

THE LAST GRIFFIN

Chapter 1

by

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THE LAST GRIFFIN

Chapter 1

The silence of the attack surprised Olivia Bonaparte. She wasn't sure what she thought that kind of thing should have sounded like, but silence hadn't been it.

It was eleven p.m. on Christmas Eve in Boulder, Colorado, and the whole night had been quiet. As she walked home from her job as a bartender at Q's, a local bistro at the open air Pearl Street Mall, snow fell in thick wet flakes, hiding the sky and anything more than a few feet away. It muffled the night sounds: car engines, horns, voices, and shouts. She didn't see the dark shapes skulking behind her, nor did she hear their footsteps.

She had no reason to worry. The way home to her Spruce Street apartment was well lit and usually busy with other pedestrians, though she hadn't seen many that night. The peace of the season surrounded her. Even her normally raucous neighbors were silent. No televisions or radios invaded the building with carols or commercials. From a few doors down came the soft strains of laughter. Had all but one family gone away for the holidays?

As she opened the door to her home, something heavy landed between her shoulder blades, knocking her to the floor. Two intruders barreled into the apartment. The ricocheting door trapped a third attacker outside and he pulled it off its hinges, splintering the wood. The sound echoed loudly in the quiet entryway. She'd never forget it. Her neighbors must have heard it. Help would come soon.

Though she only saw the three attackers, she almost felt the presence of more waiting not far away. Of course, that could have been her imagination. Like cowards, her muggers wore red-brown bear costumes and flanked her as she struggled to her feet. In Miss Atwood's self-defense class, she'd learned a wide, defensive stance and she took that now, rolling her hands into loose fists. Specific moves eluded her; she just hoped instinct would take over. The yell that bubbled in her throat died away as the bear-men attacked, quiet as grave-robbers.

Desperate, Olivia fought, connecting her boots to shin bones and knees, and her fists to everything she could reach. Still, the men threw her to the hard linoleum like a rag doll. On the floor, she continued to kick, connecting more than once with rigid bone. She wrapped her hands around legs and bit. She thought there'd be some screams or shouts at least. But the only sounds were grunts, growls, and deep raspy breaths. The sounds scored across her mind, and she knew she'd remember them forever.

Her ribs snapped under one kick and another brought an ache deep in her back where she figured her right kidney was located. Then all fight fled her and she huddled as tightly as she could into a ball. This would ruin the holiday for her neighbors. Bright wrapping paper and ribbons would have a darkened hue, hymn singers would be a tad more somber and everyone would be dressed in black. No longer would she be thought of as the plain girl down the hall. She would be remembered as the girl who ruined Christmas. Would anyone tell Miss Atwood at the orphanage? Or would the elderly woman learn of her death from the newspaper? Olivia was pretty sure the final blow would come soon, but suddenly the brutes scattered.

It was silent for only a moment, and then footsteps pounded outside and across the floor. Unable to see the door from her position near the opposite end of her couch, she called, "Who is it?"

When no answer came, she turned her head in a small movement. White-hot pain in her back penalized her, but she could see a tall, clean-shaven man with curly brown hair approaching. Police? So quickly? Apparently, her neighbors had heard. He squatted beside her, his knees

popping at the effort. His nose looked like it had been broken once or twice, the bump exaggerated and slightly skewed off-center.

His brow was furrowed with ... what? Confusion? Concern? His rich, brown eyes stayed focused on hers. It felt as if something tangible passed between them. He frowned as if he felt it too, and it worried him. He took her hand with a gentle touch. "Medical help is coming. Hang on."

She squeezed her fingers around his, and he rubbed his thumb across the back of her fist. He said, "I'm Brian Merullo. What's your name?"

"Olivia Bonaparte."

"While we wait for the ambulance, tell me a little about yourself, Olivia."

"I'm twenty-three, and I work Q's as a bartender. There's not much else to tell."

He asked a few more questions. Her answers were basically all the same:

"No, I didn't see their faces."

"No, I don't know of any enemies."

"No, nothing out of the ordinary happened the past few weeks, or month even, except this attack."

Olivia opened her mouth to say more, but crisp wind blew through her ruined door. Shivers from cold or shock rippled through her. Reaching across her body, he pulled a couch blanket to cover her. Close to her face, like he was, the scent of snow and mud from his street clothes filled her nostrils. He held her chilled hands in his warm ones and talked to her about anything that seemed to cross his mind. She was glad to have something to take her thoughts off the pain and terror she felt shaking inside her skin. His dialogue was as gentle as his voice, and she found it easy to listen, though wave after wave of nausea and deep-dwelling pain rolled over her.

At last, she heard the cry of a couple sirens entering the parking lot. At the same time, a black-haired man arrived. He spoke to Brian in a voice as smooth as ice. "They're gone."

Brian's gaze locked with Olivia's, and she again felt that connection pass between them. What was that? Her brown-haired knight loosened his grip on her hand. "I'm going to find the men who hurt you. Just hang on, okay?"

She wanted to hold him back, to say, "Wait! No! I need you here." Anything to keep him from leaving. She clenched his hand as hard as she could. She needed his strength; it would keep her safe. He smiled an apology, worked his hand out of her grasp and left as ambulance workers in bright coats and white pants entered. The paramedics gently probed her body, sending Olivia into spasms every time one of them touched the small of her back. It seemed like forever, but at last they decided she was stable enough to transport to the hospital.

Uniformed cops arrived. She asked one, "Where are the men who rescued me? I want to thank them."

She looked for Brian, the man with the mesmerizing brown eyes, but she didn't see him anywhere. He'd probably gone to interview neighbors. He was on the job, after all. Still, she felt the keen edge of disappointment.

Olivia was lifted onto the transport gurney. The harsh bite of pain enveloped her completely, and she lost consciousness.

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