



Twisted

LIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANDI BOYES

Twisted Lies

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Chapter One

““**Y**ou lying piece of shit!”

After grabbing the first thing I can get my hands on, I send it flying across the room. When the lit scented candle shatters into the wooden headboard a pair of handcuffs are dangling off, I suck in its citron blossom scent while screaming like a banshee.

I'm stunned.

Speechless.

Yet, oh so relieved.

If Isaac, my friend and boss, hadn't suggested I start my eight weeks of vacation a day early, I'd be none the wiser that my fiancé is a two-bit cheat. I was apprehensive about taking so much time off as it was, but in the year Cedric and I have known each other, we've only spent the equivalent of seventy hours in the same room. I wanted to know the man I was set to marry in a couple of months. I didn't want to be caught up in the chaotic storm adventurous men like Cedric instigate without any thoughts on the aftermath of their turbulent ways.

Thank God the twister ended before all my Amex points were cashed in.

I don't know why I expected better from Cedric. Our entire relationship has been one dangerous twister after another. We met at a surgical convention in Dallas. I thought he was a little cocky, but I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't flattered by his attention. A month after the convention, he accepted a position at Ravenshoe Private. Three months later, we were engaged.

It's been a crazy year, but I never anticipated this, and from the widening of Cedric's eyes when it dawns on him who threw the candle, he wasn't either.

"Twinkie Pie." He bats away the blonde whose waterfall locks are barely concealing the adulterous event occurring before my very eyes before he scuttles across the damp-with-sweat bedding. "You were meant to meet me at the airport tomorrow afternoon for our flight."

"I left early. I thought it would be nice to wake up in the same location as you on our first anniversary instead of in a different state." I wave my hand across the mountaintop views stretched as far as the eye can see. "The view was worth seven hours on the freeway, but the greeting could sure do *with some work!*" With my annoyance as piqued as my voice, my last three words come out as shouts. "We're supposed to be getting married in three months! We leave on a once-in-a-lifetime trip tomorrow afternoon. Yet, here you are, fucking a whore on the sheets your mother gifted us at our engagement party!"

"Hey," the blonde pipes up. I assume she's going to defend herself against the derogative name I called her but am proven wrong when she stammers out, "I thought we were going to see the lights of Paree together, Snookie Bear?"

Her pout enhances the plumpness of her lips from sucking my fiancé dry, and they make me utterly ropeable. "Oh, go ahead, sweetheart. Go see the *lights of Paree* with him." I

overemphasize her nasally voice while trying my darndest to impersonate her bimbo attitude. “Just make sure you clean the smegma from his cock before further oral activities.” She swishes her tongue around her mouth when I murmur, “A buildup of dick secretions causes all sorts of nasty issues if you swallow too much of it.”

When I turn on my heel, Cedric leaps out of bed. “Jae...” His chase-down isn’t to beg for forgiveness. He wants to pinch the last of my nerves. “If you no longer want to go on our little getaway, perhaps I could take Rosha with me. She’s never seen Paris—”

“Neither have I!” My half Australian, half Korean heritage echoes in my ears when my shouted words bounce off the thick wooden walls of the cabin. “That’s why we were going to *Paree*.” I’ve never believed in physical violence, but before I can remind myself of that, my knee pops into Cedric’s groin in sync with my purse, whacking him up the side of the head. “And I’d rather rot in hell than ever let *you* use *my* Amex points.”

After a final sneer, I continue my exit.

In good judgment, Cedric lets me leave.

While galloping down the stairs of the cabin, I grumble my annoyance about both his inability to grovel and for stupidly discounting the numerous rumors the past six months about him sleeping with interns at Ravenshoe Private.

Although this estate has been in his family’s vault of properties for almost a decade, this is the first time I’ve traveled here. With the holiday of a lifetime already maiming my stingy heart, I suggested that Cedric collect his ski equipment from the cabin instead of purchasing it new. I

thought it would save us a couple of dollars. In reality, it saved me thousands.

Even annulments are expensive these days.

I'm glad I am so frugal. If I hadn't been, every milestone I've achieved in the past ten years would have been null and void. I would have been back to square one.

My luck wanes when I slide into the driver's seat of my convertible. Within a second of stabbing the start button, the playlist I created for our trip commences blaring out of the speakers. It's brimming with heartfelt songs that tear my heart out as effectively as my tires shred up the salt Cedric's family laid in preparation for his arrival.

Do they know he's screwing a blonde-haired, blue-eyed hipster with an exotic name like Rosha in the master suite of their family cabin?

I bet they do.

Nothing gets past Cedric's mother. She knew her beloved son was planning to propose even before he asked her advice on what type of ring someone like me would like.

In case you're wondering, his swipe had nothing to do with my heritage. It was solely based on my intelligence.

According to Cedric's mother, I'm not his type. He likes busty girls with air for brains—*Rosha on tap*—something I'll never be even with me winning a handful of beauty contests during my teens. My green, almond-shaped eyes paired with my father's tanned skin gives me a distinct look not many mixed-race women have, and when added to the fact I'm a stickler for believing you are what you eat, I have unblemished skin that hides the fact I'm rarely seen without a book in my hand.

I don't read romance novels like the nurses at Ravenshoe Private. I love a good fiction book, but non-fiction medical theses are more my jam. Summarizing a seemingly impossible surgical procedure was one of the rare things Cedric and I had in common. He loved a good hypothesis on the anomalies of the human anatomy as much as me.

He just took his research one step further by conducting his revisions on breathing specimens instead of cadavers.

As the scene I interrupted rolls through my head like a film in a movie projector, I exit the windy driveway of the Lancaster winter estate. The roads are extremely slippery but isolated. It's almost midnight, so a lack of traffic is understandable, not to mention the fact that the Lancasters own almost every property from the foot of the mountain to its peak.

This region of Cataloochee is prime ski territory, and although you can ski at one of the many resorts located within the area, you won't see the Lancasters sharing their splendor any time soon.

They value exclusivity even more than morals.

My eyes snap from the road to the radio in my Audi S5 when the song Cedric proposed to booms from the speakers. While endeavoring to switch the song to one about cheating spouses getting what they deserve, the moonlight bouncing off my engagement ring captures my attention. It's a monstrosity of a ring that I happily stored in my locker at the beginning of every shift. It's too large to wear with gloves, and since they're a part of my personal protective equipment, I used them as my excuse not to wear a piece of jewelry that was meant to signify that Cedric and I were off the market.

God, I'm a fool.

How could I have not seen the signs sooner?

I'm not a first-year college student or a medical intern with no prior experience. I'm thirty-five years old, for crying out loud. I should have spotted Cedric's game plan from a mile away.

I probably would have if I hadn't been blinded by his handsome face and unblemished grin. It also doesn't help that he was my first serious boyfriend. You don't become the Chief Medical Officer of a world-renowned hospital just shy of your thirty-second birthday by scrolling dating app sites every night. I worked my butt off the past sixteen years, and what do I get for it? A cheating fiancé who wants to take his mistress on the global adventure you planned together.

As Cedric's final words ring in my ears on repeat, and before I can yank off the ring that exposes all my flaws, I dig my cell phone out of my medical bag. While darting my eyes between my phone screen and the road, I log into the travel app our itinerary is saved in, then click on the link to check-in for our flight tomorrow.

I'm not going to Paris—I'd rather volunteer to do every colonoscopy for the next calendar year than surround myself with loved-up couples in one of the most romantic cities in the world—but I am sure as hell going to make sure Cedric doesn't profit from my decade-long slog. I put in the hard yards to splurge on a trip of a lifetime, so only I will benefit from it.

My father's favorite saying is that you'll never hit a six with another man's bat, so if Cedric wants to take Rosha to see the lights of Paree, he'll need another batsman because his big hitter was just bowled out.

With my focus more on making sure I punch in the correct flight number than where I'm going, I don't spot the deer and her fawn on the road until it's too late to brake. I still do, but since I'll still collide into them at a speed that would kill them, I yank on the steering wheel. A pop sounds from my back tire a second before the car I bought after I was awarded the position of surgeon at Ravenshoe Private Hospital, and I sail over the picturesque landscape instead of around it.

There's no avoiding the collision I must inevitably face, so instead of bracing for impact, I send a silent prayer to God to make the suffering of my parents more bearable before I close my eyes and surrender to the peace engulfing me even faster than panic.

As the words of "Surrender Me" by Rise Up filter through my ears, the passenger side of my Audi impacts with the trunk of a massive pine tree. The jerking movement it rockets through my body forces my torso forward at a rate too fast for my seat belt to harness. I'm flung into the steering wheel a second before the collision twists my car around, so I travel the remaining three hundred feet backward.

Not knowing what's coming makes the impact of my ribs against the steering wheel less noticeable, but nothing can take away from the blinding pain that radiates through me when the back half of my car is crumbled by a second tree trunk.

It shoves me so far forward, within seconds, I'm trapped between the steering wheel, an airbag, and my seat. Then, not long after that, I black out due to excessive pain.

Chapter Two

By the time I come to, blood is coating my throat, my body is numb from the blistering cold temperatures both inside and outside my mangled car, and I'm terrified the cause of death on my death certificate will be cited as a mauling by a bear instead of a traffic accident.

I can't move my neck. Not only am I fearful of spinal damage, but I'm also terrified by the sound of snapping twigs in the distance. It doesn't take a genius to realize I'm not alone in this dense, dark forest, and the knowledge is terrifying.

The silent scream bubbling in my chest escapes my mouth when a dusting of hairs skim my forearm. They're thick and untamed, similar to a bear's fur prickling when it detects the distinct aroma of blood I'm striving to ignore.

Blood is a part of my life, but that doesn't mean I'm a fan of either its scent or prognosis.

"Please don't eat me. I'm too overcooked," I mumble through the wooziness, making my words drowsy and slow. "You want a ripe, young victim to devour. Someone like Rosha. I'm not her." *Ask my fiancé.*

My last three words are only for me. I'm too busy choking through the bile racing up my throat to articulate them out loud, but they're also embarrassing to admit.

No one wants to acknowledge they're someone's second choice.

"Please don't eat me," I repeat on a sob once I've cleared away the gunk unwillingly vacating my stomach by angling my head to the side.

I've made a mess of my shirt, but from the strands of almost black hair stuck in the cracked windscreen, a little bit of vomit on my favorite blouse is the least of my problems.

Although the pain the brief movement of my head zaps down my spine has me frantic, some good comes from it. A bear isn't approaching me. It's a man with big, calloused hands, matted hair that hangs to his waist, and enough facial hair I am confident I'm not the first person to mistake him for a wild animal.

"Help," I beg when he steps away from the wreckage instead of racing toward it like most people do when they stumble onto an accident.

Even when I'm not at work, I am forever on the clock. I've delivered babies on the side of freeways, stuck my finger into the gunshot wound of a victim to pinch an artery until first responders could arrive, and I've handled more than my share of traffic accidents.

Even if you don't have a medical degree, you don't leave someone stranded when they're in trouble. You're meant to help.

"Please," I cry when he continues retreating. "I'm stuck. I can't get out." My breathing turns even more irregular when my last confession sets off alarm bells in my head. "I also think I smell gas."

My chin quivers in sync with the brutal shake my confession causes my body. The last time I announced I could smell gas, the car a young woman was trapped in exploded. The blast was so brutal, it sent the man I was helping and me flying through the air. I don't know what injuries he endured from the blast, but I was handed a condition that almost ended my medical career before it had truly begun.

I don't know what compelled me to take that road home that night. There was a detour sign up on my way to the hospital I was completing my final year of residency at, but it was two blocks down from the road the accident was on. I guess you could say I didn't want to risk being detoured again, but part of me believes it was instinct. If I hadn't arrived when I did, who knows how long it would have been before help arrived.

Not that my presence did much good anyway. With the female driver deceased upon arrival, the next fifteen minutes were a frantic blur. I remember carnage and mayhem, then a massive blast that still rings in my ears to this very day.

The man I was helping before the explosion was nowhere to be seen when I woke dazed and confused in a local emergency room. I was left to slot the pieces of the puzzle together by myself. With a knock to the head making things extremely blurry, I had a lot of questions to answer without any real knowledge of what the hell had happened.

I think the male passenger was transferred to the same hospital as me, but I've never found any records about his admission, and I've been searching for years. He's the only one who can fill in the gaps that have kept me awake even a decade later.

“Please,” I cry out again, certain the heartache of being left to die alone is on par with discovering your fiancé in a compromising position with a woman a decade younger than him. Rosha would have been lucky to be twenty-one. “I don’t want to die alone.”

That isn’t anyone’s wish. It’s why I don’t let my patients out of my sight when they’re transferred to palliative care. Someone should be there, holding their hand. If that person can only be me, so be it. I’ll do it.

No one enters the world alone, so they shouldn’t leave it that way either.

A salty blob dribbles down my cheek when, in the corner of my eye, I spot the caveman-like brute reemerging from the dense woodlands. His hands are no longer balled up at his sides like they were when our eyes collided for the quickest second in the blackness of the night. They’re clutching a large chunk of wood that looks like a club a real-life caveman would have wielded back in the day.

Although grateful for his return, I wish I had been more specific when I voiced concerns about dying alone. I accepted my fate shortly after my car sailed over the cliff edge, what I am assuming is hours ago, but I don’t want to be knocked over the head like an animal to be put out of my misery.

The wooziness making me feel sick doubles when my savior raises the chunk of wood high into the air like he’s been ordered to knife a victim in a B-grade horror movie by a shoddy director. When he yanks it down with an absurd amount of force, I say my final goodbye.

The air my whispered words free from my lungs is a waste of breath. The club lands nowhere near my temple. It fills the minute snippet of space between my legs and the steering

wheel. Its fit is so compelling, it is as if he specifically chose it for the job.

My eyes lock with a pair of murky baby blues hiding a world of secrets when the man grunts a word that resembles, “B-back.” His voice is rough like it hasn’t been used in years and was dragged over a ton of gravel before delivering his one stuttered word. I’m not even one hundred percent certain that is what he said, but it’s what I run with when he pushes me back to amplify his statement.

“I can’t,” I force out through the bile making its second trek from my stomach to my throat. “I’m stuck.”

“Back!” he repeats, his tone and volume more forceful since it’s delivered without a stutter or an ounce of understanding this time around.

Ignoring the weak shake of my head, he flattens his calloused hand against my chest, then pushes me away from the steering wheel with all his might. The pain his shove rockets through my body is intense, but not enough for me not to comprehend what he’s trying to do. He doesn’t mean to hurt me. He just needs space between the steering wheel and me so he can wedge himself between us.

Tears burn my eyes when he endeavors to reverse the effects of crumbled metal and glass with his bare hands. He grunts a deafening roar before shoving the steering wheel with everything he has.

I’d call him an idiot for attempting to replicate the jaws of life if his plan wasn’t working. The more his body-quaking grunts rumble through our almost conjoined bodies, the more distance he places between us. He’s moving the equivalent of a mountain to save me, and the knowledge makes me extremely woozy.

I'm not solely lightheaded because of the lengths he will go for a stranger or the elbow he wedged between my thighs to stabilize himself. I'm on the verge of passing out from the amount of blood that pours from my ankle when the twisted steel pinning it beneath the gas pedal pops free.

Some of the metal responsible for holding my seat in place pierced through my ankle. I'm bleeding profusely and almost certain to die before first responders arrive if he doesn't tourniquet my leg right now, but before I can instruct him on what he needs to do, the blackness charging at me from all sides wins.

I'm out cold before a single word leaves my mouth.

Chapter Three

Crunching sticks wake me for the second time this evening. They're breaking beneath me like I'm jogging through dense woodlands without the fancy orthopedic running shoes my feet forever don when I tackle the grueling St. Thomas Street hill in Ravenshoe.

But I'm not running.

My feet aren't even on the ground.

They're dangling down the front of a person who smells like woodchips and pinecones, and my ass is being clutched by a hand that feels as rough as the one that pushed on my chest before I blacked out.

After taking a moment to settle my stomach's gurgles, I take in the scenery more thoroughly. The crunch that drew me from an unconscious state are sticks incapable of withstanding the stomp of a man with extremely large feet. The stranger who freed me from the wreckage is weaving us through trees that are hundreds of years old. His speed gives no indication he's worried about the almost starless sky. His race through the dense woodland is without worry that you'd swear he knows the terrain out here better than the back of his hand.

We dart, weave, and bob until we reach a tree that disappears into the thick clouds above our heads. A squeal rips

from my mouth when he slips us inside the massive tree's trunk before he pulls me flush with his body. Not even a second later, an explosion to rival all explosions booms into my ears. The blast is so powerful, it rattles the tree trunk as effectively as my lungs batter my ribs. It's a terrifying boom that thrusts me back into the nightmare of my past, where I nearly lost more than my livelihood.

My inability not to help someone in need saw me undergo test after test after test to prove I could continue with my surgical internship. Deaf doctors aren't unheard of, but there's a *massive* bridge between hearing-impaired medical practitioners and their more fortunate counterparts. It took months to prove the hearing deficiency I faced in the days following a traffic incident wouldn't affect my surgical expertise, and even then, I doubt the outcome would have been as successful if multiple favors didn't exchange hands.

Mercifully, none of the barterings were of monetary value.

If they were, I'd be up to my ears in debt.

I shake off memories of the past when the inferno engulfing my car brightens the forest surrounding us. It sends flames hurling toward the sky and gives me the quickest glimpse of a pair of murky blue eyes hidden under a mess of matted hair.

My savior's face is barely visible through his thick beard, unkempt mane, and dirt-stained cheeks, but not even the wooziness bombarding me could have me mistaking him for a hideously ugly beast. If my head could concentrate on anything but the pain making me unbelievably nauseous, I could determine there's a handsome man hiding under his rough and rugged exterior.

No one with a facial structure as defined as his could be classified as ugly.

When the unnamed man feels my heated gaze floating over his face, he growls a low, menacing groan, announcing his disapproval of my gawk before he tosses me back onto his shoulder and recommences his sprint.

“Hospital,” I murmur through the rapid churns of my stomach when I realize he’s moving us away from the direction my car traveled when it ping-ponged down the range. “I need to go to the hosp—”

A noose hanging off a branch of a tree steals my focus for a moment, then not long after that, I’m swamped by unconsciousness for the second time.

WHEN I WAKE, the flips of my stomach are felt by both my throat and nose as I bring up the snacks I washed down with an endless supply of cherry Pepsi. I had just come off a double shift, so I needed more than an IV of caffeine to keep me awake during my drive from Ravenshoe to Cedric’s family cabin.

Mercifully, Pepsi tastes the same coming up as it does going down.

I can’t say the same thing for the corn candy I scarfed down with it. They taste meaty and have the texture of overcooked potatoes.

“Hospital,” I mumble after rolling away from the bucket someone is holding under my chin. “I-I need to go t-to the hospital.”

As memories of my accident mix with the horrifying footage of Cedric getting his dick sucked by a girl at least ten years his junior, I drift in and out of consciousness before I eventually surrender to the blackness endeavoring to swallow me whole.

I STARTLE SO MUCH when something whizzes past my head fast enough for my barely conscious state to take notice, the sweat beading on my brows dribbles past my ears. The fever-inspired blobs are absorbed by the spongy material the unnamed man slammed his fist into to bring me to heel. His hairy hands are mere inches from my face, only held back by the bowl he presses against my lips.

He grunts in a low tone before he tilts the bowl so its contents splash against my dry and cracked mouth. My vision is too blurry to see what he's trying to feed me, but since nothing but the refreshing smell of water is filtering into my nose, I part my lips and swallow down the liquid he slowly trickles into my mouth.

A moan of a woman not on the verge of dying rattles in my chest when blissfully cold water wets my lips, tongue, and throat. It gives instant relief to my heated skin and makes the gurgling churns of my stomach less obvious.

Once all the liquid in the wooden bowl has slid down my throat, the man who freed me from the wreckage replaces the dry flannel on my head with a soaked one.

Well, I think it's flannel. It's not scratchy like a towel, and it feels more organic than manufactured, but it is the perfect implement to keep my body temperature at a non-dangerous

level. Fevers alone are rarely life-threatening, but when combined with an open wound, they can be fatal.

When the stranger lowers his hard-skinned hand from my face, his fingers trek of my cheek gentler than the method he used to wake me, I snatch it up like it's my only lifeline.

I realize that is the case when he answers my question with an abrupt shake of his head. "H-Hospital?" While darting my eyes between the hand he retches away and his slit eyes, I ask, "W-Why not?" Even after a stern talking to my head to get with the program, one of my words still comes out with a stutter.

"Sir?" I query, shocked by his ignorance.

He's distracted by something, but still. Ignorance shouldn't be anyone's strong point in a life-and-death situation.

"S-Sir..." I try again before the water I gobbled down returns in the most violent manner.

I heave into the bowl the stranger holds under my chin on repeat, reprieve only awarded when unconsciousness once again takes hold.

Chapter Four

As a relatively painless groan vibrates in my chest, I blink on repeat, confused as to why the candles that were dancing in the stranger's eyes earlier are extinguished. There's enough light peeking through a pair of icy windows to get away with natural lighting, but I'm lost as to why the candle wax is fully depleted. They were standing tall only hours ago, but now the wax is melted around the bottom of the wick.

After taking a minute to breathe out the queasiness making me confused as to whether I'm in shock or hungry, I attempt to gather my bearings. It doesn't take me long to realize I'm in a log cabin. It's ten times smaller than the ones the Lancasters had built on the peak of the mountain, but its small size doesn't detract from the fact it's well built.

The floor plan is smaller than the guest bedroom in my apartment, but the space has been utilized well. It reminds me of the tiny houses you see on all the lifestyle channels these days. It's compact but well thought out. Even with a blizzard raging outside, a fireplace in the middle of the compact space keeps things super cozy, and the kitchen is small yet versatile. The only thing really letting it down is the amount of dust coating every surface.

I choke on a clump of dust bunnies when I yank open the bedside table to see if there are any identifiable contents inside. The handful of knickknacks filling the newspaper-lined drawer appears homemade, but there isn't a single shred of evidence as to who owns this cabin. It's as bland as the unvarnished furniture that hogs the floorspace.

Even to a novice camper, it's obvious this cabin was designed for a solo inhabitant. There's one rocking chair squashed next to the fireplace, one dining chair, and one bed—the one I've awoken on.

As I swallow down the nerves bubbling in my throat as to where my savior slept last night, I swing my head to the left. My hand shoots up to clamp my mouth when my eyes lock in on several deer heads mounted to the wall the bed is squashed against. They're dead, but like all spooky things, I swear the buck in the middle follows my trek when I scoot up the bed to place some much-needed distance between us.

The situation worsens halfway up the 'bed.' It isn't what you'd anticipate when hunting a furniture shop for a new bedroom suite. The base is made from the same chunky wood as the dining table and kitchen counter, and although the mattress appears genuine, it isn't often you'll find one covered with a patchwork quilt made from fur.

I freeze like a statue when reality dawns. I'm not admiring the cashmere softness of a bear skin rug cabins around these parts have on their polished oak floors. I'm resting on deer skin—quite possibly the bodies of the deer heads mounted to the wall.

Yuck!

A hiss whistles through my teeth when I attempt to scamper off the bedding made from dead animals. When I peer

down at my feet, I learn the cause of my pain. My right foot is as mangled as the remains of my car after cartwheeling down an embankment. But unlike my car's unsalvageable self, my foot's chances of survival are high. Numerous butterfly stitches hold the mottled skin together, and although bruised and swollen, there are no signs of gangrene.

The tissue surrounding the stitches is very much alive—unlike my heart when a door on my right shoots open. It sinks as low as my morals when the man who rescued me walks out of a room I assume is a bathroom from the amount of steam that follows his exit. His hair is wet and no longer weighed down by knots, and if you exclude his thick beard that reaches his collarbone, his face is clear of any mess.

Although ethics would usually have my assessment stopping at the base of his neck, since we're not in a hospital, and I'm technically the patient, I drop my eyes to the lower half of his body so fast, I add to the dizziness bombarding me.

With his teeny tiny towel giving him no coverage, I can confidently declare his chest is as hairy as his face and that the bumps in his midsection are as spit-inducing as the width of his biceps.

He gives meaning as to why everyone is fascinated to discover if Big Foot is real. There's something oddly attractive about a beast of a man with no grasp of reality.

I snap my eyes away when the stranger busts my watch. He grunts at me like an animal. It isn't a like-what-you-see groan but the grumbly moan of a frustrated man.

Although mortified he caught my gawk, some good comes from my embarrassment. My lowered head has my eyes stumbling onto my antique medical bag. It was a gift from my father when I was accepted into medical school. It's been

passed down in his family for generations, and I am so incredibly grateful the stranger removed it from the wreckage before it exploded—even more so when I remember my work cell phone is inside.

While acting ignorant to the pain making my stomach swirl, I snatch up my bag, dig out my cell phone, then log in via facial ID. Since there are only a handful of cuts and grazes on my face, it logs me in first go.

After pushing aside my shock that a notification from my iCloud-synced travel app announces that my plane to Paris departed two days ago, I hit the first number on my recently called list before squashing my phone to my ear.

The name at the top of my most called list doesn't belong to Cedric. It's for my boss and almost decade-long friend, Isaac Holt.

“Come on...” I groan through clenched teeth when a prerecorded voicemail from my cell phone provider announces there isn't adequate service to connect my call.

I scoot up the bed until I'm in a seated position, then hold my phone high in the air, praying for a single bar.

I get nothing.

Not just because there's no service this deep in the woods, but also because the unnamed man storms across the room to snatch my phone out of my hand.

“What are you doing? I need my phone. I require urgent medical assistance,” I plead as he stomps to the other side of the cabin like his towel isn't dangerously close to slipping off his wide hips.

My last comment is a lie. He patched me up so well, I doubt an intern at a local ER could do a better job. It just feels

wrong to be alone in a cabin with another man so soon after breaking things off with my fiancé, not to mention most people seek assistance during a crisis, not isolation.

Both shock and anger bombard me when the stranger dumps my phone into a shallow wood-carved sink before he switches on the faucet full pelt. The water pressure is basically nonexistent, but there's enough flow to ruin my phone.

I can't understand a word grumbling from his mouth in a series of long grunts and mumbles, but even a novice lipreader could get the gist of what he's on about.

Help isn't arriving for me anytime soon.

My throat works through a hard swallow when the stranger spins around to face me. His hair swishing against the curve in his lower back isn't the cause of my distraction. His rueful glare at my cheeks is.

When it dawns on me what he's staring at, I swipe at my face like a mad woman. I didn't realize tears were weeping from my eyes until his cocked brow and furled lip pointed it out. Only a handful of tears dampen my face, but he glares at them like they haven't stopped streaming from my eyes the past three days.

Once I'm confident I have matters under control, I say, "I can't stay here." Certain my life is about to replicate a horror flick, I caution, "People will be looking for me."

He slams his fist down on the dining table, diverting my attention to him before he abruptly shakes his head. His nonverbal confirmation that I am to stay with him has me lost for words. It's clear he's frustrated that I'm in his domain, but he's refusing to let me leave.

It truly doesn't make any sense.

With my confusion rendering me silent, and the tension palpable, the unnamed man sucks in three big breaths before he stalks to an antique closet in the far corner of the space to get dressed.

Although stupid of me to do with a bugged foot and possible stage-three concussion, within a nanosecond of realizing this could be my only chance to seek help, I use his distance from the only door connecting me to the outside world to my advantage.

As I hobble across the warped wood floor with too much eagerness for my brain to register the pain rocketing up my leg, I dart my eyes between the brute of a man getting dressed and the large carved door. He acts oblivious to the thumps of my feet, even with them being loud enough to overtake the pounding of my pulse in my ears. The only reason he busts my escape is because he spins around to face me once he finishes getting dressed.

Unfortunately for him, it's too late. My hand is curled around the rusty doorknob. Freedom is within my grasp.

"Ugh!" he grunts before he races my way like a madman.

Eager to flee before he can catch me, I throw open the door and bolt through the tight opening without watching where I'm going.

Big mistake.

Not only is the icy ground impossible to grip since it hasn't been salted like almost all flat surfaces in these parts the past couple of months, but there also isn't another cabin in sight. We're in the middle of the woods. Nothing but snow-topped trees can be seen for miles.

Incapable of giving up even when the odds are stacked against me, I start to bolt for an opening on my right. I don't even make it through the door. The bearded stranger doesn't end my campaign to flee. Something dumped by the door does.

Its furry disposition stops me from skidding across the icy verandah, but any attempts to seek help without risking a mental evaluation is lost when I land face-first into a sticky and ghastly smelling matter.

I learn the reason for the peculiar yet highly recognizable goop covering my face and torso when I draw away from the object I tripped over. Deer heads can't get mounted to walls without first removing said head.

Not only did I fall onto the remains of a deer, but I also landed face-first into its headless carcass.

Chapter Five

While screaming bloody murder into the blistering cool air, I scramble back from the deer that shouldn't look familiar since they're a dime a dozen around these parts but somehow does.

The violent screeches ripping from my throat ramp up when my endeavor to get away from one murderous scene sees me stumbling into another. The stranger with the waist-length hair and gruff exterior already seems the size of a giant when I'm on my feet, so you can picture how ginormous he is while towering over me.

“No!” I pelt into him with my fists when he plucks me off the ground by a quick yank on my arm before he tosses me onto his shoulder like I'm a sack of potatoes. “You need to let me go. People will be looking for me. Very. Important. People.” My last three words are separated by the sudden realization that there could be no one looking for me. I checked into my flight, so as far as my family and friends are concerned, I'm in a remote village in Prague eating braised beef dumplings. “You'll be in big trouble if you don't let me go this instant!”

My fight to get away from the stranger could have me mistaking one of his grunts as laughter, but I swear he

chuckles while marching me back into the cabin like my legs and arms aren't violently clashing with sensitive regions of his body. I drag my nails down his back, rip at the hair swishing in front of my face and direct the kicks of my feet to the area of his groin only just covered by a pair of dowdy sweatpants.

When my violence fails to slow him down, I toss out threats that aren't technically mine to issue. "This land is owned by the Lancasters. They don't take kindly to trespassers." My last word leaves my body with a grunt when he walks us into the steam-filled room. I'm not just stunned by his lack of concern about my beatdown, I'm shocked by the faint memories creeping into my head.

I could swear on my grandmother's grave that we've done this before, but instead of me being tossed over the stranger's shoulder, he carried me in his arms like a groom would a bride over the threshold.

My breathing staggers when my eyes scan of the bathroom fills my head with more hazy memories. They match the movements the stranger makes while removing the shirt I'm wearing as a dress, but back then, not a single protest spilled from my mouth.

Since I'm conscious this time around, the instant his hand grabs the waistband of my panties, objections fire from my mouth hard and fast. "Whoa, whoa, whoa."

I didn't say they were good objections.

My head is far too woozy for that.

Either deaf or ignorant, the stranger slips my panties off in one fell swoop, distributes my weight to his left side, then heads for a shower cubicle that looks as organically sourced as

the rest of the cabin. The ‘tiles’ lining the walls are shavings of rock and shrubbery on a compact bed of dirt is the floor.

When he switches on a ‘faucet’ at the side of the cubicle, I make myself one with the hairs stretched across his pecs. It’s below freezing outside, and with no modern appliances in sight, I anticipate the water to be as bitterly cold as the snowy ground that almost killed me last night.

It isn’t, but since my focus is on another damning revelation, I don’t take the time to appreciate how pleasant it is.

According to the date on my work phone, my accident wasn’t last night. It was three nights ago, so the familiarity of an often-understated task shouldn’t be surprising. Nurses bathe their patients all the time. It’s a necessary part of their recovery, and more times than not, the most healing.

You feel icky after an accident, so if a nurse washes away some of the murkiness before waking you, more times than not, the recovery time is significantly reduced.

It was for me when I was blasted across a swampy woodland by a furious explosion. From the medical records I read, I had mud from the roots of my hair to the tips of my toes. It was lodged so far in my ears, preliminary results indicated my hearing had been irreparably damaged by the blast. Mercifully, after multiple ENT appointments and a simple procedure, my hearing returned stronger than ever.

I stop reminiscing on what I thought would be the worst couple of weeks of my life when a screen of red hinders my vision. The mixing of the water from the rain-simulated showerhead above me and the deer’s blood is a quick reminder that I’m not bathing in the natural spring a couple of miles south of Ravenshoe. Nor is the goop on my face a mask. It is

the blood of a dead animal—the same species I almost died trying to save.

With bile racing up my esophagus and my brain only seeking solutions instead of explanations, I scrub at my cheeks like a blood-red cleanser is part of my daily facial care regime while acting oblivious to the fact I'm being held under the water by a man with no name.

Once I'm confident every drop of the deer's blood has been removed from my face and neck, I shift my focus to my collarbone and chest. I grope my breasts more eagerly than Cedric ever did when something brushes my backside two chest strokes later. It's neither of the stranger's hands. One is curled around my knees, and the other is bracing my back.

After hiding my puckered nipples, I slowly raise my eyes to the stranger's face. I've studied the human anatomy for years, and although my personal research on this particular region of the male body could be counted on one hand, I'm confident I know the identity of the object jabbing me in the backside.

The unease bombarding me from all sides should have my eyes immediately locking with the stranger, but I drift them over his matted beard, plump lips, and undeniably straight nose before locking them with his baby blues that seem familiar even with them being full of anger.

"I'm engaged," I mumble when his eyes eventually float from my now-covered breasts to my face. "Do you know what that means? I belong to another man. I was visiting him before my accident. His family owns this mounta—"

Oomph.

The air his needy gaze forced into my lungs rushes out in a hurry when he pulls his hands out from underneath me. My ego gets more bruised than my backside, thanks to the leaf filtration system responsible for directing the shower's water into buckets wedged under a tiny opening carved out of the logs that line the cabin.

After glaring at me like I'm gum stuck under his school desk, he pivots on his heels and races out of the bathroom.

Unfortunately, he doesn't forget to latch the lock on his way out.

Chapter Six

My eyes shoot to the bathroom door when it flies open with a terrifying crack. I'm not sure how long I've been huddled in the corner of the shower stall, but the water ran dry a while ago, and although I'm somewhat delirious, I am reasonably sure hypothermia is close to setting in.

The shower's drainage system makes environmental sense, but the amount of wood required to combat the blistering cold conditions its drainage hole creates counterbalances its effectiveness.

Even when surrounded by bushland, fireplaces are hazardous to the ozone layer.

As are brooding men with no idea about privacy.

The still-unnamed stranger bursts into the bathroom without a care in the world that he removed my only article of modesty when he stormed out over an hour ago. He's wearing a rolled neck shirt, a thick winter jacket, a pair of jeans that wouldn't look any better on a wrangler, and boots that go to his knees.

If he didn't wrongly believe you can hold women hostage against their will, I would have said he looks like a sexy,

rugged mountaineer, but since he is as delusional as I feel, I'll keep my thoughts to myself.

With a grunt, he plucks me from the floor. Then, just as quickly as he removed my shirt an hour ago, he replaces it with one that makes my nose tickle with the urge to sneeze.

“What the hell,” I pant out in either shock or deliriousness when he falls to his knees two seconds later. His hairy face is a mere inch from my bare sex, and my woozy head has me mistaking his heated breaths as needy instead of angry.

I warn my head to get with the program when he stretches the waistband of a pair of panties that look oddly similar to the ones I packed for red week. He's not dressing me so I can attend a fancy gala as his plus one. He's my captor, not my savior.

My unspoken words taste bitter in my mouth. If he's my captor, why did he save me from a fiery inferno then keep me alive for three days? If his endgame is to kill me, why prolong the process with unnecessary steps?

Because there is a heap of weirdos in the world, Jae.

I'm drawn from my highly accurate thoughts when the bearded man jerks up his chin. We're strangers, but the angling of his shoulders has me confident he wants me to use them to balance on while slipping my feet into the opening of my panties.

Although I could never be accused of being submissive, I fan my hand over the taut muscles in his shoulders before stepping into the cotton material of my underwear. Cedric's betrayal doesn't have me eager to mix things up. The black object peeking out from the bottom of the stranger's winter coat is solely responsible for pulling me into line.

He has a gun.

A big one.

“I’ve got it,” I assure him when he commences guiding my panties up my legs. Even with fear being my strongest emotion, my body mistook the slither of his hands. My thighs are shuddering like his head is wedged between them.

Once my underwear is covering my backside, and I’ve had a stern talking with my head, we step through the process again. Except this time, the stranger holds open a pair of fleece-lined sweatpants for me. They’re miles too big, but unlike the shirt, not as dusty.

While yanking the fluffy pants up my legs, a faint memory trickles into my head, freezing my movements. “This isn’t the first time we’ve done this, is it?” I wait for him to finish guiding the polyester material to my waist before finalizing my interrogation, “You’ve dressed me previously, haven’t you?” I more pinch his shoulder than balance on it when a second memory steals the air from my lungs. “Except I wasn’t standing. You were holding me against your chest.” My eyes bulge when the memory playing in reverse reaches the reason as to why I needed to get dressed. “We showered together.” I swallow in rapid succession. “We were naked...” As my eyes fall to his, he tears his away, but it doesn’t stop my confession. “*Both* of us.”

With his ignorance at an all-time high, I search his face for answers. His expression is nonchalant, but I don’t need to read his emotions to extract some truths out of him.

Today *isn’t* the first time he’s seen me naked.

While the stranger guides a sock over my mangled foot, I strive to unlock some more memories. There are not many,

and thankfully, they aren't as nightmarish as the ones that still keep me awake a decade later. The slow montages of our daily shower routines remind me of *Beauty and the Beast* dancing in the ballroom, except Beauty is on the brink of unconsciousness, and the Beast is doing everything in his power to keep her alive, but I must remain cautious.

Keeping me alive just to torture me seems like a stretch, but I've witnessed many unscrupulous acts during my short yet tumultuous thirty-five years. There could be more at play here than I realize, so I need to keep my wits about me because playing dead won't work this time around since the perpetrator knows how to keep me alive.

With the horrors of my past resurfacing too fast for me to shut down, I ask, "Why are you doing this? What are your plans with me?" When he continues to ignore me, I shout, "Answer me! What do you want from me?"

A lot of people mistake the rock on my finger as meaning I'm worth a lot of money. I can assure you I am not close to wealthy. Yes, I make a decent income being the chief medical officer of a world-renowned hospital, but have you seen how much an average house in Ravenshoe costs? I live in an apartment because I couldn't afford an attached duplex, much less a house. And even though the broker touted that it had ocean views, you must break your neck to take them in.

If the stranger's plan is to ransom my safety, he's shit out of luck. My parents could probably rustle up a couple of thousand, but since their retirement in Hawaii is self-funded, he may need to take that in cashless bonds.

My worries that this is a hostage situation double when the stranger locks his murky eyes with my engagement ring.

"It's probably fake. Cedric is cheap when he's paying."

Ignoring me, he glares at the hideous rock like he despises it before he secures a duffle bag to his front, twists away from me, squats down so low the muzzle of his gun scratches the floorboards, then makes a gesture with his hand like he wants me to copy him.

His frustrated grunt reverberates through my frozen form when I don't immediately jump to his command. He doesn't appear to appreciate ignorance, even with him showcasing it in all its glory.

When his next grunt is burly enough to shift my focus from the gun he's doing a poor job of concealing to his face, I pinch a pleat into my sweatpants before squatting like I need to use the bathroom.

I do, but that's something we'll keep between us.

When the stranger takes in my crouched stance, his scoff sends my pulse skyrocketing. It's as gruff as his grunts but with an edge of danger highlighting it. "*Ughis!*"

"I don't understand what you want me to do," I blurt out, confident he can understand me even with him only speaking one mumbled word to me.

Although I can't one hundred percent testify that actually occurred. It could have been a figment of my imagination. Not many things are making sense right now, and my body's odd responses are by far the worst.

Instead of repelling away from the stranger when he curls his hand around the back of my knee and yanks me forward, I topple onto his back with a girly squeal. Then, when he abruptly stands, I clamp my legs around his thick waist. I could excuse my blasé response on not wanting to add another

bruise to my backside, but I'm not known for taking the easy way out.

Honesty starts at home. If I can't be truthful with myself, who can I be with?

While we're on the matter of honesty, although I'm confused as to why the stranger wants me to ride on his back, I'm also curious—even more so when our entrance into the main part of the cabin sees him yanking a deer skin off the bed and attaching it to my back as if it's a cape.

Its thick hide protects me from the frigid winds blasting the cabin from all sides when he walks us outside. The snowstorm weather forecasters warned about during my commute to Cataloochee is in full swing. It's bitterly cold and wet, and although the solemn conditions give reason as to why the stranger won't seek medical attention for me now, what was his excuse the night of my accident? It was snowing then, but nothing like it is now. He could have sought help back then if he wanted to. The fact he didn't makes me even wearier.

"Where are we going?" I ask several painstaking minutes later, heartbroken by the silence surrounding us. Shouldn't the rotation of rescue helicopter blades be sounding above our heads? Or at the very least, the buzz of snowmobiles.

If anyone is looking for me, they're not close to my location, and the knowledge is so distressing, another thirty or so minutes pass before a second wind of hope forms within me. "Are you taking me to the hospital? Or the local sheriff's office? Either will work. You don't have to walk me in. You can leave me out front. I won't tell anyone what happened." My nose screws up. "Not that I think anything happened. I just..."

I stop talking at the exact moment my stomach launches into my throat. Another wooden structure is on the horizon, but unlike the cabin we left over an hour ago, it doesn't give off a cozy, rustic vibe.

It looks like the set of a horror film. It's low to the ground, covered with both shrubbery and snow, and there are dead animals hanging from a secondary structure on its left. A deer, three rabbits, and a bird I don't recognize are dangling from the silver hooks every *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* inspired film uses as props. They're beheaded and their stomachs are cut open. If that isn't already concerning, there's a giant silver hook in the middle of the pack, empty and primed for its next victim.

What if that victim is me?

Too scared to think rationally, and almost certain my blasé response an hour ago is coming back to bite me on the ass, I beat into the stranger with everything I have before leveraging my getaway by digging my good foot into his ribs and pushing back with all my might.

Although my escape almost gets snagged by the sling holding his shotgun to his body, I land on my ass with a thud. Shock I'm not swallowed whole by the snow the stranger hiked us through doesn't get the chance to register. I'm too busy crawling through the sloshy track he left behind to let something as measly as surprise slow me down.

I've barely scampered three feet away when the stranger catches up with me. He doesn't yank me up by my hair like almost every gory mafia movie depicts. He bands his arm around my waist before plucking me from the ground as if I am weightless.

“No!” I scream, still hopeful someone will hear me even with us tracking deeper into the woods. I wouldn’t say I have an overly girly voice, but when I want to be heard, I have no issues bringing out the pitch that has my voice ringing in the interns’ ears long after initiation.

All hope is lost when my cries for help echo back at me.

There’s no one close by.

Not a single sole.

I am alone and at the mercy of a madman.

“Please,” I beg, my one word more a sob than an actual word. “I don’t want to die. I’ve barely lived.” My plea comes out as honest because it is. I work. That’s all I do. That isn’t living. It isn’t even coping, but it won’t stop me from begging for mercy. “*Please.*”

When my pleas get me nowhere, I claw my nails into the stranger’s leathery hands before throwing my head back.

The crack of my skull into his nose is brutal, but it has nothing on his grunt. “*Arrgghhh!*” It isn’t close to friendly. It roars through my chest as loudly as the stomps he does to race us inside the wood-like structure.

In my haste to get away from him, I didn’t check the direction I was crawling. Like an idiot with air for brains, I was scrambling toward the murderous scene instead of the freedom I’m sure is here somewhere if I were given a chance to look.

Although tired both emotionally and physically, I fight the stranger all the way. I kick him, bite him, and scream so loud, he has no choice but to clamp his hand over my mouth to ensure he doesn’t suffer permanent hearing loss.

It's at that exact moment my fight comes to an end.

I'm petrified of being suffocated to death. It's my biggest fear. Every nightmare I've had the past decade involves me being killed by some form of brain hypoxia.

Brain hypoxia is when the brain doesn't get enough oxygen. It can be from drowning, choking, suffocation, or cardiac arrest, but my fear solely stems from oxygen deprivation by breath manipulation.

Even if it could have spiced up our unindulgent sex life, I wouldn't let Cedric curl his hand around my throat. I was paranoid he didn't know me well enough not to take it too far, and from his lack of remorse three nights ago, with good reason.

I loathe my neck being touched, but even more than that, I hate how paralyzing my fear is when it reaches full fruition. The stranger could do anything to me right now, and I wouldn't be able to stop him. I'm frozen with fear, and I have no idea why.

It isn't like anyone has tried to kill me before now.

Chapter Seven

When creaking floorboards broadcast that I'm no longer alone, I roll over the best I can without announcing my movements to the bearded stranger. He didn't hurt me last night when fear paralyzed me, but he did take advantage of my frozen state to protect himself from another attack.

I'm tied to a bed oddly similar to the one in the original cabin, and to keep things in perspective, he used a length of vine to restrain me instead of rope.

The subtleness of the vine is deceiving. It's soft against my skin instead of scratchy like the rope would have been, but even rubbing it against the unvarnished slat of wood for over an hour this morning didn't loosen its grip on my wrist. It's as close to my skin now as the stranger was last night when he mistook the shivers of my body as me being cold. He used his body heat to warm me, and although his closeness should have increased my panic, it eventually subdued it. Not enough for me to contemplate sleeping, but it did give me time to process things.

If the cabins are his stomping ground, and he lives in the woods full-time, does he comprehend that women don't fall out of the sky in snow-white convertibles? Even as adults,

we're conditioned to believe what we're taught, so how warped would someone's mind be if his way of life was starkly different from the norm?

I stop endeavoring to diagnose the stranger in a field I have no right to practice in when something stabs me in the back through the shirt he dressed me in last night. It's long and pointy like the stranger's fingers, but without his scratchy fingernails.

Although I want to continue pretending I'm asleep, the stranger doesn't give me that choice. He tugs on my shoulder firm enough to make me become one with the 'mattress' before he shoves a banana into my hand.

It's a little unripe, but the loud grumbles of my stomach don't care. I rip it open like it's my favorite candy bar before endeavoring to swallow it hole.

The smell barely registers with my senses before the stranger grunts at me. "*Ugggh!*" He snatches the banana out of my hand, rips an inch off the top, then hands me the measly piece.

"That's it? That's *all* I get? A meager inch? I would have gotten more from Cedric, and that's saying something." I mumble my last sentence through the sliver of banana sliding down my throat. It's a little bitter since it's not ripe, but with it being my only source of food for god knows how long, I gobble it down like two scoops of vanilla ice cream and a generous helping of chocolate sauce will soon follow it.

Once the clump of fruit has slid into my stomach, I return my eyes to the mostly untouched banana. If it was the dessert Cedric was forever adamant we should share, it would have been eaten by now. So not am I only shocked it's still in one

piece, I'm also a little excited. "Can I please have some more?"

The stranger's eyes drop from my lips to the banana before he rips me off another chunk.

"Thank you."

I chew this piece instead of swallowing it whole, conscious I won't starve if I use my manners. My second chunk was almost double the size of my first one, and it doesn't take a genius to realize praise goes a long way, even during a situation you'd never anticipate.

Furthermore, the longer the stranger watches the subtle movement of my lips, the more time I have to scope the premises. I couldn't see a damn thing last night. My paralysis gives me tunnel vision as it is, but the blizzard made matters worse. Shadows didn't dance around the compact space until the stranger lit the fireplace. Since that wasn't until after I stopped shaking like I was in an ice bath, the opportunity to snoop never presented itself until now.

As suspected from the layout of the 'bedroom,' this cabin is almost a direct replica of the one we left last night. Even the rocking chair wedged next to the roaring fireplace is in the same spot. There are just a handful of differences. No deer heads are mounted to the wall, and there isn't an ounce of dust to be seen.

He also has a gun by the door instead of an animal carcass.

When I finish my second piece of banana—*and my perusal of his home*—I lift and lock my eyes with the stranger's. I don't have to use my manners this time around. He hands me a third piece without a syllable slipping from my lips, the pleas in my eyes loud enough for a deaf man to hear.

I almost shove the chunk into my mouth like a piggie, but a flicker of silver on the kitchen counter steals my focus. A knife isn't the best defense against a gun, but I bet it would have no issues slicing through a segment of vine, and the thought pops a brilliant idea into my head.

The stranger takes a step back when I shoot my hand up to cover my mouth at the same time my eyes pop out of my head. After making a gesture like I'm about to be sick, I gag like I just found out Cedric and I are related by blood.

"Bucket. I n-need a bucket," I stammer out through the gap between my fingers. "Sick."

One word and the stranger leaps to his feet, startling me with his large size. After swinging his head to the left, he drags it to the right. He's not as prepared this time around, and his need to improvise sees the chips falling in my favor for a change.

As he races into the bathroom, I slip off the bed and hobble to the kitchen. "No," I breathe out in frustration when my stretch for the knife comes up half an inch short. I reach with all my might, but my fingertips only brace the butt. "Come on..."

The vine curled around my wrists digs into my skin when I give it one last shot. "Yes!" I almost shout when my efforts pay off. I have the knife in my hand, but regretfully, I also have the angry eyes of a stranger glaring at me. "Stay back!" I warn when his eyes flick to the door where his gun is resting. "If you move for it, I'll cut you up into little pieces."

He smirks at me. Not a dainty little I'd-like-to-see-you-try smirk, but full-blown you're-not-brave-enough-to-give-me-a-papercut smirk.

I'll show him.

After strengthening my stance, I say without the slightest quiver to my words, “I just want to go home, back to my fiancé. You can’t keep me from him—”

He charges for me before all my false statement leaves my mouth and, just as quickly, I slice the knife across his chest. It skips across the hairy skin firm enough to mark, but the paper-thin cut barely slows him down.

With the bowl he fetched from the bathroom, he knocks the knife out of my hand before pushing me back with the same amount of aggression. I land on the bed with a thud, but I don’t go down without a fight. I kick out my leg so harshly, the bloody mess my headbutt caused his nose last night returns stronger than ever.

Blood gushes from his nose at the same time a roar rips from his mouth. It freezes me in an instant. However, not all my stiffness is in fear. The rumbles of his deep voice cluster in an area of my body much lower than my head, and it’s usually responsible for every stupid decision I make. It was the reason I was engaged to Cedric. He was handsome, and I thought he’d be a knockout in bed.

I learned otherwise remarkably fast, but since real-life men rarely stack up to their fictional counterparts, I tried not to hold it against him. Besides, five minutes of heat is better than the none I was getting the two years before we met.

After stepping out of the firing zone of my still wildly flinging legs, the stranger drags his hand under his nose. Even though I shouldn’t, I feel bad about the amount of blood that smears onto his calloused hand, but any chance of acting remorseful is lost when he snatches up the bundle of rope he didn’t use last night.

He loops it around my uninjured ankle, then flips me over so I'm on my stomach. When he pulls my unrestrained hand behind my back, my eyes pop out of my head. "You can't hog-tie me! I'm not an animal." He continues tying my hands and feet together like a word didn't spill from my lips, forcing me to blurt out, "I need to use the bathroom."

When he huffs at me, I snap out, "Huff all you like, but when I ruin the bedding, and you can't get it dry-cleaned since we're snowed in, you'll have no one to blame but yourself."

I should have kept my mouth shut. The lack of trust in the stranger's eyes exposes there's no way he will let me use the bathroom alone, so instead of unearthing a way to free myself from a dangerous situation, I thrust myself headfirst into one.

"I don't need to use the facilities. It's fine..."

My reply is left dangling with the rope on the bedpost when the unnamed man uses the knife to cut me free, tugs me across the mattress by my good ankle, tosses me onto his shoulder like I don't weigh a thing, then stomps us outside.

I don't whack into him for the third time. Not only am I exhausted, but I'm also shocked to learn where he's taking me. He is walking us down an icy patch of grass that looks like it was recently shoveled. It leads to a rectangular box in the far back corner of the cabin's 'house yard.'

"That isn't what I think it is, is it?" I ask before plugging my nose to protect it from the stench. "You can't have an outhouse. We're not in Australia!"

The wooden box nestled between two massive trees looks like the 'toilets' my Uncle Kevin has dotted across his ten-thousand-hectare ranch near Dubbo, Australia. There's no plumbed water on his cattle property, so the ranchers were

forced to get inventive. They built over half a dozen long drop toilets on the drought-ravaged cattle station.

I thought Uncle Kevin was uber-rich when he spruiked about having six toilets. I learned otherwise when we went for a visit. His workers didn't dig the holes deep enough. Even months after returning to the States, I could still smell the stew they ate the night we arrived.

When the bearded man pries open the door of his rectangular box, I hold my breath. As predicted, his 'toilet' is a hole in the ground with a makeshift toilet seat dangling above it.

Thankfully, the smell is nowhere near as bad as I was anticipating.

He must have dug a hole deep enough to invade China.

"You *really* need to stop doing that," I grind out through clenched teeth when a second after he lifts the toilet seat, his hand slithers under my shirt to glide my panties to my knees.

Although I'm busting to pee, I hold back the urge. The stranger is crouched *directly* in front of me. He's closer to my private parts than Cedric has been in months.

When he shuffles even closer like he's striving to determine if the gurgling of my stomach is because I need a bowel movement, I bite out, "Can you please turn around. I can't... *pee*..." yep, that was delivered as immaturely as you're thinking, "... with an audience."

My mouth falls open when his huff sounds like a breathy chuckle. It was nowhere near as deep as the one he did when I dragged a knife across his chest. It is more breathy and carefree, and it has me shocked. It's proof he can understand me even with him wishing he can't.

The way he shifts his head to the right when I commence talking is proof of this. “Anything that happened while I was unconscious doesn’t count. I didn’t have a choice back then —”

When he roars at me, I shit myself, but mercifully, pee is the only thing that comes out.

With the smugness in his eyes way too obnoxious for a man with a bloodstained beard and my bladder’s screams finally answered, the stranger hands me a square patch of fur.

“What do you want me to do with that?”

His nostrils flare during his breathy grunt before he lowers his eyes to my vagina.

“No. Nuh-uh. Not happening.” I thrust the patch of fur back his way. “I’ll drip dry—” My words are replaced with a squeal when he snatches up the fur, wipes me from front to back like every little girl is taught, yanks my panties up my thighs, then tosses me back onto his shoulder.

“You know they have this great thing called toilet paper. You should look it up sometime.” Our return to the cabin is so quick, I’m dumped onto the bed before half his groan leaves his mouth, then he attempts to restrain me like I’m the criminal half of our duo. “You don’t need to tie me up. You have a gun and a predicted thirty-five inches of snow in your favor. What more do you need?”

I shouldn’t feel guilty when he thrusts his hand at his busted nose. However, I do.

It won’t stop me from another attempt to flee, though.

After ramming my palm into the orifice he highlighted, I sprint for the door.

I'm not planning to run through it.

I'm after his gun.

It doesn't matter who you are in the world, no one wants to come face to face with a weapon capable of slicing you in two.

I've barely sprinted three steps away from the bed when the vine I didn't realize the stranger fixed to my wrist is yanked. I fly backward with a high-pitch squeal before I'm reeled in like a prized catch in a fishing competition.

"You can't keep me here!" I push out with a huff before folding my arms under my chest. "My fiancé will be looking for me, and when he finds me, you'll—"

The stranger clamps his hand over my mouth, silencing more than just my lies.

Chapter Eight

With a grunt, I move away from the object the stranger is jabbing into my back. I don't care if it is a churro dipped in Nutella, I'm not playing his games anymore. Being paralyzed by fear is nothing to joke about. It's a manic psychosis that could end my medical career if it ever got out, yet he used it against me like the words I were speaking could be more detrimental to my health than him.

We all know that's a lie.

"No!" I snap out when he yanks on my shoulder.

He ignores my plea—as he has every grumbled comment the past several hours—by forcefully rolling me over until I'm staring at the ceiling instead of the wall. I'm still tied to the bed, but the length of the vine was shortened so no matter how hard I stretch, my hands won't get close to any dangerous instruments in the kitchen.

Some of my sass takes a step back when the stranger places a bowl full of stew onto the bedside table then nudges his head to it. It smells delicious, and my stomach hasn't quit growling the past three-plus hours, but I wasn't lying when I said I'm no longer playing his games, so instead of eating the meal he prepared, I give him the stink eye to rival all stink

eyes before rolling back over to face the only solid wall in the cabin.

“*Ugh!*” he grunts, clearly unimpressed by my denial. “*Haw.*” I feel his eyes on me for twenty long seconds before he adds hands into the mix.

“No!” I slap his hands off me before scampering up the bed as far as I can. “I don’t want your food. I want to go home.”

His eyes that suddenly appear more remorseful than dangerous, bounce between mine for two heart-thrashing seconds before he shakes his head while banging his chest with his fist. “*Augh.*”

When he twists away from me with balled-up fists, I think it’s the end of our confrontation.

I’m poorly mistaken.

In a quick twist, pull, and straddle maneuver, I’m yanked down the bed, my hips are cuddled by his thick thighs, and then my hands are pinned above my head by one of his highly nicked and scratched hands.

“What the hell are you doi—” With his free hand, he silences me for the second time today. Except this time, fear doesn’t shut me up. A chunk of meat does.

Even with it tasting delicious, I spit out the chunk of juicy goodness he stuffed into my mouth before peering up at him like I don’t fear him in the slightest.

He takes my barter and raises the stakes by straining a second piece of meat through my teeth, then clamping my mouth shut.

“Just because you put it into my mouth doesn’t mean I have to chew it,” I gabble out between a clenched jaw and closed lips.

I really need to consider my replies before responding to a deranged man. The flare darting through his eyes announces he took my warning as more of a challenge than a threat, not to mention the quirking of his lips.

“What are you doing?” I ask for the second time when he releases my mouth from his grip, my voice hitched with unease. I thought he would shovel food into my mouth until I had no choice but to swallow. Instead, he gobbles up the chunky product before he crushes it between his teeth long enough it couldn’t be anything more than mush.

When he arrows his head toward mine, his cheeks extra plump thanks to the slosh in his mouth, my sluggish brain finally clues on to what is happening.

After swallowing down the chunk of meat I stuffed behind my back molars, I furiously shake my head. “You can’t feed me like a baby bird. Do you have any idea how unhygienic that is? You could have anything in your mouth...” My words trail off when a faint memory trickles into my head. We’ve done this before. Many times. It’s how he kept me alive for three days. He fed me like a mother bird would her baby.

He spat in my mouth.

And for some inane reason, acknowledging that out loud isn’t as distressing as it should be. I may have died if he didn’t feed me, and although I wish he could have prepared my food with a mortar and pestle instead of his teeth, it’s kind of hot knowing how desperate he was to keep me alive.

“Okay, okay! I’ll eat!” I scream when his mouth narrows in so close to mine his beard tickles my chin and neck. It isn’t as rough as believed. It reminds me of a cashmere sweater that’s been worn too many times over the winter, so it isn’t as soft as it once was. “I’ll eat,” I promise when he notches back an inch and lowers his eyes to my lips. “See?”

After wrangling one of my hands free from his firm yet painless grip, I fish out a chunk of the meat from the bowl balancing on the flat space between my breasts I wish my chest didn’t have when I’m lying flat on my back, then pop it into my mouth.

“*Uh.*”

Confident his grunt is encouragement for me to eat another piece, I dig out a second generous portion, then slide it between my lips. It isn’t a hard decision to make considering how juicy and delicious the meat is. It is so tender it melts like butter in a sinfully hot mouth.

“*Haw.*”

And so the cycle continues until the bowl is empty, and my stomach is so rounded, the stranger has to distribute most of the weight of his large frame onto my pelvis to allow room for my stomach’s growth.

I don’t know what cut of steak he used, but it was extremely tender. So fresh, it’s as if he purchased it from the butcher only minutes before cooking it.

I freeze when a disturbing notion enters my head.

There are no markets nearby. No cabins. We are *completely* isolated.

So where the hell did he get a fresh cut of steak from?

The sloshy contents in my stomach rush up my food pipe when I recall the murderous hut at the side of the cabin. It's filled with animals—*dead* animals.

“What did I just eat?” My stomach doesn't give the stranger the chance to answer. It's so eager to evacuate the foreign matter puffing it out, it sits at the base of my throat before I can announce to the stranger that I need to be sick. “Sick.”

He huffs and arches a brow as if to say, *I'm not falling for that trick again.*

Sadly, my squidgy stomach doesn't wait for no man. It heaves on repeat, and before its gurgling rolls can be deciphered by the stranger as legitimate, it burst through the cracks of the fingers endeavoring to hold it back.

“*Ught,*” the stranger groans when the splatters of vomit project far enough to dot his chest. He unpins me from the mattress by climbing off me before he uses the knife dumped halfway between the kitchen and the ‘bedroom’ to cut through the vine holding me hostage to the bed. “*Hunn...*” he adds, distracting me from considering another escape attempt.

I would have given it another shot if I didn't have chunks of vomit down the front of my shirt. If I turned up at the local sheriff's office looking like this, I'd most likely be put on a twenty-four-hour mental hold. Since that could unearth my fear paralysis, I let the stranger guide me into the bathroom instead.

“*UHN?*”

I'm not sure when I learned how to speak caveman, but I nod my head to the stranger's question before stepping away from the vanity sink holding almost as much of my stomach's contents as the bed. "You should warn a person before feeding them a foreign product. I could have been vegan."

The woes of my stomach seem nowhere near as bad when the stranger huffs. It wasn't a gruff, menacing puff of air. It was hinged with laughter—laughter that vanishes when he takes in my stained shirt.

"It's fine. It's hardly noticeable." I breathe heavily out of my nose when he whips off my shirt in one fell swoop. I could argue, but really, where would it get me? I've learned pretty quickly I either do things his way, or he'll force me to do it.

My logic is disregarded when his hand moves for the waistband of my panties. They're untouched. The vomit didn't get anywhere near them. So why the hell is he taking them off?

I lose the chance to ask when the removal of his clothes soon chases mine. He strips out of the sweatpants he's wearing sans underwear before he drags his shirt over his head in the familiar back-of-the-neck gather and pull.

The memories that have trickled in my head the past twenty-four-plus hours are proven accurate when my eyes rake the stranger's body. He is as big as a beast but without the shrinkage you'd expect if he were a steroid junkie. His muscles are as naturally sourced as the dark hairs spread across his chest and the meal he just fed me.

Although his body is a work of art, it doesn't change anything.

He is my captor, not my savior.

“Enjoy your shower. I’ll wait for you out there.” I whine like a child when my attempt to leave the bathroom with my morals intact is thwarted by the unnamed man banding his arm around my waist and drawing me back.

I try to act oblivious to the large chunk of fleshy muscle brushing my backside, but try as I may, my libido picks up on it long before my astuteness shuts down the inanity. “This is wrong. I’m a taken woman. You can’t force me to shower with you.”

With ignorance his strong point, he walks us into the shower stall, switches on the water, then holds me under the spray to clear the chunks of vomit my shirt missed. What the water can’t budge, his hands take care of. He glides them over my breasts, down my arms, and around my stomach, only stopping when the tip of his pinkie finger reaches the apex of my sex.

“Why stop?” I push out with a half sob, half groan. After peering up at him, I say, “You’ve already taken away *all* my rights, so why act all high and mighty now?”

I’m angry, and rightfully so, but not all my anger is for the unnamed man. I’m mad at myself as well. My body should be repelling from his touch. Just the thought of him touching me should make me sick, but for some stupid reason, it doesn’t.

That has me as confused as I am angry.

“Why are you doing this to me? What did I ever do to you to deserve to be treated this way?” When he angles his head and draws together his brows, signs I’m getting through to him, I ask, “Did I hurt you? Am I responsible for *this...*” I thrust my hand around his cabin before guiding it down his body. When he shakes his head, I ask, “Then why are you hurting me? Why won’t you just let me go?”

With the water left running and towels nonexistent, he marches us back into the main half of the cabin. His flaccid cock swings in his legs' brisk movements when he places me onto the solo dining room chair before he searches the numerous drawers in the kitchen.

Since his back is to me, I could make a run for it. I don't. Not just because I'm naked, but also because curiosity is strangling my senses. He's acting as if he has the answers to all my questions in his cabin, but he's only just remembered that.

I sit a little straighter when he pivots around to face me over a minute later. He's clutching a worn-out piece of paper, and his eyes are wide and bright.

Too curious for my own good, I attempt to hobble to his half of the kitchen. A hiss of pain barely whistles between my teeth when he ends my campaign by coming to me instead. After forcefully placing me back into my seat, he hands the newspaper cutout to me. Although he endeavors to keep his eyes on my face when I drop mine to the article that is two decades old, they occasionally lower to the gentle rise and fall of my breasts. It isn't my intuition telling me this but the puckering of my nipples from his heated gaze.

I'd call him out on his wandering eyes if portions of the story about a local Cataloochee woman didn't require my utmost devotion. Although her traffic accident was over twenty years ago, some aspects of the article have my heart pumping. She sailed over almost at the exact spot I did and crashed into a tree as big as the one that ended my ping-pong down the range. Her car also caught fire shortly after impact, but she wasn't pulled from the wreckage in time. She died in the inferno.

“Who is this woman? Was she your mother?” When the stranger shakes his head, I mumble out, “Wife?” He balks before he once again shakes his head. “A family member?” When he continues shaking his head, his aggression growing with every denial, I blurt out, “I don’t understand what you’re showing me. Yes, our stories are similar, but what does Rosie’s accident have to do with me?”

He jabs his finger at the image of Rosie’s burned wreckage with so much hostility, he almost stabs his finger through the frail paper. “*Ugh. Ugh.*”

“I still don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me,” I shout after taking in the picture with more diligence. “Rosie died. I didn’t because you saved me, but that doesn’t automatically make me yours. You can’t claim someone because you saved their life. That isn’t how things work.”

I stop talking when he snatches the newspaper clipping out of my hand. He crumbles it in his hand so firmly, I’m worried it will represent nothing but ash before he storms to the far corner of the room.

I watch him when he commences getting dressed, torn between copying him and fleeing from him. It’s clear he has aggression issues but tell me one person with a communication difficulty who doesn’t. They have a reason to be cranky. My hearing was only affected for a couple of days, but the frustration about not being able to communicate effectively has never left me. It’s why I learned sign language and brail.

I had no clue how much I relied on speech to express myself until I couldn’t hear the words of the people around me. It created a massive barrier between medical staff and me that I refused to hand to my patients once my hearing returned.

My ability to interreact with my patients no matter how they communicate is what made me the doctor I am today. I love helping people, but it's even more special when I get to go the extra mile for those already doing the hard yards, and the reminder of that has me stepping into the panties the stranger fans out at my feet instead of using his crouched position to my advantage to stage another daring getaway.

Chapter Nine

Just like the night he walked us to the cabin deep in the woods, the stranger carries me on his back for our adventure outside this time around as well. We've been trekking through the densely treed property for almost an hour, and we've yet to stumble onto a single morsel of life. We're completely alone, and I'm torn as to how I should reply.

Before moving to Florida, I spent the majority of my schooling years between California and Australia. I didn't understand the complications that come from a snowstorm until I got stuck in the middle of one. I thought snow days were about marshmallows floating in hot chocolate and an endless number of hours to read. I didn't consider the isolation, power outages, and the damage little snowflakes can cause.

The ground doesn't just get suffocated by it. It causes accidents—bad ones—and proof of this stares me in the face when the stranger carefully guides us down a terrain significantly damaged by something plowing through it.

My stomach launches into my throat when he skims us past a large pine tree. There's a massive graze down one side.

The paint embedded into the gouge deep enough for me to lay in it matches the color of my once beloved car.

This must be the tree that flipped my car around, forcing me to finish my travels in reverse.

My heart that I've only just coerced back into my chest cavity beats erratically when the twisted remains of the vehicle I once thought displayed my importance to the world sneaks into my peripheral vision. It is a twisted mess of metal and glass and proves without a doubt that the envy of others will never come close to feeling loved and protected.

It is as ugly as my heart became after witnessing Cedric's betrayal.

After taking a moment to reel my emotions in, I survey the area. There are no flashing lights in the distance or the frantic calls of volunteers searching the dense woodland for me. It's just the stranger who saved me and me, and for some insane reason, the acknowledgment of that doesn't scare me as much as it once did.

I should be dead.

The charred remains of my car leave no doubt to this.

And the person I have to thank for that not being the case is the man I'm accusing as being my captor.

God, I've never felt more stupid.

"Thank you," I praise when the stranger peels me off his back like a father would a child riding on their shoulders. My voice is more sincere than the one I've utilized on him the past thirty-plus hours.

After removing the deer skin he once again used as a cloak, he fans it over an exposed stump, then plants my

backside on top of the snow-dampened fur. I peer up at him when he snorts out two short, breathy grunts.

When our eyes lock, he grunts again, announcing that he wants me to stay put. He has no reason to believe me, but the sincerity in my eyes must get me over the line because when I jerk up my chin, he pushes back the bangs I'm endeavoring to grow out, then stalks to my car.

I almost tell him to be careful—just because a flame has been extinguished doesn't mean it can't be relit—but it dawns on me that my worry is pointless when he lifts the back quarter panel of my car as if it's a toy.

I watch him in utter silence, stunned when the same beast-like strength sees him pulling at a length of steel trapped beneath the charred wreckage. His seemingly inhumane strength already has me mesmerized, but the quickest glimpse of a patch of mottled skin on his nape is far more distracting.

From a distance, it appears to be a birthmark, but the gurgling of my stomach when he angles his head to ensure his hair hides it has me worried it is something far more sinister. Birthmarks are rarely textured like the skin on his nape. It has multiple grooves and lesions associated with it, oddly similar to skin burned by an intense flame.

I know the markings of a burn better than anyone, and I didn't specialize in dermatology during my studies. My findings didn't come until after my internship.

When the stranger strongarms a strip of steel out from beneath the back tires of my ruined vehicle, I wrench my eyes away from him like I wasn't ogling him with a pair not belonging to a medical professional.

“What is that?” My interrogation is more out of curiosity than evidentiary purposes. I recognize the straight line of steel Xs with nails poking out the top. I’m just lost as to why a set of road spikes would be lodged under my car. “I veered to miss a deer and her fawn.”

There’s no confidence in my declaration whatsoever. The particulars of my accident are described as hazy at best, but even someone with a Grade 3 concussion couldn’t deny this evidence.

Needing answers, I hiss through the pain of placing weight onto my bung foot before attempting to hobble toward the wreckage. I don’t even get two steps away from the stump when the stranger grunts, lifts me from the ground by my underarms, then plants my backside back onto the deer hide.

After glaring at me long enough I can’t misunderstand his desire for me to remain seated, he dumps the homemade spikes onto the sloshy ground next to us, then digs the folded-up news article out of the pocket of his winter jacket.

The white clouds of his breaths in the frigid air float between us when he stabs his thumb at the image of Rosie’s burned car.

Although the similarities of our accidents are even more compelling now, I still don’t comprehend what he’s trying to show me.

When I say that to him, air rattles in his lungs when he thrusts his calloused hand to the wreckage almost hidden by the unrelenting snow before he thrusts the newspaper article in my face.

“I’m sure accidents occur like this all the time. Especially out this way...” My last sentence is nowhere near as

convincing as I'm hoping. If my crash was an accident, how did spikes get under the chassis of my car? They're clearly homemade, and the only people who travel this road are Cedric and his family. They own the entire estate.

Let me stop you before you get too far ahead of yourself. The Lancasters are *extremely* family-oriented. They'd *never* plot to take out one of their own.

My inner monologue trails off when a disturbing fact pops into my head. The morning of my accident, I rang Cedric's father to get the physical address of his cabin. I knew of its location, but I didn't have an actual address I could punch into the GPS, so he knew I was planning to surprise Cedric. He knew I'd be traveling that road at some stage the night of my accident.

The stranger's eyes drop to my lips when I mumble, "But why would he want me dead? I don't have anything he wants. I'm a surgeon. That's all I am. A professional. A medic. A big brain on two skinny legs, as he's quoted many times the past year. His family has never once treated me like a person. To them, I'm... I'm... I'm..." my voice croaks when I choke out, "... *nothing*."

With my heart a twisted mess, and the snow coming down so fast I can't see six feet in front of me, the stranger plucks me from the stump, then hooks me onto his back without a single protest seeping from my lips.

I must be in shock. Not just from realizing how close to death I came, but also from learning it may not have been an accident.

That's a bitter pill to swallow, and I'll need more than thirty seconds to process it.

Fortunately for me, neither the blizzard nor the stranger's once unwanted protectiveness will give me much choice but to sit back and evaluate things.

Chapter Ten

With snow creeping up all sides of the cabin, my panic should be just as elevated, but for some strange reason, I'm more worried about Rosha than myself.

Does she know she's bunkering down with a man whose family is as shady as the eerie shadows dancing in the woods?

I bet she wouldn't be so eager to suck Cedric's micro-dick then.

When my shudders conceal the laughter I wasn't anticipating to rumble in my chest at any stage within the next six months, my thumb that's been sanding the wooden windowsill picks up an unusual pattern in the grain.

I've been sitting by the only window in the cabin for the past three-plus hours. A million thoughts have raced through my head, but only one has remained, *I should be dead*.

By a deliberate act or from accidentally rolling over a set of spikes not earmarked for me, I don't know, but the more I try to unearth the truth, the more confused I become.

I own nothing of value, not even Cedric classed my time as valuable, so I truly don't believe the spikes were for me. But since it took hours for me to reach that conclusion and several

feet of snow, I won't be able to expand on my findings until this blizzard blows over.

I'm trapped more now than I was when pinned behind the steering wheel of my car, but once again, the thought doesn't terrify me as much as it should. I've lived my life a million miles an hour the past ten-plus years. I didn't want to be accused of slacking off, so I worked relentlessly to prove every promotion I've been granted was given purely on performance instead of my friendship with the founder of Ravenshoe Private Hospital. I commenced work before the sun rose and didn't finish until it had long rested, and although I love my job, I would be a liar if I said my schedule wasn't exhausting.

I had no clue I was on the verge of burnout until I spent three hours watching snow fall from a sky without an ounce of guilt fettering my features. The stranger probably thinks I'm the laziest person on the planet. Although his presence is forever felt, while I wallowed like a heartbroken idiot, he chopped wood, stacked the fireplace, and removed the vomit from the bedding.

It only took seven minutes and thirty-three seconds for him to clean up the mess I made. I plan to get over Cedric's betrayal even quicker than that. You can't be heartbroken when the person you're mourning didn't own a single piece of your heart, much less all of it.

Forever curious—and sick of commiserating over someone not worthy of my time—I bob down to take in the detail in the wood I'm sure is a knot.

Shock isn't the only thing that takes hold when I realize the indents are a set of initials. Excitement takes hold as well.

“JR...” I mumble to myself as my thumb traces the cursive J at the front of the short two-letter carving.

With my mind more focused on the craftsmanship of the initials than how they were placed into the wood, the rough edge grates the tender skin on my thumb. Expletives rip from my throat when the collision awards me with a nasty splinter.

I stand to stomp out my frustration, forgetting that my foot is more damaged than my thumb. It buckles under my weight, and the pressure of its fold pops the last couple of stitches holding the torn skin together.

“It’s okay. I’m fine. I just...” Before I can finish my reply, the man who’s been eyeing me from afar the past several hours scoops me into his arms and marches us into the kitchen.

After plonking my backside onto the thick chunk of wood that makes up the dining table, he hands me the unripe banana I refused to eat earlier before he searches for something in a set of drawers next to the empty kitchen sink.

I should be endeavoring to remove the splinter from my thumb, but my curiosity is too high to discount. My thoughts were so focused on myself the past several hours, I missed several indicators as to the stranger’s identity.

Although faint, JR is carved in the far-right corner of the dining table, the leg of the rocking chair, and in the wave of the wooden counter in the kitchen. His name is everywhere, but just like *Where’s Wally*, it didn’t stick out like a sore thumb until I found the very first one.

Now I can’t miss it.

It’s *everywhere* I look.

The stranger stops cleaning the dust off a sewing needle with his shirt when I murmur, “JR?” I wait for his eyes to lock

with mine before asking, “Are you JR?”

When his brows stitch, confused as to how I unearthed his identity, I nudge my head to the faded engraving etched into the kitchen counter. “It’s on the counter, the rocking chair, and under the windowsill.” A second unexpected giggle bubbles in my chest when I blabber out, “And now that the fog in my head is clearing, I’m reasonably sure it was engraved in the vanity sink in the bathroom as well.” Since he doesn’t deny my claim, I whisper, “That’s you, isn’t it? You’re JR?”

His expression is gruff, but no number of fine lines can hide the truth in his eyes. “Is JR your nickname or your actual name?” Niceties are a thing of the past when he breathes heavily out of his nose before he snatches up my hand and careens the needle toward my thumb. “Whoa. Hold up! You can’t just jab a rusty needle into someone’s skin. You need to sterilize it before mentally preparing the patient for the operation they’re about to face.”

JR’s scoff is silent, but I’m aware of its existence since the hot breath it’s delivered with hits my exposed knees. I’m back to wearing a shirt as a dress since I slipped out of my damp-from-the-snow clothes within a minute of JR stacking the fire. He built up the flames so well clothes are more an option than a necessity.

“Scoff all you like, JR...” his nostrils flare when I refer to him by his name, “... but splinters hurt like a bitch, so until you give me some form of pain relief, the shard of wood is staying in my thumb.”

Blood doesn’t bother me, but I hate pain. I have no tolerance for it whatsoever.

When JR slants his head before dropping his eyes to my feet dangling over the edge of the table, I swallow the brick

that suddenly lodged itself in my throat. Even a novice medic can tell the once-again gaping wound in my foot will need more than half a dozen stitches to close it. The dissection of a splinter will seem like child's play compared to the help my foot needs.

After taking a couple of moments to think up a better plan, then surrendering to the idea that I'm at JR's mercy, I say, "Pass me my medical bag. There could be something in there that'll take the edge of the pain."

I haven't practiced medicine on patients for almost two years now, but with my private cell on Isaac's speed dial list and his wife and four children his number one priority, I have a range of goodies in my bag—even a drug patent that's set to hit the market at the end of this year.

They're calling the breakthrough medicine 'Viagra for Women.' Dryness and a wailing libido will be a thing of the past within an hour of taking a little pink pill. Even if the guy is a dud, you are *guaranteed* to come. Just hitting the speed bump in the driveway of the Lancaster winter estate a little too fast almost set me off. It's the stuff of magic, and I was hopeful it would re-spark the connection Cedric and I had when we commenced dating.

It turns out all he needed was a newer model.

I stop internally whining about how much of a fool I am when JR returns front and center. Instead of handing me my medical bag he's clasping for dear life, he thrusts a brown bottle my way, then grunts like he's serving me a three-course meal.

"Thanks... but I'm more a gin and tonic type of girl," I gabber out when I recall how long it's been since I've had alcohol. My life is so hectic these days, I can't remember the

last time I had a glass of bubbly. Before Cedric entered my life, a glass of wine and a bubble bath was a once-a-week necessity, but he hogged all the spare time I had, which wasn't much, but still, it could have been better spent.

JR shrugs as if to say, *suit yourself*, pulls out the dining room chair he ruined by stealing half its padding, then plonks his backside on it. After pulling out the cork in the bottle with his teeth, he shoots it across the room with a spit-free pot shot, then takes a generous chug of the dark liquid inside.

“Not a fan of blood?” I ask, confident that his scull was a sign of a man needing a nip of liquid courage.

His eyes bounce between mine for two painfully long seconds before he shakes his head. Our conversation is extremely one-sided, but the fact he can understand me and is replying soars my pulse to a never-before-reached level. And don't get me started on how I'm now seeing him as more my savior instead of his captive, or we will be here all night.

“Is that why this is so thick?” I tug on his beard during the ‘this’ part of my comment like my hands aren't as shaky as my insides. I'm not shaking in fear. It's from remembering how he freed me from the wreckage using nothing but his bare hands and a chunk of wood. Even if his thoughts are a little warped, that level of determination deserves recognition. “Are you afraid of a little razor nick?”

Any confidence our interaction gained me flies out the window when he digs the needle he fetched from the kitchen drawer into my skin without warning.

“Ouch!” My squeal makes it seem as if I'm three, but I don't care. I wasn't lying when I said I hate pain. “That hurts!”

Before I can yank my hand out of his grasp to inspect it for a gaping wound, JR tugs it back his way, then does the last thing I ever thought would be erotically stimulating, but somehow is.

He spits on my hand.

The alcohol mixed with his saliva adds to the burn of my sensitive skin, but I don't have an excuse for the warm slickness it coats my panties with. We don't sterilize wounds at my place of employment like that, but JR could be onto something. Imagine how revolutionary it would be for woman's health if they were excited to seek medical assistance instead of being scared. There'd be lines stretched for as far as the eye could see—perhaps even across the globe if ruggedly handsome men like JR were responsible for the sterilization of their wounds.

Although that could also cause a lot of self-harming, so I guess the right thing to do is for me to keep this medical marvel to myself.

In the silence of numerous thigh presses, I watch JR suck the excessive liquid off my no-longer-shuddering hand before he inspects the microscopic nick in my thumb to make sure all the splinter of wood is gone.

Once he's certain it is, he releases me from his strong yet painless grip, then snatches up my medical bag from where he dumped it on the floor. He pushes aside a set of stethoscopes, the birth control sample Isaac was adamant Isabelle will never take, and the magic pink pill I was telling you about earlier until he finds a suturing needle and a ream of medical thread.

“Oh no, you don't need to stitch up my foot again. It's just a scratch. I'm sure it will hold out until after the blizzard.”

I whine like a child when he ignores my assurance by jerking up his chin with a grunt, wordlessly suggesting for me to scoot back.

I'm about to tell him to go to hell, but my words trap in the back of my throat when he places my injured foot onto his thigh. Our contrasting heights are extremely apparent, but the difference in our builds is even more obvious when you take in how tiny my foot looks on his thigh. He has those thick chunky thighs men who do a lot of squats have. They're the size of tree trunks, and I've seen enough of them the past thirty-plus hours to confidently declare that.

When JR glances at me over the needle and thread, his expression abstruse, I twist my lips, acting unimpressed about how faultlessly he threads the cotton through the needle's eye.

It's all for show. Just the seamless way he stitched me up the first time around reveals he knows what he's doing. I'm just not known for praising people who confuse me as much as they fascinate me.

JR's appearance is extremely rough, but when you exclude his grunting and remember how he kept me alive for three days, he doesn't seem nearly as daunting. He pulled me out of a dangerous wreck, kept me alive during a medically challenging concussion, and is so in touch with his femininity, he knows when a woman needs space.

He only approached me once while I was sitting at the window for the past three hours and that was to hand me the banana.

The remembrance of his nurturing way does little to settle the nerves fluttering in my stomach when he careens the needle toward my foot, though.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea. I can’t tolerate pain. I’m a wimp.” This is proven without a doubt when he rips the suturing needle through my unnumbed skin in the middle of my wound. “*Ouuccchhh!*”

With his facial expression hidden by his scruffy beard and angled head, JR nudges the bottle of alcohol to my half of the table with his elbow before he returns his eyes to a wound in need of over a dozen stitches.

“Can you at least wait until I’m tipsy before you torture me?” I plead before snatching up the bottle and downing two generous mouthfuls. “Sweet lord.” I cough through the burn stretching from the back of my throat to my stomach. “What the hell is that? Unvented isopropyl? It tastes like pure alcohol.”

It’s hard to see JR’s mouth through his thick beard, but I swear his lips are itching to furl into a grin. His twinkling eyes give away his smile even more than his mouth.

“You won’t be laughing when I hurl on your fur rug. As far as I am aware, I haven’t eaten today, and we all know what happens when a once-a-year socialite drinks on an empty stomach.”

It dawns on me that JR has more personality than his outer shell lets on when he tosses the banana I refused earlier into my lap. After arching a brow as if to say, *there’s your solution*, he returns his focus to my foot he’s only just started to suture.

Although his next three stitches are nowhere near as painful as the first two, I swallow numerous mouthfuls of the mentholated spirit-inspired drink over the next twenty minutes.

It hits my head faster than the bottle of bourbon I borrowed from my parents' liquor cabinet when I was sixteen and makes my words slur when I stammer out, "Do you think Cedric ever loved me? Or was it just about the sex?"

I balk more than JR.

Cedric and I didn't have sex. He hung around long enough for me to give in to his groveling, then the actual deed from beginning to end lasted five minutes maximum. Cedric said foreplay was not his forte.

Needing to wash down the bile his endless lies instigate before I add to the mess in JR's beard, I chug down another generous helping of the murky dark liquid.

Regretfully, it increases the nonsense spilling from my mouth instead of ending it. "I guess some people will say I'm to blame for him straying." I swallow an extra generous mouthful of liquid courage to ease out my next confession. "If I had kept him satisfied, he wouldn't have looked elsewhere. That's what his mom will start her argument with." I groan. "Hell, my mom may even start with that. She's all about women keeping their men happy." I lock my eyes with JR's that are darting between my ankle and my face. "Do you know that I'm the only member on my mother's side over the age of thirty who isn't married?" I gasp like I just found out Cedric and I are related by blood. "The horror."

My focus shifts from seeking the slightest glimpse of JR's smile to the bottle in my hand when a weird clicking noise gains my attention.

The liquor I'm downing like water almost resurfaces when I learn the reason for the noise. My engagement ring is clinking against the neck of the half-empty bottle.

The memento that was meant to signify my importance in Cedric's life pains me more than JR undertaking a minor surgical procedure on my foot without anesthetic, and my drunken head is adamant it must be immediately dealt with.

"Here, hold this." Alcohol sloshes onto the floor when my attempt to thrust the bottle into JR's chest is thwarted by my woozy head seeing him twice. One is a mirage compliments to my tipsy head, and the other is real, but I have no clue which is which.

Perhaps I died in the wreckage, and they're both a figment of my imagination? It would make sense as to why the widening of his eyes when I yank off my engagement ring makes it seem as if I know him when I don't. His eyes, when not sheltered by his hair, are oh so familiar, yet still very foreign.

Things become even murkier when not even unvented alcohol can hinder my smarts. "Alcohol is great for killing bacteria, but a good old rinse of soap and water is actually the preferred method of wound care. Alcohol burns, which increases the risk of scarring and slows the healing process." When JR yanks back the bottle he was about to pour over my wound, then cocks a brow, I stammer out, "Rarely anything you watch in movies or read in books is factual." I nudge my head to the bottle that should be emptier than it is with how heavy my head feels. "I'd get more benefit drinking what's left in that bottle than dousing my wound with it."

With a grunt like he instantly believes me, JR hands the bottle back to me, then twists around to face the sink. Over the rim of the homemade brew attached to my lips, I watch him fill a wooden bowl with water before he drops a cloth into the suds-free bowl.

After returning my foot to his thigh, he squeezes the square of flannel in his hand before guiding the flow of water dribbling out of it onto the wound he just stitched back together.

It's the simplest of tasks, yet so fascinating to watch. I'm usually the caregiver. I am rarely on the receiving end of the treatment. Furthermore, for the man the size of a giant, I'm shocked he knows how to be so gentle.

Once he has the wound washed with warm water, JR lifts his eyes to mine. He grunts again, but instead of me having no clue what he's trying to say, I read the words he can't speak from his eyes.

"Yes," I reply, faintly bobbing my head. "That's good. You did great."

My praise shifts the tension between us. Instead of it being crippled with unease, it is brimming with sexual friction. Butterflies come alive in my stomach when JR's focus shifts from my foot to my knee. He uses the cotton swatch to clear away the smears of mud that flicked up during our trek through the woods.

Although his touch is as mellow as a snowflake falling on my nose, it's catastrophic to my insides. I'm burning up everywhere, and it has nothing to do with how close to the fire we're sitting.

JR's fingers are so long, even with his hand cupping my knee to ensure he doesn't miss a smear of mud, his fingertips skim the sensitive skin on the inside of my thigh. The callouses on his fingers have me wondering what a beard as thick as his would feel like while gracing the same area. Would it feel prickly like a five o'clock shadow or as soft as a cashmere scarf?

I bet with the right angle, you could experience both sensations at the same time, and the knowledge has my thighs pressing together with so much urgency, JR's eyes lift to mine a mere second *after* I've removed the lust from my eyes.

He watches my throat work through two hard swallows before he creeps his hand under my shirt with a suppleness a man his size shouldn't have.

More than alcohol hinders my senses when he brushes the back of his hand down my panties. I shouldn't be wet, but I am. I can't recall the last time someone looked at me the way JR is peering at me now. I feel wanted—very much so—and the desperateness it instigates is undeniable in my low tone when I let my libido speak first for a change.

“Please touch me.”

His growl almost sets me off. It's low, deep, and dangerous. It exposes his restraint is wavering as much as mine. With him having far less to lose than me, he responds to the tension thickening the air in the most brilliant way.

He pulls my panties to the side, locks his eyes with mine, then slowly inserts a finger inside me. The bolt of electricity his simple touch darts through my body is embarrassing. I nearly come undone with only one thrust, and the realization has me reaching for the bottle of alcohol he dumped next to my thigh to chug down a generous gulp.

When JR mistakes my wish for our exchange not to be over before it begins as disgust, he yanks his finger out of my vagina, pushes back in his chair with so much force it smacks into the kitchen counter, transfers my sorry ass from the dining room table to the bed, then hightails it to the bathroom.

“I didn’t... I wasn’t...” *Come on, brain, think!* “It isn’t how it seems.”

When the brutal slam of the bathroom door gobbles up my words, I sink into the ‘mattress’ before throwing an arm over my blurry eyes. I’d follow him if I could trust my legs to keep me upright. Since I can’t, I swish my tongue around my mouth, curse my stupidity to hell, then surrender to the alcohol curdling my stomach as relentlessly as the pain in JR’s eyes before he bolted away from me.

Chapter Eleven

When the shudders wreaking havoc with my body the past hour become too much to bear, I scoot back, hopeful the winds whistling through the cracks of the cabin's floor aren't as noticeable on JR's half of the bed.

With how things ended, I didn't think I'd sleep a wink last night, but the throat-burning concoction JR gave me while suturing my foot knocked me out in under a minute. The drool on my pillow exposes I slept like a baby, not to mention the fact I'm waking up before the sparrows without the thumping head I was anticipating.

My pause of appreciation is cut short when my scurry across the 'mattress' ends with me almost toppling onto the floor with a squeal. JR's half of the bed is empty, and the knowledge has my neck cranking back so fast, I almost give myself whiplash. I didn't hear him leave the bathroom last night, but I assumed he'd eventually succumb to the call of the night.

A new type of disappointment fills me when I discover the cause of me waking up in a cold bed for the second time the past two days. JR isn't chopping wood or cooking god knows

what on an ancient stove, he's sleeping on the unvarnished floorboards in front of the fireplace.

With his only source of warmth an almost extinguished fire and a thin sheet-like blanket, he must be freezing. I shivered most of the night, yet I was snuggled under three deer skins, my back was cushioned by a fur-lined material I'm pretending is a woolen underlay, and I had enough alcohol racing through my veins to keep half the continent warm.

Should I be disappointed or relieved to find him sleeping on the floor? I'm not sure which way any of my pendulums are swinging. I am glad he respects me enough not to push past any boundaries I'm not comfortable with, but I'm also wary his decision stems more around believing I rejected him than upstanding morals.

I don't know what I was thinking last night. Cedric is a cheating dud, and I'd give anything to hurt him as much as he hurt me, but JR doesn't deserve to be the rebound guy. I don't even know if he knows what that is. Has he only been out of the loop a couple of days like me? Or is this type of isolation normal for him? From the delicacy of deer meat to the homemade furniture, I'm steering toward the latter.

The thought doesn't bother me nearly as much as it did only yesterday. The world we live in isn't all that beautiful anymore. People hurt people just because. There's no rhyme or reason to their madness, so I understand how this type of existence could be inviting to some people.

Don't get me wrong, I don't think it's for me, but perhaps I'm not here to consider a new way of life. Maybe I'm here to share my knowledge instead of extending on it.

With my head as confused as my heart, I drink in JR's features instead of plotting a daring escape. The blizzard

doesn't give me much choice, but I don't think even a handful of options would change the verdict. His way of thinking isn't the norm, but no matter which way you look at it, he's not once physically hurt me. When I think back at our exchanges, I was the one being the bully. I hit him, kicked him, and head-butted him. And for what reason? Because he kept me alive in an impossible situation before mistaking protectiveness as ownership.

It makes me ashamed and has me seeking ways to make it up to him.

The dwindling fire seems like a good place to start.

After flopping my legs off the bed, I stretch out for the stick JR used to wade us through the snow yesterday afternoon from the dining room table, then use it as a brace to stand. It's a little flimsy, but with the wound in my foot sealed, and the swelling reduced from the cold water JR soaked it with, my hobble to the door doesn't take nearly as long as I was anticipating.

When I curl my hand around the ancient doorknob, pride swarms me from all sides. I wasn't lying yesterday when I said I have a low tolerance for pain. A papercut makes me teary-eyed, so to fight through the pain jolting up my leg to help someone makes me feel invincible.

The belief is pulled out from beneath me when I carefully pry open the door so I don't wake JR. Wind gusts into the cabin so fast, the door and I are sent flying backward. I sail through the air like a leaf on a hot summer's day, my breezy ride only ending when I crash into a solid surface. It's hard, hairy, and solely responsible for the budding of my nipples.

Even when my body should be focusing on anything but my libido, it can intuit the difference between the fur of a dead

animal and a wild beast of a man in the buff—even more so when JR’s body responds to my almost nakedness in the same manner.

He’s hard, but regretfully, so are his facial features, which forces me to blurt out, “I swear on my nanna’s grave that I wasn’t trying to escape. I was gathering kindling for the fire.”

JR’s heart booms wildly against my chest when he drops his eyes to mine. I’m wide-eyed and open-mouthed, but not even the sharp cut of my jaw from my angled head to peer back at him can hide my puckered nipples from his rapacious gaze. “If I weren’t, would I really try to flee in only a shirt? It’s cold in here, let alone out there.” I nudge my head to the snowy grounds outside, hopeful he’ll buy my act that my puckered nipples are from the below-freezing temperatures. “That’s why I was fetching firewood.”

It feels like minutes pass before his grunt adds to the tension bristling between us, but it isn’t even seconds. When he scoops me into his arms and marches me back to bed, I’m terrified he doesn’t believe me.

My worries are unfounded when he sets me down nowhere close to the restraints that circled my wrist my first twenty-four hours here. After tossing a shirt over his bare chest and tugging on a pair of sweatpants, he heads out the open doorway that makes it seem as if the cabin is a refrigerator.

I grin like a love-sick idiot when his return sees numerous wedges of dry wood being placed onto the dwindling fire. When his eyes stray my way like he’s seeking my approval, I briefly nod while praising, “That’s great. Thank you.”

With it still dark and the icy conditions begging for more coverage for my bare legs, I slip beneath three layers of deer skin before hunkering down low. JR kicked the door closed

after a quick intermission outside, but it will take more than chunks of lumber to combat the winds whipping up through the cracks in the floorboards.

“Are you warm down there?” I ask JR through clattering teeth several minutes later, confident the rug he’s resting on isn’t protecting his body from the bitter temperatures. The white breaths parting his lips assure me of this, not to mention the goosebumps prickling almost every inch of his torso. Just like Cedric, JR sleeps shirtless. “Because if you’re not, you can share the bed with me.”

The fact he already isn’t shocks me. I assumed we had shared the bed every night the past five nights. Cedric didn’t care how upset I was. He’d never sleep on the floor. When his mother insulted my Korean heritage last Fourth of July, I made Cedric take me to a hotel.

With his parents living in a popular area of the country, the hotel only had a room with one bed. Since Cedric didn’t stand up for me, I told him he either drives back to his parents’ house or sleeps on the floor. When I came out of the bathroom after taking a long shower with the hope it would calm me down, he was in my bed, snuggled under the blankets, and he wasn’t budging no matter what I said.

With him being far too big and wide for me to move, I ended up sleeping on the couch. I was certain that was the beginning of the end for us, but when he filled my office with dozens of roses, I let another red flag slip by me.

It was stupid of me to do, but what girl doesn’t want to believe they’re someone’s number one? He made his mother apologize, and we moved on with our lives until he stuffed up again without any concern that I told him his last mistake would be his last.

My fiancé didn't respect me enough to sleep on a plush carpeted floor so my opinions were valued, yet a man I barely know combatted a blizzard to explain himself in a way I could understand.

As I said before, JR's ideas of protectiveness are warped, but I'll never admit they're unwanted. It feels nice to be wanted, so much so, I extend my olive branch so perversely, he'll have no choice but to accept it. "Please come up. You must be freezing."

Silence.

My offer is answered with nothing but silence, and it has my stubbornness rearing its ugly head.

"*Arrggh!*" JR grunts in a rough tone when I toss off the deerskin and bear weight on my foot again like I have the strength to drag him to my half of the cabin.

"If you don't want me to come to you, then come to me! It's your bed, so it isn't like I'm sharing it with you. You're sharing it with me." I scoff like he's being an idiot. "Besides, we've showered together multiple times, you had your finger in my vagina only hours ago, and you've seen me naked. How much worse could things become in a bed?"

I swallow my sass when he tosses off the thin piece of cotton keeping him warm, then stands to his feet in all his six feet of glory. He didn't just remove his shirt when he went back to bed, his sweatpants went right along with it.

The tingles racing through my body double in strength when my lack of retort sees him slowly crossing the room. His flaccid cock swings like a pendulum on a grandfather clock, and no matter how much my brain screams for me to roll over and act disinterested, I watch every mesmerizing sway.

There's no doubt JR is a rough and dangerous man, but that doesn't deter from his sexiness in the slightest. His body is big, built, and beautiful, and the wildness of his untamed features add to his appeal. He truly fascinates me, however, not all my admiration hinders on his attractiveness. I'm just as interested to learn who he is and how he became the man he is.

Does he live out here full-time?

Was he raised here or left to fend off the wolves alone?

And does he find me as interesting as I do him?

From the glimmer that darts through his eyes when I fan open the deer skin to invite him into my bed has me leaning toward it being a mutual fascination.

I squeal like a schoolgirl when JR flips me over like I don't weigh a thing, flattens his hand on my stomach, then draws me back. He's done this before, cloaked me with his body. I'm certain of it, and it wasn't just when I was in the throes of a sickening panic attack.

The memories trickling into my head assure me those times were purely therapeutic.

The hardness pressing against my ass guarantees that isn't the case this time around.

Even an unconscious person wouldn't miss such a growth.

After coughing to clear my voice of any immaturity it shouldn't have, I ask, "How much longer do you think the blizzard will last?"

Locals have a knack for things like predicting weather patterns and durations of such patterns, so although my question appears simplistic, I'm hoping it's the commencement of a slew of information.

“JR?” I query, shocked about his ignorance. Communication isn’t his strong point, but I didn’t think that would still be the case when lying in bed with someone without any pants on.

JR growls in frustration when I roll over to face him.

Hours ago, it would have frozen me in place.

Now, I see it as more of a challenge than a threat.

I take a moment to drink in how his plump lips are as thick as his beard and his still straight nose even after being battered numerous times the past thirty-nine hours before I lock my eyes with his oceanic baby blues.

A grin tugs at my lips when I catch him partway through his appreciative stare. He drags his eyes across my lips and over my cheeks before they eventually find mine several heart thrashing seconds later.

“How...” Shock renders me silent before another word can leave my mouth. I’m not solely surprised by the amount of admiration in JR’s eyes when they locked with mine. I am choked up by the snapping of his eyes to my lips the instant they begin to move. “You’re not ignorant,” I murmur, my voice hitched with both alarm and awe. “You’re deaf.” When his eyes rocket back to mine, I sign, “*Aren’t you?*”

I wait and wait and wait for him to answer me, and just when I think he never will because he doesn’t understand sign language, he jerks up his chin.

“*Can you only understand sign language, or can you speak it as well?*” I both speak and sign my question so he can choose his preferred method of communication.

JR’s second delay is nowhere near as tortuous as the first, but it has the same tear-producing response. “*I can sign too.*”

I could kiss him. I would if I weren't so damn excited to have unearthed a way for us to communicate. *"How long have you lived out here? Were you raised here? Have you ever left the woods? Do you know what a banana split is?"*

My eagerness to learn everything about him comes off as rude, and I'm not the only one noticing this. With a grunt deeper than any he's hit me with previously, JR flips me back over, bands his arm around mine so they're pinned to my chest like I'm wearing a straitjacket, then he buries his nose into my hair.

Even if I want to apologize for my insensitive interrogation, I can't. JR has made sure he can't see my lips or my hands, so instead of using words to express my sorrow, I use actions instead. I melt into his embrace, the ease of my action surely better than any apology I could muster.

I hope my gesture will expose to him that my interrogation was purely out of curiosity, but within minutes of it being initiated, the rhythm of his heart and the warmth of his body pressed against mine coerces me back into a restless yet somewhat horny slumber.

Chapter Twelve

I thought waking up in a cold and empty bed would be the worst thing I'd face this morning. That isn't close to the truth. Yes, my bed is empty, but the disappointment roaring through me has nothing on the ache in the lower half of my stomach.

I'm busting to use the facilities, and the pain is excruciating.

"JR..." I murmur before rolling over to his half of the bed that's surprisingly warm considering how low the flames are in the fire. "Would a trek to the bathroom be too much to ask?"

Up until two days ago, I would have never asked someone to accompany me to the bathroom, but after the frantic whistles of the wind last night and taking the inches upon inches of snow covering the only window of the cabin, I know it won't be a solo trek today.

I don't need JR to place me onto the toilet seat, but I sure as hell won't make it that far without his help.

After breathing out my annoyance that I'm not as strong as I like to portray, I stand with the aid of the chunky bed knob. "JR?" I try again before I curse my stupidity to hell.

He's deaf, you idiot. He can't hear your calls for help.

Just as I snatch up the stick JR dumped by my bed last night to whack it against the bedpost, a groan sounds from the bathroom. It's rough and unhinged like someone is in as much pain as my bladder.

"Hello?" I murmur, confident the grunt didn't come from JR. I've grown accustomed to his grumbles the past couple of days. This wasn't one I'd heard before. "Is someone here?"

Mindful the spikes JR located could have been earmarked for me, I hold out the stick in front of myself like it's a weapon of mass destruction before I hobble toward the bathroom, confident that is the direction the noise came from.

"I should warn you that I'm armed." Partway through my confession, my eyes stray to the doorway. My worry doubles when I spot JR's gun resting against the warped wooden material. My father always says if you see a hunter without a gun, he's most likely being hunted, and the groan that leaves the bathroom this time around backs up his claims.

JR sounds like he's in pain and has me racing through the bathroom door without a single thought for my safety.

He saved me, so it is only fair I return the favor.

"JR..." I burst through the door at the speed of light, then I almost choke on my spit. JR isn't being tortured by a bunch of locals who have confused him as Big Foot. He's washing himself in the shower, and the visual is enthralling.

The water has flattened his hair away from his face, his beard is glistening with the droplets I'm suddenly envious of, and his hand is wrapped around his fat cock.

When it dawns on me that he's relieving tension in the exact manner you'd expect for a man who lives in the woods, instead of upholding his privacy, I watch every sordid detail

with a wish my tongue could hang out of my mouth, and the urges of my bladder are pushed aside for a throbbing clit.

I've never seen a more stimulating image. The pumps of his hand are long and controlled, yet still urgent and greedy. He drags his hand down his veiny shaft until his uncurled pinkie dips into the curly black hairs covering his sack before he drags it back to the glistening tip.

Although now is not the time for a medical evaluation, his lack of foreskin assures me his move to the wilderness didn't occur until after he was circumcised. The perfect symmetry of his cock's head is too refined to consider the prospect he was circumcised by wilderness lovers. It's curved, glistening with arousal, and so damn thick, I doubt much more than the knob will slide between a woman's lips when she was giving him oral.

The jealousy my last thought instigates is outrageous. It rips through me as dangerously as the jolt of pleasure JR's next groan does. He appears close to climax, and I'm standing barefoot on shards of glass in anticipation of its arrival.

Will he speak when he comes?

Will he stay mute?

Or will he lock his eyes with mine across the steamy room, forcing me to turn around?

The popping of my eyes out of my head should inform you which route he takes, but in case it doesn't, he went for choice number three.

"I'm so sorry," I blubber out before spinning around and snapping my eyes to the wall like I wasn't eyeballing him with a pair of eyes not belonging to a medical professional. "I need to use the bathroom, but the path is snowed over." Lying to get

myself out of trouble already reveals my level of stupidity when I'm turned on, so forgetting that he can't hear me since I'm facing away from him ranks low on the inane things I've done the past few days.

"I need to use the bathroom," I sign. *"I think the track might be snowed over."*

After breathing out three times, I slowly drift my eyes to the steamy vanity mirror. It isn't the standard mirror you'd usually find in a rustic cabin. It's more an industrial sheet of reflective steel tacked to the wall, but it does as intended and allows me to lock my eyes with JR.

"I shouldn't have watched," I breathe out slowly, suddenly remorseful. "It was just—" I stop, unsure how to articulate what I just saw before the most brilliant response pops into my head. "Exhilarating." I shake off the tingles the flare in his eyes causes before responding, "But that doesn't excuse me for invading your privacy. I shouldn't have..."

My apology is cut short by the quivered breath that parts my lips when JR re-fists his cock. With his eyes locked on mine and his bottom lip caught between his teeth, he drags his hand to the base of his cock before he returns it to the glistening tip.

When his hand remains circling his thick cock, but it doesn't move an inch, I squeeze my thighs together, then jerk up my chin, encouraging him to continue.

He does that not even half a second later.

With every second our eyes lock and hold, the tension in the room magnifies. It crackles and hisses in the air, and before my brain can talk me out of it, it has me spinning around to face JR front on. I want him to see what the image

of him stroking his cock does to my body. I want him to drink in my pebbled nipples, rosy cheeks, and dilated eyes even more than I want to lap up the glistening bead at the end of his impressive cock.

The droplet of precum grows and grows and grows until it eventually rolls to the underside of his cock's head and is then gathered by his hand so he can use it to quicken his strokes.

Who knew a bead of precum could be so erotically stimulating? Its descent and ultimate destruction have my panties the dampest they've ever been. I'm hot all over and on the verge of begging JR to become a minute-man like Cedric so I can take in the way his eyes dilate when he comes and discover if it will soften his hardened features even more than a peaceful night's sleep.

I'm so close to having my unvoiced wishes answered, I can taste his arousal on the tip of my tongue. It's right there, almost in his grasp, then a noise I was seeking two days ago steals my focus from his engorged knob.

Even with the winds last night sounding like a freight train, there's no mistaking the distinct noise of helicopter blades. They're so loud, it seems as if they're hovering right above us.

The hope sees me sprinting for the front door of the cabin even faster than I bolted during my endeavor to protect JR.

JR grunts for me to stop, but I'm out the door and wading through the snow in two heart-thrashing seconds. Then, just as quickly, I wave my arms through the air like my lips aren't turning a dangerous shade of blue.

"I'm down here!" I scream, certain this is the rescue crew who most likely had to suspend their search due to dangerous conditions. "Hel—"

Before all my plea leaves my mouth, I'm crash tackled from the side. The snow softens the blow of JR's hit, but I'm winded when he uses his body and a deer skin to conceal us from the rescue helicopter circling above us.

"No... don't," I beg through big wheezy breaths when my endeavor to free myself from his hold has JR's hand inching toward my mouth. He wants to silence me even more than I want to escape his clutch.

This could be my only chance of freedom. I can't give this up because of my libido. I worked too hard for too long to watch all my dreams circle the drain.

I don't know if my pleading eyes get me over the line or the weakening of the helicopter blades above our head. Whatever it is, the effects are devastating. JR's ploy to hide me from the people endeavoring to save me worked. The helicopter is retreating, and the knowledge makes me extremely angry.

"Why did you do that?" I whack into him like my body no longer cares that he's pinning me to a snowy ground with the very thing it was mesmerized with only minutes ago. "They could have been looking for me. They might have been my only chance of getting out of these woods alive!"

His angry roar freezes me. I can see the denial in his eyes, smell the anger seeping from his skin, and the pungent aroma intensifies as he plucks me from the ground, tosses me over his shoulder, then storms back into the cabin.

When he dumps me onto the bed, his eyes stray to the vine curled around the bed knob for the quickest second. His contemplation on whether to restrain me or not barely lasts five seconds, but it's long enough to warn me that I'm pushing the perimeters of his understanding.

After glaring at me like I've lost the privilege to watch him please himself, he storms to the closet to get dressed. It's a fast, angry procedure that ends with him removing my sleet sodden shirt and replacing it with a dry one.

I won't lie, his eyes' refusal to budge from my face hurts more than it should. I like the way he looked at me when stroking his cock. It was a wanton stare instead of one pronged with disrespect.

"I don't believe the spikes were for me," I mutter, needing to say something to lessen his anger. "Cedric is an asshole, and his family don't have the best morals, but that doesn't make them murderers." When he snatches up the vine, even more angered by my so-called defense of the Lancasters, I snatch my hand away before pushing back from him with a grunt. "No. I'm not letting you do this. I know you can communicate with me. You just choose not to. Well, guess what? You don't get to be angry at someone for not understanding you when you won't give them a chance!"

I slap his hands away when he careens them toward my face. I'm scared as hell, but since my anger is ten times worse, I refuse to let my fear of being suffocated to death paralyze me this time around. I deserve answers, and since he is the only one who can give them to me, I'll fight him for them.

"Tell me what they did? Tell me why you hate them so much? Then perhaps if I know why you're so gung-ho to keep me away from them, I won't fight you at every turn."

With his hand weaved through my hair to force me to hold his gaze and his eyes boring into mine, he exposes every sordid detail. He doesn't use words to share his secrets, though. He doesn't need to. The hurt in his eyes I was

mistaking for anger is extremely telling, not to mention the slash marks on his wrists no amount of callouses could hide.

The Lancasters made him want to give up, but for some reason, he held on, and I can't help but feel like that reason was me.

Chapter Thirteen

““C an I help?”

Although JR’s back is facing me, I wait for his eyes to fleetingly lock with mine in the reflection of the steel splash back in the kitchen before asking my question. It’s a similar size and cut as the mirror in the bathroom but steamier since JR has been preparing dinner for the past hour.

What started as an awe-inspiring day soon turned into a nightmare. JR hasn’t spoken to me all day. Although that isn’t unusual for him, he hasn’t grunted at me either. He’s avoiding me, and for some inane reason, it hurts more than Cedric’s betrayal.

“I don’t know how to prepare...” I swallow before forcing out my next two words, “... *deer meat*, but I can shell peas. It was my job anytime we had a family function during my childhood.”

I wait and wait and wait for JR to answer me, and just when I think he never will, he removes the bowl of peas from the cutting board he’s preparing fresh meat on and places them on the table in front of me.

“*Thank you.*” Since he’s facing me, I sign my praise as well as speak it.

His grunt is brisk, but it sours my heart rate to a never-before reached level. There's no doubt his shell is as hard as his exterior, but the more I chip at it, the more fascinating he becomes. He's reserved and aloof but still compassionate and caring. There are so many layers to him, and it will take more than one snowstorm to work them all out.

Desperate to spark a conversation, I talk about what everyone does when snowed in—the weather. “With how hard it's snowing, I bet you wish you had an inside toilet. The multiple treks after you eat your stew will be horrendous.”

I mentally pat myself on the back when his grunt is more humor-based than annoyed. After placing two handfuls of diced meat into a rusty pot on top of an open fire heater, he twists back around to face me. Although it presents the perfect opportunity for me to recommence the interrogation I instigated this morning, I wasn't lying when I said his silence the past couple of hours hurt. So instead of bringing up the past, I keep my focus on the now. “Is it wrong of me to admit what you're cooking smells so good I'm regretting my decision to stick with vegetables?”

When I nudge my head to the bowl of peas I'm in the process of shelling, air whizzes out of his nose before he moves toward the dining table to speed up the process. With how slow I am, his stew will be soup before he adds vegetables into the mix.

My brows stitch when he pauses three steps away. He looks a little lost. I realize why when his eyes drop to the only chair in the room. His cabin isn't set up for visitors, and my backside is hogging the only chair.

“Here, you have this seat, and I'll—” My breathing shallows to a purr when my hobbled leap from the chair is

quickly followed by JR taking a seat and pulling me to sit on his lap. “Sit on your lap.”

Within minutes, the awkwardness of sitting on his lap and trying not to swivel dissipates, and the enjoyment of a simple, basic existence takes over. I smile while remembering how I sat on my grandpa’s knee while shelling peas. He used to tell me stories about growing up in Korea and how I was lucky to live in the United States.

I thought he was too old to understand the difficulties of growing up in a country where neither of your parents originated from. It was only as I got older did I realize what he meant. I had so many more opportunities growing up than my mother had. I explored multiple continents, gained friends solely because I sounded different than them, and grew up with two loving parents who forever encouraged me to strive for my goals.

Up until yesterday, I thought I was doing that.

Now, as I sit on the lap of a man who has no possessions but a content soul, I begin to wonder if that is true.

How can you put a price on happiness when it’s meant to be free?

After breathing out the uncertainty swirling in my stomach before it requires a trip to the bathroom, I ask JR, “Do you always favor your left side?” When he peers down at me with his brows quirked, I place down the pod I’m in the process of shelling. *“You pick up things with your right hand, revealing it is your dominant side, but all your strength seems to come from your left side.”*

While keeping my head tilted to ensure he can see my lips, I raise his hands and mimic the moves he does while shelling a

pea. “You gather the pod with your right hand, but you shell it with your left.” After taking a moment to drink in the contrasting sizes of our hands, I rip through the peapod with my left hand, grimacing when I destroy half the peas in the pod during the process. “I’m clumsier with my left, but you seem ambidextrous, if not favoring your left side.”

When I mimic the movements I just made, but with his hands instead of mine, the peas pop out without the mess mine made. “See. Ambidextrous.” When his eyes darken with unease, I add a bit of humor to my next comment. “You also always toss me onto your left shoulder. You should mix it up occasionally and let me view one butt cheek as regularly as the other.” Realizing I’ve gone too far, I blurt out, “Not that I was perving on your butt. It was just... there. I couldn’t help but look.”

I burrow my head into my hands before saying a silent prayer for my smarts to return. I get that and so much more when JR pulls my hands down from my face before covering them with his.

With his heart beating as fast as mine, he gathers up a pea before guiding its deshelling with my left hand. It’s still a disaster, but three peas land in the bowl instead of on the floor.

I call that a victory.

Tears well in my eyes when JR signs, “*Again.*” That’s the first word he’s spoken to me, and although simplistic, it’s a massive milestone I can’t wait to extend on.

After settling the shake of my hands with his, he repeats the process. We save four peas this time around, but when just as many land on the floor, I say with a giggle, “You’re going to curse the day you saved me.”

JR freezes at my confession I now see him as my savior instead of his captive, but he shuts down his shock before returning to showing me how to shell peas.

We work together side by side for the next several minutes, and the tension it causes is bristling. It crackles and hisses in the air as powerfully as it did this morning when I watched him stroke his cock. It is an awe-inspiring time that has me doubting more than my intuition. I thought I loved Cedric. He's smart, energetic, and well-established, yet not once in the year we spent together did he have my body heightened with as much anticipation as it's being bombarded with now.

We're shelling peas, but JR's lack of dictatorship and patience is like an aphrodisiac. Every fine hair on my body is paying attention to each movement he does, and the occasional smirk slipping out from beneath his bushy beard mesmerizes me as well as the peacefulness in his eyes.

He may not have it all, but right here, and right now, he believes he does.

Regretfully, the infinite number of sparks darting between us doesn't improve my shelling skills. They're still a disaster. It's a rough estimate, but at a guess, I'd say there are more peas on the floor than in the bowl.

When it dawns on me that they're most likely JR's supply for an entire year, I say, "Shall I'll gather up the strays and wash them?"

Not giving him the chance to answer, I slip off his lap and commence hunting the balls of goodness I suspect JR grew himself. There isn't much to pursue during our slippery treks to the toilet, so I take in a tiny greenhouse with more interest than I generally would. Although the roof is covered with snow, the hessian wrapped around the soil means the plants

inside are none the wiser to the icy conditions surrounding them.

“Have you ever tried peapod soup?”

When I tilt back my head to make sure JR can see my lips, partway there, my throat gets scratchy. My crawl around the dining room table has placed me in direct symmetry with JR’s crotch, and I’m not the only one noticing. He’s hard, and despite my brain telling me it has nothing to do with me sitting on his lap, my insides cheer like the deer meat he’s about to eat is filet mignon.

When my perverted gaze gets busted, I snap my eyes away before blubbering out, “It isn’t actually factual. You need as many peas as you do pods, but—” A silent scream rips through my internal organs when something crawls over my hand. It isn’t lightweight like an ant wanting to roll a pea home to its family. It’s decent in size, has a heap of legs, and feels as hairy as JR’s chest.

With my breathing irregular and my body frozen with fear, I slowly force my eyes to my hand. Karma for having irrational thoughts about a man so soon after ending my engagement is served without prejudice when I notice a big hairy spider on my hand. It’s a wolf-spider, and although I know they’re harmless, I scream bloody murder, flick it off my hand, then attempt to leap to my feet.

I say ‘attempt’ as my head smashes into the thick wooden tabletop long before my feet return to the ground. The collision almost knocks me out, but before I can collapse into a sobbing heap, JR scoops me into his arms, then sprints for the bathroom.

He’s fast in general, but his brutal speed has me convinced he isn’t a fan of spiders either. Not only does he lock the

bathroom door with the spider on the other side, but he also stuffs a ‘towel’ under the airy crack, so we won’t have any more unwanted visitors.

“Not a fan of spiders?” I murmur with a giggle that JR cuts off with a vicious stink eye. It doesn’t have any heat to it. His eyes are too filled with worry to let anger in.

After depositing my backside onto the wooden structure we brushed our teeth at this morning, JR moves to a shelf at our right to gather up supplies. I always carry a toothbrush and a tube of minty paste in my medical bag. I’ve been caught out by double shifts too many times. Although it should have felt awkward sharing my toothbrush with JR, it didn’t. He had one, but it was just so worn down there were barely any bristles left on it. Besides, I’m eating the food he rationed to get him through the winter. Sharing is very much the way of life out here.

“Where’s the blood coming from?” I ask JR when droplets dribble to my brow. “I can’t see a gash.” He pulls me back from the mirror before he weaves his fingers through my hair. It’s a little matted since I forgot to brush it this morning, but he finds the tear in a remarkably quick time. “Do you think it’ll need stitches?”

I stop praying for him to say no when he shakes his head two seconds later. Instead, I focus on not crying when he pinches the wound with a swatch of animal fur to slow the bleed by pretending we’re in the bathroom for a completely different reason—like a retake of this morning’s riveting performance.

I’ll always be a wimp when it comes to pain but shifting my focus to something else works better than expected. Within seconds of locking my eyes with JR’s bushy beard, I’m more

fixated on a tiny twig entwined in his facial hair than my throbbing head.

It's somehow twisted itself through the dark, wiry strands, but it doesn't appear suffocated by the unusual conditions it finds itself in.

Kind of like me.

Only days ago, JR scared the living hell out of me. I'm not facing the same issues now. He fascinates me, but even more than that, he intrigues me. That's a rare feat for someone like me. I rarely have time to assess someone's qualities, much less rate them on a scale of one to ten. I don't face the same challenge here. I have all the time in the world, and most of it has been spent trying to figure out JR instead of far more pressing matters like letting my family and friends know that I'm safe.

What can I say? A broken libido isn't a nonexistent one, and this is the first time in a long time I've allowed it to take center stage for a change.

"Y-You have a twig," I stammer out when my endeavor to free the stick from his beard sees JR snatching up my hand. "It's right there. I was going to get it out for you."

Although his eyes continue to show his unease, he releases my wrist from his grasp, wordlessly permitting me to remove the twig.

With one extraction comes another and another and another until his beard is as clear as my soul feels for helping him. I'll never be able to fully repay him for pulling me out of the wreckage before it exploded, and something so simple as de-fleecing his beard shouldn't feel so impacting, but it's the

god honest truth that my soul feels brighter from helping him, prompting me to ask, “Can I wash your hair?”

As my eyes follow the bounce routine of his, I whisper, “Please. We could do it here... over the vanity. Once you grab the dining room chair and the travel-size shampoo and conditioner out of my bag, it’ll be like a real-life salon.” Nothing but honesty rings in my tone when I add, “I’m sure you’ve washed it plenty of times, but it isn’t the same as when someone does it for you.” I shrug. “It’s nice to be pampered occasionally.”

In my excitement to continue paying my penance, I forget that my foot is fucked up. I slip off the vanity straight onto my binged foot, my hiss of pain only hidden because JR follows orders as if he likes the idea of my hands on him even more than I’m dying to watch him touch himself again.

After dragging the dining chair from the kitchen to the bathroom, he snatches up my medical bag and dumps its contents on a wooden shelf at the side.

“That isn’t as it seems,” I assure him when a box of magnum condoms is the first thing to fall out. “They’re for a friend who went from wanting no kids to craving half a dozen.” When JR’s brow pops, I mutter with a smile, “His wife had baby number four last month, so I figured he’d want some form of protection. When he didn’t, I stored them in my bag for a rainy day.”

Is a snow day close enough?

Disturbed by my inner monologue and JR’s frozen stance, I place the chair where I want it by pushing him onto it. The water ram system installed outside of the house rattles into gear when I turn on the tap. With JR installing the pipes to

pass through the fireplace during circulation, the first blast of water comes out steaming hot.

Once it settles to a pleasant temperature, I gather up JR's hair and place it under the flow of water. He has even more strands than I realized. They hog the vanity sink, and more than a handful of times, my fingers get caught in the knots of my soothing massage.

"Have you ever had your hair washed before?" When the insensitive nature of my question dawns on me, I attempt a quick back pedal. "By a professional? I'm not really a wash-and-blow-dry type of girl. I barely have time for a trim. I haven't cut my hair in years." When silence reigns supreme, I mutter, "I guess it's the same for you?" I lock my eyes with his, smiling when I notice how relaxed he looks. "Although I have a feeling you rocked the long-hair gig no matter how close you lived to a hairdresser."

While manipulating the shampoo to ensure it coats every strand of his wild hair, the tips of my fingers brush past the mottled skin on his nape. As suspected from viewing it from afar, the texture of his skin exposes it is distressed from a burn. It's warm to touch even with the thinness of the scars revealing his injury occurred quite some time ago.

A squeak pops from my mouth when JR snatches up my wrist for the second time. I'm not just startled by his quick grab, I'm shocked by the sheer amount of familiarity in his eyes. It's so strong, it almost drowns out the unease they didn't hold only moments ago.

"Do you not like being touched?" I ask before I can stop myself. "Or do you just loathe being touched by me?"

My question shocks him as much as it does me, but instead of reacting negatively, he proves it isn't my touch he dislikes.

It's the response of his body he hates. He is once again hard, and when he places my shampoo-coated hand onto the obvious bulge in his sweatpants, he gets even thicker.

“There's nothing wrong responding like that when someone is pampering you.” I lean into his embrace when he treks a calloused hand down my bruised cheek and across my busted lip, compliments to my accident. His touch is detrimental to my sanity, and it doubles the sparks that have been blistering between us the past two days. “Yes, even when someone is battered and bruised,” I mutter on a moan when it dawns on me what he's asking. “Attraction has nothing to do with looks and everything to do with your soul setting on fire.”

I gather up the hand he used to point out my imperfections before requesting him to shut his eyes. When he does as asked—after a stern stink eye that warns of the repercussions if I were to run from him again—I trek the back of his hand down my budded nipple. Even with his sweatpants lined with a thick layer of fleece, I see the throbs of his cock when he learns my body is responding to his closeness in the same manner as his. It strains against the crotch of his pants, its growth so uncontrollable and appears seconds from breaking through the rigid material.

When JR's eyes pop back open, I freeze, shocked by the wild rowdiness swarming them. He stares at me with such raw passion, even if I hadn't caught Cedric cheating, nothing could stop the next set of events from occurring. JR's wanton gaze activates every one of my hot buttons, not to mention the continuation of his hand's descent of my body.

I go up in flames when he slips his hand under my shirt. He's barely touching me, but the sensation it rips through me is almost overwhelming. I've never had this type of pull

before. This type of craziness. And it grows more rampant when the briefest brush of his fingers down my damp panties starts an avalanche of gropes, moans, and swift maneuvering.

Before I can comprehend what's happening or pray for it to occur sooner, my backside is planted on the vanity, and JR tugs my panties off without the slightest bit of strain fettering his features.

"*Ugh,*" he grunts when his caveman removal of my undergarment causes my head to flop back and my eyes to close.

I want to watch every sordid thing he does to me, but the idea that he couldn't wait a second to drag my panties down my thighs before consuming me is too erotic to act nonchalant. To be wanted like that is euphoric, and I can see it being extremely addictive.

When I lock my eyes with JR's and he sees the lust filling them, he switches the flickering flames brightening them to an out-of-control wildfire. After parting my legs so his wide shoulders can fill the gap, he blows a hot breath over my aching pussy before teasing the sensitive skin with the faintest tickle of his beard.

It isn't wiry or scratchy. It represents a snowflake dusting the tip of your nose. It's soft but not subtle and oh so teasing.

JR's molten eyes flick from my dampened sex to my face when a shameful plea tears from my throat. "Please," I beg again, still unashamed. "I might die if you don't touch me."

Although I could blame rampant horniness for my recklessness, it feels so much greater than a desire to get off. I'm alive because of him, yet I had no clue the awakening was only occurring now.

“Please.”

With his eyes boring into mine, he grips my ass, yanks me forward, then drags his tongue up my slit. My body trembles, and every ounce of air in my lungs leaves in a long, frantic moan. His tongue is as calloused as his hands and as thick as his cock.

“Holy shit.”

He spreads me wider, then plunges his tongue in deep while his eyes never once leave mine. They drive me even wilder than the flicks of his tongue and the gentle nibbles of his teeth. He devours me whole while staring at me like he’s the luckiest man alive and has wanted this longer than he’s craved anything else in his life.

With the hope that it is true, I give him everything I have. I grind down on his face before raising one of his hands to my breasts. I don’t have much in the way of feminine assets, but the way JR devours me more hungrily the longer he gropes my breasts makes it seem as if I do.

He consumes me with greedy licks, hungry bites, and growling moans that soon have me teetering on the edge of orgasmic bliss as dangerously as my backside hangs off the vanity. I’m on the brink of detonation.

As my nipples pucker and lava roars through my veins, I weave my fingers through JR’s hair to hold his mouth hostage to my pussy before giving in to the sensation burning me alive.

Lust burns a path from my core to my pussy as I shake through a mind-altering orgasm. It’s long and draining, filled with both relief and vehement need I don’t see being subdued anytime soon.

By the time my eyes remember to blink, JR is standing over me. His sweatpants are huddled around his knees, and his cock is fisted in his big, dominant hand. He looks set to claim me with more than his tongue, but before he can, the glistening drop at the top of his fat cock pops a brilliant idea into my head.

“Can I?” I beg, my voice still husky from the screams that hacked my throat to pieces. After pushing him back, I fall to my knees in front of him. My nonexistent pain threshold is a thing of the past when I peer up at him with lusty, immodest eyes. “Please.”

I’ve never experienced a more primal occurrence than a smart, opinionated woman on her knees in front of a large, beastly man with a cock that’s as monstrous as his personality, and the situation becomes even more erotic when JR gathers the drop of precum I’m mesmerized by so he can rub it into my lips.

He isn’t teasing me with what may come. He’s preparing my lips for the stretch they will inevitably face from taking a man as well-endowed as him.

With my lips wet with precum, I replace JR’s hand with mine before narrowing my head toward the glistening tip of his fat cock. His growl when I swipe my tongue over the slit is felt all the way to the base of his impressive shaft.

When I lower my lips down his twitching shaft, I can’t get much more than the head in, but JR doesn’t seem to mind. He rocks his hips back before I come close to gagging, then he slowly rolls them forward again.

The more he watches me, the faster I stroke the sections of his cock missing out on the heat of my mouth. His cock responds to every teasing lick, suck, and vibration of the

moans that won't quit tearing from my throat. It jerks on repeat, but unlike Cedric's dick, it doesn't race over the finish line after only two sucks.

He fucks my face without restraint, and I accept every inch he's willing to give me. It is a chaotic couple of minutes, and just when I'm on the verge of believing heaven is on earth, JR takes an unsteady step back before slinging his head left to right.

"*What is it?*" I ask, confident he couldn't hear the rotation of helicopter blades even if they were once again hovering above us.

Just as the undeniable scent of something burning filters into my nose, JR tugs out the 'towel' he stuffed under the door. I leap to my feet when wafts of smoke plume into the bathroom. His cabin is on fire, but instead of racing away from the flames like someone who suffered burns would, JR races straight their way.

Chapter Fourteen

I stare at JR's ruined kitchen with my mouth gaped and my eyes full of tears. When the stew bubbled over, the splatter was caught by the shirt I hung in front of the flames to dry. When it bogged down the cotton, it slipped off its temporary hanging spot, landing straight into the flames of the open fire. It only took seconds for the fire to spread, and despite JR's best efforts, what wasn't destroyed by the inferno is covered with black soot.

His cabin is uninhabitable.

When I say that to JR, he slams his fist onto the dining room table so firmly, it snaps in two. His aggression should scare me, not to mention his strength, but the vulnerability he showed before the fire has me stepping toward him instead of repelling away.

"It's okay. Everything here can be replaced." He glares at me like I'm insane, like I have no clue how hard he worked for everything he has. "But until then, we can either go back to the other cabin or rent a place in town for a couple of days."

Now his stare scares me. I'm not panicked he wants to physically harm me. It is the absolute despair in his eyes I'm paying the most attention to.

“What do you want to do, JR? Tell me what you want to do, and I’ll do it?” I’m not a naturally submissive person. If leadership is required, I’m usually the first to put their hand up. But since the damage to his cabin is my fault, I can take a step back and let someone else lead for a change. “Do you want to stay here?” My heart beats at an unnatural rhythm when he angrily shakes his head. “Then where are we going to go? We can’t stay here, but you’re refusing to go to town as well.”

As quickly as my anger surfaced, lucidity made itself known. “We could go to Ravenshoe.” When he scoffs, I blurt out, “You won’t go to town because you don’t trust the Lancasters, but you can trust me when I say they have no influence in Ravenshoe whatsoever.” I step closer to him, hopeful the sincerity in my eyes will get me over the line. “I know people there who will help us.” I gather his hands in mine. “Whatever the Lancasters did to you, we can fix it in Ravenshoe. I promise you that.”

I’m convinced nothing I could ever say will get me over the line, so you can imagine my shock when he snatches up a duffle bag that survived the carnage and commences packing.

“We’re doing this? We’re going to Ravenshoe?”

Before he can answer me, a twig snapping in the distance steals my focus. It wasn’t an overly loud snap, but in the quietness of darkened woods, it is most certainly hair-raising.

Just like earlier when JR intuited the fire without smelling the smoke, he drags his eyes over the tree-studded landscape. He’s far more trusting of his intuition than me, and his dedication pays off when a second snap occurs not long after the first.

“It’s probably just a deer,” I murmur when the worry blackening his alluring gaze augments. “Or a bear,” I tack on when the snapping is loud enough for me to hear over the frantic beat of my heart.

I step back from the large window spanning one wall of the cabin. I’m having a hard enough time wrangling one hairy beast into line. I don’t need another one tossed into the mix.

“Come back to the bathroom so I can wash the shampoo out of your hair before it gets in your eyes, then we will sit down and work out where we’ll go from here—”

JR cuts me off by pressing his fingers to my lips. When I remain quiet as wordlessly asked, he slips on a pair of fleecy, soot-ruined pants, stuffs his feet into snow boots, tosses on a thermal shirt and thick winter coat before he fetches the chair out of the bathroom.

Once he has it sitting directly in front of the cabin’s door, he gathers up his gun, then hands it to me.

“Why are you giving that to me? I don’t know how to fire a gun.”

Once his wild hair is contained in a messy man bun and a box of bullets are in his hand, he shifts his focus back to me. I’m stunned with silence when he teaches me how to load and fire his shotgun with a step-by-step tutorial. I’m not solely stunned the chamber can hold three shells—I thought the maximum was one—but I’m also shocked to learn the chamber was empty at the start of his presentation.

Did he remove the bullets after my failed attempts to flee or before? I truly don’t know, but both answers please me in uniquely different ways.

After showing me how to brace the gun on my shoulder before firing, JR heads for the door. I don't know what shocks me more, my panic that he's leaving me alone or the sudden decline in my confidence the further he retreats from me.

"Take me with you."

His grunt is the roughest he's delivered, but it doesn't stop another plea spilling from my mouth.

"Please. I don't want to stay here by myself. I'm scared."

JR can't hear the panic in my tone, but my eyes must do a good job of relaying it. They halve his strides, but regrettably, they don't alter his stance. After a brisk shake of his head, he signs, "*You'll be safe here,*" before he disappears through the door.

He is gobbled up by the blizzard not even three seconds later.

BY THE TIME JR RETURNS, I've worn down the floorboards even more than decades of use and have chewed off all but three of my nails. They're not even real, yet I gnawed them down to nubs, and I see the situation worsening when I spot a trail of blood left in the wake of JR's step.

"What happened? Why are you bleeding?"

He snaps away my hands before I can discover the source of the deep scratch-like wounds on his left wrist and right arm before he snatches up my medical bag. The shock that rendered me mute hours ago comes back full force when he stuffs the antique bag full with an assemblage of personal

products and food, fixes it to my back, then pulls one of the deer skin rugs off the mattress.

I'm a little lost when he walks me through the cabin's door instead of bobbing down so I can jump onto his back, but my disappointment doesn't get the chance to register. I'm too fuming mad about him pushing me headfirst into the mud pile the runoff from his earlier shower caused to let a little bit of disillusionment bombard me.

"What the hell, JR!" I scream at the top of my lungs when he scoops up chunks of mud in his hands so he can get the parts of my body my topple missed.

Within seconds, I'm covered head to toe with mud, and I am the angriest I've ever been. I look like a swamp monster, and I smell even worse than that.

When I say that to JR, the moon bounces off his teeth a mere second before he plucks me from the mess with a tug on my arm, tosses me on his back, then races for the heavily treed section of the woodlands.

Images of Bella on Edward's back in *Twilight* flash before my eyes. JR isn't as fast as Edward, obviously, but his ability to weave us through ancient trees without stopping to gather his bearings exposes this section of Cataloochee is as much in his veins as Forks was to the Cullens.

My heart beats as wildly as JR's when we reach an opening almost an hour later. Even with my stay brief, I recognize the wooden structure in front of us. It's the first cabin where I woke up dazed and confused.

It no longer looks warm and inviting. How could it with every piece of furniture on the front verandah destroyed beyond repair and the window smashed in? This place has

been ransacked, and the heated disappointment it fires through JR's veins announce it wasn't done by him.

When JR presses his lips to his fingers for the second time today, I nod without hesitation. A million thoughts are bombarding me, but the damage to the cabin looks fresh enough to suspect the culprits may still be inside.

Worry fills me more than anger when JR places me down onto a stump just outside of the clearing before he sneaks toward the ransacked cabin. I don't want him to get hurt, but the odds are stacked against him when he leaves his gun in my possession.

He's only just crawled beneath the wood slats of the floorboard when an accented voice steals my devotion. A man with inky black hair, a scarred face, and a shiny shirt is exiting the cabin by its only entrance. When I notice his cell phone is a satellite phone, unease trickles through my veins, but before I can work out why relief wasn't my first emotion, any chances of my head overruling my libido fly out of the window.

This man isn't hunting JR because he's confused him as Big Foot.

He wants *me*.

"What do you mean there was no body in the driver's seat? Perhaps she incinerated in the blaze. That's what happens when you get around in a soft top with no care for your safety."

Even with distance against me, I hear his caller's reply. That's how loud the stranger has his volume set. It has me wondering if the scars on his face affected his hearing as well.

“There’s no evidence to indicate Jae was in the car when it exploded.”

“Fuck!” The dark-haired man shouts. “We can’t call the coroner in without a body. The last thing we want is another seven-year delay.” After dragging a hand down his face, he asks, “What did Sheriff Michaels suggest?”

My throat works through a hard swallow when his caller responds, “To bring in sniffer dogs. They caught a scent around an hour ago, but it went cold not long after that.” My eyes shoot back to the crack JR squeezed through when the mannish voice adds, “Shouldn’t take long to re-establish a trail. One of the dogs nicked him up pretty good when he tried to steer them away from Jae’s scent.”

I thought JR’s wounds were scratch marks, but the jagged edges and deep indentation are more fitting of a bite mark.

I snap my eyes back to the unnamed man with a scarred face when he gabbers out, “*He?* I thought she was traveling alone?”

“She was.” I curse Cedric to a lifetime of misery when the caller adds, “Cedric established this at the start of our hunt.”

I lose the ability to swallow my spit.

He said hunt, not rescue, proving JR’s overprotectiveness was for a good reason.

He truly is saving me.

“Could she have picked someone up on the way?”

“Doubt it,” the caller replies. “But Sheriff Michaels has half his team looking into it. The roads on all sides of the mountain are barricaded. We *will* find her. You just need to work out what you want to do if she’s found alive.”

I sink into the shadows of the woods when he strays his eyes my way. His stare is so accurate, anyone would swear he's spotted me staring at him. "If she's alive, make sure her resurrection is brief. If you can't do it, have the dogs take her out. From what I've heard, death by mauling is an entertainer's delight for this family."

Just as he ends his call without a goodbye, the menacing growl of a blood-thirsty dog echoes through the dense woodlands. It sends a chill down my spine that doubles the height of the goosebumps on my arms and renders me so speechless that when JR returns to my side with a dusty wallet and a set of keys, I am as mute as him.

"*Ugh*," he grunts before pushing out the bangs I grew to hide an almost decade-long secret like he already knows them all. I'm covered with mud, but he stares at me like protectiveness is the sweetest form of love.

"Get me out of here," I beg, finally unashamed to ask for help when it is needed.

Chapter Fifteen

After nodding without pause for thought, JR hooks me onto his back, shelters my body from the bitterly cold winds with the deer skin, then races us along the edge of the clearing.

Approximately ten minutes later, his speed reduces from a hurried sprint to a leisurely jog. I learn the reason for his changeup when I spot something oddly out of place in the distance. I've studied the landscape of this woodland for hours on end the past couple of days, so I know a fake set of branches when I see them.

"You've had a truck at your disposal the entire time!" I shriek out when it dawns on me what the camouflage material and fake pine bristle stems are hiding.

JR clamps his hand over my mouth. Not just to shut me up but also to lessen the chance of my girlie shriek reaching the ears of a man who wants me dead. He ran for what felt like miles, but we're technically only a few hundred feet from the cabin. He took us the long way to ensure the massive pine trees surrounding the cabin kept us hidden, then I go and ruin his plans by being a loudmouth.

When JR's pleading eyes request for me to be silent, I dip my chin. I learned my lesson. He won't need to tell me twice.

Furthermore, I'm so close to passing out, anything above a nod is beyond my comprehension right now.

After slipping his hand from my mouth, JR dips us under the camouflage mesh, carefully pries open the driver's side door of a truck that's clearly older than both of us, then slots me behind the steering wheel.

I automatically commence scooting to the passenger side. It didn't matter if it was a truck the size of a tanker or the Matchbox car Cedric begrudgingly hired during his first overnight trip to Ravenshoe, if it had a gas pedal and a brake, Cedric was in charge, so you can picture my shock when JR closes the door without the slightest bang before he hotfoots it to the other side.

He slips into his seat, throws down the visor, snatches up a set of keys, then hands them to me. "Whose keys are those?" I ask after dropping my eyes to the pair he's clutching for dear life. When it dawns on me that now is not the time to be seeking answers for injudicious questions, I jab the key into the ignition before making sure JR is aware of the risks associated with this daring operation. "Are you sure you want me to drive? My track record isn't that great in these conditions."

JR's unexpected grin fills me with enough confidence to fire up the ignition without an ounce of fear bombarding me. Although I can't see a single thing in front of me, the truck's deep rumbling engine leaves me no choice but to flatten my foot on the gas pedal. If the truck's engine doesn't alert the goon to our escape, I'm certain the plumes of smoke the exhaust pipe is choking on will soon activate his other senses.

A reason for JR's trust in my driving skills is unearthed seconds after the woodlands remove the tarp hindering my

view. A pack of dogs is chasing us. They're heavy fanged, drooling, and seemingly more interested in JR's side of the truck than mine.

"Be careful," I beg when JR climbs out the passenger window.

With my eyes bouncing between the rugged landscape and his ruggedly handsome face, I watch him toss a machete at a massive tree trunk coming up on our left.

His aim is perfect, and within a second of the machete slicing through a section of vine curled around the truck, it slithers through the snowy field, its snake-like maneuver only ending when a net made from liana cuts snavels up the first dog in the vicious pack of three.

Although the remaining two are still capable of chasing us down, like all imprudent foot soldiers, they lose steam when their leader is taken out.

When they circle the opening in the snow where the net flung out, I grin with excitement. JR could have fought back with violence. He could have instilled the same level of fear onto the dogs as they're bombarding me with. The fact he didn't has me gobbling up his features even more than I was in the bathroom both this morning and this afternoon.

My stare is so consuming, it takes JR yanking on the steering wheel to avoid us colliding with the trunk of an old pine tree.

When a lack of clearance knocks off the side mirror, I shoot my eyes to JR. "Maybe you should drive now."

Before he can answer me, we break through a gathering of shrubs, straight onto a busy road. Motorists honk and brakes are compressed, but before we come close to veering into

oncoming traffic, I yank on the steering wheel with so much force, I get us back on the straight and narrow in an impressive period of time.

“Why the hell are there so many idiots on the road?” I grumble under my breath. “Don’t they know we’re in the middle of a blizzard!”

An icy road is a thing of the past when JR tugs on the steering wheel for the second time. Instead of veering us away from a tree trunk, he directs us straight toward one.

“Holy shit,” I mutter when a second yank careens us down a windy dirt road I’m sure hasn’t been used for years.

The wheels of the truck bump across the landscape more than they roll, and their bounce routine has me fearful JR’s life is still in danger when he removes a large pair of tin snips from the duffle bag he packed in a hurry and raises them to his face.

I grimace more than I cheer when he commences hacking off his beard. He doesn’t bring the blade of the snips close to his jugular, but within seconds, his beard goes from bushy to cropped in less than five minutes.

“No,” I push out on a sob when his hair is the next thing to face the chop.

He doesn’t trim it as short as his beard, but the inches he loses break my heart. His hair is a part of who he is. I am as fond of it as I am of the hairs on his chest.

Once the hair from his beard and face is tossed out the window, JR signals for me to turn down a bush track coming up on our right.

It’s as rough and bouncy as the last road, but within five miles, it pops us out onto a state freeway half a mile from a

state trooper barricade.

I stray my eyes from the flashing lights disappearing on the horizon to JR. “You knew they were there.” Although I’m not technically asking a question, he nods as if I am. “How?”

My nose crinkles when his face becomes washed with remorse. He has a lot of bad memories, which makes me even more concerned that pushing him out of his comfort zone will increase his pain. I was able to pack up my life and relocate years ago because I’ve never really seen one place as my home. We moved a lot when I was a kid, so none of my roots are firmly planted in one spot.

After a couple of seconds of painful silence, he flips down the visor above my head, exposing a faded polaroid. While doing my best not to get us in a wreck, I take in the faces of the two people in the image. I know both of them even with them technically being strangers. The woman was referenced in the newspaper article JR showed me two days ago, and the man, although a lot younger in this photograph than he was when I met him, was once a patient of mine.

He came in with a nasty head knock a little over seven years ago. I was working in a rural hospital as part of my penance for keeping my career when a hearing deficit almost pulled it out from under my feet. I had just gotten him stabilized when his care was overtaken by local law enforcement authorities.

Supposedly, he was wanted for murder. I couldn’t believe it. His eyes were far too kind and honest to ever warrant such suspicion. I tried to stop them from taking him. I rattled off statistics about men his age with head wounds suffering long-term side effects if not death.

Nothing I said made any difference.

They marched him out like he was already convicted by a group of his peers, and the next day, I walked out right alongside him.

It was that weekend I accepted an offer from Isaac to work with him on building the most advanced hospital in the world. He had the money and the vision, and I had the ability to sniff out the doctors who weren't about the money.

Cedric was the only one who blindsided me. If I were honest, I'd admit his attention caught me off guard, but it was nowhere near as perverse as the swiftness of JR's moves. I'm driving us away from an entity sworn to protect and serve only days after he tied me to a bed.

I'd call myself insane if this didn't feel as right as the first time I drove to Ravenshoe with nothing but a suitcase in my trunk and my old ID card stuffed in my wallet instead of the one that was thrust in my chest when I stumbled onto an accident scene I was never meant to witness.

The young woman who died in the wreckage was a well-known figure in the underworld. Her family doesn't bury their dead because they don't leave any bodies.

They have the same beliefs for witnesses, hence my appointment at a hospital forty miles from the area we're fleeing. The blast almost cost me my hearing, but the consequences that followed it were almost just as career-ending. If I hadn't met Isaac when I did, who knows where I'd be right now.

Everything in life happens for a reason, and now I'm beginning to wonder if Cecil's inclusion was for more than encouraging me to take back the life I threw away because I was too scared to fight for what was right. Perhaps if I had fought harder back then, Cecil's death wouldn't have been the

first autopsy rostered at Saint Francis Hospital the morning after he was taken into custody.

After taking a moment to get the emotions in my voice under control, I ask, “How did you know Cecil?”

JR waits a beat before signing, “*He took me in when I had nowhere else to go.*” He scrubs a hand down his recently trimmed beard, his brows inching when his trek is far shorter than usual. “*He saved my life.*”

“After that?” I query, too curious for my own good.

Once he’s yanked down the sleeves of his winter jacket to hide the slash marks on his wrists I just pointed out, he reluctantly shakes his head. “*Before that.*”

I flex my hands against the steering wheel when he scoots across the bench seat of the truck. Although he’s spent most of the last hour and a half running, he smells delicious. His scent is so manly, I wish I could bottle it up and sell it. Then I’d be able to donate as much money as Isaac does to ensure disadvantaged families receive the same level of medical care as everyone else in the country.

My breaths become heated when JR pushes away the bangs curtaining my face. They’re not the short, chopped style I got when the Bureau changed my identity and instigated my parents’ early retirement to Hawaii. They now hang to my ears, but they still hide the scar I wanted gone even more than the Petrettis wanted to bury me under six feet of dirt.

When JR’s thumb traces the lightning-shaped burn partially hidden by my hairline, pride shoots through me instead of disgust. For almost a decade, I’ve hated that blemish. Only now am I realizing it’s there because I consistently put other people’s lives before my own. I help

strangers every single day, but that day, a stranger returned a favor that inevitably saved my life.

I'm so choked up with emotions it takes the B-Double we're veering toward to sound his horn for me to notice he's flashing his lights.

With a squeal, I yank on the steering wheel before slamming my foot on the brake.

We skid across the asphalt in slow motion, the truck's bounce routine as juttled as the word JR screams before he wedges himself between the steering wheel and me. "B-Back!"

Chapter Sixteen

JR's back, hip, and buttocks endure the full impact of the truck's collision with a tree siding the freeway. I don't feel a single thing except the shredding of my heart when a mangled roar escapes his lips. I should be in the process of being crushed to death, or at the very least, pinned to my seat, but his quick thinking saved my life. He put his body on the line for me, and I don't know whether to relish his devotion or sob about it.

I lose the chance to do either of those things when the truck comes to an abrupt stop. We only sailed partway down the terrain, so we're close enough to the road to hear the calls of frantic motorists asking if we're okay and the sirens wailing in the distance.

"Please don't move. You could have spinal injuries," I beg when JR's response to the sirens is to immediately commence exiting the twisted remains of his truck.

His flight mechanism is activated, and although I'm only one step behind him, he could be seriously hurt, so I must shut it down.

After grunting like my worries are unfounded, JR rams his elbow through the blistered glass next to my head then climbs through the crack his shove caused. My stomach gurgles when

his dip back into the cab to assist me out exposes multiple cuts and abrasions to his ears, neck, and arms. He shouldn't be walking in his state, much less bobbing down to offer me a piggyback once he helps me climb through the skin-ripping opening.

"I can walk," I assure him, confident my wounded foot will look like a scratch compared to the bruises and contusions I suspect are on his back.

After gathering up his duffle bag, wallet, and the photograph of Cecil and Rosie resting on the bench seat like we didn't just roll down the side of an embankment, he hooks me onto his back like I don't get a say in the matter before he races us deep into the woods.

Since I trust him with my life, objections only fire through my head when we arrive at the back entrance of one of the many hotels dotted along the freeways on the East Coast several painstaking minutes later. "I don't think this is a good idea. We should keep moving."

It dawns on me how selfish my suggestion is when I take in JR's slow stalk to a dark sedan at the back of the lot.

He's in a heap of pain.

If memories of Cecil's unjust incarceration weren't playing through my head like a movie, I'd march JR to a hospital right now. Since it is, I switch tactics like I need to book an appointment with a psychiatrist to have my head examined.

"Maybe we should get a room. Lay low until the heat dies off." When JR immediately shakes his head, I push out, "Cutting your hair and hacking off your beard isn't enough to get us past however many goddamn barricades they've placed between here and Ravenshoe. We need time to sit down and

devise a plan.” I step closer to him before gathering his uninjured hand in mine. “A plan that will get us *both* out of this alive.” I thrust my hand at the hotel. “Here is as good a place as any.”

His late grunt of disapproval adds more stacks of wood to the fire in my belly. It’s obvious he wants to protect me, but when there’s a chance his dedication could be his undoing, it’s morally and ethically impossible for me to let that happen. It goes against everything I am and who I hope to still become one day.

JR eyes me with suspicion when I unzip the duffle bag attached to his front and pull out the medical bag he stuffed inside before we left the cabin. With my heart in my throat, I dig through the contents dislodged during our travel down a previously untaken road.

It feels like Christmas morning when I find what I’m seeking.

“I have this.” I show JR the medical license a federal agent supplied me during transport to my new life. I wasn’t in witness protection as such. I was merely gifted a new life I didn’t want. “It’s a photo ID. That’s all a place like this needs.” I once again thrust my hand at the hotel. “And no one in my life knows about this alias. It was given to me by an agent who was killed over seven years ago. We will be safe here.”

JR takes in my pleading eyes for a couple of seconds before dragging his wary gaze across the empty lot. When it dawns on him that it is as desolate as my heart feels from drinking in the pain swamping his alluring blue irises, he reluctantly dips his chin.

Ignoring my immature jig, he digs a bundle of notes out of his dusty wallet, hands them to me, then hooks his thumb at an emergency exit door at the back of the several- stories-high building.

Not needing words to understand his request, I nod. “I’ll meet you at the emergency exit as soon as I have a key.”

Like the situation isn’t already bristling with lung-clogging tension, I lean in to press a kiss to the edge of his mouth. It doubles the protectiveness of the invisibility cloak he slung over me when he pulled me out of the wreckage days ago and has me thinking I can do no wrong.

Mercifully, reflections can’t lie, and mine bouncing off the automatic glass doors of the reception area is shocking.

I look like a swamp rat.

After scoping the area, I plop down my medical bag next to the wishing fountain at the side of the hotel’s entrance. The water pumping through the Greek goddess-inspired fountain is freezing, but it gets the job done. Within seconds, the mud on my face is cleared away, and my goopy hair is pulled back in a low bun I secure in place with a pen from my bag.

I’m so put together, I smile at my reflection this time around instead of grimacing. The mud did wonders for the fine lines I can’t stand in the corner of my eyes, and even with my slicked-back hair exposing the scar JR traced earlier, it adds definition to the roundness of my face.

My springy steps dampen a little when the hotel clerk spots my entrance. His eyes still rake in my body, but with my clothing in desperate need of laundering and my feet only covered by socks, I’m not exactly hotel guest material.

“I was in an accident,” I advise like it will excuse my three sizes too large shirt and pants. “This was all the tow truck driver had.”

“Oh dear,” he mutters, his high pitch indicating why his sweep of my body was quick. It’s as eccentric as the flail of his hand when he asks if I’d like him to call me an ambulance.

“Oh no. That isn’t necessary. I’ve already been seen by them.” When his cocked brow announces he doesn’t believe me, I blurt out, “I’m also a doctor.” I hand him the medical license of my alias. “So the only thing I need you to do is book me into a room, then point me in the direction of the closest dry cleaner.”

“Honey, every Quality Inn has an in-house dry-cleaning service.” He *tsks* me before adding, “But I’ll be sure to jot down directions to the nearest boutique.” After drinking in the dirt wedged under my nails, he mutters, “And a beautician. *Sheesh*. I haven’t seen nails that bad since Britany went crazy.”

Since he accepts the wad of cash as down payment for my room and doesn’t bat a fake lash at my request for a room facing the freeway, I don’t respond to his multiple snipes about my disheveled appearance. Excluding my face and hair, I feel horrible, so I can only picture how bad JR is feeling.

The remembrance sees me snatching up the keycard the clerk sets down and scampering toward the elevators at breakneck speed. I’m halfway there when the growling of my stomach stops me in my tracks.

After spinning back around to face the clerk, I ask, “What time does room service cut off?”

While cocking his hip, he arches a perfectly manicured brow. “Does this look like the Ritz?” Before I can answer him,

he asks, “If our guests are hungry, we feed them.”

When he hits me with a wink, I realize I judged him too quickly.

He’s more playful than rude.

“Thank you.” I wait for him to accept my praise with another wink before slipping down the corridor I’m praying like hell leads to an unalarmed emergency exit.

I send thanks to God when my push on the lock doesn’t awaken the guests with a screaming siren.

“Hey,” I greet JR, shocked by the surprised expression on his face. “Sorry it took so long. The clerk was extremely... *chatty*.” I almost said flamboyant until I realized that would be categorizing him in a way I plan to no longer do. Perhaps if I hadn’t misjudged JR so fast, his trust would be a little higher. “I asked for a room with a view of the freeway. Figured it would be best to keep an eye out just in case.”

After entering the elevator, I shift all my focus to JR. “Are you okay? How’s your breathing? Any struggles or sharp intense jabs near your ribcage?”

Before he can answer me, the elevator stops on the second floor. The instructions on the keycard state our room is on level twelve.

I smile at the elderly lady who bounces her eyes between JR and me for two long seconds before she slowly slides into the elevator.

With the elevator being designed for a maximum of four travelers, I attempt to scoot over to JR’s half so we’re not invading her personal space. I say ‘attempt’ because the instant I sway away from the lady, her hand jolts out to grip my wrist.

While keeping her eyes locked on the elevator panel announcing she's going to the rooftop pool, she tugs me closer to her. Although appreciative of her worry—if more people were like her, the world wouldn't be such a horrible place—I shake my head so fast, flicks of mud dot the mirrors lining the elevator walls.

I am not JR's captive.

He is my savior.

When I express that to the lady out loud, she peers at me as if I am crazy before brushing off my assurance with a scoff.

Her reply stuns me.

Seconds ago, I thought she was a kindhearted woman looking out for those in need. Now I realize she's a judgmental old cow like the woman Isaac told me about the first time he took Isabelle to his penthouse.

Although our circumstances are starkly different—Isaac was very much embedded into Isabelle's life by then—I can't help but test his theory. Before JR has the chance to object, I dump my medical bag onto the floor, use it as a footstool to climb up his body, then seal my mouth over his.

His lips are surprisingly firm for someone who had their dick in my mouth only two hours ago, but within a couple of strokes of my tongue, he cracks open his mouth and returns my embrace.

Our kiss is animalistic, out of control, and not suitable for anyone below the age of eighteen. Just the long strokes of his tongue on the roof of my mouth have me ready to combust, much less the way he grips my ass so my pussy hovers above the ridge in his pants growing firmer the longer we kiss.

It's needy, rough, and so goddamn perfect, I have no clue we've reached our floor until JR carries me out of the elevator before he opens the door to our room with his boot instead of the keycard.

As he walks us through the living room of our suite to the bedroom, I rip at his clothes, desperate to feel the heat of his skin under my hands.

By the time he tosses me onto the bed, I have his jacket undone and shirt bunched halfway up his fantastic stomach. The chances of absorbing his wickedly sexy body as it deserves is swiped out from beneath me when I take in the bruises extending from the swell of his left hip to above his ribcage. They're not the standard black and blue coloring you see when a patient comes in with internal bleeding, but their freshness could be deceiving my better judgment.

As could my libido.

Conscious now isn't the time to let my desires overtake my smarts, I slip off the bed, then carefully force JR onto it. He grunts his disapproval when my hands' perusal of his body stops at his ribcage instead of his rapidly hardening cock, but when I shush him, he's too surprised by my confidence to slacken it.

After ensuring I can't feel any protruding bones or life-threatening contusions, I gather my stethoscope out of the medical bag JR must have collected from the floor before exiting the elevator.

The front of JR's pants tightens even more when I blow hot air on the steel chest piece while stuffing the earpieces into my ear. His thoughts are as elsewhere as mine, but since he knows we won't move onto the next stage until I've given him the all-clear, he pretends he's the ideal patient.

“Can you breathe in deep for me? Nice big breaths.” While listening for any indicators that he punctured his lungs, I admire the expansive rise and fall of his chest when he does as asked. His pecs are bigger than my head, and the knowledge has me miscounting the thumps of his heart when I switch my focus from his lungs to his chest.

He has a robust heartbeat that grows more rampant when our eyes fleetingly lock for the quickest second. Our closeness has them appearing even more familiar. I swear I’ve seen them before, but for the life of me, I can’t work out where.

“Have we met befo—”

In quicker than I can blink, JR tugs the stethoscope prongs out of my ears, throws it across the room, pulls me onto the bed, rolls me over, then reacquaints our lips.

Sweet lord, this man knows how to kiss.

He is as controlling throughout it as he is with everything else he does, but not in a domineering take-whatever-he-wants way. His grip on my hair is so firm, I can’t mistake that it’s weaved throughout the knots, but not hard enough I can’t pull back from his mouth if I want to.

Not that I’d *ever* want to do that!

His kiss is too sublime for that. Too heated. It goes above and beyond any kiss I’ve ever had, and it sees me deepening our embrace. I kiss him hard, desperate to experience everything he’s willing to give me, and he answers my pleas in a way I could have never imagined.

Our kiss takes on a life of its own. It sparks something from deep within me and has me acting like I’ve never done before. I tug at the waistband of JR’s sweatpants without my mouth once leaving his. I swallow down his groan when my

impatience to wrap my hand around his velvety shaft has me jacking him off before the waistband of his pants is halfway down ass.

I pump his thick cock on repeat, dying to learn if the moans rolling up his chest will revitalize me as much as the breaths of life I've given to patients over the years. I'm confident they will, but I've always been about letting a person show their strengths instead of prying them out of them.

When my frantic strokes have precum leaking from the head of his impressive cock, I'm anticipating for our event to soon come to an end. For the teasing touches and almost climaxes he's faced the past two days to send him racing over the finish line within a couple of minutes of the sprint beginning, so you can imagine my shock when he pulls my hand out from his pants, then pins it with my other hand above my head.

After shoving my shirt up so it sits under my chin, he pulls down my pants then commences kissing a trail of hairy kisses across my breasts and down my stomach.

His dedication to my body shocks me.

Aren't men always about themselves in the bedroom?

Isn't it meant to be about their desires before mine?

That's how every man I've ever slept with acted. They didn't care if I got off. If their needs were met, they rolled over, went to sleep, then instigated a second helping the next day.

That's why it was rare for me to still be there the following day. I don't care how starved you are for affection, no one wants to feel used. Furthermore, if I was about to work a

hundred-hour shift, I didn't want to waste my precious time on things not worthy of my attention.

Wetness slicks between my legs when JR's recently cropped beard tickles the sensitive skin I had waxed earlier this week in preparation for my trip. His beard is even softer now that it's been trimmed, however, no amount of pampering could take away from the friction it surges through me when he grinds his chin against my sex to coat his beard with the scent of my arousal.

When JR's hands slide down my thighs, my legs naturally part, but he adds an additional shove to get across his point that he wants me opened and exposed. His slip off the bed exposes this, not to mention his heated rake of my body as he drinks in every scandalous inch.

I'm filthy dirty, but my murkiness has nothing to do with how I look and everything to do with how wickedly immoral JR's stare makes me feel. I was engaged only days ago. I'm a well-educated and respected member of society, but when he stares at me like he is now, I'd give it all away in an instant.

Thoughts like that should be illegal. You shouldn't be able to have such a strong connection with a stranger. But I'm done lying to myself. I've done it for years, and where did it get me? Engaged to a man I hardly knew and living a life that was full of loneliness even while surrounded by people.

That's madness, but it has nothing on the craziness that rips through me when JR's recklessness gets the better of him. He spears his tongue through my pussy's folds before he grazes his teeth over my clit's hood.

I call out, my body on fire after only one lick, and everything I thought I knew about myself comes undone. I am no longer Jae Ward, Chief Medical Officer of Ravenshoe

Private Hospital. I am Jae Ward, hiker, naturalist, and recent inductee into the I'll-do-anything-for-a-ruggedly-beast-of-a-man-to-eat-my-pussy-like-he's-never-been-feed hall of fame.

And there'd be no option left off the table if that beast were JR.

“Oh god.” As my hips buck against his mouth, JR slides his thumb up and down my slit. I'm lost as to what he's doing until he pushes the fat nub inside my body. My vagina clamps around it in an instant, the intrusion both welcoming and painful.

“It's been a while,” I blurt out when JR's eyes lift to mine, stunned by the tightness gripping his thumb. “And Cedric didn't have much to work with.” He licks me harder and faster when Cedric's name leaves my mouth like he's his competitor instead of the man he mopped the floor with days ago. “I'm also a fan of pelvic floor exercises.”

If JR's mouth isn't up to the task of getting me off, you can be assured his smile is. It peeks through the beard I wish he didn't hack a second before he returns to devouring me like I'm his favorite dessert.

My entire body shudders as an orgasm prepares to overwhelm me. Moan after moan breaks free from my throat as he drives me to the brink. I'm sweaty even with the AC switched off but also shaking like I'm cold.

“Oh...”

I fall hard and fast. It is a brutal climax that takes everything from me. My control snaps as a whirlwind of emotions has me gasping for air. I feel like I'm trapped, like a panic attack is just around the corner, except I'm not scared. I feel free like I can finally live my life without fear.

And the sensation deepens when JR groans while devouring every drop of cum he's coercing out of me. He eats me like a wild animal, the lashes of his tongue and nibs of his teeth unstoppable. They push me into climax for the second time even quicker than they did the first time.

I shudder as frantic moans roll up my chest. I can't stop coming. The sensation is too much. The prickly softness of his beard and the rough, demanding strokes of his tongue are all too much yet all my brain can come up with is 'more.'

More licks.

More finger-fucking.

More him.

I want it all, and JR gives it to me.

I've barely come back from a third float through hysteria when he releases my hands, climbs up my spent body, curls my legs around his waist, then lines his fat cock up with the entrance of my slicked pussy.

I'm drenched front to back, but he still takes his time coating himself with my wetness. He doesn't want to hurt me, and I have no clue why it took me days to realize that.

As I use one of my hands to open myself to him, the other pulls his sweatpants over the generous swell of his ass before tugging them to his knees. His shirt is next on my hitlist, but before I can expose his hairy pecs to my rapacious gaze, he impales me with one ardent thrust.

I still as a burn of desire rips through my heated center. It hurts, and we both freeze for a minute. I hate pain. It is the bane of my existence, but this pain is different. It's stupidly wanted even with it feeling like I'm about to be torn in two.

“Perhaps you should warn a girl next time,” I mutter like it is JR’s first time having sex. “No!” I push out with an almost sob when my confession sees him retreating with an expression on his face that reveals he plans to do a whole lot more than prepare for a second pump. “It hurts, but that’s okay. Sometimes good things are meant to cause a little discomfort.”

JR peers at me with stitched brows.

He seems wholly lost.

“If we’re not prepared to experience the occasional bouts of pain, how will we ever learn to cherish the non-painful times? It’s kind of like having sex for the first time. If we stop because we can’t push past the pain, how will we ever learn that it’s meant to be a pleasurable experience?” When his confusion doubles, I breathe out nervously, “Just go slow. A woman’s vagina needs time to adjust to the intrusion.”

I begin to wonder how many women JR has been with when he briefly nods before slowly inching back inside me. He takes it super slow, his eyes only leaving my face when I roll my hips upward so my clit can grind against his eye-bugging V muscle.

He drinks in the way my body responds to the friction before slowly backing out.

“Oh, god, yes,” I moan on a purr when his third thrust occurs with the pad of his thumb rubbing my clit.

He circles the nervy bud until I’m at the point of detonation before he rolls his hips to increase the pressure of his grind. It creates the perfect amount of tension and soon has me begging for him to take me harder and faster.

As the bedding scrunches under my back, I dig my feet into the springy mattress and raise my ass off the bed. JR can take me even deeper now. He can almost fit every inch of his big, thick cock inside of me, and the awareness has me screaming like a banshee.

The change-up unlocks a new beast-like demeanor from JR. He fucks me relentlessly, his pounding rhythms more detrimental to my sanity than his ruggedly handsome face. He takes control, and I give it to him without a single ounce of hesitation.

While gripping the bedsheets in a white-knuckled hold, I scream his brilliance into the night air. I'm desperate to come, almost at the point of begging, then JR withdraws his cock, flips me over, yanks me back, then drives home for the second time.

He slips in without the fight of earlier, and within a second of groaning his appreciation of the fact, he curls his hand around my sweat-slicked body to find my clit.

It's the fight of my life not to bury my head into the mattress to muffle my screams. The only reason I don't is because I want JR to hear them. I want him to know how unhinged he's made me. He's working for every scream leaving my body, so he deserves to know of their existence even if he can't hear them.

Shockwaves rocket through me as another orgasm sparks to life. I can't hold it back when the throbs of JR's cock announce he's close as well. Instead, I surrender to the madness before dragging JR to the depths of hell with me.

It's only fair since he pushed us there first.

Chapter Seventeen

As I stare at the steam creeping under the bathroom door, I can't help but think back to my thought before I fell into the most orgasmic climax of my life. It didn't seem like it was coming from the present. It felt like it was from the past, from a time before I even knew who Isaac was and how influential he'd be in my life. It wasn't from the here and now, which confuses me even more so.

Lust is a potent desire. It muddles your brain and the chemical fusion has you responding differently to how you normally would, but this doesn't feel like that. Yes, the sex was amazing, and the connection is something romance novelists could write about for centuries to come, but it feels like more than my libido is talking right now. Like something deep inside of me wants to be released, but only JR has the key.

How is that even possible?

He was a stranger only days ago. *Wasn't he?*

I'm drawn from my thoughts by someone tapping on the hotel room door. Since it is most likely the second batch of food I ordered after we scarfed down our first helping like piggies in under ten minutes, I don't alert JR to the fact we

have a visitor. I snatch up his wallet from the bedside table, then hightail it to the door.

The sleepy grin on my face doubles when I notice who is behind the door. It isn't a waiter. It is the clerk from last night, and he's holding out a bag of freshly laundered clothes in front of himself. "I rummaged through uncollected dry cleaning for you. Size two, right?"

Nodding, I murmur, "You, my friend, are a godsend."

When he takes my praise as permission to enter my room, I block his entrance the best I can with my five-foot-four height. Although appreciative of his help, I don't want him seeing JR naked if he walks out of the bathroom in the buff as I'm hoping. I also rather he miss the mess we made of the bedding last night.

Some you'd expect from a couple staying at a hotel, but the smears of mud would have even the most un-deviant mind taking a second look.

I don't know about you, but I'm not into *that* fetish, and I'd rather not have my name associated with it—alias or not.

"Fine. Don't share," the clerk says, his tone more pompous than annoyed. "But if it's washable and rechargeable, hook a guy up when you're checking out."

Since it's neither of those things, I reply, "It'll be my pleasure."

With a wink I don't think I've ever pulled off, I accept the dry cleaning out of his hand, then tug a handful of bills out of JR's wallet to tip him.

He accepts the bills, waves them in the air before commencing a dramatic exit that becomes even more perverse when he mutters, "Be sure to let him know the hot water is

endless. Not all *nasty* activities need to happen on the bed, and you don't always need to be naked either."

I stare at the now-closed elevator doors with my mouth hanging open and my eyes bulged. I didn't think he could see into our room, much less hear the shower, and don't get me started on the fact the goodies he dropped off include a pair of jeans suitable for Big Foot.

He truly is a godsend, and I owe him a lot more than the twenty-something dollars I gifted him.

After closing the hotel room door, I spin around to face our disheveled room. The reason for the clerk's psychic abilities is exposed when the scent of raunchy sex smacks into me. It's even more erotic since it has JR's manly smell deeply embedded in it. The clerk wouldn't have cared if I answered the door in a nun's robe, he knew I did the nasty last night, and for some reason, the thought doesn't bother me nearly as much as it usually would.

I cringed at the thought of anyone knowing I had sex with Cedric, but I want to shout it from the rooftops when it comes to JR.

How screwed in the head am I?

Clearly, not that off-kilter considering my confession has me heading for the bathroom instead of the bedroom. Steam slips out the tiny crack JR left open when I deepen its gap. My body acts as if it hasn't sought release in years when my eyes lock in on JR in the shower. Although his hair isn't as long as it once was, the ends still reach the swell of his hips when drenched with water. It has the same flat appearance as the hairs on his face and chest, and although his cock is flaccid, it could never be accused of being flat.

It's too mesmerizing for that.

“*Ugh*,” JR grunts when the heat of my gaze overtakes his blistering hot shower. When our eyes lock and hold, he angles his head to the side before the slightest furling of his lips doubles the output of my heart.

He's feeling playful, and evidence of that is showcased in the most brilliant way he stomps across the bathroom, whips off my shirt, then pulls me into his big, manly body like he did in the hazy memories in my head.

My legs float through the air like a ballerina when he twirls us around to face the shower stall. Then they stiffen like a board when he steps us under the spray.

“Sweet lord, that's almost hot enough to burn my skin off.” I curse my poor choice of words when the stiffening of JR's body announces he could see my lips during my horrible attempt to be funny.

He hasn't let me close to his wounds to determine their source. He either pins my hands above my head or positions me so my arms can't get anywhere near the scars on his back, but I am still confident they are the scars of a burn victim.

Feeling remorseful, I raise my eyes to JR's face before asking, “Can I wash you?” When he balks for the second time, I add, “I won't go anywhere near your back. I promise.” I don't know what's more shocking, the need in my voice when I say, “I just want to pamper you” or my undeniable urge to nurture him.

I've heard of disinhibited disorders where someone becomes obsessed with their savor, but aren't those neurological ailments meant to be one-sided?

If they are, that isn't what neither JR nor I have. We're both presenting obsessive traits, and it's proven without doubt when the strokes of my bubble-coated hands over his chest and down his midsection represent more than a need to take care of him.

I want to protect and shelter him before removing the pain from his eyes. I also want to teach him the world isn't as cruel as whatever he faced to scar his body the way it has, and I think I know the perfect way.

I can't tell if JR's grunt is in warning for me to be careful of my foot when I kneel in front of him or if he's excited to see me kneeling before him. I go for the latter when the clear bead glistening on the tip of his cock doubles in size when I wrap my hand around his velvety shaft.

As JR gathers my drenched hair to the side so it won't interrupt his view, I skate my tongue across the slit in his cock's head. I moan when his delicious precum activates my taste buds better than the room service we shared earlier. He tastes delicious, and come hell or highwater, I'm not going to stop until I've sampled everything he's willing to give me.

With his fingers tangled in my hair and our eyes locked, I circle my lips over his veiny shaft before sucking him down hard. His grunt is pure ecstasy. It rips through my body along with a surge of electricity, urging me to take him even deeper than I did yesterday afternoon.

My inner muscles clench when I take his rock-hard cock to the very back of my throat. His echoing growl when I gag adds to the wetness between my legs. He can't hear my gags. He's feeling them by gripping my throat in a pain-free yet extremely erotic manner.

His clutch augments the crazy sensation blistering through me. His hand is on my neck, the other is weaved through my hair, and his dick is in my mouth.

Could things possibly get any better?

I realize they can when JR feeds his cock into my mouth inch by inch. He takes it slow, stretching my throat in a way that's somewhat painful yet still sexually gratifying. I love the way he adapts to his surroundings. Being deaf hasn't disadvantaged him in the slightest. If anything, it's made him more appreciative of his other senses, and he uses every one of them over the next several minutes.

He watches the lust burning through my eyes.

He smells it seeping out of me.

He feels the heat of our exchange roaring through my veins.

And a second after I swallow down the thick, salty squirts pumping from his cock several long sucks later, he tastes it as well.

I grip the showerhead with all my might when JR's wish to devour my pussy sees him plucking me from the floor with so much force, before I can comprehend what's happening, my legs curl around his shoulders and my pussy mashes with his face.

Curls of lust flicker through me when he buries his tongue deep inside me before he drags it up to my aching clit.

"Oh..." I push out with a moan when he hits the nervy bud with a stimulating mix of bites, licks, and sucks. He has me coming undone in a shameful amount of time, and I love every single minute of it.

His beard absorbs the aftermath of my blinding orgasm long before it can slick my thighs. He gobbles up every drop like he's starved of taste before he brings me to climax again and again and again.

"Oh, god. I can't. I'm..." Goddamn insane if I'm considering stopping this. We have to return to the real world soon. We've already stretched our stay from a day visit to an overnight adjournment. We can't hide forever, and the realization has me grinding my pussy onto JR's mouth instead of yanking away from him.

"Oh, god. Please. Fuck." Swearing isn't usually my go-to way to express myself, but when you can't find a better word, you go with what works. This is ten years of sexual tension and buildup. It deserves more than a handful of moans and pleas to stop.

More than my heart stops beating when my eyes flutter shut. Sparks of lust aren't the only thing blistering before my eyes. Faint memories of a time I've tried to forget race to the forefront of my mind as well.

They're just as blistering and as explosive as the climax ripping through me, except they end with me landing in a swampy marshland with my savior's painful howl piercing my ears a nanosecond before they're silenced by the mud.

He got burned protecting me.

His *back* got burned protecting me.

When JR senses that I'm reeling from more than back-to-back orgasms, he lessens the severity of his licks before he eventually pulls back.

"It was you," I murmur, suddenly knowledgeable as to why his eyes feel so familiar. "You were at the accident. You

were the man I tried to save but couldn't."

He grunts before shaking his head, denying my claims.

He can deny them all he likes, but I know the truth.

I searched for him when I woke up in a hospital bed with ringing ears and no real knowledge about what had happened, but the instant my hunt thrust me down a path I didn't want to walk, I gave up. I changed my name, my location, and my field of expertise, and the only time I thought about the man with the pain-filled blue eyes was when my fear of dying by brain hypoxia paralyzed me so well, I had no choice but to contemplate on times gone.

I swish my tongue around my mouth to loosen up my next set of words. "I thought the FBI had relocated you like they did me. Or worse, that *they* had killed you." I don't need to express the Petretti name to get my point across. He knows who they are since he was also victimized by them.

And that's proven without doubt when a highly recognizable voice outside of the bathroom says, "I once thought the same until I learned the Petrettis don't play by the same set of rules as everyone else." Even with him as naked as the day he was born, JR shields my body with his when Cedric walks into the steam-filled bathroom, but I'm the only one left reeling when he adds, "Do they, CJ Petretti?"

Chapter Eighteen

“Tell him he’s wrong,” I solicit when JR doesn’t immediately refute Cedric’s claim. “Tell him he has you mistaken for a Petretti victim. That you’re running *from* them *with* me.”

“He can’t tell you that becau—”

“Shut up, Cedric!” I scream, my roar so loud it startles JR even without him looking at me. “I don’t need your help.”

“Clearly, you do.” He thrusts his hand down my body still pinned to the shower wall, my naked pussy mere inches from JR’s head. “Fuck, Jae. I thought you were smart. I thought you would have seen through his act in under a second.”

When Cedric scoffs at me like I’m an imbecile, my feet land on the floor a nanosecond before JR pins him to the steamy tiled wall by his throat.

Despite my foot and heart screaming for a different outcome, I dip under JR’s arm before he can pummel some sense into Cedric with his fists.

I’m not inclined to protect Cedric after what he did to me, but I’m also not in the right frame of mind to determine if JR’s beatdown would be justifiable in a court. Cedric did break into our hotel room, but not once have JR or I asked him to leave,

so he could argue he was a wanted guest even with that being far from the truth.

“*Ughn!*” JR roars when my presence forces him to direct his punch to the wall behind Cedric’s head instead of his nose.

He only changed the course of his swing to ensure he didn’t hurt me.

Cedric doesn’t see things in the same manner, though. He thinks I’m sheltering him because I believe the lies spilling from his mouth.

“Tell her the truth, *CJ*.” His tone is way too haughty for my liking. He’s acting as if he has the world at his feet, and I struggle not to deem the same when he adds, “Tell her how you planted spikes on the road because you want the land Cecil left you both, and that when she survived the accident, you conjured up a ruse about people hunting her so you could cash in the bounty the Petrettis have had on her head the past decade.” He drops his eyes to mine that are staring at him in disbelief. “Then he gets to kill two birds with one stone. Collect the bounty on your head and the land in one fell swoop.”

“*Ugh!*”

“No!” I stop JR from going into a violent rage with one word before I upend Cedric’s theory with a handful more. “Cecil was a patient of mine for *only* hours, so I’m highly skeptical he left me anything. And JR...” I pause, his name suddenly bitter in my mouth, “... *survived* a fatal accident that night. He didn’t instigate it.” Sappiness fuels my next reply, “Furthermore, he has saved my life more than once.”

“That’s not what the coroner reports says,” Cedric straight-up denies. “He’s wanted on murder, and not just one count

either.” Too shocked at JR’s lack of objection to form one of my own, I give Cedric the entire stage. “He orchestrated the death of his sister before killing a man for endeavoring to get his mitts on the same piece of land he’s trying to take you down for.”

“You’re a liar, Cedric.” I wish my words were stronger. It’s hard defending facts when you have no clue if they’re true or not. I only remember portions of the accident which claimed the life of Ophelia Petretti. Most of that night is a black void in my head.

I’m reminded as to why that is when Cedric thrusts a pathology report into my chest. I’m naked, but I’m stripped bare when my eyes rake over the report. “Betradexliroids is—”

“A hallucinogenic drug that swept the black market ten years ago. Its sales overtook fentanyl the following year,” I interrupt, aware of the document he’s showing me. It’s the same drug a federal agent told me about when I came to in a morgue the day following Ophelia’s accident. It was meant to kill me, but for some reason, it only stole portions of my memories. “What does this report have to do with JR?”

I’m left speechless when Cedric replies, “His fingerprints were on the vial agents found in your room after you went into cardiac arrest.” Horrifying memories creep into my head, freezing me further when he mutters, “He poured it down your throat, then clamped his hand over your mouth to make sure you couldn’t spit it out.” I can’t tell if its smugness in his eyes or remorse when he whispers, “That’s why you clam up anytime I touch your neck.”

I want to correct him, to explain that it’s more than fear instigating my lack of interest, but before I can, JR’s roar rumbles through my chest. It is unlike anything I’ve ever heard

and exposes that he's opposed to every word leaving Cedric's mouth.

"Were you there?" I ask, mindful he will have a harder time deflecting my interrogation than Cedric's.

When JR jerks up his chin, I blubber out, "Did someone try to kill me?" I'm blindsided when he nods for the second time. "Then why did you leave? You vanished without a trace." Some of my anger evaporates when remorse flashes through his eyes. He has honest, truthful eyes that should have alerted me to his identity a lot sooner than they did. "You thought they succeeded?"

I see only half of his head bob before Cedric interrupts a conversation he should have never been a part of. "Hence, the reason he only tried to kill you *after* he organized for Rosha to spike my drink with a sedative. He thought you were dead." He twists to face me, his expression not close to sorrowful. "I swear to God, Twinkie Pie, I had no clue what I was doing that night. You know I'd never deceive you like th—"

JR shuts Cedric up with his fist before I can slap his lie from his mouth. The connection of his fist to his face knocks Cedric unconscious, leaving the remainder of my fact-finding mission to me and the man I'm slowly realizing is still a stranger.

After putting some much-needed distance between JR and me, I plead, "Tell me the truth. Are you CJ Petretti?" When he steps closer to me, his cock swinging like a pendulum, I hold my hands out in front of myself, stopping his approach. I'm naked, but even if I weren't, I couldn't feel more exposed than I do right now. "Answer me! Are you CJ Petretti?"

When he reluctantly bobs his head, I suck in a shocked gasp of air. It wasn't a proud, I'm-a-member-of-mafia-royalty

nod. He looks a little sick, but it is a head bob, nonetheless.

I brace myself for a second blow before asking, “Were you involved in the events that occurred the night of Ophelia’s accident?”

His nod this time around is ten times quicker, and I’m out the bathroom even faster than that. Although he follows me, he maintains an amicable distance when I gabber out under my breath, “Don’t forget you taught me how to shoot.” I kick the butt of his gun before I commence getting dressed. “You lied to me,” I growl out when his eyes shift from seeking an instrument to tie me down. When he ruefully shakes his head, I shout, “An omission of the truth is still a lie!”

“N-No. I-I saved y-you. I-I never w-wanted to h-hurt you.”

His stutter breaks my heart as much as the sentences it delivered. He is a large, proud man, but his eyes reflect nothing but the pain of a lifetime of abuse when his words don’t come out as polished as he’d like.

With my mood nowhere near as unhinged, I ask, “If that’s true, why didn’t you tell me any of this at the cabin?”

“*Because I wanted you to know me...*” he touches his chest before continuing, “... *JR. Not Colum Junior Petretti.*”

“Bullshit!” Cedric groggily enters the room like JR isn’t capable of knocking him out for longer than two minutes. JR went easy on him because he doesn’t want me looking at him as if he is a monster, so Cedric shouldn’t be so cocky. He should be counting his lucky stars. “You knew with one truth comes many.” He drifts his glassy eyes with mine. “And he only wants you to know the good parts.”

“Don’t,” I snap out when JR looks set to make Cedric’s return to the land of the living a short stay. “Although a part of

me really wants to see him get his just desserts.” Cedric acts maimed by my words. His acting is pitiful. “I’m not sure you have the right to issue that punishment just yet. We have a lot to discuss.”

JR’s disappointed expression during the first half of my comment maims my heart more than Cedric’s fake offense. *“We do. But I didn’t do what he said. I’m not a murderer.”*

I’m certain JR isn’t the only stranger standing across from me when Cedric replies to his signed pledge. “We both know that’s a lie.” He’s not once told me he understands sign language, and he had plenty of opportunities to announce that. I was brought in to assist a deaf patient with consent forms only last month. Cedric was his surgeon.

When JR’s fists ball, Cedric makes a mad dash for my half of the room, stupidly believing he’ll be safer on this side. I’d hate to tell him his assumptions aren’t close to accurate. I hardly know JR, but if push comes to shove, and I’m forced to determine who’s telling the truth and who isn’t, Cedric would be labeled a liar from the get-go.

I’m still on the fence when it comes to JR, but I can’t forget the memories that cleared away some of the goop in my head only minutes ago, not to mention the ones we’ve created the past couple of days. No number of skirts will change the outcome. He saved me, and to date, that’s far more than anything Cedric has ever done for me.

Unaware his slander is tainting his light instead of brightening it, Cedric continues chipping away at JR’s hard exterior in an extremely demoralizing way. “I wasn’t around during the earlier stuff, but I know for a fact you did some of the things you’ve been accused of.” He folds his arm under his

chest, all pompous-like. “Roderick didn’t kill himself like Cecil did. You *killed* him.”

“*Cecil didn’t kill himself. Roderick murdered him...*” Before JR can consider the consequences of his next set of words, he signs in a hurry, “*So I hurt him in retaliation.*” He shifts his eyes to me. “*What happened was an accident. I didn’t mean to kill him. I just—*”

All his dirty laundry isn’t aired for the world to hear. A bang splinters the door of our hotel room a second before riot police storm inside. They scream for us to get down, but not one of their eyes are on Cedric or me. They have their target locked and loaded, and he can’t hear a single word they’re screaming at him.

My eyes burn from the smoke bomb they release to blind JR before they stealthily approach him. They’re coming for him at all sides, screaming their demands like they’re unaware he is deaf.

“Armed law enforcement officers. I repeat, we are *armed* law enforcement officers.”

“Put your hands behind your back and get down on your knees!”

“Now, CJ!”

“Do not resist! If you resist, we have the right to shoot.”

“He isn’t resisting,” I plead on JR’s behalf when I remember how concerning his size can be to some people, much less his inability to communicate in what society deems an acceptable manner. “He’s deaf. He can’t hear your demands.”

“Why are you defending him?” Cedric asks in shock, his voice more disgusted than curious. “He tried to kill you.”

I snap my eyes to his so fast, I make myself dizzy. “And when he supposedly couldn’t go through with it, you told the men exactly where to find me!”

“To save you from him!” he shouts, his words overtaking the federal agents’ repeated demands for JR to surrender.

“Dogs wanting to tear me apart aren’t rescue dogs, Cedric!” I push him away from me with all my might before falling to my knees so JR can see me under the cloud of smoke. “*Stay down, don’t resist, and maintain your right of silence until you have a lawyer present.*”

My heart breaks when Cedric sneers out, “He just confessed to murder on tape. You can’t fucking save him, Jae.” He yanks off a length of wire taped to his chest, unlatches his necklace, dumps both products into the hands of an agent wearing a black balaclava and thick gloves, then exits the room like I cheapened our relationship by bringing in a third party into our duo.

Although some may say that is what JR is, I don’t feel the same way.

He saved me from a lifetime of misery.

He didn’t push me headfirst into it.

Chapter Nineteen

With the roar rumbling up my chest louder than the vibration of a dozen pairs of boots stomping across a carpeted floor, I pin one agent to the wall by his throat before kicking another away from me.

A baton slams into my back at the same time I toss the agent I pinned to the wall into three of his comrades. I can't trust the FBI. They did me wrong years ago, and once again, it is more than my life at stake.

My blood boils when, in the corner of my eye, I spot Jae pushing Cedric away from her with the same amount of aggression I'm instilling on the federal agents. For a woman with a short stature and waif-thin appearance, she has a lot of strength in her push. She sends Cedric flying before she bobs beneath the choking haze of smoke separating us, then locks her eyes with mine.

The panic flaring through her pretty green eyes could be excused on the insurgence of federal agents swarming our room, but I know it's more than that, and her signed words confirm it. *"Stay down, don't resist, and maintain your right of silence until you have a lawyer present."*

When Cedric towers over her with the same angry sneer he wore when he was informed her convertible was corpseless, I

race for him so fast, I only recall I'm not wearing a stitch of clothing when a prick with a death wish tases me in the cock. It rockets a painful zap up my spine, but since it isn't one-tenth of the bolt I feel when Jae's lips circle my cock's head, I rip off the cords powering the prongs with electricity, knock out the guy who tasered me with a fist to his nose, then continue with my mission.

Cedric can't be trusted. Not only did he give Roderick's goons information to access the LoJack in Jae's car, he also watched them release a pack of dogs trained to rip Jae apart the instant they find her. He's a part of this. I just haven't worked out exactly where he slots into a two-decade-long dispute.

I hammer Cedric like I wanted to earlier but couldn't since Jae was too close to the firing zone not to get hurt.

I only get in a handful of hits before I'm stung for the second time. This time, I'm not hit with the prongs of a taser.

I'm jabbed with a needle.

The serum it races through my veins pulls my legs out from beneath me in an instant. I fall to the ground with a roar, and even quicker than that, Jae curls her body over mine to protect me like I did her last night when Cecil's truck sailed off the freeway.

Her quick thinking saves my bruised hip, back, and spleen from additional injury, and thrusts my thoughts back to the last time I was defended by a woman...

"M-Mommy..."

While praying her tummy isn't as sore as mine, I sneak into her room. Daddy said she went to bed early because she was sick, but he lies—a lot—even more than my older brother,

Roberto. The marks on Mommy's face she calls 'kisses from Daddy's hands' don't make her stomach swishy like mine. They make her sad, grumpy, and a lot of the times she cries, but she never gets sick.

"My t-tum-tum hurts. Can you m-make it better?"

It always aches when Daddy is in charge of dinner. Ophelia is only little, so she can't cook, but since she's the only girl in the house other than Mommy, Daddy said we either eat the leftovers in the back of the refrigerator or go with him when he visits his friends.

Since they're usually bossier than Daddy when he drinks his special brown medicine, I picked leftovers.

Now I'm feeling sorry for myself.

"M-Mommy..." This plea comes out more like a groan than a plea. My tummy is more goopy than the homemade slime Dimitri got stuck in his hair at preschool last week. A bully tried to make fun of our last name. He said it was dirty. Dimitri punched him right in the eye. I don't think his bully will pour green goop onto a Petretti's head again anytime soon.

"I t-think—"

My warning comes too late. The week-old spaghetti I scoffed down because I was super hungry is now on the floor instead of in my stomach.

"Oh, n-no," I whimper on an almost sob.

If Daddy finds out I made a mess, I won't be able to sit for a week. He made Roberto's bottom bleed with his belt last week because he spilled soda pop on the kitchen floor. It was a quick fix since the floor is covered by the ugly tiles Daddy

brought back from Italy when Ophelia was born, but the bedrooms have carpet.

I'm going to be in big trouble.

"Hey, CJ, none of that. It's okay." The soft nurturing tone my mother uses almost hides the wetness on her cheeks when she bobs down in front of me.

Even with her face banged up, she's really pretty. I don't know if girl germs are true, but every time we go to the grocery store to pick up supplies, the men at the store act like it's not a big deal to catch cooties. They watch Mommy like Dimitri eyeballs Jessica Rabbit from Who Framed Roger Rabbit. He's only five, but he tells everyone when he's a big boy, he's going to marry Jessica.

If he does, I hope his hands don't kiss her face. Daddy's hands make Mommy's face puffy and sore. Her eyeballs are almost as big as her cheeks.

After clearing away the chunks of regurgitated spaghetti wedged between us, Mommy whispers, "See. It was just a little mess. There's no need to cry."

When she brushes away the two salty blobs that escaped my eyes, I do the same for her. I am extra careful while skating my hand against her bluish skin since Daddy's kisses look angrier than the ones he put there last week. Even with Mommy hiding in her room all day, the gash in her cheek is still wet with blood. One side of her lip makes it look like she got stung by a bee, and the blood running from a cut in her hair makes it look more red than blonde.

"I d-don't think you should let Daddy's hands k-kiss your face anymore."

I stutter all the time. It's a bad habit Mommy promises Daddy I will grow out of, but this one is more because I'm worried I'll get in trouble for sticking my nose in adults' business again. Daddy doesn't like when I do that, but instead of kissing my face with his hands, he uses them on my bottom.

I nuzzle into Mommy's hand when she curls it around my face. She pretends she can't see the extra wetness in my eyes when she replies, "I have to let him kiss me, bubba. If I don't, I won't see you anymore."

"W-Why?" I ask, lost. I go to school like a big boy, but I still see Mommy every day. Ophelia is too little to go to school, so Mommy stays at home to take care of her. That's how I know the bump on her head last week wasn't because she fell into the door like Daddy told Roberto and me. He pushed her. Ophelia said, and although she's only four, she doesn't tell fibs like Daddy. "If you g-go, we will come with you. R-Roberto said."

Roberto is my big brother. He's nine and knows more than any of us. He promised last week if Mommy went to live in another house like Daddy always threatens, we could go with her. His friend, Hayden, did that with his Mommy last year. His parents got something called a dimorce. Now his Mommy doesn't cry every day.

"You could g-get a dimorce, then you w-won't have t-to cry."

Since my room is next door to my parents', I hear Mommy cry all the time. It makes my chest hurt, and sometimes, little droplets fall down my face. I hide them like Roberto taught me. It hurts too much when Daddy sees them.

My bottom lip pokes out when Mommy shakes her head. "I'm sorry, sweetie, it isn't that easy."

Just as she scoops me into her arms in preparation to take me back to the room I share with Roberto and Dimitri, the bedroom door rockets open, and Daddy enters the room like a bear with a sore head.

He must have had too much medicine. I also get a woozy head when Daddy doesn't follow the doctor's orders for my special medicine. It's meant to make me feel better, but most of the time, I'm super sleepy.

I fight my throat to swallow my spit when Daddy's eyes drop to the murky red mess on the floor. Mommy cleared away all the chunks of spaghetti, but there's a big splatter right next to her feet.

I'm about to hold my hand in the air like I do at school, but before I can tell Daddy the mess is my fault, Mommy pretends she puked on the carpet. "I shouldn't have eaten pasta. I forgot how horrendous it made my morning sickness with Ophelia. I tried to make it to the bathroom, but I was too slow. I'm sorry, Colum. You know what I am like when I'm pregnant."

I don't know what pregnant means, but it makes Daddy's face blow up like a balloon. "You're pregnant?"

Nodding, Mommy places me back onto my feet and whispers for me to go to my room before she gingerly paces toward my father. "Go on, CJ. I appreciate you checking on me, but it's time for you to go back to bed. It's late, and you have school tomorrow."

As she gently pushes me past my father, the tears I held back earlier fall down my face. Daddy's hands look like big, giant balls. That only ever happens when they're about to kiss Mommy's face.

A BIG BOOM wakes me from my sleep. It's not the same bang that's awoken me at least once a week since Mommy told Daddy she's pregnant. It sounds like a bomb went off in the kitchen, and despite me promising Mommy not to rush into her room when I hear noises like this, I jump out of my bed and sprint into the hallway.

My speed is so fast, I skid into the kitchen as if I'm on an ice rink. Where we live is too hot for snow, but Mommy promised we'd make snow angels one day. We just need to wait until our new brother or sister is here. Since that's only three months away, we're getting closer every day.

My hands shoot up to protect my ears when another lot of booms blasts into our house. Our place is not very big, and someone at school said it was worse than the hood, but the paint-peeled walls and dirty floor don't look as yucky when men wearing black balaclavas let off fireworks inside.

I can't speak very well, but I know how to read, and the letters across their vests are super easy.

FBI.

My heart patters in my chest when I remember what Roberto said about the FBI last month. He said they were the good guys like the police. Dimitri didn't agree with him. He said they're worse than dog poo on his shoe. We laughed about that for almost five minutes. That was a new record for us. We don't laugh very much.

I'm not sure what I think about the FBI yet, but it's clear Daddy doesn't like them. Instead of getting on the floor like they're shouting at him to do, he pulls out the big black gun

everyone knows is hidden in the couch but no one is game to touch. Roberto almost lost a toe when he was four. He pushed the wrong button on the gun, and it sliced off the top of his shoe.

I clamp my ears even tighter when the bangs and shouts get louder. The ringing hurts so much, and the pain it zaps through my head makes me want to fall to my knees and cry.

“S-Stop!” I shout. My ears hurt too much. They’re being too loud. If they don’t be quiet, they’ll wake up Ophelia. Then they’ll be in big trouble. Daddy doesn’t like when you wake Ophelia up. That’s his job anytime he’s home.

Wetness fills more than my eyes when I race into the living room to tell them to stop. Daddy wants them to stop as well, but instead of using his words like Mommy encourages me to do, he pulls Mommy in front of him to use her as a shield.

The men surrounding him immediately stop firing, but it’s too late. In a scary two booms of my heart, Mommy goes from standing in front of Daddy to lying face-first on the stained carpet. Red gunk oozes from her stomach into the carpet like my spaghetti vomit months ago, and her eyes close two seconds after that.

“Mommy!” I scream, my voice finally void of the stutter I’ve had since I could talk.

As I run to help my mommy, a bullet whizzes past my head. It hurts my ears even more than the shouted words, but the pain in my chest is worse than that. When I kneel next to Mommy, the red goop seeping into my pajama pants hides the wet patch soaking the front of them. I’m scared and angry at the same time, and it has me acting out.

With tears streaming down my face, I leap to my feet and charge for my father. I don't want to protect him. I want to hurt him. He killed my mother, but instead of acting like he's sorry, he's staring at her like he finally found the money pot he's been seeking the past six-plus years.

"Y-You killed her! Y-y-you hurt Mommy." I bang my fists into the lower half of his chest four times before I'm sent flying backward.

I think it's because Daddy swatted me away like a fly but learned otherwise when a man with a big shiny head promises, "It's okay, CJ. You're safe. We won't let him hurt you anymore."

Chapter Twenty

JR

When I come to, I'm groggy and confused. My head is throbbing, and my body feels like it was hit by a Mac truck. It was a tree trunk, but all bruises eventually end up feeling the same.

Wounds are like trust. On the surface, they appear identical. It's only when you scratch beneath them do you realize how different they can be.

I trusted Agent Tobias Brahn when he said I was safe from my father.

He broke my trust, then I did the same thing to a man who learned the hard way you can *never* trust a Petretti...

When Old Man Stephens enters the workshop of a rural property three clicks out of Hopeton, I tug off the earmuffs that are meant to protect my hearing from the industrial equipment producing such high-quality pieces, its customers have no clue its crew has only been three men strong the past six months.

"What is it?" I ask after swallowing down the urge to stutter like I wasn't born with a speech impediment.

I've learned to control my stutter the past fifteen years, but it's not always accomplished when I'm thrown into situations I can't control. Since that happens more times than not in my

family's industry, my stutter rears its ugly head more often than I'd like.

I transfer the sawdust on my hands to my jeans when I notice how white Old Man Stephens' face is. I've been working for him since I dropped out of college at the end of last year. The bullet that whizzed past my head a mere second after one ripped through my mother's six-month pregnant stomach caused significant hearing loss to my right ear.

Doctors were hopeful the reduction to my hearing would get better with time, but regretfully, it got so bad, I struggled to hear my professors even when they enhanced their voice via the PA system wired throughout the lecture halls.

I could have sucked it up and used the assisted-hearing implements offered at my university, but since that would mean I'd have to admit I have a problem, I decided college wasn't for me before dropping out halfway through the second semester.

Hearing loss in one ear is a small price to pay for what occurred that night. My mom didn't fair nearly as well. She died that night, and so did my relationship with my siblings. They didn't see what happened, so even to this day, they have no clue our father pulled our mother in front of him to protect himself from a bullet earmarked for his heart. They believe his claims that her death is the Bureau's fault, and they've spent the last decade doing everything they can to make them pay.

Dimitri is still a teen, yet his criminal record is longer than the plank of wood I'm contorting into the leg of an armchair some rich schmuck in Ravenshoe is paying out the eye for.

I've tried to tell them the truth multiple times the past fourteen years, but when my efforts doubled the loudness of the constant dull ring in my left ear, I gave up. My father

doesn't want them to know, and I was sick of being beaten by him and his goons to ensure I knew he wasn't joking about his demands for me to keep my mouth shut.

I've done precisely as asked the past three years, which makes me even more shocked to discover the cause of Old Man Stephens' white face and massively dilated eyes.

No one likes being visited by the reaper, not even when he's your father.

After gesturing to Old Man Stephens that I'll take care of his unwanted visitor, I signal for my father to follow me outside. My steps out of the almost derelict property are sluggish and slow. I wasn't aware my father knew I worked here. Old Man Stephens agreed to keep my employment off the books so we'd avoid exactly this. I don't get paid as much as his other two employees, but since no one in this town would give me the time of day when they learned my last name, I took what I could get.

Don't get me wrong, I like what I do, but the promise issued to me the night my mother died had me convinced I'd be doing more with my life than hiding from my father and building furniture that costs thousands of dollars to buy but only nickels to make.

Tobias tried to keep his promise, but there's only so much bureaucratic tape one agent can cut through before his resources eventually run dry. I don't blame him for backpedaling on his promise. I've wanted to do the same for years, and it's my flesh and blood I'm referencing.

Old Man Stephens only mixed things up because the furniture I restored on the sly during closing hours showcased my talents before I was halfway done with its restoration. On the agreement I kept his workshop location on the down-low

from anyone in my family and that his clients referred to me by my middle name—JR for short—I can use the tools in his workshop in return for a seventy percent cut of the profits I make. The other restorers get a fifty-fifty share.

I've been called CJ since the day I was born, but the name cited on my birth certificate is Colum Junior. Although JR isn't technically a part of my name, it maintains the two-letter theme my mother fought for when she succumbed to my father's often unvoiced demands to have a son named after him, so JR doesn't bother me.

It's even the name I used to book a room at a Motel Six two miles from here. That's why I'm so shocked my father found me. CJ Petretti is practically a ghost, not to mention the fact he came to pull me into line himself. He usually sends his henchmen to do his bidding.

"W-what are you doing here, Pa?" After having a quiet word with my head to get with the fucking program, I wipe off the sweat coating my hands with my wood chipped coated jeans, then lock my eyes with a pair identical to mine in every way. All the Petretti boys have the same murky blue eyes. "I haven't seen Roberto or Dimitri in mont—"

"I'm not here about them." His snapped voice startles me, but I don't let my bewilderment be seen on my face.

We're in public, I remind myself. I'm safe here.

I can't say the same thing for the home I walked out of with no intention to return the day I turned eighteen.

My wish to expand my wings outside the 'family's brethren' is another reason I dropped out of university. The tuition was more than I could afford, and although I have handyman skills and a face that could help pay the bills each

week, my budget couldn't stretch far enough to add the equipment needed for a student with a hearing disability.

When my father's thin, aloof lips part, I slant my good ear his way so he isn't forced to repeat himself. I've grown accustomed to lip reading the past three years, but since he communicates more with grunts and mumbles, testing how good my skills have become on him could end disastrously.

He doesn't take well to ignorance.

"I'm here about this." He thrusts a piece of paper into my chest, his push so forceful, I'm shoved back two spots.

"W-What is it?"

Since I drop my focus to the official-looking document, I miss what he says, his words muffled by a wrathful snarl. The single sheet of paper appears to be a deed of some type, and the address cited at the top is for the exact location we're standing.

When worry gurgles in my stomach, I snap my eyes back to my father. "O-Old Man Stephens owns this p-property outright."

"He does," my father agrees, his smug grin doubling. "But he hasn't paid taxes in over a year."

I shake my head, confused as to why he cares if Old Man Stephens is sidestepping the Internal Revenues Department. He's done it for decades, so what gives him the right to highlight other business owners' flaws as if he has none?

My jaw grits when I realize he isn't referring to the IRS. He's talking about the money he forces the businesses in Hopeton to pay the Petrettis to remain in their good books. It's meant to be for protection, but everyone in this town knows the only people they need protection from are the Petrettis.

“H-How much does he owe?”

My endeavor to fix-up Old Man Stephens debt pleases my father so much he doesn't whack me up the side of the head like he did a trillion times when I stuttered as a child. I'm not surprised. Dollar signs are flashing in his eyes. Nothing distracts him when money is on the line, especially when it doesn't belong to him. “Too much for you to pay on his behalf.”

I scoff at his claims before marching to my 'desk' in the middle of the warehouse and throwing open the top drawer. The checkbook inside is the only proof I am Col Petretti's son. I can't forgo protocol at a bank, and since that is where the hefty restitution my father sought for damages to my hearing and 'acute mental psychosis' was deposited, it has remained open dispute my multiple attempts to commence a new identity.

“How much?” I ask, pleased I held back the stutter this time around. It lingers when I'm uneasy, but since I'm more angry than nervous, it won't return any time soon. “Two, three million?” When he mocks me with a grunt, I snarl out, “Ten million?” A greedy flare darts through his eyes, forcing me to say, “Take it. Have it all. I'll give you every fucking penny if you promise to walk away and never come back.”

I think I have him hook, line, and sinker, then I remember I don't turn twenty-one for another two weeks. The settlement I was awarded by the state was placed into a trust fund so my father couldn't squander it like he did the mammoth payment he received from the death of my mother. No one knows what he did with the money. They just know it's gone.

“T-Two weeks. That's a-all I need.” I'm not stuttering because my father's smirk is a replica of the one he wore every time I spotted him sneaking out of my baby sister's room. It's

because to men in this industry, two weeks is the equivalent of a lifetime. His wolfish sneer during the middle of my offer assures me of this, not to mention him gesturing to his goon for him to light the rag he doused in gasoline partway during my realization the three thousand dollars stuffed in the bottom of my toolbox is the only cash I have access to right now. “I-It’s two fucking weeks. I’m sure you c-can wait two f-fucking weeks.”

Ignoring my pleas, Mario, my father’s head honcho when it comes to dishing out punishments, tosses a lit rag under a stack of wood at the side of the workshop. With the varnish acting as an accelerant, thick black plumes of smoke fill the air and my lungs in a matter of seconds.

When flames lick at the wooden slats holding up the workshop’s roof, Old Man Stephens races outside with a fire extinguisher in his hands and a grave look on his face. He isn’t solely panicked his livelihood is about to go up in smoke, he’s also worried about the gun Mario directed at his head within a nanosecond of him interrupting our negotiation. Disobeying my father by any means is usually followed by Mario lodging a bullet into someone’s skull.

Since I don’t want that person to be Old Man Stephens, I stammer out, “I-I’ve got this. I can handle this.”

By ‘this,’ I mean my father. He didn’t arrive here for no reason. I have something he wants. I just need to work out what that is.

After straying my eyes from a man frozen by both fear and shock to my father, I ask, “What do you want?” When a familiar gleam brightens his icy blue eyes, I tack on, “I’ll do anything you ask... once the flames are extinguished.” It takes everything I have not to stammer when his conceited grin

forces me to speak words he coerced out of me more than once during my childhood. "I swear on my mother's grave I'll do anything you ask."

The smoke is almost at choking level before my father gives Old Man Stephens permission to smother the wood with white foam. The fire extinguisher does its job, but even someone not in the relic furniture industry still knows the damage is significant. Agarwood is hard to come by, and its expensive price tag reflects that.

Old Man Stephens lost more than a pile of wood today.

His very existence is on the line.

"I-I-I'll pay you back. I swear to you, I will r-replace it all," I promise while being led to my father's blacked-out Audi by Mario, conscious it isn't his fault he took a chance on a man not worthy of his time.

Mario's grip on my elbow would have you convinced I'm the criminal of our trio. I can assure you I am not. I haven't done a single illegal thing in my life. I haven't even touched a drop of alcohol yet, and if the furling of my father's lips when I slide into the back seat of his town car is anything to go by, I may not get the chance.

MY EYES RIP AWAY from a dusty, blood-stained boxing ring in the middle of one of my father's derelict warehouses to him. "I-I'm not a fighter."

I fought many times during my teens, but not a single fight was my choice. I have a surname that causes controversy, a stutter that encourages bullies, and two younger siblings to

defend. I either tell people to back off with my fists or watch Dimitri and Ophelia be relentlessly bullied like Roberto was most of his childhood, both at home and in school.

“I’ve never been professionally taught.”

“Neither has your competitor, so this will be a fair and just fight.”

My father’s smile is as off-putting as our previous four hours together. We ate at Petretti’s Restaurant before attending his tailor to purchase me a suit. I knew he was up to something, but since I gave him my word I’d do anything asked if he spared Old Man Stephens’ workshop from going up in flames, I went along with his twisted game of pretending he is a devoted father.

But, in saying that, these final proceedings aren’t close to what I was anticipating. I thought he was bringing me to heel to ensure the leash was short once my trust fund unlocks. I never considered the idea that he’d want me to be a participant in his illegal fight circuit.

I’ve never been an overly cocky man—Dimitri snagged the pompousness needed to succeed in our family’s ‘industry’—so not only do nerves take flight in my stomach when my father suggests I warm up for my fight, my naturally engrained flight mode activates as well.

I would have been out the door ten minutes ago if I didn’t see a blacked-out SUV parked half a block up from Old Man Stephens’ ranch. If I don’t go through with this fight, five decades of hard work will be removed with a tin of gasoline and a handful of dirty rags.

Since I gave Old Man Stephens my word that wouldn’t happen, I head for the locker room at the back of the

warehouse to warm up, hopeful as fuck today won't be the day I bow out of my family legacy for good.

“PUT THIS ON.” Mario tosses me a satin robe professional fighters wear before instructing the two goons by the door to make a path through the crowd of rowdy spectators. I don't know much about my father's side business. I avoid his shady 'enterprises' as much as possible, but a gimmick like this seems strange. Even more so when Mario instructs, “And pull the hood up. We want your identity to remain a secret until it's time to fight.” When my eyes stray to a gym bag my father dumped onto a bench without peering my way twenty minutes ago, Mario spits out with a chuckle, “No gloves. We fight bare-knuckled around these parts.” He cracks his bloody and bruised knuckles to emphasize his point. “You'd know that if you weren't a pansy.”

I slant my head to hide my smirk that he thinks I'm gay. The more disapproving my father was of my so-called ways, the looser his reins became. His belief gave me a range of freedoms Roberto and Dimitri never had.

If he hadn't caught me with my hands down the front of a cheerleader's pants my final year of high school, I doubt I'd be here now. He'd never place himself in the position of being embarrassed, and me losing this fight tonight would do that, wouldn't it?

Dread fills me when I follow two of my father's goons out of the makeshift locker room at the back of the warehouse. The hum of the crowd makes it difficult to determine one voice from another, but from the tidbits of the conversation I catch from reading their lips, it seems as if tonight's fight is the

feature match. Words like 'undefeated,' 'possible world champion contender' and 'blood bath' are used far too often to exclude them as a minor detail, but regretfully, my name is never associated with them.

Not a single man filling the outdated building of steel and glass know who I am. They don't hiss in shock when my slip through the frayed ropes of the boxing ring exposes my face. They're not even glancing my way. They are too busy taking in the exchange between Ophelia, our father, and a man I've never met but is so well known in this industry, he has the attention of everyone in the room.

And the attention grows when he stands up to my father like I did when I was six.

Although the stranger's stance is strong, there's only so much controversy a man can endure before his knees eventually buckle. Mine bent from hope. His bow under the pressure that it isn't just his life at stake, it is my baby sister's as well.

Mario has his gun directed at the back of Ophelia's head. If the unnamed man denies my father's terms, Mario will kill the woman the stranger is endeavoring to save without an ounce of remorse on his face. Ophelia is worthless in this industry. All women are. That's why my father so blatantly used my mother as a shield, because to him, her life would never be more valuable than his.

Mercifully, Ophelia's date doesn't feel the same way. After bartering with my father for what feels like minutes but is barely seconds, he alters the direction of his steps. He heads for the boxing ring instead of the exit he was racing for mere minutes ago.

My identity is disclosed when Ophelia begs for him not to fight by disclosing our connection. “No, Isaac, please. He is my brother.”

In an endeavor to slow his strides, she claws her nails into his arm. It does little to weaken his strides. Even men not born in this industry understand the consequences of renegeing on a deal. Isaac knows as well as I do that someone’s life will perish tonight, but what he doesn’t know is that for some reason, my father pinned the target on my back instead of the boyfriend he swore Ophelia would never have.

THERE’S no uncertainty to my claims forty minutes into our match. Isaac and I have fought a bear-knuckled and honest fight. We gave the thousands of spectators their money’s worth, but my father still wants more.

He always wants more.

With blood gushing from a cut above my eye and my right thigh corked from an earlier kick, I swoop down low to batter Isaac’s midsection with a quick left-right-left combination. The skillset the crowd of mostly mafia men raved about when I walked to the ring is proven without a doubt when Isaac deflects my onslaught after only two hits in with a brutal upper cut knock to my chin.

I sail back with a grunt, my landing distorting more than my ego. It also cracks my wrist. The weird way it hangs when I leap back onto my feet sends a collective hiss across the warehouse. The only one not sickened by its deformed hang is my father. He looks bored. Like forty minutes of blood, sweat, and anarchy is something he faces every day.

My hopes of getting out of this situation alive dampen even more when it dawns on me how accurate my comment is. If it's gory and controversial, my father is first on the scene, and tonight's event is as scandalous as it gets.

It is proven without a doubt when Isaac argues on my behalf. "Throw in the towel. He's your fucking son!"

I have a broken wrist, fractured ribs, and a painful whistle in my good ear that won't quit no matter how many times Isaac's foot connects with it. I'm battered, bruised, and bleeding from multiple cuts and abrasions.

Isaac isn't fairing much better, but no matter how many times the referee strays his eyes to my father to get permission to end the fight, he denies his numerous requests.

My father's brief headshake to Isaac's request adds fuel to the fire brewing in my gut. I knew tonight's target was nailed to my back. I just can't fathom why. I'm no good to my father dead. If I die, the millions of dollars I was awarded in what my family called a 'botched FBI sting' gets placed into a trust for Ophelia.

People assume I'm slow because I have a stutter, but I'm not so stupid to sit by and risk the chance of my father benefiting from my mother's death more than he already has. I would burn every dollar before I'd ever let him have it.

My focus shifts from my father's stoic face to Isaac when I notice he's heading my way. His knuckles are busted and bruised, his body is covered with a range of contusions, and his dark hair looks black since it's soaked with blood, but he too knows only one of us will leave this mat on their feet, and regretfully, that man won't be me.

Isaac wants to protect my baby sister from a monster, and since I've craved the same the past decade, I'll succumb to the pleas in his eyes. No man wants to lose, but it's the least I can do given that Roberto and I left Ophelia's safety in Dimitri's hands the past four years. He's only a year older than Ophelia, so we should have been sheltering him just as much as he protects Ophelia.

"I'm sorry," Isaac mouths, his words only for my ears.

I nod, acknowledging the utmost empathy in his eyes before bracing my stance.

Isaac favors kicks over punches, so the roundhouse kick he does to my temple to end our fight isn't shocking, but the horrendous screech it rips through my ear is. It's more deafening than Ophelia's screams when I lifelessly flop onto the mat, and almost on par with the bullet my father fired with no concern his six-year-old son's head was almost resting on his gun.

Despite what my payout tells you, I'm not deaf in one ear because of a federal agent. My father is responsible for the loss of hearing in my right ear.

Just like he will be for my left ear as well.

Chapter Twenty-One

JR

I jerk my head to the side. My need to vomit is so strong, I'd rather it roll down the side of the bed I'm chained to than choke on it. There's no one to fetch the regurgitated meal Jae and I shared in the hotel room when I stupidly agreed to her suggestion to lay low for a couple of days.

It wasn't my head speaking on my behalf. It was my heart and another region much lower that pumps just as much blood.

Jae fascinates me more than any woman ever has. It's been that way since the day we met in the most unusual of circumstances...

"It's okay. Stay where you are. Help is on the way."

The ear-damaging shriek that hasn't stopped piercing through my ears since Isaac's kick to my head knocked me the fuck out doesn't take away from the uniqueness of the female's voice. It's foreign but not from one nation or in an obvious manner. It's pretty, which is an odd assessment for me to make while waking up in a sludgy marshland siding the road with no clue as to what the hell is happening.

I remember waking up with a massive headache within minutes of being knocked out, and Ophelia slapping Isaac over and over again before the confirmation I was unconscious, not dead, saw her falling back onto her knees at

my side. I even remember her screaming at Dimitri through the jacked-up Bluetooth speaker in her outdated bomb that their plan was stupid and reckless, but I have no clue why I'm being assessed in an alligator-infested swamp by a beautiful mixed-race woman with dazzling green eyes.

Her face is so flawless, I begin to suspect that Isaac killed me, but my soul isn't clean enough to enter heaven's gates without additional scrutiny. It's plausible considering how unblemished my savior's face is. Her skin is without a single flaw, and the lightness of her eyes in comparison to her almost black hair makes her even more fascinating.

She is beautiful. A true angel from above.

"I need you to stay still. Internal injuries are impossible to comprehend in these conditions."

"My s-sister," I stammer out, my voice drowned out by the thrumming of my pulse in my ears. "I was t-traveling with my s-sister."

Even though my memories are hazy at best, I remember the disgusted look on my father's face when I groggily slid into the passenger seat of Ophelia's car. He refused to call an ambulance. His reasoning, if I could walk, I didn't require medical assistance.

Ophelia didn't agree with his assessment, and since her screamed terms were overheard by more than the men paid to answer our father's every whim, a blond man on Isaac's side of the ring during our fight guided me to Ophelia's car that was covered with so much dust it seemed as if it hadn't left the warehouse parking lot for weeks.

We commenced our travels shortly after that, but that's where my memories come up blank. I don't even recall which

direction we headed when we left the lot. My brain is a muddled mess of confusion.

When I attempt to knock some sense into myself, the pulsating of the blood in my ears drops to my stomach. I slant my head away like my savior's voice is adding to the ringing in my ears instead of decreasing it.

I don't mean to be rude. The pain is just too intense not to respond.

Some benefit comes from the change-up, though. Not only does the vomit racing from my stomach to my throat spill onto the ground instead of in my rescuer's lap, it also has my eyes stumbling onto a wreckage.

My sister's Honda Civic is wrapped around a large tree.

She's still fastened into the driver's seat.

"Ophelia!"

I race toward the wreckage like my wrist, ribcage, and left shoulder aren't busted up.

My speed is fast, but it has nothing on the determination of the stranger wanting to keep my soul as unblemished as her face. "It's too late. She's gone." As her almond-shaped eyes bounce between mine, she spreads her hands across my chest, slicing its ache in half. "She's been gone for hours."

It takes my woozy head a couple of seconds to understand what she's saying, but when the truth finally dawns, my composure circles the drain right along with its gruesome acknowledgment.

"No!" I yank at my drenched hair, hopeful the pain it causes will stop my head from registering the image of my baby sister slumped over the steering wheel. "We o-only just

traveled d-down this road. We left the warehouse thirty minutes ago, i-if that...” When my eyes drop to my watch, my voice lowers to that of a whisper. It exposes that my fight with Isaac ended four hours ago. “I-It can’t be right. We j-just drove down this r-road.” I return my eyes to my savior. “There c-could still be time. We could s-save her.”

“No,” she whispers in a heartbreaking tone before she once again steps into my path. Her tiny height and svelte frame shouldn’t be capable of blocking the image tearing my heart in half, but somehow it does. She’d be around the same height as Ophelia—pocket-sized yet formidably strong. “Trust me, she’s gone. There’s nothing you can do for her...”

“S-She’s my sister. My b-baby sister.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” Her tone is genuinely remorseful. “But she’s been dead for quite a while...” As her words trail off, her noticeably slim nose screws up. “Do you smell that?” She twists her torso so she’s facing the mangled wreck before flaring her nostrils. “Does that smell like gasoline to you?”

When I glance in the direction she’s peering, the situation goes from bad to worse. A blacked-out SUV is parked behind Ophelia’s car. There’s only one association I know who gets around in pimped-out Range Rovers. It’s the same entity who refuses to leave a body.

“Is that your car? Where did you park?”

In my panic, my questions come out without the stutter my voice is rarely without.

“Over there.” She hooks her thumb in the direction opposite the SUV at the exact moment the back passenger window of the SUV glides down, and a tattooed hand clutching a Molotov cocktail pops out of the opening.

As the oily puddles beneath Ophelia's car finally make sense, the goon tosses the now-lit Molotov in the direction of the gas tank.

"Get down!"

I feel like I'm shouting, but my words are produced as slowly as the steps I take to protect my savior from a criminal entity that will massacre its own blood for profit.

I snag her wrist, yank her into my chest, then spin in preparation to run into the safety of the damp marshlands.

We don't even get two steps away when the flames engulfing Ophelia's car ignite the gas tank. Its furious blast sends me and the unknown woman flying through the air at a rate too fast for me to counteract.

Our crash into sloppy mud is as brutal as the blast that burned my shirt off my back. It knocks me out for the third time this evening and has me panicked my father claimed more than my life tonight.

He returned an angel to heaven as well.

MY ATTEMPT TO protect my thumping head from the annoying beep of a monitor is thwarted by a cool, steel material wrapped around my unbroken wrist. The smell alerts me to the fact I'm waking up in the hospital, not to mention the incessant beep of a pulse oximeter.

Although grateful I survived the blast, there isn't a lot to celebrate. My baby sister is dead, the murmured whispers of the nurses prodding me expose the prognosis isn't much better

for the woman who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I'm cuffed to my hospital bed.

"W-What's wrong with h-her?"

Since I'm lying on my stomach, I have to contort my neck to read the lips of a plump nurse with strands of gray hair twisted off her face with an old-fashioned clip. She warns the younger, less rule-following half of the duo to remain quiet before she continues caking my back with a greasy substance.

"Is s-she okay? Can you a-at least tell me that?"

It's hard to determine if the brunette's grimace is because she's about to give me bad news or because I'm yelling. My hearing is so bad right now, I'm beginning to wonder if the vital monitor was responsible for my return to the living or the cracks of my decimated heart fusing together.

"I need you to stay still." I assume she is going to give me the same line the pretty mixed-race lady did about internal injuries being hard to assess from the outside, so you can picture my shock when she adds, "The fluid loss from your burns could cause severe damage to your internal organs."

"B-Burns? What burns?"

The only part of my back I can see is the top of my shoulders, but I don't need to see more than that to understand why I'm lying on my stomach. My back is badly burned, and it has me worried my rescue scarred my savior with more than nightmares.

"Did she g-get burned? Is that why her p-prognosis isn't good?" When the brunette's eyes shoot to the clearly inferior of the two, I shout, "Answer me! Did she get burned?"

I don't know why I'm so frantic to be informed of the condition of a woman I've not been formally introduced to. I

guess you could say Ophelia is dead, so I'm thrusting my remorse for not protecting her onto my savior, but that's a weak response.

I'm so desperate for an update, while the nurses discuss protocol, I use some of the gel coating my back from the top of my shoulders to the base of my tailbone to loosen the grip of the handcuff curled around my wrist.

It's almost halfway down my hand when the young nurse's eyes lock with mine. "She wasn't physically injured by the blaze." If she's speaking out loud, I can't hear her. Unlike when I woke, her girly pitch doesn't sound like she's talking under six feet of water. I can hear the guilt in her shallow breaths, but her words are silent. She must know I can lip read. "She—"

When her eyes rocket to the left, so do mine. The reason for her abrupt silence is understandable when I spot who's entering my room.

The devil is walking the halls, seeking new victims.

"Leave." When the head nurse attempts to tell my father they haven't finished dressing my wounds, he shouts so loud, even through the bandages curled around my head and the hearing disability he gave me, the vibration of his threat vibrates my eardrums. "Leave of your own accord or in a body bag. The choice is yours."

The head nurse charges out of the room like her ass is on fire. It takes me wordlessly convincing the younger of the two that I'll be fine before she shakily steps past my father, then disappears into the corridor.

After closing the door, my father unhurriedly stalks to my half of the room. Although the scrub of his jaw almost has me

missing what he mumbles under his breath, the disdain in his eyes tells me everything I need to know.

The wrong Petretti child perished tonight.

He wants me dead, and when my eyes lock onto the official-looking document in his hand, I understand why. It's the will I had drawn up when Dimitri and Roberto followed our father's footsteps instead of our mother's. The declaration that says the millions of dollars I'm set to inherit in only a few short weeks will be solely awarded to Ophelia in the event of my death.

"S-She wouldn't have g-given you a dime," I mutter out fearlessly since the only person I was living for is no longer here.

The groove between my father's brows deepens before he finds a way to soothe his anguish. He stabs his pointy nail into the goop coating my back before he treks his finger over the grooves in my spine.

"I know," he mouths while taking in the redness on my face from holding in my screams. The pain is excruciating, but I'll never let him know that. "That's why I had plans in place to fix that." When his finger reaches the top of my spine, he adds another three fingers into the mix before dragging his hand back down to my tail bone. "But you took care of matters for me."

I'm lost as to what he means until I see the smugness in his eyes. "I-I wasn't driving. The a-accident wasn't my fault."

"I know," he repeats again, still smirking. "But with the rag used to light the wreck covered with your DNA from the fight and the gasoline tin having your prints on it, as far as

everyone around here is concerned, you killed your sister. Your baby sister.”

“W-why would anyone believe that? I had n-no reason to kill her.”

My last word comes out in a roar from him ripping my ear out from beneath the bandage curled around my head. Although the words he growls into my ear have me grateful I’m not fully deaf, they’re devastating enough for me to wish I were. “Isaac was meant to kill you, then during a heated argument with the sister of the man he murdered, he’d lash out violently, resulting in the death of two of my beloved children in the one night.” He inches back, his facial expression less than impressed. “Instead, he left you to live the life of a coward. One that saw your only sister so frantic to save you, she was murdered in the process.”

“I-It was a traffic accident. An a-accident isn’t murder.”

“Some jurors may believe that.” He exhales sharply. “But a handful will clutch onto the DA’s belief that you instigated the accident after finding out she’d siphoned your bank account of millions of dollars. Their wish to watch you fry will soon convince the masses.”

“You’re insane! Ophelia couldn’t h-have taken my money. I don’t even have a-access to the funds yet.”

Your life expectancy in this industry is already low, but mine lowers even more when my father thrusts a sheet of paper my way. It shows multiple transactions under ten thousand dollars being wired from the account the Feds set up on my behalf to Ophelia’s personal bank account.

Every penny is obliterated, leaving me broke.

The document looks so authentic, for half a nanosecond, I remember how badly Ophelia wanted out of our family.

Mercifully, just as fast, I remember she's more like me than Roberto and Dimitri.

"She w-wouldn't have done that. S-She wanted out, but she wouldn't have h-hurt me like this."

"She did hurt you," my father disagrees. "And it created the perfect motive for you to kill her." His snicker belongs to an evil, vile man. "If you hadn't been so greedy, this all could have been avoided. All you had to do was share your wealth, then your sister wouldn't have stolen from you, and you wouldn't have killed her in retaliation—"

"I didn't kill her! You..."

Before all my confession leaves my mouth, he silences me like he did when I was a child. He rams the barrel of his gun into my good ear before snarling that he won't miss this time around.

"You're alive because of me," he mouths while glaring at me as if I'm his lowest-ranked foot soldier instead of his son. "Remember that when you're defending the Petretti name in a maximum-security prison." Droplets of blood pool into my ear when he digs his gun in even deeper before muttering, "You're not supposed to enjoy being railed by a lifer, but knowing you, you probably will."

Once he's confident he has me as angry as I am scared, he returns his gun to the holster around his waist, ruffles my hair like you'd expect a father to do when they see their child after months of no contact, then he joins two police officers in the corridor.

The instant he hands them a fat-waded envelope, I know my choices are limited. I either stay and get locked away for Ophelia's 'murder' or run.

When my hand finally slips free out of the cuff compliments to the excessive amount of gel on my back, you can guess which direction I take.

I bolt, my flee only ending when I realize the devil isn't the only one venturing into uncharted waters tonight. An angel is also tiptoeing over the fine line.

Chapter Twenty-Two

JR

It takes me blinking several times in a row to clear the heart-clogging vision in front of me. My head is so woozy, even with my ears not being able to hear a single fucking thing, I can imagine every word ripping from Jae's mouth as she tussles with a blond man outside the window of the holding cell I'm detained inside.

She's warning him in no uncertain terms that if I am to die in custody, she will have every single member of his crew permanently ostracized from their positions.

“And don't think I'm joking, Alex. Regan is on her way here, and if I can't make you see sense through the madness, I'm sure there's a way I can convince her to twist your arm for me.” Alex shits bricks when she gets up close to him to keep their conversation between them and other lip-reading individuals. “Especially if I tell her about those vitamins you asked about last year to make sure your swimmers are extra strong to improve your chances of a mini Alex running around within the next year.”

Alex scrubs a hand across his scruffy beard. “You can't tell her that. That's doctor-patient confidentiality.”

Jae folds her arms under her chest before arching a brow. It was that spitfire stubbornness that kept her alive the three days

following her accident. Even while unconscious, she fought with everything she had. It made my obsession with her even greater.

“That privilege is only when the patient *pays* for the consultation. You’re too cheap for that.”

Her take-no-shit attitude exposes why it was stupid of me to ever believe she was taken out by one of my father’s goons...

I crash tackle the brute clamping his hand over my savior’s mouth so violently, his bounce across the tiled floor exposes his scrubs are fraudulent. He isn’t a medical professional. He’s one of my father’s goons. The make and model of his gun that skids across the floor with him exposes this, much less the Petretti emblem tattooed on his neck.

If my father can’t brand you with disdain, he takes the old-fashioned route. Every member of his crew has the Petretti family emblem tattooed on their neck.

“G-Get the fuck out of here!” I shout after gathering up his gun and directing it at his head.

I’ve never fired a weapon in my life, but for once, my namesake works in my favor. The goon looks worried. So he should be. I’m seconds from blowing his brains out. That’s how unhinged I feel from taking in my rescuer’s unmoving chest and pale, lifeless face. She looks like she’s dead, and her wish to help me was what pushed her into her grave.

“Your father—”

“Will be the least of y-your worries if you don’t leave r-right fucking now!”

After dusting his hands down the front of his mock uniform as if it is as stained as my gown from landing into a bush

under my savior's window, he tosses a glass vial across the room.

Not thinking, I snatch it up before it shatters on the tiled floor.

The goon grins like he's walking away victorious. I discover why when he mutters, "Good luck explaining that."

On his way out, he jabs the emergency call button on the doorframe of the private suite. It sends a 'code red' alarm through the paging system of the hospital. It alerts nurses that a patient is crashing in the room I'm standing in with a gun, a vial of vapor-like liquid, and an unresponsive woman.

Matters couldn't get any worse.

"T-This wasn't me," I advise the first nurse who races into my savior's room. It is the young medic from earlier, the one who told me my rescuer's life wasn't in danger a second before she was removed from the room by my father's surly tone.

I guess she forgot to calculate the odds of my father never leaving any witnesses to his crimes.

After taking a couple of seconds to assess the situation, the nurse slings her eyes to the left. "Bring me the crash trolley." While I do that, she switches off the emergency alarm, then shouts down the corridor that it's a false alarm. "The patient accidentally bumped the button in the bathroom. She's a little woozy. I'll get her back into bed before finalizing my rounds."

I can't hear what the person replies, but the nurse doesn't wait around for it either. She returns to my savior's bedside even quicker than I arrive with the trolley, then she commences assessing her condition. "Did you see what he gave her?"

While taking in my rescuer's name scribbled across the whiteboard above her head, I shake mine. "No. He h-had his hand clamped over her m-mouth."

Her groan is so potent I feel it more than I hear it. "The liquid in the vial you're holding, does it smell vinegary?"

As she opens Jae's mouth to take a whiff of her breath, I pull off the cork stuffed into the glass vial, then take a sniff of the liquid inside. "It's k-kinda vinegary."

When I dip my pinkie into the vial to see if it tastes as it smells, the nurse shouts, "Don't sample it. If this is what I think it is, even a droplet will cause significant memory loss." She pops open Jae's hospital gown to place heart rate monitor pads onto her torso. "Betradezliroid is rampant in the sex trafficking market at the moment. The less the girls remember, the less zombie-like they are with their customers. It's all the rage in mafia industries."

I'm taken aback by her openness, considering she knows my last name. It's rare to find someone so frank, let alone when they're informing that knowledge to the son of a criminal underworld figure. "If that's the c-case, if all he wanted was for her to f-forget, why did he h-have her hand over her mouth?"

The nurse shrugs. "I don't know. But right now, we don't have time to work that out."

I assume she's referencing the horrifying straight line on the heart monitor she recently attached to Jae's chest but learn otherwise when she nudges her head to the corridor. A tactical response unit is preparing to storm Jae's room. The only reason they haven't charged is because I'm still clutching the gun I snatched off the floor earlier.

After realizing the duo helming the campaign are the mercenaries my father paid off outside my hospital room only minutes ago, I snap my eyes back to the nurse.

“Go,” she encourages when she spots my massively dilated gaze.

I shake my head. “I can’t. I-If I leave, they will kill her.”

“I can protect Jae,” the nurse promises. “But I can’t issue the same guarantee to you. They won’t let you come. They say you’re not redeemable. That none of the men are.”

What is she talking about? What does she mean I can’t go with her? And how can I be unredeemable when I haven’t done anything wrong?

Oh, God. Does she think I hurt Jae?

“T-This wasn’t me!”

The tactical response unit uses my distraction to their advantage. They race into the room with bulletproof shields helming their campaign and knee-capping batons picking up the slack.

“Go!” the nurse encourages again before nudging her head to the window I squeezed through when I noticed Jae’s mouth was being held shut by a man with wide shoulders and an angry scar down the back of his neck.

With the roar of the officers’ boots stomping my way deafening and my mind shut down, I snatch off my necklace, stuff it into Jae’s balled-up hand, spin on my heels, then race for the window.

The procession of mostly rogue police officers almost reaches me before I dive through the minute opening. My landing into the bush the second time around isn’t any less

painful than the first. That might have something more to do with the nurse announcing Jae's time of death than the spiky branches digging into my calves and arms.

She said she'd protect her.

Instead, she pulls the sheet over her head before wheeling her out of the room.

After swallowing down my shock, I sprint across the soggy land just as quickly. I run and run and run until the image of Jae's flopped head demands a breather long before my battered lungs, and I find a tree trunk capable of holding my weight.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jae

““W ill you please talk some sense into him?” I spin to face Isaac, never more relieved to see his stubborn and determined face. “They sedated him even with me advising them he could be suffering from grave internal injuries.” I grip his business jacket like I’m on the verge of collapsing. That’s how upsetting it is knowing a patient is hurting but being denied the opportunity to help them. “He put his body on the line to save me, Isaac. I don’t care who he is or what he may have done, he doesn’t deserve to be treated like this.” I toss my hand at the window of JR’s holding cell. “They’re treating him like an animal.”

“It’s okay.” He cradles my jaw in his hands like he does Callie anytime her thoughts spiral to a time before she was his daughter before promising, “I will take care of this. I will make it right... *after* I’ve ensured you’re okay.”

I value his friendship greatly but not enough to forget my objectives. “I’m fine. As I’ve been telling them the past two hours, he didn’t hurt me. He took care of me.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “Yes, I’m sure, Isaac.”

He takes a moment to gauge the authenticity of my reply before shifting on his feet to face Alex. “What’s the issue?”

Alex shrugs before scrubbing a hand along his beard that can’t conceal his smile when he spots Regan at the other end of the corridor, talking on her cell phone. She looks so fierce in a red mini skirt, red pumps, and a silky blouse that clings to her body, it takes me ramming my elbow into Alex’s ribs to remind him of my earlier threat.

It brings him to heel remarkably quick. “It’s out of my clearance. This area isn’t in my jurisdiction, so I have *no* say on *anything* happening.”

That’s the same excuse he’s given me the past two hours, but Isaac doesn’t take no for an answer. “So who do I need to speak with to make this happen?”

“It’s higher than you realize.”

The blood is nowhere near as stale between Isaac and Alex as it once was, but Isaac forgets that when his temper gets the better of him. Izzy only gave birth to their fourth child a couple of weeks ago, so this is the last place he wants to be. I told him not to come, but that isn’t how he operates. If you’re a part of his inner circle, he’s there for you no matter what. “I didn’t ask how high this goes. I asked who I need to speak to.”

My smile is ill-timed, but it can’t be helped when Isaac threatens Alex the same way I tried earlier. “Do I need to bring Regan into this?”

After leaning in close to keep his words out of Regan’s ears, Alex hisses out, “You can’t fuckin’ use her against me all the time.”

“Wanna bet?” Isaac fires back, his voice a mix of humor and sophistication. “But I won’t need to *if* you do the right

thing. You know murky shit is happening in this region of the Bureau. You've voiced your concerns numerous times, so why aren't you doing anything about it?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" Alex strays his narrowed eyes to me. "We found her as requested. Now my hands are tied."

"They won't be if you point me in the direction of someone with some say around here." Isaac unbuttons his suit jacket, then flings his hand at the window I highlighted earlier. "Look at him, Alex. He's on the verge of..." He stops talking when his eyes follow the direction Alex takes. "Jesus." I've never seen Isaac speechless before, but since it isn't the right time to relish it, I store it away for a better time. "Are you sure he is who you say he is?"

"DNA proves it," Regan announces before I can after joining us in the corridor. She's finished her call, but I can't tell if she's happy about what was shared during her brief conversation or frustrated. She looks a bit of both.

"He just has beast-mode activated," Alex mutters before he cozies up to Regan's side so he can drink in her expensive perfume without making it obvious he's smitten with her even years after they became an official couple.

Although jealous about all the lovey-dovey relationships forever thrust in my face, I'll never have the opportunity of achieving the same if I forget the reason several high-powered figures are convening in the one space. I felt things for JR I haven't experienced before, and although some of them could be excused under the circumstances of our confinement, I'm confident not all of them are from that. I felt things for him years ago, and back then, he was a stranger.

They were so strong when the Bureau first came to me with an offer of protection, I denied their suggestion. Waking

up in a morgue already had me on the back foot, so I only imagined it getting worse when I conjured up ways to unearth the identity of the man who survived the crash.

I only changed my mind when Isaac's warning about the Petrettis leaving no witnesses proved accurate. I felt like I was being watched at all hours of the day and night, and when that unease stretched to my family, I had no choice but to agree with the Bureau's suggestion. I either hid who I was or lost who I was. There was no other option.

At the time, I thought the decision was easy. It was only after meeting Cecil did I realize I had made the wrong choice. I wasn't honoring the woman I was, I was hiding like a coward.

The system is rigged, and if it weren't for a brave few constantly fighting to keep it honest, we would have lost the battle a long time ago.

I won't lie. Traveling to Ravenshoe for the first time was terrifying. Hopeton, the town ruled by the Petrettis for over two decades, borders Ravenshoe. I had thrust myself headfirst into danger like it was a part of my job description, but by doing that, I gave abuse victims a voice, helped women escape horrendous circumstances, and ensured people like Cecil didn't have their deaths recorded as a suicide when the evidence stated otherwise.

Cecil didn't kill himself as Cedric claimed. Someone murdered him, and if my intuition is anything to go by, JR knows who that was.

Not above begging, I mutter, "Please, Alex. He requires urgent medical attention."

I get the response I'm hoping for, but it isn't from Isaac or Alex. It comes from Regan. "Go." After spinning around to face Alex, her first objector, she states, "She is a medical professional, and I am a lawyer. If anyone has an objection to a citizen of our country receiving medical treatment from a highly decorated doctor or having his rights upheld by his lawyer, then they can speak with me." Alex is pissed as hell she's declared herself as JR's lawyer, but with his jurisdiction not as high as Regan's morals, he keeps his mouth shut. "Grab your medical bag. I'll escort you in."

"Regan—"

"No, Alex. The fact he hasn't already been seen is wrong." Her expression changes when she mutters, "If that was you..." She can't finish her sentence, and the knowledge puffs Alex's chest with pride instead of annoyance.

Alex locks his eyes with Isaac's, then nudges his head to the corridor. "Keep watch. They don't have any surveillance in this part of the office."

"For a reason," Isaac pushes out with a snarl before doing as instructed. He doesn't like being bossed around, especially by Alex, but the sooner this situation is sorted out, the quicker he will be back with his family.

That's enough incentive for him to commit murder.

"If anything happens to them, Alex—"

"I'll hold the gun to my head myself," Alex interrupts, conscious as to where Isaac's threat stems.

I slant my head to hide my smirk when Isaac replies, "I don't need a gun to take you down."

The same could be said for JR. He held his own against over a dozen agents with batons and shields. He was only

taken down because he was so desperate to get me away from Cedric, he put all his focus on who he determined was the greatest threat.

The reminder has me shifting my eyes back to Isaac, “Once I’ve ensured he’s okay, we need to talk about Cedric.” The groove between his dark brows deepens when I mutter, “He is as bad as you warned... if not worse.”

My heart batters my ribs when I skirt through the door Alex recently unlocked. JR is far too large for the cot in the back of the room, and his skin looks clammy even with it being drained of color.

“Do you have any idea what they gave him?” I ask Alex after checking the dilation of JR’s eyes and the speed of his pulse.

Alex shakes his head. “I’m not here on assignment. I was returning a favor.” He purses his lips before starting again, “Most agencies use analgesics to knock perps out long enough to detain them, but this operative doesn’t follow the rules like the rest. The bigger the target, the wider and more durable the net.”

“JR isn’t a threat.”

Alex glares at me as if I am bonkers. “He confessed to murder on tape, Jae. That overrides your beliefs.”

Hating that he’s right but determined to prove him wrong, I nudge my head to the medical bag. I believe JR’s claims that the man he killed was in retaliation for Cecil’s death, but I’ll never get the answers I’m seeking if he dies due to insolent fools mistaking his size as meaning he is a brute.

I did that once.

I won’t let it happen again.

“What is that?” Alex asks when I load up a syringe with flumazenil.

“It’s proven effective for the reversal of antagonist sedatives. Although it would be more effective if administered through an IV, it will still work via an injection.” After blowing my long bangs out of my face, I roll up the sleeve of the shirt they dressed JR in before loading him into the back of an unmarked van. “I don’t have any naloxone, so fingers crossed this works.”

I grimace before jabbing JR with the needle. Within a minute or two, he exhibits signs the drug administered is working. Then, a minute after that, he responds as any man would when treated like an animal.

He lashes out.

“No,” I huskily warn when Alex responds to JR’s grab of my throat by moving for his gun. “He won’t hurt me. He just isn’t alert enough to realize it’s me.”

I pray for my theory to be proven accurate when JR firms his grip on my throat instead of loosening it. This is as tortuous as having my mouth clamped shut, and it’s taking everything I have not to fall into an old coping mechanism. I would have been there thirty seconds ago if my relapse wouldn’t have JR sedated again. Even a novice medic knows too many sedations are dangerous.

Desperate for air, I stab my nails into the leathery skin on JR’s hand just as his eyes pop open. My lungs screaming demands are answered within a nanosecond of his eyes locking with mine. He loosens his grip before doing something no one is anticipating. He pulls me down onto him before rolling us over on the rock-hard bed so he can spoon me from behind.

“I need to assess you,” I sign, grateful I know how.

My voice would expose too much muckiness a medical professional shouldn't have if I were to speak, and the sentiment highlighting it doubles when JR grunts out a disapproving reply.

He's been mistreated and misunderstood, but since the very thing he was taken down trying to protect is in front of him, uninjured and safe, he acts as if he has the world at his feet.

And no matter the cost, I'm going to ensure he does.

Chapter Twenty-Four

JR

Twenty Years Old

M*y frustration skyrockets when the vine I'm using as a noose snaps under my weight for the third time in the past hour. It's strangling the life out of the trees surrounding me, but no matter how many times I endeavor for it to snap my neck before crushing my windpipe, it doesn't happen.*

Suicide should never be an option, but what other choice do I have? My baby sister and the woman who endeavored to save us are dead, my father wants me to take the downfall for their murders, and I'm broke.

The documents he paraded in front of me in my hospital room looked real because they were. Every single dollar in my trust fund is gone. I don't have a penny to my name, and despite me answering my father's every whim yesterday, Old Man Stephens doesn't either.

My father didn't even wait an hour after the fight to order the torching of Old Man Stephens' workshop. He burned it to the ground before setting alight his attached cabin.

That's how I ended up here, hours from my hometown, at the base of a mountain skiers occupy for hours on end during the winter months. I rode here on the tray of a truck of a man who should hate me, confident anywhere he'd take me would be better than where I'll end up when I finally succeed at taking my life.

I don't necessarily want to die, but even hell would have to be better than asking my father for help. I'd rather not exist at all than become his puppet like Roberto and Dimitri.

After breathing out the heaviness most likely weighing down the noose, I stand to my feet, dust off my backside, then reclimb the tree that looks like it's been here for centuries.

Chunks of bark flick up into my face when I scoot across a branch double the width of my thighs to reach the snapped vine dangling off it. With my mind blank of a single thought, I remove the busted length of liana before twisting two recently cut pieces together, hopeful plaiting it like I imagine Jae would have done with her dead-straight hair will make it more durable.

While knotting the ends together, a shimmer in the far corner of the tree-dotted landscape captures my attention. It isn't a light, more the sun that's slowly rising on the horizon bouncing off a reflective material.

"What is that?" I mumble to myself since there isn't a single person within a fifty-mile radius of me. An abounded piece of metal shouldn't move the way it is. It follows the sways of my head, blinding me more than once when I secure the plaited liana around the tree's branch.

Regretfully, I'm not a curious man, so instead of investigating the ray distracting me from the ultimate endgame, I drag the reinforced noose over my head, tighten

the knot I'm praying will hold for the required time to knock me out, count to three, then leap off the branch like I'm bungee jumping off the Auckland Bridge.

The vine holds out longer this time around. It brings me so close to asphyxiation, white spots dance in front of my eyes, but a mere second before the blackness can fully take hold, the liana holding me several feet from the ground once again snaps, sending me crashing back to earth with an almighty bang.

"Fuck!"

The echo of my fist crashing in the snow slash ground exposes how alone I am. It's me versus the world... and perhaps the reflective light that won't fucking quit even when it wins.

Its blinding rays snap my last nerve so perversely, before I know what I plan to do when I reach it, I sprint through the dense woodlands separating us like my feet aren't cut up and bleeding from the mad dash I did to escape the officers chasing me when I leaped out the window of Jae's hospital room and ran like my feet weren't taking me straight back to the bane of my existence.

Hopeton is my hometown, but it is far from home to me. It is where my mother was killed, my father rules, and where I learned more than my sister had gained her angel wings.

By the time I reached Hopeton, Jae's death was circulated on every news channel in the country. The journalists stated the talented up-and-coming doctor died a hero, but that she didn't make it out of the marshland breathing. They completely overlooked the fact that I tried to save her after she had done the same for me.

My brutal speed through the dense tree-studded landscape slows when I reach an opening in the forest-like setting. A log cabin sits in the far-right corner of the cleared land. It appears abandoned, but I still stammer out a greeting while hesitantly pacing toward it. "H-Hello? Is a-anyone here?"

The eerie creak of the front door peeling open doesn't register with my damaged ears, but the girlie squeal that rips from my throat when I walk through a spider web years in the making is so loud, they register it twice.

Spiders give me the fucking creeps, and I'm man enough to admit that.

My curiosity piques when I spot a large bundle of rope in a room I assume will become a bathroom since it's half plumbed.

Perhaps that's why this cabin beckoned me?

Rope would have to be far more durable than a length of vine.

Confident that will be the case, I snap out of my trance-like state before entering the room the size of most people's walk-in closets to gather up the rope.

Partway across the warped floorboards, my trespass of private property is busted. "That bundle of rope couldn't hang a deer, so if you want it for what I think you do, you're wasting your time." A man I'd guess to be mid-seventies hobbles into a cabin that's seen better days. When he stabs out the cigarette dangling out of his mouth into an empty ashtray, I slant my head to ensure I can't miss what he says next. "The vine got ya, didn't it? It's finicky shit that's as useless as tits on a bull."

He doesn't wait for me to answer him. The red marks on my neck tell him everything he needs to know, not to mention

the bobbing of my Adam's apple about how frank he is when discussing a taboo topic such as suicide.

After blowing out a large plume of smoke he held in for longer than necessary, the damage to his lungs not a concern for a man his age, he yanks up the sleeves of his dirty flannel shirt, exposing deep slash marks grooved into his wrist.

"You might have better luck than me, but since you'd need a sharp knife that digs real deep, and I need every one I have for the deer, I'm not going to give you one." He nudges his head to the woodlands surrounding his rundown property. "So off you go. If I find you during one of my hunts, I'll be sure to return you to the earth from where you came or whatever the fuck they say these days."

"Y-You live out here?" I should be denying his claims I'm trying to kill myself, not feeding my curiosity as to why someone would want to live such a bleak, dismal existence.

He coughs through the smoke still escaping his frail lungs while replying, "You're in my home, aren't ya? Trampled all over with your muddy feet."

"This is a-a shanty. I-If that."

I curse my inability not to think before speaking before attempting an apology.

Not a syllable fires from my mouth before the stranger reminds me I'm no better than him. "Says the boy attempting to end his life in the middle of nowhere without a suicide note in sight." After dragging his eyes down my body, he returns them to my face. "You didn't arrive here alone, so why are you trying to leave that way?"

"N-no one wants me," I reply before I can stop myself. "I'm n-no g-good to anyone."

I glance up from my feet when he grunts out, “You’ve got a lot to learn if you think that rope can hold your weight, but there’s always a way if you’re willing to adapt. I could certainly put you to work if you were interested.”

“W-What?” I stammer out, certain I heard him wrong.

He couldn’t possibly be offering me a job, right?

My own father doesn’t want me around, so why would a stranger?

I didn’t mistake the offer in his tone. “You’re too late to harvest, but we got seedlings to plant for the spring and meat to cure. There’s plenty to do, you just have to decide if you want to do it.”

I stare at him dumbfounded. Men with my own blood don’t want my help, so why the hell does he?

When I ask him that, he shrugs before spitting out with a snarl, “I’m getting a little long in the tooth. I need someone to —”

“W-wipe your ass? I’m g-good.” I dump the rope on the floor beneath my feet, confident I’d rather preserve with twisted strands of vine than care for a stranger how my father failed to do for his mother.

“I was going to say, ‘lift the deer,’ dumbass.” As he shuffles past me, the scuttle of his feet only just clearing the rope, he smacks me up the back of the head with a rolled-up newspaper. “I’ll take myself out to pasture before I’ll ever let a punk-ass kid wipe my ass.”

With his statement sounding more honest than deceitful, I follow his hobbled walk into the shambles he calls a bathroom, certain a couple of hours of delay to my endgame won’t hurt anyone but me.

“Are you just gonna stand there?” the man asks after yanking out a stool from beneath a wooden bench. “Or are we gonna get you cleaned up and ready for work?” He drops his eyes to my distorted wrist. “I ain’t got nothing to fix broken bones, but I have a needle and thread that will close up those gaps quick smart.”

When he waves his hand across the top of the stool, I hesitantly pace his way.

“I don’t bite, boy,” he promises when my first instinct to him raising his hand to my face is to protect myself from another blow. “But if I did, I doubt I could hurt you more than you’ve already been hurt. Who did this to you?”

“N-No one important.”

“That’s right,” he agrees. “Because toxic people are like clouds. When they float away, it sure is a beautiful day.”

Cecil wasn’t wrong. I had so much murkiness surrounding me back then, I thought the only way to rid myself of it was to end my life.

He taught me otherwise.

Despite him having nothing but a parcel of land and a half-built cabin, he took me in, fed me, clothed me, and instilled more morals into me in a year than my father had done my entire life.

He was my protector both before and after his death—as I will be Jae’s.

I just need to find my way out of a second mind-hazing maze first.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Hey,” Jae mouths when my groggy eyes float over her face and veer toward her kiss-swollen lips. “Do you want to share where you went the past forty minutes?” She doesn’t give me the chance to answer. “Flumazenil is the most effective ten minutes after being administered, but you continued napping like I didn’t give you an extra hit.”

I’m confused as to what she’s referencing until an intense urge to protect her spikes the hairs on the back of my neck. We’re being watched, and once our stalker gets close enough for me to grab them, I’ll be sure to pass on my dislike of being gawked at with my fist.

I hated it when I was a kid, and it grew more perverse when I realized my identity could end more than my second chance at life...

“Does that look like twine to you?”

After bobbing down to secure a tomato plant to a stake with a length of string, I slant my head so my good ear is facing away from Cecil. He can talk about the difference between twine and string for hours, and although I’ve grown to love his debates the past three years, my head is thumping way too much this afternoon to tackle his nonsense.

The dark brown brew Cecil lives off every winter is the equivalent of rat poison. It tastes like shit, burns the fuck out of your throat, and knocks you on your ass. But unlike the rats that got into the crop of corn last year, you're back onto your feet within a couple of hours of downing a bottle.

Perhaps two if you're as old as Cecil.

He hasn't yet reached the age where he needs assistance to wipe his ass, but he's cutting it close. The only reason he's held out so long is because of the environmental toilet we installed in a makeshift bathroom a few years back. It's the size of an aircraft toilet, meaning he doesn't need to bend to wipe. He can do it while standing.

While the heat of Cecil's breaths hit the back of my neck, I chuckle about the time he had to wipe with a wad of leaves because I hadn't returned from the store with toilet paper in enough time. He used the wrong leaf, and the consequences of his actions stretched from the back of his knees to a region of his body I have no intention of ever seeing again.

We now have patches of fur in case of an emergency.

Cecil's cabin was designed for one, but a man who should have passed years ago doesn't take up much space. In the warmer months, I sleep on a hammock swinging off the front verandah. In the colder months, I wear a hole in the rug at the front of the fireplace I installed after shivering my way through my first three nights as Cecil's unwanted house guest.

I stop recalling a time that seems so long ago when a rolled-up newspaper smacks me up the back of the head. Cecil learned about the hearing loss in my right ear rather soon into our unusual housing situation, but he doesn't take kindly to me using it to my advantage.

He hates ignorance almost as much as he does the outside world. He hasn't stepped foot off his land in over ten years, hence the reason I've never felt like a burden to him. I keep his cabin stacked with the things he can't grow himself, and he keeps my mind away from the dark thoughts it constantly faced during my adolescence.

It's an odd pairing, but it works for us.

My brows furrow when Cecil mouths, "Go inside," instead of telling me. Even with my hair hanging past my ears, the annoying ring Isaac's roundhouse kick caused my left ear is still present to this day. It's frustrating, but I'm hoping the thicker my hair becomes, the less annoying it will be.

It will also be the perfect barrier for the whiny voices of the women who flock to my side during my bi-annual treks to town. Even with them not knowing my family's notoriety, they hang off my every word like my face alone makes up for the horrific scars on my back.

Since I don't agree with them, I thank them for their invitations before returning to the cabin Cecil inherited over a decade ago.

My father would make heads roll if he learns of my celibacy the past four years, so I won't mention the fact I've never gone past third base with a woman before.

"Let me f-finish getting these tomato plants s-straightened, then I'll stoke the fire s-so water will be r-ready for showering."

Only a couple of weeks ago, the thick black poly hose mounted to the cabin's roof supplied enough hot water for two showers and a bucket of water to do some laundry. But since it's cooling down faster than usual this year, we've reverted to

using the ancient boiler most households removed when electricity was invented.

“Inside now, punk ass.” Cecil’s words are fired out of his mouth so quick, I struggle to lip read what he says. “I won’t ask again.”

With my hearing not the best, it takes me shifting my eyes in the direction of the vibration under my feet to understand Cecil’s unease.

We have visitors.

Visitors.

Not once in the three-and-a-half years I’ve lived here have we had visitors. And from the sternness on Cecil’s face when he orders me into the cabin for the second time and his quickest glance of the gun that rarely leaves his side, it isn’t hard to determine these aren’t visitors we want.

“Goddammit, kid,” Cecil growls down my good ear when I stand at his side instead of cowering away as he’s hoping. “Sometimes you are more trouble than you’re worth.”

I scoff at his claim. I tried to take the cheater’s way out years ago. He taught me that wasn’t the right way to go, so I refuse to make the same mistake twice.

“Who’s this?” asks a man I’ve never seen before. Even with the locals being sporadic around these parts, I’m confident we’ve never met. You can’t mistake a face as ugly as his.

“None of your business,” Cecil replies before pulling me behind him like I can’t protect myself. I guess his logic makes sense. I did arrive on his doorstep with a broken wrist, multiple fractured ribs, several contusions, and one hell of a bruised face.

I was unrecognizable.

“None of my business?” the man replies with a mocking laugh. “That’s funny considering everything here is my business.” After dragging his eyes across the overflowing vegetable patch, a whistle blows through his chipped front teeth. “Wow. You have quite the setup, old man. I’m impressed.”

Although the stranger with a thick gold chain around his neck and an arrogant swagger appears to be praising Cecil, neither Cecil nor I take it that way. You can’t praise someone while destroying something that took them months to achieve.

While stomping across a bed of carrots almost ready for harvesting, the man with an ugly sneer gestures for two men in a blacked-out SUV to join us in the recently restored shade house. “But I still don’t understand what you’re doing here. This isn’t your land, so you have no right to farm it.”

“You know that’s a lie, Roderick. The planning and land registration has been over this a dozen times the past ten years. From the roadside to the quarry belongs to me. Everything from the quarry and beyond is your grandfather’s.”

“My grandfather’s?” Roderick spits out, his tone as pompous as his shiny shirt. “My grandfather is dead... because you killed him.”

My eyes shoot to Cecil as fast as spit lodges in his throat. “No,” he gabbers out through the chunk of saliva breaking up his short reply. “Memphis’s death was an accident. No one is responsible for it.”

“He wouldn’t have been driving without chains if it hadn’t been for you and that whore.”

Cecil is up in his face in an instant. “Talk about your grandmother like that one more time, and I’ll smack the arrogance off your face with my fists. She was a good woman who didn’t deserve to be lumped with a prick of a family like yours.”

Roderick acts like he isn’t scared by the threat in Cecil’s tone, but even someone who only met him two seconds ago couldn’t deny that fret is the main part of his expression when he replies, “Save that for the next time you visit the grave you put her in.”

“Hey,” I shout when the clicking of Roderick’s fingers see one of the men lighting a rag similar to the one my father’s goon used to torch Ophelia’s car. “There’s n-no need for t-that.” When he acts as if he can’t understand my stuttered words, I try another tactic. “Unless you h-have a fucking death w-wish.” That stops him in his tracks as well as my anger ends my stuttering. “This land is riddled with chemicals needed to combat the loss of nutrients from the quarry draining the land of all its goodness.” He flicks his eyes to Roderick when I lie, “The natural gas seeping through the b-broken land is a ticking timebomb. One flame could cause a catastrophic blast.”

I soundlessly thank a goon’s disdain of all things logical when Roderick signals for him to distinguish the flame. “In a fuckin’ water bucket,” he shouts when the man’s wild flaps almost see his silky shirt go up in flames.

After watching the blond-haired man plunge the lit rag in and out of a water bucket more times than needed to extinguish the tiny flame, Roderick shifts his focus back to Cecil. “I’ll give you until the end of the month. If you’re not out by then, I’ll come remove you myself.”

He gives Cecil time to see the wish for anarchy brewing in his eyes before he gestures for his goons to enter the SUV with the same dismissive gesture he did earlier.

Once goon one has slid into the driver's seat, he locks his eyes with mine. "Make sure you move on with him too. There's nothing out here for you but trouble, and most of it will come from him." He points at Cecil's chest before he flips him the bird, spins on his heels, then stalks away.

I wait for his all-terrain vehicle to be lost in the rugged landscape before shifting on my feet to face Cecil. Before I can fire off one of the thousands of words swarming my head, he nudges his head to the tomato plants in desperate need of staking. "Better get a wiggle on. We only have an hour before the sun sets." When I try to once again ask him what the fuck is going on, he cuts me off for the second time. "Then I need you to move on to chopping the firewood. You've let it get away on you the past couple of weeks—"

"Like the stale air between you and Roderick?"

The glare of a man nearing his eighties shouldn't be able to pin a man in place, but Cecil pulls it off. He's a hard-ass in all meanings of the word, but since that is part of his teachings to live a humble existence instead of a wish to rule the world, I don't give it much attention.

"You don't need to worry about Roderick. That boy has too much hot air in his lungs and no one to take it out on since the man responsible for his anger is no longer breathing." He squeezes my shoulder, silently announcing the similarities between Roderick and me before he slowly shuffles toward the cabin, where he grumbles about how he doesn't need to answer to a punk-ass weasel who thinks they know what's best for him.

*Since I'm unsure if his grumbles are about Roderick or me,
I return to staking the tomato plants, conscious Cecil's age has
nothing on his ability to put me on my ass.*

Chapter Twenty-Six

““H ow are you even here? This is a secured area, Cedric.”

One name, and I'm onto my feet like I wasn't taken down with a horse tranquilizer. My stumble to the glass window separating Jae and me is so perverse, even with Cedric's lips fattened by my fists, I have a hard time reading his reply. "It's amazing what you have access to when you're seen as a valuable asset."

Jae gags at his reply before knocking him down a peg or two. "Give them time. I'm sure it won't take them long to realize how *useless* you are."

She hits a nerve, and it has Cedric's attitude backpedaling quick smart. He steps away from her with his hands held in the air like they will be when he's arrested. "I just want to make sure you know what you're getting yourself into. He isn't who he says he is."

"And neither are you," Jae fires back, her voice surprisingly strong considering her gall has Cedric puffing out his chest to remind her about their contrasting sizes. "But that isn't what this is about, is it? You lost, and everyone knows the Lancasters never lose."

“Hey!” I try to shout when he grabs Jae’s arm, but no sounds come out of my mouth. I haven’t used my voice in years, and up until I had to use every muscle in my body to free Jae from the mangled remains of her car, I didn’t know I still had it in me.

It’s hard to trust anything when you’ve been silenced by more than endless lies...

“Back in my day, men lost hands for stealing.”

Although confident Cecil’s statement is factual, I place down the handwritten letter I was in the process of reading before pivoting around to face him. He knows my hearing is so shit, even while sneaking up on me, he makes sure I can either see his lips or he stands at my left.

“Did you ever bring her out here?”

Cecil dumps a deer carcass onto the dining room table I molded from a pine tree that didn’t survive a snowstorm last winter before returning to the foyer to remove his jacket and shoes. We stock up on deer and rabbit meat just as snow starts falling. The cooler conditions mean we don’t have to cure the meat, which saves us from an extra salty winter.

“She’d been here before. Just not with me.” The unease of his last sentence keeps me quiet, much less what he says next, “Excluding the pieces you’ve added the past three years, everything you see here was from Rosie’s private collection.” I smile along with him when he pushes out with a grunt. “She dragged it down the damn mountainside herself. That woman was as tiny as a fairy but stronger than a giant.”

His smile switches to a scoff when I ask, “Is that how her husband found out about your affair?”

Roderick's claims last month were factual. His grandmother did have an affair with Cecil in the months leading to his grandfather's death, but what he failed to mention was the fact his grandfather was an abusive piece of shit who was only with Rosie for her parents' money.

He also skimmed over the part that Cecil and Rosie met because Cecil saved his grandmother from an inferno similar to the one that engulfed Ophelia's car almost four years ago. Rosie was trapped in the wreckage, and although her husband didn't have a scratch on him, he sprinted for cover instead of ripping off the passenger side door like Cecil did.

When Rosie woke up in a hospital bed, her memories of the accident were sporadic, but she remembered the kind eyes of the man who never left her sight until first responders closed the doors with her on one side and the stranger on the other.

After learning her savior's details from a local journalist covering the story, Rosie wrote to him. That one letter soon expanded to thousands. Then, almost five years later, they organized to meet.

I don't think either of them were anticipating an affair. Rosie merely wanted to thank Cecil in person, and Cecil was desperate to conduct his own assessment of how well she had recovered from her injuries.

Cecil assures me they were nothing but friends for several months after their initial meeting. Things didn't heat up until Rosie's husband, Memphis, offered Cecil a job. It was during those long hours that Cecil realized Rosie deserved more than a husband who thought money was the only thing needed to take care of her.

He swears on Rosie's grave that he didn't woo a married woman. He simply showed her how good life could be with

him, but anyone north of Texas will tell you he's the worst liar. He wooed her with everything he had, and just when things started to look on track for them, Memphis found out about their affair, died in a car accident the same night, then only eight short months later, Rosie's convertible sailed over the same edge of road.

Her wreckage landed half a mile from where Cecil's cabin now sits, and although Cecil was at the main house at the time, he explains the collision was like a bomb going off. It rattled the cabin window, and flames stretched past the treetops. Even if he wanted to save her, the blast wouldn't have allowed it.

Cecil's story becomes a little shady after that. As with most estates when both parents die, Rosie and Memphis's assets were divided between their children. Since Roderick's parents were deceased, their share went to him.

Only one piece of property was excluded from the asset register. The cabin Cecil calls home. Even before they had met, Rosie had the deed for the cabin placed into Cecil's name. It was a seemingly innocent gesture from a survivor to her savior until you unearth how much a piece of land like this is worth to a mining company. The ground out here is filled with minerals—minerals neither Rosie nor Cecil ever want to see mined.

That's why Cecil never leaves. Roderick is working off the theory that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and since he believes it won't be long until Cecil 'takes himself out to pasture' as he often quotes, I see his visits becoming more frequent.

"D-did they ever find out who put the s-spikes on the road the night of Rosie's first accident?"

Cecil places a bucket under the stream of blood flowing from the deer's sliced neck before shifting on his feet to face me. Usually, he sets my ears on fire with stories from back in the day. Today, he doesn't seem as interested. "A local journalist was on the case more than the sheriff's office. I don't know if she found out anything. She vanished around the same time of Memphis's death."

He doesn't articulate the word 'death' like he believes it. He mutters it out with a scoff like he either doesn't believe Memphis is dead or that his death wasn't an accident.

He has good reason to be suspicious. Although the culprits were smarter the second time around when they remembered to remove the spikes that punctured Memphis's SUV's tires before a search team was called in, it was clear to anyone with half a brain that the circular holes in the front tires were not from sticks perforating the rubber matter.

Despite rumors circulating that Memphis had been murdered, the coroner ruled his death as an accident due to excessive speed and an increase in blood-alcohol content.

Naturally, Memphis's family blamed Cecil. Rosie wouldn't hear a word of it, though. She defended Cecil right up until the day she died, but regretfully, the assurance of a dead woman isn't much to go off. Cecil was removed from his position the day of Rosie's funeral, kicked out of the house they shared with only the clothes on his back and ordered to return the truck he had been using to the quarry.

Although I'm not one hundred percent sure how much time passed before he arrived at the cabin Rosie had left him with a bundle of rope and an extra sharp knife, I do know his bid to end his life was as unsuccessful as mine almost four years ago.

Every time he got close, he heard Rosie calling his name. It was so crystal clear he pulled his knife out of his pocket and hacked it through the noose on the brink of killing him.

After landing with a thud, he searched the dense woodlands for her for hours. When he failed to find her, he took shelter in the hollow of an old tree and slashed his wrists. He woke several days later in the cabin she had left him with bandaged wrists and a robust pulse.

He doesn't know how he got there or who carried him from Rosie's crash site to the cabin, but the curiosity in learning their identity is what has kept his heart beating the past several years.

He travels to the hollowed-out tree once a day to pay his respects to both Rosie and the person who saved him. It was where he was coming back from when a deer must have caught his eye. Although we have plenty of meat from a late fall hunt, there's no such thing as too much protein for a growing man. I've bulked up so much the past three-and-a-half years, even with my hair now past my shoulders, you couldn't accuse me of being feminine even if you spotted me from behind.

I learn a wish to splurge during winter isn't the reason for the last-minute hunt when Cecil says, "His hide is extra thick." A grin pulls at my lips when he mutters, "Figured my floorboards would appreciate a bit of cushioning between your lard ass and itself this winter."

That's as good as it gets for compliments from him. He makes out every improvement we've done to the cabin the past three years is to add resale value, where, in reality, it's all for me.

Cecil never had any children, but he's more of a father to me than my own father ever was.

“Let’s see if y-your assumptions stack u-up.” After lifting the dead carcass off the table like it doesn’t weigh a thing, I toss it over my shoulder then nudge my head to the storing room I’m in the process of building. “What did I tell y-you last month, Cecil? Stinky t-toilets and dead animals belong outside.” I stray my eyes to the deer heads he mounted to the wall late last year. “Only l-living things are meant to sleep inside.”

He grumbles under his breath the entire walk to the meat house, but not once does he dispute my claim.

AS I ROLL AWAY from the roaring fire, I toss off the deer skin blanket Cecil hasn’t stopped gloating about the past four weeks. I did get a little over envious while stacking tonight’s fire, but my skyrocketing body temperature has nothing to do with the winter arriving early and everything to do with the raging boner I’m doing everything in my power to ignore.

Cecil is asleep in a bed mere inches from me.

Now is not the time to stroke one out.

I usually take care of business during Cecil’s daily trips to the woods, but with them becoming as infrequent as my visits to town the past two years, things have become a little hard, and I don’t mean in a figurative manner.

My dick has been as unused as the hazy memories in my head. I haven’t touched a woman in years, and the memories of those times are nothing to write home about.

I don’t view sex in the same manner as my brothers. After witnessing my father spending more time with his whores than

his family, by the time I reached the age where I should have been interested in sowing my oats, I was disgusted by the whole concept.

With my father refusing to raise a gay son, instead of asking about my sexual preferences, he paraded me in front of the women paid to sleep with him. When that didn't work, he tried to bribe them into 'turning me straight.'

Mercifully, they loathed his ideas on parenting as much as they did him. When he left me with them to 'fix me,' they spoiled me with ice cream and candy and assured me it didn't matter if I liked boys or girls, I'd be accepted no matter what.

The bubble their guarantee surrounded me with was burst when one of my father's favorite whores quoted that to him. He slit her throat in front of me and locked me in the room with her deceased body for over sixteen hours without food and water.

I was nine years old.

Nine.

That day almost traumatized me as much as my mother's death. It wasn't solely Meredith's death that maimed me, it was how my father used and abused her for hours on end while I was in the room with them. I could close my eyes, but even with my hearing poor, nothing could block Meredith's screams from shredding my eardrums.

Even a decade later, I could still hear them. They fucked with my head even more than wondering if the woman I was endeavoring to bed was with me because she wanted to be or because she was one of the props my father forever used to keep his kids in line.

Prostitution isn't a gimmick most fathers use, but when it convinces your son to run drugs for the family business instead of being locked away for fooling around with a minor, it's a tactic my father used often.

Roberto didn't know the girl he was sleeping with was fifteen. She looked a lot older, and since they had met outside of the Hopeton realm, he assumed he was safe.

He learned otherwise only a week after his eighteenth birthday.

When the floorboards beneath me creak in protest to my heavy frame, I give up on my endeavor to sleep. While rubbing my eyes, I swish my tongue around my bone-dry mouth before scampering into a half-seated position. I'm not surprised when I notice Cecil's bed is empty. He's been rising earlier and earlier the past couple of months. He knows his time is thin, so he wants to jam in as much as he can every day.

Halfway through the second scrub of my eyes, my hand freezes. There's a peculiar smell in the air. To begin with, I excuse it as the recently skinned deer hide sitting too close to the fireplace. Winter came early this year, and it's been colder than a witch's tit the past couple of days, but this smoky substance doesn't appear to be natural.

It reminds me of burning plastic—like the scent that plumed through the air when Cecil peeled off the shirt clinging to my back almost four years ago. My shirt was made from polyester, so when it rubbed against my wounds from the inferno that engulfed Ophelia's car, it gelled us together like we were one.

My brows furrow when a weird taste is the next thing to bombard me. There's no way the smoke filling the air is

natural. It's riddled with chemical compounds and the smell of melting flesh.

With my heart in my throat and my confusion at an all-time high, I scan the desolate yet full-of-nutrients ground. My mouth falls open when I discover the cause for the unusual scent. The smoke isn't because I forgot to clear out the chimney at the start of fall. It's from a raging fire engulfing Cecil's greenhouse.

"Cecil!" I shout while praying like fuck he's nowhere near the inferno. There are enough chemicals in the greenhouse to cause a sizable explosion. I barely survived such a blast, so I don't see Cecil fairing any better.

When Cecil fails to answer me, I shoot up from the floor before racing outside like sloppy mud isn't sloshing up my legs. "Cecil, are you in there?"

With silence strengthening my worry, I toss open the greenhouse door, protect my lungs with my forearm, then enter the black smoke-filled space. My lungs commence protesting within a nanosecond of bursting through the deadly haze, but my intuition proves right when I spot a dark figure slumped over the tomato seedlings.

"Cecil!"

The pain I endured when Cecil dressed the wounds on my back in the weeks following Ophelia's accident has nothing on the terror raining down on me now.

Cecil's chest is still.

He isn't moving.

I don't even think he's breathing.

With no concerns for my safety, I race his way. Flames are licking at the ceiling of the greenhouse, but I push through my panic as determined as ever to save Cecil as he did me almost four years ago.

The chemicals I mentioned earlier are at the point of boiling over, so when I reach Cecil, instead of commencing CPR as his still chest is desperately begging for me to do, I drag him out of the danger zone by the scruff of his shirt.

His heaviness as I drag him over months' worth of produce adds to the weight on my chest. I thought only deer got heavier after dying. I had no clue humans did as well.

Just as we reach the clearing between the cabin and the greenhouse, the containers of chemicals explode. The blast is so furious, I'm thrown a good six to eight feet from where the flames race over Cecil's frozen form.

My back is on fire, and my skin is giving off the same putrid scent it had after my father's goon set Ophelia's car alight, but after rolling on the sloshy ground to put out the flames dancing across my skin, I scamper back to Cecil's side, then commence CPR like help isn't over an hour away.

"Come on, Cecil." I pump on his chest like the first-aid book he left lying around taught me. He said his odd assortment of books were fire starters, but within a couple of months, he was comfortable enough around me to read them without fear of judgment. He even lent some of his favorites to me.

Thrillers are my favorite. I'm halfway through a book by Stieg Larsson now.

The fear making it hard for me to breathe eases a little when my third set of compressions brings back Cecil's

coughing gurgle I've grown accustomed to the past four years.

While his lungs fight to remove the smoke choking them, I roll him onto his side before racing into the cabin to fetch him some water. He forced me to drink water by the gallons when he learned the cause of the wounds on my back. It didn't help my skin, but it kept my lungs healthy.

"Here..." I shove the glass into his hands before crawling across the crispy ground to switch on the sprinkler system. The blast took care of most of the flames, but for what it missed, the sprinklers will get.

"Slow sips," I urge after returning to Cecil's side. As he gulps through the water with more gusto than a man on the verge of death, I ask, "What were you doing out here? You know you're not meant to go outside by yourself."

He's barely coherent, but a reminder that he isn't as young as he thinks he is won't go unpunished. He smacks me up the back of my head with his open hand before grumbling under his breath, "I'm not dead yet, boy. It'll do you best to remember that." I curl my arm around his back when his smoke-hazed senses almost send him falling backward. Although he shoos me away, his slit eyes can't hide the admiration in them. He's pleased I saved him, proving he still has a lot of living left to do, but he's also confused. "Something felt off, so I thought I'd investigate."

"You could have woken me. I would have checked for you."

"I could have... but I didn't." In between coughs, he mumbles that he was fine years before I arrived, and he'll be fine years after I've gone. Before I can disclose I'm not going anywhere anytime soon, he mutters, "Then something went and struck me over the head. Knocked me out cold." He slaps

my hands away when I attempt to check his head for a bump. "It wasn't hard enough to kill me. Just enough to keep me down for a little."

"A little? You weren't fucking breathing—"

I get whacked for the second time.

Cecil hates when anyone who isn't him swears.

"I was down, but now I'm back up." He curses like a sailor when his attempt to stand sees him crashing into my arms.

If that isn't already concerning, his lack of fight when I lift him into my arms to carry him to his truck is extremely daunting. I've never believed my claims he was old and frail. I just liked teasing him about his long-winded innings.

Although tired from his exhaustive fight to live, Cecil has no issues threatening my life when it dawns on him where we're heading. "No doctors! I told you the day you take me off this land will be the day I take my final breath."

"You need help—"

"I've got help. Who do you think is carrying me around like a baby?"

"I agreed to help you harvest corn, not bring you back from death!"

His spit hits my cheeks when he pffts at me. "Death? Please. I'm fine. I just need a rest. I'll be right as rain tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I blubber out more to myself than Cecil. "You haven't taken a single day off the entire time I've lived with you, so if you're out until tomorrow, you need medical assistance."

I grit my teeth when he mutters, “Don’t make me tell you twice, boy.” For a man the weight of a child, his snarl has a lot of impact. “The sick go to the hospital to die. I’m not done living just yet. I still have a lot left to give, so you either put me in bed or put me down entirely.”

Conscious his ‘a lot left to give’ comment has more to do with me than he will ever let on, I alter the direction of my stomps. I’m not fucking happy, but if I were to force him, and something terrible happened, I’d never forgive myself.

The victorious gleam darting through Cecil’s eyes as I walk up the front stairs of the cabin disappear when I mutter, “Don’t look so smug. From what you told me the last time I had a fever, you only have rectal thermometers, and since you refuse to go to the doctor, the doctor will have to come to you.”

“You’re not a trained professional!” Cecil spits out, his fast words whistling through his teeth.

With a husky chuckle, I reply, “You don’t need to be to take someone’s temperature.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

JR

When I bang my fist on the glass separating Jae and me, the wobble my blow causes the bulletproof material is so perverse, Cedric's hand slips from her arm.

It's two seconds too late for him, though. Not only have I seen the mark his grab left on Jae's arm, but Isaac has as well, and just like he stood up for Ophelia the day she died, he does for Jae this time around too.

He takes down her bully with three meticulously executed strikes to his face before he lowers his fists to Cedric's midsection. I lose count of the number of punches he inflicts before agents swarm the corridor.

They pull Isaac off Cedric, and the blood that drips from Cedric's nose when an agent props him against the wall across from me thrusts me into my hundredth memory this week...

I wiggle my good ear with my thumb when the annoying whistle that's doubled since the blast picks up as I exit the cabin. Cecil has always been a snorer, but his bear-like grunt seems worse since the fire.

His lungs are full of the murky black soot covering every inch of his livelihood.

There's nothing left to salvage in the greenhouse.

Even the tomato stakes melted in the blaze.

After dragging a hand down my tired face, I pull off my socks, then gallop down the front stairs of the cabin. I can't save any of the produce Cecil was planning to can for next winter, but the quicker I get started repairing the crops, the faster we'll have more than deer meat to consume.

I can survive on deer meat. I'd just rather not.

It isn't a delicacy I'd choose to eat forever.

My steps into the charred remains of a once-thriving greenhouse slow when I notice a boot imprint at the side of the water tank that's empty since I forgot to switch off the sprinkler system once the fire was contained. I usually get around barefoot. Cecil's stomps are less impacting to the soil than mine, so he wears boots, but the ones I'm stalking are far larger than Cecil's boot size. The owner must wear at least a size eleven shoe, and the deepness of the tread makes it appear as if his footwear was recently purchased.

Upon noticing the prints lead away from the greenhouse, I alter the direction of my route. They trek past Cecil's truck and down the driveway, ending at a gate hidden by overgrown shrubbery.

When I spin around in preparation to ask Cecil if he's had any visitors the past week I didn't know about, something in the bush captures my attention. It's the Dodger's bat usually hanging above the cabin's front door. Cecil often joked it would take someone down quicker than a bullet.

"What the fuck?" I stammer out under my breath when my dip to pick up the bat has my hand slipping on a gooey

substance. A vibrant red stain marks one end of the bat. It looks like fresh blood.

It takes me longer than I care to admit to unearth how Cecil's bat got blood on it, but when it finally clicks, I race back to the cabin like I'm outrunning a bullet.

Cecil said something hit him over the head. I assumed it was one of the steel panels holding the shade cloth up in the greenhouse. I didn't consider the prospect he was struck by something. Roderick wants to be a gangster, but he doesn't have the gall to pull it off.

Well, he didn't. Now I'm not so sure.

The floorboards of the cabin shriek as loudly as the front door when I race inside. "Whatever hit you over the head wasn't an accident. You were struck by a bat." I tug on a pair of boots before spinning to face Cecil's bed. "There are footprints in the mud, and I found this under the shrubs out front."

My words clog in my throat when my eyes lock with Cecil. His chest is rising and falling, but his freight-train snore is nonexistent even with his eyes closed.

That isn't a good sign.

"Cecil." I race to his bedside before placing two fingers on his neck to feel for a pulse. There is one, but it's faint, and the reason for its dullness could be attributed to the amount of blood that coats my fingers when I remove them from his neck.

He's bleeding—profusely.

"Jesus Christ, Cecil," I push out with a groan when I roll him over to inspect where the blood is coming from. His hair is parted by a large split. It's seeping out enough blood to ruin his deer skin bedding.

Although Cecil has said numerous times the day he leaves his cabin will be the day he takes his final breath, his injuries don't give me any other option. If I don't seek urgent medical treatment, he will die. There's no uncertainty to this.

After gathering Cecil in my arms and ignoring the fact he doesn't badger me about carrying him like a child, I snatch up his keys, then race outside. The slosh of a water-soaked ground makes a mess of my boots when I bolt for his truck. Instincts naturally have me veering for the passenger side door.

Even when he was under the weather, Cecil never let me drive when we took his old truck down the dirt tracks weaved throughout his property. He said he knew every road so well he could drive them with his eyes closed. Since they were the only trips he ever took, I never discredited his claims.

After buckling Cecil in, I use an old shirt to prop his head against the rusty doorframe, remove the solar charging ports from the battery, then dive into the driver's seat. With his truck not being used very often the past six months, it takes a couple of turns of the key for the dirty fuel to pass through the engine. When it does, I reverse away from the cabin like I've driven every day for the past three years, throw the gearstick into first, then head for the entrance.

As the bells Cecil rigged to the front gate jingle when I yank it open, I consider my options. There's a doctor's office smack bang in the middle of a town not too far from here, but with the practitioner being a blood relative of Roderick's, I don't see him being overly obliging to an impromptu visit, so instead of turning right when I exit the driveway, I pull the steering wheel to the left.

We barely make it five miles from the base of the mountain before flashing lights reflect in the rearview mirror of Cecil's truck. I'm hesitant to pull over. Trust has always been an issue of mine, but it worsened after I learned how many Ravenshoe PD were on my father's payroll. They netted Roberto along with my father.

When the patrol car glides up next to me, I'm given no choice but to yield. The barrel of the shotgun he's pointing at my head is extremely convincing.

After signaling my intention to pull into an upcoming side street, I do precisely that. The sheriff parks behind me a mere nanosecond before he demands that I place my hands behind my head over the loudspeaker.

"I was just r-reaching for the registration p-papers," I mumble through gritted teeth before doing as asked.

Curse words spill from my mouth without pause when I recognize the condescending smirk of the man behind the steering wheel of the patrol car. He is Roderick's second cousin and long-time friend, Sheriff Dumont.

"What's your excuse for driving ten miles over the speed limit?" he asks after moseying up to my window like the rights for the town are in the breast pocket of his uniform.

"I w-was under t-the limit." I know this because I purposely kept it five miles under the designated signage so I wouldn't be pulled over by anyone in this county. They're as crooked here as my father's bottom teeth. "This r-road is seventy."

Sheriff Dumont tsks me. "There's a sign half a mile backing reducing the speed to sixty. At times, these roads get a little icy, making them unsafe to travel on at full speed." When

I attempt to look in the direction he hooked his thumb, he shouts for me to return my hands to my head. "One more failure to follow directions will see you charged with failure to cooperate with a police directive."

"I'm not r-resisting. I-I was just looking for t-the sign."

"T-The s-sign? Are you a retard or something?"

His impersonation of my stutter snaps my last nerve. "No. I have a f-fucking speech impediment." That's nowhere near as noticeable when I'm angry. "Which doesn't affect my ability to see, and since I didn't t-take my eyes off the road for a single second, I know there's no sign r-reducing the speed limit to sixty. You just made it up so you could p-pull me over."

"You didn't take your eyes off the road for even a second?" When I nod, he murmurs on a chuckle, "Not even to make sure he's still breathing?"

My back molars smash together when he shines his torch into Cecil's face. The fact he can see how unwell he looks but doesn't offer any assistance is all the proof I need as to why I sought help in another county. He, along with almost every other person in this region of the state want Cecil dead, but I refuse to let that happen.

So, with my head locked down and my heart certain this is the right thing to do, I drop my hands, throw the gearstick into reverse, then flatten my foot to the floor.

When Cecil's truck crashes into Sheriff Dumont's patrol car with enough force to sound the siren, I do a quick shift change, then take a wide birth around the sheriff so he can't tack attempted murder onto the charges I'll be sure to face once I've ensured Cecil is safe.

When patrol cars dart out of every side street to shadow my sprint to Saint Frances Hospital, it dawns on me that my earlier assumption was right. Neither the fire nor the bump to Cecil's head were an accident. Roderick has grown impatient, and everyone knows irrational decisions usually follow a lack of patience.

With Cecil's truck too slow to outrun the deputies following us, I fan my hand across Cecil's chest to hold him in place better than his seat belt before using the truck's chunky tires to my advantage.

I veer us down an unmarked road like four-wheel driving is on Cecil's bucket list. Since the low-riding patrol cars can't follow our trek across the rugged landscape, we reach Saint Frances several minutes before them. It isn't a lot of time, but it's enough to get Cecil out of his truck and onto a gurney in the emergency room before more than ambulance sirens rumble through the busting ER.

"Take him to the trauma bay," shouts a female voice a second after flashing a torch into Cecil's eyes and checking the wound at the back of his head.

When she spins around to gather instruments off a trolley being wheeled in by a plump nurse, I choke on my spit. Although her face is a little rounder than it was years ago, and her eyes darkened by the lack of natural light, I swear she's the angel from my dreams.

My memories from the night Ophelia died are blurry at best, but you don't often find beautiful Asian women with dazzling green eyes, so they kind of stick with you. Not to mention the insane patter the quickest careening of our eyes caused my heart.

It's only ever responded like this to one person.

To her.

I'm not the only one stunned by the intense zap bolting between us. Jae's dead- straight hair slips off one shoulder when she angles her head to the side before her perfectly manicured brows join together. She looks like she has a million questions in her head, but before any of them can leave her mouth, her focus is returned to Cecil by a devastating disclosure. "He's coding."

In less than a second, Jae races into the bay where they took Cecil. Even if my heart hadn't already confirmed she's the lady from my dreams, confirmation smacks into me hard and fast when her brisk movements push back her bluntly cut bangs, exposing the lightning-shaped scar on her forehead. It was from where my necklace seared her skin.

It is her—Jae—the woman I thought had died because she put my safety before her own.

My utter bewilderment doesn't get the chance to fully register. Sheriff Dumont and his posse of deputies are charging my way. They have every exit covered, and before I can discover if Jae's bid to revive Cecil is successful, I'm tackled, cuffed, read my rights, then carted to a sheriff's office three towns over to face charges of reckless driving, endangering the life of an officer, and evading police.

It also commences hours of silence that ramps up my agitation to the point of no return when I'm marched into the sheriff's office to be formally interviewed.

"Is Cecil o-okay? Did he pull t-through?"

I've asked the same two questions every time my cell door was marched past in the last eight hours. My focus should be on my illegal incarceration, but until I know Cecil is okay, I

won't be able to concentrate on anything but him. I'm so fucking desperate for answers, I'd plead guilty if it guaranteed me a small moment of reprieve.

"Answer me, is Cecil o-okay?"

I thought the fury lining my face was the cause of Sheriff Dumont's frantic swallows but learn otherwise when a gruff, accented voice on my left asks, "Who is this Cecil he keeps referencing?"

With my heart in my throat, I spin around to face my father. He's aged disgracefully the past almost four years. I'm not surprised. From what I've heard, burying your child before you ages you at double the speed, not to mention the horrifying rate when you're the reason she's dead.

"From what I was informed on arrival, the town folk weren't aware of your lineage until your fingerprints were scanned into the system." He steps closer to me, his face more crinkled with anger than time. "That you were hiding from them and me. Was that a lie?"

As much as I despise Sheriff Dumont, the clicking of my father's fingers gives me no choice but to loosen the noose around his neck instead of tightening it. If I don't deny his claims, Mario, my father's second in charge, will kill Sheriff Dumont where he sits. "No. That w-wasn't a lie. I kept my identity hidden from e-everyone. Cecil was the man I knocked over while stealing his truck. I'm just eager to know if I'm facing murder charges or j-just assault."

"J-Just assault." My father's smug grin exposes he's pleased by my thug ways, but his tone indicates he still loathes my stutter. After locking his eyes with the sheriff, he asks in a condescending manner, "So, is he dead or alive?"

“Umm... He’s ah...” Sheriff Dumont checks some paperwork in front of him. “Recovering at the hospital.” He lifts and locks his eyes with mine. Although they show his gratitude that I didn’t rat him out, there’s something off with them. He wears the face of a snitch extremely well. “And since there are no charges pending, you’re free to go see for yourself.”

“You’re l-letting me off scot-free?” There’s something I’m missing. Something big. “I stole a truck, r-rammed it into your cruiser, and almost ran you over, b-but you’re just going to let me go?”

His chin quivers as his head bobs up and down. “You veered to miss me, and the damage to my car is minor. The scratches will buff out.”

I glare at him in shock.

I pulled him from the fire, yet he leaves me to burn the aftermath of his rescue.

What a fucking coward!

“What about Cecil? I almost k-killed him.” My anger smooths out my juttled words, but there’s no way I can’t express remorse when referencing to falsely hurting Cecil. He’s been there for me in ways my father couldn’t ever comprehend. If it weren’t for him, I’d be dead. There is no doubt about this.

“He doesn’t want to press charges.” I call Sheriff Dumont every name under the sun when he mutters, “He just wants to live out his final years in peace. As we all do.” His last sentence is barely a whisper.

I understand that he’s scared and that my father will rain all types of hell over his life if he finds out how much a sleepy town like this makes per year, but common decency when you

save someone's life is to repay the courtesy. You're not meant to commence nailing their coffin together the instant trouble surfaces.

If I were honest, Sheriff Dumont isn't solely to blame for my father's resurrection into my life. In my eagerness to seek medical help for Cecil, I didn't consider the consequences of my actions. Having your fingerprints scanned into a nationwide database isn't a big deal for most people, but for me, it was always going to be catastrophic.

Although I always assumed my father would be happy to see the backend of me, so why is he here now?

When I ask him that, something on his face changes. It centers around greed, but for once, he's sniffed out an empty money pot instead of an overflowing one.

"I have n-nothing of value e-except the clothes on my back." I fan out my arms, showing him they're not anything to brag about. Cecil is sensible with his money. There are no flashy gimmicks or the latest electronics, just honest work and the assurance of a full stomach every night. Since that wasn't something I was guaranteed during my childhood, I relish it more than staying up-to-date with fads.

"I am not here for what you can give me but for what I can give you." My father lies so often, I truly don't believe he can tell the difference between the truth and a fib anymore. "With Roberto dead..." I choke back a sob at how nonchalantly he announces that my older brother has passed. There's no remorse in his tone, no sadness. It is as if he truly doesn't give a fuck, and that's proven without uncertainty when he adds, "You're now second-in-charge of an entity worth millions of dollars, if not soon to be billions."

“I don’t want your money. It’s filthy. It’s blood money. I don’t want anything to d-do with it—”

Cecil smacks me up the back of the head to teach me discipline and respect. My father does it to maim because not once does he do it to my deaf ear. He forever aims for my good ear. “Another word from your mouth, and I’ll burn this entire fucking town to the ground. This is your birthright, your lineage, and you will not disrespect the Petretti name.” He leans in real close to ensure my deep breaths won’t have me missing what he says next, “But if you do, I’ll be sure to pay Cecil a visit on my way out.” He strays his eyes from my flaring nostrils to Sheriff Dumont. “Which hospital did you say he was at again?”

“Saint F—”

“Fine. Let’s go. L-Let’s leave now.”

I direct my father to the door like my heart isn’t racing a million miles an hour. I have no intention of becoming his lackey like Dimitri, but I need to get him as far away from Cecil and Jae as possible before he learns the reason wannabee gangsters are sniffing around Cecil’s turf, and that the witness he wanted dead is stronger than he could have ever predicted.

Once that is achieved, I’ll work out a way to keep them safe. I’ll even go as far as using the notoriety that comes from being raised by a madman if I must.

It’s okay to come out of the shadows when you’re protecting what’s right. My mother taught me that the night she was murdered, and although I couldn’t save her from my father, I have every intention of saving myself from the misery he forever instills in everyone he meets.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jae

I spin away from JR so he can't see my lips before growling through clenched teeth. "Having a hearing impediment doesn't mean you're an idiot, so stop treating him as if he is one."

The processing officer acts as if I didn't speak while lodging JR's fingerprints into the federal database. The fact they don't already have his details exposes that he isn't the monster they think he is. He was raised by a horrible man with unjust punishments and misguided morals, yet this is the first conviction JR has faced in his thirty-two years.

Alex was right when he said this went higher than him. The chain stretches so far, even with Isaac reaching out to contacts in this area, he had a hard time finding the U-bolt holding JR hostage.

Mercifully, he did, and now JR is being processed for a late afternoon bail session. I don't know what I'll do if his request for bail isn't approved. It took a heap of favors to get things moving, so I'd hate to think what Isaac had to offer to have Cedric's interview switched from being a witness statement to an interrogation of a perpetrator.

The Bureau wrongly believed he was their latest golden boy.

It was only after Alex did a heap of digging did they realize how wrong they were. I'm not surprised. Surgeons are automatically given a prestigious notoriety from society, but when money comes into play, all bets are off.

Although I'm quickly learning I hardly knew a thing about Cedric, I guarantee you that is what *all* this is about. He doesn't do anything without a fee associated with it. That's why he never worked at any of the medical clinics I attend once a month in the communities dotted around Ravenshoe. He said he paid to learn his skills, so people should pay to utilize them.

He doesn't have a single compassionate bone in his body, and it's proven without a doubt when he responds to my snarl during his escort from an interview room to a holding cell. "Depends on who you're asking. From what I've heard, you were useless for the weeks you were deaf." I want to smack the arrogance off his face when he mimics the voice of a hearing-impaired person when they first learn to speak. "They wouldn't even let you stitch up a patient, much less operate on them."

"Let the man run his mouth," Regan suggests while grabbing my arm to ensure her suggestion is enforced. "From what I heard, today might be the last time it isn't filled with an inmate's johnson."

She says her last sentence loud enough for Cedric to hear. He isn't being held in custody solely for his alleged involvement in my accident and subsequent hunt, but also for tax fraud, malpractice, and even more concerning, the sale of organs on the black market.

Isaac's contact high in the Bureau held nothing back when he reached out to him for any information he had on Cedric

and his family. He's been wanting to take him down from the moment he rocked up at Ravenshoe Private acting like he owned the place.

I thought his dislike was from two alpha males clashing.

I learned otherwise quick smart.

After watching Cedric being led into a holding cell, Regan shifts on her feet to face me. "We have a bit of a dilemma."

"Isaac?" I query, panicked his tussle with Cedric has gotten him in trouble with the law.

Regan shakes her head. "No. He's fine." She drags her eyes to the end of the corridor. When I follow the direction of her gaze, I find Isaac standing at the end, talking into his cell phone. "If not a little gluttonous with his gloating." After returning her focus to me, she adjusts the collar of my shirt and straightens my skirt like she personally selected it from my wardrobe for me to wear. "The judge assigned is a friend of a friend. He's strict but understanding that not everything on paper is as it seems."

"Which is good for JR..." I say, pushing her along. I hate suspense. If I read a novel, I'm one of those annoying readers who flick to the last page to make sure everything ends okay before I start reading it.

"Yes..." I breathe a little easier until she tacks on, "... *and* no. He can't be bought, which means the bail hearing is marked in his calendar as a murder hearing." She stares me straight in the face while saying, "They are rarely granted bail."

"But since it was in self-defense, the charge should be lesser, right?"

Regan shakes her head. “Self-defense can’t be argued when there’s no body.”

I stare at her in utter shock. “What?”

“The man he is accused of murdering has been missing for seven years...” Regan once again straightens my collar, a bad habit of hers when she’s nervous. “... but a body was never recovered.” Hope fills me long before dread, but Regan is quick to shut it down, “Authorities believe CJ may have hidden his body somewhere in the woods.”

“JR,” I correct her, too shocked to tackle the big flaw in her reply. “He likes to go by JR.” I take a breather before pushing out, “He also loves those woods. They’re his home, so he wouldn’t desecrate the land like that by burying someone there.”

Regan breathes heavily out of her nose before suggesting, “There is a way we could find out.” I know what she’s going to ask before she can articulate it. She wants me to convince JR to lead us to his victim.

I shake my head so fast, even if JR can’t hear the whooshes, he’ll feel them. “I can’t do that. If there’s a body...” I stop talking, my heart to shatter by the prospect he killed a man to continue as normal. It’s been living in denial ever since he confessed. I said days ago that JR confuses protectiveness as possessiveness, so who’s to say he didn’t make the same mistake a year ago?

“Not if it was self-defense as claimed. We have the report you lodged years ago arguing against the coroner’s findings of Cecil’s death. If we can prove it wasn’t suicide, and JR, who was in fear for his life, responded *solely* to protect himself, he won’t face a single hour behind bars.” When I remain hesitant,

Regan adds, “This is what he wants, Jae. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have made this.”

My heart beats in an unfamiliar pattern when she plays a video currently going viral across multiple social media platforms. JR is standing front and center on the screen. His hair and beard are back to their original bushy state, and he’s clutching the shirt he plucked from the floor when he left me in the shower stall for almost two hours.

“That’s my private cell phone,” I murmur when a reflection bounces off the stainless-steel trim around the kitchen.

Regan hums in agreement. “Hunter had a trace, but we lost it when he took you deeper in the woods. The helicopter flew over where it was last pinged a couple of times, but all we saw was snow and deer.”

“We?” I ask, too stunned to form entire sentences.

“Yeah, we. Hunter, Hugo, Isaac, Alex, and me. We’ve been out this way since you failed to board your flight.” She laughs like it’s no big deal. “Isaac has tabs on all his favorite people. I thought you would have realized that by now.”

“I do. I’m just...” I pause to think of a good word to describe what I’m feeling. When my mind comes up blank, I mutter, “Shocked. Izzy only gave birth a couple of weeks ago. He should be home with her and their kids.”

Regan screws up her nose. “That would be odd considering they’re all here with him.” She bumps me with her hip as if to say, *jeez, you don’t know Isaac at all*, before she returns my focus to the screen of her phone.

For someone out of the loop on social media the past couple of years, JR’s video is surprisingly advanced. While

peering down at the screen, text pops up next to his head stating his name, date of birth, and connection to the Petretti entity.

Aware people are skeptical when it comes to claims of infamy, he holds up a photograph. I don't know whether to cry or smile when the face in the image registers as familiar. He is the man I helped the night Ophelia Petretti died. There are no misgivings to that now. Even with his eyes full of apprehension and his body not battered and bruised like it was the night we met, I'd never forget that face.

"Why did he put this up?" I ask, confused as to why he wants the world to know he's a Petretti when he's tried so hard to hide his heritage.

Regan slips her phone into her soft leather briefcase. "Because he thought thrusting himself back into their line of sight would save you as you had done for him seven years earlier."

I snap my eyes to hers, confident I heard her wrong.

I didn't.

When she spots my bewildered expression, she smiles before muttering, "JR isn't the only one deserving of a cape. After Cecil's death, JR wanted to die too. The only reason he held on was because he didn't want you to face what he and Cecil had gone through."

I'm lost as to what she means, but mercifully, Isaac joins our conversation. He doesn't pussyfoot around anything. He gets straight to the point. "The cabin Cedric mentioned during his brief stint undercover is in your name. The deed was transferred to you when members of a crime syndicate in this

region of the country instigated proceedings to have Colum Junior Petretti declared as deceased.”

“But he’s not dead. He’s right there,” I thrust my hand at JR, confident no one could miss a man of his size and impressive stature.

“Yes, but no one knew that,” Regan informs. “His last confirmed sighting was the night of Cecil’s suicide.” I almost interrupt her to correct her that Cecil didn’t kill himself, but I’m left speechless when she adds, “It was a local sheriff who claims to have seen his father shoot him down.”

“What?” I gabber out, utterly stunned. “Why would his father do that?”

“Because Col’s greed was always greater than his wish to shelter his children from harm,” Isaac replies on his behalf. “The cabin CJ—”

“JR,” Regan corrects before I can.

“The cabin *JR*...” Isaac’s glare has no heat to it whatsoever. Well, not for me, anyway. Regan isn’t so lucky. “... resided at with Cecil is on a portion of land a Sicilian crime syndicate has been trying to get their hands on the past two decades. The mineral in the ground makes the land’s value incalculable. It is well into eight figures...” he gives me a second to swallow my shock before muttering, “... and you own half of it.”

“That’s not possible. I don’t...” I stop talking, having no plausible excuse for the evidence Isaac presents. My name is on the deed of a property I never purchased. “Why is this newly endorsed?” I ask, confused by the date on the bottom of the deed. “Cecil died almost seven years ago, so why did the transfer only occur last month?”

“Because—”

“In some states, it takes seven years to declare someone is dead in the absence of a body,” I interrupt when my smarts finally kick back in.

As Isaac nods, Regan runs her hand down my arm in a supporting manner. Nurturing isn't in her nature, but before I can interrogate her on a number of unusual quirks she's grown the past couple of weeks, she says, “Even with your phone switched off, Hunter was able to strip some files from your device. In the minutes leading to JR making his TikTok debut, something must have alerted him to the fact he had been removed from the deed.”

“That was me,” I murmur, my tone high with disappointment. “I told him he was on land owned by my fiancé's family, and they wouldn't take kindly to trespassers.” I scrub a hand down my tired face when I'm hit with more truths. “That's why he made a video.”

Isaac nods, agreeing with me. “By announcing to the world that he's still alive, he effectively removed the heat off you. It was a smart move. One I would have encouraged him to do if he hadn't thought of it himself.”

Although smitten JR cares enough about me to put my safety before his own, I'm still lost as to how his cabin connects with his arrest. A conviction won't see him stripped of assets, so why did Cedric volunteer to help put him away?

When I express my worries to Isaac, Regan doubles them. “Because you can't benefit from someone's death you caused.” After showing me a copy of the article JR presented to me days ago, she adds, “Cecil was awarded the cabin almost two decades ago when his partner was killed in a traffic accident.”

“Rosie,” I mutter, suddenly knowledgeable as to why JR believed my career over a cliff wasn’t an accident.

Regan nods. “The cabin wasn’t the only thing Cecil inherited, but it was by far the most valuable.” She pauses to build suspense. “Her children were not happy.”

“Roderick.”

She half shrugs half nods. “Roderick was Rosie’s grandson, and although he was originally set to receive a sizable inheritance, some shady dealings saw him left with hardly anything. Believing Roderick’s love of the cabin wasn’t from a monetary standpoint, Rosie doctored her will to state that in the event she and Cecil died at the same time, Roderick would become the owner of the cabin. He, not understanding the law, assumed that meant it would still become his once Cecil also passed. But—”

“Cecil had other plans,” I interrupt, smiling.

Regan smiles along with me. “Originally, the land and everything on it was left to C—” She stops, swallows, then starts again, “JR.” I smile, grateful for her willingness to come to bat for a man she doesn’t know. “But after meeting a pocket rocket doctor whom he immediately recognized from the photos he was shown the prior four years, he had a last-minute change of heart.”

“The clergy he requested,” I mutter under my breath as tears prick my eyes.

The morning Cecil was brought in, I was walking out from a double shift. I could have kept walking. There were plenty of doctors rostered who could have handled a knock to the head with their eyes closed, but something stopped me. I’ve told myself time and time again that it was the pain in Cecil’s kind

eyes, but only now am I wondering if it was something else. I only caught the quickest glimpse of the man who carried Cecil into the ER before he was crash tackled by local law enforcement officers, but now that I'm thinking back, his long hair and blue eyes registered as familiar.

“When Alex raided the cabin, he found this under the floorboards.” Regan hands me a secondary newspaper article. It isn't about Rosie's accident. It is an article a federal agent ensured went viral to the world more than Ophelia's death. It was about me, and my so-called heroism when I 'died' trying to free Ophelia from the wreckage.

My annoyance about Agent Macy Machini jumping the gun is heard in my tone when I disclose, “I thought running was the solution.” I shift on my feet to face Isaac. “I realized it wasn't when our lives collided again. That's why I took your sperm.”

To cut a long story short, Isaac was Ophelia Petretti's boyfriend. With him heartbroken and confident he would never move on from her death, he booked in to have a vasectomy in a country town far from his stomping ground. I was his surgeon.

I tried to talk him out of it. I even hooked him up with a therapist known for persuading her patients to see things from another perspective, but with Isaac adamant sterilization was what he wanted, I did the procedure as ordered. I just glossed over the fact patients don't usually give a sperm sample until after the procedure is done, stored his wrigglers at an IVF clinic with falsified papers, then confessed to my crime almost six years later.

I anticipated for Isaac to strip me of my medical license, or at the very least, remove me from my position at Ravenshoe

Private. He did neither of those things. He handled it better than expected, and although I don't think he'll ever fully trust me again, he will forever support me because, without me, he wouldn't have the family he adores more than life itself.

I stop reminiscing when a thought pops into my head. "Although this a compelling weave of deception and lies, something doesn't add up. Even if JR is convicted, the land won't be returned to Roderick and his family. JR wasn't awarded it for committing a crime, so they have no basis to overturn Cecil's last will and testament."

"That's true," Regan agrees. "But... if the jury believes Roderick's family's claims that Cecil committed suicide after confessing to Roderick that he had killed Rosie's husband, the flow-on effect could see JR stripped of his inheritance. No matter how long the chain, if one link comes undone, the entire chain is ruined."

"JR wouldn't have hurt Roderick for no reason."

"I agree," Regan backs up again. "But we don't have time to wade through the evidence to back up those claims right now. JR's bail hearing starts in less than an hour, and I'm afraid if we don't give the judge something that proves the charges need to be downgraded, JR will be transferred to Wallens Ridge to await trial."

Isaac and I grit our teeth at the same time. Wallens Ridge State Penitentiary has been embroiled in controversial activity for decades. Its staff is as crooked as the inmates, and the warden is as shady as Col Petretti once was.

My thoughts freeze my heart. "Has anyone told JR that his father is dead?"

Regan's wide eyes stray to Isaac. When he briskly shakes his head, she shifts them back to me. "No."

"What about Ophelia? Does he know she's alive?"

I only found out a couple of years ago that Ophelia's accident was staged by the same federal agents who organized my new life. My head was so muddled with confusion, I had no clue the 'special guest' in the room in the back of the private jet that flew me to my new life was Ophelia. I was scared, terrified my life was about to replicate a horror flick, and in so much pain from the gunk in my ears not responding to the change in altitude, I spent most of the trip with my head between my legs while chewing gum.

My deafness after the blast was attributed to the eustachian tubes in my ears malfunctioning. Usually, they're responsible for regulating the pressure in your ears, but since mine had collapsed and my ears were full of goopy fluid, my hearing was completely blocked after my flight.

Symptoms generally last a couple of days at most, but when mine stretched to weeks, the head doctor at Saint Frances Hospital, Jacinta, suggested I visit a local ear, nose, and throat specialist.

A simple balloon procedure cleared everything up, and the very next month, I ran into Isaac for the second time in my life.

Needing a moment to process how in the world I'm going to tell JR his baby sister isn't dead, I float my eyes back to the desk he's being processed at. As suspected by the prickling of the hairs on my arms, he's already watching me. His expression exposes he lipread the confession I'm struggling to work out how to tell him.

Although he should be upset, not an ounce of annoyance fills his eyes. He appears more relieved than anything, and the knowledge exposes what I need to do to make sure he isn't hit with a second bout of shock.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jae

“I still don’t approve of this,” Isaac grunts out while floating his gray eyes around the only available cabin in the state JR is facing prosecution. “The fact you can’t leave the state until his trial is over is already concerning, but you just testified that you believe he is an unhinged member of society.” He shakes his head like it will stop the swear word I see in his eyes from being released.

It doesn’t when I reply, “I played on the DA’s belief that he is as dangerous as he looks.” When he scoffs, I talk faster, “You heard what Regan said. Bail is rarely granted for murder suspects. The only exception usually given is when the judge believes the suspect’s incarceration will endanger the lives of others or himself.” I lower my voice so the parole officers raking the cabin for dangerous instruments don’t hear me. “The slash marks on JR’s wrists helped me convince him of the latter.”

“He isn’t suicidal, Jae.”

“*Now*, Isaac,” I say his name with the same husky edge he used to deliver mine. I understand he feels guilt for what happened to JR over ten years ago, but if it is going to get in the way of JR being found not guilty, I need to shut it down. “We don’t know what it was like for him back then. No one

knows why he was living the life of a hermit hundreds of miles from his hometown. We can make assumptions, but until we know the *facts*, this is the best *and* safest option.”

The judge granted JR bail on the condition that the land in question was placed up as part of his bail bond, and that his pre-trial detention occurs within the state the charges were filed and conducted under the guidance of a medically trained professional.

Although I’ve never practiced in the field of psychology, I did major in it before attending medical school. I am qualified for the job I signed up for. I just need my heart to forget the disappointment that blazed through JR’s eyes when I announced to the judge my fears of his personal well-being. I belittled his ability to take care of himself and used examples of the way he had lived the past ten-plus years as examples to strengthen my concept.

The words spilling from my mouth broke my heart as much as they did JR’s, but the nicks were worth it when the judge agreed with my concerns. He deemed JR more at risk of himself than fleeing the country, and as such, granted him bail at the cost of five million dollars.

The deed of the cabin more than covered the bond. If it hadn’t, Isaac would have stepped in. He’s been seeking a way to redeem himself since the day they fought.

“He won’t hurt me, Isaac,” I whisper, confident that is where his worry stems from. “He isn’t like them.” Izzy is a law enforcement officer, but when I stray my eyes to the men currently tearing the cabin apart, the anger that blazes through Isaac’s eyes would have you believing otherwise. He doesn’t trust them any more than JR does. “I trust him.”

Although Isaac's tight expression softens during my confession, worry is still prominent in his tone. "You don't know him."

"And you didn't know Izzy when you flew me to the other side of the country to keep an eye on her sister you were bidding on." His love for Callie shines brightly in his eyes, making them appear lighter gray than steel gray. "I could have told you you were crazy—"

"You *did* tell me I was crazy."

I continue talking as if he never interrupted me. "But the instant my eyes landed on that little girl, I knew I would have regretted my words every single day for the rest of my life if you had listened to me." I sling my eyes to the blacked-out SUV JR is detained in. "And I will for him as well. I have to help him, Isaac. It isn't a maybe or a should. I *must* do it."

"Then let—"

"No," I interrupt, aware of his demands before he can voice them. "Izzy needs you. Your family needs you." His ego takes a hit when I mutter, "I don't," but he takes it on the chin like a man because, despite his wish to protect everyone in his realm, the needs of his wife and children will always come first. "Go be with your family."

When Isaac drifts his eyes to Regan, hopeful she will back up his campaign, he gets far less than he bargained for. "I agree with Jae. You have everyone on this. You don't need to be here as well." After scooting off the armchair Alex placed her backside onto when she threatened to serve the parole officers papers on the spot for the mistreatment of her client in her presence, she advises, "Alex and I will stay until Hawke and the guys arrive, and Hunter wired this place up so well, I'm feeling a little violated."

I don't care if she brings out her Texas twang, she can't pull off the innocent look, and I'm not the only one noticing. With an arched brow and a smirk spread across his smug face, Isaac queries, "Frosting tins?"

Regan pouts. "Left on the kitchen counter as requested." I grin when she pokes her tongue out at Isaac before muttering, "Party pooper." My smile doubles when she adds, "Along with my bag of tricks. Once Alex is off assignment, it will be vanilla frosting all the way home."

I'm lost as to what she means, but Isaac looks a little green around the gills. Not enough to change his constant stern expression but enough to convince Regan and me that he's finally giving in.

"Call me if anything changes. I want to be the first to know." When Regan crosses her heart and hopes to die, Isaac places on his winter coat before shifting on his feet to face me. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to. The remorse in his eyes expresses everything he wants me to know, and only a portion of it is for me. The rest he wants me to express to JR on his behalf.

"I'll take good care of him."

"Oh, I bet she will," Regan giggles out with a waggle of her brows.

As she walks Isaac to the door, I shift my focus to the lead parole officer. "Are we good?"

He has arrogance by the bucketloads, but his attitude simmers a little when Alex butts shoulders with me to hear his reply. "Yes. Everything is good to go."

After signaling for his crew to pack up, he marches out the door Isaac just exited.

He's barely slid behind the steering wheel of a dark blue sedan when Alex mutters under his breath, "Glory chasers are the worst." He slumps into an armchair, kicks his feet up onto a coffee table, then drags a hand across his scruffy beard. "They do *none* of the work but expect *all* the glory." He nudges his head to JR being chauffeured out of the back of the SUV the parole officer's car is parked behind. "If he's convicted, Flynn Bob, over there, will claim he found the evidence."

"In a house JR has *never* lived in?"

He drops his feet and leans forward until his elbows rest on his knees. "Facts don't matter to glory chasers. It's all about gloating and money."

"If he's after money, he's in the wrong industry. What does a senior agent take home these days?"

"Don't ask," Alex groans out with a hiss. "Or you'll have me considering Isaac's offer with more thought than it deserves."

The disgust in his voice makes me smile. "Would it really be that bad to work for Isaac?"

He glares at me like I'm insane. "Ah. *Yes*. I'd rather abstain from sex for a year than be bossed around by Isaac Holt."

"Even with it giving you the opportunity to stay in the same state as Regan and the baby she may or may not be carrying."

Alex's eyes snap to mine so fast, I'm confident he's dizzy. "Regan is pregnant?"

The disappointment that blazes through his eyes when I stammer out, "Not as far as I'm aware," cuts like a knife, so I

give him some hope to cling to. “But she is exhibiting symptoms that she could be.” He listens intently like I’m disclosing the meaning of life when I add, “Her moods are like a rollercoaster. She’s eating more than usual, and I don’t know about you, but I swear her cup size has increased the past couple of weeks.”

Alex peers down at his palm, curls his fingers like he’s groping something, then shoots his eyes to Regan’s chest. “You’re right. Her tits are bigger.”

I roll my eyes at his typical male response. Of course, he’d focus on my breast reference first.

My eyes only get halfway around when Alex suddenly leaps to his feet, yanks his phone out of his pocket, and asks Siri, “I need a drug store close to my location.” He cups his phone, makes a gesture for me to keep our conversation between us, then hightails it to the kitchen. “I don’t care how far away they are as long as they can deliver. I need a…”

I jump out of my bones when Regan mutters in my ear, “What’s he ordering?” She snuck up on me so agilely, I didn’t hear her steps.

“Umm… dinner.” Not the best response for four o’clock in the afternoon, but it is better than telling her I dropped her into a steamy pile of poo with the hope it will keep Alex and her occupied long enough I can have JR all to myself for the rest of the afternoon. “With the blizzard, you have to order super early.”

I begin to wonder if my ruse is a ruse when Regan’s eyes pop out of her head. “Make sure you order a creamy pasta,” she shouts before racing Alex’s way. “I’ve been craving carbs all day.”

She darts through the swinging door a second before JR is stopped in front of me by an officer with kind eyes yet stern features. “This is an emergency beacon. If at any time you need us, pull on this tab.” He references the tab he mentioned, blind to my silent assurance that I don’t need an emergency necklace. “Local agents will be on the scene within minutes.”

Despite my heart begging otherwise, I accept the device the agent is handing me before scribbling my name across a custody release form with JR’s real name typed across the top. “You can remove his cuffs. He won’t need them.”

“Are you sure?”

I let my slitted eyes answer on my behalf.

He holds his hands out in front of himself like my glare is more maiming than a bullet. “Okay.”

For the first time today, JR is treated like a human. Not only does the officer face him to announce he is bobbing down to remove the shackles from his ankles, but he also signs his movements.

“My sister was deaf,” he declares to my shocked expression.

“*Was?*”

While stabbing a key into the lock between JR’s ankles, he jerks up his chin. “She died a couple of years back.” He drifts his eyes to the woodland surrounding the cabin. “She loved these woods so much, when times got tough, she vanished in them.”

I lock my eyes with JR when the officer’s voice cracks at the end of his statement. His facial expression gives nothing away, but his hands do. “*These woods don’t hide anyone. They teach them how to survive.*”

Since I agree with him, I nod. Nothing I said to the judge today came from my heart. I merely used any tactic I could to give JR the chance to see his beloved woods again.

When I sign that to JR, he shifts his eyes away from my hands before asking the officer if he's free to go.

"*Your room is third on the left,*" I advise, sighing when I almost sign 'our.'

This cabin only has two rooms, but JR's silence the past hour has made it obvious he's not interested in sharing the same bed with me, much less the same air.

After showing the officer out and testing the durability of the locks on the doors and windows, I skirt past the kitchen to let Alex and Regan know that I'm going to get JR settled in before coming to assist in preparing dinner.

Regan looks a little lost, but Alex is quick off the mark when it comes to defusing her. "She means to set it out, not cook it. Stop being so pedantic, Rae."

"I'll show you *pedantic*, Mr. Fancy Pants," she bites back while following him into the den.

Once I've breathed out my nerves, I bang on the door of JR's room with enough force to knock it down. I need him to feel the vibrations since he can't hear them.

When he fails to acknowledge my request for entry, I curl my hand over the circular doorknob and turn. I'm not surprised to hear running water. JR is obsessed with showering. I'm unaware if it is a new obsession or if it's something he's always loved. We've yet to discuss matters not pertaining to cheating spouses, murderous families, and crooked men.

I can only hope that day arrives sometime soon.

I've unpacked half the clothes Isaac had Catherine pack for JR and me into the walk-in closet and drawers when the shower faucet switches off. Half of me wants to hide away from my problems, but the other half is dying to get them out of the way so we can move on to more pressing matters than JR's wrongful belief I am ashamed of him.

I go for the latter when my inability to make a decision is overtaken by the creak of the bathroom door being pried open. After another big exhale, I spin to face JR. "There are clothes for you in the closet. I didn't know if you free ball out of choice or not, so I asked Catherine to pack you a range of underwear. You don't have to wear them if you don't want. I just want you to feel comfortable."

I head for the door, but before I make it all the way there, I remember how running from my issues with Cedric never made them any better. If anything, it made them worse, and the reminder has me twirling back around like a ballerina.

"And me wanting you to feel comfortable is the reason I said what I did today. They were going to lock you away, JR." My voice cracks with emotion. "The last time that happened, the man I failed to protect came back into my custody in a body bag." I swipe at the tears careening down my face, maddened they're making me look weak. "I should have fought harder for him. I shouldn't have let them take him."

JR crosses the room so fast my legs are curled around his waist, and I'm pinned to the door I was about to exit by his large frame before the rest of my confession leaves my mouth. "He wasn't well. Just moving him could have killed him." I stare him straight in the eyes while confessing. "But I swear to you, I tried. I even stood in front of the door to block their

exit.” More tears slip down my cheeks when I mutter, “But it wasn’t enough. They just pushed past me.”

The salt of my tears flavors our kiss when JR forgives me by sealing his lips over mine. This is a lush and gentle kiss, starkly contradicting to the man I portrayed him as in court. It shows although his last ten years were blatantly different than mine, they weren’t as horrifying as his first two decades on earth and that he’s capable of displaying love and being loved.

And that is precisely what I do for the next ten minutes.

I beg for forgiveness with my lips and tongue before the itch extending from my palms to the tips of my fingers becomes too prominent for me to restrain. They slip under JR’s borrowed shirt with a grateful sigh before they explore the rigid bumps in his midsection.

The raw energy our connection zaps through our bodies comes out with a moan. I love how responsive his body is to my touch. It’s like he’s been starved of touch his entire life, and even the tiniest brush of my skin against his is catastrophic to his senses.

As my hands exploration of JR’s body drops below his waist, he pulls me in closer, then drags his recently cropped beard down the vein throbbing in my neck. The tension is already blistering, so you can imagine how perverse it gets when he groggily breathes in my ear, “He w-wouldn’t blame you.” After pulling back far enough, I can see his eyes, he signs, “*He wouldn’t even blame me. That wasn’t the man Cecil was.*”

I rub at the groove between his brows, loving that a large brute of a man can still be in touch with his feelings. He’s not ashamed to display the love he has for Cecil in his eyes. He wears it like his heart—right on his sleeve for the world to see.

“I only spent a couple of hours with him, but I could tell he was a good man.” A grin peeks out from beneath JR’s beard when I mumble, “A little straightforward, but a good man, nonetheless.” The situation goes from needy to serious in two point five seconds, thanks to my next question. “Will you tell me what happened? I tried to find out, but every direction I took led me to a dead end.”

After a reluctant nod, JR places me back onto my feet before he paces to a large window at the side of the room. Although it doesn’t face the land he fought so fiercely to protect, I can imagine he’s picturing it when his hands commence a story that is as painful to hear as it is for him to share.

Chapter Thirty

JR

Twenty-Four Years Old

My eyes stray from the scenery whizzing past the back passenger door of my father's SUV to him when the blacked-out sedan following us veers down a side street.

"Where's he g-going?" Mario rarely leaves my father's side, so not only am I cautious about today's change-up, but I'm also fretful. The hospital Cecil is admitted in is in the opposite direction, but the road Mario just went down is the one you'd take if you want to take a shortcut to Cecil's cabin. "There's n-nothing out that way but w-woods and bears."

"Mario has some matters to tie up. Nothing that affects you."

He's lying. Not even years of absence has lessened my ability to sniff out the bullshit that constantly spills from his mouth.

"Cecil has n-nothing of value."

I realize I hit the nail on the head when my father replies with a sneer, "Then he won't mind Mario taking a look, will

he?” He doesn’t give me the chance to answer. He signals for his driver to increase his speed despite him already traveling ten miles over the designated seventy signage.

I knew Sheriff Dumont was full of shit.

When we reach the ‘T’ intersection that either directs you off the mountain or leads you to the numerous ski resorts dotted on sistering mountains, my clipped nails dig into the skin on my palms that show I’m not afraid of hard work. SUVs similar to the one we’re traveling in are parked on the emergency truck ramp in case their brakes fail during descent. The goon who nearly set fire to Cecil’s greenhouse months ago is leaning on the front quarter panel of the lead vehicle. His hair is slicked back, a cigarette is dangling out of his mouth, and his arrogance—that’s at an all-time high—triples when he returns the head bob of my father.

It is the simplest of gestures, but it skyrockets my panic to a never-before reached level.

“You f-fuckin’ prick!”

With my mind shut down and fear for my life not prominent, I slam my fist into my father’s nose hard enough to displace it before I toss off my seat belt, yank open my door, then roll onto the asphalt like the rough road surface won’t shred my skin off my body even more than the flames that engulfed it.

Thankfully, a sloshy embankment softens the blow of my fall. I still get hacked up by the sticks and bushes siding the road, but my roll out of a moving vehicle only keeps me down for half a second. I’m up on my feet and racing through the woodlands like I know them as well as Cecil a nanosecond after a bullet rockets past my head.

I don't know who's firing at me, and at the moment, I don't care. Nothing but reaching Cecil before Mario does is on my mind.

Mario is my father's go-to goon for punishment, so even if my father is clueless to the value of the land Cecil's cabin is positioned on, just wrongly believing Cecil hid me from my family the past almost four years is enough of a reason for my father to punish him.

My speed through the dense woodlands is so fast, trees decades older than me blur when I sprint past them. I run like the wind, my pace only slowing when I seek the markings in the trees Cecil pointed out during our sometimes-daily explorations of the woods. He said they'd lead me home if I ever got lost, and they do exactly as promised.

In less than ten minutes, I break through the clearing surrounding the cabin.

"Cecil?" I call out, put off by the eerie silence. There isn't a single residence within a twenty-mile radius of Cecil's cabin, but dead quiet isn't something we often have. The ram watering system I copied off a YouTube video I watched in college is noisy. It bangs and rattles at all hours of the day and night to keep the water moving through the pipes, yet today, it is as quiet as a mouse. "Are y-you here?"

After checking that the cabin is empty and snatching up the pocketknife I'm rarely without, I head for the charred remains of the greenhouse, conscious that is the only other place to hide around here.

Partway there, my head snaps to the side when a twig breaking under someone's foot demands my attention. I didn't exactly hear the stick snap in two. I more sensed it. When you live in dense woodlands, you pay attention to every movement

the land makes because more times than not, the slightest rustle of a tree's branch announces more than a windy day.

I put years of hunting skills to work when I scan the rugged landscape. It is an endless sea of green and brown with some scatters of white from the snow that fell overnight, but in the very far corner, there's a flicker of light reflecting the last of the sun's rays.

That's the sign I'm seeking, and it is what I race for.

"Cecil."

I stop dead in my tracks when I find him. He isn't giving Mario lip as I was anticipating. He's dangling from the tree by the rope he told me years ago was useless.

"No!"

I sprint for him so fast, my feet lose traction in the sloshy mud. I crash into his still legs like a foal learning to walk before I curl my arms around his thighs and hoist him into the air.

"Help!" I scream, aware my pleas are worthless but too fucking lost to comprehend what I'm doing.

I need to cut him down.

I need to loosen the rope digging into his neck so firmly his face is purple, but to do that, I'd need to let him go.

If I do that, he will die.

I will never climb the tree he's dangling from in enough time, not to mention hack through the rope that would have easily claimed my life if Cecil hadn't deceived me.

"Come on!" I scream, torn between yanking on the rope hard enough to snap it, but mindful it could snap Cecil's neck

and continuing to hold him up until my father and his cavalry arrive.

Just as Cecil's heaviness breaks my heart, a rustling at my side gains my attention.

"H-Help me, p-please," I beg, uncaring that my voice is on the verge of a sob. Roderick isn't as heartless as my father, so this scene will be just as shocking to him, wouldn't it? "I'll hold him while y-you climb up on the t-tree and loosen the r-rope."

"He's gone, CJ."

"No!" I shout. "He's a f-fighter. He's got this. He j-just needs some help." I nudge my head to the tree again. "Climb up and c-cut him down. P-Please!" My last word echoes through the dense woodlands because they can't bounce off a man as soulless as my father.

Roderick shakes his head, infuriating me to the point I almost let Cecil go. "He's fuckin' purple. He's dead." All rational thoughts leave my head when he tacks on with a condescending smirk, "And it serves him right after what he told me. He's a murderer."

"Cecil wouldn't hurt a fucking fly!" I roar, my voice unlike anything I've ever heard. "He is a good man—"

"Was," Roderick corrects. "You can't refer to him in the present since he isn't with us anymore."

I charge for him before he knows what hits him. I'm blinded by rage, and so fucking angry I pound my fists into his face over and over and over again until the blood streaming down his cheeks matches the salty blobs careening down mine. I don't stop beating into him. I hit him with everything I have.

My anger. My rage. My wish that I could belt into my father with the same amount of intensity.

I beat the living shit out of him, my onslaught only ending when the vicious sneer of my father curdles my stomach more than the image of Roderick's caved-in face. "I should have known there was a monster inside you. You are, after all, a Petretti."

As quickly as rage blinded me, it disperses, and I realize what I've done.

I became the very thing I swore I'd never be—I became my father.

Sickened, I leap to my feet and charge for the woods. I miss darting behind a large tree trunk by half a second. The delay costs me greatly. Not only does a bullet shred through the ear, damaging the already ravaged cartilage from years of abuse, but one also rockets through my right shoulder.

As blood pools out of me, I stumble through the woods like I drank too much of the liquor Cecil lived off every winter. My mind is hazy, and my vision is blurry.

I'm on the verge of death.

Perhaps it is for the best?

Cecil is dead, and I killed Roderick.

I have nothing left to live for, so instead of fighting to fill my lungs with air, I slump into the hollow of a tree trunk, pull out my pocketknife, then drag it up the veins in my wrists.

It is only as the blackness starts seeping in do the pretty green eyes of a beautiful mixed-raced lady fill my head. I was meant to save her, and in a way, that is exactly what I do when

the blood pouring from my wounds eases the pain on my chest enough, I can take my final breath without hindrance...

Jae's frantic swipe of her cheek draws me from my thoughts. The first tear dribbled from her eyes when I confessed to finding Cecil hanging in the woods, then they flooded down her face for every other word I signed after that. "What happened?" she begs, her lips quivering so bad, she must sign her question as well to ensure I can understand her.

"I woke up in a cabin deep in the woods," I explain like it isn't as shocking now as it was back then. *"My wrists and shoulder were bandaged, and my ear was patched back together."* Jae's shocked breath fans my cheeks when I pull back my hair to show her my mangled ear. It is as fucked up as my back. *"I thought my savior had merely delayed what needed to happen."* She rapidly shakes her head, unwilling to acknowledge how badly I wanted to die. *"Then I found this stabbed to the back of the cabin's door with my pocketknife."*

I pull my wallet out of my pocket, grimacing when the name printed on my driver's license is the first thing I see. I am not Colum Junior Petretti. I am JR Bassett, Cecil Bassett's son.

With the paper not aging like my wallet's lengthy stay beneath the floorboards of Cecil's cabin, it puffs out the worn leather material in an obvious manner.

Jae's hand shoots up to cover her mouth when I unfold the last document Cecil ever handled. It is the will and testament he had the clergy at the hospital witness when he recognized Jae from the newspaper articles I had shown him when we shared stories about the women we had met, loved, and lost.

"When I saw he had included you as a beneficiary, I went to Saint Frances, assuming you were next." I huff out a laugh.

“I was wrong. You walked straight past them. They just let you leave.” She leans into my touch when I brush away the tears clinging to her beautiful face instead of repelling away when I admit, *“And so did I, because it was then that I realized they didn’t know Cecil had changed his will. As long as I was alive, you were safe. That’s why I kept living.”*

Jae presses her lips to mine before murmuring, “Thank you,” with so much gratitude I feel her words in the vibrations of her breaths.

I issue my thanks in the same manner before slowly pulling back. I’ve shared a lot, and I need to make sure lust doesn’t have her forgetting she’s sitting across from a murderer.

“For the first couple of weeks, they searched relentlessly for me, but within months, the search crew dwindled down to two, and I was left to fend for myself.” It’s not the right time for a grin to tug on my lips, but it can’t be helped when I remember my shock of a white convertible sailing over my head when I was hunting for something better to eat than deer meat. *“I don’t usually hunt on that side of the mountain, but something drew me there that night.”* My smile is wiped from my face when I disclose, *“The tree we hid in was the tree where I slashed my wrists. You know everything that has happened since then.”*

“Except where you went the night we fled the cabin.”

I bob my head up and down as memories of how kickass she looked holding a shotgun fill my head. *“There was too much rustling on the horizon. The mountains on each side of the woods block the winds from that side, so I thought it might have been Roderick’s family coming for me since I announced*

on social media that I wasn't dead. But it wasn't. They were —

“After me?” Jae interrupts.

I jerk up my chin. *“I don't know how TikTok works, so I assumed my video loaded, but from what the officer told me earlier, it didn't work until your phone got reception as we approached the hotel.”*

I'd give anything in the world to hear Jae's laugh. I can imagine it would be a little ear-piercing, but in a way someone who's never heard it would truly appreciate. “That's what you get for dumping my work phone under a stream of water.”

After moving to the large bed in the middle of the extravagant room, Jae plops her backside onto it, then raises her eyes to mine. They're flaring with worry, but I realize not all of it stems from my confession that I killed a guy when she mutters, “I attended Cecil's autopsy.” She licks her lips before disclosing, “The ligature marks around his neck didn't correspond with someone who had killed himself. He was also too weak to climb a tree. The amount of blood he lost from his head wound would have made him too woozy. He was too dizzy to walk, much less climb.” After brushing away a handful of tears, she says, “The coroner completely ignored my points. He ruled his death a suicide, and when no amount of arguing would change his mind, I went back to my old life the very same day. I wasn't going to hide from corruption for a second longer. I was going to fight against it.”

When I nod, inspired by her strength, she murmurs, “And that's why you need to fight the charges brought against you as self-defense, JR.”

I shake my head. *“I killed him.”*

“To protect yourself.” She stops the brutal shake of my head by standing to her feet. “He killed Cecil, so how do you know you weren’t next?”

“I wasn’t thinking about me when I beat him.”

“That’s right. You weren’t. *Because* your mind had switched to survivor mode, it was doing *anything* in its power to live.” When she reaches me, she gathers my hands in hers so if I want to continue arguing, I’ll have to use my voice. “You’re not a monster, JR. You are *not* your father, and I’m going to make sure the world is aware of that.”

She steals my ability to offer a comeback by sealing her mouth over mine.

Chapter Thirty-One

Jae

With my breathing leveled and my feet barely touching the ground, I sneak out of the room I shared with JR last night. Excluding the time I grabbed the two plates of the creamy food Alex ordered, we didn't leave our room. I don't want to give JR a single second to doubt any of my responses yesterday afternoon. Nothing he said changed my feelings for him. If anything, they made them stronger. I was able to live a normal, safe life because he kept the scent off me for years, and now I need to do the same for him.

I stop tiptoeing across the cabin's expansive living room when Regan mutters with a yawn, "Do you really need extracurricular activities after all the sexercise you did last night?" She finishes her yawn before finalizing her sentence, "You guys must be as exhausted as Alex.

She waggles her perfectly manicured brows. "Totally worth it, right?"

Since I can't disagree, I bob my head.

"So what's with the hiking gear?" I feel self-conscious when she lowers her eyes to my skintight yoga pants and three sizes too big shirt. Regan is the very epitome of a barbie doll—big green eyes, flawless skin, blonde hair, and breasts Alex

has to use his massive hands to measure. “If you want Jell-O legs, wake up Big Foot for round three.”

She brushes off my sneer with a tongue poke before flopping onto the couch.

I join her in the living room, albeit hesitantly. I’m not overly good at lying, but when you’re desperate, you’ll give anything a shot. “I’m not going for a hike. I need to pop into a drug store. They don’t deliver out this far.”

“I know,” she mutters with a gag. “Alex was harping on about that all night last night.” She straightens her back, then angles her head to the side. “What do you need to purchase? If it can wait, I’m reasonably sure Alex is going to town this morning once Hawke and the rest of the security detail get here.”

“*We’re* going to the drug store,” Alex corrects as he enters the room shirtless and shoeless. I’m unsure which direction to look when Regan appears on the verge of having a coronary while drinking in his pajama-pants-only stalk of the elaborate space. “And not a damn hour too soon.” After greeting Regan with a good morning kiss, he shifts on his feet to face me. “Why? What do you need?”

“Umm...” *Come on, brain.* “Something to remove taser barbs from a *sensitive* area.” I removed the prongs embedded into JR’s cock last night, but since that delicate operation was kept between JR and me, I use it to my advantage. “They tasered him—”

“Right in the cock,” Alex butts in with a laugh.

Regan socks him in the stomach, halving his chuckles before locking her wide-with-concern eyes with me. “They tasered him in the...” She points to her crotch like she’s never

said the word penis before. When I jerk up my chin, her face whitens, “But instead of removing them last night, you took care of business instead.”

Even a virgin would know what her took-care-of-business comment refers to. She thinks we had sex with the barbs still embedded into JR’s cock. Although that was what we did minutes *after* I carefully removed them, I’m not a complete barbarian. But since that isn’t something I can disclose to Regan right now, I nod for the second time.

It whitens her face even more.

“Wow...” She stops, throws a hand up to her mouth, then races for the bathroom dividing the two rooms of the cabin.

When the noise of a woman being sick filters into the living room, I shoot my eyes to Alex. He looks more excited than nervous.

“You better go help her,” I suggest, aware this is the perfect opportunity to make my escape. “If this is what you’re hoping, but it’s unplanned, she’ll need a lot of support to ease her into the idea.”

With his mind on his personal life more than his job, he nods, then races into the bathroom. I snatch up the keys to his SUV and hightail it outside before my head can talk my heart out of my decision.

With JR not willing to plead not guilty, I either need to find evidence that proves it was self-defense or risk losing him for a lot longer than another ten years.

I lower down Alex’s FBI cap to cover my eyes before waving a greeting to a young officer monitoring traffic coming and going from the cabin. With the plates on Alex’s SUV federal and my daggy clothes concealed by the steering wheel,

the rookie agent waves back before he unlocks the gate so I can exit.

I'm tempted to do a little jig when I am on the open road. The only reason I don't is because my heart is in my throat. One wrong movement might see me bringing up last night's dinner into a toilet bowl like Regan. Cedric was remanded until trial, but when Alex searched Cecil's cabin, he found it empty.

The man with the scarred face was nowhere to be seen.

After checking the address placed on JR's arrest documentation against the one I punched into the GPS, I stray my eyes across a gate covered with vines.

"I guess this is it," I mutter to myself while pulling on a parka thick enough to combat the freezing temperatures. The blizzard has blown over, but it is still cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey. I smile about my dad's favorite saying while climbing over the gate. There are too many vines strangling it for me to push it open.

Partway down the overgrown driveway, I breathe a little easier. Even with the ground sloshy and the snow melted, there's no mistaking this cabin. It was the first one I woke up in, and the one we fled when a madman took over its ownership.

The inside of the cabin, although still ransacked, is empty, so I turn to face the landscape JR described so well, I know the exact direction to walk to hunt for clues.

Tears prick my eyes when I reach a tree with a rope noose hanging off a thick branch. I don't know if they left it up as a cruel reminder for JR or if they were too busy rushing

Roderick to the hospital to take it down. Whatever the reason, it's a horrible reminder of how cruel some people can be.

After sending a prayer to Cecil to thank him for taking care of JR, I shift on my feet to face the cabin, then crank my neck in the direction JR said Roderick came from. There's nothing out that way but more woods, so Roderick must have been hiding in wait for JR to show up, or he knows this land as well as JR.

Once I've breathed out the nerves bubbling in my stomach, I crouch down onto my knees in the area Roderick lied lifeless, then push away the sludgy snow and leaves coating the ground.

I don't know what I'm looking for, but I'm praying like hell something is here. I'm just really hoping it isn't a body. I've seen plenty of corpses in my time, but I steer clear of decayed ones.

I'm on the verge of giving up when my hand scrapes across something hard in the soil. With my teeth, I remove the gloves stopping my hands from getting frostbite, then drag them over the object protruding from the ground.

"What is that?" I ask no one since I'm the only one stupid enough to be this deep into the woods so soon after a blizzard.

I snap my eyes to the left when a faint voice answers my rhetorical question. "A gun." A woman who I'd guess to be approximately late thirties, early forties glances past my shoulder before she slowly walks out from behind a large tree trunk. Just like JR when he approached me, my first thought is that she looks disheveled and unhinged. But the more I watch her, the more I realize she too is using the woods as armor.

“Is it your gun?” I ask, thrusting the muddy side pistol her way.

She shakes her head so vigorously, she makes me dizzy before she points behind me. “It’s his.” Her words are as shaky as her hands.

When a man with a scarred face steps out from a tree even larger than the one the woman was hiding behind, instincts have me leaping to my feet to protect her. Some could say she is who I need protection from, but my intuition hasn’t reached the same conclusion.

She disclosed the stranger’s hidey-hole, and her eyes are as humble and honest as JR’s. Not to mention the fact that I misjudged JR the first time I laid eyes on him in almost a decade, I refuse to make the same mistake again.

“Stay where you are, or I’ll shoot.”

The man laughs a mocking chuckle. “That gun hasn’t been fired in years.” The eyes of a snake stare me down as he mutters, “Not since it was believed to have taken down a rabies-infested vermin who should have kept walking when he stumbled onto this place.” After snarling at the lady I’m protecting as if my skin is made out of armor, the man steps closer to us. “Death was knocking on Cecil’s door. I was this close...” he holds his thumb and index finger an inch apart, “... from righting the wrong my grandmother made.” He spits on the ground, missing the shock that fills my face when it finally dawns on me who he is. JR isn’t a killer because his victim isn’t dead. He’s standing right in front of me. “Then *he* went and ruined everything.” The way he sneers ‘he’ leaves no doubt whom he’s referencing—JR.

“Rosie left this land to Cecil because she didn’t want to see it mined. If you sell this place, you’ll be denying your

grandmother her final wish. Is that what you want, Roderick?" His smirk belongs to an extremely dangerous man. He's not ashamed I've worked out who he is. He's proud. "Walk away before JR fixes the error he made seven years ago."

"And how's he going to do that?" He doesn't wait for me to answer him. "You're here, with *us*." The woman behind me shivers in fear when he locks his eyes with her. She is not his friend. She is his enemy. "And he's all the way on the other side of the mountain, surrounded by law enforcement officers who want him dead just as much as I do." He shrugs like his next words aren't direct stabs to my heart. "They're thirsty for blood since he killed one of their own last night while trying to escape."

"JR didn't kill anyone. He was with me the whole night."

He steps even closer, forcing me to point the gun at his head instead of his heart. "That isn't what the DNA will say. It's all over the deceased officer's corpse."

My heart launches into my throat when he holds up a baggie full of hair. Even with the early morning sun bouncing off the plastic material, I know whose hair is inside. It's the strands JR clipped off in a hurry two days ago.

"He will still find a way to protect me."

There's so much confidence in my tone, Roderick's headshake makes him look like a fool. "Not possible. He failed seven years ago to reach Cecil in time, and it will be the same for you this time around as well."

His arrogance brings out my bitchy side. "I got out without a second look, didn't I?"

It's slapped into a black void when he discloses, "Because I wanted you to." He fans his arms across the landscape.

“Because by forcing you to come to me, it forced her out of hiding.” He bares teeth while snarling, “You should have let him die.”

“You killed Cecil!” the female screams, her voice broken up with huskiness. It’s clear she adored Cecil as much as JR did.

“And I’d do it again if it fixed that whore’s mistake!” He bangs his chest. “*I* was her blood. Her family. Yet she left everything of value to him.”

“Because you killed your grandfather,” retaliates the woman as her strength rises from the murkiness bombarding her. “Your fingerprints were on the spikes stuck under Memphis’s car. You tried to suffocate him before first responders could arrive. If it weren’t for my brother, you would have killed them that night.”

“Those are lies. *Hearsay*. They’ll never hold up in court.”

“Because you threatened my family so much, my brother had no choice but to hide the evidence.” She locks her watering eyes with mine. “I was searching for it. I was determined to take him down.” Salty blobs glide down her cheeks when she confesses, “But when he killed my mother and tortured my sister for hours on end, I wanted to die.”

“But Cecil found you before you could.”

Dirty strands of blonde hair fall into her face when she shakes her head. “No. Rosie did.” She shifts her eyes back to Roderick. “When I woke up in the cabin, I told her everything you had done, and even though you were her grandson, she believed me because she knew you were evil. That’s why she left you nothing but the plot of your parents’ gravesite.” She hands me a hessian lap-sack bag brimming with old electronic

equipment. “It’s all in here. *All* of it. And for what it misses, I’m sure this will more than make up for it.”

She points an old-style remote at the branch Cecil’s noose is dangling from. A video camera is mounted where the branch comes off the trunk. It’s pointed right at Roderick, meaning one thing—she got Roderick’s confession on tape. It’s no longer hearsay.

“You conniving little bitch!” Roderick roars when reality dawns on him that he just convicted himself. He charges our way, his face as red as his balled-up hands. “You will rot in hell before I’ll ever let that evidence see the light of day.”

Not thinking, I cock back the hammer of the gun and fire one time. As predicted by Roderick, the barrel seizes with the bullet still in the chamber. I’m about to use its butt as protection, but before it can skim halfway across Roderick’s temple, a blur of muscle and testosterone comes out of nowhere and side-tackles him to the ground.

JR is still wearing the sleeping pants he went to bed in. His hair is damp with sweat, and every one of his muscles contracts as he beats the living shit out of Roderick. He belts into him with everything he has, his strength so mesmerizing it takes me several long seconds to remember that this is the opportunity I’ve been seeking. I have the chance to save JR as he did me multiple times.

When my stomps on the sloshy ground do little to slow JR’s onslaught, I thrust the bag of electronic goods into the frozen female’s chest, scoot past Roderick, who was so blindsided by JR’s second attack, he’s already unconscious, then bob down to place myself into JR’s line of sight.

“That’s enough, JR. I’m safe. We’re safe. You can stop now.”

The animalistic movements of his fists slow a little, but I need them to end completely. If they don't, he will kill Roderick this time around.

“*JR!*” I sign and shout. “You are *not* your father,” I whisper when his eyes lock with mine for a fleeting moment. “So stop now before you undo all the good you did to ensure you would never become him.”

He glances down at his bloody hands before returning his wide-with-terror eyes to my face. He looks set to run. The urge is burning through his eyes like an out-of-control blaze, and the flares brighten when the flickers of police lights bounce off the woodlands surrounding us, but something stops him, and this time around, I know that something is me.

Epilogue

Jae

Almost One Year Later

“**W**hat were his stats again?” While waiting for the ER nurse to update me on her findings, I cup the receiver of my phone before leaning over to pluck one of the carrot sticks off the platter in front of me.

Today is my final day at Ravenshoe Private, and although I’m very much looking forward to my next adventure, I’m also a little sad. This place has been my home for so long that when I think back at the years gone, it pops up more times than the penthouse apartment I sold for a record-breaking price last month.

Ravenshoe’s housing prices are still ridiculous. I don’t care how much of a mecca it is, millions of dollars for an apartment is beyond the joke—as are Isaac’s smirks every time I gripe about the exclusivity of the city he built from nothing.

“That’s far too high,” I reply when Trinity comes back with the figures I’m seeking. “Start him on labetalol. The selective alpha-adrenergic and non-selective beta-adrenergic

receptors should bring down his blood pressure. If it doesn't, look at other beta-blockers."

"Okay."

Before Trinity can hang up, I shout, "But take it slow. If you drop his blood pressure too quickly, he'll face even more challenges." After requesting her to keep me up to date on Mr. Norlanger's case, I hang up.

A second emergency presents itself when Isaac enters my office looking suave in a three-piece suit. His smirk is as victorious as the price tag of his tailored suit. I'm not surprised when I notice the headline of the paper he's clasping. Cedric was sentenced to life behind bars yesterday for his involvement in the sale of organs on the black market, and although he worked at Ravenshoe Private for eleven months of his four-year involvement in an underground crime syndicate, not a single organ sold could be traced back to Isaac's team.

Ravenshoe Private's staff is too stringent with the rules. They'd never let something as important as an organ go missing without reporting it to the hierarchies, and with Isaac's medical chain extending to Saint Frances, I plan to make sure it follows Ravenshoe Private's blazing trails.

"Did you watch the proceedings?"

Once I've logged out of my computer for the final time, I shake my head to Isaac's question. "My opinion of Cedric was already too low to taint it any further, so I saved myself the heartache."

Cedric and I didn't meet by chance. When Roderick realized it was getting close to the seven years for the coroner he couldn't bribe to declare JR as dead, he commenced putting steps into play to claim the land he was never entitled to.

That's how he stumbled onto a copy of Cecil's last will and testament Tasha used to convince JR he still had something to live for.

Tasha was the reporter Cecil said was tracking the evidence of Memphis and Rosie's accidents more than local authorities. She dug so deep into a Sicilian crime network, her family's entire existence was placed on the line. Her mother was murdered, her father was convicted of a crime he didn't commit, and her sister was brutalized in front of her. She wanted to die, but just like Cecil gave JR a reason to live, Rosie was Tasha's beacon of hope.

She let her stay at the cabin rent-free, brought her food and essentials every single week, and encouraged her to share her story by doing the same.

It was an interview Rosie did with a national newspaper that got her killed. She didn't straight up declare that her grandson was a menace to society, but she dropped so many hints, more than just the Federal Bureau of Investigation started looking into her claims. Her children did as well.

They shunted Roderick from the family, and when Rosie 'died,' they made sure he didn't get a penny over the amount cited in her will.

Roderick never disclosed Rosie's final wishes to Cecil, though. He kicked him out of the home they shared and fired him from the quarry, all the while making out he was acting on the family's behalf.

His act was so convincing, Cecil gave up hope only a few short weeks later. That was the night Tasha saved him. Although she had the strength to carry him through the woods and care for him in treacherous conditions, she didn't have the gall to go against Roderick and the crime entity backing his

campaign, which is understandable considering the escalation of his crimes the deeper he merged himself into the life of mafia royalty, but she always kept an eye on Cecil.

It was that cautious watch that saved JR.

When things went quiet after she ensured JR knew who Roderick's focus would be shifted to if he dies, Tasha lived a humbled, off-the-grid existence that only ended when news of CJ Petretti's death forced her out of hiding. I don't know what garnered her the strength this time around to go against Roderick, but her determination to fix the mistakes she's adamant she made saved my life and ensured JR got to live his without shackles.

Tasha's inclusion in my life has been a godsend.

I can't say the same for Cedric.

With the clergy who filed Cecil's last will and testament no longer working at Saint Frances and his last known address unknown, before Roderick could threaten to kill his family if he dared to tell anyone about the adjustment, he was forced to come up with a new plan.

That plan included getting close to a doctor who never had a spare second for herself but could always find time for a fellow medic.

Roderick coerced Cedric into dating me.

With the FBI's presence noticeable in the Cataloochee area since Cecil's death, my 'accident' wasn't meant to occur until we were on foreign turf. Roderick only switched things up when Cedric couldn't keep his dick in his pants long enough to get me on a plane. When Rosha called to confess her sins to her older brother, Roderick got inventive with the spikes he

had used to force their grandmother off the road for the second time in her life.

He killed her that time around instead of scarring her as Col had done to his son only years later.

Although charges have never been brought forward regarding Roderick selling organs on the black market, I believe that is how he and Cedric met.

An admission of guilt won't make much difference to Roderick's sentence, though. With Tasha's evidence undeniable, he'll be lucky to serve one of the eighty-eight years he was sentenced. If an inmate doesn't kill him, a lethal injection will. That's how evil and corrupt his crimes were after his face was disfigured by JR. He took his anger out on everyone around him, including the niece and nephews of a Sicilian crime syndicate leader.

He is the very epitome of a dead man walking.

"Are you here to walk me out?" I ask Isaac while heading for the coat rack to grab my winter jacket. It doesn't get overly cold in Ravenshoe, but since you can never be too careful on long drives down snowy hills, I always pack an extra layer of clothes just in case.

"More like kick you out," he replies with a playful grin. "Did I hear you right when I walked in? Did you ask Trinity to keep you up to date on a patient?"

Not thinking, I nod.

"Won't that be a little hard to do at your new placement?"

I brush off his unwarranted concern with a wave of my hand. "They have this brilliant thing called satellite phones. Supposedly, they work on the moon, so I'm sure they can handle a snow blizzard or two."

“They better,” Isaac mutters, shocking me with hope in his tone. “You’ve been a part of my team almost as long as Hugo. It’s hard to let you go.”

As my heart beats out a happy tune, I reply, “I’m still a part of your team, Isaac.” I twist my lips. “Just as of close of business tomorrow, I’ll live a handful of states over from you.”

“I could—”

“No,” I interrupt, cutting him off. He’s offered multiple times the past six months to find a rustic ranch on the outskirts of Ravenshoe for JR and me. To begin with, it sounded ideal, but then I realized it would be selfish of me to remove JR from the one place he’s ever considered home. I can practice medicine anywhere, but you only ever have one home, and mine is with JR.

“JR belongs at the cabin... and I belong there with him.”

Incapable of arguing against the absolute honesty in my tone, Isaac gives in with a chin dip before offering to help me into my coat. The puffiness of the material stuffing it seems ridiculous for the Floridian climate, but Isaac doesn’t give me hell about it because he knows I’m not going back to my hotel this evening. I’m going to surprise JR on what is officially our first anniversary.

I still can’t believe it’s only been a year. The love I have for that man makes every day feel like fifty, but in a good way. Not once have I felt the dread that bombarded me when I considered taking the next step with Cedric. I got hives when he asked me to marry him. When JR did the same with the stem of a wildflower he twisted into a ring, I wept happy tears.

He lives such a humble, basic existence because all his richness resides in his heart.

After pulling my hair out of the collar of my winter coat, I spin around to face Isaac. “Don’t,” he begs when he spots the wetness in my eyes. “If you cry, Isabelle will cry. If she cries...” He doesn’t finish his sentence. He doesn’t need to. His balled-up fists tell me everything I need to know. “Now get out there and say goodbye so I can take my wife home to tuck our children into their beds.”

There’s no chance of me holding back my tears when I step out of my office. Everyone is here—Isabelle, Hugo, Hunter, Regan, Alex, and their drooling baby boy. Ryan, Trinity, and Trace, the clerk at the hotel who tried to warn me about the FBI’s impending arrival by scribbling it onto the dry-cleaning bags he gifted me. Even my parents are here. But no matter how fast they make my heart patter, its flutters are nothing on the ones that bombard me when I spot who’s standing at the end of the long line of farewellers, looking oddly out of place in snow boots, Wrangler jeans, and a scruffy beard that’s growing fast but isn’t close to the length it was one year ago.

“I told you, you didn’t have to come,” I sign to JR before throwing my arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

My heart melts when he whispers into my ear. “I w-wanted to come.”

He’s come so far with his speech the past twelve months, but he has the occasional slip-ups when he’s thrust into a situation he’s not comfortable with. Traveling to a town that borders the one that gives him nightmares would be daunting to anyone.

We spend all our time at the cabin for this exact reason. After spending the six weeks of my holiday I was supposed to use touring Europe at the cabin with JR, I returned to

Ravenshoe. I lasted a whole three days before I chucked a sickie so I could return to the cabin for a long weekend.

With it obvious that three days was the absolute limit I could stretch to before I needed my JR fill, Isaac reduced my in-office hours to match my somewhat insatiable needs.

His understanding made it a blissfully beautiful twelve months, but it's no longer enough. An hour is too long to go without seeing JR, so when three days became tortuous, I knew it was time to make some changes.

JR has supported me all the way, and every time I return to the cabin, there's a new piece of furniture for me to take in or a new wing to help sand and stain.

After pulling back so I can take in JR's deliciously sexy face, I say, "Since you're here, can you spare five minutes so I can show you something?"

He nods without hesitation, my every wish always on the forefront of his mind.

When I stray my eyes to Isaac, he dips his chin, granting my request before suggesting for everyone to convene in the conference room for a round of drinks while I freshen up. I should have realized the platters of food he had delivered today weren't his only parting gift. He's grown a fascination for planning surprise parties ever since Isabelle caught him unaware with one the day they married.

"If you can take a seat on the chair in the far corner of the room, I'll be right with you." This is the part where I'd usually switch off the lighting to showcase this room's abilities to its full extent, but since JR needs to see my lips and hands to communicate, I keep them on.

JR's dark brows cinch together when I snag a bottle of gel off the shelf on my right and a handful of paper towels from the sink. "It isn't what you're thinking," I mutter, grinning about his deviant mind. "And when have we ever needed lubricant?"

He grunts out a husky laugh that's cut short when I slip onto the hospital bed wedged between us. "It's okay," I promise, hating the concern in his eyes. "We're okay."

I wait for him to nod before squirting the fluid onto my rounded belly and grabbing up the ultrasound wand. JR watches me like a hawk until the image of our daughter appears on the screen next to his head. He's seen pictures of her and attended every ultrasound, but since this equipment is far more superior than the ultrasound machine at Saint Frances, he's never seen her in 3D detail like this.

"That's her leg," I advise when he runs his finger across her tibia bone on the ultrasound screen. "And this is her hand, chin, and tiny little nose." I take my time pointing out every adorable feature before changing the angle. "And that's her..." I'm about to say booty, but with her having a body part I'm not anticipating, I choke on the word.

"I don't think girls are meant to have one of those," JR signs, his happiness seeing his hands move a million miles an hour.

"No, I don't think so either. Raquel!" I shout, confident she'd never leave valuable equipment like a portable 3D ultrasound machine unattended.

When she pops her head into the room, I ask, "Can you please confirm something for me?" I wait for her to nod before scanning the wand past the bottom of our 'daughter.' "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

“Do you mean a penis, Dr. Jae? Because if that’s what you’re seeing, yep! I’m seeing the same thing.” Her lips twist as she recalls the hundreds of pink baby products I’ve purchased the past eight weeks. “Who did your twenty-week scan?”

“Meeka at Saint Frances.” I groan at the same time Raquel mutters, “I told you she has no clue what she’s doing.”

“Be sure to pass on your findings to Isaac. If he wants to trim the fat from Saint Frances, he should start with her.”

Raquel steps back with her hands held in the air when JR growls about her curling her arms around my back to help me into a half-seated position.

“Gentle, tiger. She isn’t hurting me.”

I’m reminded that Raquel is exactly like her big sister when she says with a shimmer, “Although I may consider it if I’m awarded another one of those growls. Damn, girl, you weren’t joking when you said they could get you off. I’m hot all over.”

“And being paged,” I interrupt when a code-three alarm rips through the ER.

That takes care of her impish grin and sees me once again alone with JR.

“Lucky you stuck with natural varnish for the baby room, hey?” He’s been renovating Cecil’s cabin the past ten months. We now have a flushable toilet, two bedrooms, and a kitchen that doesn’t require the fire to be operating to be functional. Solar panels are an amazing thing but having a man who knows how to use his hands is even better.

Along with all the furniture we own, JR made our daughter’s crib. He hand-molded every piece of wood he sourced

from the woodlands bordering our property. I love it as much as the hundreds of rolls of toilet paper I stuffed into the back seat of the all-terrain SUV I purchased specifically to ensure not even a snowstorm will stop us reaching Saint Frances Hospital when our son arrives in three short months.

Some may say I've gone a little overboard with the number of 'essential items' I've stuffed into every nook and cranny of our cabin, but I know how life-changing a blizzard can be, and there's no such thing as being too optimistic.

Also by Shandi Boyes

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[Saving Emily](#) (Noah & Emily - Novella)

[Wrapped Up with Rise Up](#) (Perception Novella - should be read after the Bound Series)

Enigma

[Enigma](#) (Isaac & Isabelle #1)

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Bound Series

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Psycho(Dexter & ??)

Russian Mob Chronicles

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Nikolai: Taking Back What's Mine(Nikolai & Justine #2)

Nikolai: What's Left of Me(Nikolai & Justine #3)

Nikolai: Mine to Protect(Nikolai & Justine #4)

Asher: My Russian Revenge (Asher & Zariah)

Nikolai: Through the Devil's Eyes(Nikolai & Justine #5)

Trey (Trey & K)

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