, she was crying now too.

"Oh John," she said, in weak voice.

He put his hands on either side of her face and they kissed. They kissed like lovers. They kissed as though Pilar was a soldier heading off to war. They kissed like they might never see each other again.

And then one office elbowed John in the stomach, ripping them apart. Pilar was frog marched down the aisle flanked by ICE agents.

Luis' head was spinning. What was happening? What crazy, fucked up dreamworld had he fallen into? If Sheridan wasn't holding onto him by his torso, he might have collapsed.

Liptak handed Ethan an official-looking document. Then he turned as if to say something to Luis. Instead though, he leaned close and whispered something in Sheridan's ear.

"Thanks for the tip-off."
Chapter 14

ANTONIO

Following the scene at the church, just about everyone went back to the Lopez-Fitzgerald house. The living room was crowded, and Beth set about fixing coffee for everyone. Antonio planned to add some rum to his, and he knew this wasn’t just the Fitzgerald in him. Everyone was shaken up by what they had witnessed. Luis stood off by himself, clearly deep in thought. Ivy, Julian, Fox, and Liz were in conversation while Ethan stood nearby, his cellphone to one ear but clearly on hold. John and Grace were having an intense conversation. Hank was trying to get Precious to leave him alone (the ape kept reaching up to touch his butt). Beth moved between the kitchen and the assembled guests delivering mugs of coffee, as did Charity. Miguel and Kay were nowhere to be found; they'd slipped out of the church as events unfolded with Pilar. Gwen was helping Theresa to get Little Ethan bundled up. She was going to take him home to the Crane mansion with her and Sarah since it looked like no one here would be getting any sleep tonight and the house would likely be noisy.

"Where’s my grandma?" asked Little Ethan.

Gwen and Theresa exchange concerned looks.

"Grandma had some business to take care of, but she’ll be back soon, I promise," said Theresa as she helped him with his boots. "Thanks again, Gwen. You sure you're OK to get them home and into bed?"

"Absolutely. I wish I could stay here to support you guys."

"Thanks. We appreciate it. We'll be back in time to open presents tomorrow morning."

They kissed each other on the cheeks, although for a second Antonio thought they'd actually pecked each other on the lips. He clearly needed some of that coffee. Sheridan told him weeks ago that the Ethan-Theresa-Gwen triangle had resolved itself in L.A., and Antonio had insisted he'd have to see it to believe it. Well now he was seeing it. Sheridan never elaborated on just how it had sorted itself out. He wondered if she knew and was keeping Gwen's confidence.

"Bye everyone," Gwen said. Ethan came to kiss her and Sarah goodbye.

"Did Theresa tell you we probably won't be back tonight?" he said.

"She did. You guys do whatever you need to in order to get Pilar out of custody. We'll see you tomorrow for gift-opening with the kids."

Ethan nodded.

Antonio turned to Sheridan, who was in her own world. She looked very pale.

"Is everything alright, honey?" he asked.

"Yes..." she said, so distant it was clear everything was most definitely not alright. Sheridan had been silent the whole drive over from the church. He put an arm around her and squeezed her to his side. He wanted to say something comforting but he was at a loss for words himself. His mother was on her way to a cell in some detention centre on Christmas Eve. The thought of it got him choked up.

Instead, Julian spoke up, addressing the room.
"I have put a call into a contact of mine through Crane Industries. It was always father who dealt with this gentleman, but I'm fairly confident I'll be able to wring some information from him, even in father's absence." Julian explained his source helped ensure Alistair greased the right palms within Immigration and Customs any time the company needed certain permits issued. To hear Julian tell it, the whole agency was rife with corruption.

Ethan was no longer on hold, and he stepped out of the living room in order to have his phone conversation.

"None of this makes any sense," Ivy said from beneath her many bandages. "I've known Pilar for most of her time here in the States. Most of it she's worked for me! If she was an alien, I would know."

"We're not talking about extraterrestrials, mother," Fox muttered sarcastically.

"She's my friend," Ivy snapped. The cotton wrappings around her head left only one eye visible, and it was shooting daggers at her younger son. "She may have also been my employee for years, but I got to know her on a personal level. We were confidants. Or, at least, I confided in her..." Her eye glanced briefly in John's direction. "My point is, I know she would never falsify documents."

"We all do!" Antonio said angrily.

"Who would ever do something like this to Pilar?" Charity wondered aloud. "You would have to be a cold-hearted monster."

Suddenly the doorbell rang, making every one jump. Before Theresa had a chance to go and open it, in came Rebecca. She was dressed in a holly red, knee-length coat with a white fur trim.

"Whatever is going on!" she trilled. "I've been waiting under the mistletoe all night for my Santa Clause. Julian, Gwen said I could find you down here with the help but I didn't expect there to be so many people..."

Precious gestured to take Rebecca's coat, but she shook her head and smiled slyly. "I'm not, ahem, suitably dressed under here..."

"What a coincidence," said Theresa. "Rebecca was just about the only person in town who wasn't at midnight mass when ICE arrived to arrest my mother. Tell us, Rebecca. Just why exactly weren't you in church tonight?"

"Because she would have burst into flames the moment she set foot in there," said Ivy.

"Oh that's quite enough from you, King Tut," said Julian. He had swapped his coffee mug for a metal flask.

"Yeah!" said Rebecca, sticking out her tongue. "Put on a pair of sunglasses and I'd swear you were dressing up as the Invisible Man."

Before anyone else could say anything, Antonio erupted.

"I've had enough of this sideshow!" he roared. "Someone targeted our mother, and I want to know why. John? Perhaps you could enlighten us, since clearly you've gotten to know my mother very well. I want to know: just what has been going on between you two."

Several people echoed his demand, although Luis remained silent and stony faced across the room. Theresa momentarily turned her attention from Rebecca to focus on John. He looked trapped. Grace,
too, appeared to be at a loss for what to do, torn between defending her son but also wanting answers.

"This boy and Pilar are an item?" said Rebecca, literally clutching her pearls. "Oh my! I really should go to church more often!"

"John?" said Grace. "What has been going on between you and Pilar? She's... more than twice your age. She's older than me! This... this is not at all appropriate."

John turned to face her. He looked around at all of them.

"I... We... Pilar and I are in love. We've been together for almost a year now. If any of you had thought to notice, the signs were right there."

Antonio felt as though the air had been knocked out of his lungs.

"The only reason this is inconceivable for you all is because none of you think of Pilar as a real person. She's your maid." He looked at Julian. "Your secret-keeper." He looked at Ivy and then Theresa. "She's your caregiver and protector. She's your constant source of emotional support and moral guidance. She constantly there to clean up your messes." He looked at Antonio, then Luis, then at just about everyone in the room. "Pilar is a real person and you all just treat her like she's the dumping grounds for all your problems. It would never occur to any of you that she might be something more. That she might have needs. Sexual needs and desires, and that maybe a man — even a younger man — might want to satisfy those needs."

Now Antonio had heard enough. He grabbed John by the front of his shirt and decked him in the face.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Hank moved to stop him but Antonio shoved him aside and began wailing on John.

"How DARE you talk about my mother that way!"

A mad scramble ensued as Liz and Sheridan pulled Antonio away, and Grace struggled to get her son to his feet. John steadied himself and wiped blood from his mouth and nose.

"Pilar wanted us to keep our relationship a secret. She was waiting for the right moment to come out and tell everyone. I'm not saying anything more about it until I've had a chance to talk to her myself."

The tension in the room was palpable. Theresa took a calming breath. "John, do you at least have any sense of who might have wanted to harm my mother like this? You obviously know more about her than... than many of us do."

"That awful man in the church said they were tipped off about her papers," said Liz. "Do you know anyone who would want to do that?"

The ensuing silence crept on for what seemed like ages. John was staring at Antonio, clearly hesitating. He had someone in mind.

"C'mon, out with it!" said Antonio.

"The only person I can think of is... your wife."
Chapter 15

Liz Sanbourne

Eve used to do this for her.

When Liz was sad or upset in the wake of their father's abuse, 15-year-old Eve would let 10-year-old Liz put her head in her lap and then Eve would run her fingers through her sister's hair, soothing her until eventually she dozed off. That was before Eve ran off of course. Before she'd taken up with Julian Crane and become a floozy nightclub singer. Normally any thoughts of Eve from that period and the things she'd done filled Liz with a burning rage, reignited her drive for revenge. But in recent weeks, those feelings had subsided.

Even if no one else would ever believe her, Liz knew what she'd seen back in July. Eve and TC had vanished into thin air, gone without a trace. After much time spent wrestling with whether or not it had truly happened, Liz had come to accept she wasn't crazy, she wasn't losing her mind. And this meant her sister and her brother-in-law had either been vaporized instantaneously or blasted into some alternate dimension. Either of these fates was terrible, and a sorrow had taken root in Liz. For all Eve's betrayals all those years ago, she hadn't deserved this. (Whatever this was...)

Julian had come to suspect Liz had something to do with their disappearance. In the church during midnight mass, he'd leaned close to her — stinking of rum — and accused her of killing Eve and TC. Julian vowed to do everything in his power to prove it and had her locked away for the rest of her life. Maybe she'd even get the death penalty.

Liz tried to shake the memory from her mind. Right now she needed to focus on someone other than herself: Antonio.

They were in the cottage, Liz sitting on the couch, Antonio asleep with his head resting in the lap her skirt. Liz still traced her fingers through his hair and gently massaged his scalp. She had been with him ever since the dramatic events unfolded at St. Margaret Mary's involving Pilar. Followed by the equally dramatic revelations at the Lopez-Fitzgerald household. Liz couldn't believe that it was true. She had heard rumours that Sheridan and Luis were running around behind Antonio's back, but she'd always dismissed them as just that. Rumours. If she'd thought it was true, she would have confronted Sheridan about it ages ago. They had developed a genuine friendship on St. Lisa's, back when she was still "Diana", but since their return to Harmony, Liz hadn't seen much of her old friend. It hadn't been anything personal. Liz had let herself become so obsessive about Eve and plotting revenge that she hadn't had much time for ancillary friendships like the one she had shared with the Crane heiress.

"The only person I can think of is... your wife."

When John uttered those words, it was like all the air had gone out of the room. Antonio had turned white and then red. He made a move to hit John again, but Grace stepped between.

"John!" she said, when the imminent threat had abated. "How could say such a thing? How could you make such an accusation??"

"Because I think it's true. I think Sheridan saw Pilar as standing in the way of her and..." John had trailed off, looking at Luis. At that moment it all clicked for Liz. She watched though as the realization came more slowly to Antonio. He sort of squinted his eyes and blinked, confused, like that couldn't possibly be what John was insinuating. In the church, the townspeople reacted in shock
and outrage to the claim that Pilar had been living in the United States illegally. But the claim that
Sheridan and Luis were lovers simply cast a pall over the room. Everyone averted their eyes or
shifted uncomfortably on their feet.

"Antonio, please—" Sheridan went to him, but he recoiled.

"You're not going to deny it? You're... you're telling me this is true?" Antonio had looked ashen at
the moment. Like he might keel over.

"Antonio, you... You're not well. We shouldn't be talking about this, you should rest after everything
that's happened tonight. It's not good for your health."

"My health? My health? Sheridan, tell me right now, are you and my brother having an affair??"

Again, she said nothing.

"We... We were lovers long before you and I ever met. Before I ended up on St. Lisa's with no
memory. Antonio, I genuinely did fall in love with you. But coming back to Harmony, all my
memories returned. Luis and I... We're soulmates." She turned to Luis, but he didn't move from
where he stood.

Finally he said, "I think everyone should leave. This is a personal matter."

Most everyone did. John's accusation against Sheridan had been subsumed by the affair's revelation.
Liz, however, refused to leave Antonio's side. She heard the tearful confessions from Sheridan, the
pained apologies from Luis. She monitored Antonio the whole time; she was fearful his ailment
might rear its ugly head, in which case she would have her cell phone out in a matter of seconds. But
Antonio didn't collapse. He didn't go blind, he didn't lose consciousness. He listened on, numb, tears
shimmering in his eyes.

Liz also watched Luis and Sheridan. There was something odd between them. For a couple of star-
crossed lovers, the connection between them seemed tenuous at best. It was subtle things. When
Sheridan moved to take Luis' hand, he wriggled away. He never made a move to touch her, and
when they did make contact his body seemed to tense up. It could have been Luis wanted to spare
his brother the pain of seeing signs that his wife and brother were romantically involved. But Liz
sensed it was something more... Could Luis suspect that John's accusation was accurate?

In the short time since she'd moved to Harmony, Liz had spent almost no time with Pilar. But
everyone in the town spoke so highly of her, the idea that she could have been circumventing the law
for all these years was unfathomable. Then again, Sheridan was held in equal high esteem by local
residents. Even Beth Wallace, who had loved and dated Luis on-and-off over the years, always
spoke highly of Sheridan and even gave her a job at the Book Café. Liz would never have thought
Sheridan capable of exposing Pilar to deportation like this, but then again, Liz also wouldn't have
guessed Sheridan would stab her ailing husband in the back...

Eventually Antonio couldn't take their confessions any more. "Enough!" he'd said, tears rolling
down his cheeks. "I can't... I just... I never want to see either of you again. Sheridan, Luis — you're
both dead to me." And with that he turned and walked out of his family home. Liz thought she heard
someone sobbing quietly from the next room and assumed that Theresa was eavesdropping.

"Antonio, wait!" cried Sheridan, but Liz put up a hand to stop her in her tracks.

"Haven't you done enough to him?" Liz asked, coldly. She shook her head in disgust, and then went
after Antonio herself. "Antonio, wait! I'm not letting you drive in the state you're in!"
She took him home to the cottage. His home with Sheridan... He had cried and raged and vented. She tried to give him some camomile tea, but he threw it against the wall in a fit of rage. Eventually she got him to sit on the couch. She got him to breath slowly. And then she guided his head down so they it lay in her lap. That is where he finally fell asleep, Liz stroking his hair and getting lost in the tormented memories of her own family betrayal. She didn't want Antonio to develop the same burning, all-consuming rage for his brother that she had harboured for her sister.

Where was Eve? Liz felt a tightness in her throat and willed herself not to cry. She didn't want to risk waking Antonio.

She stared out the cottage window as the first rays of dawn lit the snow-covered branches. It was Christmas morning.
Chapter 16

SHERIDAN

"Please Luis! Luis, you can't possibly think I would ever do something like that."

Pilar's hearing was the next day. Luis had been keeping Sheridan at arm's length since the Christmas Eve revelations two weeks prior. The hearing dates had been bumped ahead into January 2004.

John's accusation had confirmed a sinking feeling that was planted in Luis' mind — a seed of doubt — when Liptak had whispered to Sheridan: "Thanks for the tip." Sheridan swore up and down that she didn't know what he was talking about. Of course, Luis more than anyone had been witness to her animus towards Pilar in recent months. Some of it had been justified. Maybe some of it had been a little extreme, but Sheridan didn't think it so unreasonable given all she'd endured that year. Pilar should have been more understanding...

But that was the last thing Sheridan could tell Luis. He was walking briskly up to the Lopez-Fitzgerald house, which had become a home base for the family and the small legal defence team they'd assembled to work on Pilar's case. Sheridan had been staying at the Crane mansion since Antonio (rightly) was staying at the cottage — their home — for now, and Luis had said he needed space to think and focus on his family.

She couldn't bare the silent treatment, so she'd parked a few doors down from the Lopez-Fitzgerald house and staked it out all morning until Luis arrived.

"We need to talk about this, Luis!"

He shut the door without looking back, leaving her on the stoop. It was an unusually warm winter day and a light rain was making everything grey and slushy. There were tears in Sheridan's eyes. How could this be happening? After all this time, Antonio finally knew the truth — and contrary to all their fears, especially Pilar's, the news hadn't killed him. At least, it hadn't physically. Antonio wasn't returning her calls either and even Liz wouldn't respond to her texts, other than to say "Antonio needs space."

Sheridan took a deep breath. She was half-thinking about going to the window and tapping on it until Luis couldn't ignore her anymore. 'No,' she told herself. 'As if they don't already think the worst of me.'

At that moment she heard the door unlock behind her and it opened. Theresa slipped out onto the step, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Hi Sheridan," she said, smiling a little awkwardly. She hugged herself against the damp chill in the air.

"Hi Theresa." Sheridan dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex.

Before saying anything else, Theresa hugged Sheridan. This just made her cry more. "You don't hate me?"

Theresa shook her head. "How could I hate you when I don't think you did this. I don't know what's going on, but what matters most right now is halting this deportation order before it's too late."

"Luis thinks I had something to do with it. He won't speak to me."
"Don't you worry about Luis. He knows in his heart that you couldn't have done something like that. I think... I think that everything happening all at once like this has sort of scrambled his brain. Mama's charges, Antonio finally knowing, and all of that on top of the stress at work he's been dealing with for half a year. It's all too much for him and he's not reacting in a way that's sane."

Sheridan looked uncertain but wanted to believe Theresa.

"How is everything going in there?" she asked, pointing to the living room window.

Theresa shook her head wearily. "Have you talked to Ethan?"

Sheridan hadn't. Even though they were both staying at the Crane mansion, he was so busy with the case he was never around or free. Gwen had had to return to LA to take care of some business there, so Sheridan had no one to talk to about things with other than Julian, and he was perpetually drunk or in the company of Rebecca.

"I hired a second lawyer to help with the case and Ethan does not like the guy."

"Stepping on Ethan's toes, is he?"

"He's only been here a day, but apparently so!" Theresa sounded like she wanted to laugh. An 'if I didn't laugh, I'd cry' sort of laugh. "His name is Jared Casey. He's one of Connecticut's top lawyers, and he's not even that old."

"Maybe Ethan is jealous."

Theresa ignored the suggestion.

"I just want to do everything we can to make sure mama is safe and that we expose whoever is responsible for this."

Sheridan nodded her agreement, silently thinking about how that would also mean vindicating her.

"Well, I should get back in there. Antonio's going to be here soon. You should probably head home for now. It would be better if you weren't here on the door step when he arrives..."

"Ok," Sheridan said, sadness in her voice. She and Theresa hugged, and then the younger woman went back inside. Sheridan felt a little reassured after their conversation, but couldn't help thinking things were bound to get worse before they got better...
Chapter 17

LUIS

Things were not going as they should. A recess had just been called so that Pilar's lawyers could confer with her and Theresa. The Lopez-Fitzgeralds had all agreed that Theresa would be the family representative; it would have been too confusing and chaotic to have her, Luis, Antonio, and Miguel all vying to have their input heard by Ethan and this other lawyer, Jared Casey, during the trial. Luis felt he should be the family point person, given his background in law enforcement, but throughout the proceedings he found himself overwhelmed with all the technical legal and bureaucratic jargon being thrown around. He had to secretly admit that much of the immigration process was a mystery to him, and so the evidence presented by George Liptak — the scumbag official at the heart of all this — had gone totally over his head. Ethan and Jared did speak this language, and Luis had been watching their expressions with growing dismay. They looked worried.

The small, windowless courtroom in which the deportation trial was held was packed with people from the community. At one point Charity fainted and had to be led out by Miguel, with Kay and Simone abandoning their friend Reese Durkee to join them. Luis tried his best to avoid looking at Sheridan, who sat across the room with Julian. He felt a hand squeeze his.

"You doing ok?" Beth, ever the reliable friend, had picked him up and driven him to the trial.

"Thanks Beth. Doing the best I can..."

"Don't worry," she said. "This is all going to be ok. I'm positive."

Luis wished he could have her certainty. Nothing was certain in his mind anymore.

"Thanks for the tip-off."

He could still hear Liptak's voice as he whispered in Sheridan's ear, a message intended only for her. If Pilar actually had forged her marriage and citizenship paperwork, if she actually was an illegal alien as was alleged, how could Sheridan have known? And how could she possibly have thought that was the solution to the growing tension between her and Pilar? He hated that he suspected her but it was a nagging feeling he couldn't shake, try as he might. They'd barely spoken since Christmas. He couldn't stand to look at her because it tore him apart to think she was capable of something so malicious.

Luis looked around the room as everyone spoke in low voices, wondering what would come next. He saw Antonio and Liz sitting together, Liz patted Antonio's thigh comfortingly as they spoke. Luis was surprised when she didn't move her hand. Those two had dated years ago. Could something be rekindling between them? Luis hoped so. Antonio had refused to speak to him directly at any of the family meetings they'd convened in recent weeks. Luis kept waiting for Antonio to lock eyes with him and a fist fight to ensue. Luis would have preferred that to the silent treatment. He would have gladly taken a beating if it meant opening up some kind of dialogue between him and his brother.

The judge banged his gavel and the hearing reconvened. Pilar sat between her lawyers dressed in an orange jump suit. The sight brought a lump to his throat. His mother was a goddamn saint. How could anyone not see that?

"Your honour," said Ethan, "we dispute Mr. Liptak's claim he was tipped off about the immigration status of our client. It is our assertion that this whole case and Mr. Liptak's unearthing of documents
was motivated by racial animus. A xenophobic campaign to attack and malign upstanding citizens who happen to be of Mexican descent. He—"

"Objection," said one of the men on Liptak's team. "Mr. Winthrop's use of the terms 'citizens' and 'Mexican descent' mischaracterize the defendant, who is not a citizen and therefore is Mexican, not 'of Mexican descent.'"

Ethan looked as though he could strangle the man. Jared stepped in at that moment, saying, "We do not believe Mr. Liptak has been truthful with the court in his assertion that some one provided him with information about Mrs. Lopez-Fitzgerald's immigration status."

The judge raised an eyebrow at this. It took all Luis' self-restraint not to look over at Sheridan. If there had been guilt in her expression, it would have broken his heart beyond repair. He had to believe she was not involved.

Liptak stood and said confidently: "I was indeed advised to look into Ms. Lopez's paperwork. I initially dismissed that recommendation. It's not ICE protocol to do deep-dives into immigrants' backgrounds based on a seemingly random tip, especially those sent via email. I'll admit, the sender's name did catch my attention, as this person is a member of a prominent American family, but I thought it prudent to ignore the messages. Only when I was confronted in person and threatened physically did I acquiesce. In the end, it turned out these were not baseless claims."

Luis' heart was pounding. Murmurs resounded in the room. The judge banged his gavel and called for silence.

"Your honour, this cloak and dagger nonsense is pure fiction," said Ethan.

"Objection!" cried one of Liptak's men.

"Enough, enough!" said the judge. "Mr. Liptak, you're going to have to provide some proof to back up these claims. I'm ordering you to tell us just who was your source. Who threatened you physically to get you to look into the defendant's file."

Liptak paused. If he was relishing this moment, he was doing a masterful job hiding it.

"Sheridan Crane," he finally said. "It was Ms. Crane." And now he pointed across the room at Luis' one true love. It was like a knife in his chest. Sheridan for her part looked stunned. She had gone sheet white. Although there was noise all around him, and the judge was banging his gavel for order in the court, Luis heard none of it. He gripped the seat in front of him and stared down at his knees. He felt Beth's hand on his back, she was asking him if he was OK. He couldn't respond. All he could think about was John's assertion that Sheridan was to blame.

"Thanks for the tip-off."

"Mr. Liptak is going to have to produce evidence if he expects such outrageous claims to be taken seriously," said Ethan.

However, Liptak was already producing papers and CD-ROMs from a briefcase.

"I have copies of the emails from Ms. Crane, sent from her personal email address. I have also brought electronic copies with authenticated metadata, lest the defence try to accuse me of forging these print-outs."

Jared called for a recess so that he and his team could review the evidence. It was a simple enough process, but still Ethan turned and called over to Reese, asking if he could provide some technical
support in corroborating the electronic information. The young man gladly agreed and a court laptop was used by the team as they checked the emails. Luis wanted to be there with them, looking over exactly what had been said in these supposed emails from Sheridan. Luis watched as Reese said something to the team; Theresa covered her mouth in surprise. The three men continued to talk amongst themselves.

"Theresa!" Luis called to her. "Theresa come here!" She hurried over. "What's going on?"

"Luis... I can't believe this, but.. Reese says that Liptak's story checks out. The emails are authentic."

But before she could say more, the judge was calling the recess to a close. Jared and Luis were whispering back and forth and to Pilar. She looked stunned into silence, only nodding or shaking her head in response, her movements barely perceptible. The judge had been reviewing copies of the emails as well, and handed them to a clerk so they could be entered into the register.

"As you can see, your honour, I received four separate emails from Ms. Crane insisting that I examine the paperwork of Ms. Lopez, claiming that they had been forged. Each time I thanked Ms. Crane for her message but told her that my office had no reason to open such an investigation. I knew the Cranes are a powerful family, but doubted she would have been able to use those connections to gain knowledge of our files. It was only when she accosted me at her place of work that I gave in."

"No!" Sheridan stood up. "These are all lies! I never, ever sent this man any emails!"

Ethan and Jared exchanged nervous looks.

"Ms. Crane," said the judge, "I am looking at irrefutable proof that these emails were sent by you. Even the defence isn't disputing their authenticity."

"Then... then someone must have sent them from my account! I sometimes use the computers at the Book Cafe. Maybe I just forgot to log off one day and then someone accessed my email that way!"

The judge looked unconvinced.

"And how, then, would you explain Mr. Liptak's claim that you threatened him physically?"

"I would say he's lying. I can say with absolute certainty that this never happened."

The judge turned to the lawyers. Jared whispered to Ethan who nodded.

"We would like to call to the stand Beth Wallace, owner of the Book Cafe." Everyone looked shocked at this, Beth most of all. Timidly she made her way to front of the room and swore an oath she would tell the whole truth. As soon as she was seated, Beth blurted out: "Sheridan would never, ever do that! I was Sheridan's first new friend when she came back to Harmony in 1999. I know she would never—"

"Ms. Wallace," Jared said, "we haven't even asked you our questions yet."

"I'm sorry," Beth said. "It's just all taken me by surprise. Sheridan isn't just my friend, she's also my employee."

"Have you ever known Sheridan to be aggressive with you or any of your other employees."

"Never."
"Ever with customers?"

Beth hesitated.

"Not.. not really, no."

"Ms. Wallace, might I remind you you are under oath," said the judge.

She looked shaken but nodded. "I'm sorry your honour. I... I may have seen Sheridan lose her cool. But I think that was only once."

Luis flashed back to that day at the cafe when Sheridan had lashed out Pilar. Beth's answer caught Jared off guard.

"Is it possible that what Ms. Crane says is true? That some one else might have accessed her email there?"

"Absolutely. We have a little 'Internet cafe' with four computers that customers can use, but sometimes staff do too if I'm using the office computer."

"And have you ever seen Ms. Crane engage with Mr. Liptak in your establishment?"

"Never. George periodically stops by because I hire some international workers through a government program. He checks up on them and will get me sign some forms. But he and Sheridan would never have any cause to interact, unless he was getting coffee or something."

"Thank you," said Jared. "That's all we have for questions."

Now it was Liptak's turn. He wasted no time.

"Tell me, Ms. Wallace, how much do you know about computers?"

Beth blushed. "Not a whole lot."

"Did you know that your 'Internet cafe' computers are on a different server than your office computer?"

"I.. I don't really know what that means. I just hired Reese to set them up."

"What it means, Ms. Wallace, is that your office computer has a different IP address than the public access computers."

"Objection," Ethan interrupted. "Your honour, where is this going?"

"I'm going to allow it. Mr. Liptak, get to the point."

"My point is the computer that sent these emails was the Book Cafe's office computer. Now who has access to that computer, Ms. Wallace?"

Beth hesitated again.

"Well, me and my staff. But that doesn't mean someone couldn't have snuck in to the office. Sometimes we get pretty busy and—"

"That's enough. You answered my question. So Sheridan would have access to the office computer?"
"Yes."

"Now, I have a different question for you. Does the Book Cafe have security cameras?"

"Yes."

"How long have you had them."

"I don't know... Since October? I got them installed after that incident where Sam had to shoot that man. It wasn't far from the cafe."

Liptak nodded methodically.

"And are they recording throughout the day or just at night."

"Both," she said. "They're digital and so the footage gets logged onto a special hard drive. The security guys told me it needs to be wiped every six months to make more space."

Liptak now addressed the judge.

"Your honour, I am convinced that there is video evidence of Ms. Crane's actions towards me. If we can look at the security footage from my visit to the cafe in early December, I know it will back up what I'm saying."

"No," said Ethan. He sounded anxious. "No, that is not relevant your honour. Ms. Crane is not the one on trial. We're here today about my client's deportation order."

"It was Mr. Winthorp who disputed my ever having received a tip. I am merely corroborating my story. I can see now that though Ms. Crane's methods may have been unorthodox, and it's unclear to me how she knew to check Ms. Lopez's paperwork, ultimately she did the right thing. We never would have found out about Ms. Lopez's forgeries if not for Sheridan Crane."

The judge considered this a moment. "I'm going to allow it. I want this put to rest definitively."

He ordered Sam, as chief of police, to accompany Beth to the Book Cafe and retrieve the hard drive. As Beth passed Luis she gave him a fearful look. 'Poor Beth,' thought Luis. 'This is the last thing she would have wanted.' But it hardly made sense for any of them to cover for Sheridan. Not if she did something like this...

Sheridan tried to approach him, but he looked at her numbly, coldly, and then walked outside to get some fresh air. His prayers that this was all a mistake, that Sheridan would be vindicated and his mother freed, were seeming less and less likely. Ethan and Jared hadn't disputed the forged records. They hadn't disputed the emails from Sheridan. His last hope was that the security footage would reveal Liptak was wrong.

When Beth and Sam, Sam went inside with the evidence but Beth stopped to talk to Luis outside.

"Luis, I'm so sorry... I wish I'd never come to this trial today. I wish I could have lied or.. or done anything but testify against Sheridan like that!"

He wished he could have smiled at her, she was so earnest and wanting nothing but the best for him and Sheridan. "Beth, it's not your job to cover up for Sheridan."

"But we don't know she isn't telling the truth. I'm sure there's nothing to be found on the security camera implicating her."
Luis wished this was true, but the sense of doubt had become all but solidified in his mind.

When court came back into session, a television was brought into the room and the video played. The security system at Book Cafe did not record audio, but the visual said enough. There was Liptak speaking with one of the employees at the cash register when Sheridan began saying something to him. Suddenly she grabbed the front of shirt and yanked him forward so they were almost nose to nose. She looked furious.

"There you have it," said Liptak. "That was the moment I knew just how serious Ms. Crane was about her accusations. When I got back to the office I looked into the 'Lopez-Fitzgerald, Pilar' file and discovered she had in fact forged her documentation. Pilar was never married and she did not immigrate here illegally. Her children may be U.S. citizens by birth, but we should never reward any parent for duplicitous, illegal actions. By all accounts, the rest of Pilar's time here has passed without any criminal activity, which is why I am not calling for her to face prison time. I'm simply asking that we deport her to Mexico and send a message to all other visitors to our country that they will not be rewarded for breaking our laws."

"No! No, he's lying!" Sheridan cried. "I was confronting him about his treatment of Ernesto! He was saying racist things and I told him to get out!"

But the judge was banging his gavel and calling for a bailiff to remove Sheridan from the court. When things had settled in the room, he cleared his throat.

"I've heard enough. I've seen enough. The evidence is indisputable. Pilar Lopez, I am ruling in favour of the immigration department's recommendation. You are hereby to be deported from the United States, effective immediately. I am adjourning this session."

And just like that, it was over.

Theresa let out an anguished wail and gripped Pilar's arm, crying against her shoulder. Luis and Antonio were both dumbfounded, Beth and Liz at both their sides, searching for the best way to support each brother. Pilar sat still, her eyes closed, tears running down each cheek. Jared and Ethan were arguing loudly with each other, and then shouting after the judge about an appeal. But now two officers came to Pilar and were handcuffing her again. Luis and Antonio stumbled to her. 'Where is Miguel??' Luis thought, before spying his younger brother at the back of the room, fighting his way through the noisy crowd to reach the family.

"Mijos," Pilar said breathlessly. "Be strong. You too, Teresa. Please, kiss Little Ethan for me and remind him his abuela will always love him. Please don't let him believe what they're saying about me. I am not a criminal." And now her voice broke as she choked back sobs.

"Mama, we're not going to let them take you," said Miguel through tears. They were all crying. That was naiveté of youth. Luis knew better. He knew there was no stopping the officers from taking Pilar. There would be an appeal, but apparently by then Pilar would already be back in Mexico.

"I will always love you, my children. You will come to visit me?"

"We're going to bring you back," said Antonio. "Don't lose faith."

"Sometimes I feel like all I have is my faith... And look where that got me...

"Pilar!" Now John was standing in front of her. The sight made Luis and his siblings uncomfortable. Luis watched Miguel clench his jaw; John and Miguel were the same age, had been friends until the revelation John was sleeping with Pilar. Was in love with her. But Miguel said nothing, just scowled
as Pilar and John kissed. "I'm coming to Mexico," John said. "I'll be on the first flight."

"John no, your schooling—"

The conversation was cut short by one of the officers. Pilar was led out of the courtroom in much the same she had been from the church on Christmas Eve. Pilar was gone. A hole had opened up in the Lopez-Fitzgeralds' lives. They huddled together for support, even Luis and Antonio putting aside their feud as the entire family wept.
BETH

When Beth got back to her apartment above the Book Cafe it was almost 3:00 a.m. but she was wide awake. Her mood was absolutely electric. She had been at Luis' house comforting him. She hadn't seen him this emotional since childhood. Maybe ever! She held him and whispered to him soothingly, expressing her disbelief, her sadness. She knew he was mourning the end of his relationship with Sheridan as much as the deportation of his mother, and that's what had her feeling so good. His love for Sheridan was officially dead. Any lingering feelings he had about her were severed by that security footage of her threatening Liptak. As much as Beth might have loathed that man and his racist views about Mexicans, after his performance at the trial today she could have kissed him!

Her plan had gone off without a hitch. In the fall she'd contacted Liptak and laid it out for him: an opportunity to shake up the Latin American immigrant community, to (in his eyes) show them that no one was really safe here. She'd also offered him a big cash incentive, paying him much of the insurance money she had been planning to use to build a new house. He was able to replace Pilar's real documents with forgeries, while Beth took advantage of Sheridan's email account left open on the office computer to send him messages pretending to be her and then hastily deleting them (and Liptak's responses) before Sheridan could see them. The in-person confrontation between those two in the cafe had been half-planned, half-luck; Beth said Sheridan could probably be easily goaded into a hotheaded response if Liptak managed to push just the right buttons, and it had worked.

He'd given Beth Pilar's actual papers in a manila envelope, a kind of receipt for doing business together. And it had all paid off!

Beth closed the door behind and leaned against it in the darkened hallway and breathed a sigh of relief. Smiling she walked quietly into the living room, not wanting to wake up her mother.

Then a lamp snapped on and there was Edna, planted on the couch and facing her, arms crossed and scowl on her face. Precious sat beside her, a sleeping mask over her eyes. Noticing this, Edna elbowed the orangutang and pulled off the mask.

"Oh hello, mother. It's way past your bedtime. Or is your leaky old bladder keeping you up?"

Beth crossed the room and poured herself a glass of scotch. She savoured the burn in her mouth.

"You!" said Edna. "You're behind Pilar's impending deportation that I read about in the Gazette!"

"Not impending, mother. Finalized. She's somewhere between here and Mexico City as we speak!" It was only then that Beth saw her mother was holding Pilar's files in her hand. "Give me that! You know you're not supposed to set foot in my bedroom." She snatched the envelope and looked inside to make sure nothing was missing.

"Bethie, I know what you're capable of, after you locking poor Sheridan in a hole for months on end. And yet somehow your evil continues to surprise me!"

"I prefer to think of it as an opportunity for Pilar to reconnect with her roots. Her daughter Paloma is still there after all, and I'm sure they'll both appreciate some mother-daughter time."

"I've certainly had my fill of mother-daughter time..."
"Ha ha. All's fair in love and war, and Pilar just wound up being collateral damage."

Edna recoiled in disgust.

"Of all the people to end up in your crosshairs, I still can't believe you would pull the trigger on Pilar. Pilar Lopez-Fitzgerald! After everything that woman has done for you."

"I will be eternally grateful she gave birth to my beautiful Luis. The man of my destiny and my one true—"

"That's not what I'm referring to," said Edna, shuffling towards Beth so she could look her daughter dead in the eye. "Think of all the times when you were a little girl and I was ... um... well, maybe having one too many of these." She snatched the glass from Beth's hand and then, to illustrate her point, gulped down the last of the scotch. "Think of the times I sent you off to school with no lunch. Or the times you went days, weeks even without a proper bath."

Beth could feel her stomach twisting in knots, and she knew it wasn't the strong alcohol. But she refused to show any sign of weakness. She scoffed. "Kids hate baths. I think of that as the only kindness you ever showed me as a child!"

"Nice try, Bethie, but you know exactly what I'm getting at." Edna jabbed a finger at her while she spoke. "Who was it fed you? Who was it who forced you to have a bath when you went playing over with the Lopez-Fitzgerald kids? Who told you you were special and smart and loved? It was Pilar."

"I don't remember any of that," Beth lied, turning away.

"You do. And let me tell you something else, when it got particularly bad — you were probably ten years old — who should come knocking on my door but Pilar. Everyone knows that woman is a saint, but I'm probably one of the few people who've ever witnessed just how fearsome her wrath could be. She made it clear to me in no uncertain terms that if things didn't change she was calling social services on me and that would be the last I ever saw of you."

This was a story Edna had never told her before. Beth turned to face her, scanning the old woman's eyes for any hint of deception but she saw none.

"Well she should have called social services! It would have freed me from my horrible life with you. Instead, Pilar was complicit. She's to blame for not stepping in when no other adult would!"

"But things did change after that! You don't remember, but for the next few years things improved. I may have not been able to afford the healthiest food or the nicest clothes, but that was a wakeup call for me and I started taking much better care of you. I stopped having men around the house. But when you got to be a teenager and were more independent... I started to slip again... I'm not proud of it, but you needed me less then anyway."

"I never needed you!" Beth shouted, tears in her eyes. "You should be ashamed of the way you raised me, but I'm not going to be ashamed of who I've become. I've paid my own way in life, I'm a successful entrepreneur, a member of the Harmony chamber of commerce. I support my ailing and infirm mother when I could have just stuck her in an old folks home. Or the loony bin. I know what I want in life and I go for it. You should be proud of me."

"Bethie, there have been times when I've been proud of you. But not in the last few years. Your obsession with Luis as turned you into a monster." At this Precious nodded.

"I'm not a monster!" Beth screamed. "I'm not! Luis knows that and soon, I'm going to make him
forget all about that bitch, Sheridan. You'll see! And if I ever hear you utter so much as a *peep* about this—" She shook the envelope in Edna's face. "—then you'll being going someplace a whole lot worse than the loony bin, let me assure you."

And with that, Beth stormed off into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

She was breathing heavily, wiping at the tears on her cheeks. She felt dizzy, almost like a panic attack was coming on, but she strengthened herself against it and soon the feeling subsided. She looked at the envelope of documents. It trembled in her hands. She knew she should burn them, rid herself of any evidence that could possibly link her to this plot. But deep down, she did remember the kindness Pilar had shown her as a child. The way she had looked out for Beth, almost like she was one of her own brood. Part of Beth thought that maybe there was a chance that someday, after she and Luis were married and had children and Sheridan was long, long gone, there might be some way to anonymously send this file to immigration officials and have them reverse Pilar's deportation. Then Pilar could come back and would be a better grandmother to her and Luis' children than Edna ever would be. At least that was her hope.

So for now she pulled out a locked box from under her bed, dialled the combination, and deposited the envelope inside.
SHERIDAN

Sheridan sat on sofa in her cottage. The light interior had always bright and cheery, but not now. Now it felt empty. Antonio had moved out. He was staying with Liz now. The last thing he said to her was she could expect someone to come back within the week with divorce papers for her to sign. There had been no wrangling over belongings, he didn't try to lay claim to half the cottage, which technically he could have, as her husband. In the eyes of the law — in the eyes of God! — it had been theirs together. Soon it would be hers and hers alone. Alone. Alone.

She thought she heard a sound on the stoop and rushed over to the door, swinging it open, expecting to find Luis there. But no. It must have been a squirrel. She could see what might have been paw prints in the snow. No footprints though, except her own from when she came back from the Book Cafe earlier that afternoon. Beth had fired her.

"I can't believe you would do something like this," Beth said. "That you would go so low. Pilar did not deserve this, Sheridan. No one does."

"You have to believe me, Beth. Please. I'm telling you what I've told everyone else — this is a set up. I can't explain how or who or why, but some one framed me. That man, Liptak. He's the one behind this, or else he was doing it at some one else's orders."

Beth just shook her head.

"I stood up for you. I defended you in court in front of all my friends, only to discover you had taken me for a fool!"

"Beth, no. You have to trust me!" Sheridan took the other woman's hands, but Beth jerked them away.

"You're fired, Sheridan. I can't have some one like you working for me. I started receiving complaints from customers the day after Pilar was deported, before you'd even worked your next shift! I can't trust some one like you as an employee."

Sheridan felt sick to her stomach at the memory. Everyone in the cafe had been watching. Even Charity Standish had been scowling at her from her table. When Sheridan finally left, she heard some one inside the cafe loudly proclaim, "Good riddance!" and a few hands could be heard clapping.

She was a pariah. The scourge of the town. Sheridan just wanted to curl up in a ball and die. She never wanted to leave her cottage. As much as she had despised her father, she wished more than ever he'd reappear and her money would be unfrozen. Where was he? There were times she wondered if this was all a plot on his part to torture her, but he'd done far worse in the past and hadn't gone to the trouble of hiding. This was different...

She went to the kitchen to fix herself a cup of tea. She heard a sound again from outside but ruled it out. Damned squirrel. She grabbed a box of lemon tea from the cupboard and nearly dropped it when there was a knock at the door.

"Luis??" She rushed back to the door and pulled it open. Her eyes widened. He actually had come!

"Sheridan..." he said, a sorrowful look on his face.
Her breath caught in her chest.

"Luis, I... I knew you wouldn't give up on us."

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, please, come in. Would you like some tea? I was just making some, and—"

"I won't be here long. I needed to speak my mind."

Her eyes started to well up but she blinked away the tears. She needed to be strong right now.

"I want to know why. Please, just tell me why. Was it because you hated my mother? Was it because you wanted to punish her?"

"Luis, I could never hate your mother. No matter what she said or did to come between us, I've always loved Pilar."

Her words seemed to pain him. Like she was salting a wound.

"Just confess. Just admit what you did! If you could just be honest with me, if you could come clean about this then.. then maybe there would be some way for us to put the pieces of our relationship back together. I will never love anyone the way I've loved you, Sheridan. Which is why I'd be willing to give us one last chance. It wouldn't be easy, but if you admit what you've done then maybe we can start to heal. We can find a way to mend your place in my family. Theresa has certainly done her share of crazy things in the name of her love for Ethan. I know that in time they could be made to understand. And we could work to find a way to bring mama back. But Sheridan, I can't do any of that if you aren't 100% honest with me. Please."

He finally stopped talking. It hadn't been easy for him to say all that and he clearly hadn't wanted anything to interrupt him. He took her by the hands — their connection was the same as ever, and a warmth pulsed through her at his touch. "Please," he said again. His eyes were pleading too.

She wanted to tell him it was her behind the whole thing. That the evidence was all true, that she had masterminded the entire thing. If she told him what he wanted to hear, then they could work together like he said to repair everything. To tackle these new challenges as a couple, a unit. She would still be loathed by the townspeople, by the whole Lopez-Fitzgerald clan, most especially Pilar, but she wouldn't have to face it all alone.

She hesitated. The words hovered on the edge of her lips.

"I... I can't."

And now the hope in his eyes was replaced with dismay.

"Luis, I swear to you, I didn't do any of the things I've been accused of. I didn't dig up dirt on your mother's immigration status, I didn't pressure that awful man to investigate her. I had nothing to do with any of it."

Now she could see he was crying.

Sheridan reached up to brush the tears from his cheeks with her thumbs, but he slapped her hands down roughly. Now she could see was angry and embarrassed. His look told her she had made a fool of him all over again.
"I hate you, Sheridan Crane. I wish you never came back to Harmony."

And with that, he turned from her and made a hasty exit, not even bothering to slam the door behind him. Sheridan would have chased after him but his words had struck her more forcefully than hands ever could. More forcefully than buckshot from a rifle.

She slowly sat down on the nearest chair, trembling. The cold January air was filling the cottage, but she didn't make a move to get up and close the door. The kettle started to whistle but the sound was distant. Everything is ruined, she thought. Nothing will ever be the same...

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