

# ONE

“Thank you for meeting with me.”

Zara lowered into the seat that Julian Scanlon held out for her. His invitation to join him for a drink in Purdy’s had been unexpected. But once he made it clear the offer wasn’t social, she couldn’t refuse. Raising her eyes, she scanned the space that had once been so familiar to her. She hadn’t been here since the raid where she’d killed a man.

Purdy’s was bustling again, alive with the upper tiers of management from the surrounding business district as if the night they’d all been attacked here didn’t happen. The robbery hadn’t deterred patrons. Its location had always been convenient for the major businesses that occupied the blocks around it. The fact that there was some danger attached to the establishment probably helped reinvigorate trade. The rich and gorgeous could walk on the wild side without venturing out of their preferred zip code.

Elvis had blasted holes in the ceiling with his automatic weapon. But the scars of the night that changed her had been patched. All new furniture had been brought in since that fateful night. The owners obviously took the trauma and used it as an excuse to remodel.

Despite all of the changes, the room still felt familiar. In the countless times she’d sat here, reminding herself of how far she’d come since walking out of her father’s house against his wishes, she would never have been able to project who she’d become.

Taking in a breath while Julian seated himself opposite her, Zara adjusted her focus to look past the CI lawyer to the bar. A major reason for her comfort and familiarity was there on a stool, hunched over a beer. As soon as she told Brodie that she was meeting Julian here, he began to make plans as though this was a full-on Kindred op. She had to remind her love that she’d only been on one date with Julian in the past and it had been a bust, so he didn’t need to wage war.

He’d still grumbled his displeasure and refused to let her come alone. So he was observing from not too far away. Given what had happened the last time she was here, Zara wasn’t averse to having backup on hand. She wouldn’t want to take action without her chief’s direction like she had to the last time.

Brodie had been in a bleak place when she’d pulled the trigger and taken her first life. By choosing to be with her tonight, she guessed he was trying to make up for not being around to execute Elvis for her.

Julian cleared his throat and the tension in his body intrigued her, though not enough to ask what was bugging him. That much became apparent when he spoke in a slow, deep tone. “First of all, I’d like to extend my condolences. Losing Mr. McCormack, it was a... a shock to us all.”

He didn’t have the slightest idea how they’d lost Grant. Only those present in Sutcliffe’s kitchen when the lethal shot was delivered knew the truth. “Yes,” she said, examining the grain of the wood beneath her glass.

It had shocked her to find out just how easy it was to obtain a death certificate, even without a genuine body. But when your boyfriend was an assassin, he knew how to handle these things. Brodie’s initial concern hadn’t been explaining where his older brother was. The Kindred were deep in their own

project of trying to decipher who Benedict Leatt was connected to. But questions were being asked, mostly of her, so she had to become vocal to the point of nagging when highlighting to her colleagues that when rich CEOs went missing, people noticed.

So, when one of Grant McCormack's cars was found burned out after a tragic road accident and the dental records of the single corpse in the car were found to match the CEO, a death certificate was issued.

Brodie had covered their bases, the Kindred knew how to conceal death and misdirect, even if they didn't usually work on the scale of someone as well-known as Grant McCormack. Zara had never questioned Brodie about the people he'd assassinated, meaning she couldn't be sure about how far the Kindred had gone to protect themselves or cover their tracks.

The pity in Julian's countenance was disconcerting. She wasn't Grant's widow, but as far as anyone in CI knew, she was closer to Grant than anyone else. "His lawyers are tracing his relatives," he said. "Cormack Industries is at an impasse. Grant held the controlling stock of the company and that will be passed to his next of kin. Until we know who that is and what they plan to do with the firm, decision making is difficult."

Grant's death had just been announced at the start of the week, though it had been three weeks since he took the bullet that killed him. She hadn't been back to CI because she and the Kindred were still basing themselves in New York. Zara knew enough of the process and the people to understand that CI would be in disarray while the lawyers tried to fish their heads from their asses.

Brodie shunned every mention of CI, but he wouldn't be able to avoid it forever. He was the last of the McCormack line. Grant had no wife and no kids, their parents were long gone. Brodie was going to inherit his father's company, whether he wanted to or not. That would mean talking to lawyers and learning how to handle business—fast.

"Yes," she said, peering at him. While everything he was saying was true, she wasn't sure what she was expected to do about it. No one knew about her personal relationship with the younger McCormack brother, who no one in the business or the media had seen or heard from in decades. "But I don't understand what that has to do with—"

"The board asked me to approach you because we had a personal relationship," he said with a furrowed brow.

A personal relationship that lasted as long as it took her to make her excuses and leave him on a street corner not too far from here. "Approach me about what?"

"You know Grant's office better than anyone. No one can even get into the room."

Her and Grant's fingerprints were the only two that were authorized to open his office door, though IT could probably find a way to override that. Tuck, Kindred's hacker, would be able to do it. It had to be a show of respect that they hadn't gone snooping yet.

But his statement brought this meeting into focus. CI wasn't expecting her to trace Brodie, they were expecting her to hold down the fort, which given its current state of uncertainty would be a hefty task for anyone to achieve alone. She was experienced in running Grant's office, but she wasn't superhuman.

"Are you asking me to come back?"

As far as Julian and the others there were concerned, she had never left her job at CI. Except without Grant, she had no role there, no reason to return. After Art's death, she had resumed her duties as Premium Personnel Coordinator as a way to monitor Grant. Now that he'd been eliminated as a threat, she had no further mission at CI.

Although, if Brodie ended up in Grant's position, she would have to guide him through dealing with day-to-day life as a CEO. Somehow, she couldn't picture her love in the grand executive chair in Grant's immaculate office that had once been his father's.

Brodie wouldn't like not being able to take Maverick into meetings, and he had zero interest in platitudes. His talent for small talk and polite civilities was nil. Being that he didn't like people, he would struggle to deal with them every day without the constant risk of a potential body count hovering over them.

It was obvious that Julian was uncomfortable tonight. His expression shifted from a frown to something more solemn and then it became sterner. Any speculation there had been about her relationship with Grant must have intensified in recent days. She and he were both away from CI at the same time, and the nature of their relationship had slid into a grey area since Brodie had come into her life.

The introduction of Brodie led to her and Grant broaching more sensitive personal topics and their conversations were often fraught and emotional. It wouldn't surprise Zara if the volatile nature of their encounters hadn't been noticed by staff.

"Yes," Julian said. "Once the lawyers locate the beneficiaries of Grant's will, there could be a shakeup. I don't know what will happen. But we will need a strong hand to steer the ship. All of Grant's staff are used to reporting to you. I know they would appreciate it if you were around to lead them again."

Managing the CI giant from behind a PA's desk wouldn't be possible. But having been with the company for more than five years, she knew its quirks, knew some of Grant's secrets about how to keep the business running without a hitch. Turning off her loyalty to the place wasn't simple, and she had wondered about the corporation's prospects without Grant at its helm.

Adjusting her focus, Julian blurred when she peered beyond him and made eye contact with Brodie, who was managing to watch their table without watching. The patrons in this bar were too enamored with themselves to notice that she wasn't paying attention to the man at her table.

The brute at the bar wearing worn Levi's and a leather jacket didn't fit in the picture of eloquence that surrounded him. The stark difference between him and his environment made her speculate about how much he'd stick out if he marched into a CI board meeting. His appearance would be jarring enough, but his words and attitude would probably lead to the requirement for smelling salts.

Sighing, she sipped her wine. Julian was uncomfortable enough that he was happy to stare into his glass, giving her time to think. Brodie would hate being stuck in an office. He knew nothing about business and would have no inclination to learn. Thus far, he'd avoided discussing the future of CI. It had taken her long enough to spur an explanation for Grant's sudden disappearance. Next, she would have to coax him into talking about the family firm.

"Let me think about it," she said. "I don't know how I'll feel about being there, working there, without Grant right next door, you know?"

And that was the truth, so it didn't take much effort to sell it. Grant had been her boss for more than five years. She'd gone through the full spectrum of experience with him, from simple boss and employee to friend to enemy. Processing his death took its toll on her because she wasn't sure if she was happy or sad that he was gone. She didn't want anyone around who might be a threat to her, Brodie, and the Kindred. But in the end, Grant was a sad, misguided man, full of rage and regret. She pitied him as much as she hated him.

"Of course," Julian said and was surprised when she stood up. "Would you like another drink?"

More than half of her wine was still in the glass on the table. She shook her head and picked up her jacket from where she'd laid it over the back of the chair. "No, thank you. Being here"—she lifted her chin to scan the space—"It's bringing back too many memories."

They said goodnight and that included a kiss on the cheek, which she'd have to soothe Brodie about when they got home. But she slipped out of Purdy's and began to walk down the block. She didn't have to turn around to know that Brodie would have departed Purdy's after her. They had a rendezvous point a couple of blocks over; he'd be following behind probably at a considerable distance.

Knowing that her love was stalking her made her smile as she swept her jacket around her shoulders and zipped it up. The fitted leather number hugged her waist and laced at the lower back and it was just perfect for tearing around on Brodie's bike with him. She couldn't turn, that would make their association obvious, but she was prickling all over. Emphasizing the sway of her hips, she expected that Brodie would be watching her ass—literally.

Having her own personal bodyguard and guardian angel relaxed her about walking on this street. She'd been attacked at CI, which wasn't far away, and she was just about to reach the corner where Tim Sutcliffe had died. She'd come so far since that night when she'd cowered in an alley fearing for her life. Brodie had been the one to take the shot, and she knew now that she'd never been in danger, but that didn't soften the memory of her visceral distress.

It had been real at the time, and its draining power was the reason she'd had no fight left when she came home to find Brodie in her bedroom. Thinking back to their dramatic roots, she knew she'd live every minute of her terror over again if she had to, because in the process of it all she'd managed to capture Brodie's love, making every emotional experience worth it.

Cutting across one street, she got into the alley where Brodie's bike was secreted and hurried to traverse the length of it. The heels of her boots clicked as she walked, echoing through the narrow space. But she didn't hear Brodie. He had to be there and his footwear was heavier than hers, yet he moved in stealth mode.

A prickling chill zipped up her spine and she shivered. They were alone here, in this private space, and a dangerous predator was on her tail. She didn't feel his approach, but a heavy hand clamped over her mouth. She was dragged sideways and spun around to be thrust against the wall.

"You let him kiss you," Brodie hissed, wiping her cheek with the back of his hand. "That slimy, good for nothing—"

"He wants me to go back to CI," she said, flattening her hands on the cool leather over his chest. Brodie pushed his body into hers. "I know. I heard."

Another concession she'd had to make was giving him an earpiece so he could listen in to what was going on at the table. Putting on Brodie's mother's pendant, which now had a Kindred camera hidden in it, was becoming part of her normal dressing routine.

"I think I'll have to do it," she said.

There was no space for her hands on his torso when he compelled more of his weight onto her. The coarse, freezing concrete at her back cooled her neck and caught her hair. But she'd learned to like it rough.

"We'll talk about it later," he said, crouching to kiss the side of her neck.

Talking about it later was Brodie's go-to place when it came to anything family or CI related. She'd heard that from him a lot when she was trying to get him to talk about Grant. But if she tried to push a conversation onto him that he was done with, he'd force her to forget it in his own lustful way.

"Can we go home?" she asked, scratching her fingers through his hair. "It's cold."

He took her hand and pulled her away from the wall and over to his bike. He helped her on, got the engine started, and then they were on the road to McCormack Manor.