

Chapter 19

When breakfast had been finished and they all felt stuffed, the girls insisted on clearing the table, over Skeet's objections. Chapin washed and Jaque dried while Brian and Skeet wiped down the table.

"You've got a real winner there, Chapin. Talented, cute as hell and on top of that, he can cook. That's a triple threat if I ever saw one." Jaque said under her breath.

"Don't I know it. I think I might have hit the jack pot this time," Chapin said, smiling.

"What do you think he's gonna do about Stan?"

"I don't know, but I think it's going to drive him crazy if he ignores it. I hope I can convince him," Chapin said.

"All right, what are you girls whispering about over there?" Skeet said wryly.

"Oh just about how cute you two are. Nothing more," Jaque said, then the two of them burst into laughter.

"Well, Skeet. What do you wanna do? Should we start looking for Stan?" Brian asked. Brian was not one to beat around the bush or be subtle. Chapin was actually pleased that Brian had brought it up instead of her.

Skeet took a deep breath and looked down at the table. "I don't really want to, but it seems like I should. So let's see what turns up. You know, Shawn is always up on where everyone is. Let's get him over here. Maybe he can help."

"Alright, but he's gonna be pissed. You might have to make more Indian Omelettes," Brian said and pulled his cell phone out of his robe and began to dial.

"Well, if it's all right, I'm gonna go grab a quick shower and put on some clothes. I'll be back in a few," Jaque announced as she headed out the kitchen door towards Brian's house.

"Shawn's on his way. He said Stan is going to be a tough one to find. He's pretty much dropped off the face of the earth. No one has heard from him publically in years."

"Looks like we've got our work cut out for us," Chapin said with a sigh. "I've got some contacts through the magazine I can call. We'll see what that turns up. You boys got a computer around here? I mean one connected to the net."

Skeet led her into the den and powered up a computer that sat by the fireplace. There was still a chill in the air so he started a fire while Chapin and Brian poured over the screen. Chapin tapped away at the keys and they were soon joined by Jaque. Skeet settled onto the couch and thumbed through a copy of 'Bon Appetite' while the other three continued the search. Skeet was halfway

through the magazine when the doorbell rang. Neither Chapin, Jaque or Brian stirred and Skeet made his way to the front door to let in Shawn.

“Hiya Skeets! Decided to track down your better half huh? Good move! I always said he was the talented one,” Shawn said with a grin as he slapped Skeet on the back. He was wearing a backpack and a thick blue coat and a red scarf, which he removed and handed to Skeet. They made their way back to the den and Shawn set his backpack down tossed his coat on the couch and warmed himself for a moment by the fire.

“You’re right, Shawn. He seems to have just dropped out of site in the early 90’s. I can’t even find a good lead. You have any ideas?” Chapin asked. She was getting exasperated and somewhat embarrassed. She was a reporter. Research was supposed to be one of her strong points and she really wanted to find some information to help.

“Well, let’s see. I was thinking back and the last thing I think I heard was a long time ago from Larry Mullen who said he had seen him on a trip home to Ireland. That may give us a place to start,” Shawn said.

“Do you have the name of a town or anything?” Chapin asked.

“Not really, but I know that Larry is from Artane, just outside of Dublin, but that’s been a really long time ago that I talked to him.”

Chapin began tapping at the keyboard again but with little success.

As Shawn stood there he began to sniff the air. His diminished site was obviously compensated by his sense of hearing, which is what made him such a great engineer, but he was no slouch in the smell department either, and he was picking up some unusual scents.

“Hey! You guys had Indian Omelets and didn’t invite me? I am thoroughly insulted!” Shawn announced. “Well can a guy at least get a cup of hot tea on a cold morning?”

“Food prep! That’s my department,” Skeet said as he headed off to the kitchen.

“I’m coming up empty. Did he say anything else? Maybe where in Artane he saw him or something?” Chapin asked.

“Not really. He said he saw him in a pub. Go figure. He didn’t really give a name or anything. “ Shawn paused and thought for a moment. “Although...”

“Yea?” said Chapin.

“He said he had been down paying respects to some friends who had died in a big nightclub fire. He said he wandered into a pub just after to have a beer and there was Stan.” Shawn said.

“So there was a fire in a town a long time ago and we are looking for a bar close by to find Stan who happened to be in there. Just great!” Brian sighed. He was becoming frustrated too. “I think this may be....”

“Wait!” Chapin cut him off. “It says here in the 80’s there was a fire at the Stardust Disco in Artane and 48 people died. It was pretty famous. Maybe that’s the one?”

“Stardust...yea, that sounds familiar!” Shawn exclaimed.

“How the hell did you find...” Brian started.

“No time to explain. Let’s see. It says that the Stardust was on the site now occupied by the Butterly Business Park. I’m not sure what to do with it, but we have a scrap. Let me see if I can find some bars in the area,” Chapin said.

“Pubs, missy. They call them pubs. You have to learn to sprechen zee right lingo!” Shawn joked.

“Yes sir!” Chapin said, firing off a mock salute. “But I’m not quite sure how to find bars errr, PUBS in the area.”

“Why don’t you just look up his name in the phone book?” Jaque asked. “I mean, that’s what we do here.”

They all exchanged glances in silence for a moment. “Can’t hurt to try,” Brian said.

Chapin tapped away at the keyboard. “There doesn’t seem to be a Balch listed in Artane,” she said. “But it was a good idea, Jaque. I wonder if we can try something similar for the pub. I mean, those iPhones can do it.”

Chapin tapped some more but to no avail. Other than the nightclub, which was a long shot, they had nothing.

Skeet came back in with a steaming cup of tea for Shawn along with a pastry. “Thought you might could use a little sustenance too,” he said, handing the mug and small plate to Shawn.

“Well, thanks,” he said half heartedly looking at the plate. “But it ain’t no Indian Omelet!” he said and took a big bite out of the pastry.

They continued the search for the next 3 hours with Chapin tapping away at the keyboard and Shawn, Brian and Jaque offering suggestions about what to look for and where they might find it.

“Wait, I may have found something here. I found a listing for a Holly Balch in a small town nearby called Harmonstown,” Chapin announced.

“Well we aren’t looking for Holly, we’re looking for Stan,” Brian protested.

“I know, but it’s the only Balch even close to there. There’s a good possibility that they may be related or at least know something about him. It’s our only lead so far,” said Chapin.

“So I guess we should call,” Jaque suggested.

They all stood around looking expectantly at each other.

“Oh get me the phone, I’ll do it,” Chapin said. Brian picked the phone up off the table and handed it to Chapin. She dialed the number on the screen and waited. “It says it’s been disconnected. Great. Now what?”

“Just keep looking, I guess,” remarked Brian.

“Look we need to solve this once and for all. I’m tired of this and I just want to find out the truth and be done. Brian, let’s just catch a flight to Ireland and find him, assuming he’s still there. Chapin, you stay here and keep working the internet.” Skeet was quite forceful.

“Look, I’ve got a laptop, I can search on the trip, but I’m going with you. I’ve got time off at work and I want to come,” Chapin declared.

“You don’t have to do that. Brian and I can handle...”

“I’m sure you can, but I want to go, so I can go with you or I can tag along on my own. Your choice, sport!”

“You’ve got work. You shouldn’t have to worry about my problems.”

“You announced that I was your girlfriend so now your problems are my problems. Let me make this simple for you. I can come and be in the hotel bed with you or I can come and be in a room by myself across the hall. It’s your choice.”

“Ummm, be careful with this one, Skeeter. If you make the wrong choice we are DEFINITELY gonna take away your man card!” Shawn announced.

“Well, I have no intention of arguing with a woman in my bed. Let’s book a flight and some rooms,” Skeet said, finally relenting.

“I’ve got some contacts around that might know something but it’ll take me a couple of days to track them down. You guys go and I’ll man the command post here and see what I can ferret out. By the way, Skeet. You SO owe me Indian Omelets now!” Shawn said.

Brian grabbed the phone and began to book the trip. It was a duty he was used to performing for Skeet and himself. But when he began making the hotel reservations, he became a little flustered. “Skeet, ummm... I am assuming one room with one bed for you and Chapin?”

“Well, I’m certainly not sleeping with you, Brian!” Chapin giggled.

“Don’t think I’d be too fond of that idea myself, sugar,” giggled Jaque.

“It’s settled then. I will be sleeping with Chapin,” Skeet said with a smile.

Brian turned a light shade of red and turned his attention back to making reservations on the phone. He jotted some information in a small notebook and hung up the phone.

“Ok, we leave from O’Hare in 4 hours, so we better get going. I’ll drop Jaque off at her place if you can drop Shawn off, then we can meet at O’Hare,” Brian suggested.

“I need to grab a few things first. At least a change of panties for God’s sake.” Chapin announced.

“Then we better haul ass. Brian and I pretty much keep a couple of bags ready to go so we don’t have much to pack. Let us just grab them and then we can head out.” Skeet and Brian headed off to their respective parts of the estate while Shawn, Chapin and Jaque stayed in the den and chatted. Within a few minutes, they reappeared, ready to go. They all headed out the front door. Shawn, Chapin and Skeet headed for the SUV parked in the drive way while Jaque waited at the front door while Brian locked up.

Suddenly a crack rang out, causing Chapin to jump. Startled, they all looked around for the source of the noise. Skeet saw a slight movement in the bushes but before he could say anything, a second crack rang out and Shawn winced and fell to the ground. Chapin rolled toward Shawn and began to assess his situation.

“Call 911!” Chapin screamed. Brian rolled on his side and reached for his cell phone. He and Jaque had dropped down in front of the door at the second crack and Brian had covered Jaque with his body to protect her. He dialed the phone and began to breathlessly try to tell the dispatcher about the situation.

Skeet placed himself between Chapin, Shawn and where he had seen the movement. He began scanning the bushes to see if he could catch a glimpse of anything. Just to his left, he saw someone trying to run. They were headed toward the back of the house. Skeet jumped up and began to run as fast as he could around the other side of the house.

He rounded the corner of the house and entered the backyard. He watched as the gate that was the entrance to the garden on the other side of the house, swung open. While Skeet was in decent shape because of all those long sweaty sets on the road, running was not something he did a lot, so he was winded. He began running an intercept course with the man. He could see a rifle in his hand, which was obviously slowing him down, so Skeet thought he stood a chance.

He ran behind a row of bushes and, as he saw the figure passing in front of him, dove at his knees. He hit the runner on the knees and heard a crunch. He pulled himself up and found himself looking into Jack Palero’s eyes, just as a bullet whizzed by his ear. Skeet pulled his arm

back, balled up his fist and punched Jack right in the jaw with his right hand and grabbed the rifle with his left. Jack tried to struggle underneath him.

Thoughts of all the trouble he had caused them, not to mention his stalking and abuse of Chapin ran through his mind and rage began to build. “Stop it, you fucker!” Skeet shouted, but Jack took a swing at him. Suddenly the rage overflowed and Skeet yanked the rifle away from Jack’s hand, spun it around and smacked him as hard as he could in the chin with the butt. Jack went limp.

“Oh my God! Did you kill him?” Chapin asked. The panic was evident in her voice.

Skeet, who very rarely lost his cool, stood up with a cold look in his eye. He spun the rifle around and aimed it directly at Jack’s head. “Now there’s a thought,” he said. “He did, after all, shoot my friend, torture my girlfriend, destroyed private property, trespassed on my place, tried to get me arrested for kidnapping and oh yea, by the way, TRIED TO KILL ME. I think shooting this delusional pile of horse shit would be justified and no court in the country would convict me of a thing.

The hair on the back of Chapin’s neck stood on end. She wasn’t sure what to make of Skeet at this point. It was a side of him she had never seen, but she tried to remain calm and talk him down.

“You’re right, baby. But he’s not worth the hassle. The cops are on their way and they’ll take care of him.” She tried to speak in a calming voice but inside, she was panicking.

“Or I could save them the trouble,” he said. He reached up and cocked the hammer on the rifle as Jack began to stir.

“Sweetie, how about if we let the cops worry with him and we worry about Shawn?”

Shawn. Skeet’s mind had been so consumed he had forgotten about Shawn. “Is...is he ok?” Skeet asked.

“I think so. We’re waiting on the ambulance, though. You should come check on him,” she said, inching slowly toward him.

“But what about him? We can’t just let him run away.”

“I don’t think he’s going anywhere, baby,” she said, her eyes moving slowly down Jack’s body. “Looks like he had an accident.”

Skeet looked down and saw that Jack’s left leg was broken in two at the knee. “It must have been when I tackled him.”

“You mean it must have been when he fell down.”

Skeet put his thumb on the hammer of the rifle and slowly lowered it.

Jack looked up at him. "I knew you didn't have the stones. Chapin wants somebody with guts, and you obviously don't have any. You can never take her away from me. Isn't that right Chapin? Tell him. TELL HIM!"

They both stared silently at him. It was finally dawning on them how messed up Jack really was.

"Sir, please put down the rifle and step away with your hands in the air."

Chapin and Skeet turned around and saw two police officers standing about 20 feet away, both with their pistols drawn.

Skeet put one hand in the air and put the rifle down with the other. One of the officers walked up and handcuffed Skeet. "Great. Just great. Here we go again," he lamented.