

Prologue

His escort said nothing, rather pointing out a turn or extending a hand to have him stop.

The walkway was pleasant enough, he thought.

Small trees lining the path gave it a campus feel, but the solid “clank” of the gate behind them brought reality back into focus. At the third gate he was pointed toward a small garden. The escort then silently turned and left.

Two women sat at a table, playing cards. They pretended not to notice as he walked by. Another sat on the ground, leaning against a poplar tree with a book. Her eyes met his briefly without any change of expression.

As the path curved to the right he saw her. Sitting alone at a round concrete table, she held a paper cup with both hands.

The woman did not look up as he sat down across from her.

“I got up early for this,” she said tersely.

“Good to see you, too,” he responded in a low, controlled tone.

The woman sipped at her coffee and he glanced about the area nervously.

“We’re quite alone,” she offered. “They don’t call it “Cup Cake” for nothing.” Her reference was to the nickname of the facility.

“You doing alright?” he asked, wishing immediately he had not.

Her eyes nearly glowed red as she lifted her head to stare at her guest.

“Just peachy,” got through her tightened lips. “How are you?”

“Look...we’re sorry it worked out this way. You know it’s for the best.”

“Why are you here?” she suddenly demanded.

“Have you heard anything?”

“Don’t play games,” she flipped her cup sideways, emptying the contents onto the grass. “Get to it.”

“It’s started... Actually been going on for over a month by the time we found out and added it up.”

“You’re still babbling.”

“Somebody is moving on the team.”

Her eyes lit up and she sat straighter on the hard bench.

“Really?”

“Five or six so far,” he went on. “Have you heard from him?”

She shook her head gently and smiled.

“Not every offer is accepted, my friend,” she told him with a laugh. “You can let them know I haven’t heard from him.”

The guest stood abruptly.

“You find that humorous?” he growled softly. “This could take a bad turn and many others end up in jail...or worse.”

The woman lifted her head, still smiling.

“I can make that happen any time and don’t you forget it.” She crushed the paper cup in her hand and added. “You tell him to sleep well...as long as I stay,” she looked around her surroundings with a pause, “happy...for lack of a better word.”

The threat was clear but so was the fact that she knew nothing. The man walked away as she raised her voice for the first time.

“I may need a new phone,” she taunted him.