


THE
BELLIAL
STONE



R.D. BRADY

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by
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"They elevated me aloft to heaven.
I proceeded until I arrived
at a wall built with stones of crystal."

Book of Enoch, 14: 9-10

*Two Years Ago
Havre, Montana*

Kenny Coleman's dirt drive was doing a number on the Mercedes. It dipped and dived with the bumps. Watching, Kenny's stomach felt like it was doing the same. The last time he'd been this nervous, it was proposing to his Mary.

"It's just a professor. No big deal," he muttered to himself. The butterflies in his stomach, however, ignored him, continuing their maniacal flying.

The Mercedes finally rolled to a stop in a cloud of dust in front of his porch. His old Australian shepherd came to attention, and emitted a low growl.

Surprised, Kenny reached down from his rocking chair, patting him on the head. "Hush now, Blue."

The dog quieted. But as the car door opened, he growled again. Kenny could feel the dog's body tense. He grabbed hold of his collar. When the driver stepped into view, Blue emitted a feral snarl and lunged for the steps, nearly yanking Kenny's arm off.

He struggled to hold him back. "No, Blue, no!"

While Kenny might be pushing sixty-five, his life as a cattleman had given him muscle. He wrapped his beefy arms around the dog's torso, carrying him back to the house, ignoring the sting as claws raked his forearms.

Kicking open the front door, he half-shoved, half-threw the dog across the threshold, slamming the door shut behind him.

Kenny stepped back, gaping at the door as Blue slammed his body into it, again and again.

He shook his head, unable to believe what he was seeing. Angry red welts crisscrossed his forearms. This was an animal who'd let his grandkids flop on him while they watched cartoons. In the twelve years he'd had him, he'd barely heard him growl.

With a deep breath, he pushed his concerns for his dog's uncharacteristic behavior to the back of his mind. He felt the professor's eyes on his back and felt the flush creep up his neck. Damn. This was not the first impression he'd wanted to make.

Rolling down his green flannel sleeves, he walked down the stairs and across the expanse in front of his farmhouse.

"I'm sorry, Professor Gideon," he stammered out. "He's never like that. I don't know what got into him."

"No harm done, Mr. Coleman. I appreciate you taking the time to show me your find." A polite smile graced the blond professor's angular face, but that politeness didn't quite reach his cool blue eyes.

Back in the day, Kenny knew he was considered a handsome man. Strong and tall with thick, dark hair, which the girls had loved to run their hands through. And in spite of his full head of now-white hair, he was vain enough to think he still was.

But he knew this professor was what currently stood for handsome. Slim, with pale blue eyes perched above a patrician nose and sharp cheekbones. Dressed in expensive slacks, a brown suede jacket, and shiny loafers, he was one of those "metrosexuals" his daughter talked about.

Can't say he ever really understood the appeal of a man who was pretty, but hell, he never did

understand much about what was cool.

~~Extending his calloused hand, he spoke a little louder than usual, trying to block out Blue's~~ unending barks. "I'd really like to know what I've found. I just can't figure what something like that is doing on my ranch."

The professor's hand was soft, the shake just shy of limp. "Well, let's take a look. How did you come across it?"

"It was the strangest thing. I was looking for a stray calf one day, and I literally stumbled over the tip of it."

"How much was showing at first?"

Kenny shrugged. "Not much. Maybe four, five inches. It was just such a strange-looking rock, all black with those brown and green veins running through it. I'd never seen one like that anywhere around these parts. So, I marked the spot and went back later to dig it out. I couldn't believe it when I saw it. I took some pictures and posted them online to see if anyone could tell me anything about it. Less than an hour later, I got a call from you."

"Have you spoken with anyone else about it?"

"No. I wasn't sure it was anything important." He avoided the professor's eyes. And I didn't want to look like some old fool grasping at straws.

"And no one else has called?" Gideon's gaze was intent.

"No, no. You're the only one. I thought for sure I'd get a couple more people interested. But my pictures disappeared from the site I posted them on and I couldn't re-post them." He shook his head. "I'm not real good with the computer. It really is an amazing sight, though."

"Well, let's have a look, shall we?" Gideon gestured for him to lead the way.

Kenny hesitated, unsure. He glanced back at the house, where Blue's growls had turned to desperate howls. Blue just didn't act like this. Maybe this was a bad idea.

But he knew the medical bills for his grandson were piling up. This strange rock might be his only chance of making some extra money. He sighed. There really was no choice. He nodded and led the professor towards the northwest.

They followed a trail created by wild horses and buffalo generations ago. Kenny tried making conversation. He talked about the Sioux and the Crow that used to summer in the area and pointed out where he had hunted for arrowheads as a kid. The professor only grunted in response.

Small talk about the weather and questions about the professor's research resulted in equally unenthusiastic responses. Soon, Kenny just lapsed into silence.

For the first time Kenny could recall, he felt the isolation of his ranch press down on him. He knew there was no one around for miles. Montana was the size of New England, with only the population of Rhode Island. Generally, the isolation of his ranch was the reason he loved it. But walking next to the professor, he couldn't help but feel uneasy.

It wasn't just Blue's reaction, which, to be honest, scared the hell out of him. It was like the dog had seen the devil himself. It was also that this man looked nothing like a professor. He was too young, too good-looking, and too well dressed.

And there was something about him that just felt off. The man had barely spared a glance at the snow-topped mountains that were a backdrop to Kenny's property. He'd never had anyone come to the ranch that hadn't commented on that incredible view.

Walking next to him, Kenny was reminded of the time when, as a kid, he'd been stalked by a mountain lion. He'd had a vague sense of uneasiness that day. But until the cat screeched as it leapt at him, he hadn't realized the true danger he was in. That day, his dad had cut the lion in half with a shotgun. Kenny gave the professor another surreptitious glance and couldn't help wishing he'd brought his shotgun along today.

“Are we getting close?” Gideon asked.

~~Startled, Kenny stumbled. Shaking his head at his clumsiness, he pointed to an arrangement of~~ three small boulders twenty yards away that stood out in the flat, almost treeless ground. “Just beyond those boulders is where I started digging. I still haven’t been able to get to the bottom of the rock.”

Gideon nodded and picked up his pace. As he passed the boulders, he came to an abrupt stop and stared at the small excavation.

The monolith stood five feet tall, although it was obvious there was still more buried beneath the earth. At first glance, the obelisk appeared smooth. Kenny's first thought had been that it looked like one of those fancy granite counter tops. On closer inspection, though, the niches carefully carved into the black stone depicting figures and what resembled Egyptian hieroglyphs became clear.

Seconds stretched into minutes as the professor simply stared at the rock in silence. Kenny’s nervousness increased. “Uh, Professor Gideon, are you all right?”

Gideon eyes snapped to Kenny. Kenny took a step back from the man.

But when Gideon spoke, his voice was calm. “It’s an amazing sight, isn’t it? Would it be all right if I went closer?”

The professor’s words reduced Kenny’s fears, making him feel foolish. What the hell was wrong with him today? The man was just a professor interested in his find.

“Sure, sure. After all, you’re the expert.”

Kenny watched the professor gracefully leap into the hole. He reverently touched the stone, tracing some of the carvings with his index finger. “Finally,” he murmured.

After a few moments of internal debate, Kenny’s curiosity won out over his uneasiness. He clambered down to stand next to the man. “So, any idea where it came from? It kind of looks like something you’d expect to find in Egypt or down in Central America or some other ancient place.”

Gideon looked over at Kenny. “Actually, this site predates those other sites by quite a significant margin.”

“Really?” Kenny asked, astonished. “Even older than the pyramids?”

“Yes. Even older than that.” He pointed to a spot on the artifact about three quarters of the way up. “Do you see this mark here?”

Kenny squinted at the etching. “That little circle?”

“Yes. That little circle is something I have been trying to find for an incredibly long time.”

Kenny's eyes shifted to the professor. The man couldn't be any older than twenty-nine. This younger generation seemed to have a different view of time than his generation.

“Hmm,” he murmured. “What is it?”

“Why, it’s the end of the world,” Gideon said with a slow smile.

“What?” He glanced over at Gideon, thinking he must have misunderstood him.

Gideon turned to face him. His smile looked almost lethal and what Kenny had thought were pale blue eyes seemed to have darkened. “You have been very helpful, Mr. Coleman.”

The words were polite, but the tone sent the fears Kenny had been shoving down right back to the surface. The professor pulled a gun from under his suit jacket. Kenny didn’t hesitate. He shoved the professor and scrambled out of the hole.

Kenny looked back over his shoulder, expecting to feel a bullet between his shoulder blades at any minute. Instead, he saw Gideon still in the hole, smiling at him. He was even nodding. Kenny didn’t understand the man’s reaction and he had no interest in figuring it out.

Kenny panted as he sprinted for the house. He didn’t hear the professor behind him. He hoped it stayed that way until he reached one of his guns. He had a shot if he could just get to his truck or the barn. He kept rifles in both of them. That hope kept pushing him forward as his legs turned to jelly, and his breathing to sharp, painful gasps.

His farmhouse came into view and the sound of Blue, still barking, urged him on.

~~Footfalls echoed through the empty space behind him and panic charged through him.~~ He knew he should keep running, looking behind would only slow him down, but he couldn't help himself. Only a hundred yards away, the professor sprinted towards him, his legs moving like train pistons. He didn't even look winded. How had he caught up with him so fast?

Kenny dug down deep for a last reserve of energy, but his body wouldn't comply. He was slowing. Dark spots were beginning to form around the edges of his vision, causing him to stumble and weave.

The professor had no such affliction. Kenny could feel his attention focused on him, the pounding of his feet maintaining their steady cadence. He kept coming, like a missile locked on its target, covering the distance to him in seconds. As he caught up with him, he didn't pull him to stop. To Kenny's astonishment, the professor started to run next to him. He glanced over at the man in terror. Gideon just smiled in response.

Then in a blur of motion, the man sprinted a few feet ahead. He came to a dead stop and whirled to face Kenny.

Kenny tried to dodge around him, but he was too exhausted and too slow. Gideon's hand snaked out and easily grabbed him by the shoulder. Gideon turned him around and pulled him close.

Kenny struggled and managed to throw a feeble right hook at Gideon's ribs.

Gideon smoothly blocked the punch and trapped both of Kenny's arms with one of his own. He leaned down into Kenny's terrified face and smiled, pressing the gun to his chest.

"Good for you, Mr. Coleman. Everyone should have such a sense of self-preservation. You'd be amazed at how few people actually do. And you've given a good effort, especially for a man of your age. You should be proud of yourself."

Kenny wanted to rail at the man. He wanted to scream at him for doing this to him and plead with him to spare his life, if only for the sake of his daughter and grandchildren. But all he managed to rasp out was a single question.

"Why?"

Gideon's voice was almost a caress when he answered. His eyes looked strangely bright, as if covered in a sheen of tears. "It's the only way for my misery to end. You have brought my search to its conclusion, Mr. Coleman. I will always appreciate that." And with a beatific smile, he pulled the trigger three times.

Pain slashed through Kenny, and then, blessed numbness. He felt himself being lifted as the echoes of the gunshots retreated. He thought of his daughter and his heart already beating unsteadily felt even heavier. I'm sorry, sweetheart.

Blue's frantic barking changed to mournful howls as they approached the farmhouse. Run, Blue, run, Kenny shouted in his mind. But the only words that were heard weren't his.

"Don't worry, Blue," Gideon murmured. "I haven't forgotten about you."

Dewitt, NY

Professor Delaney McPhearson glanced at the clock over the kitchen cabinets. She was barely a quarter of the way through the tall stack of undergrad criminology papers in front of her.

“Crap, crap, crap,” she muttered. She needed to move if she was going to make her self-defense class.

“Crap, crap, crap,” Max, her roommate Kati's three-year-old son, said from his spot on the floor. Wincing, she gave Kati an apologetic smile. “Sorry. Forgot he was there.”

Jotting down two more quick remarks, she whisked the papers off the table, placing them next to the larger stack of still-to-be graded ones on the kitchen island.

She knelt down to Max and ruffled his sun-kissed brown hair. “That's a bad word, Max. I shouldn't have said it.”

Max nodded at her, his bright blue eyes, matching the Sesame Street t-shirt he wore, solemn. “Crap bad.”

Laney restrained the urge to smile. “Yes, bad.”

She looked over his head at Kati, who was shaking her head good-naturedly. Kati and Max share the same the soft, brown hair, slim build, and button nose. The only difference was their eye color: Kati's were a deep brown. Kati's hair, now in a short pixie cut, only accentuated the similarities between mother and son.

“You better move if you're going to make your class,” Kati warned.

“I'm going. I'm going.”

With a quick kiss to the top of Max's head, she jogged to the stairs. Taking them two at a time, she ducked into her room, and rummaged through her dresser for her workout clothes.

Pulling off her pajamas, she struggled into the sports bra and yanked on a deep purple t-shirt. Pulling her long, wavy, red hair into a ponytail, she had just slid into the black pants when her cell phone rang.

I have no time for whoever this is, she thought, even as she reached over to her nightstand to check the caller ID. She smiled and flipped the phone open, cradling it to her ear.

“Drew. Where the hell have you been?”

Drew Master's familiar chuckle made Laney smile even wider. She pictured him sitting at his desk, his mop of curly brown hair falling over his deep blue eyes.

Her uncle had always hoped the two of them would turn their platonic friendship into a romantic one. At least, he had hoped it up until she explained that the main stumbling block was their identical taste in men.

“Sorry, Lanes. Work's been insane.”

“See? You're working too hard. You should have taken that position with my uncle.” Laney's uncle, Father Patrick Delaney, was one of the Roman Catholic Church's premier archaeologists. He'd gotten custody of Laney after her parents had died in a car crash when she was eight. As a result, she'd spent almost every summer at one dig site or another since childhood.

Since Laney met Drew freshman year of college, he'd spent every summer with them as well. Even when they went to different doctorate programs, they stayed close. When Drew finished his doctorate, her uncle had offered him a position with one of the Vatican's dig sites. Drew turned him

down. Instead he'd agreed to work with Dr. Arthur Priddle. Not a good call in Laney's opinion, but also not her decision.

"You know I think the world of your uncle. But Arthur's research is much more in line with my own. And, at the time, I thought it would come with fewer strings."

"Not the case, huh?"

Drew snorted. "Hardly. He's been running me ragged. I don't think he understands that we're colleagues and I'm not his grad student. And he's been even more security conscious than usual. The man has taken paranoia to a whole new extreme."

Laney caught her reflection in the mirror, her dark green eyes reflecting her concern. This was like Drew. He wasn't a complainer. He'd spent one summer in Egypt covered in bug bites, in the sweltering heat, with an unknown rash that caused his feet to swell to the point that he'd had to hobble around in sandals two sizes too big. He'd barely mumbled a complaint.

Seeming to sense her worry, he added some bounce into his next words. "I mean, it's intense, but good. Priddle really has a way of looking at things from a new angle and developing an innovative approach."

Laney opened her closet, looking for her gym shoes, and grimaced. "Right. Innovative and without any social skills or conscience."

At Drew's silence, she sighed, realizing she wasn't helping. "Sorry. Ignore that. I just don't like you being so far away. So tell me, how are you doing? Really doing? And no placating."

Drew let out another laugh, this one less good-natured and more nervous. "Okay, maybe things are a little stressful, right now. But you know Priddle, perfection is his goal."

Although his tone was light, Laney heard a heavier emotion under the words. "Drew, is everything okay?"

He hesitated before answering. "I don't know. He's been even crazier than usual lately. We've got this new project we're working on, and he won't let me talk about it with anyone. And I mean anyone."

Leaning down to tie her sneakers, she tried to think of a way to give her thoughts an optimistic spin. "Well, he's not exactly known for his openness. And besides, his research is so esoteric and off the map, it's often dismissed before anyone really gives it a chance. Maybe he's just trying to make sure word doesn't leak out before he can present his entire argument." She paused. "Are you regretting your choice to go work with him?"

"No. I mean, I really think ancient civilizations hold the answers to who we are and where we're going. There's so much out there we can't explain - who built the sphinx, why the older pyramids are more technologically advanced than the newer ones, the maps of Antarctica that pre-date our history. And those are only a few. There are thousands of examples of unexplainable history. Pre-historic civilizations are the only possible answer. And he's the archaeologist doing the most innovative research. So, I don't regret it. I just wish..."

"He was a normal human being?" Laney deadpanned.

Drew barked out a laugh. "Exactly."

Laney didn't disagree with Drew's interest. Before she'd turned to criminology, she'd thought hard about archaeology, for many of the same reasons that Drew had mentioned. According to mainstream archeology, the dawn of civilization began around 3,000 BC. Yet, there were more and more archaeological sites and discoveries of great skill that were being uncovered that pre-dated that arbitrary timeline. The Piri Reis map, the research of Steen-McIntyre, Puma Punku. None of them could be explained by the traditional timeline. She knew why Drew was so passionate about the topic. She just really wished the academic who was top in the field wasn't also such an ass.

She grabbed her exercise bag as she headed down the stairs. "Well, at least I got you to laugh."

And I hate to do this to you, but can I call you later? I'm heading to my self-defense class."

"You still teaching that?"

"Yup. Every Saturday, me and Rocky have a group of anywhere between five and twenty women we take through the paces." Rocky, a.k.a. Detective Rochelle Martinez, was a pint-sized powerhouse. Six months ago, she and Laney had started offering a free women's self-defense class Saturday mornings.

"Maybe that's what I need. Some martial arts. I liked those classes you took me to in undergrad."

Laney smiled. She'd been studying martial arts since she'd been a kid. And she always loved introducing people to the discipline. But Drew, while a gym enthusiast, was not exactly the most coordinated student she had ever taught. "Well, I think exercise is always good," she said diplomatically, as she waved goodbye to Kati and headed outside.

Walking down the porch, she crossed the lawn to her silver Pathfinder. "I really do need to go, though. Can I call you later?"

"Um, yeah. Actually, though, I have a favor to ask."

"Anything."

"Any chance you could read over a paper I've been working on?"

"I thought you weren't allowed to share any of that work," she teased as she threw her bag into the passenger seat.

"I'm not. But I thought maybe if I showed him something that we could send out, it would kind of pave the way for some of the bigger findings we're going to be revealing down the road. Before I give it to him, though, it has to be perfect. I want to make sure there are no glaring errors in the logic or God forbid, a typo. But I really need you to keep this on the down low."

Laney hopped into the driver's seat and hit the speakerphone button on the cell. "Not a problem. I have some papers to grade tonight. I can look at it tomorrow, though, and get some comments back to you by around lunch. Will that work?"

She could practically feel Drew's relief pour through the phone. "That would be incredible."

Putting the truck into reverse, she started to back out of the drive. "What's the paper on, anyway?"

Drew was silent. She waited for a slow-moving Honda to pass and maneuvered out, onto the street. "Drew?"

The sigh was barely audible, but she caught it. "Promise me you'll be open-minded?"

"Of course."

"It's on an ancient technologically-advanced society that existed prior to written history."

Laney slammed on the brakes and stared at her phone, knowing exactly what Drew was trying to avoid saying. "Drew, are you talking about what I think you're talking about?"

"Yes. It's about Atlantis."

Saint Paul, MN

A few stray beer bottles rattled along the street, blown by the wind. Gideon curled his lip in distaste. Neighborhoods like this disgusted him. It was populated almost solely by undergrads, with smattering of graduate students and a few young professors who had not yet made enough money to move to better accommodations.

The houses weren't rundown because of economic shortcomings, but because of neglect. The residents didn't take pride in where they lived.

Although it was late morning, the neighborhood remained quiet. Given the hours traditionally kept by this population, that was not surprising. In fact, Gideon had been counting on it.

He'd watched the couple on the first floor of the prewar-era colonial drive away a few minutes ago. Like most of the houses on the block, this one was broken into two apartments. His target lived on the second floor. He watched the street for another few minutes, noting little activity.

Easing himself out of his car, he straightened his trench coat, pulling up the collar against the slight rain. He crossed the street and tried the front door. Unlocked. He sighed. This was simply too easy. He passed the entrance to the first floor apartment and headed up the stairs.

At the landing, he followed the hallway back to the front of the house. Pausing before the only door, he listened for any sounds from inside. A chair scraped along the floor and someone crossed the room.

He rapped on the door three times, tapping his foot as he waited for the occupant to answer. He heard the locks being undone and restrained the urge to roll his eyes. No asking who it was, simple trust that nothing of harm could be on the other side of the door.

The man who opened his doors was in his late twenties, of medium height, with a mop of curly brown hair, jeans in need of a good wash, and a rumpled Henley.

"Can I help you?"

Gideon smiled. "Drew Masters?"

Drew nodded.

Gideon took a step forward, crowding Drew back into the apartment. "We need to have a little chat."

Dewitt, NY

Muscles aching, Laney settled into the bath with a contented sigh. After the self-defense class she'd stopped by the Kung Fu school for a little sparring.

The plan had been to stay for a half hour, tops, and then get right back to her papers. But Sifu had decided to run a bracket. Everyone paired up and the winners fought the winners of the other pairing until only one remained.

She'd tried to beg off, knowing if she didn't, she'd be up all night grading. But then one of the new guys made a snarky comment about women getting black belts due to affirmative action, and she was in. She smiled. The victory was good, but man, it hurt.

The house phone rang just as she started to doze off. She opened her eyes with a groan. I'm not getting it. There is nothing short of fire that can get me out of this tub right now.

Kati and Max had left an hour ago to spend the week with Kati's parents in Ohio. Quiet in this house was a rare and wonderful thing. She wasn't giving it up, short of an emergency. A really desperate emergency.

But then thoughts of her ungraded papers replicating like rabbits in the kitchen seeped into her brain. With a muttered curse, she pulled herself from the tub and dried off. Throwing on some sweats, she did a quick run-through with the hair dryer and headed back down the stairs. Pouring a giant mug of coffee, she settled down once again in front of her papers with a sigh.

Twenty minutes later, she was deep into a paper on the role of neuropsychological deficits in violent crime when the front bell rang. She looked at the clock. Six o'clock. She couldn't think what it could be.

Walking to the door, still holding her paper in her hand, she peeped through the transom glass next to the door. Smiling, she undid the locks and flung open the door. "Uncle Patrick. I didn't know you were coming by."

"I called. I guess you didn't hear me."

His strong Scottish brogue seemed more pronounced in the quiet. She'd overheard one of his parishioners describe him as a redheaded Paul Newman. She couldn't disagree. With his strong cheekbones, bright blue eyes, and just the smallest hint of grey around the temples, he did bear an uncanny resemblance to the actor.

She stepped back to let him in. "I was in the bath. We ran a bracket at the school."

He pulled her into a hug and held her longer than normal.

She pulled back and looked into his eyes. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "How'd you do in the bracket?"

"I won. But they gave me a good run for my money."

"You really should get your instructor belt. You could have had it years ago."

She waved his words away, leading him back into the kitchen. "I don't need it. I'm happy with my current belt."

"What's all this?" he asked, eyeing the papers covering the table.

"First term papers of the year." She held up the paper she was grading. "Believe it or not, one of my students has actually written a good paper. Miracles do happen."

"So I've heard." He smiled, but it lacked its usual warmth.

She frowned. Her uncle could always be counted on to bring up the energy level in a room. Today, though, a worried expression marred his usually upbeat countenance. And his ramrod-straight posture, a remnant of his Marine Corps past and strict exercise routine, was also noticeably absent.

“Are you sure everything’s okay?”

He cleared his throat. “It’s just ...” He looked around the room, anywhere except at her. His eyes stopped on her coffee pot. “Could I get some of that coffee?”

Alarm bells shrieked in her head. Her uncle never drank coffee. Tea, yes, practically by the bucket. But coffee?

She paused before nodding. She knew from experience her uncle would tell her what was going on when he was ready and not before. Growing up, it had frustrated her to no end.

“Of course.” She gestured at the table. “Take a seat.”

In less than a minute, she’d placed a coffee before him. Settling back in her chair, she waited until he took a shaky sip. “Okay, you’re beginning to scare the heck out of me. What’s going on?”

He sighed and looked into her face, a veil of tears in his eyes. “It’s about Drew.”

Her stomach plummeted and she shook her head. “Drew? Nothing’s wrong with Drew. I just spoke with him this morning.”

He leaned forward in his chair, his surprise and intensity evident. “You did? What did he say?”

Laney recounted their conversation. “So I told him I’d review the paper, and get it back to him tomorrow.”

Patrick’s shoulders drooped at the words. He reached out, taking both of Laney’s hands in his. “That won’t be necessary, sweetheart. I got a call from a colleague of mine out at Saint Paul. Drew...”

Laney tried to pull her hands away and ignore the icy fingers of fear that ran down her back. “Of course it’s necessary. I promised him I’d get it back to him.”

She could feel his hands trembling, and tears now ran down his cheeks. She felt a catch at the back of her throat as her own tears threatened.

“I’m sorry, honey. Drew died this morning. He committed suicide.”

Her uncle wanted to stay, but Laney needed to be alone. She needed to grieve, yell, break things. And if her uncle were here, she'd be focused on him and how he was reacting. She needed to be selfish. Just for tonight.

Outside on the porch, he hugged her tight. "I'll be back in the morning, right after 7:30 Mass. I'll bring bagels, okay?"

Laney concentrated on keeping her voice even. "Sounds like a plan."

Patrick gave her one last look. She knew if she showed any sign of despair, he'd never leave. "I'm okay. I just need some time to myself."

He reached up and kissed her on the cheek. "You call me if you need me, okay?"

She nodded, but didn't speak. She knew if she opened her mouth, the ocean of tears she was holding back would burst forth. He headed down the porch stairs to his car. She watched until he drove off.

Her legs shook as she walked back into the house. Tears began to rain down her cheeks. She focused on the stairs. Just make it to the stairs, she ordered herself. Just there.

Her knees gave out just before she reached them. Pulling herself to the bottom step, she collapsed, her back against the wall. The rain of tears was now a waterfall. She squeezed her legs to her chest, as if somehow she could provide herself with some comfort.

This wasn't possible. He was fine this morning. There was nothing in his voice to indicate he was that desperate... Was there?

She replayed the conversation in her mind. She shook her head. No, something was wrong here. There was nothing to suggest he was suicidal. He was the most upbeat person she'd ever known. He wouldn't have killed himself. Her conviction drove her to her feet.

"He wouldn't have killed himself," she said, needing to hear the words out loud.

She walked into the kitchen, swatting at the tears on her cheeks. Pulling a bottle of water from the fridge, she took a long drink. Okay, if he didn't kill himself, it must have been an accident. But what happened? She knew the police wouldn't reveal any information to her. But...

She pulled out her phone and punched in Rocky's number. "Detective Martinez."

"Rocky. I need some help." She quickly explained about Drew. "They're saying it's a suicide. But I know him. He wouldn't have killed himself. Can you find out anything?"

"Give me a couple minutes. I'll call you back."

A couple of minutes turned out to be over an hour. She tried to grade some papers while she waited. But her mind kept wandering back to Drew. She gave up when she could no longer read the words through the tears.

She needed to do something with her hands, something that would distract her. She unloaded the dishwasher, folded laundry, filled the dishwasher, swept the kitchen floor.

The whole time, doubts flooded her mind. Had she missed something? Should she have called more? Should she have pushed him more when her uncle offered him the job?

With each new question, she cleaned harder. She was about to tackle the bathroom when her cell rang. She had it open before the second ring.

"Rocky?"

"Yeah, Laney. How you doing?"

The calm tone made Laney go cold. "What'd you find?"

“You might want to sit down.”

~~She pulled out a kitchen chair and sank into it. “Okay. Tell me.”~~

“I’m sorry, Laney. Drew hung himself.”

Her body jolted at the words. A vision of Drew, lifeless and hanging, flashed across her mind.

Rocky continued, oblivious to Laney’s response. “Apparently, a friend stopped by. They were supposed to go to lunch. When Drew didn’t answer, he used his spare key to open the door. He said Drew sometimes got caught up in work and didn’t hear the door.”

A memory from college ghosted across her mind. Eight friends had shown up at her and Drew’s place once for a night of drinking. Drew had been lost in his work, oblivious to the party that had broken out around him. An hour after everyone arrived, he’d looked up, shocked, when she’d handed him a beer.

Rocky’s voice was somber. “He found him hanging from the ceiling fan and called the police.”

Laney rocked in her chair, tears streaming down her face, a hitch in her voice. “There’s no mistake? They’re sure it was a suicide?”

“They’re pretty sure. I’m so sorry, honey.”

Standing, she paced the room. “No. You don’t understand. He wouldn’t do this.” Her voice broke. She paused, staring at the ceiling, and willed the tears back.

Taking a deep breath, she continued. “Was there anything off in the apartment? Anything missing?”

“No...nothing was missing, according to the friend.”

Laney pounced on the hesitation in Rocky’s voice. “But there was something, wasn’t there?”

“Well, there was just this one thing. Everything was there, like I said. But his laptop was completely wiped.”

Laney thought of the file Drew had sent her. “Wiped?”

“Yeah. Apparently, there were no data files, no programs except the basics that came with the model. In fact, they said that if they didn’t know any better, they would have thought it was brand new. But the friend ID’d it. They figured Drew wiped it before... well, just before.”

Laney’s brain struggled to make sense of what Rocky was telling her. “How did they find that out? Why did they check the computer?”

“They were looking for a suicide note. Apparently he’d printed one, but they didn’t see it right away. It fell behind a dresser. So they checked the laptop for one, and realized it had been wiped. If they’d found that note, they probably wouldn’t have checked the laptop at all.”

“It wasn’t a suicide, Rocky. And Drew would never wipe out all his work. Somebody did this to him.”

“I know you’re upset, honey. But all the evidence points to a suicide. You need to accept that and let yourself grieve. Why don’t I come over? We can talk.”

“No,” Laney barked and then closed her eyes, softening her tone. “Sorry, sorry. It’s just a lot to take in. I think I just need to be alone right now.”

Rocky was silent for a moment. “Okay. But if you need anything, you call me, all right?”

“All right. And thanks, Rocky.”

She closed the phone and stared out the kitchen window. The backyard was bathed in shadows. She pulled the blinds shut, the sight making her feel more alone.

She ran her hands through her hair. This wasn’t right. Why would Drew wipe his hard drive? She shook her head. He wouldn’t. Drew was proud of his work. He would never just let it disappear.

Unless he was desperate, a small part of her brain whispered. But she shut the voice down. No. Until she knew otherwise, she was going to trust her feelings. She and Drew had been friends for almost ten years. She knew him. If he were ever despairing, he would reach out for help. He would

ask her.

~~A chill went through her and her head jerked up. The file. He said he was sending her a file. What if he'd asked for help and she hadn't known?~~

She flew up the stairs and into her office, guilt and fear dogging her steps. She flipped open her laptop and hit the power button.

After an agonizing wait, she entered her password and made her way to her email program. Scrolling through the unsolicited ads and emails from students and colleagues, she found the email from Drew, entitled: For Your Eyes Only :). She smiled at the emoticon.

She moved the mouse over to it and, taking a deep breath, double-clicked. A dialogue box opened:

Hey, Laney. Thanks for letting me vent earlier. I think I just needed someone to listen. I've attached the file. Can you read it and get back to me with any comments? You are lifesaver!

And I was thinking, I've got some free time coming up in a few weeks. Mind if I come up for a visit? It'd be great to see you and your uncle. It's been way too long.

Love ya lots,

Drew

She stared at the screen, trying to find some hidden meaning in Drew's words. But there were none. It was just what it appeared to be: a message asking for help with a paper and about getting together in the future. Nothing sinister, nothing despairing. Just normal.

Tears once again threatened, but this time they were tinged with relief. He hadn't killed himself. She knew he hadn't. So what had happened?

She glanced at the attached file link. She moved the mouse to click on it and paused. Not quite yet.

She ran down the stairs and found her keys. Sprinting back to the office, she inserted the flash drive attached to her key ring and copied the file.

"Probably just being paranoid," she muttered.

She stared at the screen before forcing herself to click on the file. A Word document opened up, entitled: The Belial Stone. She smiled. Drew always did like making waves with his titles.

And the term Belial would certainly do that. Depending upon the source you were reading, Belial denoted either wickedness or even the Devil himself. The term appeared in the Bible multiple times as well as in a number of the Gnostic Gospels.

She remembered the project she and Drew had developed. It incorporated the final apocalyptic battle between the Sons of Belial and the Children of the Light depicted in the Hebrew War Scroll. But she'd never heard of the term Belial associated with a stone before.

She started reading through the first few sentences and couldn't make it further. His writing style was almost as familiar to her as her own. She stifled a sob. She wasn't ready to read this. She closed down the file and ejected the flash drive.

Laney pictured Drew when they'd met freshman year of college. He'd been hopelessly lost in the library, and she'd been equally confused. Together, they'd found the books they needed. Realizing they were both majoring in anthropology, they spent most of their time together from that point on. They'd been each other's shoulder when their love lives had careened off the rails and the person they could always count on for a laugh. He was the brother she'd never had. And now he was gone.

She couldn't stifle the sob that escaped her lips this time. And she didn't try to stop those that followed. She slid off the chair and onto the floor, giving in to the tears. The grief enveloped her.

At the edges of her mind, however, a single question whispered: If Drew hadn't killed himself, then who had?

New York City, NY

The sounds of Pavarotti breathed through the penthouse, his soulful tenor seeming to reach for the dome of the cathedral ceilings. Gideon stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked Central Park, his eyes closed, embracing the emotion of the music. As the last strains of the aria died away, he opened his eyes and watched the traffic crawl through the Manhattan streets below.

He drained his wineglass and walked to the dark granite island, taking a seat at one of the high-backed leather chairs. He refilled the glass from the bottle of cabernet he'd left to breathe.

Swirling the dark liquid in his glass, he powered up the laptop in front of him. "So, Mr. Masters let's see what you've figured out."

He pulled up the most recent documents. The title of the first one leapt off the screen at him. He quickly scanned the document.

"My, my, aren't you a clever boy," he murmured. His anger began to simmer as he realized how Priddle's trust of Drew Masters could have ruined everything. If this had gotten out...

He glanced through the remainder of the files, shaking his head at how truly dangerous Priddle's actions had been. That fool. He punched a number into his phone.

"Dr. Arthur Priddle."

"Dr. Priddle," Gideon drawled, his voice laced with quiet rage. "You have not been following our agreement."

Priddle's words stumbled over each other in a rush. "Mr. Gideon, I have. I've done everything you've asked."

"Really? Why, then, am I sitting here reading a paper entitled 'The Belial Stone' written by a Dr. Drew Masters?"

"Sir," Priddle said, his voice taking on an unpleasant whining quality, "I had to bring on some more help. There's just so much to do with the site and with my classes. But he was sworn to secrecy. He was never supposed to talk about any of our work."

"Well, apparently he didn't keep up his end of the bargain, either. That, however, will no longer be a problem. It seems Dr. Masters gave into a moment of despair. He's dead."

"What?" Priddle screeched.

Gideon held the phone away from his ear with a look of disgust. When the squealing died down, he said, "Perhaps you should keep the stakes in mind before you make any more unwise decisions, as well as the prize."

"Uh, yes, yes, sir. Of course. It won't happen again."

"I'll make sure of it. You're leaving for the site tonight. I'll have a car at your residence in two hours."

"Uh, sir, I'll need a few days to wrap things up with the University."

Gideon's words lashed out. "Tonight. I don't care what you tell the University. You will be on plane in three hours' time. Do not forget who you are dealing with." Gideon disconnected the call.

He didn't worry about whether the professor would follow his orders. He knew he would. He'd tapped into two of the professor's most motivating emotions: fear and greed.

He idly brought up the laptop's browser and glanced at the last few sites Drew had visited. None were problematic, except, maybe...

He opened the email page and spent a few minutes hacking into the program. He glanced at the emails Drew had sent over the last day. Most were innocuous: notes to students about class, one to his mother, a few bills he'd paid online.

The last email, though, was to a Delaney McPhearson. It had an attachment. He opened it and then cursed softly. Damn it, more fires to put out.

He looked up as the door opened from the bedroom across the living room. An Asian man, dressed in a tight black t-shirt and a long leather coat, crossed the room.

"I'm heading out. Are you sure you don't want to join me?" Paul Cook raised an eyebrow as he caught Gideon's eye. "Problem?"

"Yes. It seems, brother, we have another fire to put out. I need you to track down a woman named Delaney McPhearson." Gideon switched to a search engine and typed in her name. "She's a professor of criminology at the University of Syracuse. She lives just outside of the city, in a town called Dewitt."

Paul crossed to the island and poured himself a glass of wine. Leaning against the island, he took a sip. "Okay. Any reason you can't handle it?"

Gideon grimaced. "I have to head to D.C. to deal with the Senator. He's getting antsy."

"Ah, and you need to play lap dog."

Gideon glared at him.

Paul chuckled and raised his hands. "Just kidding. I know we need to keep the Senator happy. His happiness ensures our success. So, this professor, what do I do when I find her?"

Gideon's voice was steel. "Eliminate her."

Albany, NY

“Where is he?” Jake Rogan slammed K-Dogg into the alley’s brick wall. Pieces of mortar chipped off the already crumbling bricks.

Dressed in torn, baggy jeans, a wife-beater and some chains, K-Dogg was reputed to be one of the toughest members of the G7s. He wore torn, baggy jeans, a wife-beater and some chains, and although they were about the same height, he easily outweighed Jake by about forty pounds of muscle.

Jake wasn’t worried. A former Navy SEAL, he’d faced a lot tougher individuals than a gangbanger with control issues. In the mood he was in, he’d take on the whole gang to get the answer he needed.

“Man, I told you. I don’t know,” K-Dogg replied. Jake knew he was trying to sound angry, but the tremor in his voice made that impossible.

Jake wanted to smash his face into pulp. He was the one who’d pulled his foster brother into the G7s. He glared at K-Dogg, pressing his forearm harder against his neck. “I am not asking again.” He enunciated each word. “Where. Is. He?”

K-Dogg grabbed at Jake’s arm, but couldn’t budge it. “Damn it, man. I don’t know! We ain’t seen Tom since he got out.”

Jake studied K-Dogg’s face, trying to gauge his sincerity. With a growl, he shoved him towards the back of the alley. “So tell me, how come you haven’t talked to him? He’s one of you.”

K-Dogg looked over Jake’s shoulder.

“Don’t even think it,” Jake warned.

K-Dogg put up his hands. “Wasn’t thinking nothing.”

“Tom?” Jake prompted.

“Yeah, Tom. He’s still one of us. G7 for life, man.” K-Dogg raised both hands, seven fingers pointed down, the gang’s sign.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re real bad asses. Now, how come you haven’t seen Tom if he’s G7?”

K-Dogg looked away and shrugged. “No reason. We just went our separate ways.”

Jake was done dancing around. He grabbed K-Dogg by the arm, twisted it and then shoved him against the wall, one hand shoving his head into the brick.

“Shit, man. Let me go,” K-Dogg screamed.

“No more bullshit.” He twisted K-Dogg’s arm. He knew with a little more pressure, he could break it. “I’m gonna stop being so nice if I don’t get some answers.”

“Fine, man, fine. Just let me go.”

Jake pushed him away again. “Now, why haven’t you guys been in touch with Tom?”

K-Dogg grumbled underneath his breath. Jake took a threatening step towards him. K-Dogg backed away. “No need to get physical, man. I’m talking.” He rubbed his arm. “Tom got out a couple weeks ago. We made some overtures. He told us he didn’t want to be in the gang no more. So we let him go.”

Jake laughed without mirth. “Right. You just let him go. What happened to blood in, blood out?”

“Ain’t gotta be that way with Tom. He done us solid. We’re good.”

Disgust dripped from Jake’s words. “The grocery job.”

Tom had gone away for five years as an accessory to attempted murder. According to court documents, Tom had admitted to knowing about the plan to rob the mom-and-pop shop. He hadn't known about the weapons. Tom was the lookout. When he'd been arrested, he'd refused to turn on any of the others. He'd only been seventeen years old.

"Tom could have hung you guys for that. He did five years and didn't say a word. As thanks, no one of you went to visit him."

K-Dogg sneered. "Yeah? What about you, 'big brother'? Ain't seen or heard you since you bolted, what, eleven years ago? You go see him much?"

This time Jake looked away. K-Dogg was right. It wasn't like he'd been any better. He'd lived next door to Tom and his grandmother, Ceilia Jeffries, since Tom was a baby. Tom's grandmother took him in when his mother had been murdered. Jake had only been fourteen. Tom had been six.

When he'd left four years later, he'd promised Tom he'd keep in touch. And they had for a few years. Then Jake had started getting more overseas missions with the SEALs. The letters got fewer and fewer, before they stopped altogether. And Tom had found a place with the G7s.

"So if something happened to Tom - and I ain't saying something has - it ain't got nothing to do with us. You need to go look at that new family of his, over at the church. But you know what, man? He probably just skipped. Won't be the first time."

Jake turned his back on K-Dogg and headed for the street.

"What? That's it? Ain't gonna say thank you?" K-Dogg called after him, but made no move to follow.

Jake ignored the taunt and turned left on Main Street. He tugged up the collar of his fleece. It was getting cooler. He noted how much more rundown the neighborhood looked. Or maybe, through his more weary eyes, everything just looked less rosy.

Jake had already spoken with Tom's parole officer and the police, but they'd both been less than useless. K-Dogg had been his next stop. He'd hoped Tom had gotten back with his old crew. That would have been easy.

But nothing about this was easy. Definitely not the 'what ifs' that weighed him down: What if he had stayed in touch with Tom? What if he'd gone to see him as soon as he was released? What if he'd come home as soon as he'd heard about Mrs. Jeffries' death? What if he'd been the big brother he should have been? What if? What if? What if?

He shook his head. It was too late for 'what ifs' now. He'd raced to Albany right after Tom's pastor tracked him down. His boss at the Chandler Group put the company plane and resources at his disposal. But even with the resources of a global think tank at his fingertips, he still couldn't find a single trace of Tom. It was like he had completely disappeared.

A shudder ran through him. "Damn it, Tom. Where are you?"

Airborne over the United States

Tom Jeffries woke up slowly. Pain twisted through his stomach and his tongue felt like sandpaper. He lay on his side on a vibrating metal floor. It was loud. Really loud. Something soft collided with him, and his eyes flew open.

A man stared back, his face contorted with confusion and fear. Tom recoiled. With his hands bound, though, he only managed to put a few inches between them. His eyes darted around what appeared to be the hold of an old military plane. At least, that's what he thought it looked like based on what he'd seen in the movies. He'd never actually been on a plane before.

Forty other men lay similarly bound around him. Some were still lying down, unconscious, while others had managed to sit up. Everybody was in rough shape. Stubble, rumpled clothes. Tom took in a breath and almost gagged. *Damn.*

He rolled onto his back to release the pressure on his left arm, which had fallen asleep. A sharp pain shot through his shoulders as he rolled onto his bound hands. He quickly flopped back onto his side and sucked in a deep breath as a wave of dizziness washed through him.

He managed to wiggle his way into a sitting position. His stomach gave another painful lurch. God, he was hungry. He glanced to his left and met the eyes of the man who'd rolled into him. He'd also managed to work his way to a sitting position.

Tom swallowed a few times, trying to get some moisture into his mouth before he spoke. "Where are we?" He was shocked by how weak his voice sounded.

The man shrugged nervously, his eyes wide. "No idea. Last thing I remember, I was on my way to visit my parole officer. Two guys jumped me and threw me into a van. Next thing I know, I'm waking up here."

Tom struggled to think through the molasses of his thoughts. "I was leaving my P.O. and hurrying to catch my bus. And then this."

He looked at the rest of the men that littered the cargo hold. They were different races and ages, but most were dressed like him: old jeans, t-shirt, a light jacket or sweater.

And they had one other thing in common: they'd all been in prison. He was sure of that. Some had tats that gave them away. Others just had that attitude. Once a guy had done time, there was something stamped on him that he could never shake.

Small windows rimmed the fuselage. Getting to his feet on shaky legs, he weaved his way through the mass of prone bodies until he reached one. *My first time in a plane*, he thought in disbelief.

Panic began to overwhelm the confusion in Tom's mind. *It'll be okay. You'll figure this out.* The words sounded good, but they weren't doing much to reduce the fear bubbling in his chest.

He stared out the window as if the answers to his current situation were somehow hidden behind the clouds. He remembered heading for the bus after leaving his P.O.'s office. He'd been worried he was going to be late for choir practice, and he'd really wanted to see Cleo. He'd picked up his pace so he wouldn't miss the bus. And then what?

He struggled to recall. *I walked down Jordan Street, cut down the alley behind the Civic Center, and then...* His head jolted upright. *And then some guy stepped from behind a dumpster wielding a knife.*

He'd turned to run, only to find another man behind him. He'd felt a sharp pain and then everything went black.

He couldn't remember much after that, but he knew he'd been conscious on and off. He'd been in a warehouse. He recalled being allowed to use the bathroom and then being stuck with a needle and forced back into the black. He recalled two other moments of brief lucidity as well. One was in a truck, and the other must have been at the airfield. He'd heard planes both times. He struggled to make sense of it. He could have been out for days. What the hell was going on?

An hour later, Tom was no closer to answering that question. He watched the clouds give way to a landscape of ice-capped mountaintops and green fields, followed by a plateau of flat barren land. He only saw one small town and a handful of houses. Wherever they were, there sure weren't a lot of people.

Tom felt the plane jolt. The pilot must have lowered the landing gear. He strained to see farther out the window. He saw the same barren land broken up by fields of green. What he didn't see, though, was anything even remotely resembling an airport. As far as he could tell, they were landing in the middle of nowhere.

As the descent became steep, he began to slide towards the front of the plane. On the other side of the plane, he saw a man turn around and grab a strap attached to the side of the plane that was used to secure cargo. Tom followed his example, as did the handful of men who had taken up positions at the other windows.

His shoulders ached, but he knew he got off lucky compared to the men in the middle of the hold. With nothing to hold onto, they crashed into one another as the plane bumped and bucked to a landing.

Almost as soon as the engine stopped, the giant cargo door at the back of the plane began to open. Tom stared at it with a mixture of fear and curiosity. He braced himself, knowing whatever came through those doors was not going to be friendly.

He wasn't wrong. When the door was fully open, four commandos in dark grey uniforms holding AK-47s rushed into the hold. "Get out! Get out!"

Tom was caught up in the mass of bodies as they were herded out of the plane. A few men moved too slow and were prodded none too gently with the nose of a machine gun.

Part of his mind yelled that they should turn around and fight. They outnumbered these guys. They could take them. But the rest of his mind just told his feet to move faster.

Once outside, Tom scrambled up a ramp into the back of a truck. He had barely turned around when the tailgate of the truck slammed shut and it pulled away. His face crashed into the wooden beams that lined the truck bed. Blood from his nose trickled down to his lip. He pressed chest-out against the beams to keep from being flung to the ground and trampled on.

Panting, he pushed his way back into a standing position. He struggled to control his breathing, but his racing heart was making that all but impossible.

Around him were the endless fields he'd seen from the sky, rimmed by an incredible mountain range in the far distance. If it weren't all so surreal, he would have thought it was beautiful.

He craned his neck, trying to find any sort of landmark. For the longest time there was nothing. Just more land. But then, in the foreground, he began to make out the outline of a structure.

"What the hell is that?" someone asked.

No one answered. Disbelief flowed through him. It was a walled enclosure, lined with barbed wire, and boasting two guard towers. It looked like a prison.

No, he thought. I did my time. I've been doing everything right. This can't be happening.

As they drew nearer, he noticed there were no paved roads, just a single dirt road leading to the entryway. And the wall wasn't made of cinderblocks. It was wood, and huge. He couldn't actually see

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