

## Chapter One

Thomas ran inside the library and stop next to a heat vent. How could it be so much colder in Denver than I had been in Bozeman? He'd traveled South.

The dozen blocks from the terminal to the library had left him colder than he walk from his grandfather's to the fast-food joint. If he'd known it would be this cold, he would have spent the few dollars for bus fare.

He let the heat soak in. As he wondered at the lack of a card reader at the entrance.

The lobby was large, with a placard thanking the families whose donations had allowed it to be rebuilt after the 2031 earthquake. One name jumped out at Thomas; Lewiston. Thomas fought the panic. Had they made a mistake? If they were important enough to be among families who'd warrant a thank you plaque, they'd have the kind of pull in the city to...

Grant had said something about them being kicked out, hadn't he? And Jules had mentioned there was tension between this Brislow and the Lewiston as the reason for Thomas to go to Denver to be safe from them. He looked at the date and reminded himself that a lot could happen in twenty years.

He walked among the columns until he found the public computers. Sitting at one, he was surprised not to see a reader for the ID Grant had provided him. There were also fewer people using them than he'd expected. He'd expected the usage to be tracked at least to the level of who accessed what. The library at the UMn did that. It was a safety measure, so they'd know if someone was accessing sites for mental and health issues, or those flagged as being sought by violent students.

The last one had been established in the wake of the epidemic of school shooting at the end of the previous and start of this century; he'd learned in his Studies for Success class. There had been the usual protests and lawsuits, the teacher had said with derision, which hadn't amounted too much before, but then, the government had taken the side of the children instead of silently supporting the gun owners by not doing anything. They'd then added, still smirking, that the crackdown on police armament and violence might have had something to do with the change in policies.

The computer asked for a name to log him in, along with a date of birth and a phone number. Only the name was mandatory, and without a scanner to prove the name was his real one, he entered Thomas Heeran. Paul wouldn't mind him borrowing his last name.

The next page was a list of public message centers, along with instruction to access an existing account via an anonymous portal.

Wondering why that was there, he discretely looked around and realized the few people at the

computers weren't the best dressed ones, and had bags at their feet. How many of the homeless had IDs. Thomas realized why those weren't required.

A lion with mangy fur caught him looked and Thomas snapped to his screen. He thought about checking his message center or using an anonymous one to check in with his family. They could tell him how they were doing, and he could tell them he was... what? On the run with no idea what he was doing?

And that was ignoring that his family might be held against their will.

It was easier not to know how he'd react to the knowledge of what him running off had caused to happen to his family. So long as it was just his imagination, he could dismiss it as such.

He hoped to God they were okay.

Huh.

Could he pray? Grant said his ability came from a god; from Thomas's god. That He was real. Didn't that imply he could hear prayers? Did He answer them?

*I don't know if you hear this*, he thought, pushing them out to the... where ever gods hung out, *but please keep my family safe*. He hesitated. Amen.

He fought against looking around to see if anyone had noticed what he did. Which was a weird thing to feel like doing, he realized, since it had all been in his head.

He'd done what he could for his family, so he set on the search for this Denton Brislow.

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Thomas walked up to the house with the thought that this couldn't be it. It was nice enough, and the front yard would probably be just as nice if it wasn't under two and a half feet of snow. But it had nothing that said 'we're rich' to it, and Grant had said everyone in the Society was rich. This looked more like his parent's house, with the large front yard here being replaced by a giant backyard.

This said 'we're comfortable upper middle-class'.

There weren't a lot of Brislows in Denver, and no one listed by the name of Denton or even D. The couple living here had caught his attention over the few others, because as part of looking for clues online as to which was related to Denton, he'd come across a news article of their house burning down.

That had happened right around the time the Lewistons had left the city. The family had been big enough in the city that their departure had made the news. It also talked about the death the family had endured over the previous year, with that an Alistair Lewiston going into the most detail as he was a man who'd made his mark on the city with all his charity.

The fire had taken place a few months before, so it might just be a coincidence. But it was the only time the name Brislow was mentioned in anything resembling what could be a conflict between the two families.

If he had the kind of money Grant implied the Society had, Thomas knew he'd, at the very least, do everything he could to get those behind burning his parent's house down out of the city.

He looked at the house again. He'd also buy them something better.

He made it onto the porch before indecision struck. What was he going to say? Ask to speak to their son, Denton? At least he'd know if he had the wrong house, but what if they thought he was Lewiston? They might lie to him and...

He pressed the bell.

He could find out anything out here and talking himself out of asking.

The door opened and a bull old enough to be his grandfather looked down at him. "Yes?"

"Hi," Thomas said, his mind racing. He had the wrong house, no doubt about that now. Why hadn't there been a picture of the owner in the article about the fire? Why hadn't he thought to look for one? "I'm... Tom. I'm looking for... I mean. Do you have a—" he ran a hand over his face. Just turn around and leave.

"Who is it, Stanley?" a woman called from deeper into the house.

The bull, Stanley, was studying Thomas and rooting him in place.

*Just say you made a mistake and turn around.*

"Well?" the woman asked, sounding closer. "Who is it?"

"I don't know," Stanley answered, and Thomas swallowed at the severity of it.

"Then don't just stand there." The woman moved him out of the way. She smiled at Thomas, looking him over. Like Stanley, she was old enough to be his grandmother. "Hello there. Are you lost?" she looked around before motioning. "Come on in."

"Aileen," Stanley said with mild exasperation, "you can't just invite a stranger in the house."

"He's just a kid, Stanley," the cow replied, showing him to the side. "He's probably freezing to death the

way you leaving the door open like this is taking all the heat out of the house.” She took Thomas’s arm and pulled him inside. The promise of heat made him melt. “I’ll have a cup of tea ready in no time, and it’s going to do you good on a day like this.”

They walked past a wall of pictures.

Younger versions of the two bovines, one a wedding picture, another of them holding a baby, then another baby and toddler. Another was of a different bull, probably the son, with cow and three children at their feet. One of Stanley and his son, taking at a party where two were laughing. Another of Aileen and their son’s wife, playing with the grandchildren.

There was a sense of love in those pictures, but the lack of a picture where everyone was there made Thomas feel like they weren’t close.

The kitchen where she sat him was smaller than his mother’s large one, which doubled as her studio for her online cooking episodes. It had the sense of a farm-house kitchen, with the clear coated cabinet doors and large clay jars that would hold flour, sugar, salt and a variety of other baking ingredients.

Then she had a large tea cup before him, along with a porcelain container filled with sugar cubes and one for milk. After a sip, he added a couple of cubes and some milk. Tea wasn’t as good as coffee without additives, he decided, although the heat it spread through him made it delicious.

She sat across from him. “Now, how about you tell me what has you outside and knocking at our door on a day like this?” she asked as Stanley took a seat at the table between them.

“I’m looking for someone,” he said. He could just leave. He knew he had the wrong house, but while he talked, he could enjoy the heat. “I got in trouble, and I don’t know where to find the person who can get me out of it.”

“What sort of trouble?” the bull asked, his tone just this side of being a threat.

“Stanley,” Aileen chided. “Don’t scare the boy.”

He stood. “I should go. This isn’t where—”

“Sit down,” she said in a firm, motherly tone that Thomas obeyed before realizing he’d done so. “Tell us what the trouble is. Kids your age blow things out of proportion. I’m sure once you tell us you’ll realize it’s nothing really, but if it is, I promise me and Stanley will help as best we can.”

The bull grumbled something unintelligible as Thomas took the cup in his hands and sipped it. He wished he was blowing this out of proportion. He’d take being made to feel like an idiot over what he was going through. And it wasn’t like he could tell them anything. They’d think he was insane.

Well, he could tell them some things, the generalities of what had happened.

“I met some people in college,” he started with, looking at his cup, “and I thought they were good guys, but then I did something and they freaked out about it. My family sent me to my grandfather’s while things cooled down, but then they sent some men to find me on the bus. I got away from them and found a ride, only for them to find me again, only now they’re ranting about some Raphael Lewiston, and then they—”

Aileen’s gasp stopped Thomas, and he looked up.

“Who did you day?” Stanley all but growled, standing slowly as Thomas took in the fear in her eyes. Then the bull’s size and that he was leaning in, his muzzle in a snarl had Thomas out of there so fast the only reason he knew he hadn’t teleported out of the house was that he was still running when he realized he was in the cold.

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Thomas huddled on the other side of the road to a modern looking two story building. Through the glass doors and wall he could see the lobby, where muscular men and women moved about. Some wore black and gray body armor.

Thomas had finally found Denton Brislow.

He’d gone back to the library from the disaster that his meeting with the older couple had turned into and went back to his search. The name had come up when he put the name in a general search instead of only searching through the Denver directory. He came on in a financial article, of all places, about up-and-coming businesses and the people who started them. The article was a few years old, but it informed Thomas that Denton Brislow was the CEO is a private security company called Steel Link. And the picture that went along with the article showed that he was a cheetah, so now he was sure he had the right one.

Unfortunately, the article didn’t say where he lived, and as the CEO of a successful company, it explained why Thomas couldn’t find his address in the directory.

Steel Link, on the other hand, turned out to be easy to find, and here he was looking at men that would make Madoc drool with lust, women, who could hold their own against a lot of the guys Thomas knew, even—was that a man in underwear that had just run through the lobby? And had that bear really been that

hot?

He was moving, thinking he could go in and get a second look at him, maybe help him out of those underwear, before he could stop, then the promise of heat on the other side of those doors, even if there was no body contact involved, kept him going.

How did anyone tolerate this cold? Thomas couldn't be paid enough to live here.

The entryway was a claustrophobic airlock, even if both sets of doors were glass. He passed the emergence stair exit, that door was metal. As he pushed the door in, hot air blasted past him and noise erupted. He stop as it closed, taking in the volume, and how none of it had made it through the glass door.

Everyone was in motion, running and walking, but even those who stood still, talking, had a sense of energy to them, as if they were just pausing before exploding in motion too.

The front desk was to the left, stretch along two third of the wall and had two receptionists. The one closes to him was a black and white rabbit talking with an otter in body armor. The one further back was a corker spaniel, with her back to him, but not busy with anyone.

Thomas took a step in her direction, trying to formulate his need to speak to the owner and not be—"Lewiston!" someone yelled on the other side of the room, the name distorted by a thick Russian accent. "Mikael not work with Samson, Samson pig!" The yeller was a giant otter dressed in the same black and gray body armor as the one at the counter, but on his massive frame it seemed to be stretched to its limit.

Fuck, the guy might out muscle Chima.

"I know what he is, Yakovich!" The reply came from an office's open door and Thomas fought his panic. Lewiston had to be common enough as a name; this had to be a coincidence. He had no reason to assume that—

A rat stepped out of the office. "He's also one of our best drivers," he said. "And since you and your wide want the best, you have to deal with him."

Thomas backed away. Now he understood why Jules had said Denton was a bad idea.

"You asshole," the otter replied as he turned.

"Tell your wife to fuck you for me!" the rat snapped back.

He had to get out before the rat turned and—

The rat was looking straight at Thomas.

This time, Thomas knew he didn't teleport because he nearly wrenched his arm out of its socket as he pulled on the door's handle and it didn't open. He had an instant of comedic fear that he should push instead of pull, but no, that didn't work either.

He was trapped.

He looked around for another way out. The rat was no where insight, but the corker spaniel was looking at him now.

No, he wasn't trapped. The smile he gave her wasn't pleasant. They just thought he was. He looked at the other side of the street through two sets of glass doors, and there he was.

He didn't stay there to see their surprised expression. He looked to blocks ahead, and he was in the deserted intersection. He looked to his left, and he was next to an empty bus stop. Again and he was before convenience store.

Now he settled for running, cursing his bad luck.

What the fuck was he supposed to do now?

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