

Chapter 1

“Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience.”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Thor, stay.” Violet Tam wasn’t worried about leaving her mastiff unattended. He always followed her commands and could certainly handle any strangers who might think a dognapping was a good idea. But the summer heat was hard on a dog his size and they needed to hurry. The enormous, fawn-colored animal sat with a dignified, but faintly unhappy air. Violet shifted the blue bin to her hip and pulled open the door to the elementary school. Holding it open with her foot, she waited for her friend Jamie Lawson to squeeze by with a cardboard box.

“This is the beginning of summer. For real. I don’t care if the official date is next week. It’s summer already.” Jamie huffed her unhappiness as she walked toward the eighth grade classroom and slid the box onto the long wooden table in the front. It was hotter in the classroom than it was outside but the air

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conditioning wouldn't be turned on until the kids came back.

"Before we became friends, I thought teachers got the summer off," Jamie said, wiping sweat from her forehead. "I don't know why I put on make-up today. I should have just rolled out of bed and come straight down here."

"You'd still be beautiful," Violet said, smiling at the idea of Jamie spending the day rearranging the classroom in her nightgown and slippers. "And thank you for helping me."

"My pleasure. I mean, not really. Just a saying, of course, but you know what I mean."

"I do," Violet said.

Jamie peered into the box. "More books?"

"Always the tone of surprise," Violet said.

"It's just that—" she picked one out of the box "—does anybody read Agatha Christie anymore? In fact, does anybody read? It's like there are just a few people reading all the books, and everybody else reads one or two a year. What are the chances one of your students is going to want to read through all of these? Aren't all the kids watching *The Walking Dead* or playing video games?"

Violet frowned. "It's not a matter of finding that one ravenous read. It's basic cultural literacy. Like knowing what *Star Wars* is. Everybody should read at least one Christie novel." She looked into the box. "Oh,

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and Arthur Conan Doyle, Dorothy L. Sayers, Mickey Spillane—”

“Okay, I get it.” Jamie started to laugh. “I’m sorry I asked. The more time I spend around you, the longer my reading list is. I’m never going to finish it before I die. If you don’t make me carry them all over the county and I’ll be happy.”

“We only have one more trunk load of boxes. Eyes on the prize, remember?”

“You mean the oven-fired pizza waiting for us at the end of this?”

“Exactly. I’m ordering the feta, spinach and sun dried tomato.” Violet hadn’t been keen on her mother’s plan to start a restaurant with wood-fired ovens. In fact, she’d thought it was downright weird. Then she’d tasted the fantastic garden-fresh, locally sourced dishes and decided it had been a stroke of genius after all. Fire and Brimstone had been popular from the day it opened. People in Arcadia Valley couldn’t get enough of the place.

“I can’t wait.” Jamie paused, draping herself over the box. “You know, I never knew people like your mom could run a pizza joint.”

“What do you mean?” Violet tried not to jump to conclusions but anger flared in her at the phrase ‘like your mom’. Jamie hadn’t seemed racist in the months since they’d become good friends but it wouldn’t be surprising if she thought Asian people should all run Chinese food restaurants.

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“You know. She’s so earthy. Like you, making your own goat cheese and lavender soap.”

“I still don’t see the conflict,” Violet said. “A natural lifestyle means enjoying the world more, not less. And it’s not exactly a pizza joint. There are a few other dishes like baked potatoes and pot pie.”

“But everybody orders the pizza,” Jamie pointed out. “Maybe they like watching it cook and then seeing it pulled out of the oven on those big wooden paddles—”

“It’s called a peel.”

“Right, that. Anyway, she’s always been about the farmers market and the goats and the...” She waved her hands. “Herbs and stuff.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “Pizza has herbs. Growing our own food doesn’t mean we don’t interact with the community. I think it’s the opposite, really, especially when we had a booth at the farmers market. We saw everybody. You grew up on a blueberry farm. Don’t you think it brought you closer to everyone in Arcadia Valley?”

“Not really. We saw people during the season, I guess. And the booth at the market was the same way. Lots of people in the summer but for the rest of the year, the grocery store is where you meet everybody,” Jamie said. She straightened up, eyes wide. “I forgot to tell you that I met the cutest guy in the dairy aisle yesterday. He said his name is Silas Black. You know him?”

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Violet hesitated one second too long. “Sure, I know him.” She could see it so clearly. When Silas walked into a room, everybody took notice. He was tall, dark and handsome, but it was a certain something, a brooding quality combined with a crackling intensity that made Silas unforgettable. She could imagine how Jamie felt when she first saw him. Silas probably laid on the charm and Jamie was swept off her feet, the way girls always were. Unless you were the kind of girl Silas didn’t think deserved any charm. Then you tried your hardest to stay out of his way.

“Uh oh. I saw that.” Jamie narrowed her eyes. “And don’t pretend you didn’t just hesitate there.”

Violet ignored her friend. “We should hurry. Thor’s waiting outside in the heat. Plus, if we don’t get those last boxes in here, we’re going to hit the dinner rush. I don’t want to wait thirty minutes for my pizza.”

Jamie looked like she was going to argue, but instead said, “Your mom wouldn’t bump your order up to the front of the line?”

“Never! She’s a professional.” Violet headed for the car, glad that Jamie hadn’t decided to pry any more information from her.

She paused to give Thor an extra scratch on her way past. He lifted his head and fixed her with a look, as if he could tell she was upset. Thor would be the only one who noticed because Violet was determined to keep the past in the past, and her drama to herself. She’d self-medicate with ice cream and cry into Thor’s coat

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later, but for now, she wasn't going to give any hint that Silas Black had any control over her life.

As they lifted the last two boxes from the trunk and carried them inside, Violet forced herself to keep her smile in place. Now that she'd had a few minutes to accept Jamie's words, it wasn't such a big deal. It was bound to happen. She'd already run into Silas once, very briefly. It was a small town and she couldn't expect to avoid him completely, as wonderful as that would be.

The Lord is my strength and my shield. Violet repeated the psalm to herself as they set the last boxes in the classroom. The old grade school rhyme about sticks and stones hadn't been true, but she was stronger now. She wasn't a little girl anymore. She could handle whatever Silas Black threw her way, and this time she wouldn't suffer in silence.



Silas tapped the front of the menu. "Summer's Glory?"

Looking up, Luke Delis nodded. "The ingredients are seasonal. They swap out the menus depending on what time of year it is. The summer is the best in my opinion but Nico thinks winter is better, probably because they use a lot more of his products."

Silas hoped they still had Nico Delis's artisanal meats on the menu. Luke pulled the winning lotto ticket with his large Greek family, but being brothers with the town's butcher had to be the best perk. Stavros and

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Theo, Luke's other brothers, were clearly made from the same Delis mold but if Silas had to choose, he'd rather be related to an artisan butcher than a teacher, a therapist, or a pediatrician. Of course he'd never tell Luke that. Or maybe he would because Luke and his love for steaks would probably agree with him.

Silas scanned the menu, surprised by the variety. Even the drink list was a whole page long. Homemade sodas using natural sweeteners, organic mint teas and lemonade flavored with fruit, and free trade coffee. He'd had his heart set on French fries but he'd forgotten they didn't offer any fried food. If it couldn't be cooked in the wall-length stone ovens at the back of the restaurant or mixed up fresh, they didn't have it.

Luke waved at a group being seated across the large space and Silas noted the full tables. Rural Idaho wasn't known for its culinary novelties and Mrs. Tam had tapped into the need for something other than fast food. Sure, there were twenty ways to prepare the state's biggest crop, the potato, but most of them went to processing plants to make potato chips. Fire and Brimstone was truly a unique twist on the local food scene.

The wide open space had been converted from an old automotive garage and one side still sported sliding doors. The brick walls had been scrubbed of paint and the hanging lights were naked Edison bulbs protected by antique blue mason jars. With the metal chairs and the vintage gas station signs on the walls, Silas wouldn't

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know whether he was in a garage or a restaurant if he didn't see mouth-watering food being brought to the tables all around him.

"So, how's the book?" Luke nodded at the paper back Silas had brought with him to read. Luke was perpetually late. Maybe it was because Luke was a doctor who might be called to an emergency, or maybe it was a personality trait, but Silas made sure to have something to read while he waited for his friend.

"Good. I've read it before." At least six times before, but he didn't say that part. It was perfectly acceptable to read mysteries. It was even okay to read classic mysteries from the fifties. But people might think he was weirder than they already did if he admitted to reading the same books over and over.

"I can't decide. I think I'll order one with the kimchi and one with the barbeque pork and red chili sauce." Luke Delis frowned at the little paper card.

"Two? I thought doctors were supposed to be health nuts. Wouldn't it make more sense to get half and half?"

"Of course it would. But what about leftovers? Won't Loki want a piece?"

"Mastiffs need more than a piece of pizza, Luke."

"Well, get her a whole pizza. As for me, I'm a growing man and I need sustenance."

"Pretty sure you're done growing, unless you mean sideways."

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Luke grinned. "That's disappointing to hear. I guess I'll always be shorter than you."

"Everybody's shorter than me. Even your brothers." At six foot five, he was used to looming over everyone, even the four Delis brothers. Stavros, Nico, Luke and Theo had all inherited their mother's looks, their father's height, and a mischievous sense of humor. If they weren't such nice guys, they could cause some real havoc in town. As it was, they had always been the kind of kids everyone was glad to see. Not like Silas. Nobody had wanted him around and he'd liked it that way.

"How are the orders coming along? We haven't had a master carpenter in Arcadia Valley for a long time. I think the closest is in Twin Falls and he's booked up for months. Probably everybody is knocking on your door." Luke asked.

"The Bodkins' new pantry is almost ready. I'll probably install it tomorrow. I made some gun cabinets to for Ron Taylor and I'll deliver those in the day or so. And then I've got a big project happening. Right here, actually."

"Really?" Luke looked around. "What's the plan?"

"Mrs. Tam wants a long bar that wraps around that side of the restaurant. More seating for the lunch crowd that just pops in for a slice or a salad." He pointed to the wall across from the ovens. "Then another built-in counter near the door for people who are waiting for tables. They can have a drink and watch the food

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cooking without crowding the entrance. Mrs. Tam says it will keep the restaurant moving smoothly and people out of the way of the servers.”

Luke looked like he was trying not to laugh.

“What?” Silas asked.

“It’s just... you called her Mrs. Tam. Like you’re still fourteen.”

“I just can’t call her Shirley. She’ll always be Mrs. Tam to me.” Silas didn’t feel like he had permission to call her by her first name. Not because Mrs. Tam herself minded. It was simply the past inserting itself again.

“Anyway, the counter sounds great.”

“I hope it will be. It’ll take a lot of time to measure and install, especially since some of the work has to be done on site after closing or early in the morning.”

“Sounds like you’re getting a lot of work coming your way,” Luke said.

“I’m definitely busy. Your brother came by and asked me about reworking some of his kitchen.”

“Which brother?”

“The one with the old house and the new girlfriend,” Silas said. “You think you’ll be best man?”

His brows went up. “Nico? It’s true they’re already talking about getting married, but they just met, really. I thought they’d have a long engagement. At least a year.” He paused. “Ok, I guess they’ve been going out a few months but really, in the scheme of things, they just met.”

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“He didn’t say anything to me. I just got the impression it was pretty serious since he’d asked her opinion on the kitchen remodel. You don’t like her?” Things would get complicated if the rest of the family didn’t like Nico’s girlfriend. Silas had only seen her at Arcadia Valley’s library, where she was the director, but he’d gotten the impression she would fit right in with the Delis family. He was good at getting a feel for a person. That’s what had made him such a good con artist. Those days were behind him, but the skill of reading someone hadn’t gone away.

“No, I think she’s great. I’m just surprised.” Luke seemed to be having trouble absorbing the idea of his older brother getting married again. “They do spend a lot of time together. They have this thing about working in the garden. I mean, I love my garden. Nothing like fresh tomatoes, but they’re really into it. She keeps talking about what she’s going to grow next. She might be a little obsessed.”

Silas smiled and said nothing. Luke would think he was crazy if he learned how much time Silas spent in his garden. It was one of the biggest draws to returning to Arcadia Valley. He knew the seasons and what kind of produce grew well. He wasn’t a picky eater, but he could never get used to store bought vegetables. They seemed almost flavorless.

Luke went on. “After Laura died, he just never seemed interested in anybody. Seems kind of sudden.”

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Silas shrugged. “Not that I know much about it, but I think that’s the way it happens. You never hear about people falling for each other after being friends for ten years.”

“Or enemies,” Luke said. “I think that’s just something girls picked up from *Pride and Prejudice* where the guy acts like a jerk and the girl falls for him anyway.”

Silas laughed. “They all want Mr. Darcy but if we acted like that in real life, we’d never get another date.” He’d done much worse than Mr. Darcy and although a lot of people in town were willing to give him another chance, there were some who would never come within a mile of him again, and he didn’t blame them. God had forgiven him, but plenty of people weren’t going to follow His lead.

“Hey, guys.” A voice sounded over Silas’s shoulder and he turned to see Stavros, Luke’s brother. “Silas,” he said, offering his hand. “Good to see you.”

Silas shook his hand, wishing he felt comfortable thanking Stavros for what he did on a daily basis. A therapist for juvenile delinquents the bookish younger brother had a quiet way about him that Silas had seen before. It was the calm and surety of a man who knew his purpose in life. There had been a man like that where Silas had been incarcerated, a person who took the time to reach out to every young man who might be looking for help. “I thought you lived in Pocatello.” *Where I used to be locked up*, he didn’t add.

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“He does. Just back for a quick meeting,” Luke explained. “He already harassed me this morning. Now it’s round two, I guess.”

Stavros grinned. “Always a pleasure. And maybe you’re following me. This is my favorite place to eat.” He held up his cardboard box of leftovers. “Fire and Brimstone is vegan friendly.”

Silas tried to cover his surprise. How strange that Stavros was a vegan and Nico was a butcher. Luke caught his eye and smiled, knowing exactly what he was thinking. “We’re all about diversity and freedom, as long as you think Greeks are the best,” Luke said with a deadpan expression.

“Ahh, well, my Irish ancestors might disagree but since my family is more recently hailing from Louisiana, I think I’ll just keep my mouth shut.” Silas mimed zipping his lips.

“Louisiana, really?” Stavros sounded surprised.

“Sure. I still have cousins there. My mom always said she was going back to visit someday but...” His words trailed off into an awkward silence.

“I’m sorry to hear about your mom,” Stavros said.

“Thank you.” Silas cleared his throat.

“We have more mom than we need. We can loan you some extra whenever you need any,” Luke said.

Stavros choked out a laugh. “I’m telling her you said that.”

“Go ahead, pipsqueak.” Luke lifted a fist and narrowed his eyes.

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Still laughing, Stavros said, "Well, I've gotta go. See you guys later." He waved good bye and was gone.

"Small town. You don't just see all your friends but you're related to half of them." Luke's expression changed to one of surprise. "Hey, that's Violet and Jamie by the door." He stood up and waved.

Silas glanced toward the door and felt his heart sink to his shoes. Jamie was grinning and waving back. Violet looked just the same as she had a few weeks ago. Maybe a little more flushed from the heat. Her silky black hair was cut in a sharp bob just below her chin and she was dressed casually in a T-shirt and jeans. Silas was suddenly aware of the fact he hadn't changed from working all day in the shop and he brushed at the light film of sawdust still clinging to the sleeves of his plaid shirt.

He said quickly under his breath, "I'm sure they want to eat alone. Let's say 'hi' and let them sit somewhere else."

Luke only had time to throw him a confused look before Violet and Jamie arrived at their table.

"It's like a class reunion," Luke said and Silas wanted to drop through the floor.

"Yeah, the joys of living in a small town. You get to see your high school classmates every day." There was an edge to Violet's voice.

"Why don't you guys sit with us?" Luke pulled out a chair on either side of the table.

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“Are you sure? We don’t want to interrupt your guy time.” Jamie was already settling into the chair beside him.

Violet stood there, unmoving. She had fixed her eyes on Jamie as if hoping the woman would hear her unspoken plea and get up.

Silas cleared his throat. “We’d love for you to join us.”

It seemed as if she wasn’t going to respond but after several seconds, Violet slowly lowered herself into the chair next to him.

“Hey, look.” Jamie reached out and grabbed the paperback. “Looks like something Violet would read.”

Silas seriously doubted that. Maybe the cover reminded Jamie of a Gothic romance. “More people have seen the movie.”

Violet leveled a look at him. “You always have a smooth explanation ready.”

He blinked in surprise. She was quoting from the *Maltese Falcon*, Joel Cairo to be exact. He’d read that line not five minutes before. “What do you want me to do? Learn to stutter?” he quoted back.

She didn’t smile at their exchange. He felt his stomach drop at the uncomfortable parallels between himself and Sam Spade. Sly, shifty, and always making sure he came out on top.

Luke looked from Violet to Silas, and seemed to decide he didn’t want to know what they were saying.

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“So, what have you guys been up to today?” he asked Jamie.

“We’ve been moving boxes into my classroom all day. We’re not really fit for company,” she said.

“What? You both look great,” Luke said, giving them each an appreciative smile. “Hey, Violet, did you know Silas has a mastiff, too?”

She looked at him for the first time. Her expression wasn’t one of pleasant surprise. “I did not.”

Luke went on. “That’s pretty weird, isn’t it? How many people have that kind of dog? I don’t even think I’d seen one before Thor, and now there are two.” Silas tried to give Luke a ‘change the subject’ look, but he didn’t seem to notice. He went on, “You know how people look like their pets? Well, Loki is really tall and all black.”

“Oh, but that thing about people resembling their dogs wouldn’t work for Violet,” Jamie said, holding up a finger. “I mean, Thor is huge and some of Violet’s eighth graders are taller than she is.”

Silas didn’t want to comment but found himself saying, “Thor, as in Chris Hemsworth?”

“As in son of Odin. You know, Norse mythology,” she answered. Her tone implied that he, in fact, did not know. “So, you named your dog Loki. As in Tom Hiddleston?” Violet asked. Her expression said that she already knew the answer.

“As in Loki, enemy of Thor. You know, Norse mythology,” Silas said.

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Jamie stared, looking from Silas to Violet. “That’s weird. Isn’t that weird? I mean, how many people have that kind of dog and then name them after somebody related to Odin. I don’t even know who that is, honestly.”

“Yeah, that’s weird.” Luke was frowning at the two of them as if they’d arranged it all beforehand and simply neglected to let him in on the joke.

Silas shrugged. “Coincidence. Loki was a rescue. I just got her a few months ago and her name was Lucky. I thought it really didn’t suit her, especially since all they used her for was breeding, but didn’t want to change it too much since she’s already three years old. I’ve always liked that character from the comic books so...” He didn’t know why he felt he needed to clarify, except that people often chose mastiffs for because they made good guard dogs. Not as aggressive as Dobermans, not as friendly as Great Danes. But he hadn’t gone in search of a giant dog. He had nothing to prove. He hadn’t even been looking for a dog. She’d been rescued from a man who didn’t value anything about her except her ability to produce purebred mastiffs. Loki had arrived in his life like a gift, as if she had chosen him.

“Thor’s a rescue, too. Sad how many people feel the need to use dogs as personal statement on their toughness.” She sounded slightly less antagonistic. But her expression said she suspected he chose Loki because he needed to bolster his tough guy persona. Well, news flash. He really didn’t need any help in that

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area. A lot of people in Arcadia Valley still gave him wary looks.

There was a short pause where it seemed Luke and Jamie expected them to bond over their dogs, but Silas stared at the table top and waited for someone to change the subject. If it were any other person in Arcadia Falls, they'd be planning doggy play dates and swapping tips on how to keep their lovable monsters out of trouble.

"I wish my parents hadn't sent me to the big high school. I would have loved having a smaller class," Jamie said. "I think it's great that you guys pretty much grew up together. Kindergarten to senior year, right?"

"Yep. Twelve years, thirty people." Luke paused, as if he were just remembering something. "I mean, not everybody stayed for all twelve years. People came and went, but on the whole—"

"It's okay. I think everybody here knows I got sent to juvie." Silas was touched that Luke had tried to gloss over the fact he'd been arrested, convicted and sent away from their small Christian high school, but there was really no need to worry about his feelings. He deserved whatever came his way.

"Oh." Jamie glanced around. "I didn't. But don't fill me in. I'm sure it's not important now."

"Really?" Violet asked, giving her a sharp look.

"You think so?" Silas said at the same time.

They locked gazes. Clearly Violet agreed with him. A person's criminal history was very relevant. He

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appreciated all the talk of fresh starts and giving the benefit of the doubt, but he'd certainly want to know if someone had been a thief, no matter how far in the past it was. As much as he wished he could just wipe away what he'd done, there was no denying it.

Violet didn't blink, almost daring him to say something.

He looked away. Sometimes silence was the best answer. He'd paid his dues and made amends as best he could. His mother had made him work off everything he'd stolen and apologize to every victim face to face. He didn't know what else Violet wanted him to do. There were some sins against others you just couldn't work off or make up for, no matter how hard you tried.

Luke said, "And Violet went to a different school for a while, didn't you?"

"Right," she said, the line of her mouth going tight. "Silas made my life such a misery that I had to leave. If I'd known he was on the verge of getting arrested, I would have tried to survive a few more weeks."

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