

Moira McBain and Andy Hall pulled up in the driveway of the Cronlords' two story house, the afternoon sun beaming down on their small golden car. "Y'know," Moira remarked to Andy as the car slowed to a stop. "This is the part of the job I've never gotten used to."

"What's that?" Andy inquired, eyeing her curiously.

"How d'ya tell someone that some kids are gonna burn their house down?"

Andy gave her a bemused expression. "Just like that, I think. Can't think of a lot of ways to sugarcoat that particular piece of news."

Moira laughed softly. "All right then," she told him, taking a breath as she pushed her car door open. "Let's go get this over with."

With Andy behind her, Moira walked to the doorway and rang the bell. "Just a minute!" came a thick, rich voice from the other side of the door, and a moment later, a woman stood in the doorway. Curvy and medium-height, the woman positively exuded authority, her green eyes piercing and dissecting both Moira and Andy within a second of seeing them. Even after several years as an FBI agent, Moira had only rarely met someone with whom she felt so ill at ease.

"May I help you two?" the woman asked, giving them a cheerful smile.

"Yes, I think so," Moira answered, reaching into her jacket and pulling out her badge, displaying it for the woman. "I'm Moira McBain, this is Andy Hall, we're with the FBI. You're Ainsling Cronlord?"

"That would be me," Ainsling answered in a clipped tone. It wasn't rude, but it wasn't particularly welcoming, either. "Have I done something wrong?"

"Oh, no," Moira laughed briefly. "It's nothing like that. Actually, we're here because we're concerned about what other people might do *to* you."

"Oh?" Cronlord asked, raising an eyebrow.

Moira nodded. "I'm afraid so. May we come in? It shouldn't take long."

There was a hesitation, ever-so-slight, before the woman smiled and answered, "Of course, yes." She was no doubt hoping that the two agents would not notice it, but Moira did. The woman stood aside, allowing Moira and Andy to enter, then led them to her living room. She gestured them toward the couch, while she herself took a large, cushioned easy chair to one side, her posture almost regal.

Andy's eyes immediately fell to a picture that sat on the coffee table in front of the couch, a picture of Ainsling standing next to a tall, lanky man with a young, blonde girl in front of them. "This your family?" Andy asked, looking up at her, pointing to the picture.

"They are indeed," she answered with a grin. "My husband sells insurance, and our Alex just started tenth grade this week."

"You must be very proud," Andy commented.

"Of course," Ainsling replied. "So, you said we were in some kind of danger?"

"Unfortunately, you might be," Moira told her. "Are you familiar with the recent rash of home fires in this area?"

"Yes," Ainsling answered immediately, and Moira noted that she seemed not the slightest

bit surprised at the inquiry. “The newspapers say the police think it’s arson. Do you believe we might be a target?”

“We raided an abandoned glue factory this morning that we think was being used by the people responsible for the fires,” Andy told her. “They weren’t there, but they left a list of names behind. A significant number of people on the list correspond with victims of the house fires. We’re sending agents to the homes of the other people on the list to warn them to be alert, since we think they may be the next targets.”

Ainsling nodded. “Very courteous of you,” she told Andy, in her clipped tone, dissecting the man once again with her eyes. “So, anything in particular we should be on the lookout for?”

“Well, we think the perpetrators are young – some adolescents, some in their twenties – so, if you see any kids lurking around that you don’t know....”

“I’ll be on the lookout,” Ainsling replied briskly, giving a perfunctory nod and seeming almost disinterested.

Andy’s eyes glanced to the picture, then back to Ainsling. “How old is your daughter?”

“Alex? She’s fifteen.”

“Do you know all her friends?” Andy asked her.

“Who ever knows all of a fifteen year old child’s friends?” Ainsling laughed dismissively, standing from her chair. “Certainly not her parents. Would you two like some tea, or something?” she asked, starting to walk out of the room, presumably toward the kitchen.

“It’s an important question, Mrs. Cronlord,” Moira put in. “We don’t know exactly how these kids are getting close enough to the houses to burn them down. For all we know, they could be getting the owners to let them in voluntarily, claiming to be friends of their kids or something.”

Cronlord turned her head, her mouth opening to reply, but before she could actually speak, she tripped over a book that someone had left on the floor. She fell with a yelp, her eyes widening in surprise, and as she did, a necklace flew out from underneath her blouse, a necklace with an intricately-carved metal symbol hanging on it. It was a symbol which, to Moira, was all-too-familiar.

“Dammit, Alex,” Ainsling grunted, anger seething in her voice. “I told you to clean up after yourself—”

But before she could even finish her sentence, Moira was up from the couch, charging toward Ainsling, grabbing her by the collar as she tried to right herself, and slamming her against the back wall with a *CRASH!* Moira took vengeful satisfaction in Ainsling’s expression, which betrayed the first traces of fear that Moira had seen in the other woman’s face. “Wells Society, huh?” Moira snarled at her. “What the hell are you doing to that poor girl?”

“Excuse me?” Ainsling shot back, trying to feign surprise – but to Moira, it was an obvious ploy.

“I know who you people are,” Moira growled. “Your whole game is sacrificing your children to your *insane* religion. Give me one good reason not to call Child Welfare *right the*

fuck now.”

Ainsling’s fear disappeared instantly, replaced by a smug, almost predatory smile, and she replied coolly, “Because if you do, Agent McBain, you know perfectly well that they won’t find anything. If you know us as well as you claim – which you don’t, by the way – then you know we’re very good at covering our tracks. And I can assure you that, if I *do* get any calls from those folks, I’ll be having a talk with your supervisor at the FBI about the little assault you’re committing right now. So let’s just keep this whole thing our little secret, eh?”

Slowly, Moira released Ainsling, her face smoldering. She turned toward the door, beckoning Andy to follow her. “You’re lucky it’s my job to stop these adolescent arsonists, Mrs. Cronlord,” she told Ainsling as she headed for the door, not even turning to look at the other woman as she spoke. “Otherwise, I might just let you burn.”