

Excerpt from Scorch Mark

Jane stands alone between a powerful artifact and the wrong hands.

Jane Walker is in a race against time to recover a powerful artifact that's fallen into dangerous hands. But first, she must convince a skeptical cop of the supernatural forces at play before a lethal chain of events engulfs them all.

1 | Jane

Now that Jane Walker knew where her mother had been laid to rest, she felt drawn there. It wasn't out of respect or duty—she'd never met her mother in the flesh—it was simply the only thing she could do as the daughter she was never allowed to be. The visceral loathing she felt for Rick Kristan, the man who'd taken her mother away from her, grew deeper as the day of his trial approached.

Heat rippled off the asphalt parking lot. It had already been a long, hot ride, and they had two hours yet to go. Jane dismounted her Honda Rebel, glad for the opportunity to stretch her legs. Ethan Bryce pulled in beside her and killed the ignition of his Fat Boy. Across a swath of summer-scorched lawn, Windermere Lake sparkled like a cool oasis. This was their last stop before the final leg to the cemetery on the outskirts of Canmore, Alberta.

She removed her helmet, shook out her dark, cropped hair, and brushed the road dust from her jeans. Ahead, just before the path to Kinsmen Beach, a tailgate party had taken root, spilling onto the lawn behind a row of pickup trucks. The tailgaters, mostly young men flaunting their abs and red Solo cups, had confiscated a collection of the park's picnic tables. Music pounded out of speakers, and the scent of barbecue made Jane's mouth water.

After the helmets were locked, Ethan pulled their towel rolls from one of the saddlebags. He stretched his neck and raked his fingers through his comically flattened hair. "Ready?"

Jane let a saucy smile cross her lips. She'd happily watch Ethan Bryce's backside all day long. "Lead the way."

Ethan came to stand toe-to-toe with her, his light brown eyes sparkling with mischief. He leaned down and kissed her. "I love it when your mind's in the bedroom." He started across the parking lot and Jane held back a moment, admiring his swagger and the broad shoulders under his leather jacket. She quickly caught up and matched his stride, looking ahead to the lake, anticipating the splash of relief from the cool water.

Her focus was on the lake, so she wasn't paying attention to the tailgaters as she and Ethan passed. But when Ethan took her hand—an unusual gesture for him—she glanced at him, and then at the men who had stopped their partying. One by one, they nudged each other and, in turn, stared at her. Startled, Jane looked away.

"You know them?" Ethan asked.

"No." Goosebumps skated across her arms. Jane surreptitiously checked her boots and jacket, smoothed her hair, searching for something—anything—to explain their attention. Anything other than the one thing the goosebumps foretold.

Ethan's carefree smile hid the tension she felt in the firm grip of his hand as he wove his way through the families who'd laid claim to patches of sand with beach blankets and umbrellas. They followed the shore to the thinning edge of the crowd, far from the tailgaters.

"That was weird, wasn't it?" Jane said.

"Depends." Ethan kicked off his boots. "Regular weird or your stratosphere weird?"

She'd already considered how a handful of men she'd never met looked at her like they knew her. Like they'd seen her before. Or met her ghost.

"They know our rides now," she said.

"We can't change that. Let's cool off and get out of here." Ethan kept an eye on the distant parking lot as he stripped down to his boxers, but he left his T-shirt on, unwilling to endure the stares his burn-scarred stomach would draw.

Jane removed everything but a tank top and bikini bottoms, an unthinkable disrobing had she still borne the blood-red birthmarks that had haunted her until the year before. The final birthmark had disappeared on her twenty-fifth birthday.

She glanced back, relieved the tailgaters hadn't followed. "Race you!" she said, and took off for the water at a run. Ethan laughed, a competitor through and through. She rushed into the lake, high-stepping until the water was above her knees, and then dove under. The water felt like an ice-cold beer on a sweltering day, a delicious quenching for her overheated skin.

They kept to the shallows, sparing an occasional glance at their belongings. Afterwards, they lay on their towels, drying off.

"Another dream's coming. I feel it." Jane hadn't had a visiting dream since the night she'd learned what had become of the man she'd once known as Buddy. A man whose life she'd accidentally and irrevocably altered. He was now Dylan O'Brien, an undercover cop. That was five months ago. But her reprieve was over.

"Because of the tailgaters?"

"Why else would those men behave like they'd seen me before?"

Ethan scrubbed his face with his hands. Accepting Jane's visiting dreams was easier for him when the dreams were dormant. Once they started up, they didn't stop until

whatever events Jane was destined to witness had finished playing out. There was no avoiding it: Jane's dreams identified her as *una testigo*, a Witness in the Inca tradition.

They opted to take a longer route back to the bikes to avoid the pickup trucks, but the party had been packed up and the trucks were gone when they returned to the parking lot. With sighs of relief, they remounted and continued on their way.

The heat of the day was behind them when they rolled into the Canmore Cemetery. Jane had a map of the grounds and the location of her mother's grave. They parked the bikes nearby, left their helmets on the seats, and searched the headstones. It shouldn't be too hard to find, given the recent exhumation. The Crown prosecutor needed to establish that Jane was Rebecca Morrow's daughter. DNA testing was the only way.

Rebecca's grave marker was a flat black stone embedded in the ground above the still-mounded earth. Jane brushed the dust off the polished stone. Other than her name, Rebecca's birth and death dates were the only adornment. Not a beloved wife or a cherished mother. Not resting in peace. In the public's eye, Rebecca was a murderer who would have been convicted had she not taken her own life.

None of that was true. Rebecca was beloved by Jane's father, David Banner. She was cherished by Jane, who'd only seen her mother in dreams. She was at peace because everyone Rebecca had cared about knew she was innocent of David's homicide. And before she was murdered, she'd arranged for the blood marks that protected Jane from the man who'd killed Jane's parents: Rick Kristan, a deluded and corrupt psychiatrist who'd treated Rebecca against her will.

It pained Jane to know Rick would never be held accountable for her parents' murders. He'd taken her family from her. She'd never get to know them. She'd never feel their embrace or hear their words of praise or encouragement, things most families took for granted.

But killing her parents hadn't been a thorough enough erasure for Rick—he'd wanted Jane dead, too, severing all the connections to his crimes. So the only justice Jane could get was a guilty verdict at his upcoming trial for her aggravated kidnapping and attempted murder. Ten to twenty-five years behind bars wasn't nearly enough.

Jane and Ethan continued on to the Super 8 hotel they'd booked. The sun had slipped beneath the horizon, painting the sky in burnt orange. Ethan joined her on the balcony and handed her a Corona. He glimpsed the photo she'd been staring at on her phone. It was a snapshot of the cryptic note that had been slid under her apartment door in the days following the police takedown at the warehouse. *I'm not done with you yet.* The arrests at the warehouse had ended a drug gang's hold on Riptide, the bar Ethan managed, but they'd earned her a handful of new enemies. She still didn't know which one had sent her the note, but it achieved its intended effect.

She turned from the rail and took the beer. "Thanks." Their balcony faced the parking lot. "Do you think any of those pickup trucks are from the lake?"

Ethan glanced down at the bleached asphalt. "We're in Alberta. Everyone drives a pickup."

"They saw our rides, our licence plates. They could find us."

"Not at this hotel. Even if one of them was a cop, the best they could do is get our Vancouver addresses." He tipped back his beer. "You hungry?"

She faked a smile and went along with his change of subject. Who could blame him? The thoughts banging around in her head were probably the same as his and not fit for human consumption.

They finished their beers and headed out on foot to find Patrinos Steak House & Pub, which met their criteria: nearby and not fancy. They bypassed the pool table, several big

screen TVs, and were seated on an outdoor patio, where they ordered the pizza special and two beers.

Ethan scrutinized the people at the other tables before his gaze strayed into the bar and the baseball game on the TV. His shoulders finally relaxed. Jane hated that her dreams caused him such stress. Whoever said sharing a burden lessened the load had lied.

Jane absorbed every detail of the restaurant and the other diners. Other than the colour of their licence plates, she couldn't make out a difference between Albertans and British Columbians. It was the first time she'd been outside British Columbia, at least that she could remember. She'd been born in Alberta, at the Wild Rose Psychiatric Hospital near Banff, but Rick had made sure there were no records of her birth. She had been less than a day old when she was found abandoned at the Joyce Skytrain station in Vancouver and taken to BC Children's Hospital, making Vancouver her official place of birth.

Back at the hotel, Jane climbed onto the bed and snuggled uncomfortably into Ethan, draping an arm across his chest. She'd been looking forward to this time away with him for weeks, but the tailgaters had ruined it.

Ethan didn't say anything, but Jane knew he was thinking about the last time she'd dreamed. She felt the weight of it, too. She'd been trapped in a dream and couldn't wake up. Ethan had to watch helplessly for days while she lay comatose. Not knowing if she would survive the dream had left its mark on both of them.

On any other night, they'd be getting busy, rolling in the sheets, but the tension of what was to come had flatlined their libidos. And if fear of the unknown hadn't done it, then Jane joining him in bed, fully dressed with her knife secured in her boot, would have. But it wasn't like she had a choice. Because if the dreams started up again, whatever she wore to bed was what she'd be wearing in the dream. She was done being caught underdressed and unarmed. If she was destined

to meet the tailgaters tonight in a visiting dream, she'd be ready for a fight.

2 | Sadie

Sadie Prescott stretched out on the king-size bed surrounded by a sea of pillows. She smoothed her hands over the cool, 600-thread-count sheets. Air-con droned in the background, releasing a steady supply of chilled air and enough white noise to drown out neighbouring hotel guests. She inhaled the rich scent of a properly brewed Americano that wafted over from the silver room-service tray.

And then she opened her eyes.

Daydreaming about her former life was how Sadie dealt with the relentless heat and the a-hole upstairs stomping around in construction boots. Hell, who was she fooling? Fantasizing was how she dealt with any stress these days. In her weaker moments, she longed for the old Sadie, the one who earned a grand for a few hours of making some sad sack feel like a million bucks. She sighed at the memory of the high-end hotels that Cynthia Lee, her former madam, insisted upon for the “students” in her Teacher’s Pet escort business. It took effort to remind herself why she’d given it up.

Though it hadn’t been even a year, the life she’d led felt like the distant past, like someone else’s life. But one thing that hadn’t changed was her distaste for mornings. If the goddess had intended for her to wake early, Sadie wouldn’t need the alarm on her phone.

She dragged herself out of bed, and while the coffee brewed, she signed into the new bookkeeping module she’d started yesterday. A few hours in, Sadie lifted the hair from the back of her neck and turned her face to the small fan she’d set up on a stack of books. The breeze blew her blonde curls away from her forehead, providing a little relief from the

suffocating heat, but it did nothing to lower the temperature in her pint-sized apartment.

She pushed away from the laptop and stretched her arms over her head. With the exception of the inconsiderate neighbour living above her, she felt sorry for the tenants on the upper floors of the Victorian mansion that had been butchered into apartments. At least she was in the basement, where it was coolest. *Coolest?* The word caught in her throat. *Coolest level of hell, maybe.*

It was still early afternoon, and she'd already finished the module. Tomorrow, after she took the end-of-section test, she could put another tick mark in the program calendar. If she didn't run into a roadblock, she was on track to finish her accounting certificate early next year. She'd then be a certified bookkeeper. She couldn't wait to get it behind her and start earning real money again. Living on a tight budget was an oxymoron: not her idea of living.

She figured she'd earned a break, and a few hours at Kitsilano Beach would lift her spirits. She changed into a bikini, pulled a short dress overtop, and dug out a sunhat from under a stack of laundry. After tossing her purse and phone into her tote, she slid into her sandals.

Too bad Jane's away, Sadie thought as she passed by her friend's apartment, which was right next door. Sadie would have dragged her along. Come to think of it, she should have heard from her by now. Sadie knew Jane had been anxious about her road trip. She hadn't had one of her paralytic dreams in a while, but the narcolepsy never left her in peace for long. It was why Jane lived in perpetual readiness, always sleeping behind solid doors with quality locks. That was something she couldn't be sure of on the road.

At least Ethan was with her. He'd learned first hand how vulnerable Jane was when she fell into one of her paralytic dreams. Though Jane had stubbornly resisted his help, he'd stepped up. And Jane had let him, which was a minor miracle.

Sadie walked the few blocks to the beach. At the water's edge, she removed her dress and stuffed it in her bag. Her Tommy Bahamas cut the glare from the water's surface as she strolled through the shallows up to her thighs, sandals in hand, cooling her legs.

Afterwards, she found a shade-dappled spot in the sand near the pathway, away from the marauding gangs of kids with their water cannons. She laid out her towel, set her hat and sunglasses aside, and lay on her back, using her bunched-up dress as a pillow. Music streamed through her earbuds, pushing the surrounding voices and laughter into the background.

A light breeze caressed her body. Her thoughts turned to Dylan O'Brien. After months of creative negotiating, he'd finally broken down her resistance and she'd agreed to a date. They'd seen each other a handful of times since then. There was no denying their chemistry, but she couldn't bring herself to sleep with him. So far, he'd been patient, a perfect gentleman, which only made it worse. She'd promised herself she wouldn't sleep with anyone again before telling them how she used to earn her living. Dylan would dump her ass the day she did, and she really liked the guy. It's why she'd been putting off the inevitable. He worked undercover, but he was still a cop. *Thou shalt not date a former hooker* was probably a commandment in their rookie handbook, printed in bold and underlined.

Soon, she told herself for what felt like the hundredth time. She'd tell Dylan soon.

Thankfully, Jane would never dump her. Their friendship had been forged in fire and tempered on the grittier streets of Vancouver. They were closer than family. They'd grown up together in the system. Jane was one of the few people who understood that reality and didn't judge anyone for the choices they made to survive it.

Unlike Ethan. But thank the goddess, that was behind her now. She and Ethan had settled their differences. He'd

even offered her a bookkeeping job at Riptide, the bar he managed. It was only a few hours of work a week, but every dollar counted when you lived on a humourless budget.

She picked up her phone and skimmed through the latest videos on social media, but her scrolling jerked to a stop at a newsfeed headline: “Local Kidnapping Case Heads to Court.” She clicked on the link. The story was a recap of the charges against Dr. Roderick Atkins and his accomplice, Andrew Ness—the men she and Jane knew as Rick Kristan and Andy Ness. They’d pleaded innocent, which was bullshit, and the reporter’s liberal use of the word *alleged* pissed her off. Another link led to a related article: “The Tragic Life of Joyce Walker.”

Sadie bolted upright. “Oh shit.” Joyce was Jane’s legal name, an unnecessary reminder of the place where she’d been abandoned. She skimmed the article. Jane’s photo was a deer-in-the-headlights shot of her in the back seat of a cruiser on the night the warehouse was raided. The night Sadie had met Dylan. Jane looked like a criminal in the photo. The article included a grainy newspaper image of the Joyce Skytrain station and rehashed the story of the night she’d been found. It sensationalized the prominent birthmarks she’d been born with and hadn’t stopped there. The reporter had uncovered the news stories of the fire that had killed her adoptive parents and the car accident that had taken the couple who had fostered her. Nice. He’d dug deep, and it was going to hurt.

“Chloe?” The man’s voice, coupled with the name he’d called her, sent her heart racing. Chloe was her Teacher’s Pet name when she’d been one of Cynthia’s escorts. She shielded her eyes and squinted up. “I thought that was you. How are you, doll?” His unapologetic gaze crawled over her body.

She searched her memory for the name of the doughy, middle-aged man standing at the foot of her towel, not that he would likely have used his real name. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Keeping up your grades?” A lecherous smile gave away his thoughts.

“I’m out of the business. Have been for months.”

He bobbed his head. “That explains why I couldn’t find your profile. You live around here?”

Sadie smiled, neither yes nor no. So much for a peaceful break on the beach. She remembered he liked to roleplay as a visiting professor who lectured on insurance fraud, an infraction he considered on par with taking a life.

His name came to her. “Brian, is it?”

“How about I come by your place? For old time’s sake.”

“How about you move along?” Sadie said.

His smile faded. “Seems only fair you adjust the fee, though, now that you don’t have a pimp fronting the business. Less for me to pay, more for you to keep? A win-win.”

Sadie took a beat. Doughboy’s attitude needed an adjustment. She raised her phone and snapped a photo of him. “Brian Maddock. Have I got that right?”

He laughed, but the tone rang hollow. “You should treat your customers with more respect.” He narrowed his eyes. “I’ll see you around, Chloe.”

3 | Dylan

Dylan O’Brien felt like an automaton, skimming first the ballistics report, then Dalton Reddy’s autopsy report, and finally the X-rays taken of Dalton before he’d escaped custody at the hospital on the night he died. The fruitless daily routine had become a compulsion. One of those reports had to be wrong, because it was physically impossible for Dalton to have been killed with a bullet fired from a gun that was in police lockup at the time of his death.

Dalton Reddy’s demise wasn’t what bothered Dylan, it was how it had happened. Dalton had climbed to the upper

echelons of a gang that laundered its drug money through the coercion of local businesses. Dylan had been imbedded in the gang for months gathering evidence that culminated in a warehouse raid. Dalton hadn't been shot during the raid, he'd been injured by a motor vehicle and taken to hospital.

Dylan had checked and rechecked the security feed from the evidence cage; Dalton's gun had been logged in before Dalton died, and the gun hadn't moved. The chain of custody for the bullet that killed Dalton was flawless, and the ballistics report that matched the bullet to Dalton's gun was solid. The X-rays taken of Dalton's chest and abdomen before he'd escaped custody showed no bullets lodged anywhere. This left the autopsy report, which ruled Dalton's death as the result of a gunshot wound. The X-ray taken at autopsy showed the bullet in situ.

It was impossible, and it left Dylan right back where he'd landed every other time he'd gone through this routine. The frustration gnawed at him. Dalton's death was a puzzle he was determined to solve. There had to be a clue there somewhere. He just had to find it.

"O'Brien. My office."

Dylan looked over the lip of his cubicle and acknowledged Staff Sergeant Nowak with a tip of his chin. The sergeant had a bark like a rottie, but his thick neck wasn't red, which Dylan took to be a good sign. He logged off and followed him.

Nowak walked behind his desk and plunked himself in the chair. "Close the door. Have a seat." A single file folder rested on the desk. The sergeant slid on his reading glasses and flipped open the file.

Dylan sat with his elbows on the armrests and steepled his fingers.

"Your psych eval came in." Nowak ran his finger down the page, dotting his Is and crossing his Ts. "The doc says you're fit to resume duties." The sergeant flipped the page. Dylan tapped his forefingers together until the sergeant

glanced pointedly at the offending digits. When Dylan stilled his hands, the sergeant repeated the finger slide. “You passed your physical.” Another page flip. “Aced your firearms proficiency test.” Another page. And another, and then he closed the folder. “Looks like you’re green-lighted for active duty.”

Dylan inhaled a deep breath and blew it out with relief. Finally. He’d worked hard to regain full use of his shoulder. The surgeon who’d removed the bullet had done a fine job, but it had taken months of physio and training to regain his full range of motion. The training was thanks to Ethan; the man was a machine. And when Dylan’s scar settled down, he’d have his skull tat re-inked.

“Your transfer to Olsen’s team has been approved. If you’re still interested.”

“Definitely.” Sergeant Dawn Olsen led a guns and gangs team. It was a sideways move from the drug squad, but it would give him a wider range of experience. A solid career move.

“All right, then. You’re in. She’s holding a briefing in one hour.” He rested his arms on the folder. “Any questions?”

“No. Thank you, sir.”

The staff sergeant extended his hand. “Welcome back.”

An hour later, Dylan joined seven other officers around a table in the boardroom. He knew each of them by name and reputation. Doc was from the K9 unit. His German shepherd, Thor, sat alert beside him. Two of the men he called friends. Each of the officers in the room acknowledged him with a nod. All except Viktor Jenko, a goateed man Dylan considered dangerous. Viktor liked to test limits and play loose with rules. Regardless, this team was tight—Dylan was joining a family. The members would have had a say in the decision, though he doubted Viktor had gone along with the choice.

One of them quipped, “You get tired of flying a desk, O’Brien?”

Jeremy Nolan, one of his friends, swiped an image from his phone onto the smart board. The room erupted in laughter. Olsen glanced at the image and fought a smile. The drawing was a rudimentary rendition of a handgun with a stickman drawn facing the barrel end of it. The stickman’s eyes were x’s.

“This ain’t the drug squad, O’Brien,” Jeremy said. “This team works from the grip end of a gun.”

“We’ve got work to do,” Olsen said, putting an end to the friendly jibes. “You all know Dylan O’Brien. He’ll be brought up to speed over the coming days.” Olsen had ten years on Dylan and a reputation as a no-nonsense ball-buster. You’d never know that to look at her. She was quick to smile and didn’t have a mean line on her face.

She pointed to an image of five evidence-tagged, putty-coloured M4 rifles on the screen. The weapons could be mistaken for kids’ toys, but they were deadly. “A new player is making 3D ghost guns. We need to find them and put that printer out of commission.” The guns had been seized from a cube van in Pitt Meadows. “These aren’t the enthusiast’s 3D guns we see at trade shows, the ones with dragon-head barrels and ball-sack grips. Those are made to test a printer’s limits and impress your buddies. These M4s are straight up production units.” 3D printers produced gun frames that bypassed the government-issued serial number. The metal parts that made up the remainder of the gun were not regulated.

After the briefing, the team cleared out, and each of the members welcomed Dylan with a nod or a pat on the shoulder. Viktor nodded as well, but from him it felt more like a challenge.

When Dylan got back to his cubicle, lying on top of it was a printed copy of Jeremy’s drawing. Dylan smiled and tacked it on the partition, right beside the paper target with

the centre blown out: three perfect shots right through the heart, and a fourth through the target figure's forehead.

Sergeant Olsen sent over a stack of background material with instructions for Dylan to familiarize himself. She'd also assigned him the task of sifting through social media feeds for chatter on 3D guns. Social media was where they often found leads.

At the end of the day, Jeremy wandered over and hung his elbows over the edge of Dylan's cubicle. His arms were ripped, an indication that fatherhood hadn't eaten into his gym time. "Want to get a beer?"

"Sure. Riptide?"

"What's up with you and Riptide? The Red Lion not good enough for you anymore?"

"Ethan's away. I told him I'd stop by, make sure the place is still standing." He didn't mention that his favour to Ethan brought with it the possibility that he might bump into Sadie. Dylan wasn't yet ready to let his friends in on that intel, and he wouldn't until he was more certain Sadie was on the same wavelength. She'd successfully kept him at arm's length since they'd met, which had suited him during rehab only because it let him focus—Sadie would challenge any man's focus. But now that he was back on active duty, rehab was officially over. Next time he saw her, he'd pour on the heat and melt that barrier she kept between them. If that was tonight, all the better.

"Okay, but next time, it's the Red Lion."

"Deal," Dylan said, and he logged off the computer. "Meet you there in fifteen."

He headed to his car, a 1969 Dodge Charger. It was a gift from the only dad he'd ever known. The two of them had spent Dylan's high-school years rebuilding it. Clever man, his dad. *The project*, as they'd called it, had kept Dylan out of trouble during those treacherous years when he might have fallen prey to a gang. He approached the car as he always did, with a smile on his face. He got behind the wheel and turned

the key in the ignition. The throaty growl made him think of Sadie. She'd been impressed the first time she'd heard it. That Sadie appreciated his wheels kicked his smile up a notch. He eased out and drove to Riptide.

The bartender recognized Dylan and let him slip down the hall to the office. He knocked on the door.

"It's open." The voice belonged to Riptide's owner, and Ethan's boss, Connor Boyd.

Dylan poked his head inside. "Sadie around?"

"She was earlier."

"Okay. Thanks. How are you making out?" It wasn't an idle question. When Dylan had been undercover, the boss of the drug gang he'd been embedded with had ordered him to teach Connor a lesson. He'd delivered the mildest lesson he could get away with, but it had to be convincing: Dylan wanted to prevent the boss from sending in a heavy hitter. It hadn't worked. A subsequent beating by the heavy hitter had put Connor in the hospital for weeks. Dylan still felt like he'd failed Connor, and he wasn't convinced that Connor had forgiven him.

"I'm tougher than I look," Connor said, flashing a capped-tooth smile and dimples. He had been unrecognizable after the beating, but he'd healed well. He had to be pushing fifty but still looked like he could be in college.

"That you are," Dylan said. "I'll see you around." He ducked out of the office and joined Jeremy, who'd arrived and claimed a table against the back wall. A server dropped off the beers Jeremy had ordered. They clinked glasses, toasting Dylan joining the team.

"You think it's safe for you, coming in here?"

"Yeah, I'm good. The major players are sitting in Vancouver pretrial, and anyone else who could ID me as Joey Hampton is shit-scared to step foot in here." Joey was the street name he went by when he'd been embedded. The first time he'd gone out with Sadie, he'd had to warn her that if

she heard someone call him Joey, she was to walk away and pretend she didn't know him.

"How are Tracy and the baby?"

Jeremy's face split into a wide grin. "Great. Can't believe I put off having a kid. Best decision I've ever made."

"*You* made?"

Jeremy laughed it off. He was a good-natured guy, and smart. They'd met in training at the Justice Institute and were roommates for a while. Even back then, Tracy had wanted to start a family. "Fatherhood looks good on you."

"Would look good on you, too. You need to get busy, my friend. Having a kid will put your life in perspective."

"You think I need perspective?" Dylan had wanted to be a father since he'd come to know his stepdad. But he wanted a solid relationship with a woman first. He'd do everything in his power to avoid repeating his biological father's mistake.

"You work too much, and when you're not working, all you do is train."

"Doesn't mean I'm not looking. Just waiting for the right woman." Maybe even someone he'd already met. Sadie. She was fearless and clever, and he loved her sense of humour. More importantly, she was a survivor. He couldn't wait to get to know her better.