"B. Anne Stevens crafts a beautifully written young adult novel that introduces Ella Strawberry, a compelling character who gives Nancy Drew a run for her money. Readers will connect with Ella, and the suspense will keep them engaged until the very last page. Highly recommended."

—Nancy Mehl
Best-selling, award winning author of
inspirational mystery and suspense
www.nancymehl.com

"B. Anne Stevens creates a teen detective readers will want to become best friends with as they try to solve the mysteries Ella Strawberry confronts in her new life in the witness protection program. Ms. Stevens combines a traditional mystery with the mystery of faith in a page-turner that grips readers from the first page to the explosive finale and leaves them eager for Ella's next adventure!"

—JPC Allen
ACFW KidLit award-winning YA mystery
author and Selah finalist
www.JPCAllenwrites.com

"B. Anne Stevens fills a gaping hole in the much-sought-after Christian YA mystery genre with this first Ella Strawberry novel. An explosive start and unexpected turns will lead readers on an adventure to unravel not only one mystery, but two. Strong faith themes and a clear Gospel message make this the start of a series that will please pre-teens and older. *The Rabbit's Foot* is a solid, wholesome choice for parents looking for clean, faith-filled fiction for their readers."

—Stephanie Daniels
Author of Young Adult fiction and Administrator of
Teen/YA Christian Fiction Bookshelf Facebook Group
www.authorstephaniedaniels.com

"*The Rabbit's Foot* is more than just a mystery; it is an intriguing journey of faith and courage. Ella's bravery as she searches for the truth is relatable and encouraging. B. Anne Stevens has created a perfect blend of suspense, sweet friendships, and God's sovereignty. Highly recommend!"

—Rachel Smith
Director of Student Engagement &
High School Track and Field Coach, California

"*The Rabbit's Foot* is a refreshingly wholesome mystery that I loved reading aloud to my preteens! The story is a fun journey, with original twists along the way. A message of God's purpose for Ella, and us all, is woven throughout the book, which is exactly what today's young adults need!"

—Emily Duncan
Middle School Literature Teacher, Homeschool Mom, Illinois

"I have a 16-year-old granddaughter, and I just loved reading this. It caught my attention, and it was suspenseful and so enjoyable. The author has such a talent for descriptive passages that I could place myself in the scenes in her book. Also, I loved her way of inserting faith and the development of the main character Ella coming to have faith in the Lord. I am grateful for this experience of reading it!"

—Patty N.
Grandmother, Florida

"The book is amazing, and it is beautifully written. The story keeps the readers wrapped, it's suspenseful, and leaves the reader begging for more."

—Millie H.
13 years old, Missouri

"This is one of my favorite books we've ever read and of course we all wish we wouldn't have to wait for the next one!"

—Ellie D.
12 years old, Homeschooler, Illinois

"Instantly one of my faves! We need more books that can relate to Christian girls like this."

—Leta S.
14 years old, Illinois

"I loved the scary action at the end of this book!"

—Coen D.
Preteen, Illinois

"This is an amazing book for teens! It's exciting, intense, and relatable. I've read it four times, and I can't wait for the next book in the series!"

—Rose S.
13 years old, Colorado



THE RABBIT'S FOOT

AN ELLA STRAWBERRY MYSTERY
BOOK 1

B. ANNE STEVENS

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Cover and book design by Damonza.

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Lion Fire Publishing, Inc.

St. Louis, Missouri

ISBN (paperback): 979-8-9964135-0-8

ISBN (eBook): 979-8-9964135-1-5

Printed in the United States of America



For Dad—Ronald Gene Sellers—who always loved my stories and took every opportunity to correct my grammar.

Although the world is full of suffering, it
is full also of the overcoming of it.

— Helen Keller

AUTHOR'S NOTE

So often our childhood shapes who we are as adults. Growing up, my parents taught me about God from an early age. Yet, even with a strong Christian foundation, emotional turmoil marked my childhood and teens. But when there was no one with whom a young girl could seek refuge, I found God. Amid my naïve prayers, He answered the simplest of requests. Why? Because He hears the prayers of His children. His presence in my young heart fostered a genuine relationship with Jesus that carried me through difficult teenage years. This understanding of God's love helped me make good decisions related to right and wrong. Many times, His miraculous intervention kept me safe in scary situations. Life was not perfect, but my early spiritual development provided the foundation upon which my adulthood flourished. My adult life, marriage, family, and career are blessed only because of His goodness.

I share this because my vision for writing the Ella Strawberry Mysteries is to help girls know how precious they are in the Lord's sight. I hope the stories help to show that trials of life do not take away from God's plan for us. As Christians, we can trust His power to supersede evil's intent to take us out. If we remain in His love and believe in His promises, we will experience the rich fulfillment of God's grace—both in this life and in the next. My prayer for every teen girl is to know and believe she is wonderfully made by the Creator God, the One Who loves her beyond measure.

By walking confidently in a personal relationship with Jesus—no matter what happens throughout life—nothing can move you from His presence and His will for your life.

I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it. Although it is meant to be entertaining, I pray it also strengthens you in your own faith journey.

Prologue

9:00 PM, Thursday, December 21
Present Day

The dazzling holiday glow of Shoreline Village extended into the Long Beach harbor as boats of all sizes competed for bragging rights with their excessive Christmas light displays. No one noticed a shadowy figure creeping over the side rail of one exceptionally large yacht as it cruised out of the marina. A second later, the human shape leapt off the edge and disappeared into the rippling blackness. The grand vessel steadily glided past the *Queen Mary* and through the harbor about a mile into the Pacific. Strings of multicolored lights traced the ship from the bow along the handrails on either side. A cone of green blinking strands stretched from the top deck to the stern pulpit to resemble a Christmas tree.

A few feet from the swim platform, a man and a woman stood at the dark end of the rail where the bright décor ended. The man argued into a cell phone. The woman's sequined clutch dangled by a thin strap from her fingers. Food, drink, and discourse were well underway, with loud holiday playlists drowning out the boat noise. A party globe in the main lounge flashed bright strobes that cut through the glass and

bounced off the water, creating a hazy rainbow of chaos that rendered the couple invisible to the distracted guests.

Half a mile away, a small bowrider with no lights retrieved the shadowy figure from the sea. The motor revved. The driver whirled the craft around and sped into the dark, away from the festivities. Five minutes later, the yacht's orange and red explosion displaced the Christmas cheer of Shoreline Village.

The blast shot high, and the shockwave rocked the marina. Debris fell like fireworks' tails. A single twinkling green strand clung to a piece of floating mast, the last of the holiday lights to flicker out. Minutes later, two Coastguard harbor patrol vessels raced toward the site. Law enforcement officers screamed at each other through radios. Their planned bust on the yacht had gone terribly wrong—months of work up in smoke. Someone was a step ahead and had blown up the whole thing.

CHAPTER 1

Six hours earlier

The sparkly red holiday dress my mother picked out for me didn't fit. The size was fine. It was the pretense that bothered me. Dread intensified as I zipped up in front of the closet mirror. If only she'd let me wear my Converse. Plus, I'd lost confidence when my best friend Angela called earlier to say she couldn't go. Last year, I was stuck for hours on the fancy yacht with my parents' snobby work friends. Ugh. Not again. Without Angela, I didn't think I could handle it. Wriggling out of the dress, I hung it on my closet door before slipping into sweatpants and a cotton tee. My African Grey parrot, Piper, was perched on top of the open door. His beak tapped the metal hanger holding my dress, but he lost interest and flapped downward to my desk.

"Five minutes!" My father's voice bellowed from the great room below.

"Five minutes," mimicked Piper.

I snorted. "We have at least fifteen minutes."

Piper walked along my desktop and shuffled papers to forage with his beak.

"Hey. Get off my homework. I gotta turn those in tomorrow."

He stepped onto my outstretched hand, his filed claws rough on my skin. I carried him to his roomy wrought iron cage by my bedroom window. He clambered onto one of the wooden platforms in his toy-filled space.

"You think Dad'll be mad if I don't go to his dumb party?"

"Dumb party. Dumb party," Piper repeated in his brassy parrot voice. He gave a low, cackling laugh.

"Shh. Don't let Dad hear that."

Piper hopped across several perches to explore the contents of his food dish.

Peering at the dress, I let out a long heavy sigh. It was beautiful. But I loathed how my father would spend the evening showing me off and making sure everyone knew who I was—Stefanopoulos' daughter and protégé. The future of the company.

I had my own goals. I wanted my own life.

A familiar whine floated from under my door. I crossed the thick aqua carpet of my expansive bedroom suite. When I cracked the door open, my Jack Russell Terrier pushed his nose through. He bolted inside and sprung up on my bed with his ears perked and his curled tail wagging. I gave him a quick scratch behind the ears. "Hey, Rusty."

"I said, five minutes!" My father's footsteps clomped up the stairs.

Shoot.

"Almost done," Mom called in her sing-song voice from her suite at the other end of the long hall.

I closed the door. There had to be a way out of this. My gaze skittered across the room, and my stomach tightened. My biology textbook lay on my desk chair. Grabbing the book, I jumped onto the center of my queen bed and sat crisscrossed.

As if on cue, Rusty sat next to me with his front paws straight out. We glared at the door.

A loud rap matched the pounding of my heartbeat. He'd be mad, but he'd get over it. I pulled my long, thick waves into a ponytail with a stretchy band and took a breath.

"Let's go. We're late," my father boomed.

"I can't go," I called back.

"What?" His deep voice penetrated the door. "Angelique! What's going on with Elliana?"

Within seconds, my mother entered, gorgeous as always. Her black, sequin cocktail dress glittered over her perfect curves. A rich ruby necklace circled her neckline. Thick, dark chocolate hair draped her shoulders. Her deep brown eyes dominated her oval face. People had said I looked like her.

Not true.

"What's wrong, darling? Why aren't you dressed?"

I squared my shoulders and lied with conjured urgency. "I have to study for one more final tomorrow." A guilty pang jabbed in my chest, but I pinched my lips together in defiance.

My father stood in the doorway, looking displeased. "What? I thought you were done with finals today." He entered with a waft of heavy cologne. Dimitri Stefanopoulos dominated all the space in any room. Loud and commanding. Large and bossy. Always perfectly dressed. And *busy*, which often worked in my favor. He usually gave me what I wanted, so he could get on with things.

Please let this work.

With a distressed voice and rounded eyes, I said, "I just found out. I'm sorry, Daddy."

"What is she talking about?" He jerked his head at my mother, but she shrugged.

"I thought I was exempt." I raised my voice an octave, pleading with my eyes. "I just found out today that everyone

has to take it. It's in Biology. I can't lose my rank, Dad. I'm number one in my class. Please let me stay."

Not a total lie. I *was* number one in my cohort, and I *did* have to start a new lab experiment in Advanced Placement Biology tomorrow. We had to set up goldfish tanks before break to observe the effects of added nitrogen when we got back from Christmas break. Sort of like a final, right?

My father's eyes narrowed. "You're trying to get out of going to my party, aren't you?"

"Dumb party. Dumb party." Piper squawked and cackled again.

I cringed. A sheen of sweat glistened on my father's forehead, and he inhaled through his nostrils. Rusty whimpered and ducked his nose between his paws.

"That bird has to go," Dad said through clenched teeth. He looked at Mom as if it was her fault before turning back to me. "This party is important, Elliana. You're a Stefanopoulos. We've been over this. You've got to learn how to handle yourself in society if you're ever going to take over the family business. I . . . I mean . . . we . . . really need you with us tonight."

My eyes cut to the ceiling. "Dad. One party is not going to ruin my future. I'm not even sixteen yet." I wasn't interested in his business at all, but past arguments didn't lean in my favor, and this wasn't the time for another.

His dark eyes flashed. "You're doing this on purpose." He glanced at his watch. "Because now it's too late to get ready in time."

"Five minutes. Five minutes," Piper shrilled.

"I hate that bird." My father spun around with a huff. He stopped short when something on my desk caught his attention.

"What's this?" He snatched the glossy pamphlet.

I bit the inside of my cheek. "I got it from school. It's about the vet program at San Jose State."

He crumpled the brochure in his palm. "I thought we decided this. You're staying here for college and learning business management."

I swallowed hard, fighting for control. "But Dad . . . I'm great at science—"

"Not another word. You have a responsibility in this family. We have a large business to run. You will not be a vet." He hurled the paper ball on my desk.

"Not another word," Piper mimicked, tapping his hanging carousel of multi-colored blocks. He stretched and fluttered his wings.

"What are you teaching that thing?" My father's arms flailed.

Piper stretched his wings wider, and his pupils dilated. The feathers on his neck stood out. He shuffled across the length of his wooden dowel. I sucked in a breath.

"Get out of my room," Piper screeched.

That didn't go over well.

"Enough. I've had it. You're done with all these ridiculous pets." My father's volume went up with each breath. His sweeping fingers moved air against my face. "I want them all gone by January. I mean it this time. And you will work inside at the resort instead of at the pool. You need to start focusing on your future. You need to grow up. People are more important than animals. The universe does not revolve around you!" He straightened his lapels. "Angelique, we don't have time for this."

Mom looked at him and paused.

"Come here." Dad jerked his head at Mom, and she followed him down the hall. A door slammed. Tense, muffled

words floated from their room. Then the door sounded like it burst open, followed by footsteps thundering down the stairs.

"Meet me in the car, Angelique!" He yelled from below.

I crumpled to my side with my palms over my face. A wet nose and fervent dog licks brushed over my hands and cheek.

A minute later, Mom entered. "Don't worry, darling." She touched my head. "We'll work it out later."

I sat up. "I'm sorry. I can get dressed really fast."

"No, don't worry about it now. It'll be okay. Tomorrow is your last day of the semester. There are things your father wants to talk about with the business, but we'll discuss them over the break."

She straightened to leave, but I grabbed her hand. "Why do I have to learn the business, Mom? I don't want to be a Stefanopoulos. Everywhere I go, people know my name. I can't even be . . . or try to find out . . . who I want to be." My voice quivered.

She kissed the top of my head. She smelled of her usual jasmine and vanilla perfume. "No matter what happens, you'll always be a Stefanopoulos."

"What if I'm supposed to be something else? I want to do something interesting, like work with animals."

"You're in this family for a reason, you know. You're created for a purpose. Everyone is."

My body slumped. "I wish I knew what it was."

She smoothed stray hair away from my face. "There's plenty of time. You're incredibly talented. You'll find your purpose."

"Angelique!" My father roared. "The car is waiting!"

"We'll be back late. See you in the morning. I love you, Elliana." Then she left.

They didn't understand. I couldn't be who they wanted.

My plan to ditch the party worked, but the guilt over

tricking my father weighed on me. After a late call with Angela about the plans for the next day, I covered Piper's cage and went to bed. I lay awake, so I could get up when my parents came in. But sleep took over the rehearsal of my apology.



The next morning brought fresh optimism. After all, Christmas was three days away, and tomorrow began school break.

My traditional blue and green tartan skirt was only slightly more bearable than the party outfit. I threw on the navy cardigan over my crisp white blouse. Opting for my aqua Converse low tops instead of the required black patent leather shoes, I *accidentally on purpose* forgot to wear the tights. Perfect. Who would care about the dress code on the last day of school?

I might be weird, but fish tank cultures excited me. I had to be good at science to get into vet school. I unwrinkled the college booklet from my desk and tucked it into my schoolbag. Two weeks until my sixteenth birthday. If I had to, I'd work in the hotel for a couple years and save all my money. After high school, I could go to whatever college I wanted—as long as I kept my grades up. And if Dad didn't support my choice, I'd have to have scholarships ready.

One glance at the red dress hanging on the closet door sent a pang through me about last night's lie. I should talk to my father before leaving for school. I kissed Piper's beak and set him on his perch inside his massive floor cage. "Don't worry. You're not going anywhere." I latched his door. "You good?"

"I'm good. You good?" Piper returned. He scratched at the unsalted nuts in his food tray. "Time for peanuts," he said.

I puckered my lips and leaned close to his cage. "I love you!"

"I love you," Piper made his kissing noises, whistled, and went to work grooming his red tail feathers.

At least my pets loved me. Why couldn't humans be like animals?

"Bye, Piper," I called as I rushed out the bedroom door.

"Bye. Five minutes."

Laughing, I scurried down the curved staircase. After trotting through our great room, a formal dining room, and into the large entertainment-style kitchen, I stopped and turned around. Odd. There was nothing on the counter to grab for breakfast. Oh, right. Maria took time off for Christmas. But where was Mom?

"Huh." I frowned. What was I supposed to do in the kitchen? Forget it. The bus would be here any minute.

Fill Rusty's water bowl. Check. The rabbit. I rushed into the mud room. Peter's dish was low on pellets. He nudged my hand with his moist nose when I reached in to deposit a cupful of alfalfa. I took a few seconds to run my fingers over his soft, white ears.

"Bye, Peter. See ya after school."

I stopped again in the kitchen to grab juice out of the fridge. Something was off. Mom wasn't around. No familiar morning bustle came from my father's home office either.

"Mom?" No answer. "Dad?" Nothing. Strange. My parents always told me if they planned to stay out all night. What was wrong?

There was a sudden commotion outside accompanied by the sounds of vehicles and car doors slamming shut. Oh, good. Mom and Dad were home, and I could apologize to Dad before school. But I flung open the side door to find a strange man with a scruffy, wrinkled face standing within inches of me. I yelped at the two small metal tools in his hands. He

stood next to a woman. They both wore black windbreakers. Stepping back, their mouths fell open.

"Who are you?" My voice squeaked.

"Who are *you*?" The woman squinted at me. Her skin was dark, and she'd fastened her oiled black hair tightly away from her heart-shaped face.

Scruffy Face moved his hand to his pocket to put the lock-pick tools away, revealing a partial view of a holster under his jacket. My breath stopped. His hand returned holding something else, and within seconds, he dragged on a cigarette as if his life depended on it.

My attention jerked to the curved driveway where more law enforcement vehicles surged across our perfectly manicured lawn. Uniformed officers got out and waited for orders. "How'd you get through the gate? What's going on?"

A cracking voice came from the man's radio. "Units on scene. All clear?"

The man turned his head and spoke into the receiver on his shoulder. "There's a girl here; stand by." Another long drag with a longer exhale of cigarette smoke.

More static. "Say again, a girl? Repeat, over."

"A girl."

"What's your name?" The woman in front of me asked, her forehead furrowed.

Why did I feel scared? "Elliana. What's going on?"

"Elliana?" The woman's eyes flickered to the other guy. They looked at each other as if confused. "Elliana Stefanopoulos?"

I frowned. "Yeah. This is my house."

I gazed past her at the yard. Where were my parents? What was I supposed to do with cops all over? What about the school bus?

The man turned back to his radio. "Stand by. Do not approach." All the officers froze and stared at us. The man

looked at me. "Why weren't you on the boat? The manifest included your name." He flicked his cigarette onto the stone lining the grass.

"Boat? Manifest?"

The woman pulled a black leather wallet from somewhere and flashed her identification. Without asking permission, they both advanced through the door, forcing me to step back, then clapped the door shut. After a brief scan inside, the woman took my arm and ushered me through the kitchen to a sofa in the living room. She rushed to the large glass windows that boasted the view of our backyard pool with the Pacific Ocean backdrop. She yanked the drapes closed.

"Please sit," the woman said. "I'm Agent Julie." She lowered herself into a chair across from me and leaned forward.

I sat, tense, on the edge of the couch. "That badge says FBI."

"Yes. Is anyone else here?"

"No." My pulse pounded. "What's going on?"

Scruffy Face looked around, checking doors, closing curtains. The lingering smell of his cigarette tickled my nose.

"This is Agent Mike."

Mike walked over to flap his badge in front of me then returned to nosing around the house and opening closets.

Julie looked into my eyes. "Don't worry, we're from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. We *will* protect you."

"I'm gonna check upstairs." Mike bounded up the staircase.

"Protect me from what? What if you're the bad guys?"

Agent Julie sobered. Her silence took too long. The air thickened, and my stomach twisted. It had to be something bad.

CHAPTER 2

Agent Julie took a long minute as if finding the right words, but then her empathetic eyes looked straight into mine. "Your parents' yacht exploded last night. I'm sorry to tell you this, Elliana, but no one survived."

The words sent a shockwave through me, paralyzing any comprehension. "An explosion? Where are my parents?"

"I'm sorry, Elliana."

I didn't understand. "No, they should be here any minute. My mom said she would see me in the morning."

"They were on the boat. They didn't make it."

I stared at Julie. Her words collided in my head. What was she saying? Rusty sat at my feet. His wagging tail brushed against my ankles and then he padded over to Julie to sniff around her shoes. She watched me and waited.

My voice cracked. "Didn't make it? You mean . . . they're . . . dead?"

"I'm sorry." Julie moved to sit close next to me.

My chest caved as if there was no more air. "That's not true. It can't be." A sudden chill swept over me, and my skin tingled. My limbs grew numb.

"Have you seen any television this morning?"

I gave a single headshake.

Agent Julie found the remote on the mantle and clicked it toward our TV mounted above the fireplace. She turned on the news. A blonde reporter with perfect makeup held a fat, square-shaped microphone. An active clean-up scene filled the marina behind her. A split screen looped a video clip of a ship engulfed in flames against the night sky. Our yacht. My eyes filled, and I blinked hard to read the captions scrolling at the bottom of the screen.

> *Explosion on luxury yacht in the Port of Long Beach leaves twenty-eight dead. Rescue and recovery are underway.*

The reporter's hair streamed behind her from the ocean wind. "Among the dead is real estate mogul Dimitri Stefanopoulos and his family which included his wife and teenage daughter."

My chest constricted in a steel grip of disbelief. "But I'm not dead. I'm right here. They're not dead. My parents can't be dead." My strangled voice shook. *Not possible. This wasn't real.* But why else would there be FBI agents right here in my house? The room tilted even though I was sitting down. Pain tore through me as if heavy fists punched my insides. I grabbed my middle as if holding myself would keep my world from falling apart.

"An investigation is underway. Preliminary information indicates arson," continued the reporter.

"Arson? Someone killed them?" That's when I burst into a wail. Rusty jumped into my lap and licked my face. My cries turned to quiet sobs.

"Julie!" Mike's distant yell drifted from upstairs. "Julie, come here!"

She hesitated. I pulled Rusty against my chest. Then she clicked the TV off and patted my knee. "I'll be right back." As

she left, her faint voice spoke into her radio, "Code 2. We're going to need Samantha."

The radio crackled, "Child services?"

My breath caught. Did they say child services? What did that mean?

"No," Julie's voice floated through the kitchen clear enough for me to hear. "I said Samantha. And keep it on the down-low. This is top security. We need transport. Plus, there's a dog." Her voice dimmed. I sat with Rusty. Mom and Dad were dead? What should I do?

Julie and Mike returned after a few minutes . . . or maybe longer. She set an aqua backpack next to me on the couch. "Did you know about this?" I stared at it for a minute.

"That's the Lululemon City Adventurer backpack I told my mom I wanted for Christmas." I picked up the bag. It still had the tags on it, and a furry, tan key fob dangled from the top handle. I frowned. "That's my mom's rabbit's foot key chain." I smoothed the soft fur under my fingertips.

"Does that mean anything to you?" Julie asked.

I shook my head. "I saw it a few times. I told her I didn't like it because it was inhumane. But she insisted the fur wasn't real." The tears came again.

Julie took a deep breath and pointed to the bag. "You should look inside." She peered up at Mike.

My trembling hands opened the unzipped main compartment. I reached in.

I pulled out jeans, two T-shirts, a sweatshirt, and some toiletries. "These are my clothes. I'm confused."

"You guys talk about going on a trip?" Mike asked.

"No."

Static came from Mike's radio. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "We have to get out of here, so they can search the place."

"Search?" That didn't sound good.

Agent Julie stiffened and glanced around. She took a deep breath and crouched in front of me. "Look, Elliana, I'm sure you have a lot of questions. So do we. But right now, law enforcement is about to turn this place upside down. And you aren't safe here. You're going to have to come with me."

Her words tangled in my head. Why was everything happening so fast? "Why . . . am I . . . not safe?"

Mike fidgeted and pulled a cigarette box out of his pocket and tapped it. "You were supposed to be on that boat. Your name was on the manifest. Everyone, including the public, thinks you're dead."

"And until we know more, we need to keep it that way. I can't explain here." Agent Julie picked up the backpack next to me as she stood upright. Her motions were more business-like now. Her radio beeped.

"The car's here. Over." The radio crackled.

Julie spoke into the mic on her shoulder. "Copy that." Her gentle hand nudged me to stand up. "Let's go."

I didn't move. "What about my pets?"

"You can bring the dog," Julie said.

"What about the others? They can't be all alone." Panic cinched my lungs so tight I couldn't breathe.

There was a fuss at the side door, and three other men, dressed like Julie and Mike, entered the house. Julie held her hand out to them to wait.

I folded over with my head between my knees and sobbed, unable to think clearly. This was all a mistake. It had to be.

Radios were going off, voices pressuring Julie and Mike to give the all clear. And what were they going to do in my house? Who could I call for help? The hovering officers made it hard to think.

Agent Julie touched my back, and then sat back down.

"Okay, Elliana. Just relax. We'll figure it out. You have more pets?"

Pets. *My pets*. "Yes. Peter needs me."

"Who's Peter?"

My thoughts were hazy. The living room looked strange like everything was far away. Rusty's wet nose against my arm sent a cold shiver through me. "How long will we be gone? I'll have to feed my pets this afternoon."

A uniformed officer from somewhere in the room cleared his throat. "She might be going into shock."

"Julie. Come on." Mike was impatient.

Julie waved him over. He dropped his head in annoyance and lumbered to the couch, carrying the cigarette smell with him. She leaned into my space and pulled me up to meet her gaze. "Who's Peter?"

"My rabbit. He's in a cage in the mud room." I tried to wipe the wetness away with the back of my hand. "And Piper will die if he's all alone."

"Piper?"

"My parrot. He's in my room. He has to have human interaction at least six hours every day, or he gets stressed out. He eats mixed nuts in the morning and kale salad in the evening . . . but we'll be back later, right?"

"You getting all this?" Julie jerked her head at Mike, who sighed, pulled out a small notebook, and started scribbling. She turned to me. "Okay, Elliana. There's Peter. And Piper. Peter. Piper." The other agents in the room exchanged baffled looks. "We'll see what we can do." She patted my shoulder. "I'm sorry. I know this is hard."

"Anything else?" Mike snapped his notebook shut.

"There's Taylor and Swift. They're upstairs in the loft area outside my bedroom."

"Taylor and Swift?"

"My hamsters."

Mike let out some expletives under his breath, but Julie glowered at him. "Shush." She stood up, put the Lululemon backpack in my hands, and pulled me up by my elbow. "Elliana, we're going to take care of your pets. Don't worry. But we have to go now."

Things were insane with Agents Julie and Mike coming and going while I stayed in a hotel suite with a different agent—a sort of psychiatrist—named Samantha. Her job was to watch me for signs of trauma and emotional instability. At least I had Rusty. But they didn't let me take him outside. Some cop assigned to security detail took him for walks.

My only possessions were my school uniform, my Lululemon backpack with my clothes inside, and my mom's rabbit's foot key fob. And Rusty. They even took my cell phone. It had to look like I died.

Then came the questions. Mostly from Mike, but Julie took over when Mike went too fast.

When did you last see your parents? Thursday night. *Why were they on a boat?* The company Christmas party was on my parents' yacht in Long Beach Harbor. *Your name was on the passenger manifest. Why weren't you on the boat?* Because I didn't want to go, and I got into a fight with my dad about it. *Why did you fight?* Because he wanted me to start being a lady and learn the family business, but I had other plans. *Did your father say anything to you about any unusual business dealings?* No. *What about your mother?* Not really. I wasn't interested. *What do you know about the Stefanopoulos Resorts hotel chain?* Not much, except my parents wanted me to start working more to get ready for the future. *Did you know anything about the getaway backpack?* No, I had no idea.

Later another FBI higher up appeared with Julie and brought up all the same questions again—as if no one had asked them to begin with. Then came a new set of questions.

Who did you talk to since Thursday night? Just my best friend Angela Robertson. *What time?* About eleven o'clock. *What did you talk about?* We made plans for the last day of school. *Is anyone else at your house?* The housekeeper comes in and out. *Did she see you last night or this morning?* No. She's gone for Christmas. *Did you leave the house at any time last night?* No. *Any other close friends?* Not really. *Do you have a boyfriend?* No. *Did you post anything on social media after 9:00 PM?* I don't remember.

They made me write down all my social media accounts.

"Where are my pets?" I asked Julie.

"They're in custody."

Whatever that meant. "It's been two days. Are they getting food? What about Piper? He needs very specific care."

"Someone's taking care of them. We're trying to find a good temporary place. Don't worry."

Don't worry? What a dumb thing to say. What happened to my parents and why? What was going on? If only my dad and I hadn't fought the last time we talked. Sometimes I started crying without warning. Samantha said I had to go through a grieving process. I missed Piper, and I missed my parents. Most of all, I missed my mom. Samantha brought me prescriptions for anxiety and to help me sleep. But I didn't want to take pills. Mom was against medications. I had Rusty. He sensed my need for comfort. If not for him, I might've taken the meds.

More bustling, phone calls, and cold pizza. Agent Julie often shut herself in the bathroom. Samantha gave her a prescription too.

The second evening, Samantha handed Julie and me

Styrofoam cups of hot cocoa. Less overwhelmed, I thanked her. My analytical side emerged from the cloud of confusion. Mom had said there were things we needed to talk about over break. Was it connected to the accident? I should have paid more attention.

Julie perked up when I mentioned that. "What did she say? Tell me exactly—"

"That was it. That Dad wanted to talk about the business over break. They were rushing off to the party." Tears threatened to return. "He said all I did was think about myself." I took a cautious sip of the steaming chocolate and sniffed. "He was right. I'm so selfish."

Julie waved her hand. "Don't go there. Be thankful they sheltered you. Seems like they were protecting you from some serious stuff." She set her cup on the side table. A loud metal noise clanked as the furnace unit kicked on, adding to the stuffiness in the hotel room.

I wanted to go home to my own sofa and my own bed. "Why would they want me to go to the party with bad stuff going on?"

"Maybe they wanted to keep you close."

"But then they let me stay home. I was a brat about it." I motioned to the backpack resting on the floor at the end of the couch. "And there was a go-bag ready for me. None of it makes sense."

"I'm sure they planned to return home."

"So, the explosion stopped whatever they had planned?"

Julie lifted her eyebrows. "You're a smart girl. And I'm certain they never would've put you on the yacht knowing it was going to explode. Look, Elliana. Your parents were involved in things you don't know about. The police found two more getaway bags with new identities for all of you. They were planning on leaving. All three of you."

I snatched another tissue from the box next to me. "That's crazy."

Julie inhaled deeply. "It is crazy. But it's true. Your mother was preparing for something."

"I wish I could see my dad again. I wasn't very nice right before he left to go to the party."

Samantha sat next to me. "There's no way you could've known what would happen. Focus on getting through this right now. Your dad loved you very much, and he knows you loved him too."

My shoulders slumped. I rolled the now-wet tissue into a ball in my palm. My voice came out hoarse. "When my mom said something about discussing things over Christmas break, I thought it just had to do with college plans. But obviously there's more to it. You know, don't you, Julie? Please tell me."

"They haven't told me everything, Elliana. As soon as I know more, I'll tell you."

"Promise?"

"I Promise."

On the third day after I last saw my parents, Agent Mike entered the suite in his black jacket and gathered some files. "We're contained." He sounded urgent. "No one knows you're alive—except your friend Angela Robertson. And her parents. They've all agreed to the rules. Time to go."

"Go where?" I asked, but no one answered. "Julie? What rules?"

Julie scuttered around to gather her few personal belongings and grab her coat. She jerked her head toward me. "Get your stuff. We'll talk on the way," Julie said.

"Am I going into foster care?"

"No."

More craziness. No time to think. I scooped up Rusty and grabbed his leash. They hustled me into the back of a black

SUV. As we sped along, we passed the outdoor mall—one of my favorite places to hang out with Angela. What about Angela? I watched my world whiz away. When could I go back home?



We stopped on the tarmac at Long Beach Airport. A small plane waited in front of us. What was that for? My sweaty palm squeezed the door handle. "What's happening?"

"Let's go." Mike hopped out and came around to open my door. I sat frozen with Rusty in my lap. I kept my arms crossed tight around his warm body.

"Look, Elliana." Julie leaned in close. "This is the best way to keep you safe. We're going to temporarily hide you away while we figure out who killed . . . I mean . . . what happened to your parents."

My heart slammed my chest like a caged animal. How could they just decide to take me away? "Why can't I go home?"

Julie's intense black eyes blinked inches from mine. "Elliana, the truth is that you're not safe at home. We must get you to a secure location as fast as possible. I know this is difficult, but I'm asking you to trust us."

"Are you talking about witness protection?"

"Yes. For now. While we sort out all this. The people who killed your parents think you're dead. In fact, everyone thinks you're dead. It's very public. Someone targeted you and your parents for a reason. If they find out you're alive, they could come after you. Right now, it's best for everyone if they think you're dead. The longer you're here, the harder it is to keep you out of sight. And the longer it takes to get these guys."

Resistance swelled. "What about my family? I may be an only child, but I have aunts, uncles, and cousins. And what

about my Uncle Tommy? He worked with my dad. Why can't I stay with him?"

Julie's face hardened, and her lips pressed into a straight line. She turned in the seat and grabbed both my shoulders. "Elliana. Your uncle, Thomas Stefanopoulos, was the one business partner not on the boat. We think he helped organize the accident."

Gooseflesh prickled my arms. My head shook hard. "Uncle Tommy? No."

"Yes. Your Uncle Tommy is not a good guy. He's doing some bad things with your father's company. That's why we need to get you away from here for a while."

"We're running out of time," Mike bent to look at me through the open back passenger door. He held his cell phone next to his ear. "All clear," he said into the phone. Then he glared at me. *I* was the all-clear. They really wanted me out of here.

I wilted. "Do I have a choice?" Rusty poked his head up and brushed my chin with his tongue.

Mike leaned on his arm while putting his head in farther. Mike's voice came out raspier than usual, and there was a whiff of his smoky breath. "Yes. Your choice is you stay here and put everyone around you in danger—because Tommy will come for you the second he finds out you're alive." His words cut through me like a knife. He continued. "That's one option. Another option is you go into foster care because you're still a minor. And Tommy still comes after you. The third option is you come with us and let us work this out."

I swallowed. What choice did I have? Helplessness swept over me. Anger burned in my throat. As hard as it was to keep it together, I managed to hold back the tears.

Julie put her arm around my shoulders. "Your parents

would want this. They'd want you to be safe over anything else."

"Can't I get some of my things?"

"No." Mike was gruff. "It has to look like you're dead. Everything stays."

"Can I at least call Angela?"

"Absolutely not. That puts her in danger too." He straightened and motioned me to get out with a flick of his upward palm.

With no other prospects, I numbly exited the SUV and held Rusty tight. Julie went first up the airstairs, and I followed with Mike prodding us from behind. The chairs on the small plane faced each other. We strapped in. Julie, Mike, and I sat in the back while another agent I didn't know sat up front out of sight. Rusty sniffed around the seat next to me, his undocked tail wagging curiously.

Once we were in the air, they slammed me with a lot of instructions and rules. No contact with anyone. No social media. No online accounts. Period.

Mike sat a few feet in front of me. He pulled out two large manila envelopes. "There's something else. These were in your parents' room close to where your backpack was found. They obviously had a plan. And it helped us make arrangements for you." He handed me one of the envelopes. I turned it upside down and let the contents fall on my lap. A new ID and passport, birth certificate, a social security number, a pre-paid credit card, and a cell phone—one of those old flip phones with no internet access.

"This ID says the State of Kentucky. I've never even been to Kentucky." I yanked open the passport. My photo. Heat rushed through my veins and my pulse jumped hard against my skin. "Why does it say Ella Lyn Strawberry? That's not my name!"

"You'll be living with a nice, retired couple who agreed to help us," Mike said. "They used to work for the Marshals. Incidentally, they also have the last name of Strawberry. I've met them before. I think you'll like them. And your new home."

My heart drummed hard, and my face heated. "New *home*?"

Why did that sound so final? I had a home—and it wasn't in Kentucky.

Julie slipped the birth certificate out of my hand. "Look, Elliana. This was the quickest way to stabilize the situation. Evidently, your parents were prepared to change your identities."

"I don't believe it."

Julie reached for the other envelope and took it from Mike. "Look at this. They already had this set up. They changed their names as well." She pulled out a stack of similar documents. "I'm going to give you these. To prove it to you." Two additional passports, ID's, birth certificates, and a marriage certificate. "Look. There's your mom. And your dad. They were getting ready to flee."

"From what?" My fingers trembled as I took the passports. Sure enough, their photos were there, but the names were different.

Katherine and Nicholas Strawberry.

"That's what we need to find out. You keep those photos, okay? We spoke to the WITSEC agents—"

"WITSEC?" I stumbled over the acronym.

"Witness Security Protection Program," Julie said. "You'll be living with Richard and Margaret Strawberry. They knew your father from when they went to college together. Your parents must've decided they were the safest option."

"I thought you said they were retired."

"They are. Like I said, they agreed to help. Your father must've trusted them enough to use their name."

I slapped the passports down. "I'm not Ella Strawberry. They would never change our names. You have no idea how important the Stefanopoulos name is to my family. Especially to my dad." My tone jumped upward. "You can't name me Strawberry. That's not right."

Mike shifted in his seat. "Sorry, kid, it's the best we have to offer. It could be much worse, but here is a lifeboat for you. You can blend in and pass yourself off as their grandkid."

"Don't call me kid. I'm fifteen years old." Heat simmered low like lava, waiting to explode. Mike opened his mouth, but Julie shot him a look, and he stopped talking.

Julie touched my arm, but I yanked away.

"Strawberry?" My trembling hands tried to gather the documents in my lap, but half of them slipped to the floor around my feet. "My name is Elliana Angelique Stefanopoulos. I'm named after my mother. My parents are Angelique and Dimitri Stefanopoulos. My last name is Stefanopoulos."

I tried to calm myself, but everything closed in on me—trapped on a small plane with nothing except a few pitiful clothes and my dog. In my hand was a blank, non-smart cell phone. No more parents. No more friends. No more pets except for Rusty. And a new ID. I wasn't even a Stefanopoulos anymore. And apparently, I had fake grandparents.

Rusty nudged his nose under my hand. I stroked his head. "What about my other pets?"

"We're working on it," Julie said.

I reached down to collect all the documents and put them back in the envelope. I picked up the credit card. The embossed name read *Ella Strawberry*.

"There's one thousand dollars on that credit card," Mike

said. "That should hold you over for a while but let Dick and Marge know if there's anything you need."

"How long do I have to stay there?"

"I can't answer that right now," Julie said.

One thousand dollars. A new life and a thousand bucks. I squeezed my fist around the piece of plastic that might be my only way out.

"I'm going to wash my face." I coaxed Rusty to sit in the seat next to me, grabbed my backpack, and went into the small bathroom. I turned the water on and leaned over the miniature sink. A collection of disposable travel packs with toothbrushes, toothpaste, and a small cheap comb spread along a narrow countertop. I helped myself to everything but the comb, which was useless. I ran my fingers through my tangled, long, dark brown waves. I was a mess. My eyes were red and puffy. Normally, I used a little makeup like my mother had taught me, but I didn't have any with me. Anyway, it seemed unimportant now.

"My name is Elliana." I spoke aloud to the mirror. The school uniform in the backpack caught my eye. A few days ago, I'd have been happy to ditch the uniform. But now I'd give anything to go to school like normal. I shook the clothes out. When I returned to my seat, both Mike and Julie looked at me, but they didn't say anything. The tartan skirt, white dress shirt, and navy cardigan made me feel more like myself. And the aqua Converse helped.

After several hours, the plane landed. We descended the stairs and walked to another car on the tarmac. The frigid air swiped my bare legs. Those tights would have been useful about now.

"Rusty needs to walk," I said as the car pulled away.

"We'll find a spot." Mike grumbled.

After a quick detour for Rusty's sake, we drove for an

hour. Mike searched the radio and landed on a sports station. Julie offered turkey and Swiss sandwiches with no condiments, but my stomach knotted at the sight of food. Finally, we passed a sign. *Welcome to Kentucky.* My breath shortened, and my words came out seething. "I don't know anyone in Kentucky. This place looks awful. I don't see water anywhere. Who would even live here?"

"Trust me, there's water," Mike said from the driver's seat.

"This looks terrible. You can't keep me here. I'm going back home as soon as possible. With my real name."

"I hope you're right," Julie said without conviction.

We drove away from Kentucky's version of civilization and entered vast prairie lands, brown and dry from winter. Nothing like Long Beach where everything stayed green year-round. We crossed two bridges. Okay, so there was water. But not the ocean. A sign displayed *Land Between the Lakes*. What was this place? We went deeper into rolling, forested hills, and the highway became a winding road with single lanes in each direction. The dense foliage made it impossible to see past the trees in any direction even though many of them had already lost their leaves from the colder season.

A good place to hide.

Agent Julie's phone pinged with a text message. She gave me a gentle smile. "Ella, I have one piece of good news. Your friend Angela has your pets."

I sighed in relief, ignoring the fact that she used my fake name. "They know Angela. Thanks, Julie."

"Apparently, the parrot is quite sassy."

My lips actually turned upward for the first time in three days. No telling what words would come out of Piper. A hollow grief spread through me. When would I see Piper again? Hopefully, he would be okay. Parrots didn't do well

without their owners. But Piper knew Angela well. That brought me some comfort.

Julie inhaled. "For what it's worth, you're a lucky girl."

"How can you say that? I'm not lucky."

"You could have been on that boat. Someone up there must be looking out for you. There's a reason you're here."

"How is this looking out for me?"

Agent Julie shook her head. "You're alive. You have a purpose, Ella."

"My name is Elliana."

"For now, you're Ella. Your new home is nice. Right on Lake Barkley. Dick and Marge will take care of you. As long as you follow the rules, you'll be safe."

Helplessness crippled my ability to think straight. I wasn't Ella. No matter what Julie said, they couldn't force that name on me . . . and they couldn't make me stay here. But I had to go along with things. At least until I figured out what to do. Something inside told me to take time to mourn. What were all those stages again? Pretty sure I was in the anger stage right now. I *was* mourning. Deeply. My parents were gone. But I needed time to myself to process all this.

We pulled off the main road onto a narrow, paved lane which headed straight into the woods. The road curved around about a quarter mile, passing decrepit structures overrun with weeds. The asphalt turned into gravel and split into a fork. We turned left.

"That way goes straight down to the lake." Mike pointed as if giving us important information.

Glimpses of shining water broke through the trees as the SUV wound its way around a pebbled driveway and stopped. Silence hung thick when Mike turned off the engine. I peeked through the windows. Tucked in the forest stood a modest one-and-a-half-story wood-planked house with tall glass

across the front, facing the lake. A covered porch stretched the length of the house, and a red porch swing hung from chains beneath the awning.

"Here we are," Mike said. "You'll be safe here. No one can even see this place unless they know exactly where to go."

"You ready?" Agent Julie asked as I hugged Rusty.

"How will I know when I can go home?"

"Dick and Marge will let you know. They're your contacts now."

"Will I see you again?"

Julie's expression softened. "No, probably not. But Dick and Marge are really good people. You'll see. They'll help you through this. I promise."

Julie seemed to care. Despite my resentment at my plight, my mother's etiquette kicked in. "Thank you, Julie, for helping me."

She gave me a sincere, close-lipped smile. "It doesn't feel like it now, but you'll be okay."

I opened my car door and inched out, taking in my new surroundings. The home sat on a spacious grassy lot with a garage and another outbuilding. The property extended about thirty yards before descending to the water's edge. The surrounding greenery rose up and over the house like a fortress of trees and branches around the house, forming a tight canopy overhead that allowed only small hints of sky. I lowered Rusty to the ground while keeping the leash strapped around my wrist. This was a different world.

The view of the lake was like a painting, framed with trees so closely packed that they seemed to grow out of each other, their branches reaching out low enough to brush the water. The sun-kissed horizon burned against the surface, creating a bright, mirror-like finish that reflected the movement of a white heron as it floated low over the shallows. Under other

circumstances, this place would be awesome. But somehow I couldn't feel the beauty of it. The serene perfection was out of my reach—disconnected by the aching hole in my heart.

The front door opened, and two older but energetic individuals hurried to greet us. Time to meet my fake grandparents.

I blew out my cheeks, lifted my chin, grabbed the Lululemon with the rabbit's foot attached, and stepped around the car. I would stay here for now—but only until I figured out how to get back to my real home.

CHAPTER 3

Richard and Margaret Strawberry gave me the choice of a downstairs bedroom with two twin beds or the attic loft. The bedroom was closer to the guest bathroom, but the loft space spanned the entire cabin lengthwise and had large dormer windows looking out into the woods. It felt more private. I needed that. I chose the loft.

The only downside was that it required climbing several rectangular pieces of wood attached to a wall at the end of the main hallway. It was like climbing into a tree house. A little difficult while holding Rusty, but I made it work. A half-wall with a ledge enclosed the loft facing the front half of the house. If I stood on tiptoe, I could peek over the ledge into the entryway, with partial views of the kitchen, the dining room, and living room.

If only Angela was here. She'd love this room. The tall ceiling slanted upwards to the center A-frame roof. The furniture consisted of a double bed, an old dresser with matching armoire, and a desk with a wooden chair. The wood planked floor featured a massive plush rug with a swirled aqua design. Okay, I did like the rug.

My new room—actually the whole place—smelled of earthy cedar and burnt logs from a central fireplace which

divided the dining room and the living room. From my loft, I could reach out and touch the brick chimney which rose through the center of the cabin. As I walked slowly around my new space, a sharp pang stabbed right through my heart. The top of a huge Christmas tree was visible at the far corner of the ceiling. The lights shone on the ornaments and reflections twinkled against the glass panes. I'd forgotten about Christmas. What day was it?

I hung my precious backpack on a large hook in the center post, trailing my fingers along the silky rabbit's foot. I missed Mom. I changed into jeans and the sweatshirt she had packed for me. I cautiously climbed back down the wall rungs with Rusty flopped over my shoulder. Once my feet were on the floor, he wiggled out of my grasp and took off to sniff around. I sat on a stool at the counter facing the kitchen where Margaret made toasted cheese and stirred a pot of soup. "Thanks for the room, Mrs. Straw—" I couldn't get the word out.

She looked up and smiled at me warmly with her gray-blue eyes. "Call me Marge. How are you, sweetheart?"

"What day is it? Christmas?"

Marge's eyes flickered. "Tomorrow, dear. Today is Christmas Eve."

My sense of time was gone. "Oh."

"Oh, dear. I can't imagine what you've been through. Please, I want you to make this your home. We're happy to have you."

"Thanks." Random country décor filled the square kitchen with no defined color scheme. It wasn't like ours—modern and white. Large windows offered an unobstructed view of the lake while at the sink, and there was a corner view of the driveway that curved around to the front. A narrow shelf

dressed the tops of the windows and displayed a crowded collection of mismatched knickknacks and antique bottles.

Marge opened a wood cabinet and retrieved three soup mugs. She spoke again. "Rusty seems like a good dog."

"He is. I promise. He hardly ever barks unless something's wrong. And he never has an accident."

Marge's smile put me at ease. "I'm glad you were able to bring him."

"I have other pets too. The agents wouldn't let me go back to my house. But now they're with my friend Angela."

"You like animals?"

I nodded and looked around, crossing my arms to hug myself. I rocked my upper body on the bar stool. "It's colder here."

"It certainly is. You can use one of my coats until we find you one. We'll go next week to buy you more clothes. Here. This'll warm you up." She set a large mug and spoon in front of me. "My, you're a skinny one. You probably haven't eaten much."

"Not really."

"We'll get you feeling better in no time." She looked directly into my eyes as I picked up the spoon. She nodded to encourage me to eat. Her kind smile reached her inviting eyes. Light and dark streaked her full gray hair which fell to her shoulders in soft neat spirals. She wore a bit of makeup with coral tinted lips. Although older than my mom, Marge looked amazing for a grandmother.

The steam from the chicken soup hit my nose. My stomach growled. I took a spoonful. "Thanks. This is good." A knot formed in my throat, and my voice choked. I blinked hard.

"That's alright, dear," Marge reached across the counter and patted my hand. "It will take some time to adjust to

everything." Her eyes brimmed. Could she really care? She didn't even know me, but her warmth drew me in.

"You have a great Christmas tree," I managed to say after recovering my composure.

"Tomorrow you can help me cook if you like. It'll just be the three of us, but I like to make things special."

"I don't know how to cook." The words from my mouth sounded pitiful. I really was helpless.

Marge's eyebrows lifted. "No experience necessary. I'll show you how to baste a great ham. You like ham?" She came around to sit on the stool next to me with her own bowl of soup. The view of the lake through the windows caught my attention. Shades of orange from the sunset danced across the lapping water.

"My mother never let us eat ham."

"Hmmm. Well, we're all about the hams out here. Maybe you'll like it."

I shrugged. "I guess I'm an orphan."

"Don't worry about that right now, dear. For now, you have us. We'll take things a day at a time. Together."

I hid my hands under the counter, picking at my cuticles. "I'm going to be sixteen in two weeks. I'm supposed to get my driver's license, but they took my permit."

"Oh, sweetheart. Dick will know what to do, okay?"

I jumped when the front door opened. Chimes from a dangling door harp sounded, followed by bustling near a tall, heavy iron coat tree. A minute later, Richard Strawberry—the one they called Dick—appeared in the entry between the dining room and the kitchen. His heavy, combat-style boots thudded as he crossed to the refrigerator. He was tall, broad shouldered, and trim. He wore a long-sleeved, untucked black tee.

"Good evening, ladies," he said as he found a can of Diet

Coke. He grabbed a toasted cheese off the plate before pulling out another stool at the end of the bar counter. When he sat, a black holstered handgun peeped out from his belt before he pulled the edge of his shirt back down.

I froze for a second. "Are you a cop?"

He popped the can. "No. But I was."

"Why do you still wear a gun?"

"It's what I do." He eyed me as he ate half the sandwich in one bite. "I worked with the Secret Service before the U.S. Marshals. Now I'm retired, but I help out with things from time to time." He spoke in a direct tone. His sharp blue eyes defied the age of his weathered face. His white hair was buzzed into a tight military cut.

"Like what things?"

He took a long drink and pointed at me with the end of the soda can. "Like you, for instance."

"Me?"

"My job is to protect you. Trust me. No one is going to find out about you—and if they do—which they won't—but, if they do, they won't get anywhere near you."

"But if you're retired, why did they send me here?"

Dick's expression softened. "I'm doing a friend a favor. Plus, they needed to find a place for you which was safely away from Long Beach." He pushed the remaining toasted cheese into his mouth and took another sip.

"They said you knew my father."

Dick nodded. "Yep. We went to college together a long time ago. The Army recruited me into a special ops program, and your father went on to work in his family's business. But we kept in touch. He helped my family out during a tough time while I was in Afghanistan. We've had each other's back when needed."

This was news to me. My father hadn't told me anything

about college friends. What else did Dick know? "Do you know what happened to my parents?"

"Only as much as Agent Julie has told me so far."

I set down my soup spoon. "They gave me all these new IDs with your last name on them. They said my parents had already worked things out. Like they were planning on changing our identities and running away."

Dick leaned toward me. "Julie told me that, too, but that was a surprise. I didn't know about any of this until two days ago. Whatever your father had planned, he never reached out to me about it. But those IDs tell me he'd obviously planned on using our connection to help your family. And that's what I'll do. He's done the same for me in the past."

I nodded. "He would be grateful . . . and I am too . . . I just wish I knew what's going on. On Friday, I planned to go to school like normal. Today I'm an orphan in a strange house in Kentucky. They told me I couldn't talk to my friends. And I have to use a different name."

Marge stood, took my empty soup mug, and replaced it with a sandwich. "It must be so confusing for you."

Dick looked straight into my eyes without blinking. "This thing is up in the air right now. I don't have all the answers. But my job is to keep you safe. So, let's make a deal. I'll tell what I know if you promise to do your part and not be . . . unsafe. If you know what I mean."

My nerves tingled under my skin, uncertain about what would come next. "What do you mean?"

"Meaning—you must do what we say. Follow the rules. As far as I'm concerned, you're here for witness protection, and that means I'm out of retirement. But that only works as long as the witness complies with the program."

His heavy words hung in the air. I gulped. "What am I a witness to?"

"Your parents' business dealings. Your Uncle Tommy. Things you may not even realize yet." Dick's locked eye contact made me squirm. He gave no expression, just stated the list of facts.

I broke off a corner of the sandwich and reached down to let Rusty take it from my fingers. I nudged the sandwich plate away from me. "I get it. I promise to obey the rules. Please, Mr. Strawberry. Please tell me what's going on."

"For starters, call us Dick and Marge. Or Granny and Gramps for all I care. You're supposed to be our granddaughter. We can't have people asking questions in public. It's a small town. Everyone will be curious. My story has to be our story. You understand?"

I swallowed but nodded.

"Call us whatever makes you comfortable, dear." Marge came back and gently patted my arm. She'd probably give good hugs, and suddenly I wanted one. My eyes watered.

"The story is that you're our granddaughter from a past relationship between my son and a woman in college. Your mother died, and we agreed to take care of you until extended family can make arrangements for you."

I swallowed. I dropped my gaze from Dick's intense eyes. My brain reeled.

"Repeat the story."

I paused.

"Look at me."

I obeyed.

"Repeat what I said. Our story."

I took a shaky breath. "I'm your granddaughter from an old relationship your son had in college. My mother died, and I needed a place to stay while the rest of the family figures things out."

"Good. That's all you need to say."

"When am I going back home?"

"Don't know yet. The FBI has to finish their investigation."

"But I have to be back in time for second semester. And I need my pets. I gotta get home."

Dick set his Diet Coke on the counter. He wiped his mouth with a napkin. Something about his hesitation made me suspicious.

My foot bounced on the rung of the bar stool. "What are you not telling me?" I knew my voice intensified, but I couldn't help it. "I have school. In two weeks. With my friends in Long Beach."

Dick shook his head. "There's a lot to this. Julie said they would vet some of your family members to find an alternative place for you, but I don't know when that'll happen—it certainly won't be in two weeks. With the explosion and securing your safety, it's kinda low on the priority list."

"*Low* on the priority list? I'm low on the priority list?" A rush of heat swept my face. "I'm going back home, right?"

"Look, Ella—"

I was adamant. "My name is Elliana!"

"Not anymore, Ella." Dick kept an even tone.

"Elliana!"

"Ella."

"Stop calling me that!" I vaulted to my feet, causing the stool to rock backward and hit the floor. I didn't pick it up.

Dick crossed his arms with a calm demeanor. "While you are here, you are Ella. It's for your protection."

"Agh! I'm fifteen years old."

"Exactly."

My fists tightened, and my chest puffed out. "What, you think I'm not old enough to understand? I'm not a baby."

"You're not old enough to take care of yourself."

His controlled temperament inflamed me more. I glanced at Marge. She looked sympathetic but didn't interfere.

My words came out louder than necessary. "I'm old enough to understand my parents were blown out of Long Beach Harbor. I think that qualifies me to know what's going on."

Marge glanced sideways at Dick. She got up to fiddle with an electric water kettle.

Dick pushed himself away from the counter and stood up. "Hmmm. Okay, Ella. I'll give you that. This thing will grow you up pretty quick."

"You think?" So what if I was being sassy? What could anyone do about it?

Marge handed me a warm cup with a teabag tag hanging off the side. "Sit, dear. Chamomile. It'll help relax you."

I planted both my feet. "I don't need tea. I need the truth."

"Would you like tea, Dick?" Marge motioned to him with her head.

As if in response to a secret code, Dick stood up. "I'll have a soda." He retrieved another can for himself. "Let's go sit in the living room. I'll tell you what I know, but you have to promise to blend in here in Havenwood. You're Ella, okay? You stick to the story. Pretend you belong. Got it?"

Marge took her own tea mug, lifted her eyebrows at me, and cocked her head toward the living room. I begrudgingly complied if only to get Dick to tell me more.